



HeartTorn

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: HIS ENEMY. HIS WIFE.
HIS ONE WEAKNESS.

One thing King Taar of the Licornyn knows for certain: his captive human bride will never be accepted by his people. He has no choice but to break the inconvenient soul-tether binding them together, deliver her back to her own kind, and forget this impulsive marriage ever happened.

In the meanwhile, a single touch, even a stray kiss, could strengthen their bond and compromise all his plans. Surely this desire burning in his veins is only a result of the magical soul-tether. He doesn't truly want this stranger wife of his . . . does he?

Ilsevel holds tight to her secrets: not only her identity, but also her connection to the human mages who have devastated Taar's land. If her dangerous new husband finds out that he's accidentally married the daughter of his great enemy, her life will be forfeit. But with the weight of guilt burdening her heart, can she find renewed purpose in this treacherous world?

And can she suppress growing feelings for this husband she never sought and this marriage she should be fighting to escape?

Return to the world of WarBride, where a brutal fae warlord struggles with all his might not to fall for his feisty human bride. Prepare for pining, temptation, danger, and slow-burn romance ready to ignite! Book 2 of a planned quartet, HeartTorn will leave you breathless and begging for more.

Intended for mature audiences.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

1

ILSEVEL

I wake to the awareness of cold waiting for me just on the other side of the cocoon in which I lie. Frost crunches when I stir, and the air creeping through the few small cracks in my defenses bites straight to the bone. But here, wrapped in the cloak of a Licornyn warlord, I am protected from the elements.

It smells strongly of him—Taar. The man who has inexplicably become my husband.

It's not an unpleasant scent: leather and sweat and mystery, a heady combination. Part of me doesn't like how safe I feel, how warm and comforted. But I can't help it. If I could, I would stay here, with my knees curled up to my chest, my head tucked in, this cloak and this scent wrapped over every inch of me, and simply let the world and all its troubles pass me by. Perhaps the grass will grow over me, and I'll be nothing more than a little mound by the side of this river in a forgotten corner of Gavaria.

I squeeze my eyes shut and curl a little tighter, as though to force myself back to sleep. Last night I was so overcome with sudden exhaustion, I simply collapsed on my side, still staring at the fire, a half-eaten travel cake gripped in one hand. When Taar approached, I didn't have the energy to flinch away from him. He merely crouched, however, and draped a rough blanket over me, taking care to tuck in my feet and draw the heavy hood of my cloak over my head.

I watched him through cracked eyelids as he returned to his side of our little camp, his broad back to me. Firelight played across battle-scarred, suntanned skin and

chiseled muscles, all prominently displayed. How did he expect to pass the night without a covering, his bare torso exposed to the frigid elements? I should have protested and made him take the blanket back; I already had his cloak after all. But before I could shape a single word, sleep claimed me.

Now, waking slowly, my nose filled with his scent, I find myself wishing I might reach for him. Wishing he lay here under this cloak and blanket beside me, that muscled torso warm and solid at my back. The thought, hazy though it is, fills my body with ideas of its own. My loins heat, deliciously uncomfortable. I squeeze my thighs, hips subtly moving, my semi-conscious self desperate for some relief.

I know now who could give me that relief.

My eyes flair wide. There's nothing but thick fabric before my vision and a glimmer of pale light shining through the crack near the frosted ground. I breathe in a ragged gasp, the warlord's name trying to form on my tongue. What would happen if I called out to him? If I begged him to go down on his knees here and now? Temptation rises with sudden warmth inside me, a burning need coursing through my veins. I remember the sensation of his hands on my body, the taste of his lips, the dancing delight of his tongue awakening me to sensations I'd never before known.

But memory is not enough. Not when the man himself is so near, and his scent is filling my head.

"Warlord," I whisper, shifting my hips again, seeking friction against the heat pooling inside me. "Taar . . ."

Before I can utter another sound, an image flashes across my mind's eye: a swath of flattened tents. Blood-soaked ground. A pyre of mutilated corpses and a charred prayer veil.

Cold floods my limbs, effectively dousing the throbbing furnace in my center. I see once more my sister's face as it was in the last glimpse I had of her in life. Her terrified eyes so wide, her hands reaching for me even as she was dragged out of the prison cart. Dragged away to that auction block and there sold to a fae monster. Oh, Auralae! My darling, my sister. How frightened she must have been. When that hideous creature carried her into his tent and then, when her gods-gift finally revealed itself in full . . .

A shudder ripples through my soul. The War Gift is the rarest and most coveted of all gods-gifts. Father would be bitterly disappointed if he knew it had fallen on sweet Auralae. Especially now that she has been taken from him. Before he could make use of her.

And it was my fault. Entirely my fault. She would be alive right now if I hadn't been so desperate to escape my arranged marriage to the Shadow King. If I hadn't written to Artoris Kelfaren, still believing in the so-called love we once shared. If I hadn't brought those damned fae straight to the temple gates.

My stomach knots. I don't know if I want to weep or scream. Neither will give me the relief I need, not from this agony of guilt and rage and hurt and lust all roiling together in my gut. And what about this tightness wrapped around my forearm? I feel it, sharp and present if invisible. Thevelra, or so the warlord called it. Our marriage cord. According to him the bond may only be severed in a month's time, on the night of the new moon. That is when, by the wedding traditions of his people, a couple decides whether to continue their marriage or part forever. If either party deems the other an unworthy match, thevelra may be safely broken, and the unbound couple may go their separate ways.

As though in resistance to this idea, the cord tightens again, sharper than before. I wince. The pain is bad enough, but worse still is that sense of drawing. That undeniable, nearly irresistible pull toward him. This husband I never chose. This

enemy, who took me captive and threw me in a prison cart, only to buy meat auction a short while later. Not a man with whom I could ever dream of sharing a lifetime.

No, I must be rid of him as soon as possible, mystical bindings be damned. I must survive until the bond can be severed and return to my own world. Then I must do what I should have done from the beginning: marry the Shadow King. Marry him and lie in his bed and let myself be ravaged by him according to law, sealing his contract with my father. When that is done—when I have sacrificed my body on the altar of marital duty—my monstrous husband and his horde will turn on my father’s enemies, slaughtering them in droves on the field of battle.

Thus will I pay penance for Aurne’s death . . . and have my vengeance as well.

A sudden flare and the sound of firewood collapsing is followed by a waft of smoke, which creeps into my nostrils, momentarily driving out the warlord’s scent. I pull back a fold of cloak to watch Taar add fuel to the campfire. He doesn’t seem any the worse for wear after his night of exposure. I watch him secretly for some moments. Indeed it’s almost impossible not to watch him.

For all he claims not to be fae, I don’t know what other explanation there is for such godlike beauty. He moves with a wildcat’s elegance, crouching and arranging the wood he has gathered, performing some sort of incantation to dry it out before adding each piece to the flames. He fetches a small kettle from his saddlebags and fills it from one of his waterskins. He adds to this some dried leaves from a silken pouch, then nestles the kettle in raked coals. All so precise, so graceful. He’s as natural at performing these homely arts as he is brutal on the battlefield. How can one man contain so many contradictions? Every move he makes seems to emphasize the latent power of his musculature. I find my eyes drawn to corded forearms and those strong, long-fingered hands. Brutal hands which I’ve seencovered in blood; tender hands which have molded my body with a fiery touch until I felt, for the first time in my life, fully alive.

My throat is suddenly very dry. Around my wrist, the velracord tightens almost imperceptibly. I must be careful. There's no point in denying the attraction I feel, but I cannot let it rule me. Taar has already lost warriors attempting to thwart the Shadow King's marriage to King Larongar's daughter. If he ever finds out I am that daughter, my life won't be worth a snap of my fingers, marriage bond or no marriage bond. I must remain above suspicion. Open, artless, and, most of all, innocent. A tricky business. But if I've learned anything in my father's court, it is how to perform in the charade of life.

Taar uses a stick to lift the lid of his kettle and check the contents. Settling the lid back into place, he sits on his heels and frowns down at his arm and the fresh stitches I gave him while he was unconscious last night.

"How does it feel?"

He startles at the sound of my sleep-thickened voice and shifts his black eyes to look at me. "So. You are awake, Ilsevel."

He speaks my name with a strange inflection, not quite how I'm used to hearing it. I like the cadence of his rough voice, however. Somehow he makes my name sound, not strange, but . . . sacred.

I sit up, pushing back the hood of my cloak. Gods, I must look an absolute sight! What with all the sobbing and racing through forests in semi-darkness, not to mention sleeping on the ground in the frosty cold. But I won't let myself care what Taar thinks of my appearance.

A lilt of song carries on the breeze, and I look over my shoulder to glimpse the nearly-invisible form of Elydark, the warlord's unicorn companion, standing watch a few yards away. My eyes cannot fully discern him, but my spirit feels the song that makes up his essential essence. He seems to be standing with his head upraised,

gazing east toward the as-yet unrisen sun, unaware of my scrutiny or simply uncaring. I watch—or rather,listen to—him for some moments. My breaths ease in and out in time to his resonance.

Then, pushing a shock of wild hair back from my face, I turn to Taar again and indicate his arm with a jut of my chin. “Does it bother you?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

He looks down at the wound. “The stitches itch, but it seems to be healing well.”

“Shall I have a look?”

At the warlord’s grunt and half-shrug, I get up, brush out my skirts, leave the blanket in a pile, and cross to his side of the fire. Taar turns to offer me a view of his arm, his own gaze fixed on the dancing flames. I inspect my handiwork. To my surprise the flesh knitted well overnight, leaving only a pale scar. Perhaps the song I sang last night, when my voice joined with the profound magic of his unicorn, healed more than just the poison in this man’s veins.

“I’m no expert,” I say musingly, “but I think it should be safe enough to remove these stitches.”

I look up to find his face suddenly so very near, I can count the squint lines framing his eyes and see the way his lashes curl, thick and dark. If I lean closer, I might just be able to discern the difference between his pupils and his impossibly dark irises.

“Go ahead then.”

I catch my breath and pull back slightly. “Wh-what?” My voice is a little puff of frosty air from my lips.

He shrugs and nods to his arm. “Remove the stitches if you’ve a mind to. I’d as soon not be itchy throughout the day ahead.”

I bite my lip then nod. “Have you tools to remove them?”

“You’ve still got my knife on you, haven’t you?”

I do, and I find the razor-sharp tip more than adequate to the task. It’s oddly satisfying to see those stitches come loose and the puckered flesh relax into its new shape around the scar. All the while Taar keeps his eyes fixed on the fire, never once flinching, though I spot gooseflesh rising on his skin where my fingertips brush.

“So,” I ask, as I pull the last of the threads free, “what happens next?”

He glances sidelong at me.

“Today, I mean. Do we travel to your country?”

“Cruor is not my country. The Licornyn dwell on the edge of the land of Cruor, but it is not our home.”

“Sure.” I back up a step or two as he moves his arm experimentally. “But that is our destination, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And how long is the journey exactly?”

Satisfied with his scar and his range of movement, Taar settles his elbows on his knees, his huge back slightly hunched as he sits before the fire. “I hope to meet my people on the borders of Cruor by sunset.”

“Sunset?” I blink. “Are we really so near as all that?” Looking around at the cold landscape, there’s nothing but wild forest surrounding us on all sides.

Taar chuckles softly at my confusion. “No, indeed. We are far from Cruor, farther

than you can imagine. But we will venture back into Wanfriel and take one of its paths to the gate.”

“And what does that mean, warlord?”

Another one of those sidelong glances. “Ah! I forget sometimes that humans have forgotten the Ways of the Wood.” He picks up the stick he’d used earlier and lifts the lid from his kettle to peer inside. A delicious aroma rises from within. Grunting, he sets the lid back in place and plucks the kettle from the coals. “Wanfriel,” he says, “is the common Eledrian name for the Wood Between Worlds. It is the very forest we traveled through yesterday, which exists in a thin place between veils of reality and can, for those brave enough to dare its depths, lead to innumerable realms. Including Cruor. It was by traveling through Wanfriel that we journeyed so swiftly from the temple to the Grimspire and the encampment of Prince Ruvaen’s host.”

I’d wondered about that. Though I was unconscious for most of the journey, it had seemed like no more than a day. Surely word would have spread throughout the region of such a large fae host encamped so near one of our centers of worship. Yet not even a whisper of rumor had reached my father’s ear, leading him to believe I would be safe enough to embark on my Maiden’s Journey. More fool him. More fool all of us.

Shaking these darker thoughts away before they can overpower me, I ask, “How do we enter this Wanfriel?”

“Through the same gate we used yesterday.” Taar pours steaming hot liquid into a wooden travel cup. “If it is still intact, that is, for it was already beginning to collapse. Otherwise, we will have to journey across the country in search of another point of entrance.”

“You’re telling me there are gates to and from this miraculous forest—gates that lead

to other worlds—spread across Gavarria?”

He grunts and hands me a cup. I accept it, turn it round in my hands, and inhale the steam. It’s a floral scent, one I don’t recognize. Though I am usually more inclined to strong black brews, I’m too parched this morning to be picky. I take a tentative sip and relish the warmth and sweetness that slides down the back of my throat.

“If what you’re telling me is true,” I ask after a few swallows, “why is it that my own people—humans that is—aren’t aware of these gates? I’ve only ever heard of one portal to and from the fae worlds. It appeared in our world five hundred years ago, initiating our interactions with the fae.”

“That gate was created by a fae king of ages past in a tremendous act of power.” Taar pours himself his own brew. “It leads not only to this world, but potentially to all worlds. But humans have interacted with the fae since time immemorial.” He takes a swallow, heedless of the heat, and swirls his warm cup so that steam curls around his face. “All those tales of poor souls lost in fairy woods are testimony to the history your kind has simply forgotten. Even now humans may stumble upon a lesser gate by mistake and find themselves wandering through Wanfriel. Few return home again to tell their tales, and those who do are often mistaken for madmen.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

We sip our drinks in silence, while my mind whirls with this wealth of new information. I had always known the worlds were larger, more varied, more fascinating than the narrow existence I lived in Beldroth Castle. I'd simply never realized how near all those worlds were. Or how terrifying.

Taar drains his cup then stands and begins to kick dirt over the remnants of the fire. "Come, zyl'nala," he says, and something warms in my chest at the sound of the pet name lilting from his tongue. "I bade my people wait for me one night only. This extra night has set me back, and if I'm to meet them at the Luin Stone, we must set off at once."

I shudder, remembering the furious faces of the other unicorn riders, who stood by as witnesses to my strange wedding ceremony. One face in particular had looked as though he would disembowel me the minute Taar's back was turned.

Rising, I help Taar kick out the fire and begin packing up the saddlebags. "How will your people react to your bringing me with you?" I ask somewhat tentatively.

Taar's brow darkens. "Don't expect a warm welcome."

2

TAAR

The gate is still open, Vellar. But it is unstable.

Elydark's voice sings in my head, wordless and full of meaning. I shade my eyes and

look beyond his upraised head to the stretch of baren landscape lying before us. From here, on the edge of the forest, I can just discern the fracturing sliver of unreality that marks the gate from this world back to the Wood Between. It is the same gate Lurodos and I opened when we brought our invasion force through to attack the Temple of Lamruil. It was not built to last; many days old by now, it is on the brink of collapse.

Can we pass through? I sing back to my licorneir, my voice inaudible to all but his spirit. Is it safe enough?

Elydark's skin ripples like a shudder. He doesn't fare well in a world like this one, nearly devoid of natural magic. If we do not cross this gate back into a realm more to his liking, he will suffer. Even so only a fool would attempt to cross an unstable portal.

I will know better when we are nearer, he says at last.

With that he sets off at an easy lope across the winter-bare fields, moving with such liquid grace one scarcely feels the beat of his hooves. He is all but invisible beneath the cold light of this sun, but the radiating power of his being generates an impression that tricks the eye into believing it sees more than it does. Used to it as I am, I scarcely notice. But my companion is a little less easy.

"Oh, gods!" Ilsevel gasps, as Elydark breaks into a gallop. She grips the pommel of the saddle with both hands, her body wrung tight with tension. I slip an arm around her waist, pulling her against me. It's not a conscious thought, merely an impulse to make her feel more secure. I regret it immediately, for the feel of her lithe body between my legs is already a distraction for which I am unprepared. Holding her close like this? It's almost more than I can bear. I focus on the landscape once more, determined to find something, anything to distract my attention from this new little wife of mine.

Wife. . . The word seems to echo in my chest, warm and strange, almost frightening. If anyone had told me I would return from this campaign with a human bride in tow, I would have laughed in his face and called him a fool! I'm not laughing now. This situation is far from humorous. Thevelracord of our marriage ceremony binds us tight. Any degree of separation leaves me exposed to dark magic, as I discovered to my cost.

Elydark covers the ground swiftly, leaving the field behind for a narrow, rutted road. The same road on which I collapsed only yesterday after leaving my new bride behind at a nearby town. Not realizing the danger such separation would pose, I'd ridden off, intending to cross the gate, return to my world, and spend the rest of my life trying not to think of her again.

Instead unchecked virulium poison coursed through my body, overcoming all resistance. I don't remember much of what happened next, but the violence lingers in the depths of my mind, along with the faint whisper of a voice:

"Give me to drink, Taarthalar. Pour out blood unto me."

I yank my thoughts roughly back to the present. I am not that man anymore, not prey to the seductive ravages of virulium. But I should never have put myself in that position, never allowed myself to be made vulnerable. Had I known the consequences of the marriage vows I spoke to this woman—had I guessed the symbolic bond of thevelrawould in fact manifest in such a real,inescapable way—I never would have done it. This woman has not only put my life at risk, but the future of my people as well.

Then again it was she who saved me.

I look down at the dark head before me. She sits astride the broad Licornyn saddle, cradled in my arms. I owe her my life. Were it not for the strange power she

bears—the gods-gift, as she named it—I would have succumbed to the virulium in my veins, dying in a last shock of violence and gore. But somehow, impossibly, she mingled her voice with Elydark's and called me back from the darkness. A feat which even the bravest Licornyn warrior would have struggled to accomplish.

Ilsevel. This fiery, gods-gifted creature, who bears a Licornyn name. And not just any name, but the name of our most sacred flower, the centerpiece of our very culture and way of life. It cannot be coincidence. Surely the gods themselves must have brought us together, intending to join her destiny with the Licornyn people. If that is true, does it explain this inexplicable desire I feel for her? Is it more than just the primal lust of a man for womanly flesh and instead something far more profound?

I grit my teeth into the cold wind blowing in my face. What good is this thinking? Better to face the truth: she bears the name Ilsevel because she is the daughter of my enemy. Some Miphato, perhaps, who traveled to and from Cruor using the mage-paths, liked the sound of the name and carried it back to his homeland to bestow on his offspring. Her name is no coincidence. Neither is it some holy sign. It is the inevitable result of conquest.

I must take care not to forget myself. The next month will be difficult, with the velra trying to make me believe I feel things I could never justly feel for a woman who is all wrong for me. I must not do anything to strengthen whatever bond already exists . . . no matter how great the temptation.

Elydark pulls up short twenty paces from the gate and tosses his head uneasily. I cannot blame him. The air ripples with the dissonance of reality breaking down, falling in on itself. Only the barest trace of structure remains, but through it, I can discern the green shade of the wood on the far side.

Well, Elydark? I ask as my licorneir tears at the earth with a sharp hoof. Do we dare?

He utters a tigerish growl and shakes his horn. Before I can question him further, he springs forward, aiming straight for the middle of that gate. I just have time to pull Ilsevel close against me and shout, “Hold on!”

Then Elydark carries us through that thin veil into the space beyond, and all sense of reality fractures. A weight like the tonnage of eons flattens my soul, dragging it out until it is stretched taut from one world to the next. This is far worse than when we passed through yesterday, and if I had enough assembled being to feel anything, I would think myself a fool for having dared this crossing. As it is I am aware of nothing but flattening and stretching, more and more, until what’s left of me is practically gone.

Abruptly as it began, everything snaps back together in a burst of needle-sharp sensation. I gasp at the pain of newly returned senses, overwhelmed by the greens and grays and golds of the forest around us, by the whisper of wind, the thud of hooves, the smell of pine and oak and birch filling my nostrils. So much experience all packed into a few seconds, I cannot for a moment fathom where or who I am.

Violent retching brings me back to myself. I look down to find Ilsevel, bent in half, vomiting up everything she’s eaten or drunk in the last twenty-four hours. My heart twists with compassion. World-traveling is hard enough on those used to it. Humans haven’t the constitutions for shifting between realities.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“There now, zylnala.” I hold her hair back as she empties her guts on the ground by Elydark’s prancing hooves. “The tea you drank this morning should steady you.”

“Oh, really?” she gasps, before heaving again. “I’d hate to think . . . where I’d be . . . if I’d not drunk your damnable tea!”

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. Having her mortal existence stretched across realities hasn’t dampened her spirit.

She sits upright at last and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Can’t believe I ever thought I wanted travel and adventures,” she mutters, more to herself than to me. Then, shaking her head, she straightens her shoulders and assumes that imperious air which I’ve come to realize is her one shield against the perils surrounding her. “Now that I’ve finished making a miserable little idiot of myself, shall we continue?”

A faint vibration, like a chuckle, ripples from Elydark. I never would have believed it possible for my licorneir to develop a liking for a human, but I feel a surge of real affection from him now. He steps into motion, plunging into the depths of the forest. Ilsevel rides well, better than one might expect for someone unused to a licorneir mount. She keeps her back lance-straight, her chin high, her hands resting on but not gripping the pommel. She prefers to touch me as little as possible, and I honor that unspoken wish to the best of my ability.

“Tell me, warlord,” she says, breaking her frigid silence, “do the Licornyn design their saddles with the view of sweeping up maidens and carrying them off in mind?”

I blink, uncertain how to answer this.

“Not that I’m complaining,” she continues, musingly. “If this saddle were designed for a horse, I should either be suffering agonies on the pommel or obliged to bounce along behind, clinging to your back like a barnacle. This is certainly preferable.”

“I’m . . . glad to know you’re not uncomfortable.”

“But do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Make a habit of sweeping maidens off their feet?”

“Not ordinarily, no.”

“But now and then, surely. Just to keep up the practice.”

“Well, one wouldn’t want one’s maiden-sweeping technique to be found wanting when need arose.”

She snorts. It’s not quite the ladylike sound one would expect to accompany such rigid posture. But then this young woman has presented a series of contradictions from the moment I first laid eyes on her. Who is she, exactly? Beyond her name, given with extreme reluctance last night, she has told me very little about herself. I know only that she was traveling on a pilgrimage with her sister when they were caught up in the attack on the temple. Otherwise she is an enigma. A mystery I would like to unravel, if only I dared.

“Ugh.” She shakes her head abruptly. “Why is everything so blurry around the edges? Is it from the gate-crossing?”

I glance briefly at the forest surrounding us. While the path Elydark follows is clear

enough, and the trees lining it remain in place, everything beyond gives an unsettling sense of shifting movement that is not found in any other reality. Over the years, I've grown used to traveling through Wanfriel, accustomed to the oddities of this particular realm, but it must be very strange to her.

"Don't strain your sight," I say when she rubs her eyes with the heel of her hand. "We are on a fae path, which leads through many layers of reality at once. If you try to see what lies beyond, you will go mad. Best to look straight ahead or simply close your eyes."

Rather to my surprise, she opts for the latter. She even rests her head back against my shoulder. My heart lurches at this small act of trust, and when her body relaxes still more, her rod-straight back curving to bend against me, I fight the urge to slip my arm around her waist and pull her closer. My hand, resting on my thigh, curls into a fist instead.

After some while a faint humming catches my attention. At first I think it must be Elydark's voice. Then I realize I'm hearing it with my ears, not my soul. It is an unexpected sound, similar to a licorneir song, but not made with a licorneir's voice. Only when it dips suddenly into a lower register do I recognize what I'm hearing: Ilsevel. She's humming some remnant of the song she and Elydark sang to me last night, when they drew me back from the virulium. It's so odd to hear such a song made with throat and tongue rather than spirit. Beautiful, though. Strange and beautiful.

As though suddenly realizing what she's doing, Ilsevel utters a little gasp and sits upright once more. "Don't stop," I say, sorry to be deprived not only of the song, but of the sweet warmth and shape of her body against mine. "That was lovely."

She straightens her shoulders and lifts her chin once more, clearing her throat aggressively. As though to drown out even the temptation to sing, she says abruptly,

“I thought all the fae forests were burned down long ago.”

Something knots tight in my gut. “That sounds like a story spread by your own King Larongar of Gavaría.”

A little shiver races down her spine. She half-turns her head as though to look back at me but thinks better of it. For a moment she doesn’t speak again, and when she does, she seems to be trying to disguise a tremble in her voice. “Are you saying there are still forests like this in my own world?”

“Yes and no. Your own forests are, by and large, devoid of magic. But there are forests which lie closer to Wanfriél than others, and the Miphates mages would never allow these to be completely destroyed.”

“Why not?”

“It would greatly reduce their access to thequinsatra.”

“And what is that? Thequinsatra?”

I frown, surprised at this question. “Thequinsatra is the realm of magic—the plain of reality from which pure magic originates. To access its power, magic must be drawn from that realm into the realm of the user. The farther a world is from thequinsatra, the harder this task becomes. Humans find it incredibly difficult, though Miphates mages have developed some interesting techniques.” I look down at her again curiously but can discern no answers from the back of her head. “Do you not know this? You are possessed of magic, so I would have assumed . . .”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

She shrugs. “Gods-gifts aren’t like ordinary magic. I don’t have to draw it or summon it. It is simply in me.”

I nod slowly. “In this regard you are more like the fae. They are born with magic in their blood, so it is always at their fingertips.”

“And do you have such magic in your blood?”

“Some. But I am a brildian, not fae.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

I chuckle softly, a huff of air through my lips. “Long ago,” I say, falling into a rhythm of recitation learned in a sunlit classroom, back when Master Mitalar, my old tutor, was still determined to make a scholar out of me. “Long ago there was a race of fae who sought refuge from their oppressors in mortal lands. They were not a great or powerful people, but to human eyes they appeared godlike in their glory. As a result humans were pleased to marry their sons and daughters off to the beautiful beings who walked among them, and a new race was born—the brildians. Neither human nor fae, but something new. Nornala, Goddess of Unity, was so pleased by this joining of the two races, that she went so far as to create a realm just for them, somewhere between Eledria and the mortal world. So Licorna came into being, and the goddess bade the brildian folk spread across it and claim it as theirs.”

Ilsevel mulls over this information. “And the . . . your licorneir?” she asks, stumbling a little over the word. “Do they originate from the same realm?”

I draw in a long breath. The question is simple enough, but not the answer. The great mystery and miracle of the licorneir is hard to encapsulate in mere words, particularly not in this language, which does not boast the depth of meaning found in my native tongue.

“At the dawn of the new world,” I say at last, falling again into that same, rhythmic tone, “Nornala looked upon the land she had made and saw that it was good for her Star Children to inhabit. Not so close to thequinsatrathat they might grow swollen with power, but not so far from it that they might become starved and vicious.

“So the goddess sent Onoril and Mahra, Father and Mother of all licorneir. They are, like the wild unicorns of Wanfriel, fiery creatures by nature. It is said that Onoril and Mahra carry the souls of stars in their hearts. But unlike unicorns, the licorneir were blessed by Nornala with thevelragift—the ability to bond. Those of my people who prove worthy present themselves when they come of age as candidates for thevelarin. Not all are chosen,” I add, reaching around Ilsevel to stroke Elydark’s shoulder. “The licorneir can be selective.”

Elydark tosses his head and utters songful laughter. He remembers as well as I the moment of my presentation. The gawky, frightened, but determined man-to-be that I was, desperate to prove myself worthy to this ancient being of light and song and power. An impossible task . . . and yet he must have seen something of promise in me.

“When a rider’s soul is ready to bond,” I continue, “the licorneir will share its name. I first heard Elydark’s namesung in my head on the shores of the Morrona River when I was but sixteen years of age. It is, of course, a challenge to translate into sounds made with the tongue—Elydarkis merely an approximation of the true name, which only I possess.”

She nods slowly, taking in all that I have shared. “When I first saw the licorneir,” she

says after a time, “that night during the battle, they were ablaze.”

“Yes. The starfire inherited from Onoril and Mahra burns in the soul of each beast. When they go into battle, that fire erupts and reveals the true nature of what to us appears as mere flesh and bone. Only a rider soul-bonded to his mount can survive that fire and become one with it.”

Even as I speak these last words, the trees around us suddenly give way to open country stretching endlessly to either side. Before us lies a great wall of mist, with only a cliff’s edge of stone lying between us and it. Below is a vertiginous drop into nothing.

“Ah!” I say, as Elydark comes to a halt. “We are near the Cruor gate now.”

“Gate?” Ilsevel grips a handful of Elydark’s mane as she looks this way and that. “Where?” I point to our right. She turns, and I hear an inhale of horror as she spies, not more than a few yards away, a painfully narrow bridge extending out over that emptiness before vanishing into the mist. “That doesn’t look like a gate to me,” she protests weakly.

“Of course not.” I turn Elydark’s head and urge him along the cliff’s edge toward that swaying bit of rope and wood planking. “We can’t have just anyone wandering out of Wanfriel into Cruor. Most gates in the Wood are disguised to look like anything other than what they are. One must either be in on the secret or have an expert nose for sniffing out such magic.”

She makes a few little gulping sounds of protest but ultimately stifles them behind her hand. It’s just as well. Like it or not, this is our only way through to that world, and while I am loath to see Cruor again, I have been too long away from the Hidden City. It is time to return home.

Elydark stops suddenly, ears pinned back. He bows his head, lowering his horn into a defensive position. What is it? I demand.

I sense something, he sings back to me, his voice troubled. I sense . . . someone . . .

Who? I look over his bowed head. Could it be that Kildorath, Ashika, and the others failed to honor my command and wait for me at the Luin Stone? Have they gathered by the gate instead, determined not to cross over without their luinar?

But Elydark shakes his head roughly, and a ripple of fear flows from his soul to mine. Then he speaks the last name I either want or expect to hear:

Shanaera.

3

ILSEVEL

A swift exchange of song passes between Taar and his unicorn. I cannot understand it, but I feel the sudden shift in tension ringing in the subtle harmony they share. In Elydark it sounds like dread, a terrible emotion to emanate from such a being.

But from Taar that dread is mingled with something else. Something which at first sounds like terror, but also—and perhaps I'm mistaken about this, for it doesn't make sense—hope.

Curse this ridiculous gift of mine. I liked it better when it was simply a knack for picking up musical instruments and singing complex arias with ease. This new awareness is far more than I bargained for and still not particularly useful. I'm just as helpless as ever in this strange world in which I find myself. I should have had the War Gift. The gods made a mistake when they gave it to Aurae instead. I would have

known what to do with such a gift. Then I wouldn't have failed my sister.

Gritting my teeth against the rising flood of guilt, I shake my head, desperate to clear out what I can of that song. "What is it?" I demand. "What's wrong?"

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“Nothing,” Taar answers with a sharpness that belies the truth. I consider pressing him for answers; then again, if something horrible is about to happen, perhaps it would be better to let him focus on being his stoic warrior-self. Grudgingly I bite my tongue.

Another swift exchange of song, and Taar urges Elydark forward. My eyes keep darting from the wood on our right back to the awful precipice on our left. It’s all too easy to imagine sudden monstrous forms emerging from that mist to swallow us whole. Is it really necessary for us to ride quite so near the edge? Despite myself, I can’t help leaning back against the solid chest behind me, taking comfort in Taar’s broad presence. Encircled in his arms, I feel relatively safe. Nonetheless my fingers can’t help seeking the knife sheathed at my belt, tracing the little gold jewel on the hilt. Not that I’ve got any real experience with weaponry; but I feel braver knowing it’s there.

Taar and the unicorn grow more silent the nearer we come to that rickety bridge. Are we actually supposed to cross that thing? It looks ready to collapse at a breath of wind, and Elydark, though light-footed, is bigger than the biggest draft horse I’ve ever seen. Add the combined weight of me and my warlord husband, and there’s no way in any of the nine hells we’re making it across. Even if we did, what awaits through that awful mist? All the stories of Cruor I’ve been told over the years clutter my head at once, a jumbled confusion of nightmares. While Taar did not confirm any such stories last night when he spoke of his homeland, neither did he deny them.

Gods help me, how did I let myself get talked into this whole mad plan?

Movement explodes on my right.

Though just moments before I was on alert, waiting for something like this to happen, I'm caught unawares. A yelp bursts from my lips, but it's nearly drowned by the wailing of this mad creature which throws itself at us in a blur of flailing limbs and flashing steel.

Elydark is not easily startled, however. The great unicorn pivots so delicately on his massive hooves, it shouldn't even be possible. The next thing I know, he lowers his head and lunges in a surge of powerful muscle, driving his horn straight into the chest of the berserker. I find myself lurched forward over the saddle pommel, staring down the line of the unicorn's bowed neck, straight into the face of a dead man.

Only he's not dead. Or not quite.

He stands with Elydark's horn piercing his sternum, protruding between his shoulder blades. He looks down at it, all wild rage vanished in a moment of utter blankness. Sparse black hair falls from a skull-like scalp across bare shoulders, wafting softly as he tilts his head to one side. He wears a crimson cloak, but beneath its folds, his torso is naked save for pauldrons in a style I recognize: it's the same armor Taar donned for his duel with Lurodos. His sword is similar as well, a distinctly Licornyn blade. He lets his sword-arm drop slightly, his stance curiously relaxed for a man newly impaled.

He looks up. His gaze is unseeing, vacant. Rotted flesh eats away at what may have once been fine features, while pale eyes sag in hollow sockets. His mouth is a leering scar.

Then, galvanized with sudden energy, he grabs hold of Elydark's horn and yanks his body free. I see the awful gash, but no sign of blood or gore. Instead a writhing red light seems to fill up that space like multistranded webbing. My eyes can make no sense of it, but my ears are filled with an awful un-song.

Elydark staggers back, the dread I sensed in him before ringing louder than ever.

“Ilanthor,” Taar says, his voice oddly strangled, close to my ear. “Is that you?”

The awful creature merely backs away, energy fled from his limbs. He sways where he stands, like a hollowed-out tree, ready to topple at the slightest breath of wind.

The underbrush stirs. Two more crimson-cloaked figures emerge from the forest, one male, one female. The man’s rotten face is equally devoid of all life or expression. But the woman steps a little forward from the other two, and, to my horror, her sagging jaw twists into an approximation of a smile.

“Hail, Taarthalar, Luinar of Licorna!” she cries, raising a gray hand in salute. Like the others, she wears Licornyn armor under her cloak. Her torso is almost as naked as the men’s, with only a swash of leather binding her breasts. Her lusterless hair is braided back from her face. She seems older than the other two, though it’s difficult to say through the decay. Her awful, lifeless eyes turn to fix on me. “And what is this?” she demands, pointing with her sword. “Are the rumors true after all? Has our brave Luinar finally chosen his maelar? To think Shanaera should find herself supplanted by a human bride! What will the elders think?”

“Naerel,” Taar breathes the name, his rough voice unable to disguise a slight tremble. “Morinar.” He utters a word that sounds almost like a prayer. Then: “How can this be? You’re . . . you’re . . .”

“Dead?” the woman supplies, casting a glance at her two companions, who offer no reaction. The hole in the first man’s chest has entirely vanished now, leaving behind not even a scar. Strange that this healing magic doesn’t seem to affect the rotten flesh sagging from his bones. “Indeed, beloved Luinar. Dead and suffering beyond all comprehension. Thanks for noticing!”

I glance up, try to catch a glimpse of Taar's face. He's gone strangely pale, his eyes white-circled, his lips curled back in a disbelieving snarl. My gods-gift detects Elydark singing some warning into his head, but he pays it no heed. "What are you doing here?" he demands, his sword arm lowering more than I like.

"Waiting for you, of course. We have a message. From Shanaera."

"Shanaera?" There's something in the way Taar speaks that name that sends a stab straight to my heart. It's like a song, almost—a song once beautiful, but broken and remade as a lament. "Is she here?"

"No," the woman—Naerel, I think—replies. "But she left behind a token by which you may know her."

She tosses something at Taar. It winks like a coin in the strange green light of the forest. His hand darts forth to snatch it midair. I catch no more than a glimpse of the object when he briefly uncurls his fingers. It's a ring—delicate leaves of silver holding a golden stone, not unlike the stone in the knife at my belt.

Taar closes his hand quickly, knuckles whitening. "Where is she?"

"Not rotting on the Agandaur Fields, you may be pleased to know," Naerel answers with a giggle that makes my skin crawl.

"Shakh," Taar growls. I don't have to understand his language to recognize an expletive. Elydark tosses his head, partially rearing up on his hindlegs. I catch hold of his mane for balance. "Tell me," Taar demands, when the unicorn's forefeet hit the ground again. "Tell me where she is."

"Oh, don't worry." Naerel shows her blackened gums in a smile. "She'll find you soon enough. She has great hopes for you, dearluinar."

Elydark shifts his weight from hoof to hoof. I see a ripple of fire flare along his neck. Gods spare me, is he about to burst into flame? He'll burn me alive if he does.

“It was you.” Taar’s sword arm rises once more as he points it at each of the dead creatures by turn. “It was you we fought in the valley below the temple. You are working with the Miphates!”

Elydark’s muscles bunch. A wordless command sings from Taar to the beast, and I have just enough presence of mind to grab hold of the pommel before the unicorn lunges. His song-roar mingles with the bellow which bursts from Taar’s throat as he swings his blade at the nearest dead man. Though his eyes remain blank, his head heavy, the man steps back at the lastsecond, narrowly avoiding the blow, which should have cleaved his head from his shoulders. With a nimble turn of carrion limbs, he slashes with his own blade, cutting across Elydark’s flank. The unicorn screams, staggers, and I find myself thrown from the saddle, tumbling to the dirt.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I land hard, breath knocked out of me. For a moment the noises of battle and mayhem retreat, and my ears are full of a ringing like music, sweet, almost serene. A little escape from the madness. Distantly Taar calls my name, transforming the lilting syllables to a war cry. I lie with my breath caught in my stunned lungs, head bursting with spinning lights. Have I fractured my skull? Perhaps—

A rotten face looms above me. I jolt up—discovering as I do so that all my limbs seem to be intact—and scoot backwards in the dirt, feet catching in my skirts even as my trembling hand goes for my knife. The dead Licornyn woman tilts her head, watching me.

“Why,” she says, “if it isn’t Mage Artoris’s little prize.” A hand, fingertips black with decay, stretches toward my face. “Don’t worry, little one. He will be glad to see you—”

She breaks off, startled by a sudden flash of steel. My knife cuts straight through those awful fingers, transforming her hand into a gruesome stump. The fingers fall to the ground, one after the other, and lie there like severed worms.

The dead woman takes a step back, looking idly at the damage. She does not cry out or even look disturbed. Merely curious. Red light whorls out from the little black wounds, twining in shining threads, reaching down to the fallen fingers. One by one, they evaporate, and when they have gone, the red light retracts into her hand.

I don’t understand what I’m seeing. The dead woman’s rotten hand is whole once more. She turns it this way and that, wriggling new fingers experimentally. Then she turns to look at me. There’s nothing but insanity in her cold eyes.

She lurches. A scream erupts from my lungs, but I manage to get one foot up and kick her in the stomach, hard enough to send her staggering back a pace. Perhaps as a corpse, she's not as strong as she once was. She's surprised by my defense, and that surprise grants me just enough time to get to my feet. I take three steps, intending to run, only to find myself on the brink of that awful cliff. Mist whorls below me. I skid to a stop, spinning my arms, and feel the pull of gravity ready to claim me. At the last possible moment I manage a single step back.

“Ilsevel!”

I turn to my left to see the mighty, flaming form of Elydark bearing down on me, Taar on his back, sword arm raised high. It's such a shock, my mind cannot remember that they are my friends. I shriek with terror, crouch, and throw my arms over my head. Though more instinct than a choice, it proves lucky. Taar's sword swings through the air above my skull.

There's a sickening crunch. Followed by athunk.

Something rolls into my line of vision. I stare at it, uncomprehending. When it comes to a stop, two white eyes gaze up at me, and though they are dead, they seem for a moment to see me. The awful jaw moves, the tongue working behind blackened teeth.

Then the head of the Licornyn woman disintegrates in a tangle of red light-threads before vanishing entirely, leaving only a cloud of floating black motes. When I look around for the body, it's already gone.

Taar pulls Elydark up and wheels the unicorn around. I catch his eye just as he shouts, “Ware! Behind you!”

Still crouched I look over my shoulder to find the first man—Ilanthor—lurching toward me. He's too close, and Taar too far away. His hands reach for me, already

closing around my neck. Just before they tighten, I do the only thing I can do in that moment, while I still have air.

I open my mouth and sing.

The song bursts from me, an avalanche of sound. I hardly know where it comes from—it's no song I remember learning. It's not in my language, or any language really, for there are no words, only sounds. Pure and clean and bright. If it reminds me of anything, it's the song I sang with Elydark last night, when together we called Taar back from the virulium poison.

But this is not the same song. It's higher, sharper. And there is no other voice joined with mine. It doesn't really feel like my voice, more like the song itself has taken possession of my tongue. In that moment I am nothing more than an instrument, used for the sweet expression of someone else's music.

I can almost see it: the power and resonance spilling out from me. It washes over my attacker in a wave, and he halts. His grasping fingers hover in the air, encircling but not quite touching my flesh. We are so close, I cannot look anywhere but into those dead eyes of his. As the sound surrounds and fills him, some of the emptiness seems to go out from that gaze. I feel as though I see him through a veil, glimpsing the truth as it once was and ought to be again. This man is a beautiful Licornyn warrior, brimming with fierce pride and unmatched valor, worthy to fight alongside a king like Taar.

He blinks once. His hands, still poised to grasp me, shake in midair. "Ulathyra," he breathes. It's the first word he's spoken. As it falls from his withered lips, he blinks again, and that spark of life in his eyes blazes brighter.

Suddenly he looks over my head and cries out in a loud voice, breaking through even my song: "Taar!"

The next instant Elydark and Taar descend on us. The unicorn is in full flame, shining and terrible. A tiger-like roar issues from his throat. Ilanthor jerks back from me, creating space for them to come between us. I cannot see what happens next, but I hear the dead man cry out, “Taar! Tell Ulathyra! Tell her I remembered in the end!”

A sharp whistle in the air.

The crunch and thud of a skull hitting the ground.

I look down and see the dead man’s decayed head rolling in the dirt on the other side of the unicorn. His eyes, white-ringed, seek mine.

Is that . . . Oh gods, is that gratitude I see in his gaze?

Then, like Naerel before him, his remains disappear in twisting red light, leaving behind only a cloud of black motes which vanish like dust on the wind.

4

TAAR

Still gripping my blade, I dismount and take three long strides to Ilsevel’s side. “Are you hurt?” I demand. She looks pale as death, frozen where she stands. I see no sign of injuries, but her gaze remains fixed on that patch of ground where her attacker’s head rolled moments before. “Ilsevel?”

The sound of her name seems to pull her back from some faraway place. She stares up at me, eyes shining with strange light, weirdly similar to the sheen of fire still covering Elydark’s skin. She blinks, and that image is gone. I see only her own brown eyes gaping up at me in shock.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“What happened?” she breathes. There’s no trace of song in her voice now. “Who were those people?”

I shake my head. I don’t know how to explain.

Rather than answer, I turn away from her and her questions. Elydark stands blowing smoke through his widened nostrils, fire flickering in his mane. An open gash in his flank bleeds silver blood in long, shining streams.

I go to him, place my hand on the wound, and close my eyes. I’m sorry, my friend, I say, singing my sorrow into his head. I should never have let him get near you.

It was not your fault, Vellar. His great head turns to nudge my shoulder gently. Ilanthor was a fierce warrior.

He was indeed. He’s also been dead these last three years, slain on the same battlefield where I left Shanaera’s gutted corpse. His body, hers, and the those of all the Licornyn warriors we lost that day were never retrieved, never given proper funeral rites.

But that in no way explains why they should walk the paths of Wanfriel once more.

My mind is so full of questions and half-formed terrors, it takes all the self-command I possess to still it for what I must do. Long years of training come to my aid, however. I begin to sing in a low voice. Immediately the soul-connection between me and my licorneir lights up. His own healing power flows through me, pouring from my palm back into his wound. The flesh knits, neatly and simply, leaving behind only

silver bloodstains against his pale hide. Elydark shakes his mane. The last of the soulfire, which had enveloped his body in battle, vanishes from sight, though I know full well it remains as hot as ever beyond my perception. We look into each other's eyes, both feeling more than we can express. Our shared song is one of wordless comfort, a reminder that, whatever may come next in our lives, we will face it together.

But the shock of those dead, rotten faces, the horror of what they mean, reverberates in my chest like the rumble of doomsday drums.

Was it really them, Elydark? I ask, hoping against hope he will contradict what my eyes have seen. Was it a Miphates trick? An illusion, a curse?

I fear not, he replies with deep sorrow. The songs of their souls were broken but recognizable. That is not something even a great Miphates mage could replicate.

