

Harmony of Souls

Galatyne Knightwyng

A dark presence has risen in the northeast of E'atara. Villages and towns are falling under the sway of clerics who seek to resurrect an ancient dragon, Rangrel, slain by heroes of old. Divided into several septs, the cult is hard to locate and difficult to fight. Five members of the an-Swyn, a coterie of fey and fey-friends, set forth to learn more of the threat, and, if possible, to bring it to grief. Now, two of them have vanished, and at least one has fallen under the sway of dark magics...

I - A Strain of Fire

Kittarina slipped out the front of the chapel and into the dark night ahead of a thickening plume of black smoke. Up ahead, a thin line of trees stood out in stark relief against the flickering orange glow of the village that burned just beyond. The continuous crackle of flames was punctuated by the occasional shriek of terror and incongruous bird calls. Kitta paused at the small font of water outside the chapel door and hurriedly scrubbed the blood from her hands, forearms, and dagger. She grimaced as the water darkened. That had been too messy. She flicked droplets of clean water from her arms and darted through the trees toward the fire.

Dark shapes ran between the flaming buildings, some seeking the relative safety of the surrounding woods, others carrying torches that they tossed through doorways or onto thatched roofs. Despite the night chill, the heat from the flames raised a sweat almost immediately. As one of the torch bearers ran past, Kitta grabbed her and spun her around. Soot and dirt smudged the young woman's face and dulled her long reddish hair.

"Rikka?" Kitta asked.

The woman squinted at Kitta through the flickering shadows then straightened and nodded. "Yes, hautmistress!"

Kitta rolled her eyes. "Are you almost done? It's time to go."

"Yes, hautmistress. Most of the others have already left. It's just me and Sparrow Squad. There are a few buildings still on the south side, by the river, and—"

Kitta shook her head. "Never mind those. Did you get the shipwrights?"

"Yes."

"Well enough, then. That was their main interest in this village, the local shipwrights and access to the river. The chapel is burning, too. Any casualties?"

"None on our side, but we had to kill a few that came after us, and..." Rikka's voice wavered a moment, "...one of the village men... he dragged his wife and daughter back into their burning house. "He said..." she wiped roughly at one eye, "he said the breath of Rangrel would bear their souls aloft."

Kitta almost hugged her, but Rikka's face turned stony, suggesting that she had already turned her anguish back into anger. "I'm sorry, Rikka," Kitta said. "I killed the cleric. He's the one who did this to them. The Sept will know about us for certain now. I don't want any of you lingering here. I don't want to linger here." She made a shooing motion. "Go... get the rest of your squad out of the village. Keep in small groups. Stay away from the road and head for the river gap in the north ridge. I'll meet you there in the morning, hopefully with something to counter what is coming."

Rikka nodded and dashed off, whistling bird calls. Other forms materialized out of the smoke and fell in behind her. Kitta watched a moment, unable to hold back a smile of pride. Rikka, all the women, in fact, had come so far in the last month. They had all been frightened since their husbands followed their martial trainers off to the dragon Sept in Harakti Tor... frightened, timid, and deceptively submissive but brimming with an inner courage that fairly screamed to be released. Well, it had been released, and the fires of their freedom would sweep the hills. Kitta turned and vanished back in to the coolness of the forest.

She picked her way carefully through the shadows beneath the trees. Her half-elven eyes could see better in the dark than a human's, but at times like this, she wished for a little more of her elven heritage. It was around here somewhere... There! A narrow, rocky track that led up into the hills. She moved some brush away from one side of an old stump and pulled out her pack. She rummaged inside and found her water skin. The water was cool and refreshing, and she drank nearly a quarter of it before returning the skin to its place.

She rose and settled the pack on her back, but a movement in the deeper shadows across the trail caught her eye. She crouched low behind the bulk of the stump and froze, searching the darkness with her heightened sight. Nothing. Slowly, she unwound from her crouch and glided forward, up the path. Nothing stirred around her, but she felt as if eyes were upon her every step.

As the path climbed up the side of the ridge, the feeling of being watched faded, along with Kitta's edginess, and she was able to enjoy the peace and quiet of the woods as well as the cleansing burn in her arms and legs that came from climbing a mountain in the fresh air instead of fighting an enemy. At the top of the ridge, the path leveled out and broadened, and moonlight shone down through the branches. Remembering her experience below, Kitta moved toward the shadows along the edge of the path where she would not be so visible. The old watchtower she was looking for should not be far, now. With any luck, Fiona would already be there, hopefully with food.

A cloud slipped across the moon, and the hairs on the back of Kitta's neck stood up. The eyes were back. She slipped into a small cluster of cedars and knelt. A little further down the path, a patch of inky blackness separated itself from the darkest shadows and resolved itself into a dark, wolfish form... no, too lean for a wolf. It rose onto its hind legs and took a few steps down the path, then turned back, sniffing. Kitta sat unmoving, thankful for the masking scent of the cedars. Apparently not finding what it sought, it slipped back into the shadows and headed up the track, almost seeming to blink from shadow to shadow, pausing each time to sniff the air. Finally, it was gone, but Kitta's heart pounded. It was between her and the watchtower.

Slowly, so as not to raise so much as a hiss of branches, she edged from the cedars into the shadows alongside the trail. Keeping low, she moved as fast as stealth allowed up the path. Several times, she had to pick a slow, painstaking route through the woods when a particularly open stretch of track would leave her too exposed in the moonlight. Finally, she rounded a bend, and the solid bulk of the tower rose black and lightless against the sky. At the edge of the trees, the crumbling remains of a stone wall and gateway flanked the path. She stopped and slowed her breathing, listening, watching. Not a flicker of movement. Not a whisper of sound.

She glided forward toward the opening in the stone wall. The softest rustle from the other side and a pebble bounced across the opening. Kitta launched herself around the gateway, shoulder low. She hit a solid form and tumbled back onto the ground. She rolled into a crouch, dagger in hand.

Fiona glowered down at her, hands on her hips. "Pardon me, were you looking for something?"

Kitta groaned and climbed to her feet, sheathing her dagger. Fiona hadn't inherited much in the way of dwarvish height, but she had all of the solidity and a seeming ability to root herself to the earth. "Something followed me up the trail. At least, I think it was following me. I was afraid you weren't here yet."

“I’ve been here since dusk. You can see the glow of the village from the top of the tower. I thought I saw some movement on the path and came down to see if it was you. You made a fine mess down there. Bound to draw some attention.”

“Yeah. I hope you have something to meet it with.”

“I do, but let’s go inside, out of the open... just in case something did follow you.”

A flight of stone steps followed the curve of the tower up to the doorway set about ten feet above the ground. Kitta stared hard at the tree line one last time as Fiona pulled open the remains of the tower’s oak door and pushed aside a heavy curtain of old canvas, but nothing stirred. Inside, on the far side of a great, circular room, a fire blazed bright in the hearth. A stone stair wound around the inside of the tower. Kitta turned in place following it up out of sight into the darkness above. The wood planking on the floor above had fallen away in some places.

“You climbed up to the roof of this thing?” Kitta asked.

“Sure.” Fiona shrugged. “The steps and battlement are good stone, dwarf built. I wouldn’t put a foot on the floors in between, though.”

“Mmm,” Kitta acknowledged. The stonework did look solid, and the main level was actually quite comfortable. Fiona had apparently swept it clean... and hung heavy pieces of canvas over the arrow loops and door. That was why there had been no light from the tower. Fiona’s bedroll was already laid out to one side of the hearth. Kitta dropped her pack against the wall on the other. She caught the aroma of cooked meat. Looking around, she noticed the pot hanging over the fire. “I don’t suppose you have anything other than hard tack and dried fish to eat, do you?”

“Rabbit.” Fiona dipped a bowl into the pot and passed it to Kitta. “I caught it this evening. Stretched it with some turnips, leeks, and... well, some other stuff I found. Mixed together it isn’t half bad.”

Kitta accepted the bowl gratefully. “Better than dried fish. That seems to be all we’ve had for the last three weeks. By the way, we’ll be meeting up with the Passeridae tomorrow. I told them to look for me at the river.”

