

# The Labyrinth

A TALE FROM CARROCK

PHILIP, THE HIGH MARSHAL OF CARROCK, slowly marched back and forth in the long hall of the castle. No, the signs were not good. His hand brushed slowly across his small black moustache as he waited for the grand ambassador to arrive. The doors at the far end of the hall were suddenly torn open and Stev Pulleny rushed in.

“You called, marshal?” he asked coming to a halt and inclining his head slightly.

“Yes, ambassador, we have a problem.” He held out a letter. “Read this.” Stev squinted at the characters and read through the short message. He looked up at Philip in shock

“This can’t be true!” he gasped.

“It is. The Hun-Halk are on the move again. They will be in Carrock within a month. Gaddar Han must have gotten wind that his lordship is tied up at Damrok.” Stev cursed under his breath. The Hun-Halk a nation of two peoples who were the most terrible and cruel ones that Carrock had known since the Landal who had destroyed the Ancient Kingdom. According to tales from far around these people were known to rape and butcher even children. One of the Hun-Halk kings boasted to have made his tent out of human skin that he had flayed while the victims were still alive. Over the years they’d tried to capture the rich valleys and mountains of Carrock, beginning already in the days of Ryan the first lord of Carrock and Yoni the Watchcarer, his wife. Then his heirs had overthrown them often. Last was Martyn á Carrock nearly eighty years earlier.

“It seems they always pick a time when some sorcerer is strong and the lord is weak or away,” the high marshal sighed. “I’m just surprised they didn’t attack ten years ago. Then they would really have gained control, while we were fighting the Battle of the Wolf.”

“No,” Stev answered, “they’d have never attacked a wizard. They are allies by principle. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Lady Roanna has prompted this.”

“Hm.” Philip brushed his moustache in agitation. “I will see if we can find a way of diplomatically stopping them. Perhaps a letter to their king.”

“Barbarian lord is all I’d call him,” the ambassador snapped. “He rules through fear, not at all by the love of his people, like the Lords of Carrock have.”

“Still, he’s human. Perhaps we can make an alliance -- for the time being.” The gray eyes were unsteady. “It’ll gain time.”

“Let’s take it to the council, marshal. They will know what to do.”

“God, don’t I wish Dylan were here,” Philip muttered.

“Where is he now, Word?” Stev asked quietly. “Where is he now...”

The green eyes blinked open. The light was dim and there was a pretty brown face framed by long black tresses looking down on him. It was smudged with dirt and looked worried.

“Dad? He’s awake.” The face receded and another came, this one also dirty, but a man’s.

“Praise the Word,” the man breathed. “Are you all right, m’lord?” Dylan closed his eyes and opened them again.

“Yes, except for this *splitting* headache,” he groaned as he sat up. “Where are we?” He looked around the room. It was mainly of earth, except for the wall he was leaning against, which was of uncut stone. Light came from a lone torch, somewhere behind Savoy the Scholar. He moved away to reveal a low opening, half in the ceiling half in the wall.

“We came through there?” the lord grunted, standing up. He pressed one hand to his head.

“I believe so.” The Scholar wiped his hands on his soiled, white clothing.

“Daddy?” a thin voice made the lord turn. It was Asha, standing just a little ways down the hall. Her face was in the shadows. In two quick strides he was beside her, knelt and put his arms around her.

“I’m here, little girl,” he whispered.

“I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry, Asha. I’m here and so are Kyle and Lora and Savoy. We’ll take care of you, hm?” He brushed her little nose with one finger. She nodded.

“Now to get out of here.” He glanced back at the hole.

“No use, sir,” Lora said. “Dad and I looked at it some time ago. There are iron bars covering it and the inside is slimy. We couldn’t make it up there if we could get rid of the bars.” Dylan grunted in answer.

“Swift should be back with Kyle in a few minutes. They’re getting some more torches,” Savoy explained.

“Torches? From where?”

“There were some in the next room over,” Lora explained. “We found an old rest of one here and then Dad went with Kyle and Swift. They found some more in the next room over and brought two back. Then Dad sent Kyle and Swift to get some more.”

“Oh.” In the same moment a barefoot and quite grubby Kyle came back around the corner, the she-wolf trailing along behind him.

“I’ve got them!” the boy laughed. He was carrying about six old but usable torches under his arm. Swift had two in her mouth. She dropped them and sat back on her haunches. She made two yips and cocked her head.

“She says this place smells like death,” the lord translated. “Where are we, Savoy?”

“I believe that we are in the Labyrinth, m’lord. There is only one exit and it is probably a long way from here.”

“Do we have food?” He asked sitting down again, his back to the wall.

“I have some in my bag,” Lora said. “It’s hardly enough for five people plus a wolf.”

“I won’t need any for about eight days,” Dylan sighed. “At least one good thing that came from my enchantment is the fact that I can go without food and water for some time.”

“Yes and water’s the other problem,” Savoy explained. “We have one flask, half-full for six living creatures. We will have to find some more and soon. This won’t last for even one day between us.”

“Then let’s stop sitting around and get moving,” Dylan decided. “The quicker we leave the quicker we’ll find water.”

“If there is any down here,” the Scholar warned. Swift yipped.

“She says she can smell it.”

“Good girl,” Lora laughed patting the wide head. “Can you take us there?” The wolf merely got up and began to trot off in the direction they’d come from.

“Well, then let’s go,” Dylan sighed, rose and took Asha’s hand in his right, a torch in his left and followed Swift.

It seemed to be hours of endless halls later that Swift’s sure nose led them to a small source of water. It was a mere trickle on the ground at first, but then ended up being a low pool, where the luke-warm liquid bubbled from a metal pipe and into a low basin. Dylan knelt beside it and cupped some in his hand.

“Do you think it’s safe?” Lora wondered. For the first time it occurred to the lord that this might be poisoned. Even Swift hadn’t tasted it.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” Dylan sighed and lifted one hand to his lips. The water tasted musty, but not unpleasant, just like water from a good old drinking pool full of rich leaves.

“Well, it tastes fine,” he said with a shrug. “If I don’t curl up and die in the next ten minutes, I think we’ll be able to drink it.” They decided to wait for a while to see if anything would happen to the lord, but nothing did, so the rest of them were able to quench their thirst. After that Asha curled up in her father’s arms and went to sleep. Eventually Kyle and Lora nodded off, too, leaning against each other, Swift acting as a back rest. Only the two men were still awake.

“Would you tell me about the Labyrinth, sir?” Dylan prompted the Scholar. The dark man sighed and took his cap from his head.

“I only know what the ancient legends say about this place,” he whispered back. “It is said that it was once a place where many kings of old hid to keep themselves and their families safe. In later years Damrok was built above it and the Labyrinth was used as a dungeon in parts. Then when the kings turned evil, it became a favorite method of killing unwanted people. Sometimes they lived for years down here, eating from the carcasses of those who died before them and looking for a way out. Only one or two ever made it out the doors. It is said that the closer you get to the exit, the more dangerous the path becomes. That makes me think that we are a long ways from the entrance, since we haven’t encountered any traps yet.”

“What kind of traps are there?”

“Probably many of the conventional ones -- pits in the path with spikes in them, shooting mechanisms that are triggered by someone stepping on them, hallways that are made to cave in when they are passed through, trapping the people inside. But most dangerous of all are the traps that are of magic. I can sense these before they snap shut, but they are often much more deadly and painful than the conventional ones.”

“So I believe we are in quite a fix, aren’t we?”

“M’lord...”

“I think we can forget the formalities, since we are in this up to our necks,” Dylan interjected. “I’m Dylan.”

“Savoy,” the Scholar answered. “As I was about to say, there is a possibility that we might find the way out.” The lord raised one eyebrow.

“You see, shortly before we left on this journey, I acquired an old parchment. I think I now know why I copied it and brought it with me.” He reached into his tunic and pulled out a small package of paper. He bent it towards the torch.

“This was written by a -- Till ya List Hayn, who claims that he lived to leave the Labyrinth, but what is most interesting, is that he described the way out and the traps that he encountered.”

“So a map!”

“No, just a description -- in a poem. That means we will have to figure out what we can trust and what not. Let’s take a look at what he’s written here. Oh, it’s written in old Cavendish, that means it won’t rhyme in our language. I’ll have to translate.” He squinted at the copied characters and began to read:

*The words of Till ya List Hayn after he escaped from the Labyrinth of Death beneath Damned Rock, the castle of the ancient Kings of evil.*

*In we fell down a slippery hole  
down to the very clutches of death.  
Four did enter,  
one did leave.  
The Labyrinth stole our life.*

*Through winding passages and giant halls  
for water we searched.  
Atreus’ pool was found  
and refreshment given  
after three days without water.*

*Beneath Hera’s guiding hand  
with the wisdom of Athena  
we searched for the outlet  
and looked for an exit  
for time unknown.*

“This guy sure knows his mythology well,” Dylan muttered. Savoy read on.

*The path did wander through great halls  
where once the ancient lords feasted  
beautiful were the tapestries  
and deadly the food.  
Three left one behind, who tasted and died*

*To the top, to the top  
run and do not rest!  
Burning wind,*

*frigid waves  
followed the traveller from the depths*

*The rooms were small, yet hid us  
from the footfall of the unseen.  
Death stalked,  
night walked,  
seeking to kill those who intruded.*

*Before us the pits deep and dark,  
the iron spears were sharp  
and poisoned  
to kill him  
who merely touched them.*

*Hades hand rushed by, striking one of three.  
Cold and evil death held fast  
and slowly she fell  
slowly she died  
but not until the gate was opened.*

*Yonder silver light?  
What is it?  
It is a rain of silver,  
a sparkling curtain.  
Only Diana's Child holds the key.*

*The shining drops are deadly  
seeking the one unclean.  
Three did come,  
two did pass.  
The traitor lost his life.*

*Across the river of crimson flames  
One must carry the other.  
The stepping stones shifted,  
the path was uneven.  
And yet Sophia's hand guides the step.*

*One last test before the gates.  
Choose the path you will go.  
One leads to back,  
the other to life.  
Right or left, where shall you go?*

*There, the gates to life.  
Yet for one to exit, one must stay.  
A death to give life,  
life given by a sacrifice  
So one stayed and one left.*

*The mournful wails of the one who left  
do echo still in the walls of the Damned Rock.  
Let him who escapes,  
let her who lives  
write this in stone by Atreus' pool.*

*In this message the path is written,  
in this poem the way is clear.  
Follow the words,  
understand the lines  
and find the door to life.*

“Interesting,” Dylan muttered. “I wonder what it means.”

“Well, it looks like they fell in through the same passage we did. Perhaps this is Atreus’ Pool.”

“It certainly didn’t take us three days to find it.”

“Thanks to Swift,” Savoy returned with a grin. He glanced at the rock wall behind the pool. It was smooth, as if waiting for an inscription.

“I guess, then, that this is where we have to put the poem.”

“In old Cavendish? No one can read that today,” the lord interjected.

“No, I’ll put down the translation. It shouldn’t be too hard. The stone is quite soft. May I use your hunting knife, Dylan?” The other nodded and shifted his sleeping daughter just enough to draw the bright blade. Savoy balanced himself on the edge of the pool and began to carve the words into the wall.

“Savoy, what do you know of Till ya List Hayn?” Dylan asked after a while.

