



# SWORDS OVER FIRESHORE



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**Swords Over Fireshore**

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*for my brother, Darragh*



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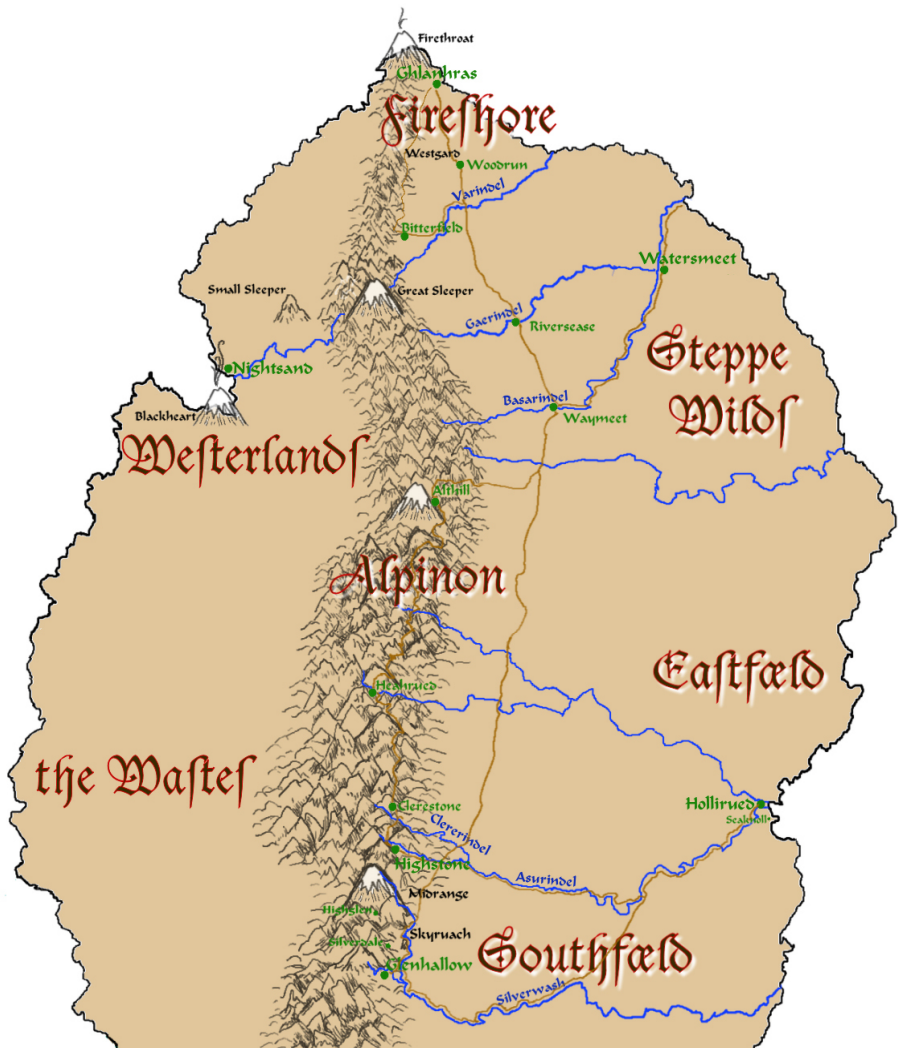
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# Map of the Ælven Lands







*Let all your actions enhance the well-being of others*

*Khi is a gift to be honored, respected, and served*

*Guard the world's creatures, for they are the hope of your future*

*All living beings are kindred, deserving your care*

—Creed of the Ælven, third stave



## ❧ Fireshore ❧

Eliani paced back and forth across the road, gazing ever northward past the bridge she would soon cross, as if she could see all the way to Ghlanhras. She could not, for the darkwood forest, dense and high enough to obscure much of the sky, blocked her view. In her mind, though, she saw the city as she had fled it earlier that night: torn by sudden chaos; black-clad, snow-haired alben atop the stone wall that surrounded its graceful structures.

Come daylight, when the alben hid from the sun, she and her escort would return to the city to rescue her cousin Luruthin and Governor Othanin. Those two she felt certain would be held in Darkwood Hall. Any other ælven in the city must wait for aid until the army arrived from the south. She hoped they would not suffer too severely.

“My lady?”

Eliani turned to see Vanorin, the stern-faced captain of her escort, holding out a set of leather armor. “If you will.”

The leather was finely worked, traced with leaves and vines in ornate detail. Nothing like her own comparatively simple leathers, which she had left behind in her escape.

She frowned. “Whose are these?”

