

## In the Goddess' Name

By Tiona Yates

Kalissa reined in her mount as the track they were following diverged. They were out of the desert proper, but they had at least a ten-day's worth of travel before they'd reach the coast. She glanced over to her partner Isala who was unrolling a map from its case. "Any idea which way will lead us to the trade-road? I'm looking forward to a proper bath once we get back into civilized areas."

Isala traced the route they'd taken with a finger, then looked up at the road, "This fork isn't mentioned here, but the northern path seems to go in the direction we need. There is a mark to the south of an oasis, but it's a small one, little more than a well, if I'm reading it right. If we hadn't had to hunt down those cultists, we would have been a lot closer to civilization." She adjusted the hood of her burnoose to shade her face better from the omnipresent heat. It was a good thing they had the pack camels with them on this journey, she thought gratefully. Their horses would never have lasted this trek if they'd had to carry all of the supplies, the pair's armor, and the pair themselves. And, unless expecting trouble, even Railah's Chosen wouldn't wear armor while trekking through the desert.

Grabbing up the camels' lead again, the small desert-bred knight chirruped at the beasts, who had already started relaxing in the few minutes it had taken to figure out what direction they needed to head. But Isala was used to camels. Her family had had more than a dozen of the beasts when she'd lived among the Ayahana. She knew why her order kept sending her and Kalissa into the desert. It couldn't be helped. There were so few knights who could speak Pundi fluently, and fewer yet knew how to deal with the stubborn tribesmen. Even though Isala was intimidated by her former people, she knew she had to work with them, because it was what the goddess demanded.

Kalissa made to follow her partner, then stopped, a blank look on her face. Her awareness shifted, and she knew they had to go south. "Isala, it looks like there's been a change in plans. We go south." She reached up to touch the hilt of the sword riding across her back for assurance, but knew that her instincts were right.

Isala looked back over her shoulder, then shifted her direction. Kalissa's instincts were nothing new. Each knight had their own magical, or mind-magical, talents, and Kalissa's included a knack for knowing where they would be needed. While it was usually easier for Isala to interpret their goddess' will, they had come to count on the fact that Kalissa knew what she was doing, even if it weren't a conscious decision. "All right, Sister. The oasis looks like it's about two days ride, so we'll make for that. Hopefully we won't run into trouble before we can get more supplies."

Kalissa cherked to SkyRunner, and started moving again. The flash of insight had been certain. They had to go this direction. But it had also had a little more information than she'd shared. In her mind she had seen flames, something burning. It wasn't much to go on, but the feeling was something she'd have to think about. If there was an oasis on this track, it hinted that there might well be a settlement there. In open desert might not be as dangerous, for there was little vegetation for it to feed on. If fire occurred in a settlement or village, the results could be more dire.

The day passed slowly, with the travelling further into the badlands. Night fell with them in the lee of a rugged bluff, pegging the camels in place. Their warhorses needed no such control; they were too well trained. There was a small spring here, and that was a comfort, even though the water provided was little more than a trickle. It was fresh, and not sulfuric. That was blessing enough here.

The pair slept, leaving their soulswords to wake them if anything dangerous should come near. Palaran and SkyRunner were likewise a good herald to things coming close. But neither horse nor sword could guard against the dreams that visited the camp. Kalissa had not had dreams this vivid in five years. The last one had been of a child's death, back when they did not know that they travelled with one their enemy. Its warning had come too late, and others had died because the knights and their

seniors had not seen the subtle workings of the cult they were trying to catch. Tonight's dream held that same intensity, a vision of a tent and fire, danger and fear.

Though Dawn Singer warmed under her skin, it did not burn with divine intensity, nor even with the heat of the fires that Kalissa tried to escape from. The fires burned everywhere in her dream, and there were screams and the smell of burning flesh. Through it all, she could feel someone's mind, vague, indistinct, but very much there. She was no mind-speaker, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was sensing someone else's very real fears. There was no way to know if what she was feeling was occurring now, or would do so soon. And only with the dawn did the dream release her, though with a determined sense of urgency.

Isala was already up, sitting perfectly still with her eyes closed. This meditation was as much a part of their routine as the practice bout that would soon follow it. Their armor was already set out near the remains of last night's fire. Kalissa must have overslept, though she did not feel well rested. Isala's gifts, mirroring priestly powers, required a period of contemplation. Kalissa's gifts did not. She felt somewhat guilty for leaving her partner to prepare things for the day.

