

"Hunted"

It was almost midnight, and still they had seen no sign of their replacements on the circuit. Elerand and Noah wouldn't have simply left town, not without reporting a reason. It was still strange, being recalled to the motherhouse like this, no reason in the offing. Kalissa supposed it had to do with the rumors of a demon army to the east. She and Isala had already become known in the Order for their success in locating and exterminating demon cults.

"The two of them should have been back by now," Isala observed dryly. Her almond shaped eyes were filled with concern, but long years of discipline had taught the desert-bred woman how to wait. "They said that they were going to care for their horses, then come back to take over this watch. It's been two hours, and not only have they not returned, but there has been no sign of cult activity here. My wards have not been tripped, even."

Kalissa nodded quietly, peering into the gloom of the warehouse. Her voice was a whisper as she responded. "I'm beginning to think we're on a wild goose chase. This place has all of the signs of a demon cult, without the cultists. Do you think we could have been set up?" Nothing moved in the darkness before her, not even normal nighttime scavengers like rats.

Almost in answer to her question, she heard a faint, almost imperceptible hum. Across her back, she felt a familiar vibration. Dawnsinger was warning her of something. On her left, her partner also reached for JusticeBeacon, her soulsword. Something was definitely wrong.

Still keeping their senses alert for danger, the Sacred Swords opened their minds to what their blades would tell them. Agony flooded their senses, and only years of training kept them from crying out. It felt like they were being ripped apart, with their insides afire. The tearing, and accompanying terror lasted for several minutes, but then it stopped abruptly. In its place was a sudden coldness, a hungry blackness, then nothing. The swords fell silent.

"We've been tricked, sister," Isala murmured as she rose, trembling from what they'd just experienced. Her usually dark olive face was so white now that it shone like a beacon in the darkness. She drew JusticeBeacon from its sheath and seemed to lose herself for a moment, questing with her mind.

Knowing that her partner had the greater share of magical gifts, and a stronger rapport with her blade, Kalissa waited silently, trying to figure out what had happened. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, she knew that they'd felt the death of another knight, a terrible agonizing death. It had to be one of their replacements, one of the young men who had been sent to take over here while the two were summoned home. But that was only one death; what had happened to his partner?

Without warning, Isala moved off, her maroon burnoose meshing with the shadows so well that Kalissa had to move swiftly to keep from losing sight of her. Isala was a small woman, seeming almost too small for the greatsword she carried, but here it served her well, allowed her to hide easily. Sometimes their work made Kalissa regret her northern height, which left her too obvious for many covert operations. Tonight, again, she wished that she could blend in better, especially after the death they'd sensed.

It wasn't the first time that they'd experienced another knight's demise, though they hoped it would be the last. Ramona's death, even though it had gone to sanctify the birth of a demon child, had been at least relatively painless, clean. From their recent rapport through their soulswords, they knew that this had been anything but. Both women dreaded to think of what they'd find when they located their missing brothers. It would not be a pretty sight.

Through dark alleys the pair moved quickly, almost unnoticed in the moonless night. Despite the ragged twists and turns of the city's pathways, Isala led them unerringly to the point she sought. JusticeBeacon was living up to its name, bringing the light of Railah to aid her servants, to right a heinous wrong which had been committed. They had to find the other knight, before he too found death.

It was probably the muffled report of their armor that gave them away. They heard the retreat of several bodies through the alleys, but never saw their opponents. Kalissa had drawn Dawnsinger and was ready to make chase, but Isala stopped her, kneeling next to a limp form in the shadow of a decrepit building, the woman called out, "Sister, there are too many for you alone. We must work together, lest they pick us all off, one by one. I've found Elerand. He's alive, but barely."

Though she hated breaking off the chase, Kalissa knew she was right. If the group had picked off a pair of trained knights, she didn't stand a chance alone. Turning, she bent to help her partner pick up their injured brother. "I think I know where we are. There should be a temple of Ollahm over there, only a few blocks away. They'll be able to tend his injuries there." Elerand looked terrible. He hadn't been killed, but he was certainly drugged, and his face was purpling with bruises. The elvari knight was smaller even than Isala, a fact that made it easier for the two to carefully carry him to safety.