One of the escort—Revani, a fair-haired Greenglen female—stepped forward, dressed in only her soft tunic and legs. “Mine, my lady. Pray do me the honor of wearing them.”

“But—”

“Revani will remain by the gate, to carry word to Woodrun if we should fail.”

Revani smiled shyly. “May I assist you?”

Resigned, Eliani allowed the guardian to help her don the leathers. “Lovely work.”

“Thank you, my lady. It is my own.”

“Is it?”

“My family are leather workers.”

“Well, I shall have a commission for you when we get back to

Glenhallow."

"I would be honored to serve you, my lady."

"Eliani, please. If we are sharing clothing, we need not be formal."

Eliani offered an arm to Revani, who clasped it with a grateful smile.

"Spirits watch over you, my lady. Eliani."

"And over you."

Eliani watched her walk away, then turned to Vanorin. "Thank you for reminding me that I am not indestructible."

Vanorin grimaced. "If I thought I could convince you to stay behind, I would try."

"You cannot."

"Still, I ask that you not be at the fore when we reach Ghlanhras. Your gift must be preserved for the good of all ælvenkind."

Eliani drew a sharp breath. Luruthin had said something much the same as he urged her to flee the alben. Now he was captive, all for the sake of her safety, her gift of mindspeech.

"I will take care."

"Thank you, my lady."

"Eliani, Vanorin. You have been forgetting of late."

"I forget nothing."

An unfamiliar tone in his voice made her glance up at him, but he was turning away. Eliani frowned, wondering if he was angry with her. She had thought she had set him at ease enough to make him treat her with friendliness. Lately, though, he had reverted to formality.

Perhaps the burden of commanding her escort had told on him. She was not easy company, she knew.

Not until the first flush of dawn had strengthened into full brightness would Vanorin allow the party to start northward. Eliani was dancing with impatience by the time he agreed to let them cross the bridge.

She carried her sword against her shoulder, for she had no sheath to it. The sword was the only possession she had brought out of Ghlanhras. As she walked, she turned her thoughts toward the challenge ahead.

Darkwood Hall was not as vast as the Southfæld governor's palace in Glenhallow, but it was much larger than her own home of Felisanin Hall, from which her father governed Alpinon. To find Othanin and Luruthin within its sprawling structure was her first concern, and she worried how to do this without alerting the alben to their presence. She had raised the question with Vanorin, and all they had been able to decide was to wait for daylight, then go quietly and listen in the hope of hearing something that would lead them to the captives.

That did not satisfy her. She frowned, pondering how else she might locate her cousin, and was startled by a sudden bloom of warmth upon her brow: her partner Turisan, signaling that he wished to speak with her.

*We are moving, love. May I speak to you later?*

*Eliani, I beg you to reconsider this—*

*My escort will protect me.*

*Will you not wait until I can consult with Eهران at Midrange?*

*For all you know Eهران is still fighting. And I cannot afford to wait even one day. In that time the alben will consolidate their hold on Ghlanhras. They might move their captives.*

She stepped on an unseen pebble and stumbled, twisting her ankle slightly. Next to her, Vanorin flung out an arm to prevent her falling. She glanced at him, embarrassed and grateful.

*“May we pause for a moment?”*

A flicker darkened Vanorin's eyes, then he nodded and turned away. Eliani leaned against a tree at the side of the road, rubbing her ankle, while her escort moved to the opposite side. They talked in quiet voices and cast curious glances at her, even as they gave her distance. After all their journeys together, they were still fascinated by her gift. She closed her eyes, the only means of privacy she had.

*My love, we discussed this. I thought we had agreed.*

*Yes, but I am worried for you.* She sensed Turisan's desire for her, and it sharpened her own. A fleeting memory of their one night together in the Star Tower smote her. She suppressed an urge to moan.

*Then ask the spirits of your elders to watch over me.*

*I do. Every day, even as I pray that we shall be reunited.*

Eliani drew a sharp breath. She had lost count of the days since their parting, but with all that had passed it must be close to Midwinter. She had hoped to be back in Glenhallow by now, not marching northward again.

*We shall.* She swallowed, hoping the longing she felt was not obvious to Turisan. *I must go, love.*

*Speak to me when you reach Ghlanhras. Before...*

*Yes.*

She sent a flood of love toward him, then withdrew. Opening her eyes, she blinked at the brightness of the day. The sun was not visible overhead—that would not occur until midday—but already its heat washed through the forest. Her guardians glanced at her, then gathered to move once more.

Strange, she thought as she started forward, to be in so warm a place at Midwinter. Her own realm would be deep in snow by now.