Kalissa quietly began donning her armor; even though it would soon be too hot for such accoutrements, they would need the weight and protection for the morning ritual. Padding, bracers, cuirass and leg protection went on in near silence. Kalissa slid her sword-harness over her shoulders, and adjusted it across her chest. Boiled leather gauntlets and her steel helm finished the gear, and she stopped to stretch out properly. She was more than an adequate fighter; if she'd had more time with her seniors a few years back, she might have reached an even higher pinnacle by now. She pushed those thoughts from her head, and waited for Isala to finish her meditation.

It didn't take Isala long to finish her meditation, and less time to gear up. Morning practice was something they seldom ignored, and even then, only under the most extreme of circumstances. It also allowed them to think out and respond to whatever knowledge they'd gained during the past day, helping things simply fall into place between them. Thus, it was little surprise to Kalissa when Isala spoke, even as she dropped her greatsword into first position. "I saw an unbalanced scale in my meditation this morning. The goddess has said that I have incurred a debt that must be filled. I know not what this entails, but you will have need to know this fact."

Kalissa's nod would have been imperceptible, had Isala not known to watch for it. Between dreams of fire and fear, it did not truly surprise Kalissa that her partner had received her own sort of warning of the coming trail. It was, quite honestly, a relief. It meant that whatever lay ahead, it was indeed their goddess' intent that they travel this way. Even though it likely would mean a delay getting back to Alamber, their superiors would not question the goddess' own will.

Slash. Step. Parry. Twist. On and on, their dance wove, pushing each knight to their limits. Their limbs woke. Minds cleared of distractions, and fear dissipated. Even if Kalissa had tried to hold onto the terror of her dreams, they were washed clear of her mind by the practice. Though she would remember their content, the horror they had possessed would no longer hold any power over her. Isala likewise merely accepted her goddess-given message. She did not know how she had incurred a debt, but did not question. All things would be revealed when it was time.

They continued on for nearly a half-candlemark; the sun had fully risen before they sheathed their swords. Stripping off armor, the pair set about morning camp chores, getting food for themselves and their beasts, readying for the ride. Kalissa packed up the armor on one of the pack camels, covering it with a blanket, lest the sun heat the metal enough to harm the beast carrying it. In most places of the world, these precautions would be unnecessary, but they rode within the outer edges of the Great Desert, and the past six years travelling with Isala had taught Kalissa much of the ways of this barren land.

Breakfast was a simple affair, dried meat and a bit of bread. They'd share out a small supply of dates while riding onward. The trickle of a spring was doubly a benefit here, as it allowed them more

water than they would have risked without it. It tasted flat and metallic, but did not possess any taste of corruption to it.

Expecting to reach possible habitation tonight, Isala made certain to fasten bells to their mounts' harness. Though Railah's chosen were not highly favored among the desert peoples, still it helped to show who they were, for travelling justices could count on at least hospitality in most regions. It was only among the poorest of the tribes, or those who harbored demon cultists, that Railah's Chosen were truly unwelcome. They hoped that where they were being sent was not such a place. They had only just come from uncovering a cult a moon past. Though such cults seemed to be becoming more common, without support, searching out such an enemy would be near impossible.

The day passed without incident, and they spotted tents nearly two candlemarks before sundown. So, the well indeed was occupied, and by the tribes, rather than a permanent village. It was only when they got close enough to see the colored patterns on the tents that Isala rode close to her partner, her sword radiating her sense of fear to Kalissa. "These are the Ayahana," her words carried softly across the desert wind.

Kalissa knew then why Isala was frightened. Nearly thirteen years ago, her partner had fled her home, after having nearly been forced into an unwanted marriage. Indeed, by Isala's own words, her promised husband had attempted to take her before the marriage rites. The diminutive knight had left him sorely injured, if not dead. In the past six years that they'd been on the road, they hadn't encountered the Ayahana, but they knew that it was likely that they would at some point. The tribe was fairly small, but large enough to have several family groups wandering through the desert. It was possible that these Ayahana had no knowledge of Isala; but it was also possible that she had kin here, someone who would take offense at her presence.