He's right. I have seen Miphates generate illusions so powerful, they can fool even the fae. But while they may construct a convincing simulacrum, down to the last freckle, inflection, or scent, no magic could simulate the unique vibration of a soul.

So it must be true then. Ilanthor, Naerel, and Morinar . . . my friends, my comrades-in-arms. I rode with them on many a campaign, but when, three years ago, I forbade my riders from taking the virulium dose before battle, Naerel joined with Shanaera in refusal. The demon's blood held her in such thrall, she foreswore her oaths to me, her king, choosing instead the glorious violence to be had from each black vial. In this she, and all those who followed Shanaera, were traitors, one and all.

Ilanthor and Morinar stayed true to me, however. They suffered the withdrawals, came through stronger than ever, and rode with me to the battle of Agandaur. There we faced nearly impossible odds, only to be brought unexpected hope when the fighting was at its thickest. Shanaera arrived, leading her rebel crew to fight alongside

my loyal chieftains and warriors. She still dreamed of liberation from the Miphates, still longed more than anything to soak the ground with mage blood.

But, as always happens with virulium in the end, that final dose took her and her people too deep. Lost in bloodlust, they ceased to discern friend from foe, turning on each other and my own warriors in their furious need for violence. Naerel slew Morinar before succumbing to Ilanthor's blade. Ilanthor himself was hewn down by Shanaera soon after.

As for Shanaera? She fell to my sword. Driven through her gut. And I held her in that battlefield as the life left her, my tears mingling with the black virulium streaks on her cheeks.

Is it possible she's still out there? Is she, like these three, trapped in a body of death and decay, walking the living world?

I saw her. Gods damn me, I saw her the night of the temple attack. She threw back that crimson hood to reveal her face, and the shock of it was enough to freeze my limbs, giving her a chance to escape with Mage Artoris in her arms.

In the hours and days that followed, I told myself time and again that this moment was nothing more than a fever-vision caused by the madness of battle. Because, dead or undead, Shanaera would never help a Miphato. None of them would. They laid down their lives in the desperate hope that we might drive the Miphates from our land once and for all.

But on that moonlit plain below the temple mount, crimson-cloaked riders fought and slew my people at Mage Artoris's command. And when we slew them back, they rose again to redouble their attack. Only decapitation broke whatever spell was on them—a spell of necroliphon death magic the likes of which I have never before seen.

Slowly, almost unwillingly, I reach into my belt and pull out the silver ring which Naerel had tossed me. Delicately wrought of silver leaves supporting a citrine stone, it is the last jewel of my mother's house, pressed into my hand mere moments before her death. I held onto it for years, but when the time came, gave it to Shanaera, along with the promise of marriage. Some while later, when she refused to give up the virulium, I asked for the ring back. She claimed to have lost it. While I didn't believe her, neither did I have the heart to push her. It's not as though I could ever bear to give the ring to someone else. Let her keep it, I thought, along with whatever memories she cares to cherish of our time together.

I study it now, turning it gently in my fingers so that the green-cast light of Wanfriel sparks on the stone. It might still be a trick. Vulture-like Miphates acolytes may have ventured out into the battlefield, picking the corpses clean of all trinkets and treasures. But somehow I know—it is from Shanaera. She was here. She left this so I would know it was her. Which means she really was at the Temple of Lamruil that night. She really did save Mage Artoris.

“Who is Ulathyra?”

Startled, I close my fingers tight around the ring again before lifting my head. Ilsevel stands where I left her, observing Elydark and me. Her arms are wrapped tight around her body, like she's afraid her very being will fly apart and she won't be able to reclaim the pieces. When I catch her gaze, she swallows hard, the muscles of her throat constricting. With an effort she speaks again, unable to hide the slight tremor in her voice. “The dead man spoke a name. Ulathyra. Who is she?”

I frown. She should not have understood any of that, for when Ilanthor spoke, he used the Licornyn tongue, which is unknown beyond our borders. I glance at Elydark, but my licorneir looks unsurprised. We both heard her sing a licorneir song after all, a feat which should have been impossible. Humans cannot hear the song of the licorneir, which is sung with the soul, heard with the heart, bypassing all physical

perceptions. That she could replicate that song in audible form, using only her human voice as her instrument . . . it simply can't be done. Yet she did it.

She's still waiting for my answer. Elydark is not about to help, leaving me to manage on my own. With a sigh I face the young woman again. "Ulathyra," I say, "was Ilanthor'svelarinlicorneir. His heartbound." Confusion mars her face, so I add, "She was to Ilanthor what Elydark is to me."

Ilsevel's eyes widen slightly. Though humans are incapable of experiencing the powerful bond between my people and their licorneir, she has observed the closeness Elydark and I share. She even joined into it in part, when she sang with Elydark last night. "What . . . what happened to her?" she asks.

"When Ilanthor was killed at the battle of Agandaur, Ulathyra was leftvelrhoar—that is hearttorn." The word is bitter on my tongue, like the taste of strong poison. "It is what happens when thevelrabond is wrongly severed."

I cannot say more. I cannot tell her the hideous state in which thevelrhoarleaves its victims. I have seen it more times than I care to remember, riders or licorneir, left without their other half, crippled and half-mad with grief. In the rider that madnesseventually turns to despair, leaving behind a shell of the warrior who once was, a pathetic husk hardly worth the life still in his blood.

But in licorneir that madness only deepens over time, until the soul of the hearttorn one is utterly lost. Unless they can be rebound to a new rider—a dangerous business, best not attempted under most circumstances—the only kindness remaining to such creatures is death.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Ilsevel studies me, a line between her brows. I feel as though she's listening to all that I am not saying. Perhaps, with that gods-gift of hers, she hears what I do not intend to share. I don't care for that idea. Hardening my face, I meet her gaze unblinking, expecting her to back down. But she only tilts her head slightly to one side and holds my stare.

"So he really was dead," she says. "A walking dead man."

I nod.

"How is this possible? Is it normal for your kind to get up and walk about after death?"

"No." My voice is sharp as a blade's edge. "It was necrolipha. Death magic."

That steady gaze of hers falters at last. My words seem to have brought a shadow over this part of the forest, a shadow deep enough to fall across the very soul. Her nostrils flare as she draws a long breath. Then she whispers, "Artoris?"

I nod. Mage Artoris Kelfaren is a death mage and a powerful one at that. Though I would be surprised to learn he had worked the spell which animated my dead companions. No—only a mage with the will and means to delve into the Rift and channel power directly from Ashtari could have worked such a horror. This stinks of Morthiel.

Ilsevel looks sick. Some of that stubborn pride with which she protects herself has slipped, and her body begins to shake. "I didn't know the Miphates were capable of

this kind of magic.”

“They shouldn’t be,” I reply. “There have been many necroliphon throughout history who have practiced the death arts. But no one has succeeded in reanimation, not even the most powerful fae kings of the ages.”

“Then . . . then how . . . ?”

She cannot finish her question. It doesn’t matter, because I couldn’t answer it. Not due to ignorance, for I have my own suspicions and beliefs about what is going on in the Citadel of Evisar, behind the obscuri spell. I simply cannot bear to speak such things out loud. Not to her. Not to a human.

Something in my eye must warn her, for Ilsevel doesn’t press me. Instead she looks again at that place on the ground where Ilanthor’s head had landed. Her gaze is so intense, it’s almost as though she’s still meeting those dead eyes of his in the moments before the spell broke, and his physical frame, held together by magic alone, evaporated into the ether.

“I didn’t think . . .” she says quietly, as though speaking to herself. She pauses, licks her lips. “I didn’t think Artoris would do something like this.”

Suddenly I am transported back to that night in the Temple of Lamruil, when I pursued Artoris into one of the buildings. By the time I caught up with him, he was dragging someone out the door, someone who resisted his efforts. Not just any someone. Her.

My brow knots. Ilsevel admitted to me that she knew the mage. Her exact words were, “I thought I did,” when pressed on the subject. At the time I’d let the matter drop, for we had more immediate concerns, and my primary goal in that moment was to win her trust and save her life.

Now I must wonder, was there more to their connection than she initially let on? I want to demand answers. Why was Artoris at the temple that night, and why was she riding at his side during our initial attack? Why did she flee the field, with him in sharp pursuit?

There is more to this story than she is telling me, and I'm suddenly hungry to know. I take a step toward her, a growl in my throat. "Ilsevel—"

Careful, Vellar.

I stop short. Elydark's voice rings in my head. In the same moment I become aware of how tight the velracord has become around my forearm. I look down, half-expecting to see it shining there, cutting into my flesh. There is nothing to see, but the effects are undeniable.

I am jealous. Jealous of some imagined connection between this woman and my enemy. Jealous that she should know him at all, filled with a furious need to learn exactly how deep that knowledge goes.

She is looking at me again, once more wrapped up in layers of coldness and pride, not quite sufficient to hide the terror in her eyes. She fears what questions I will ask, fears what revelations I might pry from her lips. And that fear is enough in itself to make me burn.

I swallow hard, my breath tight. My fingers clench around the hilt of my sword.

But Elydark's voice holds me at bay. She is no threat, Vellar. I have heard her soul-song. There is no resonance of death magic in her.

If she knows Mage Artoris—

What difference does it make? She is not a Miphata. Her magic is unique, and she has used it only to help you or to protect herself. She poses no danger.

My jaw hardens. It sounds like you're on her side.

My licorneir snorts, tossing his muzzle. I am, as always, on no side but the truth. And the truth is, my brother, you must guard your heart from all the velrais trying to make you feel. Jealousy, anger, fear . . . any of these may lead you down a path you do not wish to go. Not with her.

He's right. Whether I like it or not. This turmoil roiling in my gut isn't real—it's the velra bond. Knowing more about Ilsevel, her history or connections, will not change our circumstances. It will only increase this inconvenient attachment we share. That I cannot have. Best to know as little about her as possible so that we can sever the velra quickly and cleanly and get on with our lives.

Ilsevel's eyes narrow. Can she read my thoughts? Can that gods-gift of hers perceive the storm in my soul? She looks as though she's preparing for battle and, slight though she is, she won't go down without a struggle.

I draw a long breath, ease it out slowly through my nostrils. None of this matters. Whatever connection she may have had or may still have with Artoris, it is no concern of mine. I cannot let jealousy rule me.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Turning away from her, I set about cleaning my sword with quick and efficient movements. “It is time we got moving,” I say. “We need to reach my people at the Luin Stone. They need to know about this.”

Even as I say it, coldness washes over me. Shanaera, if she is indeed out there, walking in the living world once more, knows all our secrets. She knows each gate to and from Cruor, knows our paths across that landscape. She knows where to find the Hidden City.

And she certainly would know that my people, if parted from me, would wait for me at the Luin Stone.

Elydark’s soul vibrates with mine, my fears communicated to his heart and echoed back to me. We look at each other, both stricken with dread. What will we find on the far side of the gate? Did Kildorath, Ashika, and the others cross over to be met by their own dead friends, slaughtered as they emerged? Will we ride through now only to step into a scene of terrible bloodshed?

I sheathe my sword. “Come,” I say over my shoulder to Ilsevel. “There’s no time to delay.”

Silently she allows me to help her back into the saddle. I swing up behind her and am met by a deep breath of her hair, still carrying traces of the perfume she wore two nights ago, when we shared that pavilion. The scent is enough to instantly cast out all fears churning inside me and send me back to that firelit bed and those moments of hot breaths and silken skin and the sweet, sweet song which she sang for me in a moment of ecstatic vulnerability. Longing comes over me to wrap my arms around

her, to pull her close, to take comfort in the knowledge of her immediate presence. The strength of the urge is almost overwhelming.

With an effort, I hold myself upright, hands on my thighs, each clenched in a fist. Go! I sing harshly to Elydark.

My licorneir turns to the bridge-gate and breaks into a swift canter. Ilsevel turns in my arms, however, looking back to the place we leave behind. Looking back to that empty patch of ground where a dead man's head rolled, as though still straining to hear the last echoes of his voice.

5

ILSEVEL

Elydark is so massive, it shouldn't be possible for him to walk on this swaying bridge so lightly, so easily. But he steps out over that drop with careless confidence, moving at a smooth canter.

I feel as though I've left my stomach somewhere behind on the cliff's edge. It's all I can do to grip the pommel and a handful of unicorn mane, squeezing my eyes shut to block out awareness of the emptiness below. It doesn't do any good. The vastness of that gulf echoes with a hollow song of its own, throbbing in my bones. Mist curls around my limbs, much colder than I expected. This doesn't feel anything like the gate-crossing from my world into the Wood. Perhaps that's the difference between a small, temporary portal and a more permanent fixture.

Taar sits bolt upright behind me, his hands on his thighs, as though determined not to touch me. There's something unsafe about him now. I can't explain it. Not that I should ever feel safe in his presence, fae that he is. But something changed back there when I spoke Artoris's name. I saw the flash in his eyes, and, for an instant, it felt like

looking into the face of the virulium-maddened creature I'd seen last night. Not a man, but a monster.

More to distract myself from these thoughts than any real curiosity, I clear my throat and ask, "Are we almost there, warlord?" The words sound dull and thick in this dense mist.

"Almost," Taar replies coldly.

"How long is this bridge?"

"It varies."

I blink. "That's not how bridges are supposed to work."

A grunt. I begin to wonder if that's the only answer I'll receive. Then: "It's how magic works. One never fully controls it. The moment you think you do is the moment you're most likely to meet a brutal and explosive end."

I chew the inside of my cheek. Though I don't want to, my mind slips back to Artoris as I saw him on the battlefield below the temple three nights ago. He had certainly looked like a man in control when he opened that spellbook and summoned power from realms beyond to his fingertips. The look on his face when he cast a death curse at the Licornyn rider, when he ripped that man's soul shrieking from his body . . . it was the look of a man who had practiced this art to the point of confidence, even arrogance.

Necrolipha. Death magic. That's what Taar called it. All these years, while I've been sitting around building sky castles about a heroic young mage who would one day sweep me away from all my problems, Artoris was devoting himself to mastering the dark arts.

My lip curls. Did he think of me at all during that time? I suppose he must have, for he did come when I wrote to him. But why? And why was he so intent on taking me back to his tower? Even I am not foolish enough to pretend it's love. Not anymore. Artoris never loved me. Those stolen moments we shared seven years ago weren't love. They were barely even passion. It was more about control: his desire to control me, and mine to control my destiny.

But when my need for control conflicted with his . . . when he ignored my pleas to slow down, to stop . . . when he frightened me so much that I screamed, and they dragged him away to the pillory to be flogged . . . whatever feeling may have fueled his desire for me must have long ago transformed to hatred.

So why did he come in answer to that idiotic letter? What did he intend to do with me? Punish me? Pay me back for the humiliation I'd caused him all those years ago? In my mind's eye I see again that terrible night of fire and screams, when the Temple of Lamruil went up in smoke. I remember how his fingers dug into my shoulder, wrenching me to my feet and away from Auae. "She doesn't matter," he'd said as I fought to return to her side. "You're the only one who matters here." When I protested, he'd turned and, without hesitation, struck me across the face.

My fingers slip to my cheek now, remembering the sting. So much for all those years of stubborn romantic fancies. Getting me away from the temple and back to Evisar was his only aim. Only . . . I can't begin to imagine why.

There's a sudden change in the air, a sense of energy pulsing through the mist. I gasp, jolted back to the present. We're leaving the Wood behind us now. A prickling sensation comes over my skin, not painful exactly, simply unignorable. As though all the millions of infinitesimal parts that make up my being are charged with sudden power. My muscles tighten.

"It will be over soon." Taar's voice reaches me as though through layers of reality.

No sooner does he speak than my existence is suddenly flattened and stretched so taut, I think I will break into a million pieces, only to snap back together the next instant. I gag, grabbing the pommel. My insides jolt with the need to heave, but I manage to get it under control. I simply breathe, long, careful breaths, in through my nose, out through my mouth, until the dizziness passes.

“Are you well?” Taar asks. I can feel his eyes on the back of my head. His voice is still cold, but there may be the slightest trace of concern.

I nod. Apparently I’m not going to embarrass myself with vomiting this time. With an effort, I sit upright and set my chin firmly. “I’m fine, warlord.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“In that case”—he lifts one hand from his thigh and sweeps a large gesture—“welcome to my world.”

Still woozy, I blink against the fog still crowding close upon my vision. At first I can't discern anything. Then Elydark takes a few steps forward. The mist clears, and a landscape opens before me. A wide vista of sweeping plains and vast blue sky, broken by distant mountains on the far horizon. Lush grass and secret groves of dense-grown trees promise a fertile land. We seem to have emerged on a high plateau above this paradise. Our view extends for miles unhindered. Sunlight glints off a winding ribbon of river maybe two miles from our present position.

My mouth drops open. After all my anxious fears, this is the nightmarish realm of legend? It's breathtaking—wild and raw somehow. Untouched by the hand of man or fae. Even the air tastes fresher than the air of my own world. I feel my gods-gift responding to the atmosphere, to the nearness of magic, in a way I did not feel even in the forest of Wanfriel.

“It's beautiful.” The words slip from my lips, a whisper of awe.

Taar chuckles humorlessly. “You have not met the true Cruor yet.” He sighs then and adds, “There was a time when Licorna stood among the most beautiful realms in all the worlds, rivaling even the fae kingdoms of Eledria. There is a great deal more natural magic in this realm than in your own world, but it does not infuse everything as it does in the fae realms, making Licorna rather less dangerous, and its people rather less mad.”

He turns in the saddle while speaking. His gaze searches this way and that across the

plateau on which we stand. Elydark tosses his head, eyes rolling. A trill of soul-song exchanges between them, but I cannot guess at the meaning.

Finally Taar breathes out a long exhale and runs a hand down his face. I wonder, was he expecting to meet more of those undead warriors on this side of the gate? There's no one here; the plateau on which we stand is barren, without so much as a clump of grass behind which an enemy might hide. We're alone beneath that faraway sky. Whether that is cause for relief or worry, I cannot guess.

Elydark begins to make his way down to the valley, following a path so narrow, it's practically invisible. It's almost as bad as that gods-awful bridge, and I fight the urge to close my eyes. "It's a full day's ride across the valley," Taar says, and points to the far side where, in the hazy distance, I can just discern a rise in the land and a single tall outcropping. "That is the Luin Stone, where my people wait for me. If we make good speed, we may yet catch them by sundown, then continue together to the Hidden City. It is safer to cross Cruor in numbers."

Safer for whom? The thought prickles uncomfortably. Taar's warning not to expect a warm welcome lingers in my ear. My only ally in this whole world is Taar—and I'll not soon forget the look he gave me when I accidentally spoke Artoris's name. I'd thought he would point that sword of his at my throat and force confessions out of me. All of it: my true name, my parentage, my connection to the mage. Everything that will make my position here more perilous.

Part of me wanted to tell him. Part of me wants to tell him still, to see if I can push him into punishing me, striking me. Maybe even killing me. It's no more than I deserve. I was the one who brought the fae to the temple doorstep. I'm the reason my sister and I ended up on that auction block. So why should I be sold and bound to a man of honor, when Aurae ended up in the arms of a monster? It would be almost a relief to know my own husband was equally monstrous just before the killing stroke fell. It would feel like justice.

I grit my teeth hard against this thought. I cannot die. Not yet. Not until I've fulfilled my purpose. I must return home and marry the Shadow King. Then I must live long enough to see him and his terrible host slaughter the creatures responsible for Aural's death. I've got to justify my ongoing existence, even if the only way I can is by giving my body over to the appetites of some stranger in exchange for his violence.

After that, nothing else matters. The Shadow King may kill me if he likes. As long as I've had my vengeance first.

We reach the valley at last and begin our progress toward the river. Elydark falls into an easy canter, so smooth he might as well be gliding. I allow myself to be soothed by the gentle rhythm of his hoofbeats. The day is cold, but the sun is high and sheds a little warmth on my skin. The green delights of the valley are a welcome balm following the frozen winter of my own world and the strange shadows of Wanfriel.

Taar is silent. I feel it, like a barrier erected between us, but I don't mind. Silence is my best defense in this enemy territory. Here and there I find a little hum of sound trying to creep up my throat and hastily force it back down. It's some while before I realize that hum is my gods-gift trying to sing in response to a song I keep hearing in snatches. I shake my head, determined to drive the lilting almost-tune from my ears. Maybe it's a bird or an insect.

The farther we go, the more unique the song sounds. And the more insistent. Though I never hear the same grouping of notes, never catch a complete phrase, I'm sure it's all part of the same melody somehow. Only not a proper melody. There's something not quite right about it. It's beautiful, but with an essential wrongness that sets the teeth on edge.

I look around, trying to catch a glimpse of the source. We draw near to the river at last, and Elydark does not slow his pace until we are at the very banks. Then he pivots slightly and trots up the bank as though searching for a shallow place to cross.

It looks so broad, and the water is so dark, I can't begin to fathom its depths. Taar seems confident enough, however, so I bite back any protests.

Just as the unicorn's front hooves splash into the shallows, another trill of song rises from the far side of the river. I lift my head sharply. It's that broken melody, but much louder, harsher. Like daggers, it stabs at my gods-gifted awareness. I resist the urge to cover my ears and instead shade my eyes and gaze across the river, searching for the source.

Elydark halts abruptly, up to his knees in river water. His big head swings to the right, his horn pointed in the same direction from which this new song flows. "What is it, my friend?" Taar asks, surprised. He reaches around me to touch the unicorn's shoulder. The soul-connection between them vibrates with an exchange of song. Elydark stamps his hoof, splashing foam, then goes completely still. Head uplifted, he stares off across the river.

The music is getting louder and more broken by the second. So broken it sears across my gods-gift, screeching with wrongness that should be right, that should be beautiful and, therefore, is so much worse. A shudder echoes through my bones. I find myself pressing against Taar, wishing I could melt into him, let him become a living shield between me and that sound.

"What is that?" I whisper. Then a cry rips from my throat, nearly drowned out by the growing song. "Whatisthat?"

"What?" Taar asks. "What do you see?"

But I don't see anything. I just hear that turmoil, growing, swelling, building up like a wave to overwhelm me.

"Elydark!" Taar barks. "Is it the vardimnar? Is it coming?"

Elydark does not answer. He lifts his head and utters a long, loud, bugling cry, like the drone of a bore and reed instrument. In the same moment that forlorn note bursts through my ears, I see them—the source of that broken song.

Unicorns. Manes and tails streaming like tattered banners, they appear in a herd, thundering along the far bank. Their flanks are all colors of the rainbow but covered in black fire that seems to billow from their hearts and combine into a great conflagration of darkness. More of that same fire smolders in their eyes, and that song of madness and loss and sorrow reverberates from their souls.

There are so many of them—fifty, sixty. A hundred perhaps. Song-broken souls, beautiful beyond description and so terrible it could shatter even the firmest sanity. Love and horror combines in me at the sight of them, twisting my gut, shredding my heart. Part of me wants to cast myself from this saddle into the river and be drowned to escape it. The other part wants to swim across these turgid depths and run with that herd, become one with them and their awful song.

As though reading my mind, Taar's arm slips around my waist. "Steady," he says. I don't know if he speaks to me or to Elydark, but the sound of his voice is just enough to tether my trembling soul in place.

Then I see it—the last of the herd, coming into sight silhouetted against the blue sky. The most magnificent creature I have ever beheld. From here, it looks the size of a small elephant, and the fire burning from its soul is black as hell flames. The other songs, individual though they may be, are anchored to the song of this beast, this being. Like it is both the source of all the others and their ultimate end.

The black unicorn stops abruptly, directly across the river from us. While the others continue their breakneck race, this final beast turns its burning gaze to look across the water, directly at us. At me.

For a moment I feel the connection—a connection of both oneness and brokenness so profound, it is as though my own soul has become subsumed in that other, greater soul. And in that soul there is so much loss, loss, loss. Loss that becomes mine, wound tight with the cords of guilt in my heart until it has a stranglehold.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Suddenly the unicorn shakes itself and keeps on running, head low, black fire billowing in its wake. As it goes, carrying its song away with it, I begin to hear other things once more—the roar of the river, the wind in the grass. Taar's voice in my ear crying out, "Ilsevel! Ilsevel, I'm here. Listen to me, zylkala. Don't listen to her song, listen to me."

Only now do I hear my own voice. Screaming. A high, wordless keen of pain, echoing across that empty landscape. How long have I been making this ungodly noise? It feels like ages. Tears pour down my face, and my whole body shudders uncontrollably.

"What happened to her?" The words tear from my lips, ragged and bloody. "What happened to them? What happened to their song?" Even now I feel their voices echoing inside my head, a chorus of pain and endless woe. My fingers dig into my scalp, as though I could tear that song from my mind. I would fall from the saddle into the waiting river if not for Taar's hold on me.

But he presses me close to his heart. Suddenly his lips are at my ear, and he's murmuring, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, zylkala. It's about to get much worse."

What happens next I could never begin to explain. Though my eyes are closed, there's a sudden burning straight through my eyelids, like a bolt of lightning. Only this is not lightning—it is darkness. Absolute darkness. And it keeps on branching and branching, until it covers the whole of the sky.

It's gone the next moment, long enough for me to catch my breath. I look up at Taar and whisper, "What was that?"

“The only thing the wild licorneir of Cruor fear,” he replies, his gaze turned heavenward, his mouth grim. “The one thing from which they flee.”

Elydark sends out one last sad bugle to the unicorns as they disappear on the far side of the river. He rears and splashes foam with his hooves. Taar leans forward, keeping his balance in the saddle even as he holds onto me. “Elydark!” he bellows. “Now!”

With a despairing shake of his head, the unicorn comes back down onto all four feet. Then he begins to sing. A sad, lonely, beautiful song, which begins in his soul and burns to the tip of his horn. There the song transforms into light and begins to glow, brighter and brighter. This is not the fire which burns across his flanks in the heat of battle. It spreads in an aura around us, a sphere of protection.

Only just in time. As the fleeing unicorns vanish from sight, darkness swallows the world.

6

TAAR

No matter how many times I experience thevardimnar, it always feels like the first. I’m like a child again, peering out through a small sphere of pale light, searching for a world that is simply gone.

There is only blackness. Not the blackness of nightfall, but of devouring. And if I let myself look too closely, if I allow my eyes to be drawn through the gentle songlight surrounding me, sometimes I see that darkness ripple, strain. As though something just on the other side is seeking to break through.

If it ever does—if it manages to pierce the fragile veil between it and me—I will be done for. Body and soul.

But Elydark's song is powerful, a song of purity, of love, fueled by ourvelraconnection. Even thevardimnar, endless and hideous though it is, cannot break through such a shield. No more than it was able to all those years ago, when it was a different licorneir I rode, and my sister wrapped in my arms before me in the saddle.

I breathe out slowly, exhaling those memories, forcing myself back to the present moment. It isn't Tassa who sits before me now. It's Ilsevel. My bride.

She's turned her torso and pressed her face into my chest, hiding. I cannot blame her. The darkness of Cruor is utterly overwhelming, even to those prepared to meet it. "Hold on to me,zylnala," I whisper, bowing my neck and allowing my lips to brush the top of her head. "It will be over soon." It might be true; it might just as easily be a lie. Thevardimnarcannot last for manyhours at a time or only a few seconds. There's no predicting it. But she doesn't need to know that now.

Eventually her body relaxes. Her breathing, which has been so tight and tense, begins to ease. Finally she looks up at me, dark eyes searching. The light from Elydark's song shines in their depths, as though glowing from the inside, not merely a reflection. "What is this?" she whispers so softly I'm obliged to read her lips.

"The nightmare of Cruor," I answer. "The secret behind all the legends and tales which have crept into your own world."

She peers out at the surrounding darkness before tucking her face back into my shoulder. "None of the tales I heard mentioned anything like this."

A shudder runs down her spine. She's so vulnerable, I cannot help the intense urge to hold her closer, to comfort and shield her. I know I should resist, but for the moment I cannot. "I'm not surprised," I say. "One can hardly describe thevardimnarif one has not experienced it. And those who have would speak of it only under duress."

“The”—she hesitates over the strange word— “vardimnar?”

I nod. “The Hand of Darkness.”

Another ripple rolls overhead, just on the far side of Elydark’s song. Glancing up, I glimpse that membranous movement, that sense of hugeness trying to push through. It won’t succeed; it never has in the last twenty-five years. Yet the terror of it is so great, I can do nothing but bow my head and let my soul sink into Elydark’s song, into the vibration of our spirit-bond. He never stops singing. Even with heartache beating through his veins, he carries on and on.

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you beforehand,” I say at last.

Ilsevel startles. Her fingers, resting on my arm, tighten to the verge of pain, but I do not shake her off. Her head bobs in a quick nod. “How did this happen?”

I want to tell her. I want to help her find a way to comprehend the horror surrounding her, to make some sense of it and, therefore, to find a ledge of sanity on which to stand in the midst of it. But how? How can I offer her what I, in twenty-five years, have not been able to find for myself?

“We call it the Hand of Darkness,” I say at last, “because of the spreading black fingers which flash across the sky moments before it falls. They are the foreshadowing, the warning. Were it not for them, there would be little hope for any of us out in the wilds of Cruor. Thevardimnar would consume our souls.”

Ilsevel shivers again. “And what does that mean?”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I rub a hand down my face, pulling at the skin under my eyes. She wants a distraction. It hardly matters what I say so long as I keep talking, keep filling her ears with the sound of my voice while Elydark fills her soul with song. I understand what she needs. The truth is, I could use a distraction myself.

“I’ll tell you what I can, zylkala. I’ll tell you the story of when it began and, based on that story, I’ll tell you what wiser minds than mine have speculated as to the ongoing cause. In the end, you will know as much as I about the doom of Cruor.”

Another undulation presses against the bounds of Elydark’s light. I glance at it only briefly before focusing my attention back on Ilsevel, meeting her upturned gaze and holding it like a lifeline. For some moments I’m afraid I will not be able to find the words to tell my story, a story I have not had to tell anyone in many long years. In the end I must simply begin and see where the tale carries me.

“In ages past the luinar of Licorna ruled from Evisar, the seat of our kingdom. It was a magnificent city, the likes of which has never been seen in the human world, a rival even for the mightiest strongholds of the Eledrian realms. And at its heart stood the great Citadel of the Stars . . .”

Evisar was so beautiful, even the kings and queens of the fae would sometimes visit to treat with the luinar and maelar of Licorna so that they might enjoy the bounty of their hosts. The golden towers, the lush gardens, the streets built in such harmony that the very paving stones seemed to sing beneath the feet of those who walked them.

But most of all they desired to see the licorneir and to hear their song. For there is nothing like that song to be found elsewhere in all the worlds.

My father, Thalorkhir, ruled Licorna for many years and was considered as wise, just, and fair a monarch as any of his forefathers. He took to wife Ashtalora of the House of Ehlark. Upon their marriage, they were soul-bonded to Onoril and Mahra, the father and mother of all licorneir. Such is the tradition for the sovereigns of Licorna, going back generations uncounted. Thus the great song of Onoril and Mahra remained unbroken, and the glory of Licorna undimmed in the worlds.

When I was still a young boy, my father would sometimes take me with him out into the open countryside beyond the city and ride with me before him on Onoril's back. "One day," he would tell me, "you and Onoril will bond. It is your destiny, as it was mine before you."

"But how can that be?" I would respond curiously. "If you die, will not Onoril be hearttorn?"

"No indeed," my father would answer. "His soul will remain connected to mine through you and through the blood you bear. It was the same for my father and his father before him, all the way back to the beginning of our world. We must protect the song of the licorneir. It is the life's blood of our world."

"And what of Mahra?" I asked. "Will she bond with Tassa?"

At this Father shook his head. "Your sister's fate lies elsewhere. One day you will choose a great lady to be queen of Licorna and rule at your side. It is her soul which shall be bound with Mahra. Such is the will of the goddess."

If my sister had been born first, our roles would have been reversed: she, as heir, would have bonded to Mahra, and her chosen husband, having proven himself worthy, given to Onoril. But it had been many generations since a crown princess was born, and though Tassa resented what she perceived as destiny's preference for me, neither of us questioned it.

So I rode with my father, listening to echoes of the unique song Onoril sang in tandem with the king's soul. Sometimes I almost thought I heard the great licorneir's true name sung in my heart. In those moments I believed that I and Onoril would one day bond as we were meant to. That destiny would play out according to its established mold.

But then the Miphates came.

The Licornyn had no dealings with humans for many generations, having found their mages to be unsavory folk. Always hungry for new ways to access the magic of thequinsatraand increase their own standing among the leaders of the various worlds, they could be conniving, untrustworthy, even dangerous.

But one day a prince of the human world came to our gates. He was an adventurer hero among his own kind—Larongar Cyhorn by name. It was said he vanquished the dragon of Mount Helesatra and was therefore favored by thegods. I do not know how true this story is, but my father was convinced. He welcomed the prince into Evisar City along with a contingent of mortal mages.

There was one mage in their number who was older than the rest—an absolutely decrepit man. As a child, I thought him foul and terrifying. While the Licornyn people are not full-blooded fae and, therefore, age like mortals, they do so much more slowly and far more gracefully. But there was a sense of grasping about this man, as though he was clinging onto life. The more he clung, the more twisted and warped his body became. His face, I remember, was strangely smooth, while his neck and hands were covered in wrinkles. His body was as emaciated as a corpse, and I suspect he was performing life-sustaining magic on himself, but at a terrible cost.

Child that I was, I was not privy to the councils of my father, mother, and their strange human guests. Now all those who were with them have perished, and I have only my guesses as to what befell during those long conferences between King

Thalor, Prince Larongar, and the Miphates. I do know that by the time the mortal prince left, half the Miphates remained behind.

They took up residence in the Citadel of Stars, which was the heart of my father's palace and a great center of power and magic in the realm. It was said to have been built on the very site where Nornala opened the gates of heaven and sent Onoril and Mahra through at the dawn of our world. The majesty and mystery of the divine lingered there, at least according to tradition.

What took place within the citadel thereafter, I do not know. The Miphates rarely left it in the weeks following their prince's departure. My father spent more and more time with them, sometimes disappearing through those great doors for days on end.

My mother grew anxious, her mouth often pinched in a strict, worried line. When I was small, my parents were always in accord, and there was great affection between them I believe. Now they argued . . . over what, I know not. But the discord of their spirits seemed to darken the very halls of our home.

Weeks passed. Months, perhaps; I was too young to be aware of the passage of time. Mother grew ever more pale and anxious, her temper short, her nerves frayed. Once Tassa worked up the courage to speak to her, saying, "Mama, what do the Miphates want with Father? What are they doing in the citadel?"

Mother narrowed her eyes. My sister flinched, expecting one of her sharp reprimands. To our surprise, however, she sighed and shook her head. "Sometimes," she said, "men grow discontented with their lot and seek means to exceed that which has been divinely ordained."

This was not a satisfactory answer. But Tassa could wheedle no more from my mother's closed lips. We've both talked of it in the years since. Even now, on long winter nights, we will sit together before a fire and seek to scry some meaning from

the enigmatic words. At the time all we knew for certain was that our mother was deeply distressed, but neither of us could bear to ask her more questions.

It wasn't much later when strange things began to happen around the citadel. Inexplicable ripples of darkness would shudder suddenly up the walls, vanishing almost as soon as they appeared. Sometimes the sun would seem to darken, though there was no cloud in the sky. After these episodes—always so brief, one almost believed one had imagined them—a great heaviness would come over my soul. I began to be truly afraid, though of what I could not name.

This went on for the better part of a year. I began to fear my life would never go back to the way it was before. My mother would never smile, my father would never find time for me. I would never again enjoy those beautiful long rides beyond the city limits with Onoril. Hatred for the Miphates swelled in my heart, particularly for that old Miphato. I never saw him again after he passed through the citadel doors. But he was in there; I knew it. And I knew as well that he was at the center of all this trouble.

One day there was a strange flicker of blackness, which split the sky in innumerable branches, like spreading lightning. It was so much worse, so much greater than the shadows which sometimes surrounded the tower, but over in a flash, leaving Tassa and me stunned in its wake. We stared out the window of our chamber, open-mouthed. Then slowly we turned to each other. Tassa whispered, "Did you see that?"

Before I could answer, Mother burst into the room. We were in our study hall with Master Mitalar, our tutor. He leapt out from behind his desk to bow to his queen, but she ignored him and scooped Tassa up in her arms. "Come with me, Taar," she said, without a trace of softness in her voice. "Hurry."

"Maelar!" Master Mitalar called after her as she hastened to the door. "Maelar, what is wrong? Is there anything I might do?"

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

She looked back at him briefly. For a moment the stern lines of her face broke, revealing something I had never seen on her features before: fear. “Pray for us, good master,” she said, a tremble in her voice. “Pray for us all.”

Then she turned and, pressing Tassa close to her heart, hastened through the palace. Her stride was so long and quick, I struggled to keep up with her. “Make haste, Taar!” she barked every few paces. I was panting too hard to question her.

All around us was mayhem. I glimpsed faces I’d known my entire life so twisted with fear as to be almost unrecognizable. Everyone we passed cried out to my mother, begging her for answers to questions they scarcely dared ask. She spoke to no one and never slowed her pace. So stern was her face, that crowds parted to let her pass, me trailing at her heels.

We made our way through the palace and out to the central courtyard, where Mahra stood waiting. I hesitated to draw near to the great licorneir. While Onoril was a familiar friend, my mother’s heartbound seemed beautiful and otherworldly. Almost frightening. She was in distress that day, her ears pinned back, her nostrils flaring. I could not hear her song, but flame flickered across her withers and down her forelegs, revealing both her power and the trouble in her soul.

“Mahra, haravel,” my mother said, stretching out her hand to touch the licorneir’s forehead just beneath the base of her horn. “You must carry them, my love. You must flee this place as hard, as fast as you can. Get them to safety.”

The great licorneir shook her head. I felt the anguish in her protest, but Mother drew her close so that she might rest her forehead briefly against her cheek. “You know my

love for you,” she breathed. “Beyond words, beyond song. And I know you love me too. It is by that love I beg you—do this last great act for me. Save my children. Save them from what is coming.”

Mahra threw back her head, uttering a sound so desperate, it could shatter hearts to hear it. Tears coursed down my cheeks, and I protested helplessly, “No, no, no!” as my mother placed first my sister than me on her licorneir’s back.

Then Mother gripped my hand and pressed something round and hard into it. “Remember,” she said, gazing up into my eyes. “Remember who you are, Taarthalar. Someday you must return here. Someday you must drive these monsters from our land. Until then, be brave,luinar.”

Luinar.

The word echoed inside my head, a word I had always and only associated with my father. Now she spoke it to me with a conviction that felt like the weight of worlds.

Before I could answer, Mahra turned her head around and fled that courtyard with my sister and me. I looked back once, straining to peer over my shoulder. I saw my mother standing there in the center of the yard, hands clasped as though in prayer. For the first and only time she seemed to me so . . . small.

Then she was gone. Not because we had left the courtyard or passed beyond range of vision. No—she vanished in a sudden fall of darkness, so absolute, it was like blindness itself. The same darkness which surrounds us even now, only far greater.

A darkness which seemed to cover our entire world.

I cannot begin to describe that ride. I clung to Tassa, who wept, bowed over Mahra’s neck and mane. I wept as well, shamelessly. The horror of that darkness threatened to

fill me up from the inside like drowning waters.

But Mahra's song sustained us. I did not hear it at first, but it was there all the while. Slowly but surely I became aware of it, shining starlight surrounding us in a sphere of glowing power. She ran as she sang, like a shooting star, streaking across this new black universe.

Sometimes throughout that ride, I would look to the right or the left and see other lights out there in the darkness. Fellow stars, winking in the night, racing for escape alongside us. I even felt their songs occasionally as they sang out through the black. They were other licorneir riders, trying to outrace the evil which had fallen upon our world. Searching to find the sun once more.

One by one all those lights went out.

For days Mahra raced on without breaking stride. Tassa and I should have fainted from pure exhaustion, but Mahra's song kept us alive, vibrating in our bones, in our souls.

Only once did the great licorneir herself stumble; only once did her song falter. That was early on in our flight, before we'd even left the boundaries of the city. I believe it was the moment my mother died—the moment Mahra herself suffered the indescribable agony of velrhoar—hearttorn. Her pain was such, she should never have been able to continue as she did.

It is testimony to the love she bore my mother that she never weakened again throughout the rest of that ride. She carried us on and on, through the darkness, singing all the way.

In the years which followed, I have come to understand that the citadel was, most likely, the epicenter of the spreading darkness which smothered Licorna. Then,

however, I could not begin to guess the scope of the annihilation surrounding us. It seemed endless and eternal, and by the end of our journey, I had all but forgotten an existence before and ceased to hope for an existence after that horror.

Then, as abruptly as it had fallen, it ended.

One moment we were in the dark. The next Mahra's heavy footfalls thundered against the turf of an open plain beneath a cloudless blue sky. There was no civilization to be seen, no cities, towns, no shepherd's huts. Just empty countryside, lifeless save for a breath of wind, which blew through the grass in gentle waves.

My mother's licorneir staggered to a halt, blowing hard. For a few moments her song continued, but even my exhaustion-numbed ears could hear how swiftly it began to fracture. Tassa and I fell from her back, shuddering and exhausted to the brink of death. We could do nothing but lie in the grass and stare up at a sky which had become unfamiliar to us.

I remember turning my head slightly, glimpsing Mahra's eyes fixed upon me. Through my own weariness, I felt the stab of her pain. Pain which I shared—her lost rider was my lost mother, after all. In that moment, however, I could not feel as she felt. I could feel nothing beyond the struggle for each successive breath.

But Mahra felt it all. The torture of velvet hoar.

She threw back her head, crying out in a loud voice which rang through that empty air. The cry became a scream, and her song, which she had sung for so long despite her pain, fractured at last.

I tried to reach for her. My lips moved, attempting to form her name. It didn't matter. Pivoting on her hindquarters, my mother's licorneir turned away from us and raced back the way we had come. Back across wild country I did not know, vanishing into

the horizon, leaving only the echo of her song behind her.

Thus Tassa and I survived the devastation of Licorna only to find ourselves alone on the edge of the world.

ILSEVEL

Taar falls silent at last. The final words of his sad tale echo in my head, a strange counterpoint to the song his unicorn sings. When I dare look up at him, his face is turned away from me, gazing out into that blackness beyond the glow of Elydark's protective sphere.

That blackness which rings with un-song.

It's not like the music of the wild unicorns from across the river. That song was broken, but in its brokenness, the beauty of the song as it had once been remained. This is worse. This darkness, this void. This is the absence of song, of light, of energy, of all that makes existence good or, at the very least, bearable. It is like death without the life which begat it.

But in its center something dwells. Something . . . not living. Existing. An anti-being, a creature of oblivion. And it wants out. It wants through from its world of un-song into this one, ravenous and ready to devour.

I close my eyes, unable to bear the sight any longer. It's better this way. With my eyes closed, my gods-gift may concentrate on Elydark's song, on the energetic exchange of soul between the unicorn and its bonded master. This is powerful magic, not something I can truly comprehend, but which I feel with an instinctual understanding as I do all music and instruments. I wish I dared join in . . . but something about this song feels sacred, and I wouldn't dare. Not with my imperfect understanding and impure heart.

“Neither Tassa nor I would have survived,” Taar says at long last, picking up threads of the story I’d begun to think he’d dropped, “were we not found by the Rocaryn, a tribe of nomadic Licornyn who dwelt on the very outskirts of the kingdom. Only they and a handful of other, similar tribes survived the cataclysm. They lived far enough away from the epicenter, and the darkness did not reach them. They make up the last of the once-great Licornyn nation. They—we—have stayed alive this long by keeping to the fringes, avoiding the worst of the vardimnar when it strikes.”

I almost can’t bear to ask the question trembling on my lips. “How often does it come? This darkness?”

I feel him shrug, his arms still wrapped around me. “It is utterly unpredictable. Sometimes days or even weeks will pass without a single event. Sometimes there will be as many as three in a single night. The wisest minds of my people have tried to discern patterns, but none have succeeded.”

“And . . . is it made by the Miphates?”

“I believe the Miphates caused it. I believe they cause it still.”

“How?”

He is silent for a while. I begin to think he will not answer my question. At last, however, he says, “I suspect they are channeling through the Rift—parting veils of reality to access the power of Ashtari, the Seventh Hell. Every time the vardimnar strikes, I believe they have opened the Rift once more to draw from its depths.”

I open my eyes a crack, peering out at the darkness. “Is this Ashtari then? Surrounding us?”

“Perhaps,” Taar replies. He sounds oddly calm about it, oddly at peace with this proximity to hell. “Or a piece of it.”

The dreadful un-song pulses again, that sense of an entity just on the other side of perception, straining to burst through. Gods above and below, have mercy! How could anyone be foolish enough to open gateways to something so horrible? I knew the Miphates were hungry for power, but this? This is pure lunacy. It would take a madman to think he might control and manipulate such a vast malevolence.

But then I think of the ease with which Artoris summoned that death curse. Would such a man hesitate to grasp at the power of hell itself if he thought he could wield it?