An old Midwinter song came into her mind, a tune she had learned as a

child. A song of snow and cold, of hope for the return of light. She laughed under her breath. Fireshore had no lack of light. No doubt the folk who dwelt here did not sing such songs.

A tingle poured through her veins. That was it! Would that she could sing, but her voice was fit only for bawdy guardian's camp songs, at best.

"Vanorin?"

The captain, who had fallen into step beside her, glanced her way. "My lady?"

"Do they sing 'The Winter Star' in Southfæld?"

"Yes."

"Do you know it? Well enough to sing it?"

"I believe so. Why?"

"You may need to."

Eliani hummed softly. Snow and the hope of light. A good tune to carry into the enemy's holding.



"Your pardon, Bright Lady. You asked to be brought the escaped female's things."

Shalár nodded to Torith, one of her better hunters, to come into her new chamber. New as hers; it had been her father's many centuries ago.

She scarcely remembered that time. She glanced at the walls, at the minimal ornaments placed there by the ælven governor, who was now her captive.

The hunter stepped into the front room and paused uncertainly. He carried a leather saddle pack, a pale green cloak, and a set of leather armor, blue in color.

"Put them on the table."

She watched him lay them down, noting the suppleness of his movements. He seemed unwearied by the night's work. Capturing Ghlanhras had been surprisingly easy. Shalár flipped open the saddle pack and began to explore its contents.

"It is time we all fed. You will organize a hunt, Torith. Take twenty hunters and bring back at least fifty kobalen." She glanced up at him. "You may have to cross the mountains."

Torith's eyes brightened with interest. He was hungry, no doubt, and would probably be happier on a hunt than idle in Ghlanhras.

"Yes, Bright Lady."

"Have the Stonereach sent in to me before you go."

Torith bowed and departed. Shalár watched him out, then reached for the

leather armor that had been found in the escaped female's room. That one, too, was a Stonereach, according to Othanin. The daughter of Alpinon's governor. Kin to the male now being held under guard.

Shalár ran a hand along the armor. Blue, a Stonereach color, and there was a leather belt stained violet. She could smell the dye. No adornments, other than the color. Alpinon was a young realm, and had fewer artisans than the older realms of Southfæld and Eastfæld. Even the Steppes were older than Alpinon and had their own specialized crafts. Only Fireshore was newer.

Shalár picked up the cloak, a fine light wool dyed pale green and lined with silver silk. Greenglen colors. Othanin had said the female Stonereach was handfasted to a Greenglen, so that would now be her clan.

Holding the cloak in her hands, Shalár felt the tingle of khi in it. Mage-blessed, she realized with delight. Such a cloak would protect its wearer well. Hers now.

She put it down and returned to the saddle pack, which contained little of interest. A small packet of dried meat and another of dried sunfruit. A spare tunic and legs, in need of washing. A comb and other grooming tools. A small reed flute.

Shalár took the flute up and felt a whisper of khi in it as well; not the strong, laid-in khi of mage-work, but the resonant khi of an object long used and well loved. It was the only item among the Stonereach female's possessions that was not strictly necessary for travel.

A knock on the door made her turn, flute in hand. "Come."

The door opened and the Stonereach male was brought in, his hands bound behind him, his gaze lowered. The three hunters who brought him watched him warily. Shalár thanked them and indicated they should leave.

"He is not to be trusted, Bright Lady. He tried to flee us."

"Ah, is that how he got this?" She touched the ælven's cheek just beneath a cut. He flinched away.

"We had to knock him down. He is dangerous."

"Not to me."

She smiled and sent a pulse of khi toward the hunters, a warning and a reminder. One of them winced slightly. All started toward the door.

"Stay a moment. Take these." Shalár indicated the cloak and the armor. "Have them dyed black, with the good dye that was found at the crafthall. These, too." She tossed the Stonereach female's spare clothing to one of the hunters.

"Yes, Bright Lady."

They gathered up the escaped female's things, and Shalár saw that the

Stonereach male watched them furtively, looking dismayed. The hunters hastened to leave, closing the door behind them.

Shalár strolled toward the ælven, looking him over with interest. His features were classic Stonereach, russet hair and green eyes, which flicked to the flute in her hands, then away.

“Your friend will not get far.”

He said nothing, but she saw the eyes narrow, the lines of the face tense. He was preparing to strike. Shalár smiled, then summoned her khi and wrapped it around his.

A small grunt of surprise was all the sound he made, but in silence he struggled. He was strong. Shalár had to use all her own strength to subdue him, and it cost her.

The hunger that whispered in her flesh sharpened. She ignored it, concentrating her will on the ælven, who slowly sank to his knees on the thick carpet of the governor’s chamber.