“My forefather wrote about a Tillus of Dell Cairn who had lived through the Labyrinth. Some say that Dell Cairn was the capital of the Lands of Cavend to the east of Carrock. Dell Cairn is the name given that city in our tongue -- royal Lectus. In old Cavendish it was called List Hayn, which could be literally translated as ‘the secret grove.’ It was called that way because it was once a place where Odin and Freya were worshipped.”

“What does this have to do with Till?”

“Just a moment. The fact that List Hayn was at that point no more than a few houses is significant, because about the time that Damrok became a bastion of evil, Tillus of Dell Cairn was supposed to have led a revolt against the kings, trying to make Carrock and Cavend a kingdom of its own, with himself as leader. Hereby he reached back to the legend of Odin’s heir, who supposedly was called to reign the whole of the Ancient Kingdom. He, his wife, and two other principal people of the movement were finally captured and cast into the Labyrinth. Tillus is said to have come out alone. That makes the poem all the more truthful.”

“So what happened to this man?” Dylan wanted to know.

“It’s uncertain, but it is said that he went and joined the Landal. He took a second wife among them and it is said that his great-grandson finally led the Landal against the Ancient Kingdom.” Savoy sighed. “Aside from being an excellent poet and a very evil man, there isn’t much else that can be said of him.”

“Then why did the *silver rain* let him pass and not his friend?”

“I have no idea, Dylan. It might have been that he held the key to it.” The Scholar finally stepped back. “There, that ought to be legible enough,” he said with grin, looking at the letters of the poem.

“Mm-hm,” the lord mumbled and then stared ahead. The mention of Tillus’ wife made him think of his lady, somewhere far up above him in the castle. How was she and what was happening? *Protect her, Word*, he prayed silently. And he was certain that the Word would do so.



**H**VENING HAD COME, twilight coloring the large throne room in crimson shades. Alick had been gone for some time now. It seemed to Tabea that the large tapestries came to life. Here Baccus danced with his Maneads, there an ancient king watched while Zeus swung his bright lightening bolt across the room. There Helios drove his sun-chariot across the sky, there Hades and Persephone reigned over the souls of the underworld. So many ancient

images of the gods. Pff! The gods. Tabea stood up from the couch she'd been sitting in and went up to a life-size representation of Hera, Queen of Heaven. These were no more than images woven in tapestries. She brushed one hand against the heavy cloth. It shivered under her hand, as if it felt that there was something different about her. There were times when these and other deities had been worshipped. She remembered that her father's favorite god had been Mammon -- money personified. She hadn't chosen any for herself. Why was that?

Over the last years she'd watched her husband come to believe more and more in the one that the Scholars called the Word. Some said that this was so impersonal -- just a word, a force. The young woman grinned as she stepped back from the tapestry. Perhaps this Word was merely an impersonal force...

Still, she'd experienced something, so long ago, when she'd been enchanted by Alick. It was that small, quiet voice that had protected her from losing her composure while facing up to Roanna. The blue eyes glanced at the rich mosaics on the floor.

"I have so many questions about you, Word," she said quietly. Suddenly she jumped. Had someone answered?

*So ask.* It must be her imagination -- no, there again!

*So ask me, Tabea!*

"Are you an impersonal force?"

*Would I be that if I talked to you in this way?* It was a simple question. Slowly she realized that the rich Voice was not inside her, but really touching her ears.

"Can I see you?"

*No one can see me and live, child.*

"But you've got to be visible."

*Yes, I was. The Word became flesh.*

"I don't understand."

*You will, someday soon. Look around you, Tabea, at the gods made by human hands. Shouldn't it be the other way around -- men made by God's hands? Zeus and Hera, Baccus and Helios, Hermes, Atreus, Athena... all of these are just images and imaginations of man.*

"You aren't?"

*Do you think you are imagining this conversation, Tabea á Carrock?* Slowly a the room began to glow brightly before her. There were shining, swirling colors. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled. The rich Voice was now clearly audible. She fell forward on her face, shaking in fear.

*I am, Tabea á Carrock. You don't imagine me and you don't have to. I am who I am and I will never change. Remember that. And remember what you have seen.* The light and the glory faded. The Presence, however, was still there, heavier than ever.

*I want you as my servant, Tabea, but you must chose that for yourself. I never will force anything on anyone that they themselves have not chosen.* The woman shook under the implication of those words.

"How can I serve you?" she whispered. Strangely she felt inadequate and filthy before this great Presence.

*I will show you when the time comes. I know also that you feel like you are too weak for that. I will cleanse you, Tabea, so that you can serve me, the way Savoy and your husband do.*

"Dylan serves you?" she gasped, looking up.

*Yes.*

"Has he ever seen you in this way?"

*No, nor does he need to. But that is his life and his story. I only show each person his or her own story, Tabea. Your insecurity and impatience were the reason you sinned when you didn't wait to marry Dylan before sleeping with him.* Shame washed over her at that. Had it really been her fault? Yes, it had. She had allured him, pressing the right buttons with her actions and clothing -- or lack of it for that matter. His impatience has been part of it, but she had known then she must wait. *Why didn't I?* she wondered. This just added to the feeling of being filthy. She had wanted fulfillment and protection and she'd taken it in an illegal way.

"You're right, Word, I was wrong there and I'm sorry about it. I wish I could do it all over again and do it right."

*You can't do that, Tabea. But I forgive you everything. I will strenghten you, child, and you will be my servant. Be clean.* The last words were merely whispered and in the same instant she felt lighter than a feather. She knew that she was more than adequate. She'd been forgiven by the Word -- the almighty God. He'd given her worth now. Slowly she sat up and stared at the darkening room. The twilight had settled. She stood and began to light the

many lamps by using a single candle that had burned until now. Baccus still was leering at her and Hera still sat on her throne, but they didn't bother her any more. They were just images and she knew the *personal, real* God -- the Word. It made her feel light and happy -- and hungry. Strangely a low table was set with food at the other end of the hall. She walked over to it, sat and was about to begin to eat, before she remembered to thank the Word for the food. It must have been him who provided it -- who else could have done it? Strange that he should be found even here in Damrok, the bastion of evil, but then if he was good and true the way Savoy had said, then he should be here, fighting the evil.

"Is this how I should serve you?" she wondered. The rich Voice was silent, but that didn't bother her. She would know soon enough.

Alick silently rushed along the dark passages to a room that he'd discovered many, many years ago during his study of the ancient lore of evil. It had something in it. He hadn't been able to open the door then, but he knew that now he would be able to enter it. He stopped in front of a low, wooden door. Here it was. What was behind it? Only one way to find out. He reached out and pushed it open...



"I'M COLD, DADDY." The little voice pulled Dylan from his deep, peaceful rest. He blinked his eyes open in the half-light. Asha was shaking in his arms. Yes, it really was cold here. He shifted himself to throw his heavy cloak around her, too. As he did the light fell across her and for the first time he noticed that she was merely wearing a nightgown.

"Asha, where's your dress?" he asked.

"Don't know. I'm cold."

"You ought to be if you aren't dressed right. But don't worry, I'll keep you warm." She shifted a bit more, snuggling into the warm folds of the brown wool. Dylan settled himself to fall asleep again.

"Ah, Dylan, you're awake!" Savoy remarked with a grin. "It's about time that we get moving again. That will get us warm." It was only then that the lord noticed that the others were already up. Lora had shared some of the meagre fare with Kyle already and now passed a piece of bread to Asha who took it gratefully and began munching on it, heedless of the crumbs that were now peppering the folds of her father's cloak.

"You're right, Savoy," the lord said, carefully extricating his daughter and setting her on her own two feet. "I think we'd better get moving." He looked down at Asha thoughtfully.

"You're going to need something a bit warmer there, little girl," he remarked. Asha nodded.

"But what?" he mumbled. He didn't have anything he could give her -- no, wait a moment... Quickly he shrugged off the brown jacket he was wearing over his tunic. The cloak would have to be enough now. He draped it over her shoulders and buttoned it up.

"How's that?" The little girl smiled and it seemed that the whole dismal corridor became a whole lot brighter.

"It's too big!" She was right. The hem brushed along the ground and her little hands barely reached halfway down the sleeves. Dylan smiled to himself as he rolled them up, so that her hands peeked out.

"I've got an idea," Lora said with a smile and opened her bag. "I have some string left over from the wrappings of the food. Maybe we can make a belt from it." Said and done. The little girl was now warmly packed up, her father's jacket becoming an oversized dress.

"Good, let's get moving," the lord prompted and they slowly wandered off down the halls. Kyle went first, holding a torch high, followed by Dylan with Asha, then Lora and Swift and Savoy brought up the rear whistling quietly. An uneasy feeling began to settle across Dylan's shoulders as they walked along the tunnel. Were they ever to get out of here?

Low thunderheads had gathered in the sky above the castle of Carrock. Stev again sat beside the bed of his enchanted wife. Her hair was tousled and she didn't rest quietly. Twice she'd gotten up and attempted to walk off, but had collapsed under a gentle touch from her husband and he'd then carefully put her back into bed. Now her head rolled back and forth and she mumbled incoherent words, as if in a daze. Sometimes he thought he could make out what she wanted to say, but then it was gone again.

Stev's thoughts however were out there in the howling wind. He rose, walked to the window, and opened it. The Hun-Halk were coming. The mere name made him shiver. It meant death and destruction to many poor people and here he was tending a sick wife. *I ought to be out there helping to find a way to protect the people.* Lightening flashed, washing the room in brilliance for seconds. The thunder clapped its hands and the gale screamed in Stev Pulleny's ears. Was it a protest against his thoughts? He stared out the window for a few minutes, before pushing it shut. He turned around and jumped.

"I'm sorry to startle you, ambassador," Philip said evenly. "I knocked, but you must not have heard."

"It's all right." He brushed one hand against his moist brow. "I'm just worried..."

"Of course." The high marshal gestured towards a chair, which the younger man gratefully took.

"Wine?" Philip didn't wait for an answer but already poured a glass from an iron flagon. He passed it to Stev, poured one for himself, and sat down in a chair across from the other.

"What did the council say?" the blonde man asked after a while.

"Nothing yet. They're all cowards." There was a bitter edge in the high marshal's voice.

"I don't blame them." Stev sipped from his glass. "We only know of the Hun-Halk from the stories and those aren't pretty. Maybe Old Roche..."

"No, he hadn't even been born at that time. I was thinking of Mother Yost." The ambassador sat up straight.

"Have you gone crazy?"

"What do you mean?"

"That old woman is almost as dangerous as Lady Roanna!" Philip made a throw-away motion with his free hand.

"Was, my dear ambassador, was."

"Is, sir."

"No, was. She has reformed her ways..."

"But is still selling talismans of Black Thor -- and worshipping him. Do you think no one knows that?"

"If we get her to help us..."

"Won't work and the council knows that. I hope you didn't suggest that." There was a look of reproach in Stev's blue-gray eyes. He had put down his glass and leaned forward, brow furrowed.

"No, the council suggested it."

"What?!?"

"Yes, the council suggested it. We wanted you to look her up," Philip continued lamely, setting his glass aside and then running a finger over his moustache. "You're the ambassador."

"Sorry, high marshal, I can't. My wife is enchanted and I must stay with her."

"But the Nation..."

"Dylan's orders go *over* the Nation, sir." The answer had a cold tone in it.

"I understand. We'll find someone else." He rose and so did Stev.

