

The Challenge

By Tiona Yates

Maran stood within the bounds of his daughter's monastery, waiting to speak with someone he had yet to feel more than a vague respect for. That this person was his son-in-law, father to his two grandsons, made little difference in that. In fact, about the only reason he ever walked up to the monastery was to visit his daughter or grandchildren. And, for the most part, Kelu didn't press the issue, no matter how much he'd made it clear that he wanted to mend the difficulty between them. Maran just could see little that could be done.

It wasn't precisely anything that Kelu had done that bothered Maran, but merely who he was. Kelu represented the Wild Steppe, the homeland of Maran's own wife Denora. And the ways of the Steppe still bothered Maran greatly. There was little that Kelu could do without dramatically changing his behavior and general aura, that would leave Maran with anything resembling comfort in dealing with him.

Thus it was with a sincere reluctance that Maran stood waiting in a quiet office for his daughter's husband. Kelu had left word that he wished to speak with Maran, and, worse, that it regarded Caldor, Maran's youngest child and only surviving son. And, while Maran loved his son dearly, he knew enough of Caldor's behavior to expect that this meeting would not be favorable toward Caldor.

A sound from the hallway interrupted Maran's reverie, and he looked up to see the steppelander enter, pulling the door closed behind him. "It is good that you have come, Father." The younger man intoned softly, inclining his head.

"Much as I may be uncomfortable in speaking with you, when the situation concerns one of my children, I have little choice, Kelu."

Kelu gestured to a chair. "Please sit. Perhaps I can offer you some ease on the decisions that must be made, and soon."

Maran's eyes flicked to the other man's face, trying to read the steppelander's intentions. But the expression was as impassive as ever, unreadable to him. He pulled back a chair and sat down heavily, hoping that things had not gotten far more complicated.

"What is it that you needed to speak with me regarding Caldor?" he asked, trying to keep his fears from reaching his voice. Caldor was certainly a scamp, but had thus far kept himself out of real trouble, at least as far as Maran was aware. If that had changed, well, Maran wasn't sure how he could deal with it. Caldor didn't have the good sense that Belor had luckily been blessed with, and Maran was

uncertain of how to chastise him without risking a repeat of what had happened with Largo, his elder son.

Kelu sat down, folding his hands together on the table between them. "Uhbara has spoken of her other brother, the one who was taken by Jirel. She has told me why you fear to chastise Caldor, but without that discipline, there is much harm that may come of his actions. I have asked you to speak with me so that we can find a solution that will not risk a recurrence of what happened with Largo. Will you work with me? I do not wish my brother to become a threat to the city, or to his family, and he risks that now."

Maran looked down, spreading his hands helplessly. "I don't know what to do, Kelu. I still feel that how I chastised Largo is a good part of why he was taken from us. If Father and I hadn't been so certain that all he needed was proper discipline, he might have a family today, be with us still. I don't dare risk losing Caldor, especially not with how it would hurt Denora. She finally has what she always wanted. I have no idea how I could face her losing another son."

Kelu's voice was soft. "I understand your fear. I would not be willing to risk Vehlan if something happened to Tsarek. But the problem remains. Caldor must learn that his actions have results, and results that he would not appreciate. If you do not act, I will have to, for his own good, and for the love I bear for his family."

There was the ultimatum that Maran had known was coming. For all that Kelu had made it obvious that he deferred judgment where possible to his father-in-law, there would be no stopping him should he feel that he must act for the greater good. And yet, to an extent, Maran was relieved. It meant that there was someone who might be able to do what he could not.

"I'd like to hear the suggestions that you clearly have, Kelu. Perhaps your distance allows you to see what I cannot." That was a big admission for Maran. But, by and far, he was honest. It tended to help quite a bit when dealing with both his father and Denora. His father was a Sacred Sword, and thus very unwise to lie to. Denora, on the other hand, merely took whatever was said to her at face value. The problems that that had caused when he'd used imprecise speech were nothing he wanted to think about.

Kelu nodded, closing his eyes as if approaching the situation anew. "Caldor lacks the wisdom that Belor learned at an early age. He has not dealt with discipline, and now does not understand when his actions are not wise or commendable. He also seeks acknowledgement of adulthood, thinking that would be his right if he were among the Steppes. It is there, I think, that we may have a solution."

Maran looked up with a quizzical expression. "As far as Denora's mentioned, in my hearing or Caldor's, he would be granted the rights of an adult pretty much as soon as he chose to. I don't see how that can bring him under control."

"Peace, Father. There is more to it than perhaps you know. Denora likely hasn't told you that each young man among the tribe must catch, tame, and train his own mount. And it is possible that she

did not understand the importance of the first, and solo, raid that each boy must complete to win such acknowledgement. While we have no wild herds near here for him to go through the first, the second is a distinct possibility."

"A raid? You can't send him off to capture a prisoner from a farmstead. These are our people, Kelu."

The younger man laughed. "Perhaps not in the form that would exist among the tribes, but a raid would prove to him how unready he is. For it is certain that he has not the skills or foresight to succeed in something like this."