Evisar. The name of the city in Taar’s story rings loud in my head. Evisar Citadel is the name of the mage tower where Artoris studied the magical arts. The very tower to which he intended to return with me in tow when he came to fetch me from the temple. I have always believed it to be one of the Miphates’ many centers of learning and magic, nothing more, nothing less. To know it was once the center of Taar’s kingdom, a kingdom which my own people willfully destroyed . . . what am I supposed to do with such knowledge? What am I supposed to think of these Licornyn, whom I have always viewed as my enemies?

“Who was the mage?” I ask suddenly. “The old one, the one you loathed so much.”

Taar’s lip curls. He speaks the name with disgust, like spitting out a mouthful of poison: “Morthiel.”

My blood runs cold. I know that name. I know Morthiel. He was Artoris’s master, the very mage my father summoned to help when, at fifteen years old, my gods-gift manifested suddenly, and the influx of magic knocked me unconscious. It was Morthiel who drew me back, who awakened me from death-like slumber when no one else could. I remember little of him—cold hands, wrinkled skin, a voice like dry

bones. He did something to my gift, something to make it more manageable. I don't know what; I don't know if it matters.

I only know I can never let Taar find out.

We are silent together for some while, listening to Elydark's song. Gods, this darkness truly feels endless! I could easily imagine we've been trapped in this place for months, for years.

"Was that Mahra?" I ask quietly after I do not know how long. "The wild unicorn we saw, just before the black lightning struck?"

"I believe so," Taar replies. "I have seen her a few times since she carried me and my sister to safety. She looks nothing like the creature she was then. But that is whatvelrhoardoes to its victims. To be hearttorn is a terrible fate."

"And what became of Onoril?" I press, remembering the other great licorneir from the story. "And your father? Did you ever see them again?"

Taar shakes his head. "I do not know. I suspect they died, along with every other soul caught within the radius of that blast." Then his voice drops an octave, almost like a song, the deep timbre rumbling in my gut. "But one day I will return. One day I will break through the gates and wards, bash down the doors of that citadel, and discover for myself what lies within. One day I will know exactly how and why they have desecrated the land of my forefathers. And when that day comes . . ."

He breathes out slowly before ending with the conviction of a vow: "When that day comes,zylnala,I will have my vengeance."

I don't know how long we remain inside that ball of light-song, surrounded by darkness. When it ends at last—vanishing abruptly, like a candle blown out, only in

reverse—it feels like hours and, simultaneously, like no time has passed at all. The world around us is once more full of blue sky and waving grass and the deep flow of the river, carrying its secrets from the mountains to some distant, unseen sea.

Elydark and Taar exchange song-words. I feel Taar's concern for his unicorn, and he reaches around me to stroke the beast's neck. But Elydark shakes his head as though answering a question. The next moment he surges into the river, continuing our journey as though nothing strange has just taken place. As though my whole world has not been changed forever.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I cannot shake the heaviness that clings to me following both the onset of that darkness and Taar's tale. My eyes dart this way and that, searching for signs of hellish residue in the world around me. The river water feels thick as it dampens my skirts and splashes against my thighs. And when we reach the far shore, I can't shake the feeling that each strand of grass is covered in some viscous substance which my eyes cannot discern.

It's the un-song. I realize the truth even as Elydark breaks into a gallop, speeding across the open valley, his nose turned toward that distant standing stone. The un-song of the darkness still reverberates across my gods-gifted senses, more real than the reality surrounding me. It clings to this world, and though I cannot see any overt effect upon the land itself, something tells me that Cruor has been irreparably changed by its proximity to hell. For one thing, there are no birds, no flowers, no insects, no signs of life anywhere around us. Nothing but endless waves of grass, bowing under Elydark's hooves only to spring back up again, unbroken in our wake.

Should I believe Taar's story? The question churns in my brain, annoying and insistent. I've known him only a handful of days, whereas I've spent my entire life in dread of the fae. Prince Ruvaen's invading force has spread devastation across Gavaria for years now. Sheltered in Beldroth Castle, I've been spared any direct suffering until recent history. But during my Maiden's Journey I glimpsed evidence of the fae and their savagery: burnt-out villages, refugees on foot in the middle of winter. Cold, starving faces turning to watch my carriage and entourage pass. One could not doubt all the rumors of fae wickedness in light of such suffering.

And what about my older sister? Faraine described the terrible unicorn riders who set upon her carriage during her journey home from her remote convent. She told me

how they'd slaughtered her guards, how they would have slain her as well were it not for the timely arrival of the Shadow King. He alone could vanquish such a deadly foe, he and his monstrous warriors.

But what if there was another side to this story? What if those vicious Licornyn, desperate to preserve their own people, their way of life, believed their only hope was to prevent King Larongar from allying himself with the troldefolk? What if those Licornyn warriors lost their lives fighting to save a world my people have all but destroyed?

I set my jaw hard. No one really knows what goes on inside Evisar Citadel. It would be foolish indeed to switch allegiances based on the testimony of one biased source. Even if that biased source is Taar—the man who has thrice saved my life at great risk to his own. The man who has shown me nothing but courtesy and kindness, even when I sought to stab him in the eye. The man who inspires in my blood such a heat as to be almost irresistible.

I wrap cold fingers around my forearm, squeezing hard over that place where the invisible level racord lies. I dare not forget the truth: I am a captive, bound to this man by powerful magic which clouds my senses. If I'm to survive, I must keep a level head.

Hours slip by. I watch the sky nervously as we progress across the valley, but there's no return of the branching fingers of black lightning. If the Miphates are truly pulling magic from Ashtari, they seem to have fetched enough for the time being. The sun moves in its lonely arc toward the horizon, tossing Elydark's shadow longer and longer on our right. He seems to be in a race against it, trying to outstrip his own long-legged counterpart.

My eyes grow heavy—the steady rhythm of Elydark's gait is so soothing, and the warm strength of Taar behind me strangely comforting. And I'm so gods-damned

tired! My chin dips. I jerk my head back upright, only for it to dip again . . .

When I wake, Elydark is still in motion, but the valley is now behind us. The unicorn climbs the steep hill on which the Luin Stone stands. It looms above us, no natural formation as I first assumed. Bathed in late-afternoon sunlight, it shines like pure gold. In fact it is pure gold, shaped by craftsman in careful lines and smooth curves. From this angle it's difficult to say what it's meant to be. It looks almost like . . . a leg?

“The Luin Stone once marked the southernmost edge of Licorna,” Taar says suddenly, as though overhearing my unspoken questions. “In the days before the Rift, it was a statue erected in honor of the first Licornyn king, Luinthakor. It stood so tall, legend has it that the king's crown could be seen from the top of the Citadel of the Stars in Evisar, though I never had the chance to verify the truth of that claim.”

I squint to study the great edifice as we draw nearer. The craftsmanship is undeniable now—that muscular calf, the bones of the ankle, the massive foot fitted into an ornate sandal. Whatever happened to the rest of the statue, all that remains is testimony to the glory of ancient days.

A ripple of song issues from Elydark to Taar. I don't understand it but detect a certain note of anxiety. “What's wrong?” I ask, turning a little to look up at Taar.

He glances down at me, his expression curious. “Did you hear that?”

I grit my teeth. Something tells me I shouldn't let him know just how much I overhear of his connection with his unicorn. “Hear what?” I ask innocently. “I didn't hear anything. Your body tensed up. That's all.”

He looks unconvinced, but he lets the matter drop. “There's nothing wrong,” he answers. “Elydark ought to be able to sense the presence of other licorneir waiting for

us above. There aren't any. Which means we've missed the rendezvous with my people."

Well, that's a relief! A sigh slides between my lips. The longer I can put off any interaction with those stern-faced Licornyn warriors the better. Still, that tension between Elydark and Taar continues in several more exchanges of song. Despite Taar's words to the contrary, he's not as easy as he pretends. What will we find at the top of this rise?

Elydark never slackens his pace, no matter how steep the path grows. He continues at the same breakneck gallop until we reach the summit, close to the towering Luin Stone. Though I saw it looming from across the valley, I am nonetheless struck by the sheer size of that gold block. The original statue of the first Licornyn king must have been massive indeed! What became of the rest of it? Did the surviving Licornyn haul away the gold following the collapse of their kingdom? Or did the Miphates find it and claim it for some purpose of their own?

We come to a stop. Elydark paws the ground and snorts as he shakes his horn. Taar, sitting very straight in the saddle, looks around the landscape. There's no sign of life to be seen close at hand, though I spot what looks like the remains of campfires clustered around the Luin Stone. His people were here not long ago. "They must have gone on without us," Taar says, speaking to himself rather than to me. "It was always an outside chance that they would be here, but I'd hoped the time-slip might work in our favor."

"A time-slip?"

He looks down, half-catching my eye before looking away again. "Your world and mine, though similar, do not follow the same flow of time. I did not intend to stay a full night in your world, merely a few hours. That extra night may have added several days to our overall journey or no time at all. It is difficult to predict such things."

He sounds as though he's trying to comfort himself with this explanation. Elydark throws back his head, shaking his mane, obviously unconvinced. But whatever exchange passes between them, Taar does not share with me.

I turn to look at the landscape beyond the stone, which had been hidden from my sight while down in the valley. To my surprise, there is a town not many miles from our current position. No, not a town—a city. Great, towering structures, bridges, a mighty wall. Shocking in its size, its grandeur, it dominates a valley equally lush and wild as the one we just left behind. Even the backdrop of distant mountains cannot diminish its splendor.

But it's empty. Like a gutted carcass, its spirit long since fled.

I blink, momentarily convinced my eyes deceive me. Maybe it's just a trick of the fading light. Surely those great towers cannot be half-choked in vines, those roads broken and overgrown in foliage and weeds. My ears strain for sounds of life, for the ever-changing song of a living city, the great harmony of a hundred thousand souls living, trading, struggling, triumphing, breeding, feeding, dying—all sheltered within those tall, forbidding walls.

There is nothing. Only ghastly echoes of wind blowing through empty windows.

“Is that Evisar?” I ask quietly, unable to tear my gaze from that sight.

Taar turns his head, regarding the city. “No,” he says. “Evisar is a full day's ride from here and is hidden behind a powerful obscuri spell. This was once the City of Uvareth, my grandfather's holding, my mother's childhood home.”

He speaks the words carefully, as though afraid to let any emotion tinge his voice. What must it be like for him? To travel across this familiar landscape only to be confronted with once-thriving cities now utterly decimated? Not even the ruinous

towns I'd glimpsed on my Maiden's Journey can compare. They were bad, yes—they had been attacked, burnt, the denizens slain or driven out. But by the time I passed by, there were already signs of return. People are resilient, and where there is life, there is stubborn determination to survive and rebuild.

There was no attack here, however. No sign of burning or destruction, no pillaging invaders. It is simply empty. Hollowed out from the inside. Echoing un-song rings in the back of my head. The people of this city, of this world, were unprepared. They had no chance to defend themselves from that consuming emptiness, that hunger-made-sentient. One moment alive, going about their day-to-day existence, the next . . . devoured.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

The nightmare of Cruor is far worse than any tales I once believed.

Elydark and Taar exchange some songful back-and-forth. Then Taar dismounts. “We’ll make camp here,” he says, turning to look up at me even as he strokes Elydark’s muscular neck. “You must be tired.”

“I’m not,” I lie and sit up a little straighter in the saddle as though to prove my words. “We can ride on if you like. Maybe catch up with your people after all.”

His eyebrow tilts. I suspect he sees right through my stubbornness. But he says only, “No, zylnala. We’ve ridden far enough for one day.”

At his words, sudden weariness seems to come over me. I feel the miles, the leagues, the world through which I have traveled since morning all catching up to me at once. When he reaches up to help me from the saddle, I hesitate only a moment before resting my hands on his shoulders and sliding from the saddle into his supportive grasp. The muscles in his forearms flex, but he lifts me down with such ease, I might be nothing more than a feather-stuffed doll. Though I’ve spent the last many hours in close proximity with this man, there’s something very different about facing him, about having my nose inches from his, about the sensation of his fingers wrapped around my ribcage. My breath catches, and my heart performs a somersault in my chest before tumbling straight to my gut.

The moment my feet touch the ground, my knees try to buckle. Unused to spending such long hours in the saddle—even an unexpectedly comfortable Licornyn saddle—my body is numb in places I didn’t even realize could be numb. With a little gasp, I stagger, leaning against Taar’s broad, bare chest. For a moment I remain there,

frozen. Listening to the sound of his heart thundering so close to my ear. His hands, still gripping me under the arms, tighten slightly. I feel the exhale of his breath against the hair atop my head.

An impulse comes over me suddenly: a powerful inclination to close my eyes and simply rest here in his grasp. To let all the fears, worries, confusion, and questions of the day melt away into a moment of pure, trustful peace.

“Zylnala.”

His voice falls over me like a blanket, warm and comforting in this perilous world. What would it be like to belong to such a man? To really belong to him—not owned, bought and paid for, but chosen. Cherished. What would it be like to know I mattered to him, that by mere existence I could make his life a little better? That would be power indeed.

But so great and terrible a man—a warrior, a king among his people—would never choose someone like me.

I squeeze my eyes tight. Slipping my hands from his shoulders to his chest, I push. For the briefest possible instant, his fingers tighten around my ribcage, hard enough to hurt. Then he abruptly releases me and takes several steps back. Not meeting my eye, not so much as glancing my way, he sets to work pulling saddlebags from Elydark’s back. Part of me wants to offer to help, but he’s so quick and certain in every movement, I know I would only get in his way. Instead I turn away, still a little unsteady on my feet, and take a few tottering steps toward the Luin Stone.

“Don’t go far.”

I glance over my shoulder. Taar’s back is to me, his attention entirely fixed on setting up a temporary camp. “If thevardimnarreturns,” he says, “you need to be within

Elydark's sphere of protection."

I sniff. It's not as though I've got anywhere to go in this wild, empty world of his. Besides, thevelrawon't let me wander.

Turning away from him again, I rub my forearm, which smarts. Is this tension I'm feeling, this pull, this attraction, just thevelrabond messing with my senses? It's easier to believe so. If I've learned anything in the last few days, it's that I don't matter—I never did. I only matter to men insofar as I further their ends. I was always Father's favorite, wasn't I? When he disparaged Faraine and ignored Aurae, I was the one he petted and praised. In the end what did that preference earn me? He still sold me to the Shadow King without a second thought.

And Artoris? I clung to faulty memories of him for so long, only for him to be no different than my father. I don't know what use he had for me exactly, what he thought he would achieve by taking me back to Evisar. But it was obviously for his sake, not mine, that he came. I am useful. And, when my usefulness is done, I am disposable.

My wandering footsteps lead me to the Luin Stone. I look up at the broken knee, towering some forty feet over my head. How tall was this colossus in its day? Imagination boggles. To think there was a civilization so ancient, so mighty, so very different from mine, existing just on the other side of a thin veil of reality all these centuries! I turn my gaze out to that devastated city. Now that the sun has set, all its intricate details are lost, leaving a black, featureless mountain beneath the emerging stars. My heartbeat echoes hollowly in my chest, a dull throb on the edge of awareness.

"Are you hungry?"

I turn slightly at the sound of Taar's voice. He's built up a little fire using wood

carried through from my own world. Kindling burns, and large pieces begin to catch, giving off both heat and light. Taar reaches into one of his travel bags and withdraws a little honey-flavored cake. He looks at me, his hand raised in offering.

My stomach knots. I remember well enough the tough outer crust of those cakes, the earthy flavor a lingering stain on my tongue. But we've eaten nothing since the morning, and I heaved all that up during the gate crossing. My innards feel positively cavernous. And I'm exhausted—so exhausted I can hardly believe it. There was a time, back in my spoiled past life, when I could not have imagined exhaustion like this, not just in my body, but in my spirit. I feel ready to break in half.

But I have just enough pride left not to want him to know that.

Holding myself very straight and upright, I leave the shelter of the Luin Stone and step over to the fire. With a quick snatch, I take the cake from Taar's hand, then hasten to the other side of our little camp, ignoring any temptation to sit beside him, to take comfort in his nearness. I've had more than enough physical proximity to this man today, thank you, gods. What I need is space. Perspective.

So I plunk myself down and gnaw at the edge of the hard cake. It breaks off in odd chunks which turn to dust on my tongue. I don't care. At this point I'd eat a rock with equal relish.

“And how are you tonight, Ilsevel?”

I pause, molars locked around a lump of cake, and shoot a glance across the flickering flames. Taar is seated in an uncharacteristically relaxed pose, leaning back on one elbow, his long legs outstretched. He breaks off pieces of hard cake and pops them in his mouth. He doesn't look at me but seems wholly absorbed in this task.

I pull the cake back out of my mouth, rolling my jaw uncomfortably. What kind of a

question is that?How am I?

“I’m . . . fine. Thanks.” I chew my lip then, worrying a bit of dry skin. “How are you?”

It sounds so stupid; I wish I could take it back the moment I say it. Taar’s gaze flashes through the flames. I meet it hard, refusing to back down or even blink. He lowers his lashes and turns his cake around in his fingers as though considering it. Finally, with a shrug, he sets it aside, sits up, and fetches his kettle from the nearest saddlebag. Filling it with water from a skin, he nestles it on the fire and watches it, as though his gaze can make it boil faster. But I know the truth. He’s simply trying not to look at me. Or hoping I’ll stop looking at him.

Finally he clears his throat. “It’s not every day one encounters something like thevardimnar.”

“No.” I sniff. “Nor does one go about being threatened by the undead or traveling through magic portals into strange new worlds. It’s certainly been an eventful twenty-four hours. But,” I finish, brandishing cake with a little twirl of my wrist, “I am, nonetheless, fine.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

He looks up, catching my eye once more in that dark gaze of his. For a moment he says nothing. We simply watch one another. My skin prickles, and I can't tell if it's with hostility or attraction. Possibly both.

“You know it's not your fault, don't you?” he says softly.

Everything inside me goes still, like the sudden hush in the atmosphere before a storm. I feel the heat, the energy of pure tempest building in my core.

Slowly I lick my chapped lips. When I speak, I take pains to keep my voice level. “What do you mean, warlord?”

Taar draws a long breath. It's strange . . . I've seen this man hurl himself into the most terrible dangers without a second thought. Memory of the ravening Lurodos, his face streaked black with virulium poison, astride his hideous reptant steed, flashes through my mind's eye. Taar met him in battle without a qualm. Yet here, in this moment, he hesitates.

“Your sister,” he says at last. And nothing more.

Nothing more is needed.

The cake drops from my numb fingers, thunks in the dirt and lies still. I get to my feet. Stand a moment, staring down at him from across the dancing fire.

Then I turn and march away—away from the campfire, away from the Luin Stone. Away from him. “Ilsevel!” he calls, but I ignore him, my strides lengthening as I put

distance between us. Night falls fast now, and my footing is not as sure as it could be on this rocky terrain. I don't care. If anything, I pick up my pace, moving faster and faster, reckless, shoes kicking loose stones to roll down the incline in small avalanches.

I come to an abrupt stop, my toes just protruding over the edge of a precipitous drop. The last rays of the falling sun shines from the edge of this world, illuminating the carcass of the abandoned city far below. I stare at it, trying once more, almost unconsciously, to hear the song which must have once sung so clear from its streets, its towers, its bridges and walls. There's nothing. A great, hollow echo of nothing.

Footsteps sound behind me. "Ilsevel," Taar calls again, but I do not turn to face him. I wrap my arms around myself, shuddering but not with cold. He draws nearer, comes a halt. When he speaks again, his voice is deeper than before, tinged with darkness. "Zylnala."

I close my eyes. I feel like a convict kneeling at the block, counting out the heartbeats until the blade drops.

"You understand, don't you?" His voice reaches for me like a pair of strong arms, trying to draw me back to him. "What happened to your sister was a tragedy. But it was not your fault. You could not have prevented it."

Of course he would think that. Because he doesn't know. He doesn't realize the truth.

I pull in a shivering breath, biting down on both lips to prevent a sob from escaping. A host of wild confessions crowd my tongue. Gods, I might as well just cast myself over this brink and break on the stones below! Maybe I will.

Or maybe there's a simpler way to bring about my own demise.

“He was there because of me.”

Taar is silent for a long moment. Then: “What did you say?”

A smile rips at my face. Now it’s there, ready to come out: my declaration of guilt. It’s almost a relief to speak it, to let the words, which have been knotted in my throat all this while, finally unspool and tumble free.

“Mage Artoris would not have been at the Temple of Lamruil were it not for me. I wrote to him. I asked him to come.”

8

TAAR

Ice washes through my veins.

I knew they were connected, possibly more deeply connected than she’d let on. But this? This is more than I let myself imagine. She wrote to him. She asked him to come and he . . . gods damn it, he came at her request. He left behind the safety of Evisar and the mage-paths, allowed himself to be made vulnerable. Because she asked him to.

“Why?” The word erupts from my throat, a deep growl. “Why did you summon him?”

She tilts her head, her hard gaze catching mine. In the swiftly fading light, her features are mostly obscured, but the burning despair in her eye shines brighter and fiercer than stars. “I loved him,” she says.

Those words might as well be blows.

I take a step back then another, reeling. The velracord around my forearm tightens to the brink of severing bone. I want to scream, to tear it free, to turn and flee from this moment, this revelation, and all the while a voice in the back of my head persists, It doesn't matter! She's a stranger. She's not your wife. You don't even know her. None of this should matter to you.

But it does. Far more than it should. And I cannot, in this moment, believe that it is merely the inconvenient potency of the velramaking me feel this way.

A smile curls her lips. "I loved him," she says again. "And I asked him to come find me at the Temple of Lamruil. To run away with me."

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

My mind revolts, playing back that image of the mage dragging her from the building, even as she struggled against him. That memory, burned across my brain, does not fit with this confession of hers. She's lying; she must be. But why? Does she know what her words are doing to me? Does she even suspect?

Her nostrils flare. She lifts her chin slightly, as though daring me to lash out at her. Why does it feel as though she's trying to provoke me to violence? I realize suddenly that my hands are on her shoulders, my fingers digging in tight, pinching the fabric of her cloak. Do I want to hurt her? Maybe. If there's any truth to her words, if she and Artoris are intimately connected, then hurting her may in turn hurt him. After all he's done to my people—after the deaths he wrought only three nights ago—ah! I would give a great deal to hurt that man. And here before me I have the means: Artoris's weakness.

My breath is tight in my lungs. My hands twitch, muscles tense with unexpected eagerness. What if I were to give in? I wouldn't have to kill her; that would only endanger my own life, bound as we are. But there are so many ways I could make her existence a living hell, all without compromising my own eventual release from our binding.

But . . . I do not want to hurt her.

I want to possess her.

I want to take her head between my hands and squeeze out any thought of him—of Artoris or any other man.

Then I want to kiss her. To kiss her and kiss her until she weeps with hunger, with need.

I want to fill her, body and soul, until there is no room in even the darkest recesses of her being for anyone but me.

These are not the thoughts of a sane man. This is the madness of ~~vel~~ trying to take over yet again. I must hold on to the truth of who I am at the center of this intoxicating tangle of sacred vows and profane desires.

Ilsevel winces suddenly. I realize that my fingers, still gripping her shoulders, are pressing to the bone. Hastily I let go and back away from her, leaving her where she stands on the edge of that drop. For a moment I do not trust myself to speak. Every time I open my mouth, words I dare not say pile up behind my teeth, vicious and dangerous by turns.

I turn away only to find myself facing Elydark. My licorneir stands at a little distance, half-hidden in the shadow of the Luin Stone. His eyes are on me, and I feel suddenly that song-connection between us, which is always present, even when I try to ignore it. It hums through my soul, into my bones. In that song I remember who I am: Taarthalor Ragnataarthane. Luinar of the Licornyn, king of a decimated people. I live for them, for those remnants of my kind who stand on the edge of extinction. And for the licorneir whose souls are linked inextricably with ours. Every choice I make, every thought, deed, or act of will must be for the good of Licorna.

Elydark holds my gaze until the certainty of my purpose is fully restored. Only then do I look back at Ilsevel. What am I to do with her? It was bad enough to find myself bound to a human, but to the love of my great enemy? How am I supposed to manage this storm of jealousy and hatred and longing and loathing all at once? How am I supposed to protect her from the dangers of Cruor when I'm not even certain I can protect her from myself?

In an act of self-preservation, I take hold of Elydark's song and wrap it around me like armor. Turning my back on Ilsevel, I take a step toward the campfire, then pause.

"You did not make Lurodos slaughter the priests of Lamruil."

I don't know what comes over me, what drives me to speak those words. Behind me, I hear the sharp intake of her breath.

"Nor did you make Artoris a target of Licornyn fury," I continue coldly. "Whatever you are to him, or he to you, makes no difference. The choices made that night were far beyond your control."

As though to prove to myself that I can, I turn, careful to feel nothing as I take in the sight of her, standing silhouetted against the bruised sky, her back straight, her chin high, her eyes burning with hatred and pain. "You cannot bear the weight of your sister's death," I say. "It is too great a burden. It will crush you."

Wind catches strands of dark hair, blowing it across her eyes like a veil. She tosses it back, the short gesture almost ferocious. She doesn't speak. She doesn't have to—I can see that my words have no effect. She has assumed the mantel of guilt, and she will wear it until such a time as she can find a punishment harsh enough to strip her bare once more. Whether or not she will survive the process, I cannot say.

But my own task is clear. I must guard both my heart and body and never once forget the truth: this woman, entirely unknown to herself, has the means to destroy me in the palm of her hand.

"Come back to the fire, Ilsevel," I say, putting my back to her. "We have a long journey before us. You'll need whatever rest you can get."

ILSEVEL

In silence I return to my side of the fire and take a seat. It's as though the impassioned conversation we've just shared never took place at all, those wild confessions still unspoken. Taar sits with his back very straight, his elbows on his knees, and never once raises his gaze from intense contemplation of the fire. Whatever his thoughts may be, they are closed down tight behind the blackness of his eyes.

I pick up my discarded hard cake, turning it round and round. Hungry though I am, I cannot bear another bite. After a little while I simply pull the hood of my cloak up over my head, lie down on my side, and wait a small eternity for sleep to come. Every other breath, I expect Taar to rise, to make a sudden lunge across the fire, and . . . what? Run me through with his sword? Maybe.

Squeezing my eyes tight, I force my breaths to slow. It's no use; my heart is still racing from that moment when I saw realization dawn in his eyes. I'd thought for a moment that this was it—this was the tipping point. Whatever protection the velracord offered would be undone, and he would see at last the enemy I am and put an end to me once and for all.

But he didn't. Of course not. He's much too honorable and noble. Damn him.

I bite my tongue, force back a curse. Then, opening my eyes a crack, I watch through my lashes how the firelight plays on his face. So grim and scarred and dangerous, and yet so beautiful. My terrifying and desirable enemy.

Shadows seem to creep out from the ring of stones surrounding the fire. They stretch longer and longer, reaching for me, and though I fear them, I haven't the will or strength to escape. I close my eyes again, let that darkness pour over me, and suddenly I am back in that prison cart, my arms wrapped around Auroe's trembling

body.

“I’ve got you,” I assure her through trembling lips. “I won’t let them take you—”

But the door flings wide with a metallic crash. Someone stands in the opening, a powerful figure, all scarred and wild, with a black streak of warpaint banding his face from temple to temple. Taar—but not Taar. Not the man as I know him. No, this is the stranger, the warlord, the fae invader. A monster straight out of legend.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

He reaches into the cage, grabs Aurae by her slender upper arm. With a yank, he rips her from my grasp. “No!” I cry, falling over myself in my efforts to follow, to climb from the prison cart. I gain the opening and tumble into the shadow-dancing world beyond. All around me, phantom figures loom and leer, but my eyes remain fixed on Taar as he drags my screaming sister away with him. “No! Bring her back!”

Taar stops, looks over his shoulder. My sister is limp in his arms, fainting with terror. I rush toward them. The ground under my feet goes clingy, each footstep a wrench, but I forge on until I’m close enough to catch Taar’s arm and stare up into his face. Into eyes of pitch, weeping black tears.

“Please,” I say, shameless and desperate. “Take me instead.”

Then I reach up, grip him by the back of the head, and pull his face down to mine. His mouth is an awful snarl of sharp teeth, but I press my lips to his, drinking in his danger, his darkness. Suddenly Aurae isn’t there anymore. There’s no one in this world but the two of us. My arms are around him, clinging and desperate. For a moment I feel both surprise and resistance. Then he grabs me. Devours me. His tongue in my mouth, his hands on my body, bruising and clawing, ripping me to pieces—

“Ilsevel!”

I wake with a gasp to the pressure of a hand on my shoulder. With a sharp turn, I stare up at the face of a stranger looming over me, half-illuminated by the red glare of firelight and silhouetted by a galaxy of distant stars.

“Ilsevel.” A voice of rumbling thunder growls in my ear. “Thevardimnar—it’s coming. We need to shelter with Elydark.”

I blink. Memories rush in, bringing with them a clash of recognition and horror so overwhelming, it paralyzes my limbs. I simply cannot react or respond, only stare at this man, this stranger, this . . . “Taar?” I whisper.

His arms slip under me, lift me from the hard ground. I can do nothing but cling to his neck, dizzy and half-convinced I’m still dreaming. “Come,” he says urgently. “There’s no time to lose.”

Only now do I become aware of the humming song of his unicorn close at hand. Elydark stands braced, his head upraised, his song already burning from the tip of his horn, shining out to create the protective sphere. Taar ducks close to his side, still carrying me. No sooner do we enter that sphere than the Hand of Darkness falls across the world once more.

Whimpering, I press my face into Taar’s shoulder. He cradles me gently against his chest, and his voice murmurs in harmony with Elydark’s song: “It’s all right. I’m here. You’re not alone, I swear it.”

My jaw hardens. Despite what he says, I am alone. Desperately alone. And the more I let myself believe otherwise, the worse it will go for me.

I push away abruptly, surprising him, I think. He staggers slightly, thrown off balance, then quickly sets me down on my feet. Though everything in me urges to stay within the safe circle of his arms, I step back, swipe hair out of my face with both hands, and turn from him. My eyes gaze out through the shimmering light of Elydark’s song-sphere into the hell beyond.

The membrane-like veil flickers with movement. That something—unnamable,

unknowable, but so enormously real—pulses with eagerness to break through. I feel the power of it, the vastness of that un-song. How anyone could be foolish enough to attempt to control such power is beyond me.

A wild desire comes over me to throw myself through the sphere of song, out into that waiting darkness. To let it claim me, drag me into itself, ending this gift of mine, ending my life-song. It would be so easy. Just a few swift steps, and then . . . what? Unmaking. Discord. A brokenness and pain unimaginable. My blood chills with terror at the prospect. And yet I want it.

Little black tendrils seep through the sphere-song, crawl through the grass toward my feet. I watch them coming, knowing that they mean to wrap around my ankles and drag me out. But it's no better than I deserve, and I—

“Ilsevel!”

Taar looms in front of me, his back to the darkness, his great broad body between me and it. His hands grip my forearms to the point of pain. “Don’t listen to it,” he growls, shaking me so that my bones rattle. “I know how tempting it can be. Don’t listen. Concentrate on Elydark’s song.”

I shake my head. It feels so heavy, like a lead weight supported on my reed-thin neck. I don’t want to hear the unicorn’s song anymore. I don’t want music in my life, this paltry gift of the gods which proved utterly useless in the end. I want that un-song to undo me, to break apart whatever melody still tries to sing through my spirit.

Taar wraps his arms around me. “I’m not letting you go,” he says. “I’ve seen this before—the pull of the darkness. I won’t let you give into it.”

Tears seep through my lashes, trail down my cheeks. I feel the great strength of this man and know there is no way I can resist him. Perhaps the darkness itself would be

strong enough to break his hold on me, but it has already relented. The little tendril arms retreat from Elydark's song. So I close my eyes, lean into Taar's chest, and listen to the thud of his heart, like a counter beat to the unicorn's flowing melody.

"Why did you save me?"

His arms tighten a fraction, squeezing air from my lungs. Then he pushes me back from him, his hands still gripping my upper arms. His black eyes gaze down into mine. He doesn't answer, but the way he looks at me, so intently . . . it's like he's searching for his answer in my face.

"Why?" I say again, the word little more than a whisper. "Not now, not with thevelracompelling you. Before. Why did you save me from Lurodos? Or even before that, back in the temple?"

His eyes are strangely wide, vulnerable even. But no matter how I seek, I can find no answers in their depths. "I don't know," he says at last, dropping his lashes.

A sigh passes through my parted lips. Suddenly I don't care about anything else—not my guilt, not my fear. Not the enormity of life waiting for me on the other side of this sphere. I care only that I am standing in this space, with this man. This man, who doesn't want me and yet will not let me go. Perhaps that's as close to being wanted as I'll ever deserve. Perhaps it's enough.

Hardly conscious of what I'm doing, I rise on the balls of my feet. His fingers tense around my forearms, but I manage to lift one hand, to rest it on his chest. Slowly, slowly, I glide my palm up over his shoulder, around to the back of his neck, underneath that curtain of thick, black hair. He's far too strong for me to move against his will, but when I tug, he bows a little, inclining his head toward mine. Soon his face is so close, our lips a mere breath apart.

“Zylnala,” he whispers. I feel the shape of the word against my flesh. It seems in that moment as though there is but a thin veil separating me from the whole great endlessness of eternity. I’ve never been so very aware of my own mortal shape and yet, simultaneously, so certain of the power contained in its feeble confines. I part my lips, my eyelids heavy. Vertigo fills my head. A single small step, and I will fall upward, up into that infinity.

The darkness breaks.

It’s so abrupt, like the bursting of a soap bubble. One moment it’s there—the next utterly gone. The world reappears around us, so solid and real, even the sky feels heavy somehow. Elydark staggers, his forelegs bowing, as his song resolves itself in a series of swift, fading notes.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

And Taar and I stand where we are, gazing at one another. His eyes are wide with shock, as though he doesn't know how we came to be like this.

He frowns, wrenches his hands free of me, and turns away abruptly, staring out at the cold, silent world. It all feels so weirdly untouched. Our campfire burns where we left it. The stars gleam overhead. The air is almost painfully quiet, without even a breath of wind to enliven it.

As for me? I'm left with nothing. Nothing but the cold patches on my arms where Taar's hands had gripped. And the prickling emptiness on my lips where his kiss almost, but didn't quite, touch.

10

TAAR

The next day we ride on in silence.

I try my best not to think about what took place between us last night, that moment of almost-connection which would have spelled certain disaster. Gods spare me, why am I even now so tempted? Her revelations concerning her connection to Mage Artoris should have doused any desire I might feel for her. Instead it seems only to have fanned the flames.

Perhaps it's not desire burning inside me but morbid curiosity. There's still so much I do not know. How she came to be intimately acquainted with a man like Mage Artoris, for instance. Or why she felt compelled to write to him, asking him to run

away with her. Run away from what? Or from whom?

So many questions, none of which I dare ask for fear the answers will sharpen these feelings which I must, at all costs, suppress. I set my teeth hard and keep my eyes turned to the west as Elydark pursues his morning shadow across the Morleon Plains, leaving behind the Luin Stone and the empty ruins of Uvareth City. By late morning, we enter Lafarallin, a sprawling forest of hardwoods, grown over uneven terrain. It is an eerie place, emptied of all life as it is. Even the trees seem but half-living things: still growing, still putting out green leaves to the sun, but somehow lesser than they once were. The vital spirit which once infused them has been sucked dry. Once upon a time, my father would take parties hunting in this wood for sport; he'd promised to take me with him when I was old enough.

There is no sport to be had here now. Noleokasdeer bounding, no wild hogs ready for battle, no sleek foxes slyly eluding the dogs' noses. Anything that survived the first fall of vardimnart twenty-five years ago, either died in subsequent surges or fled to the fringes of this world. Like my own people.

By midday we come to a stream. Elydark, who has been singularly focused on his run for hours, comes to a sudden halt, his forefeet splashing in the water. It is time to rest, Vellar, he sings into my head.

Surely you are not tired, my friend, I respond, half-joking. I've known my licorneir to gallop a full day and half the night and still be fresh to run again the following morning.

Not I, but your bride. She is parched. I fear she cannot go on much longer without refreshment.

Guilt stabs my chest. I'm so used to long rides across Cruor, the urgent need to cover as much ground as possible governing all other concerns. And I've never had to

concern myself with the realities of human frailty before. I look down at Ilsevel, huddled on the saddle before me, her head bent at an angle. “Shall we stop here, zylnala?” I ask gently. “You look ready to drop.”

She shakes her head and straightens at once. “Ride on if you like, warlord. I’m fine.”

That word again, spoken with such ferocity: fine. I know better than to believe her.

Without bothering to argue, I swing down from the saddle then turn to reach for her. Ilsevel presses her lips in a hard line, her shadow-ringed eyes narrowing. Weary though she is, she still sparks with defiance. I say nothing but beckon gently with my fingers. With a little sniff, she rests her hands on my shoulders, allowing me to ease her down from Elydark’s back. Strange how that gentle pressure, the slight digging in of her slim fingers, has become familiar to me already.

The moment her feet are on the ground, she steps back from me, staggering a little. Quickly she pulls herself upright, chin high, gaze lowered. No moments of lingering closeness this time. I tell myself I’m not disappointed. For the most part I believe it.

Ilsevel takes a few steps toward the stream, kneels, and moves as though to cup water in her hand. “Don’t drink that!” I say hastily, my voice sharper than I mean it to be.

She looks back at me, her expression cold. I fetch a cup and a pouch from the saddlebags then move to crouch beside her. First scooping a cupful of flowing water, I shake the contents of the pouch into it. A fine dusting of purple powder disperses in the water and sinks to the bottom where it rests for some moments.

“The waters of Cruor are corrupted,” I say and angle the cup for Ilsevel to see what takes place inside. “They’re unsafe to drink without purification.” With those words, I swirl the liquid, creating a little maelstrom. When the water stills again, the dust has floated to the surface, no longer purple, but blackened and slimy.

Ilsevel sucks in a breath, her lip curling with disgust. That expression doesn't fade, even when I have used my knife to scrape out and discard that film before offering the cup to her. "Here," I say. "Drink."

Her fingers reach for the cup, her expression wary. "Is it . . . safe now?"

I nod. "The petals of the ilsevel blossom are infused with magic drawn straight from the Goddess Nornala's realm. Their powdered form is strong enough to purify even the corruption of Ashtari."

Her gaze flicks to meet mine at that word: ilsevel. I wonder if she will question it. Instead, however, she merely bites her lip before lifting the cup to take a tentative sip. Her eyes widen with surprise, and she takes another, larger swallow, then drains the whole cup in a last draught. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she casts me an embarrassed look. "That was . . ."

"Refreshing?" I suggest with a half-smile. She nods. "It's best not to drink more," I continue, answering the question I can see bubbling on her tongue. "The ilsevel blossom is not meant for mortal consumption, and even ibridians must partake of it with caution. They were sent by Nornala to this world as sustenance for her children, the licorneir."

Ilsevel looks into her empty cup, her expression thoughtful. "Truth is, I'm not thirsty anymore. It's just that . . ."

"I understand." Gently I take the cup from her fingers. "Water purified by ilsevel blossoms is more quenching than ordinary water. But it can leave one with a sense of yearning. It will not harm you in small doses, but it is best not to indulge." I refill the cup, purify the contents, and drink for myself, savoring the sweetness of the ilsevel-blessed water. Longing seems to rise and fill my chest cavity as well, though not a longing for water, I think. I'm used to that desire and long ago learned to regulate it.

But there's something sweet about sitting here by this stream with Ilsevel. Though I know the forest is far from idyllic, these waters dangerously corrupted, it's easy to imagine all that away. To believe we've chosen to spend this time together, venturing into Lafarallin on a pleasure ride, reclining beside this stream for the pure joy of sheltering shade and each other's company. My gaze, almost against my own will, strays to her lovely face, losing itself in the subtle details of her dark brows, the curve of her cheek, the soft plumpness of her lip even fixed in that stern line. What would it be like to see that mouth softened into a smile, bright and spontaneous? A devastating sight, no doubt. But I'm uncertain a man like me, hardened by war and loss, possesses the means to inspire such a thing.

"Do you think we'll catch up to your people soon?" Ilsevel asks abruptly.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Her question works like a counter-spell, breaking the enchantment of the moment. “It’s impossible to say,” I answer, and turn away from her to gaze across the stream into the forest beyond. There’s no distinct path through these trees, but Elydark has been making his way with purpose, following a course even I cannot discern. “We have no way of knowing how far behind them we are or if they took this same route. I hope to meet them before we reach the hinterlands, but it may be our paths do not join until much closer to the Hidden City.”

She takes this in. “And what of the undead?”

The warmth of the moment, the idle fantasy of calm, vanishes as though before an icy gale. I force myself to meet her gaze again. “What of them?”

“They’re out here somewhere, aren’t they? That’s what those three at the gate yesterday said. That someone is looking for you.”

I nod.

“Shanaera.”

The sound of that name, pronounced inexpertly on Ilsevel’s lips, sends a shudder down my spine. But I say only, “Yes. I believe she is here in Cruor, somewhere. And she is searching for me.”

“Was she . . . important to you?”

I hesitate. But what is the use of keeping such a secret? I have nothing to hide,

nothing of which to feel ashamed.

“She was promised to be mymaelar. We were to take thevelrabinding, speak the vows, and be made husband and wife.”

There’s a stillness in the air, a tension not present mere moments ago. I find myself suddenly aware of the trickling water over stones and the soft vibration of Elydark’s ongoing song emanating from where he stands a little downstream. From Ilsevel there is nothing. Not even a breath.

Then: “What happened to her?”

That is not a story I’m prepared to tell. It’s too much, too vulnerable, and Ilsevel, though my legal bride, has no right to hear it. “She died,” I say simply. “I was unable to reclaim her body.”

She nods. If she realizes I’m not telling the whole truth, she gives no sign. That stern mouth of hers parts slightly, letting out a tightly held breath. “You think . . .” She pauses, then, “You think the death mages . . .”

“I don’t know what to think.” I turn away from her. “For all I know this is some Miphates trick, an illusion.” Even as I speak the words, I know them to be false. I’ve got Shanaera’s ring—my mother’s ring—tucked into my belt. I feel it there, burning against my skin; evidence of a truth I do not want to face.

Once more I fix my gaze on the far forest, all its endless, intertwining shadows. It seems to me as though I’m seeing a prophetic glimpse of my life: the twisted enigmas, unanswerable questions, and unavoidable catastrophes. Somehow I’m supposed to make sense of it, to bring order to this chaos and healing to this land. It is more than any one man may hope to accomplish, even with a licorneir at his side. And yet what choice have I but to keep on striving, seeking, fighting, until the last of

my life is wrung from my body?

“What happened to their unicorns?”

I lift a brow, cast Ilsevel a short look.

“The undead we saw.” She plucks a piece of grass, twining it around her fingers absently. “You said that one man . . . Ilanthor?”

“Yes.”

“You said his unicorn, Ulathyra, was hearttorn when he died. What happened to her?”

“Attempts were made to recover all the hearttorn licorneir who survived the battle of Agandaaur Fields. Some were found and slain.”

“Slain?”

“Yes.” The hard truth is heavy on my lips. “In most cases it is the only merciful thing to be done with avelrhoar. They go mad with grief.”

“Can they not bond to another rider?”

“Not often. It is rare that something so sacred as thevelrabond can be formed anew.”

Once more Shanaera’s face fills my mind. Though we never formed ourvelarin, the intention was there between us for many years. And now here I sit with a stranger, my forearm tense, aware of the tightness of the invisible cord drawing me ever closer to her. How could I even begin to think of sharing such a bond with someone else? Particularly with a woman not of my people, who doesn’t know our ways or honor our most sacred traditions.

I cannot stay here a moment longer. Rising abruptly, I look down at Ilsevel, still seated there by the water, that bit of grass wrapped around her fingers. “We have far to go before day’s end,” I say, “and we do not know when thevardimnarmay strike. It’s best we keep going.”

I resist the urge to offer her my hand. She rises on her own, brushing bits of grass and debris from her skirts, and silently steps over to where Elydark waits for us. I lift her into the saddle and mount behind, careful to touch her as little as possible. Elydark splashes across the stream and falls into a steady lope on the far side, weaving through trees and shadows as gracefully as a breeze.

“How do they travel?” Ilsevel says suddenly, tossing the words back over her shoulder.

“What?”

“The undead,” she persists. “How do they travel across Cruor without unicorns?”

An intelligent question, one which I have been puzzling over all this while. Without the song of the licorneir to protect them, all living things are imperiled in Cruor. What about unliving things? Surely the dead may travel at will across the land without risk from thevardimnar. But are they on foot? They rode horses in the mortal world, but horses would be at terrible risk in the wilds of this world.

“I don’t know,” I answer at last. One more mystery to add to my collection. But this one I’m not keen to discover.

It’s nearly evening by the time we come to the end of Lafarallin Forest and emerge into open country once more. Before us lies the Agandaur Fields, a stretch of farm country, once rolling and green and carefully tilled. Those days are long gone, however.

Elydark comes to a halt on the edge of the tree line, shaking his head uncomfortably. I don’t blame him. Though we have many times looked upon this sight, it is always a shock to see it again.

“What is that?” Ilsevel gasps, interrupting a silence which she has maintained for some hours now.