“The Passeridae?” Fiona raised an eyebrow. “I’ve heard that name in every tavern between here and the Labyrinth Sea. A thousand rabid women, they say, burning towns and taking the men for slaves to replace husbands who joined the dragon in Harakti Tor. I thought they might be your doing. You have quite the following, don’t you?”

Kitta shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, not really. They’re just villagers, and less than fifty of them at that. Most of them are women whose husbands have gone to join the Sept. They’re tired of always being afraid... of having their lives stripped from them. Everything they are doing comes from them. They just didn’t believe they could do it. Now they call themselves the Passeridae. It’s a sort of songbird, like a sparrow. They say that they will drive the dragon from their lands and fill it with their song again.”

“Huh!” Fiona snorted. “I’d call that a following. As far as they’re concerned, you freed them. Though, even if they get their husbands back, none of them will be the same people who set out on this road.”

“I... It just sort of happened. I almost feel like I’m using them just to achieve our own ends. I think I’m going to send them on their own way after we meet up. No good will come from dragging them down our road. I’ve been wondering if we shouldn’t have gone to Winter’s End Gathering and sought help from the rest of the an-Swyn after all.”

Fiona shook her head. “There was no time. We are already inside Sept territory. The an-Swyn would have to move in force to fight their way here and they do not act as one without the consent of a conclave. Galatyne never came back from Harakti Tor. Now Medva is gone, too. They may not live through such discussions. And you said Falana is slipping further away?”

“Yes. I tested her. I was in Harakti Tor and saw her riding alone just outside the gate. I made sure to step in front of her. She looked right at me and didn’t know me.”

“Maybe she’s being watched. She could have just been maintaining your covers.”

“No.” Kitta finished the last of the stew and put the bowl on the hearth. “It was more than that. I could feel the wrongness. I’m telling you, it won’t be long before she’s leading their troops against the towns that aren’t swayed by the clerics. Speaking of which, I hope you have found a way to deal with Falana. I had to kill one of those dragon priests, and I suspect she’ll be on her way here soon, if she isn’t already.”

Fiona grinned. “Indeed I have.” She knelt on her bedroll, lifted a long, narrow, oilskin bundle from atop it, and handed it to Kitta. “Go ahead.” She nodded at the bundle. “Open it.”

Kitta frowned. Just by the shape and feel of the object beneath the oilskin, she knew it was a weapon. She untied the thongs and folded back the cloth. A silver acorn winked firelight back at her. Unwrapping the bundle further, she unveiled the dragon hilt of a sword. The dragon’s body formed a sinuous S-shaped guard, tail curved toward the hilt, neck and head toward the blade which arced in a long, graceful curve from the dragon’s belly. Blue leather wings wrapped around the grip and clasped the silver acorn pommel in their clawed tips.

“Where did you get the blue leather?” Kitta asked.

“I didn’t. The sword chose that color.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grasp the hilt,” Fiona encouraged. “Draw it out.”

Kitta pursed her lips. “If it were anyone other than you, Fiona...” She wrapped her fingers around the leather wings. They were warm. She let the oilskin fall away. In the fire light, the blade looked almost like a tongue of flame. Suddenly, a faint pulse of blue light rolled down the length of the blade... then again... and again. The intervals... another pulse... they almost seemed... A slight warmth grew in the center of her chest. Kitta pressed one hand against her sternum, then pulled out the thong on which her *lia failte*, the stone that marked her as one of the an-Swyn, was strung. A light pulsed within it in time to the blade and her life blood.

“Fiona?” Kitta asked, forcing herself to look away from the blade to fix the half-dwarf with a hard stare. “What did you do?”

Fiona still grinned, obviously quite pleased with her accomplishment. “I sang the steel.”

“Yeah, I gathered. What exactly does it do?”

Fiona held out her hand. Kitta passed her the sword, hilt first. A slight tingle ran up her arm as Fiona touched the hilt and a faint flutter rippled through her chest. It passed as soon as she let go of the sword. The blade still pulsed its blue light, though perhaps slightly slower, and Fiona’s own *lia failte* flashed it time to its rhythm.

“You said that the clerics of Rangrel had woven some kind of spell in Falana’s mind,” Fiona said, “and that you were able to break it or block it temporarily with that herb you brought to the last gathering...”

Kitta nodded.

“Well, I started thinking. This magic that has her is probably wound into the core of her being. We need something that reaches just as deep. Do you remember the words spoken over the *lia failte* just before their gifting?”

Kitta thought for a moment, running through the ceremony. *This stone shines brightly...* “Each member of the an-Swyn is asked to add a part of themselves to it.”

“Exactly.” Fiona tapped her glowing *lia failte*. “Each of these stones carries within it a piece of each of us. I was able to sing Falana’s thread that resides in my stone into the blade. It will respond to any an-Swyn who wields it.”

“So, how does this help us? We don’t want to hurt Falana. We want to... to fix her.”

Fiona shook her head. “It can’t hurt Falana. It’s keyed to her essence. If the blade touches her, or anything she is in direct contact with, for that matter, it will release the magic of that thread and realign her core of being.”

Kitta gestured to the sword. “So, all we have to do is hand this to her?”

“Not exactly.” Fiona laid the sword back on its oilcloth. “Only the blade is sung like that. You have to hit her, or even her sword, with it.”

“If I have to hit her with it?” Kitta stood and started pacing in front of the fire. “Fiona, are you kidding? You’ve seen how fast she is with that damned wyvern’s grace thing she does. And speaking of wyverns, Reiksciel’s going to be with her, you know.”

“Yes, I know. I sang the hilt to ward the bearer from lightning.”

Kitta stopped in mid-stride and turned to face Fiona. “Wyverns breathe lightning?”

“I think so.”

“What if they breathe something else? What about their teeth... and their claws?”

Fiona shrugged. “Stay low. Move fast.”

“Gods, Fiona, this plan sucks.”

II - Call and Reprise

Kittarina half ran, half slid, down the steep, gravelly path. There were few trees along this stretch of the ridge to grab onto, but she gripped Fiona’s cloth-wrapped sword tightly in her left hand and held it out to one side for balance.

“Could you possibly make any more dust?” Fiona called from behind her. “I’m almost getting some fresh air back here.”

Kitta skidded to a halt at the bottom and glanced over her shoulder. Fiona easily picked her way down the slope, every step seeming to find solid footing. “Sorry,” she called back, then stuck her tongue out when Fiona coughed and waved futilely at the cloud of fine dust that had risen in the wake of Kitta’s descent.

She turned back to the path ahead, squinting into the bright morning sunlight. The river gap couldn’t be much further. Already she could see the languid ribbon of water winding off in the distance to either side of the ridge. The gap had to be just past the next crest, maybe another quarter mile, and the Passeridae should be waiting for them. Their paths would lie in different directions soon. They were fighting to save their homes and their way of life... for all of them. Kitta believed in that, but her quest was too personal, and it wasn’t right to drag the Passeridae any further into it. She would miss their fiery spirit and their own style of camaraderie, so different from the exaggerated confidence and coarse bravado of the predominantly male military units she had traveled with.

Kitta wished she had a little more confidence herself at the moment. She drew several inches of the sword from its oil cloth wrap. The blade glowed a bit brighter than last night, seeming to intensify ever so slightly even as she watched. “Fiona, why is it getting brighter?” She was afraid she already knew the answer.

“Pardon?”

“The sword... it’s getting brighter.”

“Hmm... I didn’t specifically work anything like that into the steel. Sometimes magic will manifest itself in additional ways. My guess would be that because it’s tied to Falana’s essence, it would mean she’s...”

“...getting closer,” Kitta finished with Fiona. “The Passeridae! They’ll be in the open by the river! If Falana finds them first...” she didn’t finish the thought but shoved the blade back into its protective cloth and sprinted off down the trail.