Maran arched a brow. "Ok, I expect you're going to tell me now how he's going to get away with a solo raid? Or not get away, as the case seems to be?"

Kelu gestured with a hand, causing an image of the surrounding terrain as if from a battle-field sand-map. "I believe you are aware of the repairs being done to the ruined tower here." He pointed at a tower hovering translucently over the table.

Maran looked at it, and the surrounding terrain. "I'm familiar with it. That tower is one that Father's been wanting repaired for a while. If I remember right, I recall hearing something about you being involved in those repairs. But what does that have to do with Caldor?"

Kelu smiled, showing his teeth in that unsettling way of his. "If a girl, preferably one he has feelings for, is kept overnight at the tower, and some of the militia from the outer farms is set to guard the place, he could be told that he has from dusk to dawn to break in, retrieve the girl, and get her safely back to town. He would be given a few days to scout before the mission, so that he has the same sort of opportunity that a boy of the tribes would have when planning his raid. But once the girl is in the tower, he would have to find some way to safely retrieve her without getting himself captured. If he can succeed at that, then my guesses regarding his foresight are wrong, and I will acknowledge his position. But I do not think he has the skill to do so."

Maran opened his mouth and then closed it. A trial, a test of wits as much as sword skill. That was certainly a better plan than any that Maran had considered. "I had not considered that a trial would be effective. And yet, it might be. Given that he would be informed in advance so that he could plan ahead, if he bothers, which, like you, I think that he might not, his reputation would be on the line. No one would say that he was not the cause of his own failure if he tries and fails. The shock of sudden failure might be enough to make him reconsider his outlook and attitude."

Kelu banished the image that floated above the table. "To be fair, the same test should be given to his cousin, Belor. Belor might actually succeed, though I do not think that he would glory in such success as Caldor would. It is obvious who would be taken from Belor for that test, as well. There is little that separates Belor from Ryka. Is there any who would be as much of a motivator for Caldor?"

Maran couldn't help but laugh at Kelu's hint about Belor and his intentions. It was an open secret now that Belor heavily favored the waif he had rescued from her father a few years back. And

with him coming into his own, that kind of favoring was likely a good thing. It would keep Belor from nearly being eaten alive with the title-hunters that had been slowly accumulating around the Academy. With an actual noble available for the claiming, many women had suddenly found interest in studying at the Academy. But Belor was never more than coldly civil with any of them.

But he needed to think on Caldor. "There are a few girls I've caught him flirting with, but none that he seems focused on. Perhaps Mirea, daughter to the tailors, Viresh and Leyda. Mostly, so far, he's just toying with the girls. I honestly hope he doesn't get it into his head to try to copy my brother. That would be a devastation waiting to happen, for we both know that he doesn't have either the uncommonly good nature than Telin has, or his practical knowledge of how to stay out of trouble."

Kelu obviously found that funny. "My Uncle has trained his wits. But that still does not keep him out of trouble, even with his oath. It merely changes the types of trouble that he gets into."

Maran couldn't help but smile at that observation. For all that Telin was properly respectable now, raising his twins with the help of his partner in both his life and his service to Lady Night, Telin always seemed to attract trouble of one sort or another. That Maran still raised Belor was more a case of Maran having more experience with youths, and the fact that Telin's house wasn't large enough for three children, even with two of them quite small.

"No, I'll agree that Telin has never been able to stay out of trouble long. He just usually manages to keep it where it doesn't affect many others."

Kelu rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So, Mirea and Ryka. I do not think that I will have difficulty talking Uncle Jalak into allowing me to use Ryka in this raid, but I do not know the other girl's parents well. Perhaps you, who have so much of the respect of the town, will fare better than I would in arranging such a test?"

Maran nodded, then thought of something. "There might be a difficulty if Belor succeeds and Caldor doesn't. Caldor will call it unfair if Belor has the use of his magic, even though he himself has gifts that Belor lacks."

Kelu frowned for a moment, then broke out in a grin. "Because without a mage bond, Caldor's own gifts cannot be taken from him, perhaps a compromise? Belor would be allowed to prepare a few items beforehand, both alchemical and magical. But he would not be allowed free casting of his magic. He would only be allowed to use magic that he has prepared before, and imbued into items to help him. Thus it truly is a test of skill and wits, rather than luck. As Belor's magic has more possible effects than Caldor's shapeshifting, limiting it to only that which has been prepared before would counter his advantage."

Maran chuckled, "That would be effective, especially as Caldor would have the ability to at least purchase and prepare other equipment he would deem necessary, including alchemical items he can get from other students here. The only difference in their preparation would be that Belor would have to

prepare any spell items, and Caldor would have free use of his shapeshifting. Neither advantage outweighs the other."

Kelu took out a sheet of paper, but not ink or a quill, and merely left his hand floating above the paper. Almost instantly, elegant writing began to appear upon the sheet, copying down their decisions so that both boys would know exactly what they would have to prepare for. When it was done, he smiled and handed it to Maran.

"Perhaps, Father, when it becomes clear what else must be done to curb your son's sense of entitlement, we can find other reasons to work together. I am grateful that you did not speak out against me when it became necessary to bring Caldor's danger to your attention."