I stare grimly ahead. Blighted land stretches before us for mile upon mile. A haze of simmering, broken magic still hovers a few feet above the ground, the remnants of

Miphates spells from when battle raged here between the united Licornyn tribes and our human invaders. It had taken many years to bring the chieftains together, to convince them of my right to rule and my worth as warlord and king. But when they at last amassed for battle, it was an awesome sight to behold. We thought that day to break through theobscurisspell, which has stood as a shield around Evisar since the time of the Rift. A valiant effort for which we gave up many lives.

The dead have all been cleared away, their remains picked over, their blood soaked into the ground. But somehow death still lingers in Agandaur. And beyond the fields, some five miles from our current position, rises theobscuris, as strong as ever it was.

It is a great wall of spellwork. To physical eyes it appears as a mist, multi-colored and churning with power. But that vision does not begin to encapsulate the horror of spirit its presence, even at five miles' distance, inspires. It is meant to cloud, confuse, and ultimately to terrify all who draw near. Any who summoned courage enough to ride theirlicorneirinto its depths have never been heard from again.

Ilsevel stares at it now. Recoiling in horror, she forgets all resistance to my touch and presses her back against my chest. "It is Miphates work," I say, my voice low, as though even from here we might be overheard. "Fed directly from the Rift, or so I suspect. Otherwise I don't know how mere mortal mages could maintain such a working over so many years. It was erected soon after the firstvardimnar, to prevent repercussions from the surviving Licornyn warlords. Now the mages rarely travel beyond it, and when they do, they use that."

I point to a series of pillars, emerging from the churning mist-spell. They are ten feet high, carved in five smooth, flat faces, tapered to a sharp point. Incongruous in this desolate place, they stand in pairs at twenty-yard intervals, extending across the field and vanishing over the horizon. At the moment, the stone is dull and cold beneath the twilight. But I have seen them glow bright as licorneir song when thevardimnarfalls.

“That is how the mage’s travel across Cruor,” I say. “They are powered by some magic which acts like a protection, not unlike the song of the licorneir. How they’ve managed it, I do not know. It’s not as effective—mages have been known to be plucked right off their paths when thevardimnarfalls. Still, neither Inor any of my people have been able to destroy those pillars. If we could break the Miphates’ access to their own world—to reinforcements and supplies from the outside—maybe we’d have a chance to drive them from Cruor once and for all. But so far, the gods have not been on our side.”

Ilsevel is very still, taking in what I say. I wonder how she receives these stories of my people’s suffering and our hatred for her kind. She’s been raised on stories of her own, after all, stories which no doubt contradict all that I now say. Does she believe me? Or does she prefer to cling to the narratives spun for her since childhood? I don’t know what I would do in her place.

Elydark moves forward at a more sedate pace. He is not eager to return to Agandaur, though he knows this is our swiftest route home. We both share far too many dreadful memories of this place. I wish I could urge him to greater speed, but there’s something watchful and careful simmering in his spirit which I cannot ignore. There may be danger close by. I trust him to alert me if necessary.

“The other night,” Ilsevel says suddenly, “when we . . . when we first met.”

Heat rushes in my pulse at the reminder of that night and all that took place between us. I suppress it and answer with grave coolness, “Yes?”

“You said your people were hunting Mage Artoris in search of a talisman. One that would open the secret paths to Evisar.”

Gods spare me, I made free with my tongue in more ways than one that night! Of course I’d thought she would be out of my life by the following morning, never to be

seen or thought of again. If I'd suspected the hold the velvet would have on us, I never would have revealed such things to her.

"Yes," I say. What's the point of denying it? It's not as though she's free to go betraying any secrets to my enemies. "Prince Ruvaen has taken captive Miphates, and he is motivated to convince them to reveal the secret workings of the talisman. If he succeeds, we should be able to travel through the obscurisat last, or even break it entirely."

And then, Nornala willing, we will set upon Evisar. With the combined might of the Licornyn riders and Ruvaen's mercenaries, the assault should be devastating indeed. The Miphates may have driven us back at Agandaur, but their losses were severe, and they have not been able to rebuild their force in the three years following. Once we are through that spell, they will be vulnerable. Unless . . .

The Shadow King.

His name is like darkness itself falling across my soul. Word reached us not long ago that Larongar Cyhorn intended to ally himself with the troldefolk, arranging a marriage between the Shadow King and his own daughter. All attempts on our part to prevent this match have proven futile. If the alliance goes through, if the trolde join with the Miphates in defense of Evisar, it could go very badly for my people.

I shake my head, disgusted. How any race of Eledria, even the reclusive and enigmatic troldefolk, could ally themselves with humans is beyond my understanding. What could Larongar possibly have to entice someone as powerful as the Shadow King?

Vellar, Elydark's voice sings sharply in my head. Vellar, I sense something.

My licorneir's caution has shifted to distress, a painful line of song. What is it? I ask,

reaching down to touch his shoulder.What is wrong?

Shanaera has been here.

A jolt of pure lightning goes through my body. Every sense in me is awake, searching, straining for some sign of Shanaera or a stray glimpse of crimson cloaks. Elydark slows.She is gone from this place now,he says, but I don't believe him. I can't.

Viciously I urge my licorneir into a gallop, speeding across the broken landscape of Agandaur. Some instinct drives me to a certain hillock, hardly distinguishable from the rest of the countryside around it. It was there that I held Shanaera's body as she bled out in black rivulets. It was there that her death was seared across my conscience, my very soul, for a lifetime. I would find it even in the utter dark ofvardimnar.

But she isn't there. The world around me is barren of life as far as the eye can see. Only there is something—something jutting from the top of that hillock, directly in that place where I'd knelt with her in my arms. Left there like a signal flag.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Elydark shakes his head, uneager to draw nearer. I do not try to force him. Slipping from the saddle, I land hard on the ground and first stagger, then run, up the incline to that place of death and memory.

A sword protrudes from the ground. A Licornyn sword, planted in the dirt, blade down. The hilt is wrapped in leather but decorated with a swath of tablet weaving in a pattern and colors I immediately recognize. I know whose sword this is.

“Kildorath,” I whisper.

Shanaera’s brother rode with me even after the death of his sister, his loyalty unquestionable. He was with me for this recent venture into the human world and did not hesitate to voice his fury when I returned to our camp at the Grimspire, a human bride in tow. But he obeyed me when I sent him and the others ahead through the gate.

I take hold of the sword, draw it from the earth. It shows no sign of either bloodstain, which means it saw no battle before it was placed here. Neither is there any trace of rust. Whoever planted it did so not long ago, perhaps earlier this very day. I spin in place, searching the earth around me for signs of what took place. There’s been a struggle here—skid-marks and muddled footprints, all partially covered by wind and debris, just visible to my trained eye.

Then I spy it: a scrap of crimson fabric. Cut from a cloak and left discarded. Stained with old, dried blood.

Elydark, I sing out in spirit, even as my jaw remains clenched tight. Our people were

here. They were attacked by—

A sudden squeal splits the air. I pivot in shock to see Elydark reared up on his hind legs, Ilsevel clinging desperately to his back. My licorneir comes down hard, hooves tearing into turf, and immediately turns his head about and sets off at a gallop.

“Elydark!” I shout, both aloud and along our soul-thread. My body lurches into motion, taking several swift-running steps. Then pain shoots along the velracord, up my arm to explode in the back of my head. I gasp, stagger, suddenly overcome with weakness.

The world around me spins, and I drop to my knees.

11

ILSEVEL

I sit upright in the saddle, gripping a handful of unicorn mane, as Taar strides away from me and climbs that slight rise in the terrain to where a sword protrudes from the earth. He takes hold of the hilt, draws it free, staring at it with an expression such as I never would have believed possible on the face of one so fearless. He looks as though he’s seen a ghost.

Elydark paces underneath me. The soul-song between him and his rider is alive with tension. It’s dark and elusive, and had I any choice in the matter, I would simply shut off my awareness of it, go back to the woman I was mere days ago, before I’d ever heard the song of a unicorn.

No sooner does that thought cross my mind, when a sudden cacophony of sound bursts in my head like a clap of thunder. I nearly scream, but choke on the sound when Elydark reacts in the same moment. Rearing, he tears at the air with his hooves,

and only the fact that I'd already latched hold of his mane keeps me in the saddle. He comes down hard, jarring all the breath out of me.

Before I have a chance to make sense of what has happened, he turns his great head about, puts his horn down, and gallops. Somewhere in the back of my awareness, I hear Taar's voice calling out after us, but I can't pay attention to that. Nor can I offer any but the faintest heed to the sudden tightening about my forearm, the painful stretch of thevelraas I am forcibly dragged away from him. My whole being is suddenly consumed in another burst of broken sound, quaking through my bones.

I know that sound. The realization comes over me in the silence that follows, a brief pause which gives my addled brain a chance to think. I've heard it before, once, on the banks of the river on the very edge of this world. Only then it had been multitudinous and distant, a chorus of devastation sung from many broken hearts. This sound is singular. And not nearly distant enough.

Elydark comes to a halt, lungs heaving. His soul reverberates with painful song which I can barely hear above the tumult of broken sound now erupting in my mind again and again. I shake my head, desperate to clear my mortal perceptions, to make sense of the world around me once more. The magic-stricken fields come back into hazy focus, the little clusters of surviving brush, the skeletons of trees, the riven furrows and spell-burnt patches.

And the dead woman.

I see her first, lying broken on the ground not ten yards from where we've stopped. From this distance I cannot discern if she is young or old, fair or ugly. Only that she is dead. The song of her soul is shattered, gone from this world. I blink and look again, this time taking in the Licornyn armor she wears. For a wild moment I wonder if she is Shanaera, come hunting for her prey. But this corpse does not rise and move, the living soul forced back into its decayed habitation. She is truly dead.

A fresh burst of broken song hits me like a blow, nearly knocking me from the saddle. I scream and throw up both hands to cover my ears, but it does no good. This song is not heard with the ears, but the heart alone. And it's enough to break my heart in two. I lift my gaze from the dead woman and see that which stands over her. Shimmering, almost invisible, as though shifting in and out of this reality, uncertain how to hold on.

It's a unicorn. Not quite as large or powerful as Elydark, but delicate-boned, almost dainty in her proportions. Her flesh seems to be falling away from her skeleton, burning up in the heat of the broken song which explodes in radiating waves from her core.

Nyathri. The word sings out from Elydark, rippling through the ether between us and that beast. Again and again he sings that same word—a name? Nyathri, Nyathri.

It's like he's reminding her of who she is. He takes a step nearer, cautiously, his head lowered, ears cupped forward. The burning unicorn looks up from the corpse. Though her skeletal head is monstrous to behold, I cannot seem to feel the horror such a sight should inspire. My heart is too full of her song. A song so broken and yet . . . and yet . . .

And yet I think I hear how it might be made right.

“Stop!” I don't know if I speak the word out loud or sing it. Either way, Elydark pulls up sharply, his eye rolling back to look at me, shocked, perhaps, that I would issue him a command. “You're going to drive her off,” I say a little more gently.

I'm not wrong. I can sense flight building up in her soul. She does not wish to leave behind the dead woman's corpse, but she will not let Elydark approach her. She's poised, on the brink of making a break, her savage song whirling around her in rapid burst after burst of brokenness. This must be the *velrhoar*—the hearttorn state which

Taar described. The same fate which befell all the wild unicorns I saw across that river. The same fate which took Mahra when the queen of Licorna died. It is truly horrible—worse than I could have imagined. Hearing that song is like feeling my own flesh being slowly blistered and burnt away, unable to withdraw my hand from the fire. To endure it must be a torment fit for hell itself. No wonder Taar said death was a mercy for such creatures.

But what if she might be healed? He did also say that, sometimes, a hearttorn unicorn could be bound to a new rider. Could we not calm her enough to bring her with us, back to Taar's city? Surely there are people there fit to bring wholeness to this broken song.

Before conscious thought has a chance to catch up with the rest of me, I slide from Elydark's saddle. The unicorn looks sharply at me, but something in my face makes him hold his peace. He watches as I step forward, slowly making my way across the barren dirt toward the dead woman and the burning beast. The nearer I come, the worse the heat grows. I stop in my tracks, halfway between her and Elydark, uncertain how to continue. Self-preservation urges me to retreat.

But when I look into that creature's eyes—into Nyathri's eyes—I see such pain there. And I understand it.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I begin to sing my own broken song. Halting at first, a sad little whimper in the back of my throat, hardly melodic. Something about it feels truthful, though. Real. I sing it again, louder this time. The world around me fades until there is nothing here but me and that skeletal unicorn. My song and hers.

I take a step nearer, allowing the music to trill across my tongue, through my lips. Wordless pain. Sorrow, and deeper than sorrow. Guilt.

I could not save her.

I should have saved her.

If only I had saved her.

My fault.

My fault.

My fault.

The song reaches out from inside me, touching the explosive bursts of song from the unicorn, mingling with that terrible sound. Becoming something like, but not quite, harmony.

She watches me. Those eyes of hers are endless pits of hellfire, red and raw. Her mane is tongues of black flame, whipping in the wind of her own pulsing energy. The flesh on her bones burns to ash, reforms, and burns again, casting endless red sparks

into the ether.

I draw nearer. It's almost unbearable. My mind tries to insist that my skin is blackening, peeling back from my bones. But this pain is not physical. It's that song of hers, ringing in my head. I know the difference. That doesn't mean it won't kill me. But if I can find just the right counter song, maybe I can douse this fire. Maybe I can bring her back.

"Nyathri," I whisper, sending the name out with my song. The instant I do so, I realize how wrong it is. Nyathri, whoever she once was, is gone. Burned away in despair. This creature is new. And she must be discovered.

I'm close to her now, closer than I would have believed possible. In the physical world, my feet stand just beside the fallen corpse of her rider. But I see none of that. There is no room for such things in this space of song we share.

The unicorn dips her head, her horn pointed straight at my heart. Fire licks up its coils, bursts in black tongues of flame from the tip. I do not back down. I sing, and my song breaks the flames and sends them off to either side. And there I am, staring into her burning eyes. Her name, her real name, is just on the tip of my tongue. I don't know if I dare speak it. It feels heavy, like a hot coal. I fear it will burn me up from the inside to give voice to it. My lips part, move to shape the new sound.

A roar erupts the atmosphere. A blinding flash, sudden and hot, bursts from the unicorn as she throws up her head. I stagger back, arms outflung in hopeless self-protection as I fall to the ground. Between my hands, I see the unicorn angle her head, and I know she means to skewer me on the spot.

I love her. It's such a strange, upswelling of emotion, I can't explain it. But I know it's true. I love her and her burning song, so horrible and so beautiful. So far beyond my control. I love her because something in me recognizes her. In that moment, as

shelunges to kill me, I am glad that she is the one who will deal my death.

“Ilsevel!”

That voice. It’s been calling my name for some while now. A voice of earth and air and physical existence, like a bedrock on which my stumbling feet may stand.

The next moment, Taar’s arm is around me, and his sword is swinging. It connects with the unicorn’s horn even as it plunges. There’s a moment of contact, followed by a shockwave. I’m jolted back into my physical body as we are flung through the air, me still gripped in Taar’s firm embrace. I have just enough awareness to feel thevelraon my wrist suddenly burning.

We hit the ground hard, rolling. Darkness enfolds me.

12

TAAR

I crouch over Ilsevel as the blast of soulfire rolls toward us, a wave so hot, I fear it will rip the flesh from our bones.

At the last second Elydark’s song surrounds us in a glowing shield of protection. The fire breaks against it and does not touch us where we lie. My arms around Ilsevel, I open my eye partway to see my licorneir standing between us and thevelrhoarone. That skeletal being throws back her head, screaming to the heavens above.

Then, without a last look at the broken rider lying on the ground at her feet, she turns and races off into the wild, trailing the flame of her torment behind her like a streaking comet.

I remain where I am, my arms around Ilsevel, covering her with my body until the last of that flame fades into the distance. Dropping my head, I breathe out hard. The weakness which took me at our parting was so great, I feared I would not find the strength to gather myself and follow after Elydark and Ilsevel. If thevardimnarhad struck, I would have been lost for sure. As it was, I felt the broken, evil magics of the battlefield trying to work their way through my compromised defenses.

But thevelradrew me straight to her. The more I staggered after it, the more viciously it pulled, until I could hardly say if I propelled myself or was carried by the strength of that spell-cord.

And when I saw her—standing there before the flaming unicorn, about to be impaled through the heart—it was as though some new spirit was born inside me. A spirit of powerand rage which took control, body and soul, and hurtled me headlong to her defense, heedless of all danger or consequence.

Her name ripped from my lips, again and again, as though I could pull her back to me, but she did not seem to hear. The hearttorn licorneir held her enthralled in some hypnotic spell. At the last possible second, my sword arm fell in a desperate swing. The ringing contact with that horn was just enough to break whatever hold the licorneir had over Ilsevel, but the blast sent us flying. Did that rough impact shatter every bone in her body? I tried to take the brunt of it, holding her close and angling my body so that my shoulder struck the ground first. But I had little control as we rolled.

“Ilsevel,” I say, my voice rough as I brush dirt from her pale face. There are a few scrapes and bruises, but a quick exploration with my hands reveals no broken bones. Her neck and spine seem to be intact, her skull spared any fractures. But she is so still, so cold. “Ilsevel,” I say again, patting her cheek. “Can you hear me?”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Elydark's shadow falls across me. Vellar, his voice sings into my head, did you hear it? Did you hear the song they shared?

I turn my head sharply, scowling up at my licorneir. What were you thinking? You took her away from me! Did you not know what danger you'd put us both in?

Elydark drops his head. For possibly the first time in his existence, my licorneir looks ashamed. Forgive me, Vellar. I heard Nyathri, and I—

A jolt shoots through my body. I sit upright, turning to look behind me, back to the place where that hearttorn licorneir had stood. Nyathri? I'd not recognized her, burning and broken as she was. Of course Elydark would know her by her song, which I could not hear. But if that was Nyathri, then . . .

I'm on my feet the next moment, abandoning Ilsevel where she lies. Despite the tightening of the velra, which does not want me to leave her side again so quickly, I press on, recovering the ground over which we'd been flung, my footsteps falling hard. I feel as though I carry a great weight on my shoulders. It only grows with each step I take nearer to that broken corpse, who lies with arms outspread beneath the twilight sky.

Ashika.

I stand over her, stare down into her dead face. Her head is half-severed from her shoulders, only hanging on by a few tendons, the spine completely broken. Her hair is matted with blood, her face drained of all life and vitality. And yet I still see her as I once knew her—my friend, my comrade-in-arms. Quick and wily Ashika, always

keen to dash ahead on fleet-footed Nyathri, scouting out dangerous terrain and bringing swift reports. She was a seasoned warrior, one I was glad to have by my side on this campaign. She and her licorneir were as bonded as two souls can be.

My knees quake. It's all I can do to stay upright, to keep myself from collapsing beside her corpse and gathering her in my arms. She would not like such emotive displays, however. I can almost hear her laughing voice in my ear even now: "Have a little dignity, luinar! For my sake if not your own."

Elydark paces heavily to my side and bows his neck to hang his nose over my shoulder. I lean against his cheek, taking momentary comfort in his presence, in the knowledge that he and I have not had to face the torment of velrhoar. If only I had been quick enough to deal a death blow! In my fear for Ilsevel, I had been concerned only with preventing that flaming horn from piercing her breast. If I had realized, if I had known . . .

I shade my eyes and look out across the lonely landscape. She's gone—Nyathri has vanished into the wild lands of Cruor. Her hearttorn state will make her vulnerable to the vardimnar. She will become as corrupt as Mahra and the other hearttorn licorneir who roam these lands, a lost and damned soul, forever separated from the light of Nornala and her eternal home.

Elydark's song rumbles low and wordless in my chest. He was always drawn to Nyathri. There was a time when I wondered if the two of them might even form a bond of their own. Now that chance is lost, even as Nyathri herself is lost to the darkness which consumes her.

I'm sorry, my friend, I say.

As am I, he replies heavily. I forgot myself and left you vulnerable. It was wrong of me. It will not happen again.

I forgive him, of course. We all do mad things in the face of heartbreak. It doesn't make our bond any less true.

I look down at Ashika's corpse once more, then turn slowly, searching the battlefield for others. There's no denying what took place here: my people, continuing their journey to the Hidden City as commanded, were set upon by Shanaera and the Crimson Cloaks. Taken by surprise, they fought valiantly and . . . what? Did any of them survive? Or were they all slain like Ashika, only to have their corpses hauled away to be experimented on by necroliphonmages? I force myself to look at Ashika's wound again, her half-severed neck. Was this gruesome end ultimately what spared her the fate of her comrades? Was her corpse simply too damaged to be useful to the death mages?

I harden my jaw. They cannot all be dead. My warriors are fierce and dauntless, a force to be reckoned with anywhere in the Eledrian realms. Even taken by surprise, they would have fought valiantly. Surely some of them escaped.

"We must hasten on," I say firmly. "We must find our people." I do not say it, but no doubt Elydark hears the guilt ringing through my spirit. I should have been with them. I should have warned them, protected them. I should have died with them. There will be time enough for guilty wallowing later. Right now I must focus on what is and what can be done.

What of Ashika? Elydark asks.

My heart twists. I would like to sew her up in her cloak, lay her across Elydark's flanks, and bring her back to her family for proper funeral rights, as befits a Licornyn warrior. But my licorneir, strong though he is, cannot bear two riders and a corpse all the long way across Cruor.

We will sing the song of parting here, I say, and do what we can for her soul. Then we

must leave her to the grace of Nornala.

Elydark shakes his head, unhappy with this plan, but unable to offer an alternative. I set to work at once, arranging Ashika's remains into a more peaceful pose. I close her eyes, use two stones to weigh down the eyelids, and angle her head so that the gash in her neck and shoulder is not quite so obvious. Crossing her hands over her chest, I bind them with a bit of twine to hold them in place. She looks almost peaceful now. At least there are no carrion birds left in this land to desecrate her body further. Perhaps she may rest easy here, until the goddess comes to claim her soul.

I wish I hadilsevelblossoms to lay upon her chest. Instead I simply sprinkle some of the dried petals from my pouch across her bloodless face, into the hollow of her throat, down to her stomach. As I do this, I begin to sing the song of parting—a song I have sung too many times over the years. A song I never had a chance to sing over Shanaera. “Alahir Nornala, rautha-almar. Alahir se Ashika, nei-almar lyar.”

Behold, Nornala, your warrior.

Behold Ashika, your daughter brave.

Elydark joins his voice with mine, his resonance a deep, droning support to the melody. I lean into his song, drawing strength from it, even when sorrow threatens to choke me with strangling fingers. I close my eyes, allow the song to move through me as it should, envision it pouring from my lips in a stream to cover Ashika, the only shroud she will ever know.

“Licor neir-nalas korval ei sonaum,” I sing. “Son elthari heileth ei idoroth.”

The songs of your Star Children will wake her no more.

Nor shall her friends cheer her from beyond the grave.

The words are ancient and yet new each time I've sung them—words I hope never to sing again, knowing always that I will have to, until the end of my days.

Another voice joins in. At first I hardly realize it, so subtly does it find its way into the harmonies of Elydark's resonance. There are no words, but I feel a deepening of tone, of meaning, followed by an upward pull. It's like my spirit, trapped here in this world of dirt and blood and despair, is beckoned suddenly to lift its gaze, to look upward into a brightness and bigness it had all but forgotten. I almost resist—part of me doesn't want to remember, wants to remain here where the grief is thick and clinging and all too familiar. But that new voice continues to ascend, higher and higher, and I cannot help but go with it.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

The final words of the death song fall from my lips. My part of the melody trails away softly, while Elydark and the other voice continue to hold their two-part harmony a little longer. For a few stolen moments I allow my soul to rest suspended in their song, carried above mourning into the vast reaches beyond hurt, beyond time, beyond decay and loss and heartbreak.

Slowly I open my eyes. Ashika's face fills my vision. For a moment I see it as it once was—alive and full of life, courage, good humor, and eagerness for adventure. I half-expect her to look up at me and smile as she once did, to wink and tell me not to be so long-faced, for all will turn out right in the end.

I blink. The image fades. I see only the gray cheeks and two stones covering those sunken eyes. She is gone. But perhaps, by the grace of that song, her soul has found the path which will lead her home.

Someone kneels beside me. A quick glance sideways, and I almost choke on an inhaled breath. Ilsevel. She has folded her hands like mine and bent her head, looking for all the world like a solemn Licornyn mourner in her borrowed gown and her free-flowing hair. Was that her voice—that miraculous, gods-gifted voice—which joined with mine and Elydark's? Her lips are still now, her eyes closed. But I can feel the vibration of song in her soul, not unlike a licorneir's. So strange. And so very beautiful.

She opens her eyes at last, her dark lashes lifting as her gaze slips sideways to catch mine. She looks frightened, as though she expects me to reprimand her. When I say nothing, however, she looks down at Ashika's still face once more. The muscles in her throat tense as she swallows. Then: "Was she a friend of yours?"

“Yes,” I reply.

“Was it . . . Shanaera? Who did this?”

“I believe so.”

“And the rest of your people?”

“I don’t know.”

She nods. Her folded hands drop into her lap. We remain like so for a time, neither moving. Finally she draws a long breath and lets it out in a gusting sigh. As though giving into an impulse, she reaches out and takes hold of my hand. It’s such a simple gesture, and yet the moment her fingers wrap around mine, fire roars across my skin and bursts in my head like a storm. I’m so stunned, I can do nothing but stare at those small, white fingers, so delicate, so unscarred. The hand of a lady who has known nothing but soft living and indulgence. But there is strength in that grip of hers.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I meet her eye again. “What for?”

“For your loss.”

“It isn’t your fault.” Even as I say the words, I regret them. If it weren’t for Ilsevel, I would have been with my people when they were attacked. I would have fought with them, protected them. Ashika might still be alive had I not allowed myself to become distracted by this warbride of mine.

She seems to read my thoughts. Her brow puckers, and she sucks in both lips, biting down hard. Then she nods, releases my hand, and looks down at Ashika’s face once

more. “I’m still sorry.”

But her sorrow cannot undo what has been done. Neither can my guilt.

Aware of that cold place on my hand where her fingers had gripped, I force myself to my feet. “Come,” I say. “The sun will set soon. We must be away from this evil place before we stop for another night.”

13

ILSEVEL

Days pass. One after another. Each chased by a long, dark, exhaustion-filled night.

I begin to forget what life was like before Cruor—before these endless hours of galloping, before these new horizons sought, found, and left behind in dust. Even the occasional spread of black lightning across the sky ceases to surprise me, though it remains as great a horror as ever. It is simply part of this new existence in which I have found myself, along with Elydark’s song and Taar’s broad presence at my back.

I lose all track of how long this journey has lasted. Each day is so much like the last, time measured in hoofbeats rather than seconds. Taar makes a point to stop by some water source at midday each day, purifies the water, and sees that I refresh myself. Sometimes he hunts, but never with any luck. While he claims it is not impossible to find prey out here in the wild country, farther from Evisar and the epicenter of the Rift, I’ve yet to see any evidence of life. What could possibly bear to live out here, among these ghostly ruins and this hell-plagued atmosphere?

So we subsist on a diet of fume cakes, which do not grow more toothsome with familiarity. I’d almost prefer to starve than gnaw my way through one more of those damnable rocks! But every night, Taar urges me to eat, his tone carefully balanced

between concern and command so that I do not quite dare rebel.

And every night, I lie down on my side of our camp, aching in every bone, feeling the wind trying to make its way through the folds of my cloak . . . and wonder what would happen if I dared creep to the other side of the fire. If I dared curl up against that forbidding wall of Taar's back, drawing warmth from his presence. Would he react? Would he bark sharply at me to get away? Would he remind me all over again how important it is that we do nothing to strengthen the *velrabond*, which already puts him at such risk?

Or would he roll over in the dark, covering me with his cloak and his body. Let the scent of his musk fill my nostrils even as the warmth of his hands molded my flesh, pressing me against him. Would we rediscover those glories we knew so briefly . . . how many nights ago? I've long since lost count. But I've certainly not forgotten the experience. My body burns to relive it, to know what new wonders may yet be discovered between us.

Each night, I bite down hard on my lower lip, squeeze my eyes tight—and suddenly memory of a pyre fills my head. *Aurae's* pyre, along with the corpses of those she had slain. My darling sister, so sweet, so innocent . . .

Then I roll over in the darkness, curl into a tight ball, and silently cry myself to sleep.

At dawn we rise to do it all again. Taar stokes up the fire, brews his tea, which he shares with me, then packs the saddlebags with swift efficiency. We mount; we ride. We cover as much territory as possible. Not once do we see any sign of his people, not since the corpse on the battlefield. Nor do we glimpse the hearttorn unicorn, though I find myself watching for her and for Mahra and the wild herd, my gods-gift straining for the faintest echo of that broken chorus. All is silent in *Cruor*, however. All songs have been swallowed up in the un-song of the *vardimnar*.

One day, late in the afternoon, Elydark crests a rise above a valley which once belonged to a prosperous lord of Licorna. I can still see evidence of fields so laboriously carved out of the wildland, the stone walls, the storage buildings, half-fallen under the weight of overgrowth, eaten away by decay. The house itself is stone: a fine, golden-faced building, with empty windows that gives off the feeling of a soul long-since fled.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“There’s a storm rolling in,” Taar says, his voice deep and rough, close to my ear. I startle a little, unused to any break in the long silence of our travel days. When he lifts his arm, I look where he indicates and see darkness gathering on the southern horizon, clouds mounding on each other as though competing to see who can reach this little valley first.

“It’s not thevardimnar, is it?” I ask uncertainly, even as a burst of lightning flashes in that churning mass.

“No,” Taar responds, “just a storm, but those can be fierce enough in Cruor this time of year. We’d be wise to take shelter. Rothiliar House lies yonder. Perhaps we should—”

“No!” The word jumps from my lips before I can stop it. I cover my mouth with my hand, embarrassed by my own vehemence. “Please,” I continue, turning to look up at Taar. “It’s so . . . so . . .” I don’t know how to express it, the revulsion I feel at the prospect of entering that once-beautiful abode, now hollowed out, the spirit dragged unwillingly from its heart. It would feel like a sort of desecration.

Taar looks down at me, his expression solemn. Then he nods. “There is an old shepherd’s hut not far from here,” he says. “Let us see what comforts it offers.”

Elydark hastens into the valley, racing against the storm. We gallop through air so tense and still, it almost hurts the skin to pass through it. When the first raindrops begin to fall, it’s a relief just to feel some of that tension break. But then thunder rumbles, loud as a giant’s roar, and lightning bursts from the sky, striking a tree not half a mile from our current position. I scream and clap my hands over my ears, but

Taar never wavers. His arm slips around me, a comfort he does not often offer thesedays. He holds me close against him so that his cloak protects me from the worst of the rain. “Almost there,zylnala,” he says, shouting to be heard above the downpour.

Something in me warms at the sound of that pet name. It’s been so long since I’ve heard him say it, I’d almost forgotten the odd little trill it makes of his rough-and-ready voice. I shouldn’t like it as much as I do.

Elydark pulls to a stop before a hillock, atop which stands a great, crooked, claw-rooted tree. It takes a moment before I notice the doorway dug straight into the side of the mound, between two massive roots. A few planks of petrified wood line the front, holding strong against the elements. An odd combination of natural and manmade, it isn’t the most inviting place. But just now, under this torrent, it might be a king’s palace.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather wait out the storm in the house?” Taar asks, his words almost lost in another crack and roll of thunder.

I shake my head. Humble though it may be, there’s no sense of emptiness emanating from this dwelling, making it much preferable to those echoing halls. “This will do fine,” I shout, rain pouring down my face, into my mouth.

Taar dismounts. After a short exchange of song with Elydark, he ducks his head under the low lintel and peers into the gloom inside. I hope his half-fae eyes can make something of those shadows; mine certainly could not. He looks back out over his shoulder. “It’s empty. You should be safe enough.”

I nod shortly and swing down the long drop from Elydark’s back to the ground, the bones of my feet jarring somewhat from impact. Wrapping my sodden cloak around me, I hasten to the door. A strong smell wafts out to greet me—earthiness, damp, and

decay. Nothing dangerous, nothing that sets my teeth on edge. It's very cold but dry.

I step inside. No need for me to duck—that doorway was built for much taller people than I. It's so dark, I stumble after a mere three steps, then stand stock still, afraid to venture farther. "Are you coming?" I cast back over my shoulder, teeth chattering.

"Elydark and I will keep watch out here tonight."

"What?" I whirl on heel, stagger back to the doorway, and grip the post with one hand.

Taar is little more than a rain-spattered silhouette looming before me. "If the vardimnar comes, I should have plenty of time to call you out to us," he says, not quite looking at me. "And I'll fetch you what supplies you need from the bags, of course."

I gape at him, momentarily wordless. Then I snarl, "I'm sure as hells not spending the night in this hole by myself!"

He glances at me, eyes a gleam. "It is . . . quite close quarters in there."

"So? I don't take up much room." I draw myself a little straighter. "Or does it go against your kingly delicacy to share a roof with me once more?"

"Ilsevel—"

"Fine! Have it your way." Gripping folds of cloak with both hands, I stomp back out into the rain, gasping as a fresh sheet of icy wetness pummels my shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Taar's voice is a bark, but another growl of thunder softens its harshness.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I tilt my chin, trying not to care as rain splashes and runs like tears down my cheeks. “If you’re determined to drown yourself out here all night like an idiot, I might as well drown with you. Isn’t that what marriage is all about? For better or for gods-damned worse?”

Though I can’t discern much of his face, I can feel his gaze fixed upon me. I try to meet it, though it’s difficult with water pelting my eyes. I’m obliged to blink and blink and blink to keep from being blinded.

“I could force you back inside, you know.”

“Yes,” I reply, “and then what? Will you bind my hands and feet to make me stay? Because otherwise . . .”

A roll of thunder drowns out his curse. But I see the way his shoulders sag suddenly and know I’ve won. “Get inside,” he growls. “I’ll get the saddlebags.”

I stand a moment longer to make certain he’s true to his word. Elydark seems to have partially faded out of this reality, a natural defense against the elements, I suspect, but his saddle and gear are all still solid enough. Taar grabs the bags and slings them over his shoulder before turning and scowling at me, his face severe in a flash of lightning.

I smile triumphantly, despite the water dripping off my chin, and turn to reenter the hovel. It’s so painfully dark inside, I cannot decide whether to step to the right or the left to make room for Taar. Instead I simply stand still until he crowds the doorway behind me. One firm hand takes hold of my shoulder, deliciously warm through the sodden folds of my cloak, and firmly pushes me to the right.

For a moment he seems to absolutely fill the space, and I wonder if I’ve made a mistake demanding he share this hovel with me. But then, somehow, he folds himself into more manageable proportions. I cannot see him, but I feel the space in front of

me alter somehow. He mutters an incantation, one I've heard him speak before: "Rhuenar tor-vel." The air tenses, and I'm almost certain I feel Elydark's voice singing back to him, sharing power through their connection. There's a noise of stone-on-stone.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

A spark flares. I put up a hand to shield my gaze, then peer through my fingers to watch my warlord husband set light to a bundle of kindling in a small clay pot with an open front. There's a crooked flue of sorts, winding its way up the root-wrapped wall, presumably to carry smoke out into the storm. It looks as though we won't have to spend the night in pitch dark after all.

Taar looks absolutely massive in this cramped space, hunched over that little clay fireplace. And yet he is graceful as ever when he settles on his haunches and casts me a quick look over his arm. "Make yourself comfortable. If you can."

There's nowhere to sit save beside him. My head grazes the twining roots dangling from the ceiling, causing showers of dust to fall if I don't duck. But the floor is padded with several layers of something soft and springy—fleeces, I think, a little smelly but mostly protected from decay. They crunch when I step, giving off faint hints of a lavender-like perfume. I wonder if the shepherds sprinkled dried plants underneath the layers of old fleeces to help with the smell.

"You seem familiar with this place," I say, easing to the ground beside Taar.

He grunts. "I have traveled across Cruor on my own before. Elydark and I have discovered any number of bolt holes to be used in emergencies."

"Will Elydark be safe out there?" Even as I ask, the wind picks up outside, an awful wailing that makes the tree atop this mound groan. Despite myself, I press against Taar's warm side.

Taar chuckles. "He would be delighted to know you asked such a question. But not to

worry—Elydark is unaffected by the storms of this world.”

Be that as it may, I don’t like thinking of the beautiful unicorn out there in that lashing wind. I almost feel guilty for abandoning him to it, though what good I would do by standing out there with him, I can’t imagine.

Taar reaches into one of the bags and pulls out another blightedumecake. I can’t help the sigh that whispers like a curse from my lips when he hands it to me. He chuckles softly, and I feel the vibration of it rumble through the arm I’m pressed up against. “Has time and familiarity not endeared you to Licornyn faire?”

“If these are a good representation of your people’s culinary prowess, I’m sorry to inform you, but you are woefully behind all other worlds and realms.”

At that Taar throws back his head and seems to just bite back a bark of laughter. He merely smiles instead, looking up at the firelight playing among the dangling root ends. “You reveal your own lack of experience with such words, I’m afraid. You have certainly never encountered the Noxaurianxyrharoac.”

I grimace. The very name sounds revolting. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not, but I’m going to tell you anyway. It’s a scorpion prevalent in the Forests of Xyre. It is seared briefly in oil and served still alive and, as you can imagine, raging. It is the responsibility of the intrepid diner to deal a final death blow and disarm the poisoned stinger before digging in.” He glances down, taking in my horrified expression. “I hear it’s delectable with a cream sauce.”

I make a face. Trust the Noxaurians to serve a meal that wants to kill you back. Staring down at theumecake, I turn it slowly in my hand. “I’m not sure even cream sauce could save these abominations.”

To my surprise, Taar takes the cake from my hands. “Perhaps it is time I shared this little secret,” he says and opens another sack. From its depths he removes something wrapped in paper-like leaves. He hands it to me, and I blink with surprise at the stickiness oozing right through the wrapping. “Go on,” he says. “Open it.”

I peel back a leaf to reveal a strange brown substance. Were it not for the way the firelight makes it glisten, I’d almost mistake it for leather.

“Taste it,” Taar says. When I look at him askance, his teeth flash in the fire’s glow. “I swear on all Nornala’s holy children, you won’t regret it.”

Not entirely convinced, I nibble at a corner of the sticky stuff. Immediately sweetness explodes across my tongue, a revelation after days and days of nothing but dust-dry cakes. I take a larger bite, my teeth sticking so hard, I fear for a moment they won’t come apart. A little piece breaks off in my mouth. I roll it around my tongue until it finally softens enough to swallow. It’s delicious. A sweetness like honey, but with a slight sourness that only increases the overall experience. I want to eat more, my appetite suddenly awakened. But half-remembered tales of faerie fruit and the dangers they pose to humans make me hesitate.

“What is it?” I ask, turning the rest of the dark lump over in my hand.

“It’s calledleolii,” Taar says. “Or, in your own tongue perhaps—sweet leather. It’s made from theliluthfruit, which grows in abundance in the hinterlands. It is inedible in its fresh form, poisonous. But prolonged exposure of the flesh to sunlight neutralizes the toxins, so my people eat it in this dried form. Take care though,” he adds as I go to take another bite, “it will go to your head.”

He’s not wrong. A second bite, and I feel a warm blurring around the edges of my brain, not unlike a heady wine. Hungry as I am, I cannot resist taking a third small nibble before Taar takes theleoliifrom my hand and wraps it back in its leaves. “Will

you not have some?" I ask, my voice rather more slurred than I like.

He shakes his head, mouth quirked. "One of us, at least, should keep his wits about him tonight." He takes a bite ofumecake, his teeth breaking through the outer crust with apparent ease.

Thus do we share a meal, meager though it may be. Afterwards we sit for some while. I'm suddenly very warm, despite my rain-drenched clothes, and resist the urge to shed some layers. I slip my cloak from my shoulders and only just restrain myself from unfastening the front of my bodice. My fingers touch the front laces before I stop and clench my hands tight in my lap. Taar doesn't move. He seems to be made of rock, his only sign of life his slow inhale and exhale of breath and the intense focus of his eyes on the dancing flames.

I should curl up and try to sleep. It will be another bone-bruising ride tomorrow, no doubt. But I find I don't want to waste this time. All our other nights together have been so cold, so distant, always with the campfire between us. All save that one night . . . that one I dare not think about too closely.

Only now I'm thinking about it again. Thinking about it while that lovely, hazy blur moves through my senses, softening all my sharp edges. I'm suddenly so aware of the heat of Taar's arm, pressed against mine. Every muscle is shaped as though hewn from solid marble, and all the various scars lining its contours only add to the overall impression of barely-contained power. The man is magnificent. Terrible and mighty, and no amount of proximity has in any way accustomed me to the dangerous thrill his presence inspires in my gut. And now, with the warmth of the intoxicatingliluthfruit bubbling in my veins, I wonder . . .

"How much farther to your city?" I ask abruptly, more to drown out my own traitorous thoughts than anything. My voice seems somewhat smothered in this close atmosphere. I wonder if Taar even heard me, he is silent such a long while.

“I expect to reach the hinterlands tomorrow afternoon,” he says at last. “With any luck, we’ll cross the Morrona River before sundown and reach Elanlein, the last Holy House, by moonrise.”

So soon? I frown into the fire. I’d thought we had more time. More time for what, I cannot say. More time for exhausting gallops across endless, empty landscapes? More time for hard cakes and sticky dried fruit? More time for silent campfires under the watchful eyes of distant stars? No, not that.

More time to spend in his atmosphere. Breathing his air. Feeling the safety of his arms on either side of me, the bigness of his frame at my back. Knowing that, even though he loathes everything my people represent, he will protect me. At whatever cost to himself.

When this bond of ours is broken, what’s to become of me then? This protection I enjoy under Taar’s mantel is false, I know, but it’s the most secure I’ve ever felt. When that is gone, I will be adrift in a world far bigger, far wilder, far more dangerous and terrible than I ever imagined from behind the walls of Beldroth Castle, back in the days when I thought I craved adventure and freedom. What I wouldn’t give for a taste of that ignorance once more! For a chance to be the thoughtless child who believed she knew who she was and what she wanted from life. For a chance to do it all over.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“Will your priest be able to break this do you think?” I ask, holding up my arm and turning my wrist. I can neither see nor feel any sign of thevelratonight. But I do not doubt its presence.

“I don’t know,” Taar replies, his voice low and thoughtful.

“Are you afraid you’ll be stuck with me through the rest of the month?”

He glances my way, the corner of his mouth tilted upward slightly. “It would not be . . . ideal.”

Maybe it’s just the fuzziness of theleoliplaying with my perceptions. But there’s something in his gaze that makes molten liquid trickle down my spine and pool in my gut. I find my eyes dropping momentarily to his lips, but hastily force them back up again, hoping he didn’t notice. Something tells me he did.

He looks away again. Picking up a stick from his supply of kindling, he prods our little fire in the clay pot. “So tell me,” he says, his tone shifting to something more distant than it was a moment before, “where do you want me to take you once you are free?”

That warm liquid in my gut hardens to stone. He’s only voicing the very question I’ve asked myself again and again, but how am I to answer? I know what I must do—return to Beldroth and let my father know I’m alive, safe, and ready to marry the Shadow King, if he’ll still have me. But I can’t very well ask Taar to drop me off at the doorstep of his enemy. A border town like the one near Lamruil’s Temple is probably my safest bet. But how can I prove to the people there my identity? I have

nothing on me to verify such a wild claim, no token or sigil, not even a convenient birthmark.

Taar is still waiting for an answer. I shrug lightly. “I haven’t really thought about it. I’ve been so focused on simply getting through each day. I still have a little time to decide, don’t I?”

He grunts. I can’t tell if it’s in agreement or otherwise. After another silence he says, “Where did Mage Artoris intend to take you?”

I catch my breath. Gods-damn me black and blue, I’d almost forgotten that I’d been foolish enough to tell him about Artoris, about that stupid letter. He’s not mentioned it since that night, and part of me hoped I’d simply dreamt that whole encounter.

“Evisar,” I say at long last.

Taar is suddenly tense beside me. Though the fire continues to flicker, and his presence is so huge and warm, I feel cold. Chilled right to the bone. “Why would anecroliphonmage want to take you to Evisar?” he asks.

I look up to find his dark eyes staring so hard into mine. “I don’t know,” I answer truthfully. “I . . . I don’t know.”

His jaw works. He seems to be thinking through and discarding any number of harsh words, either demands or accusations. I try to keep my face as open as I dare, to give the appearance of honesty, even when we both know I’m holding onto more secrets than either of us dares acknowledge.

“You did not want to go with him,” Taar says at last, slowly. As though he’s trying to make sense of the words he’s saying. “You resisted. I saw you.”

I nod.

“Then why . . .” He stops and once more carefully reshapes his words. “You told me you asked him to come. To run away with you.”

I look down at my hands, empty in my lap. They look like such lifeless, useless things, and yet only a short time ago I believed I could clench and shake them against the whole mad world!

“He did not want to take my sister. When the attack came.” I stare into the fire again, seeing once more the licking flames burning across the rooftops of the temple buildings. The screams of the dying priests echo in my ears, along with the savage roars of the virulium-maddened Noxaurians. “He would have left her to die, and I . . . I learned what kind of man he really was.”