"You *won't* find someone else, high marshal." He stared at the ground. "I hope you remember what Dylan told us before he left." He now looked Philip square in the eye. "Any action for the welfare of the state has to be approved by the council *and* by *both* parties of the executive office -- that's you and me. I don't approve it. I will trust in the Word. He's taken us this far and will the rest." The high marshal was clearly impressed.

"I wish I had your faith, Stev Pulleny," he said with a half-smile.

"You can. Just try believing."

"I'll think about it. I'll take your veto to the council. They won't be very happy to hear it." He leaned forward. "I must warn you of something, royal ambassador: There are those in the council who are quite angry with Dylan for appointing you to this office, since you aren't of the Gentry. They will want to get you out of the way."

"I know that, marshal, but thank you for warning me." Philip nodded and turned to the door.

"Oh, marshal!" The dark-haired man turned back just slightly. Stev was grinning at the thought.

"Remind those angry people of two things: first, they are only of the Gentry because the lower folk chose them for that place and second, the Lady herself is not of 'noble' blood either. They didn't have anything against her."

"She doesn't have the power you do ambassador."

"Correct, high marshal. She has more." Philip smiled to himself.

"Good evening, ambassador."

“Good evening, marshal.” With that the high marshal left the chambers of the royal ambassador, who sat back down next to his wife. How long would it be until Dylan returned?

The singing had stopped quite some time ago and Dylan had taken turns with Savoy to carry his daughter. She was quite grouchy by now, hungry and tired, her little feet hurting from the rough path. Kyle was being a brave boy, but had been limping for some time. The lord had finally decided to take a break and Lora took Asha back down the hall to go potty. Savoy carefully examined the boy’s feet.

“And you’re sure they don’t hurt?” he asked.

“No.” It sounded resolute. Dylan grinned at that.

“Okay, but I’m still going to put something on them. It’ll help you walk better.” With that the Scholar reached into his once white robes and pulled out a little tin with salve. He smeared some of it on the boy’s feet.

“Now, you have to keep your feet out of the dirt until I tell you, all right?” Kyle nodded.

“Good.” Savoy straightened and came over to Dylan, who thoughtfully stared into the dark.

“He’s a brave boy. Much like his father,” the dark man remarked.

“I think more than his father,” the lord answered, brushing one hand against his beard.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I’m starting to get scared of this place.”

“Then you’re better than I am, Dylan. I’ve been scared of it since we’ve been here.” The lord turned and glanced at the dark face. It was dead serious.

“Well, you could have fooled me.”

“You don’t always have to show everything you feel.” Heavy silence rested between the two men. They could hear the little girl whining somewhere down the tunnel.

“Swift should be back soon,” the lord remarked after a while and turned away from the dark to sit beside his son.

“How’re you doing, boy?” he asked putting one arm around his shoulders.

“Okay, I guess.” He was silent for a moment. “I just wish we hadn’t brought Asha.”

“Oh?” A little smile rested on Dylan’s lips.

“Yeah, all she does is whine and you’ve got to carry her.”

“I kind of wish we didn’t have to bring her either, son, but not for that reason.” Kyle looked up at his father.

“Why?”

“Because she’d be safer if she weren’t here.”

“Don’t scare me, Dad.” It sounded serious.

“I meant what I said, Kyle. It’s not going to be easy, but I want you to do something for me, hm?”

“What is it?”

“You like Lora, right?” The green eyes of the boy took on a sparkly effect and he gave a shy nod.

“I want you to look after her for us, okay? I’ve got to look after Asha and Savoy has to look after the map. So that makes it your job to watch Lora and Swift. Will you do that?”

“Sure, Dad.” There was something joyful about his smile. “At least she’s not like Asha or the girls at the castle.”

“Oh?” Dylan raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, she’s real pretty and real nice. I think I’ll marry her when I grow up.” His father chuckled at that. At least there was one bright thing in this whole dark time. Children were just so wonderful.

“Maybe, Kyle, maybe,” was all he answered. In the same moment both Swift and Lora and Asha came back to where the men were. The she-wolf was clearly very excited, dancing around slightly, her tail swinging in circles so hard that Dylan was afraid it would come off.

“What did you find, Swift?” Dylan asked in the wolf-tongue.

“There is a great room a short ways up there that looks very much like it would in your stone walls,” she yipped in return. “And there’s food!” He quickly translated for the others.

“The halls of the kings, Dylan,” Savoy said quietly. The lord just nodded and they decided to go on. The ointment had dried enough that Kyle could walk and he solemnly now went alongside Lora, while Swift led the way.

“I’m hungry,” Asha groused from her position on Dylan’s shoulders.

“I already gave her some bread,” Lora called from behind.

“But I’m still hungry,” the little girl snapped.

“I’m sorry, Asha dear, we don’t have any more food,” her father sighed. “Let’s sing a song.” And half-heartedly they began to sing the melody to an old drinking song that everyone knew, which had to do with a clumsy barmaid who was too generous for her father’s liking and all of the accidents that happened because of that. It lifted their spirits just slightly and Dylan found himself grinning as they walked into the vast halls.



**B**EAUTIFUL TAPESTRIES HUNG ON ALL OF THE WALLS of this great room, making the lord of Carrock involuntarily think of the throne room somewhere high above them. Torches flamed brightly along the walls and a heavy iron chandelier hung from the ceiling. There was a long table, spread with food fit for a king -- pheasants, venison, roast pig, stuffed chickens, roasted doves, vegetables of all kinds, fruit, fresh bread, pastries and more. The smell made the mouths of the travelers water. They stood there gaping at the rich fare, wishing they could dig in.

The swishing of a dress made Dylan turn his head. A tall woman had just entered the room, clothed like a lady. Her hair was like the deepest night, her dark eyes unsearchable. She was dressed in white silk, gloves on her hands. Pearls and diamonds sparkled in the light.

“Welcome to my table, travelers,” she said in a melodious voice. “It is not often that I can greet guests.”

“I can understand that,” Savoy answered. “There are few who would venture down here. Who may you be?”

“I?” The lady laughed and it sounded like little silver bells tinkling. “I have many names. There are those who would call me Demeter others have given me the name Freya. But it is my name that does not matter. What is important now is your filling your stomachs.” She smiled and reached out to take Dylan’s hand.

“Come now, noble lord, you and your company. Feast at my table and forget your troubles for this night.” There was a very strong wish inside Dylan to give in to this stunning woman, when suddenly he saw an amulet around her neck. It was a small figure of a naked woman on a horse with a sabre in her hand.

“Tell me, Lady Freya,” he said in a cordial manner, “do you also go by the name Astarte?”

“Yes, noble lord, I do.” Her smile was still as charming and her hand stayed in his.

“I believe that Astarte was known to kill those who supped at her table in an unworthy manner.”

“In an unworthy manner, noble lord, but in that way only.”

“We are unworthy, Lady Astarte. We do not serve you.” She pulled her hand back as if she was burned.

“Whom do you serve?” she asked, her dark eyes flashing and voice like ice.

“We serve the Word, the God almighty, the living God.” It was said quietly, but with conviction. Astarte’s face went white, whether it was from fear or anger Dylan couldn’t tell.

“Yes, the histories tell of the true God defeating Astarte many times, though she had wormed her way among his people,” Savoy chimed in.

“How dare you insult me in this way!” the woman screamed. Lora took an involuntary step back, while Swift’s fur began to rise. She growled, fangs becoming visible.

“Begone, spirit,” the Scholar ordered, “your food holds nothing but death to those unfortunate enough to fall to your wiles.” The woman screamed once, Dylan could not decide whether in agony or in anger, and suddenly the room was empty, except for a long wooden table with many chairs, most filled with the bleached bones of others who had been trapped by Astarte.

“There goes dinner,” remarked Dylan. “And Till ya List Hayn did not say anything about that femme fatale, did he?”

“He did not have to meet her, Dylan,” Savoy answered. “I believe that each person sees what he or she is meant to. Our temptation would only be complete if we were invited to the table. We’re much to civilized just to dig in. Come along...” With that he turned and they walked from the hall, Asha still whining that she was hungry.

“Well done, fools,” Roanna snapped to herself as she stared into one of the mirrors in the Hall of Mirrors. Too bad that you could only see a few of the many rooms of the Labyrinth. Oh well, the principle ones were enough. Wasn’t the conjuring of Freya good enough for them? *Cursed Scholar*, she thought to herself. *Well, there still are many traps they do not know.*

Somehow she now wished that she could see where that Lady Tabea was. It might be interesting to watch her. Perhaps it might give the sorceress a way to allure her. And yet she was nowhere to be found.

“That fool Alick knew what he was doing,” she sneered. “Now he is probably enjoying himself with her.” With a wave of her hand the mirror showed her own proud face and white hair again. She didn’t know how far she was from the truth.



**R**OUGH, UNCUT STONES NOW FORMED THE SLIGHTLY RISING PATH that Dylan and his friends went up. The cold had somehow gotten less and it had been about a half-hour since they had to throw away the first of their torches. It made the lord feel a bit woozy. By now they had only encountered one trap. Still they had eight more torches, counting the one that they’d just lit. It should be enough.

A short ways behind him Lora and Kyle went along side-by-side. The beautiful girl from the south was humming to herself, one hand playing with one of the long, silver earrings she wore.

“Lora,” the boy cut through her thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Do you think we’ll ever get out of here?” She smiled at that. *Oh, I wish so much that we would*, she said to herself. She had successfully hidden her fears deep down inside up until now and she had no wish to show them at all. Oh, just to be out in the open again.

“Yes, I think we’ll get out. The Word is guiding your Dad and mine.”

“Good, ‘cause then we can get married.” She stopped fumbling with her earring, a bit amused at Kyle’s remark.

“I think you’ll have to get a bit older first,” she interjected.

“Okay. Then we’ll just have to wait.” It sounded final. *The lord has spoken*, she thought wryly, playing with her earring again. Suddenly it slipped from her grasp and tinkled among the stones.

“Oh!” she cried and went down on her hands and knees, feeling for it. She found it quickly, but also something else. The ground was wet.

“Dad, there’s water on the ground.”

“What?” Savoy sounded very worried.

“There’s water on the ground.”

“And it stinks here!” Asha whined from where she was padding beside Dylan.

“Like rotten eggs...” the Scholar whispered. “*Burning wind / frigid waves...* -- Oh no! The second trap!” Dylan stared back at his friend.

“Get moving!” Savoy cried. “*To the top, to the top / run and do not rest!*” The lord scooped his little girl up in his arms and started running. As they moved the smell began to get worse and now their feet were splashing in small puddles. *Move, move*, Dylan chanted to himself. Suddenly the tunnel ended against a stone wall.

“What now?” the lord panted, more to himself than to the others.

“Look, handholds!” Kyle cried. “This is gonna be fun!” *At least he doesn’t understand that we’re all about to die here*, Dylan thought, just a bit angrily.

“Okay. Savoy, you take Asha. I’ll take Swift and go first. Let’s move it!” He turned to the wolf. “Come on, Swift, on my back,” he ordered in wolf-tongue, kneeling down. The she-wolf did as she was told, her front paws resting on his shoulders. Lora quickly wrapped the cloak around her and tied it fast, so she wouldn’t fall. Then Dylan started the climb. It was only about twenty steps, but he must go quickly. Suddenly a quiet clicking alerted him. He had pressed down on something with his right hand. He glanced over his shoulder and found himself staring at three arrows.