His breath came in labored gasps, yet still he resisted. Losing patience, she gave that part of his khi under her control a twist, a technique she had developed herself, one that caused pain. She took no particular pleasure in giving pain, but it was useful.

The ælven let out a small groan. She released him suddenly and he dropped forward, gasping for breath.

“You look uncomfortable. Perhaps you should get up.”

He glanced at her, green eyes full of outrage, shadowed with fear. She smiled.

“You would do well to comply. You will spare yourself much unpleasantness.”

He looked away again and made no answer. Shalár felt a stab of annoyance.

“Get up.”

He gave no sign of having heard, merely stayed there on his knees, head down, staring at the floor. Shalár pushed him onto his back with a bare foot, then straddled him. Alarm filled his eyes and flashed through his khi.

Shalár’s smile widened as she made herself comfortable. Clothing still separated them, but that was easily amended. She wanted to enjoy his discomfort first, as he realized the use she would make of him—though it would not be for pleasure, but for her people’s future.

She wished for a child, and though the ælven were her enemies, she knew that they also represented the best hope of conception. Capturing Ghlanhras had meant that she had also captured new breeding stock for her people. She would waste no time making use of it.



She took hold of the Stonereach's khi again, and this time he was distracted enough that she got a firm grip on him. He closed his eyes and turned his face away, small and futile gestures.

"This must be uncomfortable for you, with your arms bound so. It really would be better if we moved to the bed."

She got up and stepped back to give him room to rise. When he failed to move, she sent him a warning with khi. He made a small, strangled sound, then slowly rolled onto his knees once more.

"Good. Now stand up."

It took two more warnings to make him obey. By then his eyes had gone dull with the knowledge that she could make him do absolutely anything she wished. Shalár smiled.

She nudged him through the doorway into the bedchamber behind the front room, and made him climb onto the bed and recline against the extravagant heap of pillows. She left his hands bound, not because she feared he would overpower her, but to remind him of his position.

He wore the clothes he had been taken in, an undertunic and legs of good silk, feet bare. Shalár pulled off the legs, marveling again that the ælven all seemed to have silk. True, it was the most durable and comfortable fabric to wear beneath leather. Clan Darkshore had to make do with fleecelod, having failed to find silkworms anywhere west of the Ebon Mountains.

She touched him and he flinched, then squeezed his eyes shut. Shalár laughed softly as she began lazily caressing his flesh into arousal.

"I want a child, my Stonereach friend. If you are lucky enough to oblige me, you shall be rewarded. Tell me, have you ever conceived?"

His eyes opened in a glance of startled surprise, then he shut them again and turned his head away. Shalár's heart leapt with excitement.

"Show me!"

She took hold of his khi, searching it for his memories. She could sense such from one who was willing, but from this resistant Stonereach she felt only hints, enough to know that he had indeed conceived, and recently.

Her closest attempts had been with Yaras, while he had openly shared with her his own memories of conception. His child had been conceived and born almost fifty years ago, though, and was nearly grown, now. This Stonereach had memories that were far more fresh.

Shalár straddled him again, lifting her silk robe to bring them flesh to flesh. He made a small sound of distress, then was still. Thrilled not by this but by the chance of conception—a better chance than she had known in centuries, perhaps ever—Shalár mounted him. She inhaled with pleasure as she sank onto his flesh, feeling it push against her inner self, the self that

must open for her to conceive.

“Show me!”

“No.”

His whisper was a plea, not a denial. He could not deny her. No one could. Shalár smiled as she reached deeper into his thoughts.



Luruthin tried to hide, tried to curl himself into a small, hard ball of anger. It was no use. The alben's khi filled him, tainted with a strange tang, like metal on the tongue.

She was older than he, much older, and powerful. Revulsion and despair went through him in waves, even as she beat herself against him, even as his flesh responded against his wish.

He tried not to think of Jhinani, of the moment when their son to be had greeted them, a moment of joyous surprise. The alben clawed her way into the memory, defiling it. That roused more wrath in him than he had ever felt, and in hurt and anger he tried to strike back.

Using his khi as he had never done before, as the creed of the ælven forbade, he tried deliberately to hurt her. She cried out, but not because of his clumsy attempt to fight. With horror he felt her flesh open to receive him, to welcome his seed.

He tried to withhold it, but that too was futile. Her rapturous excitement carried him along and he felt himself emptying into her even as her flesh clamped around him.

He turned his head, letting grief slip from beneath his clenched eyelids. She had stolen from him, and he had allowed it.