There’s nothing but silence between us for some while. I can almost hear my words grinding through Taar’s brain as he seeks to make sense of them, to make sense of me. I know it doesn’t all add up, but even now he doesn’t press me for answers I’m unwilling to give. I am, as I have always been, utterly at his mercy. And yet he remains merciful.

“So,” Taar says after what feels like hours, “you do not care for him anymore.”

My lip curls, undecided whether it wants to smile or sneer. “I don’t think I ever really did.”

Taar takes this in without comment. The fire crackles in its pot, casting an eerie red glow about this small chamber. A far cry from the tapestry-lined room of stone and brocade in which I lived my coddled life up to now. Even the stark quarters at Lamruil’s temple were luxurious by comparison. But I do not wish to be back in either of those rooms with all their easy comforts close at hand. What prisoner would

long for her prison, even a prison of silk and lace?

“I’m tired,” I say suddenly. Taar offers no reaction, so I add, “I will sleep now. Good night, warlord.”

There is little enough room to lie down, but I turn away from him, curl on my side in my sodden clothes and damp cloak, shivering with both cold and exhaustion. Sleep is far from me, however. Instead I find myself straining to listen through the howling wind and rain outside for some far-off song. A broken song, full of guilt and loss and pain. A song which, I’m almost certain, might be made whole, if only I could hear the right harmony to sing into its brokenness.

“Good night, zylnala,” Taar says softly after what feels like a long, long while.

14

TAAR

My gaze travels to her small form, curled up on her side on the shepherd’s fleeces. Even through the wet folds of her cloak, I can see the shivers that quake through her every so often and wish I might warm her properly. This small fire radiates precious little heat, not enough to dry our clothes. Wearing little as I am, my skin is already dry, and other than the damp locks of hair hanging over my shoulders, one couldn’t tell I’d just stood out in a thunderous downpour. But she might catch a chill. Humans are such frail creatures.

Only I can’t say she’s given me an impression of frailty over these last seven days of our acquaintance. Indeed, she’s proven unexpectedly resilient, facing each new challenge with a mingling of stubbornness and pride that makes for quite a convincing facsimile of courage.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

A smile pulls at my mouth as I remember the way she stood there in the storm, scowling up at me even as pelting rain all but blinded her. Gods spare me, she would rather drown standing upright than let me care for or coddle her in any way!

My smile slips away, replaced by a frown. Who is she? The question plagues me even as it has since the beginning. Ilsevel . . . Mage Artoris's intended lover. A gods-gifted pilgrim, a worshipper of Lamruil. A bereft sister. Such is the sum of my knowledge of this woman. Every new piece I've added to the puzzle has only served to increase both my confusion and curiosity. Sometimes it's all I can do not to grab her by the shoulders and demand explanations. Her full name to start with. And what in the sight of all the gods she was actually doing at that temple with Artoris that night.

With a sigh I turn my gaze down to my own forearm. Firelight plays across my skin, highlighting various scars from many years of violent campaigns. But my mind seems determined to play tricks on me. I believe I see the winding coils of velra, wrapping as tight as when the young priest bound us on our wedding night. In my head I hear my own voice speaking the sacred vows of bonding: "With my faith will I honor you. With my body will I protect you. With my arms will I shelter you. With my heart will I warm you."

I had not meant them. Not truly. But there must have been some power in those words so thoughtlessly spoken, some force beyond my simple intention of saving her life and abandoning her immediately thereafter. With every passing hour I've found myself more and more determined to uphold what I vowed that night. To protect her. To shield her from the darkness of this world and all others.

“My mouth, my lips, my tongue, my every waking breath, are dedicated to your pleasure and delight.”

I breathe out slowly, careful not to let my gaze turn to her shivering form once again. My veins are warmer than they were before, and that warmth seems to pool in the pit of my gut. Gods! I should have known better than to let her talk me into entering this confined space with her. It's one thing to put from my mind the shape and softness of her body when she's lying on the other side of a crackling campfire. It's another altogether when she's beside me, the generous curve of her hip unhidden beneath the folds of that wet cloak. Days of riding with her nestled between my legs have done nothing to blur the memory of our night together. Of her soft lips, trembling gently under mine. Of her smooth skin, prickling with awareness at the molding of my hands. Of those delicate, melodic whimpers and moanscoaxed from her slender throat. And the taste of her, that warm sweetness, so eager under my tongue.

I rub a hand viciously down my face and give my head a swift shake. The last thing I need right now is to become distracted. Ashika's death still weighs heavily on me, along with fear for the rest of my people, still missing. And what of the Hidden City? Without the Licornyn Riders to protect it, my people are vulnerable.

Shanaera is out there. She knows all the secret ways across Cruor. Even unmounted she is dangerous, and something tells me she and the undead following her are not without means of swift travel. I don't like to imagine what sort of steeds the Miphates will have provided them with, but knowing thenecroliphon . . .

I must get home. I must see Tassa and all the greatdakathtents with their patterned walls, stretched across the green country of the hinterlands, beyond reach of thevardimnar. I must know they are safe and whole. Then I will begin the great labor of gathering the tribes once more in preparation for an assault on Evisar. Any day now word may come from Prince Ruvaen that he's unlocked the secret of Mage Artoris's talisman. The warriors of Licorna must be prepared to ride across the

devastated fields of Agandaur one last time.

But before any of this may be accomplished, I must rid myself of this bride.

The heat in my veins doused once more, I allow a last glance down at her form. Though she still shivers, I believe she sleeps at last. Her breathing has changed, slow and even. She's so small, so slight, her little human frame utterly unsuited to this world in which she now finds herself. If the call from Ruvaen comes before silmael, what will I do? Ride with her before me in the saddle to face the Miphates and whatever defenses they have gathered around their citadel? No. She is no warrior. And her presence will make me far too vulnerable.

We must break this bond. Tomorrow night, if I push Elydark to the limits of his strength, we can be in Elanlein. Onor Gantarith must know how to free me, to free us. And we've been so careful all these nights, allowing neither word nor deed to strengthen the bond.

One more night. One more ride.

I can do this.

I must.

A sigh on my lips, I lie down in the small space still available on my side of the hovel. Dried medicrunches beneath the old fleece, filling my nostrils with a sweet, familiar scent. Long ago my mother used to place sachets of fumed blossoms under my pillow every night, a ward against bad dreams. I do not expect to dream fitfully tonight. Now that I am reclining, exhaustion radiates through my limbs.

Still, part of me resists sleep; something in me, down in my center, feels tense. As though some unseen threat lurks in this space, hiding in the shadows just beyond the

firelight. But there's nothing there, certainly nothing I need fear. And Elydark stands guard outside the door, prepared to sing his song of protection should thevardimnarfall.

So I close my eyes and, with the practice born of many a long campaign, drop off almost at once into dreamless sleep.

15

ILSEVEL

I feel the great bulk of him shifting as he lies down in what is left of the small space we share. After a few moments, he begins to breathe more deeply, blessed with a warrior's gift of being able to drop off to sleep anytime, anyplace where opportunity allows. I'm left listening to the rain pounding overhead and the tree groaning down to its roots.

Tomorrow night.

Moonrise.

This could all be over by this time tomorrow. Of course I'll still be deep in enemy territory, at the mercy of this dangerous warlord; that much won't have changed. But this bond, such as it is, will be severed.

Why does the idea fill me with such dread? Like the mooring ropes anchoring me to this world are about to be snapped, leaving me to float off into a dark atmosphere.

I grit my teeth, curling my body even more tightly into itself. It's not as though I have no plan, I remind myself firmly. The Shadow King still presumably needs his bride. Vengeance is still within my grasp, if I can only keep my wits about me long enough

to take it.

But what will become of Taar? Will he march with Prince Ruvaen's forces against Evisar Citadel, only to be hewn down by my monster bridegroom? Will the retribution I crave encompass this man who has been my protector? In saving me, has he only fostered his ultimate doom?

"No," I whisper. The word is faint and phantomlike on my trembling lips. There must be another way. There must be another path before me, something other than selling myself in marriage. What if . . . what if . . . ?

What if Taar wanted me?

The thought flickers in the back of my mind, almost too dangerous to be acknowledged. I suck in a sharp breath, hold it fast, wait for reason to banish the idea entirely. Instead I find myself turning the question over, studying it from other angles. What if I were more to him than an inconvenience? What if I were more than a mistake?

Page 32

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

What if I were to stay in this terrible world of hell-rent sky and hearttorn unicorns? What if I were to join my song with that of this man? This wild, dangerous, devastating man.

In the half-dark of the hovel, I roll onto my back, staring up at the little roots dangling from the ceiling. Beside me Taar lies huge as a mountain, his shoulders an impregnable wall. There is such a great gulf between us, and yet . . . I lift my arm. Around my wrist gleams a faint golden cord, not-quite invisible, not-quite real.

Tomorrow may be too late. But tonight we are still bound.

Tonight, he is my captor husband, and I, his enemy bride.

16

TAAR

“Taar.”

A softness like song whispers along the edge of my undreaming mind. A whisper, a breath.

“Taar . . . are you awake?”

I am not. I am held fast in a grip of sleep, much deeper than I like to admit. Paralysis numbs my limbs, even as my mind fights through fog.

“Taar . . . Taar . . . do you hear me?”

Cold hands touch my spine. My body jolts in response, pushing my mind roughly back toward the surface of consciousness. The cold retreats immediately, leaving a tingling place on my skin. I struggle harder, resisting the current trying to pull me back under, back into the dark of heavy sleep.

That icy touch returns, lighter this time. Featherlight fingertips, trembling with chill, but full of life. They run along my skin, up my back to my shoulders. Suddenly I am aware of my body once more, aware of my mind resting in the dark space behind my eyelids. I try to open my eyes, but they’re too heavy. Instead my concentration shifts to that touch—the weight of a cold palm against my shoulder blade, small fingers gripping my skin.

“Taar . . . I want you . . .”

The song is soft, plaintive. I know that voice, though for the moment, I cannot remember from where. It tantalizes me, even as that hand resting against my bare flesh begins to warm. I breathe out, my lips parting. I want to move, to turn from my side onto my back, but my limbs refuse to respond.

That touch moves from my shoulder blade, travels to my bicep then trails down my arm. As it goes, the cold vanishes, replaced with little pinpricks of fire. My body responds, my veins stirred to life. As that hand moves from my arm to my oblique muscle then slides slowly, slowly around to my abdomen, the heat inside me awakens. Delicate fingertips trace the lines of muscle and scars. A low growl rumbles in my throat, and the touch freezes, like prey catching whiff of the predator’s scent. We remain like so for some heartbeats, neither of us breathing, neither of us moving.

Then her hand begins to slide down farther. Slipping under my belt. Slipping down to the warm place where urgency is beginning to swell.

My eyes flare wide. I stare before me into darkness, the scent of fumes in my nose. I cannot for the life of me remember where I am. That touch, cold before, but now hot as a brand, is searching, tentative but determined. Small fingers wrap around my length. I catch a breath. The grip tightens, relaxes, tightens again, and though the angle is awkward and the technique untried . . . gods spare me, it's been so long!

With an effort of will, I reach down, and grip that hand tight, taking the invader captive. Then, gently, I slide my grasp to her wrist. For an instant I could swear I feel warm coils wrapped around that slender forearm. The impression passes, and I pull her hand free from my trousers.

A small hitch of breath sounds behind me. Then that plaintive song in my head once more: "Taar . . . I need you . . ."

I roll heavily, taking care not to crush the little body curled up at my back. Turning onto my arm, I prop up on my elbow and look down into the pale face upturned to me, only just visible in the near-darkness to my brilliant gaze. Her eyes are black pools, but a strange fire lights their depths—a soulfire, full of life and song and desperation.

In that moment I cannot remember her name.

In that moment I cannot remember either the bonds which tie us or the host of cold hard realities that must inevitably separate us.

I cannot remember anything except the taste of her mouth and this sudden yawning thirst to drink of her lips once more.

I catch her face with my hand, my palm covering her cheek, my fingers digging into her hair. My mouth descends toward hers, hesitates. Lips pulled back in a snarl, I clench my teeth against the driving desire in my blood. A long breath exhales from

my thickened throat. My fingers tense, feeling the delicate shell of her skull and how easily I might crack it in two.

Then she cups my face between her hands, tips her chin up, and presses her lips to mine.

17

ILSEVEL

For an instant, when my mouth catches hold of his, I am in control.

I feel it—that power, that surge of pure flame which a conqueror must feel when he sends up the cry to charge, to take, to pillage and decimate at will. It's so different from any sensation I've ever known, so different from the helplessness I've faced, not only these last few dreadful days, but all the years of my life. Here, in this little sheltered space beneath the storm-wracked hillock, I am mistress, I am queen. My desire takes precedence over all others, and I will have what I want.

The illusion ends too soon.

He pulls free, easily breaking that point of contact. The inch of space suddenly between our lips feels like a chasm. I gasp, my fingers tightening against his cheeks, his temples, twisted in strands of his long hair, unwilling to relinquish my feeble command. Though I pull, he resists with strength far greater than mine, unbendable, untamable. Hot breath blasts in a gust against my skin, and I whimper with need, lips parting, eyes half-closed.

Then he changes his angle and slots his mouth back over mine with a force that shatters any ideas of control I may have briefly cherished. A rush of dizziness fills my head. Though I am lying on my back, I feel as though I'm teetering on the brink of a terrible plummet. My hands slip from his cheeks to his shoulders, grasping him as though for balance. He might be the only solid thing in all this dreadful, pitching world. Fear thrills in my gut, but I cannot tell if it's fear of him and the absolute power he wields over me, or fear that I might lose hold of him and fall alone into the waiting darkness.

His insistent mouth parts my lips, evoking an explosion of sensation along every nerve. It's so much, almost too much. And when his tongue slips between my teeth, swiping with rough greed, I feel as though my very core will erupt. My heart throbs, blood pulsing. I open wider to receive him as we devour one another. Just when I think I can bear no more, he breaks away, leaving me faint and gasping for breath. His ardor does not abate—his kisses now trail down my neck to my collarbone, eliciting more bursts of heat and delight.

Some small part of me is aware of the rough fleece and the crackling of dried leaves

beneath my body. But mostly my senses are full of the warmth of his breath, the weight of his mighty shoulders poised over me, the caging of his arm pinning me in place. My body moves almost of its own accord, my back arched with the need to press myself against him. I run my fingers along his shoulder, eager to draw him to me. “Taar,” I breathe, my voice no more than a whisper.

He does not answer, not in words. His mouth rests against my throat, and he inhales deeply, as though dragging in a scent of perfume. Then his lips move again, so soft they’re almost chaste. They touch my jaw, my cheek, my temple. I tilt my head, thinking to catch those lips with mine again, but his mouth eludes me and instead finds that sensitive place just behind my ear.

He nips. A short, sharp pain, followed by the softness of his tongue, licking away the sting. I whimper as prickling sensation erupts across my flesh. Oh gods! This is what I need, what I’ve craved with every fiber of my being all these long, cold nights. He shifts his balance to one elbow, nibbling the shell of my ear even as his hand slides from my head to my jaw, my throat, and lower still, to the topmost edge of my bodice. There he glides deft fingers back and forth, tracing the upper curves of my breast with such delicacy, it might drive me mad. I don’t want delicacy—I want hardness and heat and more pain. I want to be consumed by him until I forget everything else.

I wrap my fingers around his wrist, feeling the great power of him which could so easily shake me free without a thought. But when I tug, he lets me pull his hand lower and press his palm over my breast. For a few gasping breaths we stay like so, my chest rising and falling underneath his hand.

Then he begins to knead me, hard enough to make me gasp. My body writhes in response. I arch my back again, eager to give myself over to him. His nose still buried in my hair, his breath hot against my neck, he finds the front buckles of my rain-soaked gown and unfastens them, one by one. I continue to grip his wrist, even as he

pulls my bodice open. Then I push myself up onto my elbows, giving him room to yank the bodice down my arms and drop it to one side. Now I wear only my damp chemise, which clings to me like a second skin.

The low fire from the clay pot gleams red, making an unfamiliar silhouette of this mountainous husband of mine. I feel his gaze trail over me, taking in the hard knots of my nipples showing through thin fabric. His hand moves, slides the loose neckline lower to bare my shoulder. His fingertips trail along the soft curve of my skin.

With a sudden growl, he takes hold of a handful of fabric and rips. The delicate garment falls away, baring my torso. I grab the back of his head as he takes hold of me, pulls me to him, his mouth consuming my breast. His tongue flicks, tastes, teases. His lips pull, and I roll back my head, groaning as sensations erupt through my veins. I wrap my legs around his waist and rock against him, even as my hands twine through his inky black hair. Heat pools inside me, pressure mounting in my core.

When his lips finally find their way back to mine, when his tongue enters my mouth with sweeping greed, I open to him, eager to receive. And when he presses me back against the fleeces, covering me with his great body, I think: Nothing can reach me here. No evil thoughts, no guilt, no pain. I can lose myself, maybe forever. Elsevel is no more.

I am only what this man needs me to be. Molded by his hands, forged in his fire.

His fingers grip my skirts, hiking them up to bare my knee. I whimper as he slides that hand slowly along my thigh until he finds my small clothes. His fingers move deftly between my legs, touching me through the damp fabric, discovering just how eager I am for him. I blush, but he doesn't seem to mind. With the pad of his thumb, he rubs me along the middle seam of my undergarments. My hips rock involuntarily in response, and I moan into his kiss. This seems to excite him. He slips his finger underneath the flimsy fabric and touches me directly.

A strange sound bursts from my chest, guttural and deep. He responds, his kisses deepening, but I'm too overwhelmed by that touch, by the pleasure rushing through my loins and dancing in my gut to do anything but gasp against his lips. I turn my head to one side, a strangled "Ah!" breaking from my throat as he kisses down the column of my neck to my collarbone. All the while his thumb continues to dance. It excites my heat in small bursts that begin to swell in intensity. He angles his hand to bring more fingers into play. One toys along my opening, and I feel a little thrill of mingled fear and excitement. Biting my lower lip, I open my legs wider. He accepts this invitation and glides one finger into the opening, up to the first knuckle. It's tight, but the sensations his thumb continues to elicit more than make up for any discomfort.

I slip my hands from his hair to his shoulders, fingers digging into flesh. "More," I whisper, my voice tremulous with need I hardly understand. He presses deeper, up to the second knuckle, while his thumb moves up and down. He is large, and I am unused to such treatment, so I cannot help a little moan. But when he seems to hesitate, I shake my head and urge again, "More, more!"

To my dismay, he pulls his hand free. I begin to protest, mewling piteously, only to realize he's fumbling with his belt. Ah! So that's what must happen. Somehow it doesn't frighten me, though perhaps it should, considering how tight his fingers felt. I don't care. I don't want this moment to end. I want everything he's willing to give me, pleasure and pain alike.

Hands trembling, I reach out to help pull his trousers down from his hips. I cannot see him clearly in this light, but I can feel him readily enough, the huge length of him suddenly pressed against the inside of my naked thigh. Oh gods, he's never going to fit! Will it frustrate him, anger him?

The lessons my father's mistress whispered to me echo inside my head: "You must never let him know you're afraid."

With far more boldness than I feel, I take hold of his length. Setting my teeth, I begin to guide it toward me, thinking perhaps if I do it myself, it won't—

His hand closes around my wrist. Firmly. I lift my gaze, though I cannot see his face in this light. But I feel him watching me, much too closely for comfort. I drop my eyes again, breathing rapidly.

Then his lips are at my temple once more. “No, zylnala,” his voice rumbles close to my ear. “Not like that.”

He begins to move. Pressing his manhood against my crest, he angles his hips, working in a rhythm that makes me squirm. There is no pain, no uncomfortable invasion. Only friction, hot and quick to make my center thrum. I groan with delight and fallback on the fleece. He kisses my neck and jaw, his hand warm against my panting breast, his length hard and insistent between my thighs.

I feel it building—that pressure I felt once before, on our wedding night. Desperate and frenzied, it churns inside me, carrying me up and up and up. My body strains, relaxes, strains again, my hips pulsing in time with his.

“Sing for me, zylnala,” he rasps suddenly. “Now.”

As though unleashed at his command, I burst. Rippling sensation pulses through me, and a great cry rips from my throat, a song, a moan. Part of me is vaguely aware that his voice is blended with mine, that he's singing in rough harmony, deep and primal.

But mostly I am floating—high up in this cloud of exquisite heat, as wild song tumbles freely from my lips.

I lay panting beside him, listening to the labored sounds of his breath. Neither of us speaks. Overhead the storm rages, and the tree groans from its roots.

Aftershocks of ecstasy prickle across my skin. I don't know what to do. I hardly know who I am . . . this version of me that feels so much, that experiences such overwhelming pleasure. Can she even be real? Or is she and this storm-tossed night and these moments of bliss all part of a dream? A dream that will shatter in the morning light.

I can't bear it. I can't bear that this—whatever it is—should end. I must do something, say something. But what? Everything I might say sounds so frail and foolish following what we have just done to each other.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

The light in the clay pot fireplace burns lower, and the already dense shadows deepen. Suddenly Taar rolls onto his side. My heart flips. He's going to break the silence between us, I'm sure of it. What will he say? Will he tell me this was a mistake? Or will he—? Painful hope twists my gut. Will he say what I'm longing to hear? That he doesn't want us to part after all. That he wants to let this inconvenient bond remain intact. I should hate myself for even hoping, but . . . but surely what we just did together must mean something. Mustn't it?

When he doesn't speak—when this cursed silence lasts too long, and I can no longer bear it—I whisper, “Warlord?”

“Zylnala.” His voice is a breath of darkness.

“Will you . . . will you . . . ?”

He touches my jaw lightly, one finger trailing. It sends dizzying sparks shooting through my veins. “Will I what?” he asks.

I let out a shuddering breath.

Will you claim me?

Will you keep me?

Will you . . . love me?

His finger slips down my throat, resting a moment against my pulse before

descending to trace the curve of my breast. His thumb moves, stroking my nipple. I catch my breath. My center throbs in pace with my suddenly galloping heartbeat.

“Will you do again what you did on our wedding night?” I ask all in a rush, shocked at my own boldness. But I can’t take it back now. I can only stare at the shadow where his face hovers, knowing full well that his fae sight can see every little expression revealed in my eyes. I am bare to him, in more ways than one.

I feel rather than see the sudden flash of his smile. His huge body shifts in the darkness, sliding lower, lower. My skirts are already hiked, and it’s a simple matter for him to part my legs and angle himself between them. Hot breath blasts against my navel. “That depends, little songbird,” he says. His tongue flicks out, licking, teasing. “Will you sing for me again if I do?”

I cannot answer. Words fail me utterly as he kisses the skin just at that delicate transition between abdomen and loins. The longing I feel, the desire, the need, it’s enough to drive me mad. One would think after what he’s done for me already tonight, I would be sated, but no. No, I need this. I need him. So desperately, so hungrily.

“Please—” I begin.

He grips my buttocks and draws my hips abruptly to his greedy mouth, and all begging words disappear. A little scream erupts from my throat at the fire of his dancing tongue. I grip the fleeces with both hands, my torso writhing even as he keeps my hips locked in place. He shrugs one of my legs up onto his shoulder, adjusting his angle. Multicolored lights explode in my head.

It doesn’t take long. A few swipes of his tongue, and I’m caught in a wave, greater and more tumultuous than before. “Taar!” I cry, my voice reverberating against the hovel walls. “Oh, Taar, Taar!” My heel digs into his back as my body arches,

collapses, and arches again, until the pressure bursts, and I'm once more riding that wave out into wild, wondrous places. Only his grip on my hips and the hot pressure of his mouth keep me tethered to this world.

When at last I sink back into the physical realm, he's still there. Still between my legs. He kisses my throbbing center gently before running a series of kisses up my abdomen. "Do you . . ." I gasp, struggling to find words again as his tongue licks between my breasts. "Do you need to . . . ?"

"What I need," he says, his lips hot against my skin, "is to hear that song of yours. Again and again. And I will have it, zylnala."

Then in a low growl, both desperate and dangerous: "Gods help me, I will make you sing all night, and damn whatever dawn may bring."

18

TAAR

I duck under the low lintel and step into the rain-soaked coolness of a world on the brink of morning.

Elydark stands some yards off, facing the eastern horizon and the shimmer of pink light just beginning to stain the darkness. He's aware of me—I can tell by the set of his ears, the flick of his tail. But he doesn't turn, doesn't acknowledge me in any way. Our soul-connection is silent, without the faintest trace of song. But he knows what I did last night. He knows.

I breathe out slowly and turn away from him to look out across the dark landscape. The sound of running water tickles my ear. A stream runs down one side of the hillock, swollen from the storm, and gushes into a rocky pool. The sight of that pool

and that cool, fresh water, as yet untainted by the poison of the vardimnar, attracts me. In a matter of moments I've stripped my garments and plunged in up to my chest. It's like ice against my skin, but I don't care. I submerge, holding my breath for as long as I can. As though somehow this plunge can cleanse the stain of passion from my body and the stain of guilt from my soul.

But when I rise again, my head breaking the surface of the water in a splash of foam, I find myself unchanged. I am still the same man I was in those hours hidden in the dark of the hovel while the storm lashed overhead. The man who gave in. Who succumbed to temptation. Not once, not twice.

Five times did I make her sing. And three of those times, I could not help but sing with her, a crude harmony of lust, longing, and release.

"Shakh," I hiss and swipe droplets from my face in a swift gesture. Even now heat warms through my loins, heedless of the icy water in which I sit. Every part of my body seems aware of the open doorway of the hovel. Of the dark interior where even now my bride lies naked on a bed of fleece and dried umediblossoms.

"Shakh!" I growl again and lift my arm from the water. The velracord is invisible in the predawn gloom, but I feel it nonetheless. It's like a snake, wrapped from wrist to elbow, tighter than ever. After all these days of careful abstinence, of making certain I do nothing to strengthen the bond, one moment of impulse was all it took to unleash the hunger inside me.

I climb out of the water and sit dripping on the edge of the pool, little caring how the morning wind chills my wet skin. Lifting my gaze, I look to the still-dark western horizon. There lies our destination, only a hard day's ride before us. Tonight, if all goes well, we will stand before Onor Gantarith and have our bond severed.

Only now the prospect feels like asking to have a limb hewn.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Closing my eyes, I struggle to still my labored breath, to ease the tension from my inflamed body. Gods on high, but I long to reenter that cave! I want to crawl on top of her sleeping body, to breathe in the musky scent of her hair and skin. I want to run my hands down her smooth contours, bury my face between her legs, and wake her with ecstasy. My very soul cries out for that song of hers—that sweet song of bliss which she sings only for me.

Where did my resolve go? Vanished, along with any wisdom and reason. I feel like a lost soul, cut off from all that I know, all that makes me who I am. My kingdom, my people, this endlesswar, and the innumerable responsibilities which I must always keep in such careful balance . . . all of them seem to burn away in the furnace of this madness which grips me. This desire, this need for a woman who is wrong for me in every way.

I can't do this. Clenching my fist, I turn my wrist as though I could even now snap the binding cord. But it clings, stronger than ever thanks to one night of weakness. How much have I already given up for the sake of this impulsive marriage? Ashika is dead; Nyathri hearttorn. My other brave warriors might be lost as well, and the whole of the Hidden City left vulnerable to attack.

Will all Licorna pay the price for Ilsevel's life and my unchecked lust?

She is standing in the doorway when I return from the pool, like a pale phantom in the morning mist. Clad in her torn chemise, her dark hair spilling over her shoulders, she watches me with wide, solemn eyes, her brow set in that knot which has become so familiar over the last week of our acquaintance.

“Warlord,” she says coolly as I approach. Last night she’d sung my name, an ecstatic melody that filled my soul. Had I only imagined it? Dreamed it in the heat of those stolen hours between us?

I nod. She takes in my dripping frame slowly, then lifts her gaze to mine, one eyebrow slightly lifted. “There is a pool,” I say with a toss of my head. “Over yonder. The rain is fresh from the heavens. Untainted. Safe to bathe in, if you wish.”

She blinks. We both know the mess we made of each other on that tumble of fleeces. A faint flush tinges her cheeks, but she makes a little grunt of acknowledgement. “A moment,” I say and step into the hovel to grab the saddlebags. I try not to look at the indentations on the floor left by our coupled bodies and hasten back out into the budding sunlight. “Here.” I take a blanket from one of the bags and offer it to her. “To dry yourself. It is cold this morning.”

Ilsevel accepts the offering with all the hauteur of a queen. Without a word she leaves me in the doorway, stepping around to the far side of the hill, following the sound of the rushing stream. I remain where I am, hands clenched into fists, determinedly looking in the opposite direction. Elydark steps into my line of view. His eyes catch mine across the little distance. His song remains silent in my head, but I can feel the condemnation emanating from his soul.

“Shakh,” I curse again for the third time this day and run a hand down my face.

“Warlord?”

I half-turn my head at the sound of Ilsevel’s voice, calling from the far side of the hill, just audible above the stream’s surging. “Yes?” I answer roughly.

“Will you pass me the blanket, please? I cannot reach it.”

I hesitate. Something tells me I should not venture anywhere near her and that pool. War rages in my chest for a count of ten heartbeats. But then I turn, stride swiftly around the side of the hill.

I come to an abrupt stop, heart leaping to my throat.

Ilsevel stands in the shallow part of the pool, up to her waist, shivering a little in the cold. Wet locks of hair hang over her shoulders, across her bare breasts. Droplets run in rivulets down her cheeks, her neck, the hollows of her collarbone, her navel.

But it's her eyes which capture me. Those dark eyes of hers, fixed on my face with absolute intensity, watching for whatever I might reveal, for any sign of weakness. There is defiance in that gaze, but also a strange vulnerability that scarcely seems to fit in those proud features of hers. Most of all there's heat—the fiery heat of a song waiting to be sung once again, needing only the right spark to set it ablaze.

I want her. Gods spare me, but I want her. Some part of me had hoped that to give in to temptation for one night would mean satiation. Surely now that the tension in my loins has known relief, I can suppress any unwanted feelings and focus on the task at hand. It's just a simple matter of physical bodies and physical needs after all. Once the meal is devoured, hunger must abate.

But no. Here in the cold light of the dawning day, I cannot deny the truth: I want her. More than ever. I want her with a gnawing starvation that hollows me out from the inside, turning all reason to madness.

And here she stands before me, offering herself. Her chest rises and falls in quick panting breaths, and her flesh trembles with cold. But her eyes hold mine fiercely, as though she's waiting for her life's sentence to be pronounced.

My feet move, heavy as iron blocks. I make my way down to the pool's edge, kneel,

and take the folded blanket in my hand. Slowly, without breaking her gaze, I extend it to her.

Her eyes lower, dropping to look at the blanket. I watch her nostrils flare as she draws a little breath. Then her lashes rise, and she meets my gaze again. Fury blazes in the dark centers of her pupils. She snatches the blanket from my grasp, little caring how the edge falls in the water.

Rising, I turn swiftly and march back to the other side of the hillock. My breath comes heavily in my tight chest. The sun crests the horizon now. We must ride soon if we are to make it to Elanlein by moonrise. And we must. Gods spare me, we must! I can't take any more of this.

I hear her footsteps approaching, hear the chatter of her teeth. She stands behind me by several paces. I cannot bring myself to turn and face her. "Dress quickly," I say without looking around. "We have a long ride ahead of us."

She draws in a sharp breath. Then, in a voice of ice: "So that's it then?"

My throat thickens. I drop my head, stare at the ground between my feet. For some moments, I cannot speak. Whatever I say will be wrong. But I must say something. I owe her that much.

"What happened last night"—the words are heavy, but I force them out, hard and clear—"that cannot happen again." Slowly I turn to face her, taking care to steel my expression, to reveal nothing she does not need to see. "It was a mistake, Ilsevel. I hope not a dire one."

She stands before me, clad once more in that torn chemise, which clings to her still-damp skin. It falls from one shoulder, and I'm reminded keenly of the moment when, unable to restrain myself, I'd ripped it away from her body. Her wet hair hangs down

her back, and her jaw is clenched as though to keep her teeth from chattering with cold.

“I’m sorry.” I hate how weak I sound but am uncertain what else to offer. “I should have . . . I should never have . . .” I stop and turn my face away, unable to continue meeting that furious stare. “I vowed to protect you. I will continue to do just that. I will set you free and return you to your people as agreed.” My heart constricts. I breathe hard, trying to loosen it, but it won’t relent. “I can offer nothing more.”

“Nothing?” Her voice is low, soft, but there’s a knife’s edge in her tone.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

My gaze flashes to catch hers. “Nothing.”

“And why is that?” She takes a step toward me. Her hips sway, and the clinging fabric of her chemise moves with her body enticingly. But her eyes are too bright, almost dangerous, lancing into mine. “You chose me—remember? You bought me, claimed me, dragged me before your priest, and bound me to you with solemn vows. You took me to your bed and stripped me bare and bade me trust you utterly. You shed another man’s blood for me.”

She’s close now, only a few steps away. With a single lunge I could take her in my arms, rip that damp gown from her frame, and tumble her right here in the muddy grass. Her eyes widen as though reading the impulse in my face, and her teeth flash in something between a smile and a snarl. “And yet,” she continues, “you insist you have nothing to offer. Why is that, warlord? Can you explain it to me?”

I knot my fists hard against my thighs. “Because you are a stranger. Because I do not know your name or your people or anything about you, and because you do not choose to share those secrets with me. Because I cannot trust you, and you cannot trust me. Not wholly, not completely. And because . . . because . . .”

She winces as though each word I’ve spoken is a blow. But when I hesitate, she lifts her chin and says, “Go on. Say it.”

“Because my people would never accept you.”

There: the crux of the issue at last, the truth which I cannot avoid. No matter what I might feel for this woman, no matter what the velvet bond may be convincing me to

think and say and do . . . she can never be my wife. She can never be mymaelar. The people of Licorna would scorn her for the very blood in her veins—and they would scorn me for choosing such a bride to become their queen. Whatever tentative trust I have earned from the surviving tribes would be broken forever, and all my hopes of leading them in a final assault against the Miphates dashed.

I have already paid too steep a price for this warbride of mine. I cannot afford to pay any more.

Ilsevel watches me through darkly slitted eyes. I feel as though she's stripping away my flesh down to the bone. Finally, in a soft voice that belies all venom, she says, "What were the other vows you spoke?"

I tilt my head slightly.

"You keep saying you vowed to protect me," she continues. "I suppose I must take your word for it, as I didn't understand any of that damnable ceremony. But what else did you vow? What else have you sworn to do for me so long as our lives are bound?"

I cannot answer; I dare not. Thevelrais already too hot and too tight around my wrist, dragging me toward her with such relentless force. The space between us is far too small.

"My own people make vows too, you know," she continues. "To give over possession of all worldly goods to each other. To comfort and keep in times of distress. But most of all, a wife must vow to give her body utterly and completely unto her husband's keeping, from which he may take his pleasure and know relief from the torments of temptation." Her mouth curves at the corner. "I made no such vow at our wedding ceremony, warlord. I made no vows at all. But you did."

I did. And they come back to me now, echoing inside my head.

With my arms will I shelter you.

With my heart will I warm you.

“Tell me,” she urges. “What else am I owed as your wife? For I am your wife, am I not? Until your precious Onor Gantarith says otherwise.”

My mouth, my lips, my tongue, my every waking breath, are dedicated to your pleasure and delight.

Longing like sickness burns in my gut, spreads through my veins. For a moment longer I resist, my very soul dragging against the force of thevelra, fighting with everything I have.

A curse growling in my chest, I lunge a step forward. My hand shoots out, grabs the hair at the back of her head, and yanks roughly. I stare down into those midnight eyes of hers, which gaze back up at me, heavy-lidded and brimming with fire. Her breath ratchets in her throat, and her lips part, so soft, so treacherous.

“You are deadly, littlezylnala,” I whisper, my voice raw, my mouth so near hers I can almost taste her. “But I’ve faced my share of deadly foes in this lifetime and have yet to be undone. You’ll find I am not easy prey.”

With those words I push her from me so that she staggers several paces. Without waiting to catch the vicious look she shoots my way, I turn from her to collect the saddlebags. “Get dressed,” I toss over my shoulder. “We ride within the half-hour.”

And in a lower voice, ground between my teeth: “We’ll reach Elanlein tonight, or may the gods help us both.”

ILSEVEL

Elydark's hoofbeats, galloping in thunderous rhythm, fill my ears with their percussion. If I let myself, I could sink into that rhythm, allow it to drive all other awareness from me. It's a tempting prospect. The last thing I want right now is either to think or to feel. Numbness is the only protection left for me as I sit astride this beast, wrapped in the arms of this man whom I want to hate with every fiber of my being.

But I can't hate him—and I won't love him.

So I must feel nothing. If I don't, I'll fall to pieces.

That pounding pulse of hooves against turf is like a song, unmelodic but rhythmic. My heart can find a counter beat, blending into the whole, becoming one with it. Miles pass beneath us—wild terrain without any sign of civilization, either past or present. Great outcroppings of stone, tangles of wild, empty forest, lifeless stretches of grasslands without bird or animal to break up the monotony of silence which holds this whole world captive. And still Elydark's hooves sing out their lonely song, as his muscular neck stretches out before me, and his horned head points ever on to the western horizon. I don't know how many hours have passed since dawn, cannot guess how many hours more lie ahead before we may reach our destination. Time has lost meaning.

Every so often my mind tries to reach back—to search for those hours of darkness not too far gone. To recall the heat of tandem breaths and open mouths, the tangle of limbs and the explosions of sensation flooding every nerve. Are those memories even real? Or are they all part of some feverish dream, born of lonely desperation? Surely I wasn't mad enough to offer myself up like that . . .

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

No. I shake my head and force my mind back down into that galloping rhythm once more. No thought, no memory. Just this present, endless now.

Somewhere out in the wild, a unicorn sings.

I don't know when I become aware of the song through the rhythm of Elydark's hooves. Perhaps it's been with me for hours, just on the edge of perception. But suddenly I find I cannot ignore it, even if I wished to. It pulls at my heart, a sad, broken disharmony that feels all too familiar.

I turn my head slightly, hating even that small movement which brings me consciously back to my own body. Taar's arm is wrapped around my waist, holding me in the saddle before him. There's something hard in his grasp, as though he fears I will make a sudden burst for freedom. A laughable thought. What freedom is there for me in this or any world?

The unicorn song tugs at my ears again. Or rather, not my ears; this song is not heard but felt, singing straight to the heart. I gaze over Taar's arm out into the lonely landscape. It's all so hazy beneath the midday sun, which glares relentlessly down at us. But somewhere out there is another broken soul. A soul whose song is not what it's supposed to be.

It's her. I'm sure of it. The hearttorn unicorn who stood over the body of her dead Licornyn rider. "Nyathri," I whisper. The name Taar spoke feels strange on my lips. Is she following us? Is there some small part of her that still hopes for redemption and reclamation?

I narrow my eyes, searching the stretch of grassy plain for some sign of a burning, skeletal being. But though her song sighs on the lonely wind, I see no sign of her. Perhaps I'm imagining that song. Wouldn't Elydark hear it if it were real? Yet his stride never falters, his focus never wavers. He gallops on in unbroken rhythm, eating up the miles.

One last trill of dissonant song ripples along the edge of my mind. To my surprise, a stray tear trails down my cheek, brushed away almost at once by the wind. I frown and face forward once more, staring at the world between Elydark's ears. I'm not going to cry. Not for her, not for me. Not for the hope which flamed so hot last night, only to be doused in a blast of cold rejection come the dawn.

I was an idiot to think I mattered more to Taar than the bothersome inconvenience I am. He's been perfectly clear about his intentions, has he not? Why should one night make any difference? I should have known better—I did know better! I simply pretended otherwise for a little while. Out of fear and foolishness and an agonizing wish not to face the reality of the choices I've made.

But that reality remains, waiting just on the other side of delusion. I won't be stupid enough to try to escape it again.

So I shut my ears to the unicorn's song, and we ride on. Hour upon hour, mile upon mile, while the world passes by. The wild, lonely landscape begins to take on an indistinct feeling, like the edge of a painting with all the details left off and nothing but ragged brushstrokes left. These must be the hinterlands Taar spoke of—the edge of his world.

Exhaustion shudders through my limbs. Part of me wonders if I should beg Taar to stop, to let me catch my breath and maybe eat and drink a little. I've never had to remind him before; he's always been so conscious of my needs. Today, however, he seems scarcely aware of my existence, intent as he is upon his goal. And little

wonder. After last night he's more determined than ever to be rid of me.

The sun begins to set, golden rays catching on a glimmer of water lying ahead. My vision is dull and dark on the edges, and it takes me some moments to recognize that it's a river. Didn't Taar say something last night about crossing a river by sundown? We must be making good time.

Suddenly the sky overhead rips. Black fingers stretch every direction, jagged as thorns. My heart, which had sunk to the pit of my chest, leaps with a terror of recognition.

"Shakh," Taar curses. It's the first I've heard him speak in hours. The soul-tether between him and his unicorn vibrates with tension as the two communicate in their silent language. "Hold on," Taar growls, crouching in the saddle, his heavy torso forcing me to lean over Elydark's outstretched neck. "We can still outrun this. Vulmon, Elydark!"

With a surge of muscle, the unicorn lengthens his already tremendous stride. Now his hooves scarcely seem to touch the ground, and we fly across the landscape, swift as a speeding arrow. Overhead the black lightning branches again, and on either side, I see darkness closing in as the vardimnar overtakes the land. Strange—every other time it has struck, it's been sudden, instantaneous. There is the warning crack across the sky and, moments later, shadow absolute.

Not this time. When I crane my neck to look back over Taar's broad shoulder, the blackness of the Rift seems to roll after us, like a wave swallowing up the world. I wish Elydark would stop and brace himself, would sing the protective songlight as he's done before. But he is focused only on the river ahead, and Taar's soul shouts across their soul-tether, urging him faster and faster.

The river looms before us, a wide and rushing torrent. Elydark never slows his pace.

Thevardimnarnipping at his flanks, he leaps from the shore and, for a perilous moment, I believe he will simply glide across the water, his hooves scarcely leaving a splash in our wake.

This idea is rudely shattered as we plunge into the rushing flow. Brown waves wash over my head, and the tug of the current is so ferocious, I fear it will pull me free of Taar's grasp. He strengthens his hold on me, however, his arms a crushing cage. We break the surface of the water, and I choke and sputter and gasp for air, even as foam slaps my cheeks. Elydark's powerful body moves underneath us, swimming hard against the river's pull. I shake water from my eyes and cast a desperate look back.

Behind us, on the shore of the river, lies thevardimnar. A black wall, impenetrable, stretching from the water's edge all the way to the heavens above. It's like the world beyond has simply fallen away. But even as I look, blinking against river spray, I see the darkness shiver, see that membrane-like ripple and the sense of pressure from the other side.

"Don't look," Taar barks, his voice loud in my ear. I snap my eyes forward again, just in time to be hit in the face by another wave. Water tries to fill my lungs, and I heave and choke. But thevardimnar does not follow us. We have finally traveled beyond its reach. I don't know if I feel relieved or not. I doubt I'll ever feel truly safe in this world.

Elydark finds firm footing on the far side of the river and emerges in a surge of droplets and foam. He staggers a few paces, winded from exertion. Taar pats his shoulder, and I feel the encouragement sung from his soul into the beast's. Only then does he turn his attention to me. "Are you all right, Ilsevel?"

I cough and sputter, nodding my head ferociously. The last thing in all the worlds I need is for him to start showing me any gods-damned care or concern. "I'm fine." I push damp locks of hair out of my eyes and try not to shiver. "Ride on, if you're

ready. No need to stop on my account.”

Taar is silent. I feel his eyes on the back of my head, like he’s staring through my skull to read my mind. Much to my dismay, he dismounts and, without looking at me, removes the saddlebag containing our supply of food and the last skin of water. “You need rest,” he says, holding up a hand to me. “It’s been a long day.”

I scowl fiercely down at my hands, which grip the pommel of the saddle in front of me.

“Come,” he urges, his voice gentle but firm. “I can’t have you fainting on the way to Elanlein. Sit a moment. Eat, drink.”

A foul word springs to my lips. It’s all I can do not to hurl it in his face. But I’m not supposed to be angry at him; I’m not supposed to feel anything. If I start to feel, I’ll start to hate him, and if I start to hate him, it’s only a step closer to loving him. Damn me if I’ll ever let myself get that close again!

With a last sniff and a swipe of water from my face, I swing my leg over Elydark’s back, ignore Taar’s hand, and dismount on my own. I land hard; the long hours of riding have numbed my muscles, making my whole body feel unfamiliar and unwieldy. Taking care not to glance Taar’s way, I hobble to a nearby clump of soft grass. My legs simply fold up under me, and I sink to the ground in a tumble of limbs and skirts.

Taar, silent and solemn, hands me the water skin first. “Drink,” he urges.