Maran looked up to meet Kelu's gaze. As far as he could tell, Kelu's intentions to bridge the gap between them were in earnest, and, today at least, that Steppe tradition might have offered them something he could work with.

"Perhaps. I must say, I am glad that you've done such a good job with Tsarek and Vehlan. I was afraid of how things might work out, with my daughter seeming to forsake our western ways in favor of your traditions. But both boys are respectful and clever, and seem to have the discipline that will help them to go far."

Kelu looked down. "That brings up another issue that I would speak first with you regarding, Father. But Grandfather must know, and soon. Tsarek seeks not to use his body as his mother does, but looks instead to the sword. He shows more than proper respect to the Lady, and might well be ready to begin such training soon."

Maran's jaw dropped. He had thought that, with none of his children showing signs of that dedication, that his sister Talina might be the last Calasti Sacred Sword. This would be news that would certainly please his father.

"That is quite unexpected. But it is good news nonetheless. I agree. If Tsarek is showing signs of Railah's favor, then he should be offered the training he'll need to take up the sword. He's young yet, and Father can handle most of the early training before he'll need to be sent to the Guardian Wood. My earlier words did not express the extent of your skill raising the boys, if that vocation is true. It isn't easy raising someone dedicated to Railah. Even with Uhbara, her devotion did not take her from us like his will him."

Kelu laughed, "The Goddess saw to it that her priests taught me well; I could do far worse than to entrust my son to her service."

For the first time, Maran could feel a true kinship with Kelu, a bond shared over their children's chosen vocations. And it brought more than a smile to his lips. Despite the formal distance that Kelu kept with nearly everyone, including both Uhbara and Selah in public, Maran knew this would be allowed. He reached over and pulled the smaller man close, wrapping him in a hug that was the only way of expressing his sudden relief at Kelu's presence.

As he let Kelu loose, Maran nodded, a faint blurriness at the corner of his eyes. "I don't think I would have understood the truth any other way. Denora's accepted you, and all of Uhbara's ghosts. I shouldn't have distrusted you for so long. But this, hearing about Tsarek, this is what I needed to hear. While you are Calasti by marriage, I can now say that you are so in spirit too. We've all given up so much in service to the gods. And I can understand that now in you."

Kelu stepped back, straightened his robe, but flashed his teeth in a smile. "If that means peace between us, then I am grateful to have finally found that key. Go with the Goddess' Blessing, Father."

Maran told Belor and Caldor to stay seated after the evening meal two nights later. "I have something to discuss with you both," he said, a sure sign that something was up.

Belor stayed seated obediently, wondering what could possibly have gotten them both into trouble. He couldn't imagine anything that he had done anywhere near his cousin that would have earned either of them a stern lecture.

Caldor's seemed put out, rather than frightened. Unfortunately, that was all too common a reaction, as far as Belor could tell. His cousin, older by just over a moon, lacked any common sense for the consequences of his actions. And, up until now, at least, had gotten away with that kind of attitude far more often. About the only people who could stop Caldor in his tracks were their Grandfather, Sacred Sword Arandel, or Lord Kelu.

Maran took out a sheet of paper, and it looked like he was nervous to explain its contents. That could not be good, Belor decided.

"Boys, it has come to my attention that at least you, son, have been making noises about feeling like you should be acknowledged as an adult as a matter of your choice, because of your Steppe heritage. I have discussed this thoroughly with an expert on the matter, and he suggested that we deal with it in true Steppe fashion."

Belor cringed. This did not sound good. Though it was clear he was talking of Lord Kelu as that expert on the subject, and Belor got along rather well with his Uncle, he had no idea what kind of dangerous or unpleasant idea Kelu had come up with. And he had every reason to suspect that it was all Caldor's fault.

Caldor looked eager, "What was his advice to you, Father?"

Maran seemed uncomfortable, but clearly resigned to the situation. "As there are no wild herds travelling through here that are tamable, for neither he nor I would suggest you trying to tame and train a unicorn, he has pointed out another, more important, rite of adulthood for the boys of the Steppe.

Before being acknowledged by the tribe, a boy must scout out, and complete a raid against an outland village. They must come away with a live, and unharmed, prisoner. While we can't handle this quite the same way here, he has come up with a modification that I, and your Grandfather, have agreed to.

"Both of you will be given the time necessary to scout ahead to the ruined tower north east of the town. After you have done your scouting, a girl, Mirea for you, Caldor, and Ryka for Belor, will be kept overnight in this tower. This will be on different nights, of course. Your job is to sneak in, free the 'prisoner' and get her back to town by morning. The people guarding her will have orders not to kill, and to not hurt the girls, though they will have the right to injure you if they catch you. Lethal force is not allowed here, on either side. If you can complete your raid successfully, then, within the bounds of town, you will be treated as an adult."

Belor shivered, "I don't want to do this, Uncle Maran. I am more than happy to be considered a child for a little longer."

Caldor shoved him, which elicited a shock from Belor's usual wards. "You're afraid. You don't have the shifter's gift and are afraid."