“Uh, oh.”

“What is it?” Savoy called

“I’m staring down the barrel of a loaded gun and when I let go, we’re dead.”

“If you don’t we’ll all be dead!” came the reply.

“I know, I know, just give me a second.” There was only one way to save himself. Hopefully the mechanism was rusty.

“Get away from the shaft,” he ordered. “I’m going to jump.” With that he lowered himself until he was hanging only by his right hand. One more breath, just a little thought ... and he let go. In the same instant the three arrows shot forward. With a loud crunch they embedded themselves in the wall where his head had been only seconds before.

“Are you sure you want to go up there again?” Lora asked him.

“We don’t have any other choice, do we, girl?” Dylan answered just a bit impatiently and started the climb again, all the more carefully. When he reached the arrows he broke them out of the wall and tossed them down the shaft, where they clattered on the ground.

“Wow!” Kyle breathed, picking up one of them and looking at the sharp point in the torchlight. There were no other arrows in the wall or hidden mechanisms, so the rest came up safely. Lora carried the only torch that they’d kept alight and once on top, Dylan rekindled his flame.

“There, now we’ve gotten away from the ‘frigid waves’ and ‘burning wind.’” the lord remarked.

“Don’t feel too happy too early,” Savoy returned. “We haven’t reached the end of this yet.”

“So what’s next?” Lora wanted to know.

“Death stalking,” the Scholar answered with a straight face.

The room that Alick stared into was small with a low wooden table and two chairs in it. There were several chests and closets against the walls and a curtain hid a doorway across from him. Silently he stepped in, his eyes getting used to the light that came from several torches. He turned and closed the door, perhaps a bit disappointed that everything was so plain.

“Ah, Alick, there you are at last,” came a voice from behind him, making him jump. “I’ve been expecting you for some time.” The ex-wizard turned, almost a bit fearfully. There in the doorway with the curtain was a tall man. He stepped through, letting the curtain fall shut behind him. There was a strange quality about this man, as if he wasn’t quite human. His hair was silver and he wore a close-cropped beard of the same color. Youth and age mingled strangely in his face and the eyes were so indistinct in color that at times they seemed blue, and at times nearly black. Yet they were frank and clear, like those of a child. He was dressed in white robes, his head bare. A thick belt of gold threads was around his waist. His arms were bare from the elbow down, thick and powerful, clearly used to hard manual labor. There were strange scars in each wrist. His feet were bare with similar scars in the heels. In his left hand was a white capsula with golden caps, a tube used for holding messages. His clothing was simple and yet royalty spread from him in every direction, making Alick bow to this man unknown.

“Rise up, Alick of Dell Cairn,” the man said with a smile. “We have much to speak about. Will you take a seat?” The old man sat down with shaking hands. To his surprise the table was set with a simple meal: fish, bread, and a goblet of fine red wine. He could have sworn that it was empty only moments before.

“Eat, servant of Carrock,” the man ordered him, “and be strengthened.” Slowly Alick did as he was told. The fish and bread tasted wonderful to his starved stomach -- he hadn’t eaten for nearly a day -- and the wine was thinned down enough so that it would keep his mind clear and yet it was incredibly rich. All the while the strange man did not touch any of the food.

“And you, m’lord?” Alick finally asked. “Will you not eat?”

“No, my friend, I will not eat. You need strengthening in all respects. The meal is for you.” The ex-wizard rose and bowed slightly.

“I have eaten my fill, sir,” he said. “Many thanks.”

“Good, Alick of Dell Cairn. Now we can begin.” The fiery eyes regarded him for a moment. “You have a question, friend. Ask it.”

“Pardon me, my lord, but who are you?” A smile washed across the man’s face.

“I have many names, friend. Among your people there are those who call me Masih. Others have given me the name Yeshu. Others would call me the Anointed.” He held out one hand. “I am who I am, Alick. And I have a comission for you.” The words were spoken slowly and majestically, making the old man fall to his knees.

“What is it, my lord?”

“You are to be a Scholar, Alick of Dell Cairn.” The old man bowed his head to hide the rueful smile that now washed across his face.

“Is that so strange?”

“Yes, my lord, it is. I am an enemy of the Scholars, my lord. I am a wizard. I hoarded my powers, only to have them broken by the Word in the Battle of the Wolf. I am not worthy to be a Scholar, my lord.”

“I am the one who makes worthy or unworthy, Alick,” the Anointed countered, rising. “Are you willing to serve me?” Alick looked up just a moment and was dazzled by the glory that suddenly surrounded the man. His robes were glowing, the belt of gold like a river of melted metal. The voice had become more majestic. His shining hair was like a royal diadem of pure silver. The ex-wizard looked back at the ground.

“I am unworthy, my lord,” he whispered.

“I will make you worthy, Alick. Are you willing?” For an instant the battle raged inside the old man. He was being chosen for something. He had given himself to the Word unconditionally and strangely he knew that the Anointed was speaking in the power of the Word. He finally decided.

“I am willing, my lord. Send me.”

“Then rise, Alick of Dell Cairn and take your commission.” The ex-wizard did as he was told and in the same instant his black robes fell from his shoulders, now replaced by ones of dazzling white. The Anointed held out the scroll, which Alick took, not daring to look in that shining, terrible face.

“Go now, Alick the Scholar,” the Anointed ordered. “You will now know what to do.” The old man bowed before the shining One and then turned and left the room. Now he knew what he must do.

The tunnel had changed again, now cut directly into the rock. The walls were rough and the ceiling not smooth. This must have once been a natural tunnel that had later become part of the many corridors of the Labyrinth. The air here shifted strangely, at times cold and clammy, then suddenly a burning heat. No sooner had sweat covered the brow, than they stepped out of the heat back into the icy cold, now shivering. Dylan carried Asha under his cloak, the way he’d carried another child during his enchantment, so long ago. The company was silent, just pressing on. The children were too tired to even complain and even the determined lord was longing for sleep.

To the left and to the right were jagged openings in the rock, leading into low chambers. It was from these that the cold or hot air blew. The only sound that could be heard was the crunching of the stones beneath their feet and the occasional quiet moan of Kyle, as his already hurt feet became even more sore. Suddenly Dylan came to a halt.

“What was that?” he whispered.

“What?” Lora whispered back.

“I heard it to,” came Kyle’s hoarse voice.

“It sounds like someone is following us,” Savoy said.

“Let’s continue on,” the lord suggested and they moved forward as silently as possible. Occasionally a deep growl came from Swift’s throat. She held herself close to Lora, who was the last in line now. The dark girl laid one hand on the broad head, feeling only a little bit of comfort. Then she heard it, too, a scraping behind her, like claws on the rough ground. Get out of the tunnel ... out! Suddenly the others vanished in front of her and she stood alone, her torch flickering. Where did they go? She looked to the left and saw one of the craggy openings beckoning her. After a moment’s hesitation she jumped through, Swift with her ... and just in time. The scraping now went by the opening to her small cavern. Her heart suddenly was in her throat as the sound paused and a quiet hissing was heard. Then it resumed and passed away. She breathed a sigh of relief and then looked around her.

The chamber was much larger than she’d imagined and she was merely sitting in the entrance. Slowly she rose, filled with awe. The room was a perfectly circular dome, as if she was in the upper half of a sphere. It seemed that light came from the walls and not just from her torch. In the center of the room was a low pedestal with a statue on it. Curiously Lora stepped closer. The statue was that of a girl, standing straight and tall. Her hair looked as if wind was rushing through it. Her face was noble and beautiful, young and yet not. Strangely, she was dressed in real clothing. A wide gray cloak was draped over one shoulder, fastened at the neck, leaving a halter and loincloth of a gray fur visible. There was a knife of flint with a handle of bone at her side and a necklace of bear claws on a leather thong around her neck. Another leather thong was around her forehead, almost like a diadem. In her right hand was a long spear with a head of deer bone.

Slowly Lora’s eyes grew wider. She knew this image, or at least who it was supposed to be. The legend of the Watchcarer was known to most people, a woman whose task it was to watch after the animals of the field and forest. She was closely bound to them, could communicate with them and was said to have special powers. But she’d vanished many years ago, only the myth remaining. Here was the proof that the story was true. The girl

reached out and tentatively touched the gray cloak. It was almost like a spell had laid itself across her. It was a call to her. The Watchcarer must return -- in her. This would be a difficult task, she knew.

"But what else can I do?" she asked herself and mustering what little courage she had she quickly swapped her clothes for those of the Watchcarer. As she fastened the string of claws around her neck and finally picked up the shaft of the spear, she felt as if she was suddenly changed. She looked towards where Swift was sitting, golden eyes full of wonder. She then threw her head back and yipped.

"The Watchcarer." Lora understood it, like she would the speech of all animals.

"Yes, Swift, I am the Watchcarer." She knelt beside the wolf. "But I'll need help. Will you help me?"

"How can I say no?" the wolf asked, bowing its head. "I will serve you with my life."

"Then come, we've got to take care of that thing out there," the dark girl said, picking up her spear.

The cleft where Dylan and the others pressed themselves was small and uncomfortable. Savoy was sitting closer to the opening, frantically looking around.

"What is it?" the lord asked.

"Where's Lora?" the Schoar returned in a choked voice.

"I don't know."

"I think she's out there, Dad," Kyle whispered.

"My God!" Suddenly there was a loud hissing, like that of a snake.

"Lora!" Savoy cried, trying to get through the hole.

"No, Savoy, it'll kill you!" the lord cried, trying to keep his friend back, but, weighed down by his children, he couldn't stop the dark man from leaping through the opening. Outside he found himself suddenly face-to-face with a scaly being. The head was crowned with three horns, small beady eyes staring into his own. It must have been as tall as a horse, the face reminding him a bit of that of a rhinoceros. It took a step forward, claws scraping against the stones. A forked tongue flicked out like that of a snake.

"Oh, Word, protect me," the Scholar gasped, taking a step backwards. The monster followed. Suddenly a clear voice rang out.

"That's enough! Begone!" The beast suddenly backed away down the tunnel and vanished. Now Dylan finally pulled himself out of the cave.

"Are you all right, Savoy?" he gasped.

"Yes, I'm fine, praise the Word. But where's my daughter?" He walked forward. "Lora?!?"

"I'm here, Dad." The voice came from right behind him. He turned around and gasped. The girl was standing there, same as before, except that the flickering torch light now played over a gray cloak and she held a long spear in her other hand. Her hair was pulled back as ever, but her earrings were gone and there was now a leather thong in the midnight tresses. Something about her had changed, Savoy was sure of that. Swift sat beside her calmly.

"Are you all right?" he asked, finally regaining his composure.

"Yes, I am." She straightened a bit. "Let's go on. It's too dangerous to stay here. I can't hold him back forever." Only then did the Scholar notice that her forehead was slightly wrinkled, as if in intense concentration. He still couldn't bring himself to move, but Dylan's wide hand on his shoulder moved him forward.

"Let's go, quickly," the lord ordered. The dark man complied slowly. Lora turned and led the way down the tunnel, leaving her father to wonder about what had happened there. They moved forward speedily, Kyle having to run to keep up at times. The dark girl's cloak billowed out like the wings of an angel and for an instant Dylan found himself thinking that his son was right about this girl. She was stunning and so different, now more than ever. *It's almost as if she's become someone totally different in those few minutes*, he thought.