Even with these fears, they knew they had to go into the encampment. The goddess had sent them, and they owed her every loyalty. Still, Kalissa flashed a lopsided half-grin at her partner, "It's been thirteen years, it would be strange for any here to know you." She nudged SkyRunner on ahead. Someone would have to take lead, and Kalissa's northern height and natural confidence might keep the attention off of Isala's origin.

The jingling harnesses of the lead mounts drew stares as the pair entered the encampment. Around them they saw the ochre and mustard yellow stripes on the tents, advertising the tribal affiliation of the residents here. Kalissa was not familiar with the intricate system of patterns that her partner had known from birth, but she knew that Isala could not be mistaken as to the identity of these people. Kalissa kept her posture straight, with a deliberate laziness in how she sat. Isala would, of course, attempt to show confidence, but it would be better if most of the eyes were off of her, at least until they knew what was going on.

Kalissa barely signaled SkyRunner to halt near the pool in the center of the encampment. With the fluidity of long practice, she swung from the stallion's back, all the while sending calmness through her sword to her partner. Between the harness bells and the greatswords riding at the knights' backs, none of the tribesmen would have missed the potentiality that the women presented. Even though they wore simple burnouses against the desert sun, Railah's Chosen were respected, and usually welcome, anywhere they went.

The women guided first horses, then camels to water, waiting for the customary hospitality to be offered. Though the flocks they could see on their way in were not numerous, they were more than sufficient to allow hospitality to be offered. It was just a matter of waiting for that invitation. It didn't take long; the camels had barely had time to get a good long drink before a young man approached the pair and bowed. "Chosen of Railah, my father has requested that you take meal with us this evening."

He looked discomfited, and Kalissa felt a trickle of recognition from him. She had never met this man before, yet he seemed familiar. Well, whatever was needed would reveal itself soon. His

discomfort indicated that they would in fact be called upon in their official capacity. Taking up the leads from the camels, she gestured questioningly, "We will need a place to keep our beasts."

Without seeming to shake his nervousness, he led them toward a picket line on the outskirts of the camp. The tent nearby was larger than many of them, and the colors had not bleached greatly from the sun. This likely belonged to the most wealthy family in the camp. That they were indirectly demanding justice surprised both knights, seldom were such judgments in the favor of the wealthy. Still, the offer had been tendered, and they dared not refuse.

After the beasts had been tended, they followed the young man back into the tent. They could smell khavat, a local drink, already boiling over a small fire in the center of the tent. They bowed in turn to the head of the family, a weathered tribesman crouching next to the fire. He nodded and gestured for them to rest upon cushions near the door. Isala seemed to take confidence; so far none of those she'd seen were recognizable to her, though she was certain she had not seen all the tribesmen as she'd ridden in. "Thank you for your hospitality, friend. I am Isala, Knight of the Sacred Sword of Railah, and here is also my partner, Kalissa Nocturne. We are grateful to come among the tribe of Ayahana." This last felt slightly untrue, for Isala was yet uncomfortable among her tribe, but she knew the forms and followed them. Perhaps in time she would be grateful for this welcome. At least she was grateful to have been granted hospitality among those she did not know.

As the knights were seating themselves, two other young men entered and took their place in the tent. The problem they would be asked to solve would not appear instantly, Isala knew. Hospitality had to come first. They might not hear even the basis of the issue until morning, when they took their place in the center of the encampment to ask what judgments were needed. And yet, it never hurt to try to gauge what they'll have to do. Rushed judgments were frowned upon by Railah's church, for they were often incomplete, leaving things out of balance. And, if Isala's meditation were to be trusted, there was something personal that she would have to deal with here.

After everyone was seated, the father introduced himself, his use of the trade tongue awkward. But where he faltered, Isala was able to clear up the difficulty. As expected, Khoral was the head of the wealthiest family in the town, though he did not have the most sons. His three sons were Alket, Manoun, and the youngest, Amer, who had brought them to the tent. It seemed that Amer was the source of the problem within the tent, for he studiously kept his eyes to the ground, while his father and brothers were so often glowering at the young man.

Kalissa sat uneasily within the circle of men, her greatsword rested across her lap. There was power around here; she could feel it, though it was not readily apparent what was causing it. Every time she tried to relax her mind, it filled with flames again, the same as her dream had carried. Her knack for knowing where to be had brought her here, but she did not know what she was to do. It was not like true foresight, only a vague feel of necessity. And yet, it seemed stronger and clearer than ever before. There was fire in the future, and she would need to deal with it.