Belor shook his head, "I don't want to risk Ryka getting hurt. And I don't need any more invitation for the girls of this town to think they can or should catch me alone. I am quite content with staying out of this mess."

Caldor's voice dripped with scorn. "You're the noble and you don't want a challenge? Is it because you aren't worthy of your title?"

Maran held up a hand. "Belor, your parents have agreed to this. They feel that it is in your best interests to compete in this. I know you don't want to. I'm pretty sure they know you won't want to. Which is why it's being made personal. If it weren't Ryka, you'd be able to just walk away, treating it like it's beneath you. But there are good reasons for you to do this. If you don't trust me on this, then you could discuss it with your father. The fact that he's agreed means that he feels it's important."

Belor closed his eyes, trying to still his heart. He did not like the fact that he was being pushed to show off like this. The last thing he needed was anyone to think that he was asking after any privileges that he wasn't due. His mother had died because her desire for more power, more rights, had driven her to kill his grandfather, and attempt to arm a force that could take over neighboring holdings. His Grandfather Arandel had taken him aside very young to warn him about the dangers of pride. And he had made it a point to show himself as humble as possible once he knew the dangers of such faults.

"I assume there are rules, beyond the keeping it non-lethal?"

Maran nodded, "Both of you will be allowed to acquire appropriate equipment before hand, not only normal things, but alchemical, if you think you need it. Because of the nature of the challenge, we cannot allow you free use of your magic, Belor. Instead, during the days you have to prepare, you will be allowed to cast enchantments on items you think you will need. You will only be able to use these pre-prepared items when it comes to magic. Nothing that can be cast directly during that night. This

will be to counter but not surpass your cousin's ability to shapeshift. Do you have any other questions?"

Caldor looked eager. "This will be easy." Belor was fairly certain it would not be.

Belor rode out alone to the tower two day later. He left Ryka at the monastery for her lessons with Lord Kelu, and carried a scroll case with several sheets of paper in it attached to his belt. Because of the years he'd spent learning riding from Kelu and his Aunt Denora, he had absolutely no difficulty handling the grey stallion he'd been given a few years back. He almost didn't need to command it at all. Instead, he merely let his leaning to see things guide the beast. It was better than risking the command magic that he'd designed years ago. Even after all of these years, it hadn't been properly tested, and might well never be.

He rode to where he could see the tower jutting out from the ground on a slight hill. It had, according to the town's records, once been the home of a mage, but had been destroyed during the Interregnum of Jahvan. The fact that the trees around here had not been trimmed back significantly thus far was indicative of both that and the fact that it had not been in use for a few hundred years.

It wasn't quite straight, having a slight lean to the south. It wasn't much of a lean, but likely the sign of a shift in the earth over time. A roof had been placed on the top, simple tile, at this point. But not all of the walls were completely solid, and there were large windows without shutters. He stopped to examine those windows from the ground. They were wide, more than wide enough that he could fit through them. And they were tall enough that that wouldn't be a problem either. So, that might be his way out.

He rode leisurely around to the main approach of the tower, seeing exactly how visible it would be to come through here. The road was fairly clear, no bushes or trees all that close. But there were a few tents and a lean-to nearby that could be used as cover, if he was very careful. It would be all that much better with a distraction.

Dismounting at the entrance, he dropped his reins toward the ground. "Stay here," he commanded the grey before turning and walking into the tower. He wanted to see how this was designed. He ignored the workmen involved in stopping the gaps in the walls, but walked through the base of the tower, examining the structure not only with his eyes, but with his mind, using his magical senses to detect anything that might be useful.

And there was something useful. The remnant of a spell that had never faded. He tugged at it, trying to unravel the bands of color that created it, so that he could see what this would do. Ah, yes, that was very clever, and he suspected that Kelu knew that it was here, and had left it intentionally.

There was another entrance to this tower, there, near the north wall. If he remembered right, there were more trees on that side than here. He didn't want to open this up just yet, but he had a suspicion that he had an idea where this exit led out to. If he could get in from that other side, he could get in mostly unseen. Which left only getting up to the top, where Ryka would be staying, and getting her out again. And he didn't count on getting out the same way he got in.

He walked out of the corner where that spell-locked entrance was, and instead walked up the stairs. The stairs were almost concealed, separated from the rest of the main room at the bottom by a wall. Perhaps the original wizard had not wanted to accidentally slip off of stairs. He quickly went up the path, finding that they opened out into a large room which may have once been the wizard's workroom. This was the level where Ryka would most likely be left, and he walked over to the windows, looking out over the countryside from here. Yes, that would be how he got out. But he'd have to do it in a way that kept him from being seen. He didn't want any chance that Ryka could get hurt.

Walking back down the stairs, he picked up his stallion's reins and swung into the saddle. He headed away from the tower, toward the north, where the passage was likely to open up. *Let's see if I'm right*, he told himself.

Yes, there, two boulders that he was fairly certain had been there for a long time. That made a lot of sense for a secret passage into the tower. It would be hidden and not close enough to the tower for an attacker to notice. If he wasn't sure that going down those stairs would be a big mistake, he'd try coming out the way he went in, but that would not be smart. He'd get in quickly, quietly, and take another way out.