She huffed up the next slope and paused at the top to catch her breath and wait for Fiona, but when she looked back, the half dwarf was less than a score of yards behind her and moving steadily. Up ahead, the ridgeline broke and dropped out of sight. Kitta jogged the last fifty yards to the steep scarp. A narrow path led off to her right, threaded down through rocky outcrops and back into the trees before emerging again on

a broad shelf of grey-white rock along the river's edge. The Passeridae sat on the sun-warmed rock, waiting. At least they hadn't lit a fire.

"Kitta!" Fiona hissed behind her.

Kitta glanced over her shoulder. Fiona jerked her head to the north and pointed skyward. In the distance a faint speck dropped down out of the scattered clouds to skim just above the trees. Kitta drew a length of the sword out of its cloth. The blade glowed a brilliant blue.

"Damn, damn, damn!" she muttered and pressed a hand to her forehead. They hadn't expected Falana quite this quickly. Kitta hadn't had a chance to work out a plan yet. She hadn't even had much in the way of hope until last night. If Falana and the Passeridae engaged one another, it would be a bad end. She raised two fingers to her lips and blew a shrill, lilting whistle, then repeated it. The Passeridae glanced up, waved, and darted into the trees. Within seconds, not a trace of their presence remained by the river.

"Impressive," Fiona said, peering over the cliff. "What exactly did you tell them?"

"Basically to seek cover," Kitta answered.

"Will they stay? A melee won't help us."

"I know. They'll stay. At least for long enough... I hope."

Fiona raised an eyebrow. "You hope?"

Kitta drew the sword fully and let the oilskin flutter to the ground. "Yeah. Like you hope this will work."

"Fair enough."

Kitta looked back to the north, scanning the treetops for movement, and started to pace. "You couldn't have sung a magic shield boss, could you? That would have been easy to get Falana to hit."

Fiona scratched her chin, then nodded. "Hmm. That's not a bad idea. Perhaps next time."

"Great. Thanks." Kitta sighed. "I guess you'd better back off a bit as well. If wyverns do breathe stuff... well, only one of us can hold the sword."

"Good point." Fiona moved a little down the trail.

"Just don't go too far!"

"Mmm," Fiona grunted and slipped behind a small stand of gnarly cedars.

Kitta continued her scan of the forest canopy, searching for the wyvern. It glided low over the trees along the near shore of the river, close enough now that she could make out Falana on its back. The elf wore chainmail and red-trimmed, grey leather, so unlike her habitual shades of cool blue. She had probably seen Kitta long ago, and Fiona as well, but was making sure there weren't any nasty surprises along the river road. Kitta waited, the blade in her hand looking nearly as if it were on fire, now.

As they neared, Falana turned Reiksciel out over the river, then into a long, upward arc that swung them back over the ridge high above Kitta's head. They banked suddenly and Reiksciel folded his wings along his lithe body and plummeted straight down. A tingling sensation flitted across Kitta's skin and the hairs on her neck stood up. A jagged, bright flash lanced from Reiksciel's nose. Kitta yelped and ducked as it struck the sword. White light enveloped her and filled her vision. When the afterglare faded, Reiksciel was again pulling skyward and the rock around her had been scorched black.

The wyvern swung back around on a lower approach. Lightning arced once, twice, three times from both his nose and tail. Kitta was ready, however, and each time, she brandished the sword in front of her, squeezing her eyes shut against the blinding light and letting the energy play over her and vanish into the ground. When she opened her eyes after the third strike, elf and wyvern were nowhere to be seen. She scanned the sky. Nothing. She shuffled closer to the scarp and craned her neck, straining to peer over the cliff.

The wyvern's serpentine form shot up over the edge of the scarp, and Kitta scurried back, raising her sword above her head. He passed close enough to Kitta that she could feel the fuzzy energy gathered around him. As Reiksciel cleared the cliff top, he raked the ground with a flurry of lightning then settled on the edge

with a bright crackle of skittering light from his feet and wingtips. The fuzzy tingling in the air dissipated immediately. Falana slipped from his back like grey smoke and drew her sword in a single fluid motion.

As Falana's feet touched the ground, Reiksciel let out an ear-piercing roar. Kitta scuttled back further, as she was sure the wyvern intended, and brought the hilt of her sword down in front of her so that the blade was between her and Falana and the tip pointed directly at the wyvern's toothy maw. Reiksciel turned his head and, for an instant, locked Kitta's gaze with one eye. Images, rapid as lightning strikes, flashed through Kitta's mind—Falana... Galatyne... a thread of fire... shadows seeping through trees then a doorway... a wall of light... jagged black lightning... inky darkness... Each one struck like a hammer blow. She almost screamed. She struggled to push them out, but as soon as she grasped at an image, it was gone. Abruptly, the flow ceased, and the images coalesced. Two Falanas stood before her, one bright and shining, the other shadowy and ephemeral, but gaining solidity. In a sudden moment of clarity, Kitta knew that Reiksciel understood. He knew something was wrong. His bond to Falana prevented him from acting against her directly, but he would not interfere with Kitta, either.

Kitta gave the wyvern the slightest nod of acknowledgement and pulled her attention back to Falana who advanced to stand just out of sword reach, her own blade held casually, deceptively so, down by her side.

"You will put down your sword, now," Falana said, "and surrender yourself to me as a warder of the Sept."

"Not very damned likely," Kitta growled. "...bitch," she added and almost winced.

One corner of Falana's mouth quirked up in an almost smile.

Kitta clenched her teeth in an inward scowl. Falana never did rise to such bait. It had been worth a try, though. Kitta sprang forward, snapping her blade out in a horizontal arc aimed at Falana's waist. The sword whistled through empty air, and Kitta staggered forward through the space where Falana had been standing. Damn, her mind screamed. She fell forward into a roll, and a thin breath of air across her head marked the passage of Falana's sword.

Kitta came up into a low crouch and pivoted on the ball of her right foot, sword held defensively over her head, then leapt straight up, barely clearing Falana's blade as it cut under her. She narrowly dodged two more attacks, unable to get her blade between her and Falana's and unable to launch another attack. Finally, she held her hands out to her side and called out, "I yield!"

Falana uncoiled from her catlike stance. "Throw your sword on the ground."

Kitta tossed the sword to the ground between them. Fiona roared out of the trees, a small-axe drawn back behind her head in one hand. As Falana turned slightly to size up the new threat, Kitta threw herself forward into a roll, her hand closing on the hilt of her own sword. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Falana knock the axe out of the air. Then Kitta was on one knee, and Falana's blade was arcing through the parry toward her. She raised the sword between them, and it connected with Falana's. Both blades shattered. Fire lanced through Kitta's chest and flared out from the shattered sword hilt. For a brief moment, a thin strand of whitish fire connected Kitta and Falana, then it ruptured. The shock wave tossed Kitta through the air. She landed hard on her back, and the air rushed out of her lungs. She tried to push herself up off the stone, but her limbs wouldn't obey her. Darkness crept in at the corners of her vision. She struggled to draw a breath. None came. Her chest felt as if it was bound in iron. The bright morning light dimmed... and went out.

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Incoherent voices whispered out of the darkness... no, voices and... running water... the occasional crunch of footsteps... Kitta rolled onto her side. She lay on something soft. She opened her eyes, and her head exploded in pain. She squeezed her eyes shut tight again, but the pain didn't go away. She must have

groaned, for hands lifted her shoulders, easing her into a sitting position, and pressed a warm cup into her hands.

“Drink this,” someone said. Fiona.

Kitta took a sip. “Uhhnd. S’awvul.” Her tongue felt like a wool blanket. “Wha’s it?”

“A tea of willow bark and skullcap,” Fiona answered..

Kitta took another sip and nearly choked. “S’not Wiwo barb.” She held the cup out away from her.

“It is... among other things. It will clear your head, so you can either drink it or feel like this for the next few days. Either way we’re moving out come morning.”

Kitta groaned but took a deep breath and downed most of the cup. Within a few minutes the pounding in her head faded and she tried opening her eyes again. No stabbing pain. She was sitting on a blanket by the river. Fiona knelt next to her. The Passeridae moved along the shore catching and carrying up... fish. She almost groaned again. It looked to be afternoon. “How long?” she asked. “How long was I out?”