Isala maintained courtesy while her partner seemed in a daze, knowing from the rapport between their swords that something was approaching wherein they would be called to act. She could even get a vague sense of fire, though it was nowhere near as clear as what Kalissa was sensing. She was wary of trying to figure out what judgment these people wanted so early. It not only was impolite, but might influence the neutrality that she and Kalissa were supposed to have. Still, she couldn't help but overhear Manoun and Alket discussing their younger brother's upcoming marriage. And every time it as mentioned, Amer would shudder, as if repressing something.

Arranged marriages were common in the desert tribes. She herself had only barely escaped such a thing. It was only her righteous fury at her proposed husband's attempt at taking her before the rites that allowed her to escape. She was not made for marriage; she knew that now. The thought of a man pawing at her made her skin crawl. She doubted that she was the only person in the desert who disliked the idea of a forced marriage; this was something she would have to take into consideration.

Isala attempted to regain her neutrality after making her guesses as to why Amer might not want to fulfill a marriage contract. The gods had decreed that each person be allowed to choose to marry or not, or whom to marry. If these Ayahana wanted to enforce a marriage against that rule, she'd fight them, regardless of how many there were. But that would leave far too many innocent young to die, their parents killed to no benefit. She had to find a fair way to deal with the situation.

After the meal had finished, the two knights took their leave and set up a small tent of their own. It was seldom used, despite their journeys. But it was also inappropriate to camp in the open in a settlement, even a temporary one such as this. Kalissa frowned as she set out her bedding for the night. "There is power here, something impressive, and, it's my kind of power." Seeing Isala arch her brow in surprise, the blond knight shrugged, "It was all I could do to not panic earlier. There is fire, like I dreamed last night. A vast conflagration. And, my instincts are telling me that the time for that fire is getting closer. I just wish I could tell more about it."

Isala nodded, stowing harness next to her bed. Her own priestly gifts had not been useful here yet, but she'd gotten a sense through sword-magic that her partner was highly disturbed, and there was little to do about it without more information. "All I could get is that we're likely going to have to deal with a marriage issue. Amer, the youngest of Khoral's sons is supposed to marry soon, but he seems not to be looking forward to it. I don't know if, or how, this might affect your sense of fire, but we'll best be on guard."

"If there is a marriage issue, perhaps someone does not want this marriage to go through. Would any of your people have reason to keep such a marriage from happening?"

"I've only gotten an inkling of something wrong about it. I don't know why Amer would not wish to marry, although, he could be like me, unwilling to take a mate or raise children. It is uncommon for such to appear in the desert, but not impossible. And his family is the wealthiest, there should be little reason for him to refuse. It is not like he would lose wealth or prestige by such a thing."

"We'll have to keep our eyes and ears open, then. It's bad enough having to deal with someone not wanting to get married, considering how your people feel about marriage and families. Having an unknown, possibly untrained, mind-mage lose might make things worse."

"We'll sleep on it. Whatever sense of power you're sensing may well make itself clearer in your mind with rest. We've only barely met any of the tribe here, so we'll have to be aware that there may be more here than is immediately obvious."

And so they slept, which had both of them dreaming deeply. Kalissa's dreams, not surprisingly, focused on fire, a tent, and a young woman being badly burnt, as the fire surged toward her. There was a sense of horror that did not come from her, that was not immediately obvious from whom it came, only that the fire was a cause of despair and, surprisingly, guilt, for whoever was seeing it.

Isala dreamed of her past, how she came to leave the Ayahana when her promised husband had attempted to take her before the rites were complete. His touch had sickened her, and her driving fury had caused her to lash out at him with his own knife, leaving lasting wounds upon him. She never had found out whether he'd lived or died, nor what would have happened to the children he had already had. At the time he'd had five sons, and a young daughter. She doubted, even if he had lived, that he would be able to add to that number. She knew she had hurt him badly. Somehow, she realized, she'd never thought about his children, those that depended on him for support. If he had died, they might have been taken in, probably by relatives. But they would not be treated as highly as if they were the natural children of those who had taken them in. She realized she had been attempting to avoid the Ayahana out of a sense of guilt, not for defending herself, but for not making sure that those who would have been her responsibility were cared for properly. She didn't, however, know how to make amends now for her deeds thirteen years ago.