Tomorrow he would prepare his spells. He knew now the spell-key for opening the secret entrance, and could enchant something with that. Beyond that, he'd make up some smoke vials, some syran powder, and a magic to get him out of the tower safely. This last had to affect more than one person...perhaps a rope or chain that could make him lighter? He was fairly certain he could do that.

He rode back casually toward home. He would use his parents' house to prepare his magic and alchemical items. Much as he hated to say it, he wouldn't be surprised if Caldor tried to mess with his preparations, especially if he failed his challenge. And Caldor's was first. There was no rule against him getting his mom's help with the alchemy, either. She'd been making that stuff for years, and could easily correct him if he had the wrong recipe. Yes, that is what he would do.

Belor knew that he wouldn't be getting much sleep the night his cousin was set to attempt the challenge that was set before him. If he was lucky, they'd give him two or three days between the challenges, so that he could get some sleep before his own. He really did not look forward to trying to run this gauntlet on very little sleep. He just hoped that if his cousin did succeed here, he would be

quiet enough and not crow about it all the next day. Though, honestly, if he lost, which was far more likely, Caldor would likely be moping and doing everything possible to try to keep Belor from being at his best. There wasn't likely a good solution to this matter.

He sat with his Uncle and Lord Kelu in the armor-donning shed near the practice grounds. There had been chairs brought so that this could in fact be reasonably comfortable, and the iron stove used to heat the shed was in burning nicely on this fall evening. Caldor came to pay his respects, carrying very little, as far as Belor could guess. There was a rope, not a foolish thing, and Caldor's sword, but no alchemical gear that Belor could tell without using his magical senses to determine.

Lord Kelu didn't miss a beat, seeming to tell the same thing that Belor had noticed. "You have everything you think you will need? There will be no returning for missing equipment."

"I will need little, because I have little to fear from mere militia. If there were a real fighter out there, I might consider it, but these are nothing more than farmers you're sending me through."

Kelu's voice was deep but lyrical. "If you believe that the tending of fields makes one less of a danger, that is your choice. Go then. You must be back, with the girl, by dawn, or you will forfeit the honor you seek."

Caldor merely shrugged, tilting his head in a rather cocky manner, and mounted up on his roan. The stallion was energetic, but at least Belor knew that Caldor could ride properly. That wouldn't be the problem. The problem would be for Caldor to get in and out of the tower without any danger to his prisoner. He certainly was thinking only about his own hide, probably considering that since the militia were supposed to not hurt the prisoners, that he'd be able to get away easily with Mirea. How wrong Caldor was. Belor had a very good reason to suspect that the militia were going to use the fact that the prisoner needed to be kept from harm just as much as Caldor would...they would make certain that he couldn't take any foolish risks.

Belor settled in on the chair for a long wait. If Caldor was extremely unlucky, he'd be brought back at dawn itself, likely bound pretty tightly. Belor couldn't help but smirk at that image. It would leave Caldor in a truly foul temper, but it would be something he could enjoy remembering. But it would make it all the more difficult too, when Belor succeeded, and Belor was fairly certain that he both could and would, partly because he was counting on the militia to be prepared for him. He would have to be creative, and keep his plans hidden, even from his parents.

The hours passed, and Belor got stiff and tired waiting for Caldor to come limping back. By moonset, he decided that he was correct. Caldor wouldn't be coming home under his own power. It was two more candlemarks before that till dawn, and he sat impatiently, sipping from a mug of tea regularly to keep him awake. He wasn't surprised when, after the sun rose, he heard the whinny of a horse objecting to its burden, and looked up to see a pair of sturdy farmers leading Caldor's roan. Caldor was tied and thrown ignominiously across the back.

Kelu stood up, nodding to the farmers. "I see that you have brought our young one back. He does not achieve the rank of warrior this night."

He moved to reach the horse, muttering calming words to the beast as he removed its burden. With a deft movement of his knife, he had Caldor's hands free, then bent do cut the bindings on Caldor's legs too. "Go, find your bed, child. Get what rest you may have, but be ready for lessons tomorrow afternoon."

Turning to Belor, Kelu nodded. "You will be attempting in two nights. Because of the need for sleep, which I think will be interrupted if you stay with your uncle, you are permitted to stay in the monastery until then. You will have little more than a hard pallet like the other students, but it will be uninterrupted by a child's resentment to necessary lessons. Get your things and go to the monastery. A monk will show you where you rest. Your classes will not be needed until you prove your skill, or fail trying."

Belor couldn't help but smile. "Thank you, Lord Kelu. I will do so, immediately." He stood up, stretching out his taut muscles. Moments later, he was speeding across the grass in the direction of his home. It would be nice to get his things and get out of the house, especially with Caldor apt to be moping a lot. But he did think he would miss what his aunt would say to Caldor's loss. It would be amusing, and he was fairly certain he knew what would happen.