Stolen like a thieving kobalen. That was the sort of creature she was, a low creature, without precepts. She was not ælven.

A brilliance filled his mind, a new presence. The soul of the child to be, come to greet them. He had never expected to be a father once, let alone twice, for it was a rare occurrence among his people. Yet no joy came to him now, despite the radiance that filled him.

Conception was the only time in many an ælven's life that mindspeech was possible. Luruthin held himself away from the contact, even as he heard the alben's thought.

*Thank you! Thank you!*

She was delirious with joy. Luruthin only felt sickened. He tried to empty his mind, think of nothing, build a gray wall between him and the others. The child penetrated it as if it did not exist.

*Thank you, my father, for opening my path.*

A shudder went through him. He answered.

*This was done without my consent. Why have you chosen such a path into the world of flesh?*

A shimmer of emotion enveloped him, of happiness blended with sympathy, with regret. Despite himself, he felt eased by it.

*We take the paths that are offered. I accept the accompanying challenges.*

*You have chosen a dark way.*

*And my khi will bear the mark of it. I am not the first.*

Luruthin made no reply. The alben leader did not share the conversation; he sensed that the child had excluded her, which gave him a small measure of satisfaction.

*All lives are woven of both dark and light. A life is a complicated plan, inevitably filled with shifts and adaptations. I welcome the opportunity to learn.*

*You come into a bitter time.*

*Yes. I will do what I can to lighten it.*

A flicker of something—hope, or pride—rose in Luruthin's heart. He tried to suppress it. He wanted nothing of this child or her mother.

*I understand your concerns. We will meet again, in time. My name is Shiláni.*

A shock went through him at the name. Taken from her mother's, the alben leader's, with only the tiniest part of his own name. How appropriate.

They were bound now, he and the alben, in a way that could never be broken. They would always be joined through this child. What should only be a joyous experience had been forced on him through pain and fear.

The alben—with a grimace he made himself acknowledge her name: Shalár—had violated his person and his thoughts, and had broken the cup-bond he had made with Jhinani. He would hate her forever, a realization that filled him with both anger and sorrow. Hatred was difficult to atone for; the atonement must be to oneself.

He felt Shiláni withdraw, adding her strength to the barrier he had made. Beyond it he knew that she remained, speaking with her mother.

While their flesh was bound together in conception, he and the alben would remain joined in thought, though Shiláni had shielded him from direct contact. Luruthin sensed Shalár gloating, though. He withdrew as far as he could beyond the gray wall, trying to ignore what he knew he could never forget.

He lay silent, becoming aware of discomfort in his flesh. His arms ached from the weight on them; his weight and hers, for the alben had sprawled over his chest in sated bliss. Disgusted, he lay wishing for her flesh to release him. At long last it did so, and the alben gave a deep sigh as she slowly slid away, leaving him exposed, the air cold on his wet and shrunken flesh.

The child was still present, he was dimly aware. She would remain near her mother until the body she had claimed was ready to receive her.

The alben moved off him, the absence of her weight a slight relief. Luruthin kept his eyes closed, determined not to respond to her.

"Well." Her voice was strangely soft. A long moment passed before she spoke again. "I am grateful to you, Stonereach. What reward would you have?"

He did not move, scarcely breathed. He felt her shifting on the bed, then felt her hands on him, pushing him onto his side and then tugging at the cords that bound his hands. It hurt, but he made no protest.

His hands tingled as blood flowed back into them. He had to move, then, to sit up and rub his aching wrists. Shalár placed herself in front of him but he would not look at her. His anger swelled at a glimpse of her bare thigh, at the bitter, musky scent of her, but he knew if he tried to attack her she would quickly subdue him with khi. Also, he realized with dismay, he could not endanger the child.

"I am in earnest, Stonereach. I wish to reward you. Name your pleasure."

"I want only one thing, and that you will not give me." His voice sounded strangled. Like his heart.

She laughed. "Do not be so certain. I can be generous."

He met her gaze then—those awful, black eyes—and let her feel his resentment. "Release me."

Her eyes widened as her smile faded. "Ah, no. That I cannot do."

Luruthin looked down, unsurprised and freshly angered. At least she would not trouble him again until after the child was born. Perhaps he would find a way to escape before then.

"But I can give you some kinds of freedom."

He moved away, to the edge of the bed. He sought his borrowed silk legs among the bedding, found them and pulled them on.

"You may dwell here, if you wish. In this chamber." Her voice was caressing, which sickened him. Could she not guess that nothing would be farther from his wishes?

She came to stand in front of him. He shut his eyes, unwilling to see her.