When morning came, the pair readied themselves for a morning practice. Kalissa had not slept well now for two days, and her body was not at its peak. And yet, no one would have known it except

her partner. Soulswords flashed in the dawn light as they moved in what would seem a deadly dance. The only sign that there was anything wrong at all was the faintest tinge of ruddy fire limning DawnSinger's blade. The soulswords always knew what was wrong with their bearers, and they worked to compensate for their bearer's weaknesses. Nor was Kalissa without reserves; her secondary talent allowed her to enhance her body for a time, though she would not be using it greatly at this time, she could draw upon it for strength while her own was weakened. And so she did now.

Being in a settlement, even a temporary one, meant that the two knights were on duty. This was reason enough for armor, at least for their first full day here. Although both hoped not to be delayed overmuch here, they knew that it was quite possible that the goddess had a long term reason for their summons. And so, they prepared for the worst by looking like they were at their best, full panoply. Both women had their hair tightly coiled at the nape of their necks, and they made sure to look regal, and untouchable. Railah was not highly favored among the desert tribes, and their status as sister knights might not mean much, if they gave an unpopular judgment. And whatever the goddess had in mind here might well be unpopular. If they were correct about what they were facing.

They walked side by side toward the well, soulswords sheathed at their backs, and seemingly not troubled by the difference in appearance between them. Whereas Kalissa was a northern blonde, tall, willowy, with an exotic faedh cast to her features, Isala seemed like a typical desert tribeswoman, until you took into account the armor and sword she bore. She was short, dusky skinned, and dark eyed. But their manner was similar, and they both displayed the comfortable confidence of a pair of Railahn Sacred Swords. It was a confidence that they may not have completely felt. Kalissa, despite her training with mind-magic, realized that the powers of the unknown mind-mage in the vicinity may well outstrip her own. Isala was back among a people who would have killed her or worse for defending herself so many years ago. Their apparent confidence might be their only shield here.

The desert folk knew what to expect from Railahn knights. The travelling justices worked to deal with various tribal disagreements as well as protect against demonic threats or even mere banditry. Railah demanded that they do the best to serve the people they traveled among, even as the people would supply for the needs of the knights. Several tribesmen had gathered near the well, though none approached the pair before they were ready.

As Isala scanned the gathering crowd, she drew in her breath sharply. Other than her own father or brothers, this was the one person who she had most wanted to avoid. Hunkered over a gnarled staff was the man her parents had wanted her to marry. When she'd seen him last, he had collapsed in the desert wastes, with his flesh torn in many places. That was by her own doing. So, Ikhal had survived. She wasn't sure what he would do now, or any claim he might have on her. She didn't reach up to touch JusticeBeacon, but focused a short burst of concern in the direction of her partner. Hopefully Kalissa would realize what was wrong.

The first things that were brought to their attention were minor things, a claim of inaccurate weights for a trade scale, a dispute over who owned a goat. Those were solved reasonably easily, with Isala acting as a TruthSpeaker, and a little logic. Where possible, justice was delivered to both sides of an argument. If any Sacred Sword were to give unbalanced declaration, it would likely have caused more problems with those who felt that they were unjustly persecuted. It had not even reached mid-morning, however, when their real problem manifest itself. Both Khoral and Ikhal approached the pair in unison; apparently the justice they sought was something they were in agreement on. This could not be good, Isala thought to herself.

Khoral and Ikhal bowed respectfully as they reached the pair, but Isala knew in an instant that her former betrothed had not forgotten her face. A gleam of cunning was in his eyes, and she did not doubt he had plans that would cause her problems if she wasn't careful. It was Khoral, however that spoke for the pair. "Knights of Railah, there is a problem which requires your service. Amer, my son, had agreed to marry Lihiri, daughter of Ikhal, some moons ago. Now that the time comes nigh to fulfill

that agreement, he refuses, though he cannot explain why. We require that justice be done, so that Lihiri is well cared for, and that there be more children to bless the Ayahana."