“Several hours,” Fiona answered. “It’s a little past noon.”

“Falana?”

“She’s fine, but groggier than you are and will be for a while yet. We needed to know how long we could stay here and woke her. The nearest Sept troops are several days away in Harakti Tor, so we let you wake up on your own.”

“Was it supposed to do that? The sword, I mean?”

“What’d you expect? That it would lick her nose and purr? Or perhaps sing her to sleep with a lullaby?”

“Well, no, but... you knew?”

Fiona shrugged. “Not exactly, I only suspected--”

“And you didn’t tell me?! Fiona--”

Fiona held up both hands in front of her, cutting off the forthcoming tirade. “I didn’t know exactly what would happen, but I spent days singing the steel. You released that power all at once. I’ve seen enough such magic to expect side effects of this nature.”

“You might have said something.”

“I might have, but if I had told you that you could be knocked ass over teakettle, you might have hesitated. Then you would be dead.”

Kitta scowled. “I guess. But still...”

Fiona crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow.

Kitta sighed and pushed herself onto her knees. The skyline tilted a bit further to one side than she would have liked, but no pain stabbed through her head. “Is Falana still awake?”

“Yes, though I think she would rather not be.”

“What do you mean?”

Fiona nodded downstream.

Kitta leaned around Fiona and looked. Falana knelt by the river a little ways off, one elbow on her knee with her head in her hand, the other arm across her stomach. Kitta climbed unsteadily to her feet and walked over to Falana. The elf turned at Kitta’s approach and offered her a weak smile.

“How are you doing,” Kitta asked.

“I’m not sure if it’s better now that I have nothing left in my stomach to throw up or not,” Falana answered. “How about you? Fiona told me what you did. Thank you... though I’m still trying to decide if I owe Fiona my thanks or a reprisal.”

Kitta shrugged. “You and me both. I’m okay, though I expect we’ll both feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

Falana shook her head. “We have to go, now.”

“Why?”

“Galatyne... he...” Falana clenched her teeth and growled. “I can’t remember. I just know he’s in danger... and... there’s not much time.”

“Did you tell Fiona?”

“I didn’t remember, then. It seems like every time I throw up, some of my memory comes back.”

Kitta sighed. So much for the good night’s sleep. “Where do we find him?”

“In...” Falana pressed a hand to her head and looked around as if trying to find something. “North. We have to go north.” She climbed to her feet but immediately swayed to one side and reached out a hand to Kitta.

Kitta slipped her shoulder under Falana’s arm, steadying her. “Are you kidding? You can’t even walk.”

A large shadow flitted across them. Kitta looked up as Reiksciel banked around.

“No,” Falana said, “but I can ride.”

Kitta helped Falana over to where Fiona and Rikka sat in conversation on a downed tree.

“We have to leave,” Kitta said. “Now. Falana says that we can’t wait till morning, that Galatyne’s life may depend on it. She can fly a bit ahead on Reiksciel. He’ll keep her safe till we catch up this evening.”

Fiona frowned and appeared about to argue but nodded instead. “If you think you’re up to it.” She pushed herself up from her seat and tromped upstream. “I’ll have my gear packed in a few minutes. We can leave as soon as you are ready.”

Rikka leapt up as well. “I’ll round up the troops.”

“No, Rikka,” Kitta said softly. “It’s time for us to part ways.”

Rikka looked stunned. “What do you mean? Why?”

“I have a friend who is in great danger. We have to go into the Sept’s heartland to find him.”

“We’ll go with you.” Rikka turned and bounded a couple of steps toward the river.

“No!” The word came out harsher than Kitta had intended.

Rikka stopped short at Kitta’s tone.

“This isn’t a raid on an unprotected village. We may encounter trained soldiers and fully vested clerics. I know the Passeridae are brave enough for it, but this is personal, and I won’t risk all of you on something that will bring you no benefit. You have a cause worthy of any army. Continue that fight.”

Rikka’s shoulders slumped. “But you’re our hautmistress.”

Kitta shook her head, as much to deny Rikka’s words as to hide blinking back the tears that welled in her eyes. She had grown more attached to these women than she had thought. “You’re hautmistress now, Rikka. You’ve always been a hautmistress. The Passeridae will follow you.”

Rikka said nothing, but Kitta felt her eyes, and those of the other Passeridae, on her as she found her pack and drew it over her shoulders then hiked over the barren rock along the river toward Fiona. Falana climbed shakily onto Reiksciel’s back and the wyvern launched them into the sky with only a faint whisper of his wings. Fiona fell into step beside Kitta without a word. Where the path angled back under the forest canopy, Kitta paused, looked back, and waved. Rikka raised a hand in answer. As the river fell out of sight behind them, a warbling note pierced the air. Rikka was calling her war birds to council. A single tear escaped and slid down Kitta’s cheek.

III - Descent into Dissonance

Kitta sighed and sat on the stump. A few seconds later, she stood back up and paced to where the game trail dropped over the rim of the valley. Below, the ramshackle sprawl of Harakti Tor marred the lush green bowl as it oozed out like a parasitic rot from the clean stone lines of the temple complex. Galatyne was in there somewhere. Falana was certain beyond a doubt. He was slated to take the initiate’s test, she said, and

that he had begun the vigil circuit about a month ago. The rite would culminate in his being brought before the city's dragon avatar, Seeledrache, for his spirit to be tested and offered in service. Falana did not believe that Galatyne could pass the test or that he had any intention of trying. She believed he had another plan, though what it might be, no one could guess. In all likelihood, Medva was in there, too, training archers. That worried Kitta. The last she had seen Medva, at the January gathering of the an-Swyn, he had seemed genuinely taken with the Rangrel Septs. If he had succumbed as Falana did....

She turned and paced back to the stump. Rikka stood waiting for her, arms folded under her breasts and a stubborn glower set on her face. She and the Passeridae had apparently shadowed them for the last four days, nights actually. They had hidden during the day when Reiksciel was aloft. The wyvern had only spotted them and roared a warning when they pushed to catch up with Kitta, Fiona, and Falana before they entered the valley.

"You..." Kitta began, shaking a finger in Rikka's face. "What were..." She took a deep breath. "I told you you couldn't come with us!"

"You can't tell me what to do!" Rikka fired back, jabbing a finger at Kitta in return. "You made me hautmistress. The Passeridae convened a council of war and decided to go to Harakti Tor. I thought perhaps we might benefit from joining forces, but if not, please do not get in our way. We don't want you to get hurt when the fighting starts."

"Aaahhhhh!" Kitta threw her arms in the air. "You don't understand—"

"!?" Rikka surged forward, hands balled at her hips, her face flushing red to match her hair. "I don't understand?"

Kitta almost toppled backward in surprise.

"My husband is gone!" Rikka continued. "Maybe dead! So it is with many of the others. The Sept has taken sons and brothers as well. Dead, slaves, willing servants... they are gone all the same. It is only the fight that holds our hearts together, now. I saw that same anguish in the eyes of your dragon rider. She has lost more than *you* understand. She is Passeridae, and we will not turn our back on her. This place," Rikka swept her hand out over the vale, "is the cause of all our pain. It is a nest of evil, and we will not suffer it to thrive any longer!"

Kitta lowered herself slowly onto the stump. The anger that had flared in Rikka's eyes was gone, replaced by a steady flame of determined strength. That same strength Kitta had seen in Rikka when she had first met her. That same strength she had nourished in all the Passeridae. Then, of course, it had been but a spark. It was now a raging inferno, and she couldn't quash it, not even if she wanted to. "We can't just march into the city in armed ranks," she said. "We need to enter the walls unchallenged if we are to have a chance."

Rikka smiled.

Kitta winked and smiled back.