Aunt Denora may never have scolded Caldor, but she also did not give him pity when his poor choices caused him problems. She would ask him to explain the situation, and carefully clear up anything that might not have been certain. Then, she would shrug and say that he could see exactly what he'd done wrong if he thought it through. If he got disruptive with his moping, she would likely suggest very coldly that there was work to do if he stayed around the house. That almost always got Caldor to leave, bringing the household back into peace.

Belor outdistanced Caldor easily, though the latter had his horse still. Belor was the only one who actually wanted to go home. And that only long enough to grab a change of clothes, his comb, and his pouch of things that he expected to need on his own run in two nights. One of the things that was necessary was his signet. He rarely wore it, but he had a proper secret with that. The ring bore a spell he kept ready at all times. That was a ward that would alert him to potential danger before he reached it. Such a ward would be almost necessary in figuring out which of several ways he would be taking to get into the tower to free Ryka.

He nodded to Denora, who was ready to start the day's chores, as he moved quickly through there. "I am to be spending the next couple of days at the monastery, Aunt. I will see you soon, though." He leaned over to kiss her cheek as he left, something he'd only started doing after getting comfortable showing affection to his step-mother, when she'd gotten back from Methil'dga. Denora never seemed to respond, but Belor got a feeling that it pleased her nonetheless.

With his burden tucked under his arm, he jogged lightly to the north. The monastery was actually closer than town was, and it wouldn't be long before he could find his bed and sleep for several

candlemarks. It would be worth it to be there; Caldor would not be interfering with him, and he would also be free from Ryka asking him questions about his preparations. While he wouldn't ordinarily have any problems telling Ryka anything, he felt that he needed to keep his plans to himself here. There was too much that could go wrong with someone expecting something other than what the situation gave him to work with. So, he meant to leave no one with expectations.

Belor had borrowed a shirt of chainmail for this challenge, judging that it would at least be reasonably quieter for this run than his usual armor. Covered with a heavy sheepskin coat over it, despite the heat, it would be even more quiet, barely clinking. He had a small tube for blowing syran powder tucked into a bandoleer, as well as several vials of smoke that he expected to need. At his hip hung a coil of rope, spelled with a lightness spell, one that would not hinder him in his movements, but would slow his fall, and Ryka's when they jumped. His signet was on his finger, his custom designed ward-spell active on it. In his pouch was a token ready to key the ward for the secret passage into the tunnel. And, lastly, he had enchanted a bracer to set a wall of energy if he needed it. He hoped that this last would not be necessary. If it had to be used, it would indicate that something was very wrong.

The only reason that Belor wore his sword on this challenge was appearance. He knew very much that if he had to fight, he had already lost. His getting in and out of the tower where Ryka was held would depend entirely on his ability to avoid detection. He wasn't as strong as Caldor, or as fast. He certainly didn't have the ability to grow scales to deflect an attack. If he got hit, he wouldn't have a chance, not against multiple enemies. So, he had to avoid detection.

With a nod to Lord Kelu, his father, and his Uncle Maran, he mounted up on his grey, pulling his cloak over himself in the hopes of vanishing into the darkness. He was lucky. There wasn't much moon tonight. If he was careful, he would be able to get in and out of there without being noticed. But he didn't count on that. The militia would have a fire, and likely several torches too. He would just have to be fast, and come from directions they weren't expecting.

He didn't even ride his gray all the way toward the secret entrance to the tower, but dismounted well beyond the fires and torches, telling the horse to await his call. He had played a bit of a trick this time, too. Since it hadn't been said that he couldn't do this, he had already secreted the mare that Ryka customarily read in the woods, with the same commands. He would call both horses when he needed them.

Gliding as silently as he could through the night, he approached the rocks that hid the secret entrance. So far, so good. There was no one guarding this, and his warding magic did not sense any danger for him here. He keyed the entrance very carefully with his ward-key, and slipped within, making certain to seal it back up behind him. He didn't know if he'd ever need this knowledge again, but if he

did, it wouldn't hurt to keep that entrance hidden and unknown. He eased through the passageway with a glow-gem set into a pendant offering just enough light to make his way down here. When he reached the inner end, he would have to hide that gem, because its light would give him away. As he did so, he listened to his ward, trying to get a sense of where the enemies would be as he got closer. There would be five militia men, certainly more than enough to take him out if he fought. He intended to keep from fighting.

There, he sensed, as he reached what appeared to be an inner wall of the tower. There was only one person in the lower part of the tower, and if Belor was careful, he could be caught with a burst of syran powder before he could raise the alarm. That would certainly be a bit of luck.

Belor prayed that the entrance from this passage was mostly silent in opening. Otherwise, it could cause a great deal of trouble. But, when he tried it, finding a lever that handled it, he found that it was well prepared, the machinery involved oiled and fresh. He stepped forward, out of the passage, tube in hand to blow the syran powder at the man near the entrance.

Pop, the packet of powder exploded, sending faint tracers of dust over the man. While the man sneezed, Belor didn't hear anyone outside sound surprise. He waited a moment until the man sagged against the wall, sleeping, then hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time. It wouldn't take the other militia long to discover that their ally was asleep. And he needed to hurry.

"Ryka," he whispered, as he reached the top of the stairs. "Get ready."