So that was it. Amer had agreed to a marriage and was now refusing it. No wonder there was such animosity in the tent last night. Breaking an agreement was not something lightly done among the tribes. Especially a marriage agreement. The father of the bride would pay a dowry for the bride, but the groom's family offered alliance and assistance to the bride's family in exchange. Isala wondered what could have happened that would keep Amer from acceding to the promise he'd made.

Kalissa must have been thinking along the same lines, and responded with a calm clarity. "Let us see and question these two, to find out what it is that causes the problem. If there is reason to refuse the wedding, we shall find out, and rectify if possible. However, as in all things, we will support the will of the Law Bringer in this." What she left unsaid was still clear in the minds of those present. If there had been reason to believe that either party was truly unwilling to marry, they could not be forced.

Khoral nodded agreement, apparently assured that these knights would talk sense into his wayward son. But Ikhal stepped closer to Isala and rasped hoarsely to her. "You may have failed to kill me before, but that does not mean a debt is not owed for your freedom. The wounds you inflicted were only partially healed by a priestess of Jirel. She said that there were two goddesses punishing me. And, consequently, my flocks diminished, and my household is no longer wealthy. Lihiri is owed a debt, because she would have married well long before, had this harm not come to my house."

His words cut Isala to the quick. She had no idea that her goddess, and Jirel, likely, had determined to punish this man beyond what she had done. If this was indeed the case, what her goddess had said about her owing a debt was indeed true. The sons would split the flocks and goods of the father when he passed, but the daughter would be left with no support if she could not marry. And, knowing how old the girl had had to be, it was becoming ever less likely that she would make a good marriage, if this one fell through. There was always the chance of taking the girl out of the desert, to one of the coastal cities, but they would still have to find some way to help her find a means to support herself. And Isala would not conscience that support being among the flesh peddlers. No one needed to be forced to debase themselves in such a manner to survive.

All Isala could respond was, "We will see Railah's will done in this."

Apparently that was enough. Ikhal turned and tottered away from the well. He had indeed been injured badly when Isala had defended herself. It seemed that he was nigh crippled, leaning heavily on a gnarled staff. In some ways, she pitied him. He had not realized that there was another way of life than forcing one's wife to bear and bear again. He could never have contemplated that his intended bride was destined to be one of Railah's Chosen, and that he would now have to defer to her judgment must gall him terribly. Unless the curse that had been placed upon him had actually changed him. It was possible that his approaching her was truly for the benefit of his daughter. She had to consider that he might have that much good left in his heart.

Amer was brought before them, and he studied his boots in shame. Isala closed her eyes and summoned up the truth-sense that her goddess gave her. "Amer, we have heard that you had agreed to a marriage only to deny it now. Tell me why this is, so that we may correct the issue if possible." She did not ask directly if the girl in question had been despoiled before the marriage. That would be unneeded insult to Lihiri if it proved to be false. But that was the answer she expected from him.

Kalissa stumbled and nearly fell back as Amer attempted to answer. Isala could feel the warning from Dawn Singer. But its meaning wasn't clear immediately. Not until Amer managed to croak dryly, "Fire. I have dreamed of fire. I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to face that fire, but I know it's coming."

Kalissa fought her way back to the present amid waves of searing flames within her mind. So, Amer was a foreseer. It was his dreams of fire that she'd picked up. It was not unheard of people with the gift to see the future to be able to share that vision with others similarly gifted. And her own gift,

while less precise, was of the same type. It didn't explain why the fire would occur, but it did explain his reluctance.

Isala nodded, "So you have seen fire. The fire is tied to your wedding? Is there anything else you can tell us about it?" She knew that Kalissa was having to fight to keep control of her mind. Yet, that meant that Isala would have to find out more. She sent what strength she could through the link between the swords. That would have to be enough to see her partner through this difficulty.

Amer seemed to draw strength from the idea that he was being believed. Perhaps these dreams of fire would have been incomprehensible to desert dwellers. But Railahns were trained to deal with prophets and foreseers. "I don't want to hurt Lihiri. I had asked Father for permission to wed her. He did not immediately want to agree, as he thought I could do better. But he finally agreed. I know that if I wed her, though, the fire will come. I don't know what to do now." His shoulders sagged as he tried to explain his feelings.

Amer's character seemed to glow in Isala's estimation at what he'd said. He must actually love Lihiri. He'd fought his family to choose the girl he wanted for his bride. But somehow, in the interim, he'd been shown a vision he couldn't deal with.