"What is your name?"

He held his breath. If she wanted that from him—anything from him—she must take it by force, as before.

"Ghlanhras is mine now." Her voice was sharper on the words.

"Fireshore is mine. That, Stonereach, is something to which you must resign yourself."

He said nothing, made no move. After a moment he heard her step away

and open a drawer. One of Othanin's drawers; this was the governor's chamber. Or had been.

She returned, and Luruthin flinched as she reached toward him. Something soft and cool fell around his shoulders.

“Wear this, and you may have your freedom within Darkwood Hall.”

He looked down at the red silken cord that draped around his neck and hung to his chest, ending in an elaborate knot. A symbolic bondage. He wanted to refuse it, but knew that to do so would be foolish. Walking free within the hall was a step toward actual freedom.

He would not thank her, though. He remained silent.

She moved away again, and he heard the sound of liquid pouring. Keeping his face averted, not wanting the slightest glimpse of her, he bolted through the outer chamber and into the corridor.

He was halfway to the audience hall when he realized she had not pursued him. He forced himself to walk, to behave as if he had the right of freedom she had promised him.

He was shaking. He paused to steady himself, drawing deep, gasping breaths. Grief brought fresh tears, but he blinked them back.

He must get away, out of Darkwood Hall. Out of Ghlanhras. Somehow he would do it. He must.

Jhinani. He would return to Glenhallow and beg her forgiveness. She had healed him once; perhaps she could do so again. The hope of it steadied him enough to walk on.

The guards in the audience hall glanced up as he entered. Their eyes went to the red cord he wore. He felt his face begin to burn but would not acknowledge it. Watching the guards, who watched him in turn but made no move to detain him, he crossed through the chamber and into the main corridor of Darkwood Hall.

Here he hesitated, at a loss what to do next. He would not be permitted to leave the Hall, he was certain. The alben leader had not achieved her place through carelessness.

For lack of a better plan, he walked toward the entrance, and passed through one of the two sets of double doors that flanked the stone wall of the hearthroom. A place of welcome in every ælven home; this hearthroom had already changed. The hearth was cold and dark; the outer doors closed.

Six alben guards stood before those doors, two of them bearing swords. They all moved their hands to their weapons at Luruthin's approach, and it was all he could do to keep from flinching away. It was not the swords that aroused his dread, it was the nets.

He felt the blood drain from his face at the memory of those nets. Dozens

of them, tripping him, dragging him down, their leaf-shaped metal weights biting at him....

He shook himself, and made himself face the alben guards. All of them wore black leathers, all were black-eyed and white-haired like their leader. Two were female, and Luruthin felt a stab of anxious dread at being in their presence.

The alben stared back at him, suspicious. One of the males spoke.

“Begone from here, Stonereach. These doors are ever closed to you.”

Luruthin made no reply, though he was oddly heartened by the claim. If these doors were closed, he must simply find another. Or a different path altogether.

He left, meaning to walk back down the vast, empty central corridor. Outside the hearthroom, though, an alben guard stood waiting. Luruthin frowned as their gazes met.

His heart filled with sudden rage, so vivid he had to close his eyes. Not so generous after all, his captor. He might have a measure of freedom, but apparently it did not include privacy. It should not have surprised him.

Swallowing, he composed himself and walked past the guard, ignoring his presence as if the alben did not exist. He set a leisurely pace down the corridor, noting the footfalls of the guard who shadowed him. This intrusion only made him more determined to escape.

He must choose his moment carefully. Daylight would be greatly to his advantage.

In the meantime he would go to Othanin, still being held in the room where they had both been thrown. If he could free the governor, then when daylight came, they could escape together.

A flicker of hope kindled in his heart and quickened his step. Hope was almost painful, but he held to it as his only beacon through this dark night.



Eliani paused as they came in sight of the darkwood gates of Ghlanhras. The wall that surrounded the city, built of black volcanic rock, was a massive darkness looming beyond the myriad greens and shadows of the forest.

Vanorin halted the party with a gesture. As one, they drew to the side of the road, their backs against the dense forest. For a long moment they waited, listening.

Eliani strained her ears, but heard only the creatures of the woodland. She had seen large, colorful birds with raucous voices on their journey hither, but none of those were evident today. A smaller bird's mournful, falling cry

was all that broke the stillness.

Catching Vanorin's eye, she nodded to the right. The plan they had agreed upon was to circle eastward from the gates, along the cleared pathway outside the wall. The gates would be guarded, but Eliani guessed that the alben would not be able to guard the entire wall. She had escaped the city by climbing the wall at the eastern side. She meant to return the same way.