Suddenly the girl in front of them fell down on her hands and knees, gasping. The torch slid across the floor and crashed into the wall.

"What is it?" Savoy asked, kneeling next to her.

"He's broken free," she moaned. "Quick, we don't have much time." And then to Dylan's surprise she spoke in the wolf-tongue, "Swift, on ahead. Find the pits and warn us!" The wolf sped off into the darkness.

"Lora..."

“Later, Dad, I’ll explain later. We’re going to die, if we don’t hurry.” She pushed herself off the ground, retrieved her torch, and quickly followed the beast that ran on ahead. Suddenly she stopped and held up the torch. There was a chasm in the ground, a thin ledge along one side. Swift was already across.

“Hurry!” she yipped and disappeared again. Lora slid along the thin ledge with ease, jammed her torch into one wall.

“M’lord, pass me Asha.” Dylan knew what she meant. He threw back his cloak and passed his torch to his son.

“Don’t worry dear, she’ll catch you,” he whispered, not knowing why he was so confident. He now held his daughter cradled in both arms, concentrated for a moment and suddenly she went flying across the pit, too scared and surprised to scream, landing safely in the young woman’s arms, while Savoy passed along the wall. Dylan then took Kyle on his back and they slid across the ledge. They could already hear the scraping of the beast down the hall.

“Quick,” Lora panted. “This one isn’t wide enough to hold him, but the next one is. They reached the next pit, which was truly a chasm. Again Swift was already on the other side. Lora tossed the torch across, where the wolf deftly caught it in her teeth. She then leaped up into the darkness and suddenly went shimmying across an almost invisible rope.

“Asha, you will have to hold on to me as tight as you can,” Dylan whispered to the little girl. “Okay?” She just barely nodded, shaking with fear, silent tears running down her cheeks. Now the Lord leaped up and went sliding across. The Scholar lifted Kyle up, who came next and then tossed his torch to Dylan, who just barely got it, nearly losing his balance over the pit, if Lora hadn’t pulled him back with almost supernatural strength. Finally Savoy came across after them.

“Just one more,” Lora gasped. In the same instant the beast came flying up the tunnel, sliding to a halt at the pit.

“Get back, all of you!” the young woman cried. They staggered behind her. A sound like a hissing steam pot was heard from the strange monster. Lora’s cloak flew up and a sticky substance splattered against it. The cloth came back down and the girl raised her spear. It glinted dully in the flickering torch light.

“Don’t you dare,” she hissed. “They’re under *my* protection.” Dylan watched in fascination as the battle of wills began. Lora’s bronze forehead was flecked with sweat, her hazel eyes burning into the beady ones of the strange being across from her. Slowly the horned head bowed down and then it began to slither backwards into the dark.

“It won’t be back,” she sighed, turning around. Her face was quite pale. Savoy stepped out to comfort her.

“Don’t touch me, Dad, or else you’ll die.” She held up her cloak “*Hades’ hand*. If anyone touches the venom with his bare skin it will kill him.” There was the sound of tearing cloth and Dylan passed her a piece of his cloak.

“That should do.” The girl nodded and carefully wiped the strange stuff off, finally tossing the soiled rag into the pit. At last Savoy took her by the shoulders.

“Daughter, how did you do that?” he asked in awe.

“Haven’t you guessed, Dad?” she asked, reaching into the collar of her tunic. She brought out the necklace with the bear claws.

“I’m the Watchcarer,” she said quietly.



**M**ORNING HAD COME AND GONE SLOWLY and in the same speed the rest of the day slipped away over Tabea, until twilight fell again. Alick was still gone and Dylan lay somewhere down in the Labyrinth. His lady sighed and slowly walked back and forth in the great room. She missed her children and husband and couldn’t stop praying for them. Most of all she wanted someone to talk to, to give her comfort, but no one could be found. She went to one of the windows in a melancholy attitude and rested her head against the glass, staring out at the last rays of day. Tonight she only let one candle burn, a lone flame, a symbol of her solitude. Perhaps soon she’d be free of this place and back in Dylan’s arms, the children at her side.

No sooner had the last rays of the sun vanished, than did she hear a quiet knocking on the doors. Tabea suddenly felt chilled, watching one of the golden doors open. What came through made her scream. It was not Alick, but a shimmering figure of a young woman in flowing robes. Golden hair fell to her shoulders and down her

back. Her eyes were a sparkling gray. The door closed silently behind her. To Tabea it seemed that a light radiated from this shade. She frantically wondered where she could find a weapon, all the while knowing it was useless.

In a moment the shade had spied her and slowly floated across the room, carefully navigating around the furniture. It came to a stop in front of the shaking lady.

“Don’t be afraid,” came a soft voice colored by deep sadness. “I will not hurt you.” Tabea’s eyes narrowed.

“I am a prisoner here, just like you,” the shade sighed.

“Prisoner? Of whom?” Tabea asked, her voice shaking slightly. She knew this woman, but from where?

“Of the sorceress.” The ghost moaned quietly once more and then sat down on one of the couches. “I am looking for my name.”

“Your name?” The fear of this strange being was slowly leaving the Lady of Carrock, being replaced by an unexplainable pity. She walked over and sat down next to the shining figure.

“Yes, my name. If I can find it, I’ll be free from this prison.” The gray eyes turned towards the lady. And suddenly Tabea knew...

“Do you know my name?” the shade asked. The woman nodded.

“I do.”

“Tell me.”

“You are Alisande á Carrock, the foster sister of Dylan á Carrock and married to Stev Pulleny, the grand ambassador of Carrock.” The ghost shook her head.

“No, no, that can’t be it,” she whispered.

“It is, Alisande.” She reached out and took one shining hand in her own. It was solid, but strangely cold. Tabea knew what she must say.

“There are two steps to freeing you, Alisande,” she began, her blue eyes gently gazing into her sister-in-law’s. “First you have to hear the truth, but then you have to accept it. If you don’t do it, then you won’t come free.” The shade pulled her hand away and rose, floating just a bit away from Tabea.

“I can’t believe it, I just can’t. It’s wrong.”

“Why?”

“It feels that way.” The shining woman turned back and tears were glistening on her cheeks. “I wish I could believe it.”

“Say your name,” the Lady of Carrock ordered quietly, rising and coming to the enchanted girl.

“I -- I can’t.” Tabea reached out and grasped her by the shoulders.

“Say it.”

“I am -- Alisande,” she said slowly, her tongue falling over her own words. Suddenly the eyes became clear.

“You’re right, Tabea,” she laughed. “I *am* Alisande á Carrock! I’m free!” She stepped away, slowly beginning to fade from the room and twirled around.

“Thank you, sister,” she called, her voice now sounding, as if it was a long way off. “You’ve broken the enchantment!” And suddenly she was gone, leaving the Lady of Carrock alone in the throne room.

Roanna sat up on her low cot. Something had changed in the atmosphere, she knew that, but what? Slowly she rose and snapped her fingers. The candle on the table came to light. The sorceress reached into her cloak and retrieved a small mirror, looked in and gasped. Only her own face reflected in it, not Alisande’s like before. The spell was broken! A loud curse came from Roanna’s lips.

“When I get that Lady of Carrock in my hands...” she hissed, grasping at the empty air, her fine fingers suddenly like long claws. Now she must make her revenge complete. Those in the Labyrinth *must not* live!

Alisande blinked her eyes open in the low light of her room in the castle of Carrock. She felt strangely exhausted, unable to remember what had happened. It all seemed like a dream. She sat up and looked around. The wind howled outside her window and a lone torch on one wall illuminated the room. Slowly she got out of bed, standing up on her feet and yet having to sit down again, before the dizziness subsided.

It was then that she realized she wasn’t alone. There at the window stood a figure, the sandy head bowed and resting against the glass panes. Silently she rose and tiptoed across the room.

Stev had his eyes shut, trying to fight against his tiredness and and frustration. If only Alisande were awake again, he'd be able to concentrate on the problems at hand. The whistling wind held his mind and so it surprised him to suddenly feel someone wrapping her arms around his waist. He straightened and turned.

"Alisande!" he cried joyfully. She was standing there in her nightgown, gray eyes clear. She had finally been disenchanted.

"You're back," he whispered, drawing his little wife to him.

"Was I gone that long?" she asked.

"Too long, dear. The enchantment..." She stepped back, the memory now returning to her.

"Oh, yes, Roanna and the children... Tabea freed me!" Stev smiled warmly.

"So it was her after all. I had hoped for so long!"

"Well, here I am again, dear husband," she said with a smile. "I'm all yours." He just brushed her tousled hair with his right and laughed quietly.



SILENCE AND SOLITUDE RESTED ON THE SMALL GROUP of wayfarers in the Labyrinth. The children had gone to sleep, using their father's lap as their pillow. The light flickered across Lora and Savoy's dark features. The Scholar now thoughtfully held the long silver earrings in his right hand.

"You know what this means for you, Lora, don't you?" he finally asked.

"Yes, Dad, I know and I knew when I decided to take the clothing and the power." The Scholar slowly lowered his head.

"Of course there were Watchcarers who married and had children..." he mumbled.

"But I know that I'm not one of them -- at least not yet." She reached out and took her father's hand. "I love you, Dad, but there are some things that happen that must be my choice alone." He looked up and brushed his free hand across his face.

"It's just that the last of my children is growing up," he remarked and smiled wistfully. "It's difficult to let go."

"It is, isn't it?" Silence rested on them for a while.

"Let's change the subject," Dylan finally sighed. Savoy nodded.

"The next is this *silver rain*," the lord continued. "But who is *Diana's Child*, who is supposed to have the key?"

"Lora is."

"What?" Dylan looked towards her, surprised.

"Diana's Child is the old poetic expression for the Watchcarer," the Scholar explained. "It has to do with the legend. It is said that once the goddess Diana adopted a girl-child that her brother Apollo had fathered. She gave this child power over the animals of the wood and the field and the charge to watch them. In reality it was an office given to a couple by the Word. Perhaps there is some record what happened to the man, but whatever it was, in the past four or five hundred years nothing was heard of him."

"But, Lora, you're not wearing the clothes of the Watchcarer, are you?" the lord asked her. She smiled, just a bit embarrassed.

"I am, but they are a bit too -- loose for my taste, just a halter and loincloth of wolf skin. I've got them on under my clothes."

"Which is what many Watchcarers did, child," Savoy added. "It was often a secret shared only by her and her family. There were few who really lived among the animals and even most of those chose to wear more than just the wolf-skin clothing. Some believe that it was never really meant to be that way, but just the necklace, the cloak, and the weapons were to be passed on. But the only one who knows the truth now is the Word." The girl nodded and stared at the rough ground just between her feet.

"The worst part is that I'm the one who will have to confront and defeat Roanna," she whispered. "That scares me." As if she sensed her mistress' distress, Swift laid her head on Lora's leg and whined quietly. The girl smiled and stroked the head.

"But you'll help me, won't you?" she asked in the wolf-tongue. The wolf just blinked and said nothing.



It *might* have been the next morning, but here in the darkness they couldn't be sure. Still they walked on, Asha complaining again, showing that she was rested. After some time Lora seemed to have had enough. She reached into her bag to get a piece of the dried bread for the little girl and suddenly gasped. It should have been the last one, but there were still as many pieces as when they'd fallen in the tunnels and they seemed quite fresh, too. The Watchcarer marveled at this and gladly gave the little girl the food, who munched on it happily, now peppering her father's hair, since she was riding on his shoulders.