*

Early afternoon found Kitta trudging along behind Rikka in a disorderly knot of just over a dozen Passeridae. They all wore tattered clothes and shuffled forward, eyes focused on the road. Some even went barefoot. Forlorn and hopeless women, Kitta thought, forlorn and hopeless. Fiona and Falana each traveled in another such group strung out along the dirt track that served as the main road to Harakti Tor. Kitta hadn't liked the idea of splitting up herself, Fiona, and Falana—especially Falana—but in the end it was agreed that this gave them the greatest chance of at least some of them getting into the city. Reiksciel, however, had failed to look forlorn and hopeless and so had to wait out of sight beyond the valley rim. Even worse, they'd had to leave behind many of their weapons. A few blades, knives mostly, were stowed in the little gear they carried, but they couldn't risk the city watch finding a cache of weapons on them.

“Hold!” grated a gravelly voice.

Kitta shuffled to a stop and glanced up. They stood before the “walls” of Harakti Tor—sloped earthworks nearly eight feet high and sixteen feet wide at the base, the whole fronted by a broad ditch. She could smell the filth and decay that wafted through the gap in the rampart that served as a gate. A guard stood to either side of the opening. Several more stood on top of the wall. All of them stared at the women with undisguised lust.

Rikka apparently noticed, too, for as she stepped forward, she tugged at her ragged shirt as if trying to stretch it further over her body but actually caused it to slip a little lower, exposing even more smooth flesh. “Our villages were attacked by those Passad... Passers...”

“Passeridae?” one of the gate guards, not gravel-voice, offered.

“Yes. We’re from several villages to the south. Most of the men had already left to train with the Sept. We couldn’t defend ourselves. We didn’t know where else to go.” Rikka raised a hand to wipe at an eye, and her shirt slipped further.

The guard smiled, more like a leer, actually. “Well, you did the right thing, dearie,” he said. “The Sept looks after its faithful. You go on up to the temple. The clerics will see you are cleaned up, fed, and given duties befitting daughters of the dragon.”

Kitta almost snorted. She knew what “duties” they would be given. During previous visits, she had seen daughters of the dragon on the streets, servicing the soldiers, clerics, and other faithful followers. It was bad enough that some came to believe it to be their divine calling. The worst, though, was when a woman happened across her husband, devoted follower of the dragon, and was treated the same as any other whore. They could endure most any physical blow, but that one to the heart... They would usually be found dead within the week.

“...but not until tomorrow at least,” the guard was saying. “They are all preparing for the execution tonight.”

Kitta caught herself before her head snapped up. Execution? What execution? Damn!

“Execution?” Rikka asked, wringing her hands.

Good girl, Kitta thought.

“Who’s being executed? What did they do? Are we safe here?”

“Don’t you worry, miss,” the other guard, gravel-voice, said. “It’s just a heretic is all. Caught ‘im trying to poison the faithful with his lies.”

“Where?”

Gravelly couldn’t take his eyes off Rikka’s chest. “Oh, they have him locked up good in the temple dungeon. They be bringing him down to burn in the Justice Court later this evening. Sunset is the dragon’s time. You umm... best get on inside. I’ll come check on yous later.”

“Thank you ever so much,” Rikka purred and dropped a half curtsy, then quickly stepped around the guards, swaying her hips and leaving them nearly drooling in her wake.

As they passed through the wall, Kitta eased up behind Rikka and whispered, “Head toward the temple complex, for now.”

The dirt road of the vale gave way to the dirt lanes of the city. Every scrap of green had been trampled into dry dust that rose to find its way into eyes, nose, and mouth. The place never failed to disgust Kitta. Waste, human and animal, filled the narrow trenches alongside the streets. When it rained, brown, stinking streams ran beside the streets and emptied into the ditch around the city walls. When it was dry, the filth joined the dust. The people of Harakti Tor lived in a jumble of ramshackle huts, mud hovels, and tents arranged roughly into blocks. Only a few structures were taller than a single story, and those Kitta wasn’t sure she would be willing to set foot in.

On the eastern side of the city, the temple complex rose high above the squalor. The temple proper was surrounded by a massive, stone curtain wall that sprouted towers and a blocky gatehouse. Kitta had never been inside those walls, but she knew it was home to the clerics and reputedly the resting place of the dragon spirit Seeledrache, sent by Rangrel to ward the city of the faithful. She wasn't really sure she wanted to go in there, now.

Just before they reached the broad temple avenue that ran along the front of the stone complex, Kitta put a hand on Rikka's shoulder and steered her down a street to the right. The other Passeridae followed. "There's a... place... we can stay down here and wait for the others."

"It is friendly to us?" Rikka asked.

"No," Kitta said coldly. "There is no place in Harakti Tor that is friendly to us. But it will serve. Follow my lead, and do not falter, do not hesitate."

At the end of the avenue a grand tent, dyed in reds, oranges, and golds, soared nearly twenty feet over the surrounding wooden shacks and covered just under an eighth of the entire block. Unlike other areas of the city, the ground around the tent was clean, if still dirt. No refuse or other filth was to be seen. A red and gold banner fluttering above the curtained door read *Damendrache*.

The single guard in leather armour sitting on a stool outside appeared unassuming, but Kitta noted the battle horn at his side. Aid was not far away. As they approached, he stood and held up a hand. "You ladies have to report to the temple afore you come down 'ere." He paused, then grinned. "Unless that is you be paying cust—"

Kitta stepped around Rikka and brought her knee up hard into the guard's groin. He doubled over with a strangled groan. As he came down, she kned him in the nose, then kicked him back through the curtained doorway, yanking his short sword from its scabbard as he fell away. She stepped through the doorway and over his still form. Her Passeridae escort filtered into the tent behind her. Those with knives whipped them out and brandished them.

Inside, a tense silence reigned. A dozen startled young women sat or stood, frozen in place, staring at her. Some wore transparent gauze wraps, others wore only filmy skirts. Entrances to curtained alcoves and smaller, more private tents ringed the main room, which was still more than four times the size of the average city hovel. Overlapping carpets, faded and stained, covered the dirt floor. Kitta's nose wrinkled at the cloying perfumes that did little to mask the stench of the city but so overwhelmed the senses that she soon couldn't smell anything.

Off in an open alcove to their right, an older woman, the drachematrone, sat in a high-backed chair behind an ornate desk. She rose as Kitta turned toward her. "What are you about?" she asked, her voice smooth, husky, and confident.

Kitta waved a hand and the Passeridae fanned out into the room. She strode up to drachematrone and put the sword tip to her throat. "Sit, remain quiet, or you will die, now."

The woman chuckled. "Little girl, you don't know what you're dealing with. We have all given our lives to the dragon, and this tent is sacred ground. You will soon be hallowed, as well, and will serve alongside us from one of those alcoves... in chains, if—"

Kitta snapped her arm forward and drove the point of her sword through the drachematrone's throat. The woman's eyes widened in shock as she slumped to the ground behind the desk.

"I know exactly what I'm dealing with," Kitta said. She turned back to the tent proper. "Anyone who finds themselves unable to cooperate will receive the same," she announced.

None of the other girls moved.

She wasn't sure, but Kitta thought she saw a hint of a smile twitch at the corners of one or two red mouths. "Rikka," she said, "clear out the alcoves. If there are any patrons, kill them." She walked back over to the entrance and knelt by the guard. She drew a dagger off his belt and another out of his boot. She

unsheathed one of the blades and slit his throat. “Send Kiri and Marris out to the intersection to bring the others here.” She cleaned the dagger on the dead guard’s tunic, then handed both blades to Rikka. “Make sure they take these. We’re going to need more, as well. Maybe we’ll get a few patrons.”

By the time Fiona and Falana arrived, the daughters of the dragon were all rounded up and made as comfortable as precaution permitted in several of the connecting tents. Additional clothing had been found for those who were... lacking. It was early yet, and they’d been forced to dispatch only four patrons who at least yielded another half dozen blades. Hopefully, they would be gone before business picked up too much. Fiona had shot Kitta a sardonic look upon seeing their hideout but had refrained from commenting. Kitta now sat with Fiona, Rikka, and Falana around the former matrone’s desk.

“Why didn’t we just go to the temple?” Rikka asked. “Isn’t that where they are holding your paladin?”

“Yes,” Kitta said, “but if we went in there, we would probably have been split up and ushered off to rooms under guard until we could be ‘cleaned up.’ Then we would have been brought here, anyway, but not on terms to our favor.”