I pop the stopper and pour purified water down my parched throat. Immediately the effects of the dried ilsevel petals work wonders on my aching limbs. Warmth spreads from my gut out to every extremity. Knotted muscles begin to relax, and my breathing comes a little easier. It doesn’t make theume cake Taar offers to me next

any more palatable, but I accept it and gnaw the edges.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

To my relief, Taar doesn't try to sit with me or make conversation. As soon as he's fed and watered me like the inconvenient pet I am, he steps away, his back to both me and the river, and stands beside Elydark. The two of them put their heads together, sharing words in their silent language nodoubt. I firmly tamp down any effort on my gods-gift's part to eavesdrop. Instead, careful not let my gaze travel back to the river and that hideous darkness engulfing the far side, I take note of the landscape into which we've entered. It's not unlike the rugged country we've traveled through all day—hilly, not quite mountainous, but with rocky ridges and sudden valleys, covered in yellow-green grass as far as the eye can see. But there's something about this wilderness that feels different. There's a freshness in the air, a certain snap and spice I can't quite define. Is it because thevardimnarhas never touched this land? Perhaps this is what all Licorna once felt like, before the Rift.

“There.”

Taar's voice breaks through my thoughts, drawing my attention unwillingly to him. He doesn't look my way, but raises one arm, pointing west, into the setting sun. I shade my eyes, curious despite myself, and spy a stone building set on an outcrop some miles from our current position—I can't judge how far in this light. Nor can I tell if it is a large structure or merely positioned in such a way as to dominate the visual landscape. It strikes me as incongruous, a manmade dwelling out here in this wild land.

“That is Elanlein,” Taar says, still without turning to me. “The Last Holy House, wherein Nornala's divine presence yet dwells in this world.”

A cold weight settles in my gut. I look at that far house again. Our destination, the

goal for which we have been striving since passing through the gate into this world. Will we find there the help Taar seeks? Is our inevitable separation truly so close at hand? Good, if so. Perhaps last night I was foolish enough to think I wished otherwise, but now? I'm ready to get this over with. To break this damnable bond, to leave behind this damnable world. To never look this damnable husband of mine in the eye again.

I choke down a final bite of fume cake. Though the last thing I want is to return to the saddle, I rise and brush crumbs from my skirt. "Well, warlord?" I say coldly. "Shall we continue . . ."

My words trail away to nothing. For suddenly, across the river, singing out from the darkness, a voice catches my ear, my heart, drags my gaze sharply around. Though some small, self-preserving part of me knows I shouldn't, I stare into the churning black of the vardimnar, as though my eyes can pierce that membrane and see what lies on the other side. See the unicorn—Nyathri—who stands there, beyond the flowing river, singing that hearttorn song.

"Ilsevel?" Taar speaks sharply, but I cannot heed him. Everything in me strains after that song, so warped and twisted and yet . . . and yet . . . once more I find myself listening for the harmony that could fix it. I can almost hear it. It's right there, on the edge of my gods-gifted awareness. I can't help thinking that, should I hear it, should I sing it, the song would be beautiful indeed. Almost worth the pain it took to create it.

"Ilsevel!"

A grip on my arm. A yank, a turn. I come to myself abruptly only to find I have wandered down almost to the edge of the river. Taar's fingers wrap around my upper arm in a painful grasp, and his eyes stare down into mine, searching my face. "Ilsevel, can you hear me?"

I blink up at him, addled, uncertain. The hearttorn song still echoes in my ears, but when I twist in Taar's grasp to look out across the river again, I find the darkness has vanished. Nothing but lonely landscape stretches before my vision. There's no sign of Nyathri anywhere to be seen. Her song fades as well, slowly at first, then swiftly, like crumbling ash. I begin to wonder if I imagined it.

"Ilsevel?" Taar says again, his voice low and urgent. "Ilsevel, can you hear me?"

I whip my head about, scowling up at him. When I shrug and push, he lets me go. I stagger back three steps, nearly falling in a heap. With an effort I pull myself upright, dragging a long inhale through my nose. "I'm fine, warlord." My hands slowly clench into fists. "I'm ready to ride if you are."

His eyes narrow as he studies me closely. I meet his gaze hard, refusing to offer either explanations or excuses, daring him to question me further. At last he nods shortly, turns from me, and calls to Elydark.

We mount without a word and ride on, leaving the river and any remnants of broken song far behind.

20

TAAR

Once there were many Holy Houses standing on high promontories across Licorna—pale stone structures, domed and graceful, from which the spirit of Nornala poured forth into our world. There my people gathered for worship on hallowed nights, beneath the light of the moon, and the songs of the licorneir could be heard rising to sing in harmony with the stars above.

Elanlein is all that remains of our sacred places now. The others have long since been

lost to the swallowing darkness of the Rift.

Despite the deepening gloom of night, Elydark finds the path to the temple, sure-footed even on the rough and winding way. I feel the excitement in his soul as we draw nearer, the uplifted energy at the prospect of once more entering into that sanctuary and replenishing his essence. By contrast, Ilsevel is almost limp in my arms. As daylight fades, so too does her stubborn strength. Her spine, which has remained lance-straight throughout the long hours of our ride, bends at last, and her body sags against mine, head lolling on my shoulder.

I grit my teeth. It's cruel to keep pressing on like this, with her exhausted as she is. But Elanlein is so near, I cannot bear to stop again. Let us get this bond severed as soon as possible. Then I can permit her to rest a day, perhaps two, before we begin the journey back to her own world. In the meanwhile I shall have to keep her hidden at the Holy House. The last thing I need is for the city folk to discover a human in their midst.

The clouds break overhead, allowing a gleam of moonlight to shine through. I turn my head, gazing out from the high path we climb to the valley revealed below. My heart seems to turn over in my breast. A sea of large, multi-chambereddakathtents spreads before my vision—a thousand strong, arranged in concentric patterns around the great Meeting House at the very center. Campfires burn like fallen stars in the darkness, and I can imagine even from this distance that I see the shadowy silhouettes of men, women, and children going about their lives, unaware of my distant scrutiny. All is peaceful, as though time itself stopped during my too-long absence and is only just now beginning to flow once more.

So Shanaera hasn't made it this far. Not yet anyway. And what of my riders, Kildorath and the others? Did any of them survive the altercation at Agandaur? Are they even now waiting for me below? I long to turn Elydark's head that way, to race him through the night-stretched shadows into those waitingdakaths. I want to find my

sister, to know that she lives.

Instead I face forward once more, fixing my gaze on the temple above. We are only half a mile away now. On either side of the path, flowers gleam in the darkness, dark petals furled back from glowing golden centers. Elydark sings softly at the sight of them, unable to contain his pleasure.

“What are those?”

I startle, surprised by the sound of Ilsevel’s voice after so many hours of silence. She lifts her head from my shoulder, turning to look at a cluster of flowers as we pass by.

I hesitate, suddenly uncertain. But then, what harm can there be in telling her the truth? “Those are ilsevel blossoms,” I say quietly.

She sucks in a little breath. After a few moments she nods shortly. “They . . . have a strange song,” she says, almost as though to herself rather than to me.

I frown slightly. I’ve never heard any song from ilsevel blossoms. But her gods-gift may make her sensitive to things my own senses cannot perceive. “They are a gift from Nornala,” I say, “sent from her heavenly garden as sustenance for the licorneir. Licorneir, you understand, are beings of pure magic and, therefore, can eat only pure magic as well. The hearts of ilsevel blossoms contain raw magic in its purest form. One blossom may satisfy a licorneir for months on end. And the petals, as you know, can be used to purify corrupt magic.”

The higher we climb, the more densely the blossoms grow, mounding on either side of the path, their fiery hearts illuminating the night. Up ahead I spy the doorway of the Holy House, where more ilsevels grow up the doorposts and hang in dense clusters from the lintel. The air is thick with their perfume.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“Ilsevels can only grow on holy ground,” I continue. “Once there were many such sites across Licorna. Now there is only this house left. Riders from the other surviving tribes must journey here several times a year to gather supplies, which we give generously in exchange for their fealty. Thus Elanlein, once the humblest of all the holy sites, has become a place of special prominence.”

I do not add the ongoing concern of our people that theilsevelblossoms grow less and less abundantly each year, that the supply is hardly equal to the demand. I do not mention the fear which hangs over the Hidden City that one day chieftains of other tribes may turn on us and try to claim Elanlein, hording the blossoms to protect their own licorneir. Nor do I add that if something happens to these precious blooms, our way of life may be lost forever. These are not concerns to trouble the mind of a human, a stranger.

“What do the wild unicorns eat?” Ilsevel asks, interrupting this trail of thought. “Not ilsevels, I take it.”

“No, but they have plenty of access to raw magic every time the Rift opens. Corrupt magic, which only furthers their own corruption. But enough to sustain them.”

We lapse back into silence. The night around us is not silent, however. Nightbirds call out to each other in haunting voices, and it is a relief to hear them after the days of lifeless stillness across Cruor. A chill wind wanders through the grassy peaks and stone ridges of the Rocar Mountain Range, carrying the scent of smoke and cooking meat from the dakathtents below. The Hidden City travels up and down the river according to the turn of the seasons, following game and seeking shelter from the harsh winter months, but the priests of Elanlein remain here, guarding the temple and

the ilsevel garden. There are fewer priests now than there once were: only Onor Gantarith and three others, including young Onor Vamir, the youthful priest who traveled with my company on the campaign into the human world. Any moment I hope to hear one of their voices hailing us as we approach.

No greeting comes, however. We reach the arched doorway, and Elydark comes to a halt, head lowered in reverence. Still there is no sign of the priests. Where are they, Elydark? I ask silently.

They are close. His ears twitch. They are watching. And they are wondering what you have brought with you to Nornala's house.

I harden my jaw. This was always going to be difficult. But we've come this far, and it's not as though I have other options.

Dismounting, I turn and assist Ilsevel down from the saddle. She does not protest, though I feel her hands shake as they rest on my shoulders. The moment her feet are on the ground, she pushes away from me, arms wrapped tightly around her slender body, shivering in the cold. I consider the possibility of leaving her out here with Elydark while I venture inside. But even that little distance between us may cause more pain and vulnerability than I'm prepared to deal with. Besides, I find I'm reluctant to let her out of my sight so near to the Hidden City. There are far too many people too close at hand who would strike her down without a second thought just because she's human. No, she must stay with me.

"This way," I say and step through the temple entrance into the shadows on the other side. There are no lights in this passage save for stray blossoms gleaming faintly here and there. The darkness is heavy even for my eyes. I hear Ilsevel's footsteps stumbling behind me; her human sight is less suited to this gloom than mine.

Before I can think better of it, I reach behind me and find her hand. She tries to pull

away, but I wrap my fingers tightly around hers. “Stay close,” I say, firmly ignoring the sudden warmth spreading from my palm. Around my forearm, the velvet feels suddenly much too tight. Nornala, please grant the priests wisdom and a swift means to end this binding!

Forging on with determined strides, I lead her to the center of Elanlein. As we go, ilsevel blossoms grow thicker along the walls. Their glowing hearts pulse with light enough to dimly illuminate the space around us. The walls are set with inlaid gemstones in rich mosaic patterns, depicting licorneir and ilsevels along with celestial motifs. The floor is cool beneath our feet, carpeted in fallen petals and leaves which shush gently as we pass. There are many twists and turns, various passages leading to secret parts of the temple, places I have never ventured. But my footsteps carry me unerringly to a place where the passage suddenly opens, and fresh night air whispers against our faces.

We step out into the Moon Chamber. The dome arches above us, smooth curves leading to a skylight circle at its peak, some twenty feet in circumference. Through this opening, the newly waxing moon shines off pale stone and fills the large space with a luminous glow. Directly below the skylight lies the great altar stone, where sacrifices are made in Nornala’s honor at both dawn and dusk each day. The remnants of this evening’s sacrifice still smolder in the center of the stone, and the fragrance of incense lingers in the air. The space around us is large enough to hold half the population of the Hidden City. It is cavernously empty now save for the moonlight and thousands of clustered ilsevel blossoms, growing in profusion on vines, which cling to the walls and cover the floor so densely, one cannot see the paving stones in places.

“Gantarith.” My voice echoes hollowly. “Onor Gantarith!” There is no answer. Just a waiting sense of held breath and watchfulness. I frown and step out into the moonlight, pulling Ilsevel with me.

Suddenly I become aware of song. It's faint—just a hum on the edge of perception, and so strange. Low and haunting. I cannot tell from whence it comes. One moment I think it rains down from the sky above, a song of distant stars; the next, it seems to emanate from the ilsevel blossoms, secretive whispers of leaves and petals.

Finally I turn to Ilsevel. She stands with her hand still clasped in mine, but she looks a thousand miles away. Her eyes have a strange, glassy quality as she gazes around her at the profusion of blossoms. The song is issuing from her: a low hum, soft in her throat, but there's more to it as well. I feel as though I'm hearing echoes of spirit, not unlike when I share song-language with Elydark. It vibrates in the deep places of my soul, awakening awareness which has hitherto slept.

I stare at her, caught in that sound. For the first time in my life, I could almost swear I hear the ilsevel blooms surrounding me singing in response. And I realize—slowly, dully, my poor earth-bound mind struggling to comprehend, even as my soulswells with the truth—the whole universe is bound together by ribbons of sound. Of song.

“What is the meaning of this?”

A startled jolt shoots through my head. The song ends, and with it, something slams shut inside me, and I am back in this chamber of stone beneath the stars, breathing heavy air. I shake my head. Sparks dance on the edges of my vision. As they clear, I find I'm looking down into Ilsevel's face. She no longer sings. The muscles of her throat are tense, her eyes very wide, frightened as they gaze beyond me into the domed space by the altar. My mind, racing to catch up, only just realizes that the voice which interrupted her song came from behind me and spoke in my own language.

I turn on heel. “Onor Gantarith,” I say and make a reverent bow.

The priest stands just on the far side of the altar, his stern face lit by the glow of the

handheld brazier he holds uplifted before him. Though his beard is still black as a rook's wing, his face is heavily lined with age. Complex braids wrapped in knotted wires hang across his shoulders, draping all the way to the widenornilbelt wrapping his waist. He is a solemn figure, a man who has looked fully upon the cruelties the worlds have to offer and yet chose faith over cynicism. Though he has served the people of the hinterlands for seven decades, he never sought any great prominence within the holy orders, content to live out his days in remote Elanlein.

Never in his wildest dreams could he have guessed he would one day be forced by necessity to assume the role of high priest, arbiter of all the most sacred traditions of Licorna.

The weight of that duty seems to mound upon his broad shoulders even now as he stares me fiercely down across the altar slab. His black eyes move from me to Ilsevel, fixing on her with such terrible severity, it's all I can do to keep myself from stepping between them, making a shield of my body.

"Luinar," he says, his voice a deep-throated rumble, "who have you brought into Nornala's house? Who is this person who dares to sing in this sacred chamber?"

"Onor." I take a step forward. "Allow me to present my bride. My warbride, that is."

"What?" Gantarith's gaze snaps from me to her. The light from his brazier seems to spark in the depths of his pupils. "Your bride? But she is human."

I nod an acknowledgement. Then, though I doubt very much it will help, I add, "Her name is Ilsevel."

"Ilsevel?" he echoes.

"Yes."

I can see the thoughts careening in his head, the momentary confusion followed by hard clarity. He is thinking of the only reason a human might bear the name of our most beloved flower. And he doesn't like it; no more than I do.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Teeth flashing in a grimace, Gantarith circles the altar. His bare feet deftly avoid any of the delicate blossoms growing up between the paving stones. His eyes remain fastened on Ilsevel, as though he might peel back her outer layers to get down to the meat of her soul. She stares right back at him. While she does not understand a word he speaks, his tone is unmistakable. I see again that same stubborn courage I've witnessed in her from the very first moment of our meeting. Onor Gantarith would intimidate kings and princes of the fae, but even he cannot make my wife flinch.

Not my wife, I remind myself sharply. Gods, why can't I keep my thoughts in order?

"We were wed under unusual circumstances," I say quickly, "and now we need the marriage bond dissolved."

Gantarith, no more than five paces from us, continues to stare at Ilsevel for some moments, his expression impossible to read. After what feels like an age, he flicks his gaze to meet mine once more. "Unusual circumstances, you say? There's a story here, no doubt."

"Yes," I acknowledge. "A long one. But the main thrust of it is this: I took this woman as my bride to save her life."

"Why?" There's real confusion in that single word. Gantarith, like any of my people, cannot fathom a good reason for a human to be saved. Certainly not by a Licornyn.

"She was an innocent bystander," I say, "a pilgrim worshipping at the temple of Lamruil."

From there I swiftly recount the circumstances of our meeting, summarizing as concisely as I may. Gantarith listens, his eyes ever drawn back to Ilsevel's face. He watches for some stray expression which might betray falsehood in her. When I come to the end of our short history, the old priest stands silent for so long, I begin to wonder if he heard a word I said.

Finally he draws a long breath and turns that hard gaze of his to me. "So," he says slowly, "the marriage was . . . consummated?"

I won't let shame color my voice. "It was necessary to save her life. She was caught up in events far beyond her scope. I felt I owed her assistance."

"Assistance? Is that what you call it?" The expression which flashes across Gantarith's features is distinctly unholy. He looks Ilsevel up and down, takes in her womanly shape. She doesn't know what he is saying, but she knows that look. She crosses her arms over her breast and scowls at him harder than ever. The priest snorts derisively and turns to me once more. "Did you say her name is Ilsevel?"

"That is the name she gave me."

"She might be lying."

"Yes. But I think not in this instance."

"Have you asked her how she came by such a name?"

"I have been able to get very little out of her," I confess. "She is in enemy territory, frightened and alone. One cannot blame her for reticence."

Gantarith narrows his eyes at me. "You are keeping something from me, *luinar*. I heard the song she sang, here in our most sacred place. That was no human song, nor was it

a human voice. There is something else at play here, something bigger.”

I hesitate. Ilsevel’s position is already so tenuous, and I don’t want to reveal anything that could compromise her more. But it’s not as though I can deny outright what Gantarith heard with his own ears. “She is gods-gifted,” I say.

“What?” Gantarith’s eyes flash in the brazier light. I find I don’t want to share further details with him, however. I don’t want him to know how I nearly succumbed to virulium poison. Gantarith was there when I first foreswore the virulium dose. He prayed over my body when it suffered through the agonies of withdrawal. It would disturb him greatly to hear of any reversion, despite the miraculous interference of Ilsevel and her gift.

I say only, “Her gift is music. She can hear the songs of the licorneir.”

“Indeed?” Gantarith’s gaze returns to Ilsevel, appraising her slowly, distrustfully. “Humans were not meant to hear the songs of the Star Children.”

I hold my tongue. Anything I say might sway him against her. He studies her, and I wait. Though I amluinarof the surviving Licornyn tribes, Gantarith holds much sway as high priest. His word may influence the elders one way or the other.

“So,” the old priest says at last, “you married her to save her life and have now brought her here to be queen of Licorna?”

“No,” I answer hastily and hold out my forearm. “I intended to leave her behind with her own people, but . . . something happened with thevelra. Something I did not expect.”

Gantarith takes hold of my arm and turns it slowly this way and that. Whether or not he can see the invisible cord, I don’t know, but when I describe the strange weakness

which overtakes me whenever I leave Ilsevel's proximity, he does not seem surprised. His brow knots, and the severe lines framing his mouth deepen. When I finish recounting the shocking discovery, he shakes his head heavily. Then he catches my eye. "How have you brought this upon yourself, my boy?"

"I've wondered much the same these last seven days." I lift an eyebrow. "Can you help, Onor Gantarith? Can you undo the binding?"

To my dismay, he shakes his head. "Not until silmael. That is the law."

"Yes, but this is an unusual circumstance." I refuse to acknowledge the sudden sinking in my gut. "We were not meant to wed. It wasn't planned or intended. It was all a misunderstanding."

"Perhaps." The priest shrugs. "But you consummated the marriage, luinar. Your vows are binding in the eyes of Nornala."

"I didn't have any choice."

“And have you left her untouched since that night?”

The answer sticks in my throat. When he looks at me, I cannot quite meet his gaze.

Gantarith laughs. It's more amused than disparaging, but my gut burns with bile, nonetheless. “Well, I suppose you are a man as well as a king,” he says. “And she is a pretty temptation, I'll grant you that. All those long days of travel, all those quiet nights beneath the stars? Not one man in a hundred would have resisted.”

“You've a dirty mind for a priest,” I growl.

“I wasn't always a priest, now was I?” With a sigh, Gantarith turns away from the two of us, stepping to the altar stone. He sets his brazier down there and lifts his head to the open sky above the dome. Is he praying? Seeking guidance from Nornala? I can only hope she will answer him directly, and we can put a swift end to this.

At last he turns around and folds his arms across the open front of his cassock. “Unfortunately, lunar, you are bound to your bride until silmael, according to the law. The only way to break that bond earlier without causing severe harm to yourself . . . well, I don't like to say.”

“Tell me.”

Gantarith presses his lips together, his jaw working beneath his black beard. Then: “If one party proves traitor, not only to the marriage vows, but to all Licorna, then the bond may be broken ceremonially via bloodletting.”

Ice shoots through my veins. I stare at him, aghast.

“The elders,” Gantarith continues, “would likely agree that she is, by the mere nature of her humanity, a traitor to Licorna. If you are determined to rid yourself of her now rather than later, well . . . you won’t have any difficulty convincing them to demand a bloodletting.”

“And by bloodletting,” I say slowly, “you mean . . .”

He draws a long breath. “I will cut her throat with the ceremonial blade and let her blood flow across this very stone in an act of purification.”

Thunder seems to pound in my ears. I turn my head away from the priest, stare sightlessly around me. The ilsevel blooms waft gently in a breeze blown down through the skylight overhead. Their many glowing hearts seem almost to mock me, so gentle and pure in the face of this new horror.

“Warlord?” Ilsevel’s voice plucks at my ear. She draws near to my elbow. Her hand stretches out but does not quite touch me. “What is it?” she demands. “Tell me.”

I lift my gaze to hers. Her brow is stern, her jaw hard. Something tells me she’s understood more of the exchange between me and the priest than I want to believe.

Rather than answer her, I turn to Gantarith once more. “There must be some other way.”

“Unfortunately not,” he replies. “If you find you cannot remain bound to her untilsilmael, this is your only choice.” He tilts his head a little to one side. “The elders might make the choice for you and insist upon her death anyway. It is forbidden for a human to enter the Hidden City. She breaks our laws simply by her presence here.”

“I cannot do this.” I run a hand down my face, grimacing. “I won’t do this.”

“If you don’t, the elders may view you as the traitor, lunar.” Gantarith’s voice is heavy with the truth of his words. “The tribes are only loosely united as it is. This might be the breaking point, the final undoing of all that remains of Licorna.”

Gods blight and damn me. He’s right. I’ve put the security of my people at risk, all because I couldn’t let this stranger go to Lurodos. A boiling sensation burns in my breast, frustration mounting, transforming to rage. Rage that she should be so alluring to me, even from the first chaotic moments of our meeting. That she should be so spirited and brave, so rash and ferocious, and that these qualities should draw me to her with such intensity of feeling that I simply could not let her fall into the hands of monsters.

And now what? Have I saved her only to lead her to another, equally gruesome death?

“Warlord!” Ilsevel’s voice echoes sharply against the stones. This time I must look at her, must meet her snapping eyes. “Tell me what’s happening,” she says and draws a breath through clenched teeth. “What is he telling you?”

Gantarith curses sharply, a most unpriestly sound. “Bid her be silent,” he growls. “Let her not profane this holy place with her human speech.”

I cast him a short glare, then turn from him to Ilsevel and answer in her own language. “Our bond will not be broken tonight. We must remain together until the month’s end, when the velramay be safely severed.”

She looks at Gantarith, then back to me. “That’s not the whole truth, is it?”

I don’t answer.

“There is another way to break the bond. You . . .” She hesitates and swallows. “You have to kill me.”

I hold her gaze, unblinking.

She lifts her head a little, jaw set and fists clenched at her sides. “If you’re going to kill me, I’d rather you told me outright. Don’t lie. I can’t . . . I can’t bear a lie.”

For a long series of heartbeats, we remain like so, staring at one another beneath the moonlit dome. Then I step forward and, before she can retreat from me, take hold of her hand. The same hand which I’d held on the night of our wedding. In that moment of connection, the velvet tightens around my forearm, and I can almost see the flare of magic between us. Ilsevel perceives it too, for I hear her sharp intake of breath and feel her wince in pain at the sudden constriction of the cord.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“Zylnala,” I say, and her eyes flash, meeting mine. “With my body will I protect you. With my arms will I shelter you.” I speak the sacred vows, not in my own language as I have always known them, but in hers. They sound strange, unnatural. But true.

Ilsevel stares up at me. Does she realize what I am saying? Does she realize what I am offering her?

“We will part on the night of the New Moon,” I continue. “Until then you are under my protection, as you have been since this bond was formed between us. I will let no harm come to you. This I vowed then and vow again now.”

The muscles around her eyes seem to tighten. Are those tears I see? But she blinks, and no stray droplets escape through her lashes as she dips her head, staring at our joined hands. She lets out a breath. Then nods. Her fingers tighten briefly around mine, but when she tugs her hand away, I let her go and turn to Gantarith.

The old priest watches us narrowly. “So,” he says, “you are determined to wait it out.”

I nod.

“You will have to take precautions if you want to be certain of a broken bond comesilmael.”

“I know,” I say. “The elders—”

“I’m not talking about the elders.” His mouth crooks in a mirthless half-smile. “If the

bond is to be safely broken and leave no lasting scars, you must abstain from all physical intimacy. For the rest of the month.” He tips his chin, eyeing me from under his lowered brow. “You cannot shake your bride again, lunar. Is that going to be a problem?”

My throat thickens. But when I answer, my voice is even. “No. That will not be a problem.”

But I can see the look in the old priest’s eye. He doesn’t believe me. Not for a second.

21

ILSEVEL

Taar is silent as we leave the domed chamber and step back into the passage. He takes my hand again, and though I don’t want even that small point of contact between our palms, I can’t very well shake him off. I could never navigate the winding ways of this temple on my own, so I grit my teeth and let him lead me.

All around ilsevel blossoms clinging to the walls flicker with their strange inner light-song. I had ceased to hear them when we stood in the presence of that priest, for his harsh voice, speaking in a rush of language I couldn’t begin to comprehend, drowned out all other sound. Now the song returns, a delicate hum on the edge of awareness. It’s strange—I’ve never heard anything quite like it, made without either voice or soul. Something about it feels familiar, but I don’t know why. It’s as though part of me has always known this song should exist, if only I could find it. As though I’ve believed in and sought after it all my life, without knowing what I sought.

We emerge suddenly through the open temple door, back out into the crisp air of deepening evening. Elydark gleams in the moonlight. He munches contentedly, and when he raises his head at the sight of us, petals scatter from his muzzle. A greeting

hums along the soul-thread connecting Taar and Elydark. Taar releases my hand, leaving me oddly bereft as he goes to his steed. They lean their heads close together, sharing words in their private language.

I rub my hands, eager to rub away the warmth of Taar's fingers. The temple doorway feels like an open maw behind me, and I step away from it, shivering. There was something in the way that old priest had looked at me, a latent hatred barely suppressed. I shouldn't be surprised—it was the same look Taar's people gave me the night of our ill-fated wedding. Am I really to spend the next month surrounded by those who would like to see me dead?

Taar and his unicorn are still talking. Though I cannot hear what they say, Elydark's low-hung head and Taar's bowed shoulders are telling enough. With a sigh I turn away from them. There's a broad, flat rock not far from my current position, surrounded by a tangle of ilsevel blossoms. I step over to it and take a seat, suddenly tired. I'm perched not far from the edge of a ravine overlooking a hushed valley. Down below stand hundreds of tent-like structures, bathed in gentle moonlight.

"The Hidden City," I whisper. Every time Taar mentioned this place, I had pictured something like the great ruins we'd passed when crossing Cruor, all those magnificent structures, those towers and bridges and tall, forbidding walls. This is nothing like what I expected. The city is arranged in a carefully-plotted circular formation. The tents themselves are, for the most part, circular as well, but with side chambers jutting out from the primary circle. Even from this distance, many of them look quite large and imposing. Nonetheless they don't compare to the magnificent architecture I'd glimpsed in passing while riding Elydark across the stricken land.

How far have the people of Licorna fallen? I wonder vaguely as I sit here, chin cupped in my hands. The tragedy of Taar's tale strikes me all over again. Once a great power among the worlds of Eledria, now a remnant people, living rough in this harsh country . . . no wonder the Licornyn folk hate my kind so viciously.

Footsteps sound behind me. I glimpse Taar in my peripheral vision moments before he draws alongside the stone on which I sit. He stands there, silent. Then he takes a seat, close enough that I feel the warmth radiating from his skin. I hate the draw I feel toward him, the urge to lean close and feel the solidness of his arm. Instead I sit up straight, pulling my cloak tight around me, and refuse to look at him. Was he lying when he said he wouldn't kill me? I'm almost certain that's what the priest suggested—something in Gantarith's tone sounded bloodthirsty to me. Maybe Taar spoke all those gentle assurances just to keep me from panicking or doing anything rash, but secretly he intends to slit my throat while I sleep.

"I cannot hide you for a month."

His voice is sudden after the long silence. I shoot him a swift sideways glance. There's a hardness to his features, to the set of his jaw. Wind whips through his long, black hair, trailing strands across his eyes, which remain fixed on the city below us.

"Hide me?" I say at last, echoing his words.

"I considered taking you back into the wilds," he says. "I thought we might stay there until Silmael, away from any prying eyes." He shakes his head. "But we can't. My people need me. I am a ruler, and I have responsibilities." He draws a long breath and grimaces, as though the words he's about to say taste bitter on his tongue. "So we will meet with the elders tomorrow morning. I must ask their permission for you to stay until the night of the new moon."

I take this in without comment. It's not as though I have any say in the matter. Strange that these elders, whoever they are, wield so much power over their king. I cannot imagine my own father submitting to any authority. But then I would hardly compare my father to Taar in any respect—they are very different men and, presumably, very different kings.

Taar suddenly runs both hands down his face. He looks tired. It might be the first time since the virulium poison laid him low that I've seen him as anything other than a figure of certainty and strength. He does not remain like so for long, however, but rises and says in a firm voice, "Come. We cannot stay here all night."

Without a murmur I leave my stone seat behind and follow him back to where Elydark waits, grazing quietly in a patch of ilsevel blossoms. Apparently, though Taar claimed a single ilsevel could sustain a unicorn for upwards of a month, that doesn't stop them from enjoying a hearty meal when given opportunity. He puts his ears back when Taar assists me back into the saddle. I don't blame him; the last thing in all the worlds I want is to ride on tonight, or ever again for that matter. But I hold my tongue.

Taar mounts behind me and nudges Elydark with his heels. The unicorn ambles into motion, picking out a path down from the temple mount toward the tent city below.

Taar does not try to speak, for which I am grateful. Though questions multiply inside my head, I tamp them down firmly. In the silence, I find myself once again hearing the delicate hum of the ilsevel blossoms, which grow down this hillside in trailing vines. I can't help the odd sense that they are following me, somehow. That they don't want me to leave them, that they're inviting me to stay and listen and understand.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

We come to the bottom of the incline and the level ground of the valley bowl. Here a forest separates us from the city, the trees so densely grown, the branches so intertwined, they might as well be a wall of stone. But Elydark continues without pause, finding a nearly invisible trail and trotting along it at a brisk clip. Beneath the canopy of this forest, I am practically blind, for no moonlight can penetrate here. Thus I don't see the figure who steps out in front of us on the path and only become aware of him when a deep voice calls out roughly: "Tor eilamar!"

I let out a little squeak of surprise and jolt back against the broad chest behind me. Elydark comes to a halt, tossing his head, but Taar's voice is level when he answers: "Veletuil, Halamar." It is the Licornyn greeting—that much I recognize. But the string of words which follows I do not know.

A flash of light erupts in the darkness. I throw up my hands to shield my eyes. It's like a star suddenly flaring into existence right here in the forest before me, so brilliant and white and dancing with other nameless colors just on the edge of perception. For a moment it's too much, but when my eyes adjust to that initial flare, I peer between my fingers.

A tall figure stands in the path, his legs widespread, his shoulders like a wall. He holds a long, teardrop-shaped lantern out at the extent of his arm. It is this which casts the strange light, but it does not contain flame—instead, to my surprise, I see a swirl of liquid contained behind glass, giving off that pulsing luminousness. It's so odd, at first I cannot tear my gaze away from it to further study the man who carries it. However, as he and Taar continue talking over one another in eager Licornyn tongue, I take time to study him.

He is built like a warrior: strong, well-muscled. His face is older than Taar's and not quite handsome, but striking in its way, with a prominent nose and a wide jaw. His hair is black and braided tightly at the temples before falling well past his shoulders. In typical Licornyn fashion, his torso is bare despite the crisp chill in the air, but he wears a wide belt and furred trousers tucked into tall boots.

All these details flash before my eyes, but they seem hardly to matter. There's something else which strikes me much more prominently, something . . . not quite right. I'm not sure how to describe it. Crippled is the word which comes to mind, though I see no sign of warping or injury in his strong limbs.

Suddenly I catch it: the faintest whisper of song. Broken song, a melody made dissonant and wrong. It's not unlike the song I heard from the hearttorn unicorns. From Nyathri. But it's so faint, almost imperceptible. Could I be imagining it?

His gaze fastens on me. He holds up his teardrop-shaped lantern to better illuminate my face. A curse bursts from his lips, and he takes a step back, his free hand going for the sword at his belt. Hastily Taar dismounts and goes toward him, hands open. The man looks at Taar, shaking his head in confusion. Their voices rise and fall, and all the while, the man keeps sending me looks that change from anger to disbelief. At one point he throws back his head and utters a loud bark of a laugh. That makes my blood boil. I knot my hands in Elydark's mane, biting back the words which spring to my tongue.

Finally the man nods, seeming to agree to something. With a last distrustful glance my way, he hands his lantern to Taar, turns, and makes his way up the path through the dark forest. "Who was that?" I demand the moment the shadows swallow him from sight.

Taar turns back to me, holding up the strange lantern. "Halamar," he says. "An old friend and battle companion."

“He seemed . . . less than pleased to see me.”

A rueful expression flashes across Taar’s face. He returns to Elydark’s side. The lantern swings on the end of its chain, casting his shadow in flashing configurations behind him. “If Halamar’s reaction is the worst we receive, we will be gods-blessed for sure.” He stops and touches Elydark’s shoulder with his free hand and doesn’t meet my eye. “He’s gone to find my sister. She will help us tonight.”

“Help us how?”

“We must prepare you to meet the elders. Tassa will inform them of our arrival and forewarn them as to the nature of the meeting which will take place. She will also assist you in making yourself ready in the morning, appropriate garments and so forth.”

We lapse back into silence. I can’t say I’m pleased at the prospect of meeting Taar’s sister. It feels too personal. Not to mention she’s bound to hate me as much as any other Licornyn I’ve met.

I pull myself a little straighter in the saddle, fighting the exhaustion permeating my limbs. Taar stands close to Elydark’s head, and I feel the hum of their shared communion. If I listened more closely, I think I could pick up a few words here and there, but I’m too tired to try. Instead I let my awareness sink deeper, back into that space which hears the gentle song of the ilsevel blossoms. There aren’t as many down here in the valley, but I spy a few stray vines climbing tree trunks, the hearts of small buds glowing faintly in the gloom. Those buds begin to unfurl when I look at them, as though eager to greet me. I look away quickly.

I don’t know how long we wait. Long enough that I begin to wonder if this Halamar forgot about us entirely, and we’re doomed to spend a cold night under these trees. My eyelids are leaden, and my head nods. I feel I could slip from this saddle, lie

down right beside Elydark's massive hooves, and sleep like the dead for a week or more.

Before I can quite resolve to do just that, however, a woman's voice calls out in the darkness: "Taar?"

Suddenly I'm awake. Anxiety spikes through my veins. Two figures step into the glow of Taar's upraised lantern—Halamar and, close at his heels, a tall, strikingly beautiful woman. She is slender to the point of thinness, but her bare arms boast defined muscles that bespeak a life of hard labor. Her black hair is bound on top of her head in fat coils held in place by glinting silver threads, and large earrings of pounded silver hang from her ears nearly to her shoulders. Her features are strong and ideally proportioned, her black eyes cat-shaped above severe cheekbones. She couldn't be mistaken for anyone but Taar's sister.

But the thing which catches my attention most forcefully at the sight of both her and Halamar is that same thread of song I'd picked up from him at first glance. That strange, broken melody—only this time it's much more pronounced. And it seems to flow between the two of them.

Halamar's face has lost all sharpness of expression, his features assuming a mask of calm. Quite a contrast to the severity in the woman's eyes. She—Tassa presumably—stops dead a few paces from Taar. Her mouth drops open in surprise as her gaze travels from him to me. I'm immediately certain that, were we to have met alone in this place, she would have torn into me tooth-and-nail, like a wildcat. As it is the presence of the other two holds her fury in check. But only just.

After a space of breaths during which I count seven thudding heartbeats in my throat, the woman wrenches her gaze from me and rounds on her brother. When she speaks, her voice is cold, low, and venomous. Taar tries to interrupt, but she takes an aggressive step forward, finger pointing at his face, and a stream of vicious words

pours forth. Taar waits until she's through, then gently takes his sister's pointing finger in hand and moves it to one side.

"Tassa," he says, "allow me to introduce my warbride. This is Ilsevel. Ilsevel"—he looks at me over his shoulder—"it is my pleasure to present to you Talanashta Estathanei, my sister."

Tassa's gaze doesn't move from her brother's face. She takes a step back and growls something that sounds like an expletive.

Up until now I've held my tongue, but this woman's tone sets my teeth on edge. "See here," I snap, leaning forward in the saddle, determined to catch her eye, "it's not as though I like this situation any more than the rest of you. It wasn't my choice to be married off to this hulking lunk of a brother of yours. Did I ask him to throw me in a prison cart and haul me away to captivity? Did I ask him to buy me and drag me away to this gods-forsaken place?"

The woman stares up at me. Behind her, Halamar chuckles softly, though his face remains a mask. Tassa shoots him a glare, and he swallows and resumes his silence. She looks up at me again, her eyes penetrating. When she opens her mouth, I brace myself, prepared for attack.

"Heisa hulking lunk." She pronounces the words in my language with only a trace of an accent. "Whatever else you may be, I'll credit you for that insight at least." She presses her lips into a hard line, her gaze running over me in the pale light of that lantern. She glances at her brother again, eyes narrowing, and says something in Licornyn. He responds in a low murmur, and she sighs.

Turning to me once more, she crosses her arms and shakes her head so that her large, silver earrings swing back and forth over her shoulders. "Very well, human," she says with a little huff through her lips. "Tomorrow I will help you prepare to meet the

elders. Perhaps my lunkish brother will be able to convince them to spare your life. Perhaps not. We shall let the gods decide.”

“Thank you,” I answer stiffly, though not entirely convinced thanks is appropriate.

She tips an eyebrow my way, then fixes Taar with another stern glare before turning to Halamar. She says a few swift words to him, which he acknowledges with a solemn nod. Once more, the air between them crackles with a faint echo of broken song, distant yet unmistakable. I shake my head slightly but cannot clear the sound from my ears. It continues singing, an eerie dissonance, until Tassa turns from Halamar and hastens up the path toward the city.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Halamar turns to Taar, speaking softly. The initial surprise and shock with which he greeted his king has faded, leaving behind the impression of a man not easily provoked to strong emotion. He and Taar exchange a few words, at the end of which Taar clasps his forearm warmly. “Normaer,” he says, a word of gratitude I’ve heard him speak before. Then he turns to me. “Halamar has offered us the use of hisdakath for the night. It is located outside the city limits. We should not be disturbed.”

I catch Halamar’s eye. “Normaer,” I say experimentally. His eyes brighten with surprise, and something like a smile pulls at the corner of his mouth.

Taar knows the way to Halamar’sdakath, so we part with the warrior and branch off from the primary road through the forest into a small side path I certainly could not have found on my own. Taar leads the way, carrying the teardrop lantern. I remain on Elydark’s back, rather cold without Taar’s presence behind me. I watch his shadowy form, illuminated by that pale light.

“That man,” I say after a little while. “Halamar . . . is he hearttorn?”

Taar stops, surprised, and looks back at me. “What makes you ask that?”

“Is he?” I persist.

His frown looks severe in the pale lantern glow. “His licorneir, Liossark, was killed at the battle of Agandaur Fields, three years ago.”

I turn this information over in my mind. “Was that when he broke off his relationship

with your sister?”

Taar’s eyes widen. “How could you possibly know about that?”

I shrug. “There was a song between them. Disharmony. It reminded me of the hearttorn unicorns by the river, and . . . and Nyathri.”

Taar studies me for some moments, multiple expressions passing through his eyes in quick succession. “Halamar and my sister were promised to wed,” he says finally. “But when he becamevelrhoar,he told her he could not go through with it. He felt he was only half a man following Liossark’s death. He told her she deserved more.”

With those words, he faces forward and leads us on through the trees. Elydark follows, head low, his great horn pointed at the ground. I think back on those stray interactions glimpsed between Tassa and Halamar. Something tells me she has not forgiven him for ending their bond. She is angry but, unless I misunderstood the broken song between them, she loves him still.

We come to a clearing near a bubbling stream. A smalldakathtent stands pale in the moonlight. Nothing like the great tents of the city I’d seen from the temple mount, this one reminds me much more of those small tents I’d glimpsed in the Licornyn encampment the night of my ill-fated wedding. There’s not a great deal of room inside for one person, much less two.

“You will find plenty of blankets andleokasskins inside,” Taar says. “Make yourself comfortable.”

I dismount, painfully aware of the similarity to last night, when I’d stood in the rain outside the shepherd’s dugout and refused to shelter without him. Tonight, however, I won’t insist on sharing. He can sleep out here on the hard ground and freeze for all I care. Without a word, I step toward thedakath.

“Wait.”

My heart leaps. A sudden rush of blood pulses through my veins. I cannot look at him, but every part of me is so aware of him—of his size, his warmth, his power. The magnificent aura of his soul, like a song in and of itself. Around my wrist the velvet tightens. I want to curse it and the terrible, irresistible draw I feel toward this man to whom I am still so damnably bound.

“Take this,” Taar says, his voice husky. He holds out the teardrop-shaped lantern. “It will be dark inside.”

Breath catches in my throat. I fear if I let it out, I’ll betray myself in some foolish way. Keeping my eyes firmly in front, I nod once, reach out and take the lantern. My fingertips brush against his, and a burst of electricity races up my arm to whorl in my breast.

Taar hastily steps back, beyond the circle of lantern light. He clears his throat. “Rest well tonight, Ilsevel.”

I open my mouth. But if I speak it won’t be to bid goodnight. The words crowding my tongue are far too perilous.

Biting my lip, I nod once, push back the dark tent flap, and carry the lantern into the shadows inside.

22

TAAR

“So where is the human creature?”

I look up from the small fire I've built in the circle of stones outside Halamar's dakath. I'd risen before the sun to gather kindling, eager to be done with the long night. It wasn't sleeping on hard ground beneath the cold sky which bothered me; I've lived rough most of my life and have little need for creature comforts. Like any warrior, I can sleep well and deeply wherever I happen to lie down.

But I struggled to close my eyes last night. Not with the hides of the dakath wall separating me from Ilsevel.

The physical distance was not great, but that barrier felt like a yawning chasm. The velvet around my arm burned painfully as I fought the urge to throw back the entrance flap and plunge into the shadowy space where she lay. But I know what I would have done had I given in. I would have crawled atop her, ripped away the covering blankets, and plunged my hand under her skirts. My mouth would seek hers in the darkness, forgetting all Gantarith's warnings. I would kiss her until she moaned, pleasure her until she sang, and to hell with all consequences.

Only Elydark's presence kept me sane. My licorneir positioned himself in the space between me and the dakath, like a living wall. Fully aware of the turmoil in my soul, he did not speak to me, did not try to argue me out of any foolish impulses. He simply stood, silent and solid, until I rolled onto my side, my back to him, and closed my eyes tight. The hours crept by slowly, one after the other. When I rose at last, I felt haggard as though I'd spent the night in combat, and my forearm hurt like the damned.

It still hurts now as I lift my gaze from my small fire to watch the dawn mist part and my sister step through into Halamar's home clearing. A large woven basket rests on her hip, a fold of pale khii fabric draping out of one side. She's come prepared for her morning work, as we agreed upon last night.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Tassa scowls at me where I crouch at the fire, her question hanging in the smokey air between us. “Grace to you this fine morning, dear sister,” I say dryly, sitting back on my heels. “Of all homely comforts, I’ve missed the dulcet sounds of your voice the most.”

A growl in her throat, Tassa stomps across the flattened grass, sets down her basket, and kneels across the fire from me. My travel kettle, propped on coals, is just beginning to belch steam. She glances at it before turning her gaze to the dakathdoor flap. “Is she still asleep?”

I grunt.

“And you spent the night out here, did you?”

I don’t answer. Using a long stick, I hook the kettle handle and lift it from the fire. I have only two cups on hand; I fill them both, straining the larger jyrete leaves as I pour. One cup I offer across the flickering fire. Tassa stares at me a moment before taking it. Her eyes never leave mine as she lifts the brew, takes a slow sip.