Kalissa managed to get a rein on her emotions, and continued the questioning. "When did you start getting these visions? What changed?"

Amer looked surprised at the question, "I was ill at the dark of the moon, for nigh a tenday. While I recovered, I began to dream of fires. And more. I have awoken from dreams of fire with palms burned, as if I had clutched at a lamp in my sleep. I fear I will now harm the one I had longed for, and that is not within me to do."

Kalissa drew her sword and planted its tip into the ground, seeming to glow in the early sun as she did so. Focusing her will upon Amer, she attempted to study him with her gift, although it was not well suited for the kind of sense she needed now. The sickness had to be a sign of an emerging mind-gift. And, it could be possible that foresight was not the only gift he had. She had to know. DawnSinger might be the only thing that would give her enough strength to sense what she needed to know.

Her awareness of the encampment dimmed as she began to see within the mind of the desert tribesman. His foresight shone brightly within him. That was the gift she expected to see, but she peered deeper, sensing a flickering behind it, that of fire. Fire-starters were rare among mind-mages. They were also among the most dangerous. It would seem that he might well have that gift, and it, like the foresight, was just awakening.

She was fairly certain she was right as the sword in her hand heated to almost blistering. She sheathed the sword in a smooth motion, ignoring the pain in her hands. DawnSinger tended to warn her in such ways, so she was not unused to the power. "I must consult with my partner regarding this, but I think I have seen what you were trying to show me. We must also speak with Lihiri, so that we can discern what the goddess intends here."

Amer bowed in response, a faint look of relief on his face. He had spoken what he'd seen, and appeared to be believed. Whatever happened, he would do what he needed to make sure he did not hurt Lihiri.

Isala raises an eyebrow at Kalissa's statements, but nodded acknowledgement. If Kalissa had found the source of power she had been looking for, that was a good thing. But her partner was right in another way. They had to be certain that Lihiri actually wanted to be married. Too many women in the desert did not realize that marriage was a choice. They had been taught from birth to be obedient to their fathers and husbands. If Lihiri felt about Amer as he apparently felt about her, that was one thing. If she did not want marriage, that would solve things a different way.

A pair of young men came forward, bringing a small desert girl toward the pair of knights. If Isala was correct in what would be Lihiri's age, this could be no other. She seemed distraught, though whether of an impending wedding, or because it was in risk of being called off, the knight could not tell.

She looked to be about fifteen or sixteen, and in the desert communities, a woman of that age was oftentimes already a mother. It was actually common in much of the world, to marry that young. It sometimes made Isala wonder how there were nearly as many women as men in the Railahn order, because a youth was not allowed to ask for a blade from the goddess at that age.

Isala spoke softly, still attuned to truth. "Are you Lihiri, daughter of Ikhal?"

The girl looked up, sniffing. "Yes, Knight of Railah. I have come because you sent for me."

The knight smiled wryly, wondering if she'd be offering a welcome choice to this girl, or whether she would be supporting the traditions of a people she no longer counted her own. "Lihiri. Speak truth, for there is nothing to fear. Do you seek marriage with Amer, of your own choice, not because it is forced upon you by your father or brothers? Do you indeed wish to marry soon, and to this person?"

Lihiri dried her eyes and nodded, almost imperceptibly. When Isala did not respond, the girl spoke up. "Amer has always been nice to me. He would be a better husband than many, and I would wish such marriage." There, she'd said it. It looked like the girl had been hurt by Amer's sudden refusal of her. Now they just had to figure out how to deal with his visions.

Isala nodded. "That is what I needed to hear. I must talk with my partner, and meditate upon the will of the goddess. What she reveals to us will be done, but it may not be precisely what is being asked. The goddess alone knows of facts that are beyond our ken, and what she tells us, we must do. Be at peace and return to your tent. It should not take long for us to know what we must do."

The knights returned solemnly to their tent, and kept their voices low. Although they were fairly certain they'd hear if anyone came to listen, they did not want people hearing their discussion. Kalissa started, letting her partner know what she'd learned. "The boy is the foreseer. He also has a talent that is potentially far more dangerous. He has seen fire, because he is the source of it. Those burns he talks about, that's his gift trying to manifest. You know what they taught us about mind-magic back in Alamber: it tends to emerge under times of strong emotion. He's afraid of what will happen if he takes her in marriage. That in and of itself would be enough to cause him to start such a fire unintentionally. Either that, or, because he cares so much for her, his own passion might start the fire. He has to be taken to the coast, and soon, before he becomes a threat to his people."