"You know," Dylan remarked, "now that I've gotten used to it again, I feel really good about not eating." Savoy smiled.

"You also have the strength to stand it without bread, your children fortunately don't."

"How much longer until we get out of here?" Kyle asked.

"Maybe one day, maybe two," the Scholar answered, putting one hand on the boy's head. "Look at that silver light up there..." Suddenly he went silent.

"The silver rain," Lora mumbled.

"My Word," Dylan gasped. Swift and Asha just silently stared ahead.

"I've got to go," the Scholar's daughter said. "I have the key."

"The Word go with you, my child," her father returned, affectionately hugging her. She nodded and slowly walked forward.

The council of Carrock had gathered early this morning and for once both of the executive officers were there. There was some unhappy muttering among the eight members at Stev Pulleny's appearance. Only Dylan's closest friends looked elated. Alisande stood by the cracked open door, not allowed to enter, but Philip and her husband wanted her to listen in and maybe give some advice.

"I call to order," the high marshal's voice thundered. Within moments the nine others were silent and ready to listen.

"Now that her highness Lady Alisande is disenchanted the grand ambassador can be with us." He leaned forward on the table. "We have beat around the bush long enough, gentlemen, and wasted four days of precious time."

"And even if his lordship could escape Damrok this morning, he wouldn't be here in time to lead the armies," Duchamps said, shaking his gray head. "Your diplomatic efforts have come to naught, the emmissaries should have been here this morning. I still suggest..."

"That suggestion is categorically denied," Stev snapped, which brought about some muttering.

"We should have been mustering from the moment we heard they were marching towards us," Galbin interjected. "We could have several thousand here by now and within two days the rest of the army."

"But what are some fifty thousand against over a million Hun-Halk?" returned Duchamps. "It would be a massacre."

"The lord of Carrock can't protect us any more," Lucius, the general warned. "We should choose a new leader."

"And that would be you, I suppose," Galbin remarked icily. The general smiled back with the same warmth and said nothing.

"That is enough, gentlemen." The high marshal was glaring down at the members. "I think one thing is clear," he continued. "No one thinks that diplomacy will work and everyone is in favor of war."

"That's not *quite* right," said Livio, a thin man with nearly feminine features. "I think we should not resort to violence at all."

"The last time we sent them ambassadors they sent one of them back blinded, missing his hands, and with the heads of the other three in a sack," Duchamps fired back.

"This time I don't even think they'll bother with one," said Conell, old Roche's eldest son. "I stand where my father would, on the lord's side. I say to battle, but not without his leadership."

"You know the border is two weeks away at top speed," the general interjected. "No army can get there and still fight."

"They're coming in from the east," rumbled Balbus, a fat old man who lived near the border. "There's nothing there that they could take anyway, the closest city being Wiston."

“Yes and no,” Galbin reminded him. “There are many farms and small fortresses there. Those people would be in danger. If we start today and muster them at the border, we’ll make it in plenty of time. His lordship will come out when he arrives.”

“That sounds plausible,” Duchamps muttered, for once having the same opinion as the “wolflings,” as he called the three who were left over from the Resisters.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Lucius accusingly looked at Poul and Enfer, the only two who hadn’t said anything yet. They glanced at each other.

“Our men are already mustered and on the way to the border,” Poul finally confessed. “We don’t need hours to decide like you do.”

“You are acting without approval of the council?” Balbus asked incredulously.

“Yes, they are, and so are Galbin and Conell,” the high marshal answered for them. “My own bodyguard has already left. They were sent away last night after I spoke with the royal ambassador.”

“This is mutiny!” Duchamps roared.

“It’s just acting when you don’t have the guts to,” Stev returned quietly.

“That is an insult, ambassador. I demand an apology,” the old man growled back.

“I will not apologize, Sir Duchamps. You need a thorn in your side to act. Now let’s vote and get this over with. Then I finally can get on my horse and join the soldiers.”

“This is forcing a vote,” Livio moaned.

“It was a necessity,” Philip answered. “All in favor of mustering the troops along the border say ‘aye.’” He looked over the nine others. “Ambassador?”

“Aye.”

“Galbin?”

“Aye.”

“Enfer?”

“Aye.”

“Poul and Conell?”

“Aye,” they said together.

“Duchamps?” The old man ground his teeth.

“Aye,” he finally growled.

“Lucius?” The general thought for a moment.

“I have no other choice,” he finally said. “Aye.”

“Balbus.”

“Aye, but only under protest.” He stroked his large paunch. “This all went much too fast for my tastes.”

“Livio?”

“I withhold my vote,” he snapped. “I have not had time to think about it.”

“But we can count on your men?” Conell asked, his brown eye sparkling like his father’s once had.

“Perhaps, when I decide,” came the cold answer.

“Very well, we might have to do without,” Philip surmized quietly. “I am also for it. Secretary?” The young man at the desk nodded. “Mark down the decision that the armies of Carrock will assemble at the eastern border of Carrock as quickly as possible. Also mark down that Livio á Westwyn has withheld his vote. The council is adjourned.” With that Livio leaped up and left the chambers, Duchamps and Balbus right behind him.

“That was very dangerous what you did there,” Balbus whispered in his ear.

“It is very dangerous what we are to do *now*,” Livio growled. “The Northkin have been on the throne of Carrock much too long, where *my* family should be reigning.”

“You ought to be thankful that Ryan á Carrock at least let your forefather live, otherwise you wouldn’t be around now,” Duchamps interjected

“Pfh!” made the scolded man and waved one fine hand in the older man’s face.

“Pfh yourself, Livio á Nordwyn,” Duchamps said quietly. “You’d better watch out, because even though I may not feel too much sympathy with many of Dylan á Carrock’s plans, I am still loyal to him. If you attempt to take his life, I will take yours.” With that he turned and walked away.

“Do you think we can still trust him?” Balbus asked.

“We must remove him soon,” Livio answered, brushing a hand through his golden hair. “We will see if the Northkin dynasty will make it past Dylan á Carrock. Seventeen of their number were too many already.”

From her niche near the door Alisande’s eyes narrowed. This sounded very much like high treason. Her husband must know.

Silver rain truly was a good description for what now sparkled in front of Lora. Shining lights danced in front of her like -- well, like little pieces of silver. It closed off the passage before her. She knew that they must pass by it. Slowly she walked forward and then a strange thing happened: The spots suddenly pulled themselves together and and in the play of light and darkness they formed a face.

“Who are you?” came a deep, rumbling voice. “And what do you wish?” She swallowed her fear and stood up straight, the torch in her left, the spear in her right.

“I am Lora the Watchcarer and my friends and I demand passage.”

“No one demands passage from me, Watchcarer.” The voice sounded bitter. “The only one who holds the key to my disenchantment is Diana’s Child.”

“I *am* Diana’s Child,” the girl returned through clenched teeth.

“You just said you are the Watchcarer,” the silver rain returned, amusement in his voice.

“Diana’s Child is the Watchcarer and the other way around.” She tapped her foot, slowly becoming impatient. “Look, we have no time...”

“Not even for my disenchantment?” the voice asked sadly.

“I don’t know what it takes to break your enchantment.”

“Then you aren’t Diana’s Child.” Lora sighed through her teeth.

“What do you want?”

“I demand one of your number as payment for passage,” came the voice, now demanding. “With the life of each traitor that I take my time here becomes less and my disenchantment draws nearer.”

“We have no traitors among us,” she answered resolutely.

“Then I will chose one. Bring your friends forward.” Lora had no choice but to obey and she led her friends out into the open.

“Look, it’s pretty!” Asha said with a smile and tried to walk forward to touch it. Dylan pulled her back.

“Don’t touch it, dear. It will hurt you.”

“I think I’ve already found my traitor,” boomed the voice.

“Not my daughter,” the lord snapped standing up and holding her to his chest.

“No, not Asha,” Lora repeated. “Listen to me, enchanted one, we demand passage. *Diana’s Child holds the key*, says the poem. I am Diana’s Child and I demand passage for all of us, unharmed.”

“You can’t do that,” the voice answered, becoming impatient. “I must have my traitor. There is only one missing.”

“Tell us of the last ones who passed by you,” Savoy finally interjected.

“Ah, yes, that little man with his wife and his friend. She was sick from the venom of the beast, but the little man kept me from taking her. No, he offered his friend, claiming he was the traitor.”

“Till ya List Hayn,” the Scholar groaned. “What was the man’s name, whom you took.”

“Arystobul Northkin.”

“That was one of my forefathers!” Dylan gasped. “Whatever was said of him, he stood against the power of the evil kings in justice. He was innocent.”

“He was a traitor!” the voice snapped.

“Perhaps to Tillus -- no, not even to Tillus. The Northkin, from whom came the Lords of Carrock, have always been loyal to their friends. Arystobul was no traitor.”

“Does that mean my life’s work has been made useless?” asked the voice very sadly.

“Yes, enchanted one,” Lora said, now stepping up to the giant silver face. “Even so, I have a deal for you. Let us all pass, unharmed, and the enchantment will break.”

“Can I trust you?” the voice and face were suddenly very sceptical.

“I am Diana’s Child. You can trust me.” The face looked thoughtful.

“Very well, Diana’s Child. Upon your word.” Suddenly the curtain lifted.

“Let’s go quickly,” Lora urged them and they rushed forward. After five steps beyond the curtain, the Watchcarer turned.

“The enchantment had been broken. Go in peace.” Suddenly the silver light was gone and Dylan thought he could hear a quiet, happy laughter.

“Who was that?” Kyle wanted to know.

“I don’t know, Kyle,” Lora answered, “but whoever it was and whatever the enchantment, he is free now.” With that they turned and walked down the tunnel.



**U**NLY THREE MORE TRAPS lay before them and already the temperature began to rise again. Dylan brushed his sweaty brow with his right hand and breathed heavily, again wondering how Tabea was. Throughout the last hours she’d constantly been on his mind and he missed her more with every step.

Under Lora and Swift’s watchful eyes they finally came into a cavern of roaring, searing heat and a low red light.

“The river of fire,” Savoy muttered, looking down into the chasm in the center. “Good description.” Down below flowed a dull red snake of molten rock, coming in to and exiting from the cavern by large tunnels.

“So how do we get across?” Kyle wanted to know.

“Stepping stones,” the Scholar answered.

“There,” Lora said, pointing at high pillars of rock that were strangely floating above the flames, not touching them or any wall.

“What makes them do that?” Dylan asked.

“Magic, Dylan, can’t you feel it?” Savoy returned. Yes, now the lord could, the power was slowly churning inside him.

“Let’s get across quickly,” the Watchcarer advised. “It’s not far to the exit from here.”

“Yes, but it’s dangerous,” Dylan answered, watching the pillars rise and fall and shift left and right.

“We’ll stand the test,” the dark girl answered with a smile and agily stepped out on to the first. Slowly she waited and watched, picking her way across the stepping stones. Finally she was across. Swift followed much more quickly, only touching four or five of them, and then only for an instant. Dylan sighed and went next. They were only wide enough for one foot to stand on and Kyle’s extra weight on his back made it harder to balance himself, but finally he was across. Savoy followed with Asha on his shoulders. It was an aching process for the dark man and more than once he nearly lost his balance, causing all of them to gasp, but then he was across and they stared at the path they’d come from.