Then, shaking her head, she lowers the cup to her lap. “Gods, you shakhedher, didn’t you.”

I swirl the contents of my own cup, watching remnant jyrete leaves whirl. “Truly, sister, your speech grows more refined by the day. Such eloquence from the last princess of Licorna.”

“Gods-damn you, Taar.” She flashes her teeth like a wildcat. “She’s human. How

could you bear to touch her?”

“I didn’t. I slept out here last night. Elydark will vouch for me.”

She glances at my licorneir, who stands on the edge of the clearing and pretends to ignore us both. Her eyes swivel back to me. The lines around her mouth harden. “And what about the night before?”

I don’t answer. Neither can I hold her gaze. I take a gulp from my cup, the too-hot liquid scalding as it pours down my throat. Tassa curses again and tosses the contents of her cup into the fire, which sizzles and sends up a cloud of dark smoke. Rising, she gathers her basket and turns as though to leave.

“Tassa, wait,” I call after her.

“Wait? Wait? What have I ever done but wait?” She whirls to face me, her long silver earrings clattering softly as they swing back and forth over her shoulders. Her face is vicious, and her hands grip the handles of her basket white-knuckled. “I’m always the one who waits, Taar, while you ride off to adventure in far worlds. I’m here, scrubbing soiled small clothes, curing smelly hides, spinningkhiirinto thread, and grindingaymarroots for the cookpot. I’m herewaiting.Trusting, believing. Praying that someday, somehow, we will reclaim the world that once was ours, and I’ll see my home again.” She shifts her basket to her hip, then tosses her free hand to indicate Halamar’sdakath.“I’m waiting for warriors to ride home, either in victory or defeat. Waiting for wounds to heal which never do, waiting for those I love to return to me, whether broken or whole, I cannot know. Always, always I am waiting, Taar.”

Her eyes hold mine across the clearing, simmering with barely suppressed wrath. I feel the heat of her pain and frustration. Life has not been kind to any of us in the years since the Rift. But I have Elydark. That licorneir bond has been my sustaining force, even through the loss of Shanaera. But Tassa has had to face each shock alone.

Slowly I get to my feet. Her eyes flash as I approach her, but she does not resist when I reach out and take her hand. “Tassa—” I begin.

“Don’t,” she snaps, dropping her gaze from mine. She lets a long breath out through clenched teeth. We stand like so for some moments, and I don’t know what to say to break this silence. I know how dearly my sister wished to one day be a rider like our mother. But there are so few licorneir left in the world, and bonds are rare. She never found a pairing; instead she was forced to watch while I, Shanaera, Kildorath, and Halamar all rode out from the Hidden City and left her behind.

“I’m sorry, Tassa,” I say at last, my voice low. “Truly.”

“Sorry forshakkinga human?”

I squeeze her hand. “Sorry for disappointing you.”

“I’m not disappointed.” She tilts her head back, scowling up at me. “I’m disgusted.”

I meet her gaze levelly. “You weren’t there.”

“Damn right, I wasn’t.”

“You didn’t see her.” I grimace as memory flashes through my mind. “You didn’t see how valiantly she fought to protect her sister. Against impossible odds, unarmed, ravening Noxaurians closing in, and still she would not back down.”

Tassa sneers. “Even a rat will fight when it’s cornered.”

A sudden swell of rage bellows up from deep inside me. Part of me is shocked—I’ve never felt this way, not toward my sister. For a split second I try to calm myself, to remember that I have voiced similar and worse opinions about humans many times in

my life.

But then my voice emerges in a growl so deep, I hardly recognize it: “You will not speak of her in that way again. Not to me.”

Tassa’s eyes flare. She wrenches her hand from mine and staggers two steps back. She looks at me like I’m some stranger. “Is that how it is then? Have you forgotten everything you are, everything those Miphates forced you to become? Has she so easily seduced you?”

My jaw clenches. “Ilsevel is guilty of no wrongdoing. She is neither a Miphata nor a warrior, but an innocent pilgrim. It was my fault she was endangered. I did what I had to do to save her life.”

My sister’s lip curls. “You’re keeping something from me.”

The moment she says it, I hear Ilsevel’s voice again, soft in my head: “Mage Artoris would not have been at the Temple of Lamruil were it not for me.” Even now thought of their connection brings bile to my throat. And how deep did that connection run? How deep may it run still, despite her declarations to the contrary?

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“There are some things, sister,” I say, turning away from Tassa’s studying gaze, “which are not yours to know.”

“What about Shanaera?”

A stone seems to strike my sternum, break through bones, and lodge in my chest. Shanaera was Tassa’s dear friend. It was Shanaera and Kildorath’s father, Markildor, chieftain of the Rocaryn Tribe, who took me and my sister in when we were discovered alone together on the banks of the Morrona River. Markildor heard our story and, when presented with the proof of Queen Ashtalora’s ring, believed we were who we claimed to be—the surviving prince and princess of ruined Licorna. He took us under his protection, raised us alongside his own two children. Tassa, Shanaera, Kildorath, and I were as close as siblings, closer even—bonded through suffering and survival.

Shanaera’s death affected Tassa deeply. I’ve not had the heart to tell her of thenecroliphonmagic and the undead I faced during this recent campaign. If I could, I would spare her that knowledge forever.

“I have not forgotten Shanaera,” I say quietly. “I never will.”

“You shame her memory, taking this woman as your bride.”

Guilt twists my gut. I push it down firmly. “I vowed to save Ilsevel’s life, and that is what I intend to do. Then she will be returned to her people, and we will not speak of her again.” I take a step toward Tassa, once more reaching for her hand. She turns away from me. “I swear it, Tassa. It will be like none of this ever happened.”

Her lips move, forming what looks like another curse. Before she can speak, however, movement across the clearing draws both our gazes. The door flap of Halamar's dakathripples, and Ilsevel emerges. She's clad still in the same rough Licornyn gown she's worn this past week, shabby and stained with hard travel. Her hair is pulled loose from its braids and hangs in snarls past her shoulders. She looks exhausted, hollow-eyed, and much too thin . . . and yet . . .

My heart leaps at the sight of her, thudding first in my throat before plummeting to my gut where it churns in molten heat. Gods-damn thisvelrabond! A separation of mere hours with only the hides of the dakath between us, and a mere glimpse of her sleep-puffy face is like the rising of the sun over the wintery darkness of my soul. I cannot let myself forget that these feelings are false. But how will I keep my heart in check to the month's end?

Of course the elders might declare a simple solution by the edge of Gantarith's ceremonial blade. My teeth grind together. So help me, if the old priest goes anywhere near her with that knife, I'll gut him on the spot!

Ilsevel catches my eyes across the clearing. At sight of my grim expression, she draws back a step, as though prepared to duck back into the dakath. Hastily I shake the violence from my head and call out to her in what I hope is a mild tone: "Good morrow, Ilsevel. Are you thirsty?"

She doesn't answer, merely stands in that opening, one hand still gripping the hide flap. Her gaze flicks from me to Tassa, uncertain which of us to fear more. I leave my sister's side and retrieve the cup of jyretea I'd left behind me on the fire stones. It's still steaming, so I offer it to Ilsevel. "Here. Drink. It's a chilly morning."

"Yes," she says, her voice like frost, "I'd noticed." She accepts the cup and lifts it to her lips. Her gaze shifts from me to Tassa. Swallowing a mouthful of tea, she lowers the cup again and murmurs, "Someone looks delighted to see me."

I glance back over my shoulder. Tassa's stare could skin alive azhorwolf, and it's fixed with absolute intensity on my bride. I hate this, feeling so torn between the sister I love and the woman I can't seem to get rid of.

"Don't worry about her," I say softly. "She will help you prepare for the meeting with the elders." Saying as much reminds me. I turn back to Tassa and call out in Licornyn tongue: "Did you speak to Elder Halaema last night?"

"Yes," Tassa replies. "The meeting has been called and the elders summoned from their beds and breakfasts. They know only that theirluinarhas returned and that he requires council immediately." She narrows her eyes. "I did not mention your warbride. You can explain that on your own."

I suppress a sigh. "And did Halamar summon Onor Gantarith as I requested?"

"I did."

We all turn as Halamar steps into the clearing, appearing a few paces behind Tassa. My sister startles at his arrival and hastily moves to one side. Her scowl deepens when he offers her a solemn nod. One would never guess by the cool look on his face that there had ever been anything between them. How Ilsevel picked up on the truth in a single meeting without even understanding the language they spoke is beyond comprehension.

Halamar salutes me after the Licornyn fashion, pressing his fist to his heart. "Gantarith will be present for the meeting and has agreed to testify as to the strange nature of yourvelrabond."

"And when will the meeting take place?"

"Within the hour."

“In that case,” I say, turning to Tassa, “you had best make Ilsevel ready at once.”

She gives me a last long look, protests brimming in her eyes. At last, however, she shakes her head and says only, “You owe me, brother.”

“Whatever you desire, sister mine, including my kingdom, if you ask it.”

“Nobody wants your damned kingdom.” Leaving Halamar’s side, Tassa stalks across the clearing, making for the other side of the dakath where the stream flows. “Come then, bride of my brother,” she calls over her shoulder in human tongue. “Let’s see what we can make of you.”

Ilsevel, still standing in the dakath doorway, shoots me an uneasy look. “Go on,” I say and nod my head after Tassa. “She won’t bite.”

Ilsevel looks unconvinced but silently follows Tassa. The moment she disappears on the far side of the dakath, I feel a nearly irresistible urge to follow. My feet take three steps after her before I realize what I’m doing and force myself to stop. Weakness trembles in my limbs, and I roll my neck uncomfortably. It’s not as bad here, beyond the influence of Cruor and the vardimnar. On this side of the Morrona there’s no dark magic in the atmosphere to take advantage of my vulnerability. But I feel the separation even so. And I don’t like it.

Halamar watches me. I meet his too-knowing gaze and struggle to keep my face as carefully blank as his own. “Do you have anything other than me cakes to eat in this place?” I ask rather ungraciously.

His eyebrow tips. To my relief, he says nothing, but enters the dakath and comes back with a fatty cut of leokas meat and day-old flat bread. Quietly he sets to work frying the meat on the hot cooking stone. I watch him but scarcely see anything he does. My attention is distracted by the sound of voices and splashing coming from the stream.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“What are the chances Tassa won’t attempt to drown my bride before the morning is through?” I ask, taking a seat opposite Halamar at the fire.

He chuckles, though his mouth remains in its solemn line. “From what I’ve seen of your warbride, she can handle herself, even against a force like Talanashta. Did she not tame our erstwhile untamableluinar?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I growl. But as I don’t feel like explaining myself all over again, I switch topics. “Have you seen any sign of Kildorath and the others?”

Halamar looks up from the cooking stone. “We’d hoped you would have news of them.”

I shake my head grimly. “I sent them on ahead when events transpired to keep me longer at the Grimspire. I didn’t want the Hidden City to be unguarded longer than necessary.”

The instant the words pass my lips, I regret them. Halamar himself stood guard over the city while the Licornyn riders were away. Though suffering fromvelrhoar, he is a warrior still, valiant and strong. But he is nothing like he was when bonded to his licorneir. “Half a man”—that’s what he called himself when he broke his promise to Tassa. It is painful enough never to have known a licorneir bond; far worse to have known such a bond and lost it.

Halamar doesn’t react to my words. He continues in that same even tone: “We have seen nothing of them. You are the first to return.”

My gut knots. Ashika's face appears in my mind, her head half-severed from her body as she lay in the dirt of Agandaur. And Nyathri . . . her licorneir is still out there somewhere, hearttorn and suffering. Did the same fate befall all my brave Licornyn? Did Shanaera and her crimson-cloaked followers decimate them out in the wilds of Cruor? I must find them. As soon as matters are arranged here, I must resupply and set out across the river, but . . .

“Shakh,” I whisper. If I go, I will have to take Ilsevel with me. Even if the elders agree to let her stay untilsilmael, I will be vulnerable if parted from her. But what can I do? Set her before me on Elydark's saddle and ride with her back into that hell-stricken land? Or wait here alongside Tassa and the old folk and thevelrhoar? Helpless, useless.

Halamar abruptly sits up a little straighter, his eyes widening. Curious, I twist my torso to look behind me and discover what he has seen. My traitorous heart turns over. Slowly I rise to my feet, lips parting with a gust of escaped breath.

Ilsevel stands before me, clad in a traditional wovenkhiirgown. The waistband sits in a low V at her hips, pale rouched fabric emphasizing every curve, while a long slit up each side reveals flashing glimpses of shapely legs decorated in silver anklets and delicate cords. Her midriff is exposed, but Tassa has taken the time to paint the traditional sun-and-moon motif of a bride around her navel with the stain of crushed ilsevel blossoms. Softleokashide wraps her breast, leaving her shoulders and arms bare save for wide silver armbands which grip her wrists and upper arms—Tassa's ornaments, intended for her own wedding but never used. Until today.

My sister has accomplished much in a short period. She's washed and brushed her charge's chestnut hair until it shines, then caught it up in small, complicated braids that crown her head while leaving long locks to flow down her back. To finish the look, she's tucked a single purple ilsevel blossom behind her ear.

I feel hollowed out. Empty of all thought, all reason. For a space of ten breaths, I cannot recall the elders or the meeting, cannot even sense the presence of my sister and friend observing me far too closely. I see nothing but her. Ilsevel, my bride. This stranger who, in the course of a mere week, has thrown my life into utter turmoil and set my heart ablaze.

A throb of lust jolts through my loins, but I'm scarcely aware of it. This is more than mere lust burning inside me. It's desire. For her. All of her: heart, mind, body, and soul. I want her with the desperate wanting a drowning man wants air.

I drag my gaze from her bare feet, taking in the gentle folds of her skirt, the tantalizing shape of her legs, the lovely indentation of her navel surrounded by ilsevel stain. Her chest rises and falls quickly, the folds of her dress emphasizing the delicious shape. I could swear I can see the pulse beating in her slender throat.

Finally my scrutiny reaches her dark eyes. I find them fixed on me with an intent expression, as though, in that moment, I hold her life in my hands.

"Well?" Her voice breaks the spell of the moment. "Is it that bad?" She wraps her arms around her bare skin, shivering. "I feel ridiculous. And exposed. This doesn't seem like appropriate attire for meeting with elders."

"It's bridal raiment," Tassa says shortly and inspects her work with a critical eye. "It makes you look more Licornyn."

I blink, suddenly reminded of my sister's presence, not to mention Halamar and Elydark, all standing by and watching me. It's just as well—for in another moment, I would have lunged across the little space between me and Ilsevel and taken her in my arms. Even now the heat sears into my flesh like a tongue of fire, urging me to give in, to drag her into the darkness, throw her down upon the piled skins, hike up those delicate white skirts, and bury my head between her thighs.

“It will have to do,” I say instead, my voice emerging in a rough bark. With a wrench of sheer will, I turn away and march across the clearing. Blood roars in my ears. “It’s time to go,” I call over my shoulder. “We cannot be late for this meeting.”

“What about breakfast?” Halamar asks, a note of wryness in his voice. “Are you not hungry after all, luinar?”

I am hungry. Ravenous. But not for the hotleokasmeat sizzling on his stone.

And something tells me he knows it.

23

ILSEVEL

I watch Taar’s back retreat into the forest ahead of me. Though I know I must follow, my feet are suddenly heavy.

The way he looked at me—so harsh, so unforgiving—as though I’ve committed some terrible sin. But it was his idea to dress me in Licornyn garb, was it not? And his sister who wrapped me in these outlandish garments and painted this strange symbol on my skin. It’s not as though I want to spend a frigid morning half-dressed and barefoot, shivering so hard I can’t tell if it’s from fear or chill.

Halamar says something low in Licornyn tongue. Tassa answers sharply, her eyebrows lowered. “What is it?” I demand, frowning at the two of them. I know perfectly well they can speak my language if they choose. “Have I done something wrong? Have I offended him?”

Tassa shoots me a disparaging look. “There is nothing right about the sight of a human in Licornyn country.” She adds something else I don’t understand, something

at my expense, judging by the low chuckle from Halamar. But she follows it up with a sweep of her arm and says with great dignity, “Go on, bride of my brother. The elders are waiting.”

Apparently she means for me to go first. With a shrug, I follow the narrow path into the forest, tracing Taar’s footsteps. My bare feet shrink from the rough terrain and cold dirt. Why in all the gods’ names would Licornyn brides choose to go shoeless on their wedding days, even this time of year? Tassa tells me it’s tradition, but part of me suspects she’s just trying to see how much discomfort she can inflict before I’ll stand up for myself.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Keeping my head high and refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing me limp, I quicken my pace. Thevelrat tugs at my wrist, eager to close the distance between me and my bridegroom. I grimace and tug back. Our foolishness of two nights ago may have made this cursed bond stronger than it was, but that doesn't mean I'll let it control me.

Taar waits for us where the small path leading from Halamar's dakath connects with the larger trail. His gaze flicks briefly over me when I emerge through the greenery, but he hastily turns his attention on Tassa, Halamar, and Elydark, who appear behind me. When we've all gathered, he turns and, without a word, marches on up the road, his shoulders set, his face forbidding.

Biting back a curse, I hasten after him. My legs emerge between the long slits in my skirt, startling me with the sight of their nakedness. Awkwardly I try to hold the slits closed even as I trot to keep pace with Taar. "I need to know what's coming," I say in a low voice, not liking for the others to overhear. "What am I to expect from these elders?"

His dark eyes flash briefly sideways. They catch mine for no more than an instant before he faces forward again. He draws a long breath and holds it. I begin to wonder if he's not going to answer. Finally: "Eight elders of Old Licorna dwell in the Hidden City, one from each of the surviving tribes. They are responsible for maintaining the unified interests of our people. The eldest is Halaema of the Rocaryn Tribe, who inhabit this valley."

"And are they . . . chieftains?" I hazard.

“No. They are all former Licornyn warriors, now too aged to ride. Because their bonds to their licorneir prolonged their lives, they are much older than others of my kind, among theoldest living beings in this world. Halaema was born before the foundations of Evisar Citadel were laid.”

I trot a little faster, trying not to let the cold ground freeze my bare toes. “Are they . . .” I hesitate over the word, determined to get it right. “Are theyvelrhoar?”

Behind me, Halamar makes a strange sound, a rumble in his throat. I glance over my shoulder, but the warrior won’t meet my eyes, though Tassa glares at me, fiercer than ever.

“No,” Taar says, drawing my attention back to him. “When the time came, their licorneir were soul-bonded to new young riders, as is the custom. Elydark was one of these.”

I frown. “I thought you said no one knew Elydark’s name until he shared it with you.”

“It’s true,” he replies. “When a licorneir is soul-bonded to a new rider, a new name is shared between them. The connection to a former rider is never fully gone, but the new name, the new bond, takes precedence. Someday I hope to see Elydark bonded anew to my son or daughter. Then he will take a new name.”

I remember what he said about Onoril, how the father of all licorneir was to be his had he not been lost. And what of Mahra? She was never to be Tassa’s. No, she was meant to bond with the future queen of Licorna. With Taar’s wife.

A shiver travels down my spine. The fiery magnificence and terror of that creature I’d glimpsed beyond the river appears again before my mind’s eye. That wild, broken, beautiful song which had so seared my heart with pain. What would it be like to bond

to such a being? To share a soul-tether, to speak to one another's spirits? What would it be like to join my voice with hers and sing in duet with a creature of pure fire and magic?

But these are not questions for me to ponder. I am not Taar's wife. Not really. Or at least, not for long.

I swallow any further questions until we come abruptly to the edge of the forest, and I find myself looking up close at the city of dakath tents spread before me. They are larger than I expected, each one made up of a central, circular tent, with three or four more off-shoots to create private chambers. From a distance they had seemed to be made up entirely of earth tones, but now that we're up close, I'm surprised to see the vivid patterns painted on the animal hide walls. They are the same hue as the paint even now decorating my abdomen, and the patterns are similar as well—sun-and-moon motifs, along with licorneir and other beasts I do not recognize. And everywhere, absolutely everywhere, ilsevel blossoms.

On the outskirts of the town, the tents are set a little farther apart with staked-out yards surrounding them. But as I let my gaze follow the road winding into the city, I see the dakaths increasing in size and set closer together. From this angle, down in the valley and not above, it seems quite a large city.

I stop, reluctant to go on. There are figures moving about the yards: women at cookpots, children either playing or performing their morning chores. Nearer still stand five tall guards: three men and two women, all older, with lined faces, ferociously armed. They do not seem surprised at the sight of their luinar; they raise weapons in solemn salute at his appearance. But when their gazes fix on me, their expressions turn aggressive. One of the old men shouts and brandishes his weapon menacingly. Taar smoothly steps between me and the man. He speaks in a sharp, commanding tone. The guard immediately stands down, and we pass through the five of them. I feel as though I'm running a gauntlet—their gazes could flay the skin from

my bones.

The people gathered in their yards are no better. Women, children, and older men stand at their fenceposts and in their dakath doorways, staring at me. Very few young adults; I can count on one hand the number of youthful faces I spy. Have they all been sent off to war, or are they out hunting to supply this large community? Those left behind watch me with unsuppressed hatred. Gods above, I've never felt so guilty for merely existing! I keep my head high and force my hands to relax their grip on the white skirts, allowing them to hang free, though it means my bare legs flash through the slits more than I like. I don't want to look flinching or frightened. I am a princess, damn it. I will act the part, though no one here may know it.

Taar strides on into his city, his gaze set firmly forward. Halamar, Tassa, and Elydark, last of all, make up the tail of our small procession. Soon quite a crowd gathers on either side of the dirt road to watch us pass. Some call out greetings to Taar, delighted at his return, only to stop short at sight of me. Antagonism seethes in the atmosphere.

"Word will have reached the elders of your arrival long before we come to the Meeting House." Taar grimaces. "I suppose there was no way of sneaking you in undetected short of putting a sack over your head."

A sack may have been preferable to this garment. More comfortable at least. "Is there anything I should say or do when we get there?"

He considers for a moment, still careful not to look at me. "When we approach Halaema, go down on your knees, clasp your left fist in your right hand, and press them to your heart. Then you must say these words: Velethuil nelanei Nornala-so. Nala itaere-so orira vel-amar."

"And what does that mean?"

“Grace unto you, Nornala’s children. May the songs of heaven sing ever to your souls.”

I make him say it again, then practice the unfamiliar cadence and sounds several times over, hoping I can remember it when the time comes. It has a sing-song quality to it, and my gods-gift rises to assist me, enabling me to catch the music of the phrase and mimic it. I’ve never encountered a song I couldn’t sing back with perfect clarity and enunciation after a single hearing. This isn’t so very different.

We draw near the city center just as I am beginning to feel comfortable whispering the Licornyn words to myself. Two massive dakaths stand across from each other with a grassy, open stretch of ground between them, in the center of which stands a large stone circle that looks as though it’s meant for bonfires. I can’t help the shuddering feeling that I will be bound to a stake and burned alive right there before this day is out. My courage falters, and I stumble.

Taar’s hand shoots out, grips my forearm. That touch sends a jolt straight up my shoulder to explode in the back of my brain. I turn sharply, gazing at him, my eyes round. He won’t look back at me. The line of his jaw is very tight and tense. But he keeps on walking, supporting me each step, as we make for the farthest of the big dakaths.

Many people have gathered around the edges of this city center. They are strangely silent, as though holding their breaths. I scowl at them all, and several flinch. This brings a bitter smile to my lips.

The Meeting House looms before us, the doorway two times taller than Taar and covered in a purple-stained curtain. The hides which form its walls are stitched together, and the painted patterns adorning them are far more intricate than any I’ve yet seen, dazzling to my eye. It ought to look savage, but it’s all done with such exquisite care and precision, I cannot help thinking it a more beautiful structure than

the hard, gray lump of rock that is my father's castle.

“Remember,” Taar murmurs as we draw near to that doorway, “when you hear me say your name, kneel and speak your piece. Otherwise you must keep your head bowed and say nothing. To look at the elders directly or to speak in human tongue will be seen as an act of aggression.” He turns to me at last, looks me fully in the eye for the first time since we left Halamar's clearing. “I won't try to deceive you: your peril is great. But I swear I will protect you. I will lay down my life if I must.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I don't believe him. How can I? Yes, he entered that death-pit and faced off against Lurodos for my sake. But it's one thing to fight a monster and personal nemesis; quite another to take a stand against his own people. I bite my lip, doubt gnawing my gut, but force myself to nod.

Taar looks over my head to where Tassa and Halamar stand behind me, the people of the Hidden City behind them. He raises one hand and speaks something in his own language. The Licornyn folk exchange glances. Somebody cries out sharply, and others seem to murmur in angry agreement. Shaking his head, Taar turns to his sister. "Pray to Nornala for us," he says.

Her lip curls. "I'll petition all the gods, brother. One after the other. Maybe someone will take pity on you. You're going to need it."

Taar smiles somewhat grimly then nods to Halamar, who steps forward and opens the doorway curtain. To my surprise, Taar offers his hand to me, palm upraised. I stare at it a moment before slipping my fingers into his. Even that small contact of skin against skin steadies me more than I like. We step together into the Meeting House.

Inside is dark and strangely cavernous. The scent of ilsevel blossoms permeates the atmosphere but intensified tenfold. I think it may be coming from the incense braziers strung from the line of pillars down the center of this massive space. There are window flaps in the higher rooftop portions of the tent, and sunlight falls in splashes on the floor, but otherwise all is deeply shadowed and indistinct.

Directly across from the doorway stands a dais. I can just discern the eight figures seated up there, not on chairs, but cross-legged on the floor. They are heavily robed,

and from this distance look like nothing so much as an assortment of hunching owls.

A strange humming fills the air. Glancing to each side, I realize there are people in the shadows, close to the dakath walls. Servants or slaves, I cannot guess which, all droning in eerie harmony. It reminds me vaguely of a licorneir song, though much simplified.

Taar begins to walk between those pillars and smoke braziers, adjusting his stride so that I need not trot to keep up with him. Solemnly, silently, we progress to the middle of the dakath. There Taar stops and holds out his free hand. “Velethuil, nelanei Nornala-so,” he says.

The eight owlsh figures make no response.

Taar’s hand tenses under my fingers. “Courage,” he murmurs.

I cast him a withering glance. What have I demonstrated other than courage all morning? He’s the nervous one.

We continue at that same sedate pace until we stand just before the dais. I keep my head bent, but peer up through my lashes, taking in what I can of the eight elders. Each wears a robe of a different color, all adorned in the same intricately painted images I saw on the dakaths. The patterns are different, denoting the unique tribes I suspect. Their faces are all so wrinkled, I almost miss the fact that there are an equal number of men and women. This surprises me: I assumed all the elders were male. Gavarian women certainly wouldn’t have been invited to sit on a council. But the very oldest of these eight, positioned in prominence slightly forward from the rest, is a woman. Her robes pool around her, regal and strange, while she herself looks so decrepit, a breath of wind might flake all the dry, brittle skin from her bones. Yet her black eyes are sharp as two blades and fixed with keen hatred on me.

Taar speaks again in Licornyn. He seems to go on forever, but suddenly I hear my name. Remembering his command, I let go of his hand, take a single step forward, and drop to my knees. For a moment I freeze—which was it, left hand clasped around right, or right around left? I take a guess, change my mind at the last minute, and breathe out a long, steadying breath.

Then, very softly, I begin to speak the Licornyn words Taar taught me. Rather, I don't speak them. I sing them. Using their musical rhythm, emphasizing the long vowels and trilling consonants, transforming the spoken word to song. As I sing, the low hum emanating from the chanters in the shadows blends in harmony with my voice.

The effect is miraculous. Divine. Sound fills the space around us, ripples out from the confines of those hide walls and rolls out across the land, not just the mountainous countryside in which these people dwell, but deep into the wilds of Cruor from which they were driven. It's a song which feels as though it might keep growing, keep rippling, until it fills this whole world before sinking into the earth itself to vibrate at its core.

Taar gasps out loud and moves sharply beside me. I don't let his reaction interrupt my flow. I keep singing until I reach the end of the phrase. My pronunciation is perhaps imperfect, but I trust the power of my gods-gift to carry it. A pity I've only just begun to discover a real use for this gift of mine beyond entertaining my father's guests. I will probably die today and never learn how deep my power runs.

When I come to the end of the phrase, I let the last syllable linger on my lips. Then, closing my mouth tight, I press my clasped hands to my heart, daring only the briefest glance up at the elders.

The old woman—Halaema—stares down at me. Her eyes bulge out through layers of wrinkled skin folds. She holds up one withered hand, and the hummers in the

shadows cease. Deadsilence holds the Meeting House captive like a spell. It feels like hours before she speaks, her voice harsh, an awful contrast to the sweetness of my song.

Taar answers at once in his rumbling baritone. I feel the power of kingship in his voice, even if I can't understand the words. I would not have the courage to stand up to a man speaking in such a tone.

But the elder doesn't hesitate. She lashes a response, and there follows a back-and-forth, all spoken in such rapid Licornyn, I can understand none of the individual words. One by one the other elders add their own voices to the discussion. Each time Taar answers them solemnly, while I continue to kneel, maintaining that posture with clasped hands. My knees ache and my spine throbs. It's not unlike kneeling at the shrine of Lamruil. Only then I was preparing for marriage to the Shadow King, a fate I thought worse than death. Now? I suspect not even Taar can save me.

He sounds angry. Stepping forward, a little in front of me, he holds up his right arm and points at the invisiblelevelra, as though the elders can see it. Some of them nod, but others toss up their hands and shake their heads, eyes rolling in disgust.

Finally Halaema turns from Taar and barks a string of words to a figure who stands off to one side of the dais. Risking the displeasure of everyone in the room, I turn my head to see Onor Gantarith step forward into a patch of sunlight. He carries his incense brazier and—my blood goes cold—a knife. A foot long at least, unsheathed and gleaming.

Gantarith makes reverence to the elders. Halaema barks something which sounds like a question. The priest turns, looks at me. Then he speaks a word I recognize: "Kya."

I cannot tear my gaze from that knife. I know what has been asked and what answer has been given.

Can the bond be broken before New Moon Night?

Yes.

I swallow painfully and look up at Taar. His eyes are fixed on Gantarith, and there's death in his gaze.

Suddenly, quicker than thought, he lunges the priest, snatches the knife from his grasp, and holds it to his own throat. A collective gasp goes up from the elders and the unseen figures on the edges of the chamber. Taar snarls a series of words, deep and threatening.

"Taar, no!" I cry and start to rise. To my surprise, a hand falls on my shoulder, pushing me back down. I turn, startled, and find Halamar behind me. "It would be best for both of you," he whispers in my own tongue, "if you kept silent just now."

I shake my head and hiss, "But what is he doing?"

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Halamar catches my eye. “He’s telling them if they want to punish anyone for treason, it is his blood which must be spilled. You, he says, are innocent. It was he who broke the law by bringing you here. You were given no choice. So if someone must die, it is he.”

Horror clutches my heart. It’s one thing for Taar to risk his life in mortal combat, but this? It’s too much. I start to rise again, struggling against Halamar’s hold, but he’s far too strong for me. “Wait now,” he growls, close to my ear. “Your husband is not unloved by his people. The elders won’t give him up easily, angry though they are. They know what his life means for the survival of all Licorna. Wait. Wait.”

I watch in an agony of suspense and horror while the elders exchange angry murmurs. All the while Taar stands there, that vicious blade lightly pressed into his skin. A bead of blood forms and rolls to his collarbone. Sickness churns in my gut.

Finally the eldest holds out her withered hand and speaks. She seems to be imploring Taar to set aside the knife. “Ah, see?” Halamar whispers behind me. “Halaema would not want her own licorneir to end up hearttorn.”

At first his words mean nothing to me. Then I suck in a breath. Before me sits Elydark’s former rider from back before he bonded with Taar and took his new name. No wonder she sounds so desperate. It is as Taar says—the bond never fully dies.

Slowly Taar lowers the knife. Another exchange of words, and he hands it back to Gantarith, who scowls at him almost petulantly. Elder Halaema shakes her head, obviously distressed. When she speaks again, however, Halamar squeezes my shoulder slightly. “See? The gambit paid off. You will live, little human. The elders

have agreed that you may stay in the Hidden City until silmael. The moment your bond is broken, you must depart, but no harm shall come to you so long as you honor Licornyn law and submit to the rule of your luinar.”

While I don’t much care for the sound of submit, I cannot deny the relief which floods my body. A smile breaks across my mouth, but when I catch Elder Halaema’s eye, I hastily stifle it and bow my head once more.

Taar returns to my side, holds out a hand to me. “Come, zyl nala,” he says softly. “Let us leave before they change their minds.” He helps me to my feet and draws me close, murmuring, “Bow your head and clasp your hands again in the same manner as before, over your heart. Then turn and walk with me. Keep your eyes down.”

I go through the motions as bidden. The elders say nothing, and I feel their old eyes on me as I turn to walk with Taar. When we are halfway to the door, I look up at him and start to speak. “Not now,” he interrupts swiftly. “Wait until we’re out of here. Then I will tell you—”

His voice breaks off abruptly as the door flap flings back, admitting a burst of sunlight. A figure stands silhouetted in the opening, tall and threatening. “Luinar!” he cries out in a loud voice.

Tension shoots through Taar’s hand. “Kildorath?” he says. “Is that you?”

The figure strides into the Meeting House, swiftly approaching. Then he stops. His eyes flash as they meet mine. The expression on his face, illuminated by a patch of sunlight, transforms from shock, to horror, to utter hatred.

In a single, fluid motion, he draws a knife from his belt and lunges straight at me.

TAAR

Instinct drives my body to action long before thought catches up. In two quick strides I intercept Kildorath's approach, angling my body between him and Ilsevel. I have no weapon on me, but I dodge his blow, catch him by the wrist, and wrench his arm behind his back, simultaneously forcing him to his knees. His knife drops to the dakath floor even as his roar fills the dark space around us.

I bend over him. My teeth snarl close to his ear. "If you raise your hand in violence against my wife again, I will cut your head from your shoulders."

Some distant part of me is shocked by the sheer violence of my words. They rip from the core of my soul, driven by some force that seems almost unconnected from me. Now they ring in the stunned silence of the Meeting House. Though I spoke softly, I feel the shock from the elders, from Gantarith, from Halamar. They all heard me loud and clear.

Kildorath pants hard. He twists his head, stares up at me. His eyes flare with fury. "How could you do this? How could you betray your people so?"

"I have betrayed no one," I answer coldly, without relaxing my grip or the painful pressure on Kildorath's arm. "I have always put the needs of Licorna and the Licornyn first, and I always will. That doesn't mean I can spare no compassion for anyone else."

"Compassion? For a human?"

It's clear this is not a worthwhile path down which to continue. "I don't care what you think of my bride, Kildorath. I require only your loyalty to myself and the elders of this council, who have determined she should remain safe among us until the night of silmael."

Kildorath curses viciously. His muscles strain, searching for some weakness in me, some opportunity to break free. If he attacks me here and now, he will be acting as a traitor to Licorna, and his life will be forfeit. I can't afford to lose him—my friend, my most loyal companion, and near-brother.

“Enough of this!” Movement across the chamber draws our eyes back to the dais. Elder Halaema rises slowly, ponderously. With painful precision she moves down the dais steps, her shoulders hunched, her robes dragging behind her, and yet there is something regal about her bearing, some remnant of the valiant warrior she once was, still clinging to her. She makes her way down the center of the Meeting House until she stands before us, her bowed head nearly level with Kildorath's where he kneels. “Young Taarthalor has spoken the truth, Kildorath Hardorthane. He has made his case, and we have agreed it would be best for all concerned that his bride remain unharmed until such a time as he can break this unfortunate bond. I call upon you now, son of Markildor, to honor the decision of your elders and submit to yourluinar, even as you have sworn to.”

Kildorath curses again, spitting the words on the dirt floor. Twisting in place, he glares up at me. I know we are both remembering the last time he knelt before me and swore fealty. It was days after Shanaera's death, when I told him how I'd been forced to slay his sister on the Agandaur battlefield. To slay her before she slayed all our friends, lost as she was to the ravages of virulium.

Kildorath was devastated. If there was any soul in existence who loved Shanaera more than I, it was her younger brother. The two had been devoted to each other, and I feared Kildorath would follow her on her path into virulium madness.

But when I commanded him to give it up, Kildorath obeyed. He, and all those faithful to my rule, suffered the ill effects of virulium-purging along with me, leaving us weak and in pain and wishing for death. We came through it, however, stronger than before. After such a show of loyalty, I had not believed anything could stand between

me and Kildorath. I would trust my very life to this man without question.

But I had not reckoned on Ilsevel.

Kildorath bows his head at last and sags in my grasp. “I will honor the will of the elders,” he growls, then heaves a great breath. “And I will serve myluinar, according to my vows.”

I hesitate for a count of three breaths before releasing my grip and stepping back. I’m braced for him to make a dart for Ilsevel, but he does not. Though he shoots her a venomous glare, he gets to his feet and stands aside, head low, shoulders bowed. “Are the rest of the riders here as well?” I ask, eager for word of my Licornyn.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Kildorath looks at me. “Seven of us crossed the Morrona at dawn.”

“Seven?” My stomach knots. Ashika, I already know, is dead. But there were eleven who set out from the Spire, the survivors of our small campaign. “Where are the others?” I demand. Only now do I notice that Kildorath is bleeding from a wound to his left arm and a cut on his cheek. He looks rough, and his eyes are harrowed.

“We were set upon.” He grits his teeth. “On Agandaur fields.”

My ears are suddenly full of thunder, and heat flames in my head. “Set upon by whom?”

He looks at me. There’s a knowing in his eye that thrusts deep into my gut. “Shanaera.”

Behind me the elders gasp out loud. Halamar curses, and there’s a sudden shifting of bodies and clamor of voices. But my gaze remains fixed on Kildorath’s. I see there all the horror of what he experienced out in the wilds of Cruor. I remember how I felt, coming face-to-face with Shanaera after all these years, seeing her leering at me from her rotted mouth. Would she turn on us, on her people, her kin, and serve the Miphates she hated so vehemently that she would damn her soul for a chance to slaughter them? It defies all belief. Yet there is no doubt in Kildorath’s face. He knows what he saw. And he knows I believe him.

Without a word I turn from him and stalk from the Meeting House into the too-bright light of swelling morning. There the other six riders sit astride their licorneir in the middle of the green, all of them wounded, haggard, and worn from their terrible

journey. Alluirnath, Keizana, Thuridar, Birenthor, Loraena, and Vomyar . . . all my friends, my brothers and sisters, alongside whom I've fought and striven and suffered over the long years. No Ashika, of course. And no Onor Vamir, our young priest. Of the twenty who rode out from the Hidden City in response to Prince Ruvaen's summons, these are all that remain.

A void seems to open in my chest, threatening to pull my spirit down into it. I should never have taken my riders beyond the borders of this world, into that human air where we are vulnerable. I should never have sent them alone across Cruor. I should have been with them, should have protected them. Now they are gone, slaughtered by an enemy I cannot understand. And what of their licorneir?

The thought has barely crossed my mind when a scream erupts in the air. To my shock, I see that two of the riders, mounted on their licorneir, have a third beast bound and hobbled between them. Nyathri—burning with hearttorn rage, but secured in powerful chaeora ropes, the only fiber in this world strong enough to withstand her flame. She tosses her skeletal head, and a great gout of fire erupts from her throat. Rearing on her hind legs, she strains against her bonds, fiery and hideous. The two licorneir, powerful though they are and bonded to their riders, struggle to keep her at bay.

Kildorath appears from the Meeting House and steps to my side. "What happened?" I demand. "When you left the Grimspire. Tell me everything."

"We waited for you at the Luin Stone, as you commanded," he replies. "We believed we saw you coming, for there were Licornyn riders in the valley. We thought you'd joined company with another tribe. But as they drew nearer, we saw the crimson cloaks." He drops his head, breathing heavily for a moment. "I don't know how to describe the horror that came over us at the sight of them and those awful steeds."

"What did they ride?" I ask. The question has haunted me for days now. No ordinary

horses could survive in Cruor.

Kildorath meets my eye. “Licorneir. They were mounted on licorneir, but . . . I’ve never seen such beasts. They were like dead things, moving strangely, their muscles and joints all half-rotten. Rather than flame, they gave off poisonous fumes that darkened the air around them. It was like thevardimnar.”

I stare at him, aghast. This is worse than anything I could have imagined. Dead licorneir reanimated? Surely not even the Miphates would dare commit such a sin! I want to accuse Kildorath of falsehood, to demand he tell me the truth. But there is no lie in his eyes.

“We fled into Cruor then, trying to escape them, for they outnumbered us. But we were ambushed in Agandaur and forced to defend ourselves. It was then that they threw back their hoods and . . . and . . .” His voice breaks. He shakes his head, and I glimpse a sheen of tears on his cheek. “I saw her, Taar. I saw Shanaera. Only she wasn’t . . . she isn’t . . .”

He cannot bear to finish. I don’t blame him. When I met her on the night of the temple attack, I couldn’t believe what I saw, forced myself to distrust my own eyes, my own memories. How could our beloved dead walk this world again? So ruined, so mutilated. Cursed creatures, wrapped in necroliphon spells. It’s a fate far worse than any death.

“They were unkillable,” Kildorath says. “I ran one through the chest—Riluan, you remember him? He laughed as my blade pierced him, and when I pulled it free, the gaping hole reknit right before my eyes.” He swipes a hand down his face. “I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

Neither would I. But I remember Naerel, Morinar, and Illanthor at the Between Gate, impervious to all but decapitation, and I know he speaks the truth.

“Only the seven of us managed to escape,” Kildorath continues. “The others were all either killed or . . . or taken. I’m not certain.”

I think of Ashika’s body, the only one left in the dirt of Agandaur, her head half-severed from her shoulders. Was she too damaged to be useful tonecroliphonmages? But what of the others? Will I be seeing them again, their rotten bodies reanimated and turned against their brothers and sisters? Young Onor Vamir’s face flashes before my mind’s eye. It was his first campaign, and how much he’d wanted to prove himself, to do his part for the cause of Licorna! Surely Nornala would not allow her brave servant to suffer such a fate.

Nyathri screams again. Her voice rips the air with pain and wrath. I look at her, my heart breaking at her devastated state. She cannot bear the loss of her rider; it will drive her to utter damnation.

“We found her on the banks of the Morrona,” Kildorath says, answering my unasked question. “The othervelrhoarlicorneir all fled into deeper Cruor, but she seemed to have been drawn this way somehow. It took some doing to secure her, but for Ashika’s sake, I could not bear to leave her suffering. I hoped you would be here when we arrived and could help her.”

There is only one way to help Nyathri now. She’s too far gone invelhroarto be drawn back again. I can offer her nothing but the mercy of death. Asluinarof Licorna, it is my sacred duty, one I have performed more times than I like to remember. But it never ceases to hurt.

“Give me a sword,” I say. Halamar steps forward silently and offers me his weapon. I move into the green to where Nyathri stands, restrained in those taut chaeoraropes. Her burning eyes roll with fire and pain. Gods-damn me, why was I not there to save Ashika? I could have spared her life and this glorious beast’s suffering, if only I hadn’t been weak.

If only I'd walked away and left Ilsevel on that auction block.

Nyathri watches my approach. One massive forehoof tears trenches in the ground. "I'm sorry, my friend," I say as I draw near, speaking as much to Ashika as to her licorneir. I heft the weight of Halamar's sword. The blow must be swift and sure; she'll run me through before I have a chance at a second. "I'm so sorry—"

"What are you doing?"

I startle at the voice bursting behind me. Nyathri roars and throws back her head, and the Licornyn riders struggle to restrain her. Leaping back out of range of her horn, I whirl on heel to see Ilsevel rush into the green. The slits in her skirt part to reveal most of her long legs, and her skin looks very pale beneath the ceremonial paint decorating her abdomen. The city folk react at the sight of her. Voices explode in a tumult of confusion and fear, but she ignores them all. She rushes forward, her gaze fixed, not on me, but on the hearttorn licorneir.

"What are you doing to her?" she demands again, her voice ringing in the stillness. Many of the people gathered here have never heard human tongue spoken before. Gasps of terror punctuate the air, followed by threatening rumbles. Ilsevel paysthem no heed. She stares into the burning eyes of the unicorn, unblinking.

"Stand back." I put out a hand to restrain her.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

She whips her head to one side and scowls up at me. “I won’t. Not until you tell me what you mean to do with that sword.”

“This doesn’t concern you.”

A furious expression washes over her features. “Can you hear that song?” she asks, tremulously. “Can you hear it? Because I can—louder than anything. It’s hersong, Taar. And it deserves to be heard.”

I hear no song, only the dissonance of Nyathri’s growls and occasional screams. She is incapable of true song anymore, not in this tortured state. “She is hearttorn, zylnala,” I say, trying to make my voice gentle. “She cannot survive in this world, not without becoming twisted beyond all recognition. Can you not sense that her soul is already nearly lost? Whatever song you think you hear, it is broken.”

“But it can be fixed.”

I shake my head. “The only way to fix this song is for another velar into be formed—a soul-bond. But no licorneir this far gone can be bonded again.”