Isala nodded, thoughtfully. "We'll have to take the girl, too. It would be unfair to her to leave her."

"We don't know if he'll be able to learn control of his gifts before he becomes a danger. It might make it worse if she's there."

"It's not about that. Ikhal was right. The girl has no prospects here, and would be left in a worse condition if we don't take her with us. If they married her off at all, it would be unlikely to be someone who cares about her as Amer does. And, if she does not marry, her brothers will likely turn her out of the tent when their father dies. And I don't think he has much longer to live. She must come with us."

"What do you propose to do with her if Amer cannot claim her because his gift is uncontrolled?"

"I will provide money, from my own stipend, to support her until she can earn her own way, if she does not marry. Or which would provide a better dowry than her father can give her. I'm sure, if we asked, Amer's family would supply the camels we'd need to get the pair to a real temple. Once there, we can solve this problem more easily. But we must get them out of this place."

Kalissa nodded, then touched her sword hilt to get a sense of certainty from her goddess. She doubted that she'd want to challenge her partner's intent on this, but the word of Railah was final. The hilts of DawnSinger pulsed warmly, and the feeling of fire faded from Kalissa's awareness. "You are right. We'll take them both. We might as well go and let everyone know. It will probably be two or three days before we can leave, and it's better to get them started on preparations."

It didn't take long to bring together the two older men and their offspring for the judgment. It was apparent that the elders expected there to be a nigh immediate wedding. They were not, however entirely disappointed when Isala spoke the judgment. "Khoral, Ikhal, Amer, and Lihiri, Railah has made

her will known. Amer possesses gifts that must be trained at a temple of Railah, for his own, and his people's safety. We will also take Lihiri with us, without taking her dowry from Ikhal. The Railahn Order will care for her until such a time as she either marries or leaves the desert for the pursuit of a trade, or devotion. A suitable dowry will be provided, should she marry. It is possible that when Amer gains control of his abilities, both in foreseeing and fire-starting, he will be able to marry Lihiri himself. We are offering that opportunity to them. We ask only that suitable mounts be provided for the journey, as well as supplies to take us to the coast. This is the judgment Railah offers."

The men looked at each other in silence, surprised. Relief washed over Amer, and he beamed at both the two knights and his betrothed. Without hesitation, he bowed to his saviors. "Knights of Railah, it lightens my heart to know what it was that caused such fear within me. I am willing to travel and learn to control this power that has manifested. I am more grateful that I will not have to leave my love to do so."

Lihiri also looked relieved. Isala had been right that the girl's prospects had been grim, had this marriage not been saved. And, though it might yet not be saved, safety and security had been offered her in a comprehensible manner. She bowed with a smile, and thanked the pair. "Many blessings on Railah's servants. A greater gift I could not ask."

With their youth agreeing to the judgment so easily, there was little that either elder could do to gainsay it. They had agreed, by coming before the knights, to abide by their judgment, and this judgment, while unexpected, was not a bad one. Supplies for a trip and mounts could be had easily, and removing the need for Ikhal to pay Lihiri's dowry made the judgment even sweeter. "So be it. I will go easily into the next life," the man responded, "knowing that my daughter will be within safe hands. My mistakes have haunted me, as much for my children's sake as for my own. Let the Goddess' will be done."

And so, with a little time needed to properly resupply and gather what the youths would need for their journey, the Sacred Swords finally resumed their journey back to the coast. Isala's heart was greatly lightened, for she knew that she need no longer fear her past. Kalissa noticed her partner's increased confidence and smiled. It had taken a long time for Isala to come out of her shell, but it seemed that she had finally succeeded at it.

As for the youths, they felt less fear for their futures, and Amer's visions of fire began to lessen as they made their way along the trade-way. It may take him some time to learn to control his gifts, but Kalissa started him on basic disciplines to gain such control almost immediately. It was not a path that any of them had originally considered taking, but it was Railah's will. Tomorrow would always come, and they were content to wait for it to come to them.