The girl in question was standing near a window, but not the one he intended to use. She turned to see him standing in the stairwell, "Belor?"

He nodded and hurried over to her.

"I hate to do this, but you're going to have to be tied to me, Ryka. It's the only way to get you out of here safely." He pulled his rope, "Get ready, while I give us some distractions." He went to the window overlooking the camp outside, tossing some smoke vials to crash in the direction he wanted them to expect he came from. Then he quickly ran back to her, pulling her into his arms.

"Tie yourself to me. We have to be tied together." She fumbled at the knot, but it seemed enough. "Ok, we're going to jump." He carefully picked her up and held her, hoping the knot held, and braced himself in the tower's window. Closing his eyes and hoping for the best, he stepped off, finding himself floating lightly to the ground. As he fell, he could feel the rope come loose. With one hand, he grabbed it, holding it around them, though they fell a little faster than he'd like. He came down hard on his ankle.

Barely taking the moment to free the rope completely, he pulled her toward the forest on this side. "Just a little ways, Ryka." He kept his words as soft as possible, hearing the searchers start fanning out around the tower. He had to hurry. He didn't want to risk her getting hurt if they found him.

Twenty foot, then ten, and then they were in the trees. He pulled her along through the underbrush, trusting in the small amount of moonlight he had. "Ok, I think we're safe. Just a moment while I arrange our return." He concentrated, for speaking the old tongue was always hard for him, then called to the horses he'd left nearby. Hopefully they hadn't been noticed.

A moment or two, and there were hoof-beats, from two directions. Belor quickly lifted Ryka to her mount before moving toward his. He was right. The sound of the horses, and possibly his call, had given the militia an idea of where to look. He would have to give the beasts their head.

"Hold on, Ryka," he hissed, digging his heels into his stallion. The mare followed instinctively. They wouldn't have cover for the first part of that, but with both horses, he had to trust that they'd get past the danger. He bent low over the horse, watching Ryka do the same. Though there was a surge of torchlight near them, they were moving too fast to be easily caught. They were past the militia in a handful of heartbeats, quickly outdistancing them. And none of the militia had horses.

It was only about five minutes before he slowed the horses down, approaching the town at a gentle walk. "Are you ok, Ryka? I know you don't like the closeness we had to have getting out of the tower, but it was the best way, the only way to get past them without letting them know where we were. And fighting just wasn't an idea I wanted to risk."

"Belor, that was wonderful. I would never have thought that we'd be flying."

"Well, falling more slowly, but you could call it flying, I guess." He looked rather abashed. "We're almost home. Let's hope that they're just happy with my success, and don't ask me to explain it."

He guided the horses through the darkened streets, seeing the light of a bonfire in the center of the practice areas. That would be a pain to clean tomorrow. He couldn't help but feel good, though. He'd succeeded with his attempt, and in good time, only two candlemarks after sunset. He expected that no one expected that he'd have such a quick plan to get in and out.

There was a moment of excited shouting as the people who'd gathered to watch spotted his approach. He trusted that Ryka would be sensible here, but he knew that people were wanting a show, so he reached out and caught up the reins from Ryka's mare, drawing her close to him as they cantered into the square. Then, with practiced skill, he nearly vaulted off of the stallion's back, moving around to carefully hand Ryka down.

It was only once Ryka was on the ground that he turned around, inclining his head toward the seats set on the outer edge of the changing shed. "As you can see, Ryka is here, with me." He did not speak loudly, nor try to draw attention to the fact that he was far faster than anyone expected. He let his deed speak for itself.

Caldor rose in a rush. "You had to have cheated. There's no way you could have gotten her out without breaking the rules."

Kelu pulled Caldor back. "Do not speak of cheating when such has not been determined. I will see if his magic has been used directly, and verify if he has succeeded within the rules."

Kelu stepped forward, extending a hand. Belor was not surprised at this test, a variant off of a truth-test, to verify if he did things as he claimed. Without hesitation, Belor offered his own hands, so that his magical levels could be read.

"I did not use magic that was not pre-cast on the test, nor did I engage in any fighting." When he could pull his hand back, he indicated his sword, which, to everyone's surprise was peace-tied. Ryka would be his witness that he hadn't tied that on his way back. It was a show of skill that he felt was necessary.

Kelu nodded. "There was no magic used directly. The indication of the peace-ties hints that he knew that the safest, and most successful, raids, use little or no combat, and instead speed, skill, and misdirection. Belor, you have succeeded. Within Sharlan, you will be accounted an adult."

Belor spread his hands, "I did not ask for this challenge, or this right. I intend to continue my studies, and take no privilege that I would not otherwise have. "

Telin chuckled as he stood up. "You've proven yourself quite smart. You've earned your position, regardless of what you think. Though your investiture as Lord Belor will still wait until you've reached your majority, I agree with Lord Kelu. You've proven your capability and wit, and that's what you're going to rely on later in life."

Belor tried to keep his expression neutral as he looked at the pride in his grandfather and uncle as well. "I only did what I had to. You didn't leave me any choice, Father. I wasn't going to leave Ryka there."