Although it was the dark of night, a priest was waiting at the door of the small chapel, a worried look on his face. "Ladies, what is it that brings you here at this time of night. My lord woke me, saying that my aid would be needed." He fumbled to a halt as his eyes fell upon the injured elf. He didn't say anything more, but led them to a back room and gestured to the bed in it.

Gratefully, the pair lowered Elerand's body onto the bed, arranging him as carefully as they could. While the Ollahmic priest heated herbs and water, the women unhooked the knight's harness, and stripped him of his armor. He hadn't been cut up, and his gear had protected him from the worst of the abuses he'd suffered, but he remained unconscious. Examining his sword, Isala muttered a desert curse. Crusted around the crest was an image made of dark clay.

She left the priest to his work and took Kalissa aside. "The ones who did this, who killed Noah, they know who and what we are. Partner, they blinded the swords, to keep us from knowing until it was too late." She held out the soulsword to explain, pointing out the seal that stole the power from the crest. "I am afraid. The cult we were hoping to hunt; I think it hunts us. If we hadn't interrupted them, they would have done to Elerand what they did to his partner. More of our lives would have been lost."

Grimly Kalissa took the blade, flaking the clay off until she could feel the heart of the sword again. It roiled within with the pain and darkness its owner felt. Almost, the knight dropped it, being overcome with despair. Determination filled her, and she strode over to the sickbed and set the blade next to its master, laying his cold hand upon it. "If

the blade was blinded, why did we feel his death?" she asked, voice filled with pain and anger.

Isala turned and set her hand on Kalissa's shoulder. "They wanted us to know, to fall into despair. Whoever hunts us knows our ways. We must have faith that Railah will guide and protect us. We cannot stay and finish this hunt. The Order must be told, and our brothers and sisters warned. A new hunt has begun, and this time, it seems that we are the prey."

There was something in her eyes and voice that shook Kalissa. She'd spent enough time around priests to know that the voice of Railah was speaking through her partner. Much as she would like to believe that this was an isolated incident, she saw a vision of the world thrown into chaos, demons preying on the innocent, and the broken swords of their defenders rusting on the blood soaked ground. She was taken back to Ramona's death, and the prophesy spoken there. Evil indeed walked among the people, even as far south as they were, in Arman, near the edge of the Dark Lands. Though she could not say why, the horror they'd experienced tonight reminded her deeply of her mentor's execution. She merely prayed that things weren't as bad as Isala feared. In her heart, she knew that they were worse.

Dawn had come before Singer Raldon, the priest, stood up. "I can do no more for him, Ladies. His fate lies in the hands of the gods." Elerand's fever had broken, and the healing magic that had been used on him caused the swelling on his face to go down some. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully, but neither woman believed that. Neither one expected to sleep properly themselves for several days, and it hadn't been their partner who had been killed.

In the hours that he'd been tended, the knight had shown no sign of waking. Under his hand, his soulsword remained quiescent, dormant even. His breathing was shallow but even, and he never made a move. Out of concern, Kalissa touched his blade, and tried questing for his mind. At first, she didn't find anything at all. Just as she was about to give up, however, she touched a turbulent awareness, full of pain and horror, one that sent her reeling backwards.

Opening her eyes and holding her head gingerly, the woman looked at her partner. "He'll never be able to give us the answers that we need, about who did this, and how, and why." She shook her head sadly and drew her knife.

Isala put a restraining hand on her arm. "Are you so certain he is lost, sister? Is there no other way?" She shuddered at the thought that they might have to kill him, to free his soul from this torment.

Kalissa pointed to the aquamarine on Elerand's finger. "He didn't know us well enough to call for help, but he felt more than we possibly could have. He was a mind speaker, and no doubt was trying to take on some of his partner's pain. Death, a clean death, will be a mercy to him. He is elvari; even if he survived, he'd have to relive that terror, that horror, night after night for eternity. Will you say the prayers, partner, speeding him into the goddess' arms?" Tears had formed in her hazel eyes, and she too was reluctant to do what had to be done. But she knew that it must be done, and soon.

Closing her eyes, Isala raised her voice in a hymn of release, begging forgiveness for what they were about to do. The chant welled out from the deepest recesses of her soul, and she stood steady, feeling Kalissa's determination. However, she couldn't watch as her partner lifted the man's chin, and delicately slit the veins.

It didn't take him long to die, and Kalissa grimly strapped his sword onto her harness, alongside Dawnsinger. Leaving the corpse to be buried outside of town, they returned to the streets. There was another sword still to rescue, to take home.