“Let’s go,” Lora finally prompted, “we only have two more things to get through.” They nodded and followed her.

A gentle hand shook Tabea awake and she found herself looking into Alick’s concerned face.

“You’re back!” she said with a gasp, sitting up.

“Yes, m’lady, I am.” There was something grave in his voice.

“What is it?”

“We must move quickly, Lady Tabea,” he answered. “We must reach the front gates of the Labyrinth soon. The lord and the others are nearly at the entrance.”

“How do you know that? And why are you suddenly wearing white?” she asked, noticing his new robes.

“I am a Scholar now,” he returned with a smile. “The Word has prompted me. Let’s hurry. It’s a long way to the gates.”

Lora was right about them coming quickly to the end. Now after a quick walk they stood at a crossroads. To the right a steep stairway ascended and to the left was a low ramp that led up also.

“So, where do we go?” Savoy wondered.

“*One leads back, / the other to life,*” Dylan quoted. The dark girl stood there, chewing her lower lip and thinking.

"Let's go up the stairs," Asha finally said. "Mommy was up there last night."

"Mommy was up the stairs?" her father asked, kneeling down beside her. She nodded her little head.

"I dreamed it last night. Mommy was at the top of the stairs waiting for us with an old man in white clothes and I ran to her and she hugged me. Then I woke up." It was told simply, but surely.

"Can we trust it?" Dylan mouthed, looking at Savoy.

"Don't see why not," the Scholar answered and stepped on the first step. Suddenly there was a loud rumbling and a portcullis descended over both passageways.

"Well, I guess we've made our choice," the lord said. "Lead on, Asha." The little girl ran to the stairs and began climbing them. Dylan and Savoy followed close behind, next Kyle, then Swift and Lora bringing up the rear.

Sweat beaded on the lord's brow as they climbed step after step. Was it the right way? Would they make it out. There was no landing, just this sickening climb. Finally there was a light at the top of the stairs. It came closer and closer and suddenly they were standing in a vast chamber with a high vaulted ceiling with small holes in it to let light in.

"We must be somewhere near the top of the castle," Savoy remarked. "There are the doors." He pointed at two high ones that were now shut. They were shaped like great wings. He quickly crossed the room and tried to open them with his hands. No use, the hard stones didn't even begin to budge.

"*For one to exit, one must stay,*" Dylan mumbled. "But how do they open and what is the idea. Do we have to offer someone?"

"No, we can't do that," the Scholar snapped in a gravelly voice.

"Daddy, what's this?" Asha asked pointing to a stone that looked like a low dais in the center of the room. He walked over and looked at them. There were two footprints in the rock. He stepped up and on to them, feeling himself sink slightly. Majestically the doors opened, revealing a passageway lined with silent armor.

"So that's it," he breathed, stepping back. The doors instantly snapped shut. Savoy turned and walked over to Dylan.

"Don't you think we can find something to hold that thing down?" he asked.

"No, it's magic, Savoy. I felt it. Even Asha could hold the doors open, as light as she is. One of us must stay behind so the others can escape."

"The children have to go," the Scholar answered.

"And Lora and Swift," the lord added. "They are the only ones who can defeat Roanna."

"That leaves you and me..."

"I'll stay, Savoy, the world needs your wisdom..."

"No, Dylan I won't permit it," the dark man said, holding up one hand. "You are the Lord of Carrock, you *must* return."

"But I have a son who can take my place. It won't be so bad if I stay behind."

"It will be worse if you don't." Savoy took him by the shoulders. "Scholars come and go, Dylan. I already know that my Brendan will not be a Scholar like I am. He is gone and married, years ago and so is Lea. My dear wife will be cared for by them." He looked at the ground and his voice cracked. "And my Lora is now the Watchcarer." She reached out and affectionately put one arm around his shoulders.

"It's time I let go, Dylan," he finally sighed. "Listen to me and go. I will stay here."

"Savoy..."

"That's enough, Lord of Carrock," he said, voice becoming commanding. "As a Scholar I order you to go and help your lands. They will be in bitter trouble when you return. While we were traveling, I heard rumors that the Hun-Halk were arising. Your people need you, Lord of Carrock. Go and don't tarry." He stepped away from the lord and took a step towards the pedestal.

"Daddy." Lora held him back gently and then hugged him. "I'm going to miss you."

"And I will you, dear child." He brushed a tear from her cheek. "Now be a big girl and a strong Watchcarer. You will make it." She nodded and he kissed her forehead before letting go and stepping up onto the dais.

"The Word be with you all," he called as the doors majestically opened. Dylan and the others walked through and the lord turned back just in time to see his friend sadly step away. The doors fell shut behind them sealing Savoy the Scholar in his tomb.

“Daddy!” Lora screamed and fell down on her knees, burying her face in her hands. Swift came up and nuzzled her, while Dylan knelt beside her and put his arm around her.

“He’s gone -- forever,” she sobbed, now hugging her wolf. “And I didn’t even tell him how much I love him.”

“Don’t worry, Lora, you will see him again,” the lord said quietly. “I can promise you that.” She looked up hopefully, tears still flowing from the hazel eyes.

“Really?”

“Yes, don’t you remember what he told you about being with the Word?”

“It’s a place where everyone is happy!” Asha said, clapping her hands.

“And there aren’t any tears,” Dylan continued.

“And no sickness and no death,” Kyle added.

“And the Word himself is there, I know,” Lora whispered and then smiled. “I can’t wait for it.” She finally got up on her feet and wiped her eyes.

“Come on, we have work to do,” she sighed and held out one hand to Asha, which the little girl took gratefully. They were about to walk forward when quick steps were heard along the pathway.

“Mommy?” the little girl called, letting go of the Watchcarer.

“Asha?” came the call back down the hall. Through the shadows now rushed a slight figure in brown peasant’s clothes, followed by a majestic one dressed in white.

“Mom!” Kyle breathed as his sister took off down the hall. He followed her as quickly as he could. Tabea went down on her knees to hug them tight. Then she slowly stood up to see a weary and dirty Dylan approaching.

“My Tabea,” he breathed, taking her in his arms.

“Dear Dylan, I missed you so much,” she whispered and then he kissed her.

“Yech!” was Asha’s comment. Finally they let go of each other to greet the man who stood behind her.

“Alick!” the lord exclaimed.

“Yes, m’lord,” he answered gravely. “I am now a Scholar and at your service.” He made a bow.

“Then we must find your sister quickly,” the Watchcarer suddenly cut in, coming up.

“Young lady, what has happened to you?” the old man asked, regarding her carefully.

“I’ll explain on the way, sir,” she answered. “We have no time to lose.”

“She will be in the Hall of Mirrors looking for us.”

“Good.” With that they turned and hurried down the dark halls to seek Roanna.

The weather was growing cold as Stev and Alisande Pulleny mounted their horses to go off to the eastern border. Cloud rolled in from the east like an omen of bad luck.

“I have a bad feeling,” the ambassador said quietly.

“About?”

“About this whole thing. Perhaps you and I should remain here. I don’t trust Livio any more and I’m not sure about several of the others.” He sighed and then urged his horse on out the gate. His wife followed thoughtfully, then dug her heels in and rode up next to Stev.

“I heard something I think you ought to know,” she told him quietly and then described the conversation she’d heard between the three members of the council. Her husband’s brow darkened visibly.

“That does it,” he snapped, suddenly turned his horse and galloped back to the castle. Philip was still at the castle. He must be warned. The servants who were following suddenly were in confusion. What was going on here?

“We’re returning to the castle until further notice,” Alisande ordered.

Meanwhile Stev had thundered through the front gates, dismounted, and raced up the stairs. Now he was pounding against the doors to the high marshal’s office. No sooner had he heard Philip call “Come,” than he rushed in.

“Ambassador!” the high marshal greeted him in surprise. “I thought you’d already left.”

“I just got some very important information,” Stev announced, leaning on the desk. He lowered his voice. “Alisande overheard Livio, Balbus and Duchamps discussing Dylan’s fall. I believe his life is in great danger and I will leave towards Damrok at sundown.”

“On the testimony of one person?” Philip asked, raising an eyebrow. “Since when are you so impatient and negative, my friend?”

“Since my *wife* overheard it. I don’t know how your marriage is, marshal, but I trust my wife explicitly. I have no secrets from her and I know that she will not lie to me.” His face was quite red now. “After all Livio’s ancestor was the first and only tyrant of Carrock and character can be inherited. I’m afraid that he has the same character as his ancestor and will be reaching for the throne.”

“Over my dead body!” Philip growled.

“And over mine and that of many others, including Dylan and Kyle’s. Alisande and I will warn them. I suggest you call Duchamps in and question him. Then I suggest you arrest Livio and Balbus for high treason.”

“Forget it, ambassador,” the marshal said, leaning back. “I can’t do that on your testimony alone. I am not Dylan who can sense these things. I need Balbus’ and Livio’s men and I need yours.”

“Fine, take them. I’ve already given Michael Dubris the command.” He glanced out the window. “We have two hours to repack our things and change, then we’ll be heading towards Damrok.”

“You’ll be traveling by Jaune Ile, Livio’s castle. Watch yourself.”

“I will, that’s why we’re leaving at night.” Suddenly he smiled. “And remember that I have a protection that few others have.”

“And that is?”

“The Royal Wolves of Carrock. Farewell, high marshal. The Word be with you.”

“And you, royal ambassador.” Stev turned on his heel and walked out of the room, not noticing a thin, weasel-like man standing beside the door. He quickly rushed down the hall in the opposite direction and moments later a horse thundered out of the castle entrance towards Jaune Ile.

“Where are they?” Roanna muttered to herself staring into the mirror. Somehow she couldn’t find them. Only once had she encountered such a powerful resistance to her spells and that was when she was seeking the Watchcarer. She’d finally found that the beast in the Labyrinth had gotten her, but a very sickening feeling made her wonder if somehow her arch-enemy may have found a way out of the maze with the help of Dylan á Carrock. She also knew that Savoy the Scholar had remained behind and was as good as dead. Yet there was still the Watchcarer.

“Well, then I’ll just have to defeat her again,” she muttered. Yet there was still a little flutter of uncertainty in her heart, remembering the strange dream of her earlier teacher and lover Sean Welling.

“The Watchcarer can and will return, Roanna of Dell Cairn. And when she does, you will die,” he’d told her. *It will not happen*, she tried to console herself, her fist closing around her robes above her heart. The sound of the door being thrown open made her turn and she nearly screamed. There stood Alick, clothed in shining white, a white capsula with golden ends in his right hand, the left at the collar of his robe. He strode in slowly, regally.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped. “I thought you were dead.”

“Not all of us are to go yet, Roanna,” he returned quietly. “The Watchcarer allowed me one thing: to offer you free passage in exchange for your vessel of power.”

“You have no right to make that offer,” she snapped back. He stood up even straighter than before, his dark eyes sparkling.

“I have full authority to do so, Roanna of Dell Cairn.” His voice suddenly had a majesty and authority that made the sorceress take a few steps back. “I have been brought from the darkness to the light and the Word has invested me with the highest office he can give a man: to be a Scholar, something I have no right to be. And yet it is grace.” He had said this in such a way that it shook the deepest part of her being. Might she take the offering of peace? But, no, she must not be weak like her brother had been. She would be strong and send them all to their death. Now Alick extended the scroll to her.