“Besides,” added Fiona, “someone in the temple might have recognized Falana, and there’s far too much magic floating around in there to risk that.”

Kitta looked in the desk drawer and found a quill and parchment. She lay the parchment out on the desk and quickly sketched out the city and temple complex. They had entered the city by the southern gate. “We’re here.” Kitta pointed to the center of the southeast quarter. “The temple sits behind a stone wall and its own dry moat, here,” she drew a long, walled area at the east end of the city, “where the valley floor begins to slope up toward the eastern rim. The Justice Court is an open-air courtyard across town.” She pointed to a box near where the temple wall met the city earthworks to the north. Kitta tapped the quill on the temple complex. “There may not be a whole army here, but it’s heavily fortified, and there’s no small number of temple guard... and, as Fiona pointed out, there’s the clerics. I’m not sure we want to go in there at all, not if we don’t know exactly where we are going, and there isn’t time to figure out a way to get a peek inside first.”

“Maybe we don’t have to,” Falana said. “They’ll have to bring him out here,” she pointed the temple gatehouse, midway between the Dramendrache and the court, then traced a line north, “and down the avenue to the court. If we’re fast, we can take him along that route.”

Kitta drummed her fingers on the desk. “That could work... and I think I may have an idea for a distraction.”

“Oh gods,” muttered Fiona, “she’s going make me pay for that sword.”

IV - Chorus of Voices

The sun was almost to the valley rim. Kitta strolled casually with Falana, Fiona, and a half dozen Passeridae down a litter-strewn dirt side street that led to the temple avenue. A dozen more Passeridae flanked them on parallel streets. They had already scouted the Justice Court. It had been aswarm with men erecting a platformed pyre around an iron pole sunk in the ground. They had also managed to acquire a few more weapons. The soldiers in this city were apparently willing to crawl into any dark corner for a bit of firm flesh.

Up ahead, the broad temple avenue crossed their street. Beyond it the wall of the “holy” compound rose grey and imposing. Kitta turned the corner. Less than ten yards away a score of archers in Sept red and blue marched toward them. Kitta started to lower her head and shuffle off to the side when she recognized Medva at their fore, wearing a dragon archer captain’s sash and plumed cap. Both groups stopped and stared at one another. A dark shadow in Medva’s eyes made Kitta back up a step and rest her hand on the hilt of the short

sword, hidden under her “borrowed” shawl. Dragon officers were accorded special magical gifts, Kitta knew, gifts not lightly bestowed. Medva took a couple of steps forward.

Behind Kitta, Falana started to hum a quiet melody. Kitta felt something inside her tug in response. Medva stopped, and a faint glow shone through the breast of his tunic. His *lia failte*, Kitta realized. Falana was a quick study, singing something similar to the magic Fiona had woven into the dragon sword.

Medva’s eyes brightened and he strode up to Kitta. “Perhaps you ladies would like to find a good place to watch the execution of the Lyfeian heretic,” he said.

Kitta didn’t miss the inflection on Lyfeian. Medva was back. “Actually, we were hoping to see the heathen bastard pass by.”

“He is already at the Justice Court.”

Kitta’s heartbeat quickened. “Surely not—”

“The clerics did not want to risk moving him through the streets. They used their magic to send him directly there from his holding cell in the temple.”

A cold tightness spread across Kitta’s chest. “Perhaps... we will go find a good place to view his final moments, then...”

Medva nodded and tipped his cap. “As you will.” He started off down the avenue.

As the company of archers passed, Kitta turned and sprinted back up the side street, her own company right behind her. She raised her fingers to her lips and blew a series of short, piercing chirps. The calls were echoed to either side, then again further off to the south. Kitta swung right onto the first cross street and was joined by the two smaller groups of flanking Passeridae. A cloud of dust rose behind them as they raced past startled residents making their way home and the occasional shopkeep closing up his stall.

They were forced to slow and push their way through noisy crowds that thronged the court and backed up into the streets. At least the dust wasn’t so bad here. It was about the only place in the city that was actually paved with stone. In the center, a dozen temple guards in red and black stood around the base of a wooden platform constructed on an eight-foot high pile of wood—well, mostly wood. Kitta squinted. The top two feet were human bones. Galatyne stood atop the platform, bound in an iron collar, manacles, and shackles, each linked to the other and into rings on the iron pillar that rose through the middle of the pyre. He was dressed in grey robes, but they were stained reddish brown. Even from where she stood, Kitta could see that one eye was dark and swollen.

A red and white robed cleric stood next to him. The cleric raised both hands in the air and the babbling masses quieted. “Faithful people of Harakti Tor,” he began, his voice carrying easily... too easily... across the court. “Long have the evils of the world battered your humble souls....”

They had a few minutes, Kitta thought, fractionally relieved. Rikka and the others should be starting their distraction, beginning, hopefully, with the tent of the Damendrache. She motioned to the Passeridae, and they again split up into smaller groups and made their way around to different sides of the court. She also took note of a handful of red and black temple guard tunics scattered through the crowd but didn’t see the blue of the archers anywhere.

“...Long have you struggled and suffered,” the cleric droned on, “while those who live in luxurious citadels take what you glean from the gracious earth.”

Grumbles made their way around the square.

“When we came here to help you make a new life, and train your men to defend you, they,” he gestured at Galatyne, “followed and turned your neighbors against you, burning your villages and slaying your unprotected families.”

Angry cries and shaking fists replaced the grumbles.

“Now the heathen filth have entered our hallowed walls. But!” He jabbed a finger at Galatyne. “This day we will gift one of them—”

“Fire!” The shout came from a side street. “Southside is on fire!”

Heads swiveled to the south. A thick plume of dark smoke rose over the city. People ran toward the burning quarter, including some of the guards, thankfully. In a city like this, fire was a vicious foe that offered no quarter. Some people, probably those with the least to save, ran for the earthworks.

“Let’s go!” Kitta shouted over the ruckus and blew a shrill whistle between finger and thumb.

They pushed their way through the milling crowd and rushed the pyre. Other Passeridae, weapons drawn, converged on the center of the court from their positions around the square. They made it almost to the pyre before the remaining guards noticed them as not being part of the general chaos and hurriedly drew their weapons. Fiona shouldered her way in front of Kitta and held out her arms. Kitta and the Passeridae with her halted. Fiona drew in a deep breath, drawing both fists toward her, then opened her hands and drove her palms forward as she let out a single, ear shattering note. Kitta staggered, her knees almost buckling. Several of the Passeridae stumbled as well, or dropped their weapons and clamped their hands to their ears. The guard’s swords shattered, and a few of the nearer soldiers collapsed with blood streaming from their ears.

Kitta darted around Fiona and slashed a guard’s throat with her short sword before he could reorient himself. Falana flashed past her and felled two more. The rest of the guards then had their hands full of Passeridae, so Kitta followed Falana up the wooden stairs to the platform, Fiona right on her heels. She threw a dagger past Falana and the cleric tumbled from the pyre. Falana whipped her sword in an arc over her head and brought the blade down on Galatyne’s chains. The blade splintered. Falana screamed in frustration. Kitta stepped past her and drove her sword against the chain with both hands. Her blade shattered as well.

“These are steel sung,” Fiona said, lifting one of the chains. Blue sparks crackled between the paladin’s skin and the black iron.

Galatyne didn’t move, didn’t speak, didn’t seem to be aware of their presence at all. Kitta noticed, then, the rope marks on his neck and lines of red that showed through tears in his robe. He had not fared well in the temple.

“Can you break it?” Falana asked.

Fiona nodded. “Yes. But I wasn’t expecting this. Galatyne must have given them cause to be fearful. I need a moment after breaking those swords.”

Kitta looked around. The court held only Passeridae and a handful of panicked residents for the time being. Most of the southern quarter was ablaze. “How long a moment?”

“Ten minutes?”

Falana’s eyes glazed over. In the distance a piercing cry rose over the din of the city. Kitta peered through gaps in the smoke and spotted Reiksciel swooping down the valley.