Although the two women were exhausted from their vigil at Elerand's side, and more, from the horror they'd experienced, they did not return to the inn. Instead, they combed the city streets, trying to find the remains of Noah, to bring home his sword. To fall in Railah's service itself was not a bad thing; your soul lived on, both in Railah's care, and, to a lesser extent, in your soulsword. That way, the strength of past knights would bolster the future generations. It made it imperative to recover Noah's sword, to give him the same closure that the other knights received.

They started their search in the alley where they'd rescued his partner, hoping to find clues as to where they had taken him, and who, and why. But their enemy had been clever; there was just enough debris on the ground to conceal their passage, and not enough to make their passage visible. Nor had they harmed the two, or at least Elerand, enough for there to be blood on the ground.

"Isala, partner, what do you make of this? Whoever we're facing is skilled, beyond question, enough so that I don't know where to go from here." Kalissa rummaged through the garbage on the street in hopes of a clue.

Glancing up at the early morning sky, the small woman shook her head. "The scavengers will find him before we do. Without him keyed into it, his soulsword cannot answer us, show us where it is. Though I dislike doing this, we're going to have to go to see the city guard, and likely wait." She ran her hand through her long black tresses and sighed. "We haven't the resources of the local constabulary, and we're going to need their help." Despite her training and determination to see things through, she swayed unsteadily on her feet.

Kalissa moved to steady her, although she felt weak and uncertain herself. Nothing had gone right since they had arrived here, two weeks ago. From their first encounter with the local authorities, who had apparently been expecting brother knights rather than sister knights, they had found more than their usual series of obstacles to be overcome. It didn't help that here on the borders of the Dark Lands, women in general were valued even less than they were in Toyurasi. The chore of getting meals even was difficult; many merchants simply would not serve them.

It looked like they'd have another fight on their hands very soon. Although the city council respected the Railahns and their position as roving agents of justice, it was still a challenge to get any kind of cooperation from their forces. However, they still had to try; they wouldn't be successful in their search otherwise.

Armored and without veils, they drew many looks as they passed through the streets: some of curiosity, more of antipathy. It wasn't uncommon for a man to murmur something about putting the pair in their place, but no one was willing to brave the greatswords they carried. With her skin crawling from the animosity she sensed, Kalissa was actually grateful to get inside the watch station.

Sitting by the window, smoking his pipe, sat the watch officer, apparently from the Dark Lands tribes himself. When standing, he would be taller than Kalissa, with a form that was whipcord lean and skin the color of polished obsidian. At his throat hung a necklace made of the claws of great beasts, probably a symbol of his manhood, if the knights understood these people's barbaric customs well enough.

He rose to his feet as the women entered, a stern grimace on his chiseled features. "You, women, why do you come bothering the guard? Go home and cover your faces like you should. Sell your unclean favors elsewhere. We don't want any of your kind here." He reached for his nearby spear and made a shooing motion. Then his eyes fell upon the hilts of the greatswords riding the knights' backs. Recognition of who they were, and what they represented, did nothing to lessen his dislike of the pair. "Oh it's you, the women who play at being warriors and speak for the goddess. Why do you come here? There is no demon cult for you to hunt in this building."

Kalissa stiffened at the comment about her skills as a knight, but did not react. Railah would not condone a brawl here, certainly not with a guardsman. So she held her peace, leaving Isala to explain their need. Because the desert traditions were not so dissimilar from the ways of the Dark Lands tribes, the small woman was better able to win the cooperation they needed.

Isala was an anomaly. The only value most desert peoples placed on a woman was in her ability to bear children, male children. Instead, she had broken tradition and entered Railah's service, learning sword skills, magic, and self authority. However, she had never lost the ability to play the role that these men expected.

"Captain Ngare, we have need of your assistance. As you would have wished, two of our brothers came here last night, to replace us and send us home. However, the cult we were hunting found them. The goddess told us of our brother's death, but we know not where he fell. We must find him, take his sword home with us when we leave today." She lowered her head and spread her hands in supplication.

His dark eyes narrowed as he considered what she had said. The possibility of these brazen women leaving town today was not lost on him, either. "You said brothers; what happened to the other knight?"