“Here is an offering of amnesty for you, sister. If you take it and agree to it we will all leave these halls alive. If you do not it will mean the end of your life on this earth.”

“You offer *me* amnesty, fool?” she asked. “You stand in my power and want to offer me the terms of surrender. I think not!” And she laughed.

“You have no power over me,” he answered, “just as I had no power of Dylan á Carrock when he came to defeat me. With the robes, office, and authority of the Scholar comes an invulnerability to all magic and sorcery, as long as I stand in the Word’s will. And now I know I do.”

"Pfh!" she hissed, mumbled an incantation, and made a throwing action with her right. Fire shot from her fingers but it stopped in front of Alick, who hadn't moved. The flames vanished without touching him. Her eyes narrowed, as she took a step back, reaching for one of the spears that leaned against the wall beside her.

"You may stand against fire, but not against iron!" she screamed, launching herself forward. The Scholar had only a moment to move aside and was not quite quick enough, the sharp point going through his shoulder. The sorceress yanked the spear back and he fell forward. She raised it again to deliver the final blow.

"Stop!" came a voice with more authority than Alick's had ever borne. It was a woman's and a girl stepped into the room with a wolf by her side. Her skin was a light brown, her black hair tied back. A circlet of leather crowned her brow. In her right hand was a spear with a head of bone, a flint knife at her side, and a wide gray cloak lay over her shoulders, thrown back to reveal smudged tunic and trousers that must have once been cream colored. Around her neck was a necklace of bear claws. Quiet, yet angry hazel eyes stared at the sorceress, who now smiled sweetly, lowering the spear just a bit.

"Lora á Wiston, the Scholar's daughter," she said gently, now sending out her net of magic trying to ensnare this girl. "How kind of you to come. I was hoping to meet you in person."

"And I you, sorceress," the young woman returned calmly. "I am afraid that you might change your mind about how positive our meeting is."

"I could hardly complain," came the unruffled answer. "Tell me what is this masquerade?" It sounded mocking.

"This 'masquerade' is your death, Roanna," came the quiet answer. It sounded almost sad. "I wish I didn't have to do this, but I charge you of murder, high treason, and sorcery in the name of the highest Authority."

"Who is that, Dylan á Carrock?" the sorceress mocked.

"No, the Word." It was said simply without anger or agitation. There was a clamness about this girl that unnerved Roanna. She slowly weighed the spear in her hand.

"I have only once met a person as impertinent as you, though not quite as calm," she snapped, trying to gain time.

"That was my predecessor. She passed the cloak and the necklace on to me and now I must challenge you." The sorceress' eyes opened wide and she now realized who was standing across from her.

"Die, Watchcarer," she screamed and hurled the spear, but Lora was much quicker than Alick, stepping aside and grabbing the spear out of midair with her free hand. She dropped the shaft and in the same instant Swift leaped forward, bowling Roanna over. She heaved the gray beast off her before the sharp teeth could bury themselves in her neck. A quick incantation and suddenly the wolf crashed against one of the mirrors, sinking to the ground, unconscious. In the same instant Roanna was back on her feet.

"Your wolf is not much stronger than the falcon I killed," she mocked.

"A wolf defeated your brother," Lora answered, circling around, so as to draw the witch away from the doorway and her brother, deeper into the room. As Roanna turned, Dylan slipped in and carefully rolled the old man over, cradling his white head in his arms.

"But *I* will defeat the wolf!" Roanna screamed and her right hand shot forward. Something like the shards of broken glass flew towards the Watchcarer, who threw her cloak up. It caught the shards and drifted to the ground, empty.

"Your tricks won't work on me, girl," the sorceress snapped.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," came Lora's voice right next to her and she could just barely leap out of the way of the sharp spear. But, though Lora had the instincts of the Watchcarer, she did not yet have the practice and so the sorceress could easily grab the shaft and hold on tight. Now they were staring eye in eye. Roanna's beautiful face split into a hideous grin and she pulled the shaft up, so it was at neck height. Her dark eyes bored into the girl's, willing her to be weak. It resulted in an instant of confusion on Lora's part and suddenly Roanna kicked out and she went down, the sorceress on top of her. The spear now lay across her neck, Roanna pressing down with all her might. The air was growing less and the brown face now took on a slightly crimson sheen that slowly began to go towards purple.

"I have defeated you again, Watchcarer," the sorceress said with a grin.

"Courage, Lora!" came a voice that the Watchcarer thought she'd never heard again and neither the sorceress. It made her glance to the side and loosen her grip for only an instant, all that the girl needed. Strength surged

through her body and she pushed the shaft up with all her might, sending Roanna flying across the room, still holding the spear. Now Lora was back on her feet, eyes blazing with righteous fire.

The sorceress picked herself up as well and rushed at the girl with the spear. The girl picked up her cloak and in one smooth move threw it over Roanna's head, stepping aside, but not quite far enough, because the maddened woman still caught her and she bounced against a mirror, her head smacking the glass painfully. In the blow Roanna lost her grip on the spear and it went clattering from her hands, rolling across the floor and finally coming to a halt against the wall, more than five feet away.

Roanna leaped back, tearing the cloak from her head and casting it aside. Her eyes reminded Dylan a bit of those of a maddened wolf's who had lost all its sanity. She now brought her hands up and began to mumble an incantation. Alick raised his head now enough to see what she was about to do.

"Don't break the mirror!" he cried weakly, but it was too late. Flames shot from the sorceress' fingers. Lora threw up her arm and the flames suddenly cut into the empty, dirty tunic, destroying it, but they went on, shattering the glass. There was the sound of a small explosion and a mighty suction and suddenly Roanna went flying forward with a loud scream. She crashed into the shards and then they closed around her, encasing her in shimmering, reflecting glass forever. Lora stood there breathing heavily. She wore the halter of wolf skin now, but ignored it staring at a figure standing just behind Dylan and Alick.

"Daddy!" she cried and rushed forward into his arms. Savoy gently pressed her to himself, just glad to be with her again.

"I thought you were dead," she whispered.

"And I nearly was," he answered. "A strange man appeared shortly after you left. He was dressed in white and had white hair and a beard and the strangest, most fiery eyes. He told me that someone needed me and then opened the gates." He stepped back just a bit and regarded her for a moment.

"You know the strangest thing he said was when I asked him how he would escape," Savoy continued. "He said that the door hadn't been made yet that could hold him. And that was the last time I saw him. I think I came just in time, praise the Word."

"You can say that again!" Lora laughed, hugging him again. "But what about Swift?" There was a quiet whining from where she'd been thrown against the mirror, while Savoy bent and examined Alick.

"It is one of the poisoned spears of the claw," the old man explained. "We must get out of the walls quickly, otherwise I will be dead within the next half-hour, not that I'd mind it anyway." He laughed quietly and coughed.

"He's right, Dylan," the Scholar said, wiping his hands on his soiled robes. "We must go right away." The lord nodded and picked up the old man. Savoy went, took Lora's cloak and spread it around her shoulders.

"She'll live," the girl told him, "as long as we get out of here and give her some clean water." Her father nodded and took her spear, while his daughter picked up the wolf. They hurried along the passages that the now failing Alick pointed them and twenty minutes later stood at the gates. The old man's vision was very unclear now and his breath came in gasps.

"I don't have my key anymore," he whispered. "But there should be a lever over there. He pointed to the right. Kyle spied it, a long piece of marble leaning against one wall. He jumped over and pulled on it with all his might. It barely moved, but the great doors swung inward. He let go and the small group rushed over the door sill and by the bleached bones that once had been Swift's mate. Across the field they rushed to where they'd set up camp four days ago.

"Only four days?" Dylan gasped. "It seemed a lot longer than that."

"Still, we've made it." Tabea answered. They laid the old man on the ground and Savoy bent over it.

"But are you going to make it, Alick?" the lord asked, kneeling next to him.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," came the feeble answer. "I left all I was back there and I have a distinct feeling that the Word isn't through with me quite yet."

"You can say that again!" Savoy grinned and reached into his saddle bag. "I will give you some herbs that should help."

The evening was cold and Dylan sat a ways away from the campfire, staring into the dark. Why was it that he had such an uneasy feeling. Savoy had told him that the Hun-Halk were rising again. That meant they would want to press hard toward Carrock. He also knew that Philip and Stev would have problems with that stubborn council.

It was normally a group of ten with him presiding and more than half were on his side, but he had always been wary of the opposition. The people would have none of another ruler -- at least during his lifetime.

"Word, I pray that my son would grow up to be a better ruler than I am," he whispered into the cool night air. He was shivering again and pulled his warm cloak around himself. He closed his eyes thinking of home, worrying that there would be difficulty. Perhaps some people would take this difficulty as an opportunity to ally themselves with the Hun-Halk and then try to take the throne. No, he knew that the Hans, the lords of the Hun-Halk, took no allies that did not only fight. He knew the stories about their cruelty and he knew that they would only answer to one thing: battle.

"And I will have to lead them," he sighed. It was not that he was afraid of it. No, the lord of Carrock was known for his extraordinary courage. It was the problem of all the lives that would be lost. They had always made it past the borders and could only be stopped at the ravine that ran east-west along the northern border. If they didn't attack from there this time? What then? Their simple armament of swords, bows and arrows, spears and other conventional weapons were no match against Carrock's pistols and rifles. And yet they went forward over their own dead until they could reach the other side...

A gentle arm laid itself around Dylan's shoulder pulling him out of his dreary reverie. Tabea sat down next to him.

"You looked lonely," she said.

"I needed to think some."

"About?"

"Carrock." She leaned forward and scrutinized his face for a long time.

"What is bothering you, Dylan?" she asked.

"I'm scared, Tabea," he returned quietly. "Savoy told me of rumors that the Hun-Halk are getting ready to attack again. What if they've already reached Carrock? I won't have time to make it to the front and help fight them. It will be sheer murder." He sighed and bent forward, staring into the woods. His voice was pressed. "Eighty years ago, under my grandfather Martyn, they attacked. They came from the north and wiped out everything until they reached the ravine that runs just a hundred miles north of the castle. My grandfather knew that they must stop here or all of the land would be destroyed, so he had his people dig a canal from the nearby river. As the Hun-Halk rushed down the sides of the gorge, my grandfather had them break the last dam and the water rushed in. Fifty thousand Hun-Halk died in those waters and were carried away and still they came on. The men shot until they had no more ammunition, arrows, or spears and still they came. It was only a miracle that made their king turn back from the canyon. Grandfather had won, but too many valuable men had died -- on both sides. I don't want that to happen again." During the narrative his wife's mouth dropped open and now she stared at the woods numbly.

"And these people are coming back *again*?" she gasped.

"Perhaps. Hopefully it's just a rumor, but we must hurry back."

"And the children?"

"We are going to have to press on very hard, lady love. It's our only hope. I pray we'll reach Alick's village in four days. There you can rest and I'll go on alone, if needed. But we must hurry." She stared at him, only once having remembered such grim determination -- before the Battle of the Wolf.

"I want to come, Dylan," she finally found strength to say. He looked at her fondly.

"I wish you could, but you should stay with the children. We don't want to lose them again." She looked into his eyes for a moment.

"Okay," she whispered and then leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Cold?" he asked. She just nodded and he spread his cloak around her, too.

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