Shouts from the temple avenue drew Kitta’s attention back to the east. Armed guards rushed down the broad lane toward the square. Damn it! Kitta bounded down the stairs looking around for a weapon, but all of those carried by the guards lay shattered and ruined. She noticed the dead cleric sprawled at the foot of the pyre, ran over, and wrenched her dagger from his chest. A knot of Passeridae gathered around her as temple guards swarmed into the court.

Kitta hurled her dagger at the nearest guard. The entire front line collapsed, arrows sprouting from their chests. She glanced over her shoulder. Medva stood on top of the earthworks with a half-score archers. Another flight of arrows dropped into the guards. More Passeridae flowed into the square from the side streets. A handful of knife-wielding Damendrache, still in their sheer silks, flitted beside them.

Kitta ran forward, grabbed up a longsword and short spear, then dashed back to the pyre and tossed the sword up to Falana, who snatched it out of the air. She spun back around and slammed the butt end of the spear into a guard’s jaw, then whirled the blade above her head and thrust it over the crumpling guard’s

shoulder into the face of another. She swung the spear in a broad arc, driving back several more guards. The square was full of them. There were too many, more than she had expected.

A fuzzy tingling lifted the hair on the back of her neck. “Down!” she yelled and crouched low.

Lightning raked the ground, searing men and leather and scorching black lines across the flagstones. Reiksciel screeched and wheeled around for another pass. In the middle of his turn, a stream of crackling fire lanced into the wyvern from the street. Reiksciel screamed and unleashed lightning on a knot of men. The lightning rolled aside, starting new fires and scattering Passeridae, but not touching the men. Another tongue of fire lashed the wyvern, and he banked away to the north with a frustrated wail. In the street, red-robed figures clustered in the midst of the soldiers.

“Clerics!” Kitta yelled. She looked up to make sure Falana heard.

Falana nodded and began to sing even as a gout of fire flared out toward the pyre from the knot of clerics. It splashed aside several yards away and curled back, dissipating in a wisp of smoke.

A flare of light arced over the pyre, drawing a bright line toward the clerics in the failing light. Kitta looked back toward the temple avenue in time to see a flaming arrow sail through the clerics’ shields. A red-robed figure fell. She traced the arrow’s path backward. Medva drew and released; halfway through the air, the arrow burst into flame and flashed into the clerics. Another red robe fell.

Orange fire swept the top of the earthworks. Most of the archers perished instantly, but Medva stood untouched, sending arrow after fiery arrow through the clerics’ shield to find their mark in both guards and clerics. Magical gifts indeed... CRUUUMMPT! Fire flared into the earthworks. The rampart under Medva exploded out into the dry moat, and he vanished in a cloud of dust. Damn, but they could use Galatyne about now.

The temple guard and clerics pushed their way through the Passeridae and into the court. They seemed to be clustering together, though, edging away from the deeper shadows along the shops fronting the square. A dark shape lunged out of the gloom of one shop, seemingly unaffected by the magical shield, and dragged a guard screaming into the shadows. Then they were both gone. The cold memory of a dark forest path raced down Kitta’s spine.

“*Seeledrache, horen sie unseren vorwand.*” A sonorous chant rose, unnaturally loud, over the din of battle. “*Seeledrache, nehmen sie unseren antrag an.*” The temple guard abruptly halted their advance.

Townfolk began to emerge from the street chanting in unison with the clerics, their fear gone, their eyes glazed over in faithful fervor. The walls of the temple complex gleamed blood red as the sun touched the valley rim. A low roar, as of a distant rush of wind or fire, filled the air.

Seeledrache... Gods, Kitta thought, it’s a summoning. “Fiona! Falana!” she called. “Now would be good!”

A robed cleric appeared on the platform. Falana twisted her sword up and thrust at him, but her blade skated off to one side several inches away. The cleric raised a hand. Falana launched herself at him, sending both of them tumbling down the side of the pyre. Falana landed on top and sprang to her feet. The cleric didn’t stir.

Fiona stepped toward Galatyne, who still seemed to take no notice of the events around him, but even as she did so, another red-robed cleric appeared on the platform, and, with a subtle flex of his fingers, hurled Fiona into the air. She hit the ground hard. Kitta sprinted over to her as Falana made a dash for the platform stairs. The flagstones were no match for dwarven resilience, and Fiona was already scrambling to her feet but let Kitta pull her the rest of the way up, then quickly shoved her away.

Falana screamed, but the cry turned into a melodic strain. A rush of heat and light swept over Kitta. She whirled. Flames roared from the pyre. Falana stood before it, her arms outstretched, singing. Inside the flames, Galatyne stood untouched. The cleric marched down the flaming stair toward Falana.

Fiona's voice split the air with a single note. A wall of force slammed Kitta to her knees. Behind it was absolute silence. Gone was the roar of flames, the chanting, Falana's song... The song! Kitta looked up. Galatyne's bindings splintered and fell away. A ball of blue fire rolled out from the paladin and down the pyre. Kitta closed her eyes. She felt a slight warmth, then... nothing. Sound crashed back over her like a wave. Above the din, Falana's voice held, unwavering.

She opened her eyes. The cleric was gone; only ashes remained at Falana's feet. The blue fire rolled out across the court. Several of the clerical shields collapsed, the men within them evaporating into ash, but the remaining Passeridae were unharmed.

Galatyne staggered forward and jerked to a halt. His left wrist was still securely chained to the iron column. Falana continued to sing the shield around him, but tears welled in her eyes. Behind her, Fiona sat on her knees, drained, chin resting on her chest.

No! Kitta railed. No, no, no!

A guard in black and red appeared between Falana and the pyre in a dead run at the elf. Kitta spun her spear up even as she acknowledged she could never close the distance in time. A dark form, jackal-like, but standing upright like a man, materialized out of the guard's flickering shadow and decapitated him with a scissor snap of two short swords, then leapt right to impale another guard as he appeared. Kitta hesitated only a second before slipping around to cover Falana's other side. She whistled, and the Passeridae closed in around Falana. The jackal-man seemed to know where the guards would appear and was there before Kitta could determine the direction of the attack. Those few that made it past fell to Passeridae blades.

Suddenly the attacks stopped. Kitta peered around the pyre. The clerics and guards both moved toward the edge of the square. Something else was different... The chanting had changed, taking on a rhythmic repetition. "*Seeledrache hort! Seeledrache hort!*"

Black smoke and fire geysered into the air from the temple complex. The column of burning smoke curled out and coalesced into a massive black and red dragon that glided over the dry moat on wings that spanned thirty yards. It landed in the court, towering above the pyre. Kitta and the jackal both stepped in front of Falana, but the dragon ignored them. It raised a taloned claw and drove it down on Falana's shield. Falana fell to her knees but held the melody.

Galatyne raised a hand. Blue fire arced upward into the dragon's face. Seeledrache roared in pain, then opened its maw and breathed a jet of fire back at the paladin. For a moment, blue fire and red met in mid-air, crackling and sizzling. Then slowly, slowly, the blue fire gave way, then collapsed. The dragon fire engulfed Falana's shield. Falana poured more of herself into the song. Her skin began to redden, as if from a sunburn, and her clothes started to smolder.

Galatyne fell to his knees. He crawled to the edge of the platform and reached out a hand, toward Falana, Kitta was sure. No... stop... he was telling Falana to stop. Kitta leapt forward and took Falana down onto the flagstones. The song stopped. Dragon fire enveloped the pyre. Falana screamed. For a moment, Galatyne was visible, kneeling in the flames. Then he was gone, consumed by the fire.

Kitta turned away. Falana's fist caught her just under the eye and sent her sprawling backwards onto the ground. Falana was over her in a flash, but the jackal threw himself at her and wrestled her to the ground.

Seeledrache roared his triumph to the sky, then turned his gaze on the small party by the pyre. No one moved. There was nowhere to go. The dragon drew in a great breath. The pyre shivered, then erupted in a shower of embers and flame as an armoured knight of blue fire rose up, ten... no, fifteen... feet in height. Seeledrache breathed. The knight raised his shield. The dragon fire struck it and dissipated. The knight lunged forward and slashed down with a fiery sword that appeared in his hand mid-swing. The flame-blade tore smoldering gashes in Seeledrache's left wing.