Kalissa lowered her head respectfully as she spoke. "Elerand also has died. His injuries were too great for healing. We bear his blade in honor also." Railah's servants did not lie exactly, although, at need, they might allow someone to misconstrue what they said. Kalissa's words were truthful, but left much unsaid. They could not afford to be held here for an investigation, not with the cult at large. Luckily, the Ollahmic priest was from Karyn; he would not make things difficult for the two.

Captain Ngare nodded thoughtfully. "If we find the body of your brother, you will leave?" It was readily apparent that he did not like working with them, helping them at all; but if he did assist them here, he could get rid of them. His eyes never wandered to their faces, but still he saw them nod. "I will get my men, help you; then you leave. I will send someone to ready your horses, to make it faster." His tone conveyed that this was no mere suggestion, but an order. Still, both women were more than happy to agree.

They were allowed to wait in the guardroom while the search of the city streets was conducted, but no refreshments were offered to them. Even among the desert peoples this was a breach of protocol, for guests were always offered the best available; however, the two had gotten used to this treatment. After all, they were only women, shameless women who did not know their place at that. Luckily both of them had come prepared for a long vigil last night. Their botas of water were nearly full, and Isala yet carried a few handfuls of dates. They ate and refreshed themselves while waiting on word of Noah's whereabouts.

Almost two hours had passed before one of the local guards arrived, out of breath, his red cape stained with sweat. He stood there panting a moment, black skin shining, before he managed to speak. Even when he did, though, he refused to make eye contact, instead keeping his gaze on their booted feet. "Servants of Railah," he was obviously afraid that even the use of their names would corrupt him, "we have found something that you should see. Come with me."

He spun around and headed out, not waiting on a response. Neither woman hesitated in following, however. They wanted to be quit of this place as soon as they could manage. Morning crowds parted, more to avoid being tainted by the woman warriors than out of respect for the guardsman. He led them deep into the bowels of the city, where adobe houses were so close that they had to pass single file. A small courtyard opened up just ahead, and their guide stopped and made a warding gesture.

Filing past him, the two Railahns quickly found out why. Blood splattered the walls of the courtyard, already dry and cracked. Bits of armor lay strewn across the ground, armor that had, up till now, been well cared for. And neither the desert peoples nor those of the Dark Lands wore anything like it; it was of northern make. To one side a golden medallion glinted, its etched surface caked in blood and dirt. But that was far from being the worst.

There was no way the pair could have proven the identity of the body; only the gear around it and the fair, sunburnt skin hinted that it was the missing knight. The corpse lay spread eagle, lacerations all over its exposed flesh. They stomach had been slit open, and the entrails removed, then burned, apparently while he yet lived. His face was badly scarred, and stared eyelessly into the heavens, its expression a mask of horror. Finally, and this is probably what had killed him, his chest had been split open with a large sharp object, and his heart removed. Neither woman could stand to look at the scene for more than a few moments.

It was an effort not to retch, but Kalissa was not about to show any weakness in front of the guard. Scanning the ground without looking again at the tortured body, she spied the sword harness abandoned in a heap of garbage. She bent to retrieve it, but the scabbard was empty. "This is our missing brother. Where is his sword?"

The guard shrugged. "This place is as it was when I found it. No sword here. Now, Captain Ngare said you leave, go home." His hand tightened around his spear, wondering if he dared to face them down if they refused to go.

Isala had dropped to her knees and bowed her head. She did not wail as the desert women did over the dead, however. Instead, she prayed. Somewhere inside her, something had broken loose, and she wept without shame as her words tumbled over one another. Not even their guide made a move until she'd finished. Finally, she rose carefully, murmuring, "Railah, give us the means to stop this evil. If it takes my life, so be it, but let it be stopped." In grim silence she turned and left the courtyard, the discarded Railahn medallion clutched in her hand.

Before noon, Kalissa and Isala were gone from the city, mounted on their fine desert steeds, their brothers' mounts and a pair of supply camels following. Neither one had spoken as they left, having no words with which to cope with the situation. Isala carried Noah's amulet, Kalissa Elerand's sword and ring. Both held the burden of the knowledge of what had been done. Their camels hronked in annoyance and the horses placidly paced along the coast road without disturbing the women's concentration.

Something was seriously wrong. Although many people didn't particularly care for Railah's chosen, to their knowledge, no one had ever before attacked them like this. They had to find out who, and why, soon, before more lives were lost.

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