A stab of dread went through her at the thought of going back into Ghlanhras. She looked up at the sky overhead, seeking confidence in the height of the sun.

Vanorin moved ahead slowly, followed by two other guardians. Eliani had agreed to be placed in their midst, though she fretted at being so coddled.

Belatedly, she sent a query signal to Turisan. He answered at once, and she could feel anxiety in his khi.

*We have reached Ghlanhras.*

*Stay in contact with me.*

*That may not be wise—*

*I will not distract you, I swear. Please, love.*

She knew his reason for asking. He feared, as she did, that this might be her last deed—or worse, that she would be captured. She had already decided to end her life if that occurred, though she had not shared this decision even with Turisan.

*Very well.*

They were at the gates. The guardian ahead of her turned right, following the path around the wall. Eliani paused for a moment and stared hard at the gates, as if expecting the enemy to come rushing out of them. Impossible, she knew, but the tingle of fear between her shoulders persisted as she followed the guardian down the curving path.

With dark forest on her right and the blacker stone wall to her left, she felt hemmed in. She knew the woods here were too dense to traverse. They would have to return this way, pass those gates again, to get back to the road and their path homeward.

The guardian ahead of her slowed. Eliani craned to see Vanorin, who had paused and was crouched, looking at something on the ground. She moved forward to join him.

She recognized the shattered fragment of a water gourd in the captain's hand. This was where she had fought the alben whose boots and weapons she had taken. Eliani had left her here, unconscious, but apparently the alben had recovered.

She should have killed her. The thought was cold, but Eliani knew that any mercy they showed the alben now would only mean another, harder fight ahead. For her soul's sake, she had not wanted to atone for taking the helpless alben's life. As a warrior, she knew it had been a mistake.

Vanorin glanced up at her, question in his eyes. She nodded. She had told him of this encounter. He dropped the gourd fragment and stood, looking up at the wall.

Eliani gestured that they should continue along the path. They were still too close to the gates for her liking. She had crossed the wall farther to the east.

They resumed their silent march, listening all the while for any sound of alarm from the city. Eliani expected none. The wall was solid; the alben would be in hiding. She and her escort would steal into the city like beams of sunlight.

When Vanorin halted once more, she nodded. They were almost due east of the city; this place would do.

Vanorin gestured to Birani, who was small and lithe, to climb the wall. Birani gripped the rough rocks with gloved hands and booted feet, pulling herself up the wall with cautious movements. Slowly she raised her head above the edge. Eliani knew she would see little thus, nor be seen; the wall was wider than an armspan.

Vanorin tensed beside her as Birani hauled herself atop the wall. Eliani swallowed, listening. No sound came from within the city; no cry of alarm or clash of weapons. Birani lay still for a long moment, then shifted to whisper down to Vanorin.

"I see no one. The houses are all shuttered."

Eliani nodded. "They are empty."

Vanorin gave her a sharp glance, then turned to Revani. "Wait here. If you hear any sound of trouble, start for Woodrun at once."

The guardian acknowledged this, and stepped back against the forest, into the shadow of a darkwood sapling. Vanorin and two others climbed atop the wall. Birani was no longer in sight; she must have descended into the city.

Four guardians awaited Eliani. Two of them climbed beside her as she set her hands to the rock, grateful for Revani's gloves. Her first climb over this wall had cut her bare hands and feet.

She paused atop the wall. She could see Darkwood Hall, its terraced rooftops rising above the other structures. Ghlanhras was silent, more so than any ælven settlement should be. No smoke rose from any chimney, no sound of labor rang from any yard or crafthall. If there were ælven remaining in the city, they were not at liberty.



She lowered herself down the inside of the wall, joining the others in its shadow. When the last two of her escort had followed her, she turned to Vanorin, nodding to the nearest street. She did not know if it was the street she had taken before, but it did not matter. Ghlanhras was an ælven city; its straight streets all ran toward the public circle at its center, crossing the curving avenues, concentric rings that flowed outward from the city's heart.

She could see the public circle ahead, a vast, open ground where markets and festivals were held; empty now. Before they reached it, Vanorin halted and drew the others into the last avenue outside the circle. The houses here looked more recently inhabited—some of the windows were open, and one or two hearthroom doors stood ajar—but there was no sign or sound now of anyone within.

With a gesture, Vanorin sent three of the guardians toward the circle. They were to go to the stables and ready horses for riding, if the horses were to be found. Legend said the animals disliked the alben, and Eliani hoped that the city's invaders had not yet dealt with the horses in Ghlanhras's stables.