"*Starke zum Seeledrache! Starke zum Seeledrache!*" The chanting changed again and grew in strength. Townspeople edged forward into the court, their burning city forgotten. Seeledrache reared back and drove

his fanged maw down on the knight, but the knight sidestepped and plunged his sword into the dragon's mouth. Seeledrache roared and thrashed, ripping the sword from the knight's hand. The weapon vanished instantly.

“Starke zum Seeledrache!”

Again, Seeledrache's head snapped down. This time, the knight grabbed it with both gauntleted hands and held tight. Blue fire coiled out and around the dragon's horns and danced down his neck. Red fire poured from Seeledrache's maw and snaked around the knight. For a long, breathless moment, they stood locked.

“Starke zum Seeledrache!”

The knight sank to his knees beneath Seeledrache's onslaught.

Kitta stood mesmerized by the struggle. She couldn't think of anything to do.

“Starke zum—” Screams interrupted the cadence of the chant.

Kitta whirled. A dark shadow materialized in the crowd, slashed a throat and vanished, only to reappear somewhere else and end another voice. She looked quickly around her... The jackal-man was gone.

Seeledrache yanked his head around and tried to spit a gout of fire at the marauding shadow, but the knight forced his head up, sending the fire harmlessly into the sky.

“Starke zum Seeledrache!”

That's it! Kitta thought. Galatyne had once said something about Rangrel's followers channeling their energy into him to raise him. This... avatar must be something similar. “The people!” she cried out. “They're sustaining the dragon! Kill anyone who is chanting!”

Kitta and the Passeridae rushed into the crowd. Falana swept passed her and unleashed her rage and anguish in a blur of steel that left a broad swath of shattered bodies. Arrows of golden fire streaked into the few remaining clerics, announcing Medva's return to the battle. Seeledrache roared. This time fear tinged the note. A higher pitched shriek rent the air, and Reiksciel dove out of the dark sky, lightning snapping and crackling from his nose, tail, and claws until he dug into Seeledrache's back. The dragon tore away from the knight and tried to snap at Reiksciel. Failing, he evaporated into a column of smoky fire. Reiksciel fell through him to the ground but immediately turned on townsfolk, following Falana. People fled the court.

The knight rushed forward as Seeledrache began to reform and plunged into the smoky mass. Blue fire rolled out and up. For a moment, knight and dragon were one in a writhing, twisting mass of armour, limbs, wings, and swirling flames. Then, Seeledrache came apart in tatters of smoke and fire and was gone. The knight stood before them. In his hand he held what looked like a pulsing, glowing coal. He closed his fiery fist around it, and it vanished with a brief flash and a puff of smoke. Behind the temple wall, a great cracking sound, as of stone being torn in two, echoed.

Kitta suddenly realized that the city was silent except for the crackle of flames. The fiery knight turned and looked at them. Falana took a hesitant step forward and reached out a hand. The knight stepped back.

“Galatyne?” Kitta asked.

The knight turned toward her with a hiss of shifting fire. He appeared to study her for a moment, then dissolved into a shower of blue sparks. Falana fell to her knees, and Reiksciel let out a piercing wail.

“He knew,” Falana said when Kitta finally worked up the nerve to approach her. “He knew he was going to face Seeledrache... one way or another. Initiate or sacrifice, that meeting lay at the end of this path. The fireball... when we tried to free him... he knew and was amassing power behind the clerics' wards to release it... We...” She turned away.

Kitta put a hand on her shoulder. “Falana... He... I...” What could she say? That she was sorry? That they couldn't have known? That Galatyne would have done the same thing? True as it all might be, it sounded hollow in the face of such a loss.

“I think,” Falana said, sinking down to sit on the stones and staring into the flames of the still burning pyre, “that I would like to be alone for a while.”

As Kitta turned away, a jackal loped out of the darkness and shifted into a small, wiry man dressed in black. He stepped up beside Kitta, a somber look on his face.

“Saba?” Kitta asked. “Is that you?”

Saba nodded, then ducked his head toward Falana. “I’m sorry that...” He shrugged, but a tear glimmered in his eye. “I’m sorry.”

V - Hymn of Farewell

Not wanting to sleep in the still-smoldering ruins of the city, yet not willing to let Falana out of sight, Kitta wasn’t sure what to do until Medva suggested they set up camp on top of the earthworks adjacent to the Justice Court. It would be a defensible position, they could see anyone coming... and they could take turns keeping an eye on Falana.

Kitta walked up to the small fire and sat down by Medva, Saba, and Fiona. Down in the court, Falana still sat by the glowing ruins of the pyre. Reiksciel let out a mournful wail.

“He speaks her sorrow where she cannot,” Saba said. He pointed at Falana then Reiksciel, then tapped two fingers over his heart. “They share a spirit.”

Kitta nodded. “Reiksciel tried to show me... back on the cliff where we fought, but I didn’t understand what he showed me, then. Falana was linked to Galatyne, somehow. That’s why she always knew where he was. Reiksciel was a guardian of gates who has always formed a bond with his rider. His link with Falana wasn’t complete because of her connection to Galatyne. Somewhere between those bonds, a crack formed, and the Sept magic wormed its way in. She had no way of knowing, no chance to even fight it. With Galatyne’s... now, the link with Reiksciel is complete and the crack is closed.”

“She blames herself,” Medva said.

“I’m not sure—”

“I am.” Medva nodded resolutely and climbed to his feet, tapping his head. “I felt the talons of Rangrel, too. She blames herself.” He picked his way down the earthworks and strode across the court to Falana. He sat beside her and rested a hand on her shoulder. Reiksciel bobbed his head and whimpered.

*

In the morning, Falana still sat by the cooling ashes of the pyre. Kitta approached hesitantly. Fiona, Medva, Saba, and Rikka stood behind her at the edge of the court. Falana took no notice of their presence.

Kitta took a deep breath and walked up to her. “Falana?” When the elf didn’t respond, she added, “We can’t just stay here.”

Falana nodded. “I know.” She sighed and climbed to her feet, then began to sing softly, a gentle, soothing melody... a lullaby without words. Blue-white light sparkled in the charred remains of the pyre. Tiny motes of light floated into air and were soon joined by larger lights, fragments of bone, Kitta realized. For a moment they stood under the cloud of light, then a change in Falana’s pitch brought a gentle breeze that carried away the twinkling ash. Falana swirled a finger and the shards of bone drew together and settled in her hands. That was all that was left, barely two handfuls of bone.

Falana knelt and wrapped them in a scrap of cloth she tore from her cloak. “I’m going to Illyr,” she said, and strode toward Reiksciel.

Kitta hurried after her. “I’m coming with you.”

“Suit yourself.” With a single, fluid motion, Falana sat astride Reiksciel.

Saba trotted over and touched Falana’s knee. “Lady elf, my kind... we can travel different paths. There is a place. We call it Funeral Mountain. It’s where... Only souls of light may pass that way. I will go there, and... well, I will go, and we shall see.”

Falana wiped a tear from her cheek. “Thank you, Saba.”

Kitta tried to pull herself up on the wyvern and slipped. Medva caught her and easily lifted her up. She clambered around behind Falana.

“We’ll catch up with you at the gathering. This was only one sept. We still have work to do.”

“I’ll be there if I can,” Fiona said, “but first, I want to make sure this temple is of no use to anyone again.”

Medva touched his bow to his forehead. “And I want to set some things aright in the villages around here... and make sure there aren’t any clerics wandering these hills.”

With that amulet of fire still in his possession, Kitta had no doubt that *these* lands, at least, would be cleric free before long.

With two beats of Reiksciel’s wings, they were airborne. The ground fell away rapidly. A skirling chirp sounded below, and Reiksciel banked around once in a smooth circle, roaring out a farewell. Rikka, Fiona, and Medva, stood in silent acknowledgement, their hands raised in a parting wave. A dark, furred shape bounded along beneath them for a few wing beats, then vanished into shadow.

Every end is a new beginning