Telin's laugh was honest. "I don't expect you'll leave her much of anywhere, son. Actually, considering your success, she may have a reward of her own to bestow on you."

There were voices from around the shed that rose up almost immediately, telling Ryka to kiss him. Belor burned fiercely with embarrassment, but knew that he didn't have any right to refuse her if she chose this, which she might. She'd been getting far more comfortable with him over the past six moons or so, allowing occasional hugs. He turned to her to try to stop this mess before it got any further, if that was possible.

"Ryka, it's your choice. If you don't want to, you don't have to. I'm certainly not encouraging this. I didn't want to have to face this test in the first place, and need no reward for doing what I had to."

She seemed at least a little embarrassed by the attention, but she didn't seem ready to hesitate, either. She stepped forward, setting a hand on one arm, while the other reached up to gently brush the hair that Belor was grateful that he could now wear long.

He knew what this meant, and tried to still his heart. He told his body, silently but determinedly that it would go no further than a kiss. He had a few reasons for that, but mostly it was a result of his discomfort whenever his body started reacting. It never felt good, not to him. But that wasn't enough of a reason to make Ryka look like she was anything less than important to him.

Gently, he wrapped one arm around her waist, and brought his other hand to cup her head. Then, going slowly enough to make certain that she could pull away if she wanted to, he brushed his lips against hers. She certainly responded quickly, more powerfully than he expected, especially with as shy of physical touch as she usually was. Her mouth sought his and he realized that this part of things he could enjoy, at least as long as he didn't have to think of anything else.

When she let go of him, he stepped back, inclining his head to her. "I'm glad that I succeeded in bringing you home safely, Ryka." He did that in part to still the instincts that she'd awakened to the end of that. Whatever was wrong wasn't with her; he was certain of that. It was something wrong with him. And he would do everything possible to never give her reason to doubt her importance to him. That was a lesson he'd learned from watching his aunt and uncle.

Meanwhile, Caldor seemed to have enough of Belor's success. He could be heard trying to argue that only someone who could fight while retrieving a prisoner should be accorded that respect. And, it sounded like he was about to say the wrong thing.

"Lord Kelu, you're the one who has experience with this, and yet you honor him for not fighting like a warrior? Was that how you did your raid?"

Belor froze. He obviously knew something that Caldor did not, and hoped that Kelu would be at least a little forgiving when he answered that question.

Kelu's voice took on a very cold edge as he responded. "Wit and skill are of more value to a warrior than mere sword-skill. However, I did not complete a raid."

"You didn't?"

Belor stepped in, realizing that if he didn't fetch his cousin a slap upside the skull, things could be very troublesome. "Caldor, Kelu was not only a mage born, but remember his heritage during his first life. He wouldn't have been risked to become a warrior, no matter what his choice might have been. You don't want to even think about what he had to do to gain acknowledgement."

Kelu placed his hand on Belor's shoulder. "Peace, cousin. I will answer my brother on this. Though I do not often speak of that time, you were correct. I was always destined to work among the shaman. The ritual of my ascension to adulthood was bloody, and singularly unpleasant. It is where I learned, despite what had always been told me, that I could not conscience the ways my father would have of me. Five men died that night, at my blade. Because of the eyes on me, the nature of the magic I was told to perform, those deaths were not clean or pleasant. As much as possible, afterward, I stayed among the warriors. And even then, I could not avoid further occasions where I have had to shed lives. Is that a success that you would hear of, Caldor?"

Caldor's face went white, then green. It appeared that he had finally gotten an idea of what Kelu had been through, growing up among the tribes. Hopefully it was a serious enough lesson to teach Caldor to watch his tongue in the future.

"I'm sorry, Lord Kelu." Though Caldor was one who liked to crow about the fact that Kelu called him brother, because of Uhbara, he seemed to realize that this was a good time for formality. "I didn't think. I did not mean to bring that up."

Kelu inclined his head. "So long as you learn from your mistakes, I will not press you on them. Acknowledge the success and honor of the one who has achieved much this night, then go to your bed. I think you have much to think on for the next few days."

Belor backed up; he really did not want Caldor forced to acknowledge him. If it happened while Caldor was angry, it would only force many days where Caldor would do everything possible to make life unpleasant for him.

"I don't need that, Lord Kelu."

But Caldor seemed to be wanting to obey Kelu's direction now. "I'm sorry I called you a cheater, cousin. You have succeeded where I did not."

Belor couldn't refuse to offer his hand in good faith. He knew to expect torments soon, but for now, he wouldn't make things harder on Caldor than they were already for having Belor proven his superior. "Thank you."

Belor decided that this event needed to finish. "Lord Kelu, if you will bring back my stallion and Ryka's mare? I will not need my mount tomorrow."

Kelu showed his teeth as he smiled. "You have earned your rest, and as much pride as you are willing to allow."

"I need no pride, Lord Kelu. Pride is a very bad thing for me, I think."

He reached out and pulled Ryka to him for a moment, then smiled, "Let's get you back to Uncle Jalak's place, Ryka, and then I'll go and seek my own bed for the night. Hopefully my ward against vermin won't need shoring up."

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