She watched the three guardians hasten to the circle and disappear from sight. Holding her breath, she listened for a sound of alarm, but heard none.

She looked at Vanorin and nodded, and the party continued along the avenue toward the rear of Darkwood Hall. She had only glimpsed the garden wall in her hasty escape, but thought it might offer the easiest way onto the roof of the Hall.

As they followed the avenue's curve, a blackness appeared blocking their way. Vanorin turned to look at Eliani and she nodded; this was the wall she remembered. It was smaller than the wall around the city, and made of shaped blocks of stone rather than the rough rocks of the outer wall.

Vanorin slowed their pace and walked near to the houses on their left. Eliani's shoulder blades prickled with a sense of danger. Part of her wished to flee, but she walked on, gritting her teeth.

The avenue ended at the street that ran along the east side of Darkwood Hall. Vanorin paused and looked to the left, then swiftly crossed the open space to the garden wall, followed by the others.

Eliani glanced toward the Hall; there had to be windows, but perhaps the alben had covered them against the daylight. They paused, clustered beneath the wall. No sign of their having been seen reached them. Ghlanhras remained silent.

Vanorin summoned Sunahran with a gesture, and after a whispered consultation, the guardian braced himself against the wall and Vanorin climbed onto his shoulders.

Eliani bit her lip, watching as Vanorin cautiously looked over the wall. After a moment he pulled himself up onto it, and gestured for the others to climb up.

Two more guardians climbed onto the wall with Vanorin's help. As they moved forward toward the roof of the Hall, Eliani climbed onto Sunahran's shoulders, whispering her thanks. She took Vanorin's hand and he hauled her up, setting her on her feet. She smiled, but he was already reaching down to help the next.

Eliani joined the other guardians on the roof and watched the rest of the escort climb up, Sunahran coming last with Vanorin's assistance. Now they must be especially cautious, and move with absolute silence. Any sound would alert the alben below to their presence.

She swallowed a sudden dryness in her throat. They would do this; reaching this point had been half the battle.

The sun's heat rose up from the roof tiles, making her uncomfortably warm in her borrowed leathers. When the guardians were all gathered, she gestured toward the highest roof in the complex, the large expanse that covered the audience chamber. She had found a way to see into it as she fled, and glimpsed Luruthin below—bound, at the feet of the alben leader—the last she had seen of him. She wished to see what the chamber held now.

Vanorin and three others went ahead, the rest came behind Eliani. They walked with hunters' stealth, crossing the tiled roofs, keeping wide of the ornately filigreed screens that covered the high windows, lest their shadows fall across them and draw the notice of those inside the Hall.

Eliani wondered about those screens. They were designed to bring light into the central areas of the Hall while minimizing the heat that came in. The alben would not care for the light, however.

She reached the corner where she had previously looked through a screen, and knelt to look again. The small hole she had made in the silken gauze covering was still there, but behind it was a darker, heavier cloth. She could not move this aside to see down into the chamber; the fabric eluded her grasp.

She glanced up at Vanorin, standing over her, and shook her head. Carefully she rose again, looking westward toward the wing where she and Luruthin had been given rooms, and whence she had escaped.

She started toward it, going slowly, trying to remember from which window she had crawled onto the roof. The varying levels of the roofs followed the major passages of the Hall; she found the main corridor easily enough, for it adjoined the audience chamber.

Following it toward the front of the Hall, she remembered the turning

into the guest quarters, and so reached the passage where she had fled the alben. She stood above the very spot where Luruthin had been taken, and closed her eyes briefly at the memory.

*Spirits, guide me now. Help me find my kin.*

Drawing a deep breath, she walked slowly along the roof of the passage. She whistled a few notes, quickly and without rhythm. Bird-like.

Beside her, Vanorin frowned. Holding his gaze, she whistled another phrase, and his brows rose. He understood; he had recognized “The Winter Star.”

She waited, listening, then walked onward. The passage turned and she followed it. She remembered her desperate search for a way outside from that passage; she had found none. It had rooms to either side, and at its very end, a room without windows.

She whistled again, a few notes at a time, pausing between like a bird waiting for its mate to answer. A few steps, another line of the song.

Murmured voices below made her freeze. The others all did likewise, standing motionless in the hot sun. Eliani held her breath, straining to listen to the muffled voice from below.

“Did you hear it? Do you know what sort of bird that is?”

Eliani inhaled sharply, and looked at Vanorin. Luruthin? She mouthed the name silently, questioning, and the captain shrugged.

She whistled a few more notes. More murmuring came from below, then a hesitant whistled answer—the next phrase of the song.

Her stomach clenched. She had found him.

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