“But you haven’t tried!” Tears spark in her eyes, and she clenches her fists as though she wants to pummel me. “You’re just going to kill her? You won’t even attempt to find another bond?”

“It too great a risk for both her and the rider.”

Ilsevel looks around at the gathered people. They’ve gone silent now, watching this

bizarre tableau of a small human woman berating their king in a foreign tongue. Halamar and Tassa stand on either side of Kildorath just outside the Meeting House. Beyond them, the figures of the eight elders crowd the door, keeping to the shadows. Ilsevel swings an arm, indicating all of them, the whole city, in a single gesture. “Why don’t you let them decide? Why don’t you let them take the risk if they’re willing?”

I gaze down at her, silent, stern.

“You’ve said it yourself.” Her voice cracks with tension. “You’ve told me there are too few licorneir and, therefore, too few riders. Surely there are those here willing to risk a great deal to form a bond! What about . . .” She spins around and points directly at Tassa. “What about your sister? Have you asked her?”

In that moment I’m grateful most of those gathered do not understand what she says. So much for promising to submit to my rule over the next month! I feel the watchful gazes of the elders, far too keen and interested, waiting for her to overstep so they may justly demand her death.

“Enough,” I growl, low in my throat, and drop my head toward hers. “You’ve been granted a stay of execution. Don’t throw it away over one licorneir.”

Her eyes burn as they meet mine. “But . . . that song . . .” She winces, as though hearing something beyond my range of perception. She ducks her head and turns it to one side, her lips rolled back in a grimace. Then she looks up at me again, pleading. “If you’re willing to risk your neck for a human you don’t know, can I not choose to risk mine for a licorneir?”

We stare at one another. Though I loom over her by more than a head, three times her breadth and ten times her strength and muscle, I feel the force of her spirit striving against mine. She sees through me, straight into my heart in a way no one else ever

has. How did I ever become so vulnerable? How did I ever let my guard down?

“Is there anyone here,” I call out in Licornyn, still without breaking eye-contact with her, “who is willing to attempt avelarin with this licorneir?”

“Kya!” several voices call out at once. One of them is Tassa. She leaps forward several paces in my peripheral vision. I lift my head and gaze slowly round at those figures crowding to the edge of the green. Their faces are frightened but determined.

“The danger is great,” I remind them, though I shouldn’t have to. They can see for themselves what Nyathri has become; they know what she can and will do to them if given half a chance. “You may not survive the attempt. No one,” I add with emphasis, “has successfully bonded with a licorneir this far gone tovelrhoar.”

“Neither has a human entered the Hidden City before,” Tassa pipes up, her voice crisp and clear in the chill air. “Today seems to be a day for new and impossible things.” I glare her way, but she meets it with a determined lift of her chin.

“Very well,” I sigh. “Every man and woman who have passed their sylarvel trials may present themselves as candidates to bond with Nyathri. The bonding attempts will be held in the temple, under the supervision of Onor Gantarith, and will commence at noon today.”

25

ILSEVEL

The unicorn riders lead Nyathri away, dragging her between them as she screams and struggles. Her song breaks across my senses like shards of broken glass. It’s all I can do not to cringe and cover my ears. But there is still something melodic in that sound, something of the song that once was. Not for long though. Soon it will morph into a

terrible cacophony, riven beyond all hope of repair.

I cannot take my eyes off her. I watch until she is led out of sight, and even then my gods-gift reaches after her, seeking that broken song. Seeking that truth which my soul understands: shame and guilt and heartbreak and sorrow. I want to sing with her, want to join my voice with that clamorous melody, for it seems to me that I might, in the singing, know relief at last for everything that's so painfully trapped inside me.

Taar's voice rumbles close at hand. He's speaking to his sister, who sends me a sharp look before pointing a finger at her brother's nose. He holds up both hands in a placating gesture. She sighs, nods. They seem to have reached some sort of agreement, and Taar glances at me briefly. His lips part as though he's going to say something. But then he presses his mouth into a hard line, turns, and marches away, following after the Licornyn riders. The city folk part to let him pass, and he soon disappears from view.

Myvelracord tightens painfully. I surreptitiously rub my forearm, even as Tassa turns to me, narrow-eyed. "Come, bride of my brother," she says. Her gaze flicks momentarily to my arm then back to my eyes. "You're with me for the time being."

Glancing around, I am suddenly aware of how deep into enemy territory I have come. Hundreds of hate-fueled faces surround me, silent but terribly focused. My only ally is this intimidating woman who hates me as much as any of them, who only tolerates my existence for the sake of her brother. "Where are we going?" I ask her, determined not to let my voice shake.

"To the temple." She indicates my forearm with a wave of her hand. "Thanks to this marriage of yours, you cannot be far from Taar without causing him pain. You must be kept close while the bonding attempts are made, but out of sight so you don't distract from the proceedings. I am to be your caretaker."

“And what of your own chance to bond with Nyathri?”

Tassa grimaces. “That is my concern, not yours. Come.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

We make our way from the city green, and Halamar falls into step behind us. Tassa studiously ignores him, but I am grateful for his imposing presence as we make our way through the crowd and follow the street back through the dakaths and the staring eyes of the city people. Several of them call out to Tassa, but she ignores them utterly. I feel painfully exposed in this garment I wear, my midriff and shoulders bare, my legs emerging through the slits, my feet freezing with every step I take. It's a relief when we finally leave the city behind and once more enter the shelter of the forest.

Tassa allows a short detour to Halamar's dakath, where I am given opportunity to exchange the bridal garments for my stained travel gown and cloak. While I don't care to be grateful to her, or anyone in this wretched world, I can't help breathing a prayer of thanks as I slip my feet back into sturdy boots. I also take the time to secure the knife Taar gave me to the sheathe at my belt. The weight of it there, familiar now after a week, gives me courage.

When I emerge from the dakath, Tassa and Halamar are engaged in heated conversation. At sight of me, they immediately jump apart. Halamar clasps his hands behind his back, while Tassa scowls, unsuccessfully trying to hide the flush in her cheeks. She gives me a once over, nods, and beckons me to follow her. I catch Halamar's eye, brow puckered in silent question. He looks away quickly.

We make quite the trio on the path back up the temple hill: Tassa leads the way, I pant at her heels, while Halamar acts as rear guard. I wonder about the warrior's ongoing presence. Did Taar ask him to watch over me as well? Kildorath's face flashes before my mind's eye, twisted with rage and bent on murder. He'd gone with Taar and the other Licornyn warriors ahead of us, but that doesn't mean he won't

double back and try to finish what he started. He'd seemed subdued enough following his altercation with Taar, but his hatred for me remains undimmed. I cast a short glance back at Halamar, hearing again traces of that broken song which clings to his soul. Would he defend me if need arose? Is he strong enough?

It's a long journey without Elydark to carry me. Who knew I would so soon find myself missing that cursed Licornyn saddle? But the higher we go, the brighter the song of the ilsevel blossoms plays to my gods-gifted senses, distracting my attention. I hear in them the perfected harmony that is missing from Nyathri's broken song. I wish I might hear the two songs together. Something tells me the one might be the means to heal the other, if only they could be joined. How such a thing is to be accomplished, I don't know. Surely if it was a simple matter of feeding ilsevel blossoms to the stricken unicorn, the Licornyn folk would have figured that out long ago. No, there's something else. Something I'm not quite understanding.

"Hurry up, human!" Tassa snaps.

I find I've drifted to a halt, staring at a particularly large cluster of blossoms growing on the side of the track. Quickly I hike up my skirts and trot up the steep incline. All the while Halamar maintains his distance behind us, never too close but never too far away.

By the time we reach the great stone building, a crowd has gathered outside—hopefuls for the licorneir bond, I suspect. Tassa hastily ushers me through them, her sharp tongue and intimidating presence enough to ward off even the most aggressive stares. We step through a side entrance which I had not seen before. The minute I'm inside the temple, a tension, which has gripped my spirit all this while, relaxes. I know then that I am close to Taar once more. The impact of thevelrais never as severe for me as it is for him, but that doesn't mean I am immune to its powers. I breathe a little easier, and the dull pain which had been throbbing in the back of my head clears away.

“Here.” Tassa pushes back a curtain which hangs over an arched doorway. Inside is a humble cell with a single window-slit, a pallet bed, and a small fireplace, dark with soot and void of kindling. It’s cold as hells. I tuck my cloak a little closer, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

Tassa, noticing, calls back Licornyn words to Halamar, who lurks at the end of the passage. He responds with a question but, at her sharp retort, shrugs and retreats. His footsteps echo away against the stones. “He’ll be back shortly with firewood,” Tassa says, turning to me. She nods at the pallet. “Gods, you humans are frail creatures, aren’t you? It’s a wonder you can cause as much trouble as you do.” I shoot her a glare, which she answers with a shrug. “You may as well sit. It’s going to be a long wait.”

Though I don’t want to give her the satisfaction of my instant obedience, there doesn’t seem to be much other choice. I take a step to enter the chamber, but before I can duck through the doorway, a ripple of licorneir song flows down the hall. It strikes my gods-gifted senses sharply, full of unexpected pain and longing.

“Do you hear that?” I ask, turning to look down the hall, which stretches into impenetrable shadows.

“Hear what?” Tassa glances over her shoulder uneasily. But there’s nothing there. After a moment even the song-echoes die away. Tassa sneers at me once more. “You’re not thinking of trying to run, are you?”

I raise an eyebrow. Where exactly does she think I would run to? Back to the Between Gate and my own world? A laughable notion. If I somehow survived being torn limb from limb by the crowd outside, I’d have to make my way on foot across this mountainous country to the river. There, if I managed to swim its wide waters, I would find myself back in Cruor, this time on my own, without a unicorn’s song to protect me.

No, I am well and truly trapped here. More trapped, perhaps, than I have ever been.

Resentment burns in my chest. As much as Tassa hates me, I think I could answer that hatred with equal force if I tried. Why should I harbor any kind feeling for my captor's sister?

Stepping into the chamber, I plunk down on the pallet bed. Tired though I am, there's no chance of sleep under these circumstances. I huddle into my cloak and simply try to block out that agonized song. Tassa must not hear it, for she paces steadily back and forth, never startling even at the sudden outbursts that scream so loudly through my head.

Eventually Halamar appears with an armload of wood and kindling. Tassa greets him with such a snappish tone, I begin to wonder if I'm mistaken about the song I still feel singing from her every time the man steps into sight. From Halamar I get nothing definite besides his hearttorn song. And yet there is a certain gentleness in his manner toward Tassa which implies a great deal. Gods help him, could he not find a better object for his affections than this wolfish woman with her permanent scowl?

The warrior sets to work silently building a fire. When he's finally got a little blaze going, he remains crouched in front of it, hands extended to enjoy the warmth. Glancing up at Tassa, he speaks in a low rumble. She chews her lip, and her eyes dart for the door.

"If you want to try your hand at a bonding," I say, startling her and drawing her attention back to me, "be my guest. I'm sure Halamar and I can keep each other company."

Her scowl deepens. There might even be a trace of jealousy in her gaze. But she's conflicted.

“You do want to bond with the unicorn, do you not?” I press.

“Of course I do.” The words sound harsh under her strong Licornyn accent. “But . . .” She bites her lip again, and her fists clench.

“Is it very dangerous?”

She curses in her own tongue, a vicious word that makes even Halamar raise his eyebrows slightly. It’s the only answer she gives, but it’s clear enough. I remember suddenly Taar’s description of their flight across Cruor when the Rift first opened. Tassa has faced her share of perils in this life—and yet there is real fear simmering in her soul right now.

I tip my head. “Is it worth the risk?”

Her eyes flash. “There is nothing more worthwhile.” She speaks with absolute conviction, despite the quaver in her voice. “To bond with a licorneir is the entire purpose of our existence.”

By the fire Halamar shifts slightly. I half-glance his way, but his gaze remains fixed on the dancing flames, his features like stone. Did I mistake the sudden uptick of tempo in that broken song of his?

Tassa, unaware or perhaps simply not caring, resumes her pacing. Abruptly she turns to Halamar and speaks rapidly in Licornyn. He nods without looking at her, then raises a hand and makes a shooing motion. With a last muttered expletive, Tassa steps to the door and pulls back the curtain.

“Good luck,” I say.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

She pauses and looks back at me, her eyes searching for some hidden meaning in my face to belie my words. I meet her gaze honestly. I do truly wish her well. I want to see Tassa, or any of the eager Licornyn folk crowding outside the temple, bonded to that unicorn. I want to hear Nyathri's song restored. The idea that Taar could kill her, ending that song forever . . . it's unbearable.

As though coming to a decision, Tassa nods shortly and leaves the chamber. Still seated on my pallet, I look over at Halamar, struck suddenly by the fact that I am alone with this strange Licornyn man—a man who has just as much right to hate me as any other soul living out here on the edges of Cruor. A shudder runs down my spine. I pull my cloak tighter. But Halamar hardly seems aware of my existence. He's lost in a world of his own, that broken song swirling around him, a palpable atmosphere of despair.

“Do you love her still?”

I blink, surprised at my own words when they blurt out suddenly. I'd not intended to speak to him, much less to ask something so personal. Now the question hangs between us, caught in silence and the crackle of the fire.

Halamar turns his head slightly but does not quite look at me. Surprise lines his brow. He presses his lips tight, and I wonder if he either did not hear me or simply did not understand the question. Should I repeat myself? Or hold my foolish tongue?

I'm still deciding when he says: “That part of me died with Liossark. I am only what you see before you now: half a soul.”

I swallow painfully against the knot in my throat. In that same moment, a burst of screaming song echoes down the templehalls, rattling my senses. Tears prick my eyes. The pain in that song is so great, it seems to call to my own pain, buried not very deep inside. The loss, the guilt—it's so much, so real. More real than anything else.

Strange how, though the brokenness is not unlike what I hear from Halamar, their songs do not sound similar to my ear. His song feels distant, though he's right here in the room with me. But Nyathri's song . . . it feels as though it belongs to me.

26

TAAR

A young hunter named Malgathor approaches the altar, sweat dripping down his face. He sings as he approaches, a wordless song of his own, full of deep resonance and reverberation. He is a skilled singer; with the right licorneir, it would make for a powerful duet.

But I can hear within the first few notes that his song is all wrong for Nyathri. Perhaps at another time. Were Malgathor not so desperate. Were Nyathri not so hearttorn.

I repress a shudder. Pure exhaustion pulses through my limbs. It's been hours now since I last set eyes on Ilsevel, and the velracord burns into my flesh. The effort to fight its pull is almost more than I can bear. Damn this binding and the impulse that compelled me to make it in the first place! Who would have thought one small, human woman could make me so weak in the sight of my people?

I feel their eyes on me—the priests and the Licornyn riders gathered in the domed Moon Chamber in the center of Elanlein. Gantarith and his two brethren stand behind

the altar, keeping some space between them and it. Their heads are bowed, their hands lifted in solemn prayersong, but I could swear they keep glancing at me through half-closed eyelids. Kildorath and the other Licornyn riders line the walls on either side of the altar, their licorneir beside them. The shimmering of consecrated fire glows from their souls as they blend their voices with the songs of the priests. Though they may appear focused on this sacred task, I know they are watching me. Suspicion simmers in the atmosphere.

Every one of them saw the moment when Ilsevel intercepted me on the green. When she prevented me from carrying out the grim duty which must be performed. When she persuaded me to go against all reason, all tradition, all divinely-ordained sacrament.

I can almost hear the question whispering just on the other side of their song: “Does a human woman now control our luinar? Has he fallen prey to human magic? Is he drothlar?”

Drothlar—cursebound. The word whispered through the city streets when I rode by astride Elydark on the way back up to the temple. They believe Ilsevel is a Miphata who now holds me enthralled. And who am I to argue otherwise? While I’ve never seen sign of Miphates magic about her, she herself has admitted to consorting with necroliphonmages. Then there’s that gods-gift of hers. Is it possible she used it to bewitch me? If she had, would I even know?

Memory of two nights ago flashes through my mind. My tongue in her mouth, my hand on her breast, the sweat and the heat and the panting of our breaths. I had felt like a man possessed. Desire overruled all rational thought. Could it be she had tricked me? Knowing how a night of passion would strengthen our bond, did she use my weakness against me?

Have I, blind to all warning signs, brought a spy into the Hidden City?

A sudden change in the song drags my attention back to the moment unfolding before the altar stone. Malgathor draws near now, his melody deepening in intensity. Nyathri kneels on the stone, her legs bent under her. Chaeora ropes bind her fast in place. I hate the sight of those ropes. Woven from the stalks of cursed chaeorablossoms—the hell-blighted counterparts of ilsevels—combined with strands of licorneir hair, they radiate a toxic form of magic that suppresses the fire of licorneir. It's an abomination; an evil necessity. Nothing else in the world is strong enough to subdue a hearttorn licorneir. Before the Rift, no one would have dared to bind one of the glorious Star Children. Such is the evil of the age into which we've been driven.

I clench my fists, watching Malgathor's approach. He is the fifth man to attempt the bonding—all others fled before they drew anywhere near the altar and the being bound to it. Nyathri's red soulfire rages with hellish flame, and none could stand it. When the time comes, will I be able to get close enough to deal the death blow? The heat of her torment has only increased in the hours since we brought her here.

Still there are men and women lining up outside the temple, begging for a chance to try their fate. As long as they are willing, how can I stand in their way? And Malgathor is strong. He's close to her now, no more than three steps away. His dark complexion is red and slick with sweat, and the skin of his outstretched hand begins to blister. He continues, singing his bold song. He is desperate to form avelarin, having failed to do so twice in the past. But this is not the bond for him—I know it. Everyone looking on knows it. His soul is not compatible with Nyathri's. At least not with what her soul has become.

The thought has no sooner crossed my mind when Nyathri lunges. Her powerful, flame-wreathed haunches surge against the restricting chaeora ropes, and her neck extends. A warning shout bursts from my throat, but I'm too late. Her sharp fangs sink deep into Malgathor's shoulder. Fire leaps from her skeletal flesh, burning him even as she shakes him so hard, his feet leave the ground. His song abruptly ends in screams of pain which echo against the stone dome and out through the skylight to

the heavens above.

I leap into action, grip a length of chaeora and wrench the mad licorneir's head back. The weakness, which has been building in my limbs these last few hours, threatens to undo me. With a burst of sheer will, I exert all my force and drag her head back, but not before she takes a chunk out of Malgathor's flesh.

Kildorath and two other riders leap forward only a few heartbeats behind me. Their licorneir follow them, brandishing their horns in defense. Nyathri roars at them, her wild, rolling eyes incapable of seeing her former brothers and sisters. She exists in a hellish new world now, surrounded by enemies. None of us can help her see any other reality.

"Get him out of here!" My muscles strain as I fight to maintain my grip on her head. Nyathri whips about; those gnashing teeth of hers go for my throat. A blast of soulfire heat flares across my skin, ready to consume me.

With a bugling cry, Elydark charges. His horn clashes with Nyathri's. A burst of white light pours out from him, enveloping me in protection, even as he holds Nyathri at bay. His red horn locks with her black one, and his song-filled eyes stare into the two pits of hell flaming in her skull.

Hastily I re-secure the chaeora rope, then back away from the altar, out of reach. "Elydark!" I call. At the sound of my voice, he backs away. Nyathri tosses her head once before lowering it, muzzle resting against the stone between her legs. She pants, exhausted, her exposed ribcage visibly heaving. Much of her flesh has burnt away, leaving only a skeletal apparition. I scarcely recognize the lithe and lovely being who used to gallop so fleet-footed across the plains while Ashika whooped battle cries from her saddle.

"Enough,luinar,"a voice beside me says. I turn to Onor Gantarith, who has left his

brother priests to approach me. He shakes his head heavily. "It is a torment to her. She should have been slain and sent beyond the pain of this world hours ago."

Guilt adds to the weariness permeating my frame. Gantarith is right of course; I should never have let Ilsevel convince me otherwise. "Very well, Onor," I say. "I will do what must be done."

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

The old priest nods in silent approval. Turning, he speaks a sharp word to a servant, who waits in one of the doorways. The young man steps warily into the chamber bearing a great, ceremonial sword in his hands. It's a match to the smaller blade with which Gantarith proposed to end Ilsevel's life. I set my teeth grimly at the sight of it. It's not necessary to perform this office with holy instruments—but for a beast as far gone as Nyathri, perhaps the kiss of sacred steel will help to ensure her ultimate peace.

Just as I reach for the hilt, a voice cries out from across the chamber: “No, wait! I will have my chance!”

My heart leaps. “Tassa,” I growl. Gods-damn it, I'd told her on the green that she couldn't attempt this bond. And if she's here, who's watching Ilsevel? The question springs to my lips, but I dare not ask with all those watching eyes fixed on me.

My sister steps into the chamber, her gaze fixed on the subdued licorneir. She's trembling; she must have seen them carry Malgathor by in the hall, screaming and bleeding and burnt. Yet she came nonetheless, stubborn woman that she is.

“No, Tassa.” Giving Nyathri a wide berth, I move around the altar to place myself between my sister and the licorneir. “I know how you've longed to make avelarin. But this is not the way. There will be other licorneir.”

“Will there?” Tassa looks up at me. Her eyes gleam with mingled terror and determination. “You cannot promise me that, Taar. In the years since I've completed mysylarveltest, I've had only three opportunities to form a bond. This may be my last chance.”

She's right. Licorneir bonds are rarer than ever, what with the loss of ilsevel blossoms and the separation of the surviving tribes across our remnant lands. "It isn't worth it," I insist, nevertheless. "She's too far gone. It's been many days now since Ashika died. Her soul is all but lost."

"But it's not lost yet," Tassa says. "I may be able to sing her back. Please, Taar. Let me try."

I want to deny her. I want to command her to leave this room at once. I feel the watching eyes of the Licornyn riders, particularly Kildorath. I'm not unaware of his feelings for my sister. If something were to happen to her now, it might be the last break in the weakening chain of his loyalty.

But Tassa holds my gaze. I can almost feel the power of her soul-song, desperate and hopeful and so very afraid.

"Shakh," I breathe, shaking my head. "Very well. It's your life to risk. But if you feel Nyathri resisting—"

"I know." A smile flashes briefly across her face. "I won't get too close. I won't do anything foolish." But I can tell from the look in her eye that she has no such intention.

Reluctantly I return to my place beside Elydark on the far side of the chamber. My licorneir's spirit hums with tension as we watch Tassa assume position across from the altar stone. Elydark wants Nyathri to be saved—he and she were on the brink of forming a mating bond, a rare and beautiful occurrence among the licorneir. The prospect, and the possibility of new young licorneir being born as a result, had been a source of both speculation and hope between me and Ashika. Elydark has been reticent about his inclination for her, but we are too closely bonded for me not to notice.

I rest a hand on my licorneir's shoulder, both offering and taking comfort, even as Tassa raises her hands in prayerful supplication and begins her song.

Like Malgathor's, the melody issuing from Tassa's throat is wordless. Otherwise they could not be more different. Where his song was low and growling, hers is high, clear, and sweet, without a trace of vibrato. A soaring, even sound which occasionally swoops to a lower register in her chest. Hers is a particularly lovely voice. It reminds me of our mother. Now that was a song worth hearing, when Queen Ashtalora joined her voice with Mahra's—a hymn fit for heaven itself.

Tassa's song is neither so strong nor so clear, but the potential is there. I watch Nyathri for a reaction. Is this the song she needs to heal what's torn inside her? Is this her chance for redemption?

Still singing, Tassa begins to move toward the altar. Nyathri's fire has sunk low. Her flesh glows like dull embers and clings to her visible skeleton. Tiny pinpoints of red light shine from black hollows where her eyes should be, watching Tassa as she approaches.

My fists clench. I fight the urge to leap forward and plant myself between my sister and thisvelrhoarbeast. But while I cannot hear Nyathri's song, perhaps Tassa can. Perhaps she hears something which gives her hope for a connection. I dare not interfere and spoil their chances.

Tassa is so close to her now. Unlike Malgathor, she's not sweating, for Nyathri's fire is sunk far too low. She stretches out one hand, trembling like a leaf. My gut knots with dread. Will those chaeora bonds hold? Did I secure them fast enough? And what of the Licornyn riders, are they prepared to intervene? They weren't quick enough for Malgathor, damn them. Neither was I. Even as Tassa's song intensifies, supported by the humming souls of the licorneir and the priests, I rise on the balls of my feet, tense and ready for action.

I'm not prepared, however, for what happens next.

Nyathri puts her head down on the stone. Everything in her, all the straining force, all the glowing ember light, goes out. She becomes, before my eyes, a lump of ashen bones, lifeless and lightless.

Tassa stops short. She swallows her song, blinking fast. "Is she dead?" she asks. Her natural speaking voice sounds so strange following the haunting melody.

In that same instant a red blaze erupts from the stone, shooting a fountain straight through the skylight. Tassa screams and throws up her hands. Someone moves—Kildorath and Miramenor, his licorneir. Closest to her, they leap together as one, Miramenor's protective song wrapping around her just in time to save her from incineration. Elydark's song surrounds me, and the priests fall back to take shelter with other licorneir as the hellish blaze sears all the nearby ilsevel blossoms, turning them to cinders.

"Out!" I cry, my voice nearly inaudible over Nyathri's roar. "Clear the chamber! Away from her!"

No one waits to be told twice. Making for all available exits, licorneir, riders, and priests alike scatter from the Moon Chamber. Elydark and I follow on the heels of Kildorath, who supports Tassa while Miramenor shields them with song. "Is she hurt?" I demand the moment we step into the coolness of the stone passage.

"I'm fine," Tassa snaps, her voice drowning out Kildorath's uncertain response. She tries to push him away but staggers and falls against his chest. His arms cradle her gently, but his face is a furious mask.

"She should never have been let near that beast," he growls.

“Who said anything aboutlet?”Tassa once more pushes away from him and this time manages to keep her balance. She turns to me, and though she’s flushed, and there are mild burnson her hands, she seems little the worse for wear, thanks to Miramenor’s swift action.

I look back through the doorway at the altar. Fire still rages, so hot and bright, I cannot see Nyathri within.

“This is it,luinar.” Kildorath’s face is suffused in hellish glow when I turn to him. The dark disks of his eyes reflect fury. “You must help her. If it isn’t already too late.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

He's right. I've known all along that it would be this way, even if some part of me wanted to believe otherwise. I turn from him to Elydark. My licorneir does not speak, but his eyes are full of both sorrow and certainty.

"We will let her burn out now," I say. "Kildorath, make certain everyone escaped in time. I want a full headcount when I return."

"Return? Where are you going?"

"To prepare for the death sacrament." I give my warrior a hard look. "Go."

With a last glance for Tassa, Kildorath hastens from the corridor, his licorneir trailing behind him. Tassa does not watch him go. Her gaze trained on me, she studies my expression by the glow of Nyathri's red flame. "What exactly are these preparations, brother?"

In answer I sag heavily against the wall. Now that the immediate crisis is past, my whole body feels as though it's held together by fraying threads. "Take me to Ilsevel," I say.

Her lip curls.

"It's not like that." I shake my head and hold up my forearm. "It's thevelra. . . I cannot be away from her long without suffering the effects."

Tassa shakes her head. "Drothlar," she mutters. Cursebound.

With that she turns and leads the way through the labyrinthine passages. Elydark and I follow, my licorneir's head close to my shoulder. I'm sorry, my friend, I sing to him, the meaning heavy as it passes along our soul-tether. I wish we could have done more. I wish we could have saved her.

He doesn't answer but nuzzles my cheek with his soft nose. He bears me no ill will, though perhaps he should. What we witnessed today, so much pain and horror . . . I should never have let that happen to Nyathri. She deserved better.

Tassa stops at last before a curtained door and calls out, "Halamar!" The curtain draws back, and my hearttorn friend emerges. He looks questioningly at Tassa. She drops her eyes and shakes her head once. His gaze shifts to me, but I'm in no mood to explain what took place over these last long hours. "Is Ilsevel within?" I ask.

He nods and steps back to give me room to pass. When Tassa moves to follow, I hold up a hand. "No. I'll go alone." At her disgusted look, I add, "I need sleep, Tassa. I'm worn out, and the velrahas cost me dearly. I need to rest before I attempt to . . . to help Nyathri. But I don't need a crowd of watching eyes observing me while I snore."

She looks as though she will protest, but Halamar inclines his head and murmurs something in her ear. Though her frown doesn't soften, she turns away from him and me and stalks back up the passage. "I'll be at home, Taar," she calls back over her shoulder. "Come find me when it's done. Bring that bride of yours if you must."

I catch Halamar's eye. He shrugs briefly before following her down the passage.

With a sigh I slip through the curtain into the chamber. A small fire burns on the hearth, illuminating the stone walls with its glow. It's a spare room: little more than a cave, with only a narrow pallet bed pushed up against one wall. Hardly a space of respite.

And yet the instant my gaze lands on the small form curled up on that pallet, half-hidden beneath folds of stained travelcloak, a rush of heat floods my veins. Muscles I'd not realized I'd been tensing suddenly relax, and the tightness in my chest eases into long, steady breaths. Even the velvet, which has caused me nothing but pain since I left her behind in the city green, transforms into something warm. Almost tantalizing.

Despite the intentions I'd stated to Tassa, a hollowness opens in my gut, filled a moment later with liquid heat. How would my sleeping bride respond were I to crawl atop her on that pallet? Would she welcome such advances? Would those flashing eyes of hers meet mine with the fire of desire or fury? If I caught her mouth in mine and pressed her back into that bed, would she open to receive me? Would I hear again that delicious moan, the precursor to the song I've come to crave from her lips?

I'm still standing in the doorway, paralyzed by the suddenness and strength of these feelings flooding through my senses, when her brow constricts suddenly in sleep. Another moment and she turns her head slightly, lips parting. Her eyes flutter open, bleary at first, unseeing. Then her vision sharpens, and she stares up at me. With a gasp, she pushes upright. Strands of hair pull free from that crown of braids to dangle in tendrils across her face. She shakes them out of her eyes as she takes me in, her gaze traveling slowly up and down my frame.

"You look awful," she says at last.

My mouth quirks. Some of the fire in my loins cools. Which is just as well. A different greeting, and I would have forgotten all my assurances to Onor Gantarith and the elders and fallen on her like a ravenous animal.

"Many thanks, zyl'nala," I answer wryly and move to the fire. After Nyathri's hellish heat, these dancing flames hardly seem warm at all. I hold out my hands to them for a moment before taking a seat with my back to the wall. Now that the initial wave of lust has passed, I am tired again. But Ilsevel is seated on the bed, wrapped in her

cloak, and by the look on her face, isn't keen to share.

She watches me narrowly. One small hand unconsciously rubs at her forearm. Is thevelra affecting her as well? She doesn't seem unduly strained by our parting, but then she wouldn't be as susceptible to the magic. The only time I saw her strongly under thevelra's influence was the night she sang with Elydark to free me from virulium poisoning. I suspect that close association with licorneir magic made her temporarily more vulnerable to magic born from the same source.

She breaks the long silence at last. "What happened? Did Tassa . . . ? Did Nyathri . . . ?"

I shake my head. Closing my eyes, I lean my head back against the wall. Memory of that explosion, my sister's terrified face as she stood on the brink of death and oblivion . . . that sight will haunt me to my dying day. Thank the gods for Kildorath and his licorneir. I owe the man much.

"So," Ilsevel says softly, "you will kill her."

It's not a question.

I nod. Opening my eyes again, I face her across the small space. She wraps her arms around her body and sits very straight-backed. Are those tears in her eyes? "Come now," I say, hoping my voice sounds gentle rather than impatient. "You cannot weep over avelrhoar you never knew."

Her brow darkens. She turns sharply away from me, giving me a view of her profile as she stares into the fire. It's quite a sharp profile, with a firm jaw and pointed nose, and that brow of hers, so stern and hard. I find I want to trace those lines, to discover if the pad of my thumb might soften them. And those lips of hers—even pressed in that severe line, their fullness cannot be disguised. Strange that she should care so

much for one of our licorneir.

“Have you done it already?” she asks, a slight tremor in her voice.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Though she's not looking at me, I shake my head. "To kill one of the Star Children is a tremendous act of power. It's a task ascribed to the lunar alone and requires an expense of magical energy." I look at her from under my brows. "I . . . was apart from you too long. I have not the energy I need for such an act. I must spend a little time in your presence and recover." She turns to me slowly, eyes narrowing. "Don't think anything of it," I hasten to add. "It's just this velvet bond. It doesn't mean anything." Who am I trying to reassure? Her or me?

"You need . . . sleep?" she says after a too-long silence.

I nod.

Without a word she rises from the bed and stands with her arms folded tight over her chest. "Go on then," she says. "Take the bed."

I glance around the sparse room. "There is nowhere else for you to sit."

"It doesn't matter."

But it does. "I will take the floor. I'm used to sleeping rough. In my current state, I doubt I'll notice it."

She looks down her nose at me. "You really are a stubborn brute, aren't you?"

There's a bite in her words, and yet, somehow, they bring a smile to my lips.

Without a word I lay down on my side, turn my back to her, and face the wall. I don't

close my eyes right away but listen to the sounds of her pacing back and forth. At one point her footsteps draw near to me, and she whispers softly, “Warlord?”

I don’t answer. But my skin prickles with awareness of her—with memory of two nights ago when her cold hands first touched my back. Some foolish part of me hopes she will kneel now and run her hands along my exposed skin again. What I wouldn’t give for another chance to experience her flesh against mine!

But she merely returns to her side of the room. I hear the creak of the pallet as she lies down once more. Soon after I close my eyes and let exhaustion claim me.

27

ILSEVEL

I watch Taar through slitted eyes.

He would not fall asleep while I remained standing, so I finally forced myself to lie down and feign sleep so that he would relax. He breathes heavily now, and the lines of his body release some of their tension, though I cannot imagine he’s comfortable on that hard, stone floor.

I wait until I’m quite certain he’s unconscious before I begin to rise. Every shift of my weight makes the rushes in the pallet mattress whisper and crackle like little explosions. I expect my warlord husband to spring awake at any moment; by the time I’m on my feet, my heart is ramming in my throat. But Taar doesn’t stir. Perhaps I underestimated how great a toll our separation of the last few hours took on him. What was discomfort for me was true pain for him. There may be advantages to my human blood after all.

Creeping across the room, I pull back the doorway curtain and cast a last glance over

my shoulder at my sleeping husband. Will the velvet wake him with my departure? Quite possibly. I won't have long before he hunts me down. Whatever I intend to do, I must be quick.

Setting my jaw, I turn and duck out into the dark passage, only to stop short.

Elydark stands before me.

The unicorn is so large, so luminous in that dark space, it would almost be comical were he not so absolutely terrifying. His horn pulses with a low gleam, and while he does not angle it at me, I'm suddenly and painfully aware of just how sharp it is. His eyes, like two fire-limned moons, gaze into mine, far too knowing for comfort.

My throat thickens. I can scarcely draw breath. I stand there, the doorway curtain wafting shut behind me, and stare at that great and terrible being. There's no running, no hiding, and certainly no lying to a creature like this.

So I whisper: "I can't let her die."

Elydark is silent. But I feel again that ripple of song-force which I've heard from him once before, when he came to find me, to save Taar from the virulium poison. It vibrates from inside him, not with words but with meaning far deeper than any language I possess. And I think I understand it.

"You care about her," I say.

He inclines his head slightly, his long forelock falling over one eye. That song-force rumbles a little deeper, until the very stones under our feet seem to vibrate.

"You . . . love her."

The word doesn't feel right somehow. Not large or full enough. Whatever Elydark's feelings for Nyathri may be, it's not romantic affection, at least not in the way I've always understood it. These beings of spirit and flame, loosely contained in frames of flesh, are too great and old and other to be bound by such meager ideas. But no other word in my tongue comes close. Onlylove.

“Will you . . .” I lick my painfully dry lips only to feel them chap again immediately.
“Will you take me to Nyathri?”

He stands there, so big, so silent, so immoveable. I will not get past him if he does not allow it; there's no point even in trying. Taar rests peacefully inside because he knows his soul-bonded unicorn is on watch.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

But there's something in Elydark's song, something in the vibration of music hovering on the edge of my awareness. I feel his interest, his curiosity. And another feeling, fainter than the others but possibly deeper: hope.

"I can help her." I don't know why I say it. I certainly don't know if it's true. Who am I to think I have anything to offer one of these otherworldly beings? But Elydark has seen me perform the impossible once before. It was he who fetched me to save Taar, he who joined his voice with mine to drive out that darkness in his blood. He understands my gods-gift better than I do. Maybe that's why he hasn't alerted Taar already. Maybe that's why we're still standing here in this cold passage.

"Her song," I continue softly, "I think I know how it might be fixed. I . . . I want to try. Before he kills her. I want to try."

Elydark lowers his head. That coiled horn of his points straight at my heart. I nearly leap back, scramble through the curtain, and fall into the chamber, yelping with terror. But I stand firm. Even when he presses that tip against my flesh. I feel pressure but no sharpness. And in that point of connection, a line of song ripples from him into me, clearer than any sound I've heard from him since that night when we sang together. There are no words, just a feeling I can't ignore.

I choose to trust you.

The vibrations are still rumbling in my soul when he turns and walks up the passage, surprisingly silent for so great a beast. His massive hooves seem not to strike the stone at all as he glides along, phantomlike.

Heart still hammering, I follow. My own booted feet make far more noise. Every few paces, I half-expect angry priests to leap around some dark corner and collar me. Ilsevel blossoms cling to the walls in places, and they seem to open their petals, turning to greet Elydark as he passes by, their delicate harmonies blending with his soul-song. I would like to listen, to analyze the intricacies of that strange music more closely.

But before long a thread of dissonance works its way through. It's so soft at first, I almost don't notice it. As we progress, however, though it never increases in volume, it captures my attention so acutely, I can no longer focus on any other song. It's ugly, broken, with a purposeful viciousness to it. Like it would destroy the other melodies if it could figure out how to work itself into them.

Elydark stops abruptly. I nearly run into him, and his silky tail flicks in my face. Spitting out unicorn hair, I back up a step and pull my attention away from that song. He's led me to an arched doorway. Beyond lies the same domed chamber in which Taar and I met the old priest last night. Only now, rather than moonlight, it's filled with a dense, smoky atmosphere, like some great conflagration recently consumed this space.

In the center of that smoke, kneeling on the huge altar stone and bound with harsh black and silver cords, is Nyathri.

My heart lurches. She looks horrible, worse than before. Her flesh is peeled away from her body, leaving only the blackened skeleton beneath. There's no trace of fire now, only smoke rising in coils from her ruinous frame. Her head is bent, her flaming eyes darkened to blacked-out pits.

But worst of all is that song radiating from her. A song of destruction, rage, and, most of all, hatred. Hatred for whom, I cannot say, but . . . but part of me suspects. Part of me knows.

I move to stand at Elydark's shoulder and peer into that hazy atmosphere. To my surprise, he trembles. Is he afraid? I never would have thought it possible. I place a hand on his shoulder, whether to offer or take comfort, I'm not sure. Gods above, am I a fool for thinking I could fix such a song? Probably. No one's ever accused me of an overabundance of wisdom; I've always been a creature of impulse and passion. It's simply how I'm made. Were I my older sister, Faraine, I would perhaps stop now to question my next steps, to consider the potential ramifications of the action I mean to take.

But I am not Faraine.

I step away from Elydark, moving into that large space. Smoke stings my eyes and my nostrils, and, for a moment, I fear I won't be able to sing. Then another wave of dissonance rolls over me, and I hear in it the half-memory of a melodic echo. It's so faint and yet so alluring, I cannot help opening my mouth and trying to give it voice.

The unicorn looks up. Fire springs to life in her eyes, ripples out across her face, down her neck, over her withers and haunches. She tosses her head, struggling against those awful ropes, which do not seem affected by her fire in the least. I hate the sight of them, binding her proud, strong limbs so cruelly to that stone.

Still singing, I move closer. The heat from her flame is intense, but somehow it seems not to matter. I both feel it and don't feel it; like the discomfort, even the pain, is happening to some other version of me, some version I don't really care about, while the real me continues unaffected.

Nyathri watches my approach. She gnashes her teeth, looking positively demonic. Her song bursts from her in ugly waves, without rhythm or melody. Loss, guilt, shame, fury, hatred . . . they sing out in clamorous combinations, each one of them all too familiar. But that familiarity makes them less terrible somehow. Or, at the very least, less surprising. Every time they strike, I find a way to modulate my voice, to

make it duck in, under, or around the belching, crashing noise of her spirit. It's not exactly harmony, but it's not wildly off.

I draw closer to her, closer to that stone. All the ilsevel blossoms, which had grown in such abundance in this space only last night, have disintegrated into little ash piles, their dustthickening the already smoky air. I struggle to breathe, and my song weakens. But I don't stop my approach.

Those binding ropes are ugly things. Black fibers twisted with silver threads, they cut into what little remains of her flesh and even seem to dig into her exposed skeleton. Now that I'm close, I hear a faint vibration coming off them, but it feels all wrong, like holy licorneir melody snarled up with the un-song of thevardimnar. It's evil, pure evil, I'm sure of it. But it keeps Nyathri subdued.

I frown. Are those cords also preventing her song from joining with mine? I feel thealmostin her dissonance, feel the possibility of harmony unrealized. Only I cannot seem to reach her. It's those ropes, I'm almost sure of it.

I reach for the knife at my belt. Nyathri's eyes flash. "Don't worry," I murmur, allowing music to permeate my words. "I won't hurt you. Let's get you free of those nasty things, shall we?"

She looks me straight in the eye. For a moment I'm caught in the spell of her song—in the eye of the storm that is her shame. It surrounds me, overcomes me, fills up my heart. Making its way to the space where I hold the death of my sister, Nyathri's guilt finds my own and latches onto it.

I should have saved her.

It was my fault.

My fault.

Where is the harmony in this song? Where is the healing for the brokenness? We are too alike, our songs, our souls too bent and fractured to be of use to each other. The fire burning across her body leaps from her spirit to mine. It will consume me. Perhaps it already has.

“Ra drothei!”

The voice bursts across my awareness, breaking through layers of song and fire to strike my physical ears. Startled, I whirl and peer through the smoke haze across the domed chamber. A figure appears, looming large and threatening. A man, mounted on a licorneir, his sword arm upraised over his head. Kildorath.

I have moments in which to act. My body feels as though it's moving in half-time, like the heavy limb-numbness of dreams has taken hold. Even as Kildorath shouts again in his tongue, even as he spurs his licorneir forward, I turn slowly, slowly, painfully. Nyathri's eyes burn me with hatred, but I stagger toward her, knife outstretched.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

The blade cuts through first one rope then another.

Then Nyathri is up, shaking free of her bonds. Her great hooves crash against the altar stone, and fire erupts from the coils of her horn. How easily she could smash me, pierce me, leave my body pulverized in her wake! She rears on her hind legs and seems to grow three or four times larger before my eyes. I scream and duck into a crouch, dropping my knife and throwing my arms over my head.

But the killing blow does not come. Nyathri pivots, leaps from the altar stone, and flees to one of the dark doorways across the chamber. Her broken song trails behind her. I watch her go, heart dropping like a stone in my gut even as my lungs struggle to take in breath.

Kildorath's wrathful voice erupts in my ears. Gasping, I turn to see him and his unicorn bear down on me.

28

TAAR

Pain stabs up my arm.

My body responds according to long years of training, leaping into a defensive crouch and reaching for a weapon before the fog of sleep has quite vanished from my vision. I remain like so for some moments, breathing hard, staring around the bare stone chamber for some sign of an enemy. But it's empty.

Another sharp stab of pain and quiver of weakness. I look down at my forearm. For an instant the coils of thevelraglow bright to my semi-conscious gaze. I see them burning into my flesh even as the cord leads away from me, across the room, and through the heavy doorway curtain.

“Ilsevel,” I whisper.

She’s gone. Gods-damn it, she’s gone!

I’m on my feet in an instant, but stagger and hit the wall, shoulder-first. Curse this damnable bond! A growl in my throat, I yank the curtain open. “Elydark!” I bark. But there’s no sign of either my licorneir or my bride. I told him to stand guard. Not once in all the years of our bond has Elydark failed to fulfill such a direct command. Did she bewitch him somehow? Did she use that gods-gift of hers and overwhelm his will?

Thevelratugs. It leads unmistakably down the passage, back toward the temple center. I can almost see it, gleaming like a thread of fire. My eyes widen. Is she making for the altar and . . . ?

“No, no, no!” I set off at a run, careening painfully into the wall every few paces. I cannot seem to move my feet fast enough, and my heart beats laboriously against my ribcage. Wrath pulses in my veins, but for the moment I’m too afraid to give it any heed. I simply must find her. Now. Before the worst happens. My head swims, and my vision darkens on the edges, but still I push on.

Suddenly my licorneir is before me. He glows faintly in the dim light of the passage. Beyond him is one of the numerous entrances to the Moon Chamber, the air still thick with smoke and ash. “Elydark!” I cry, my voice echoing against stone.

He swings his head around, looks at me along the length of his horn.Forgive me,

Vellar, he sings into my head. I had to see. I had to know.

“Had to know what?” Staggering to his side, I lean heavily against his shoulder and look out into the chamber. My heart stops.

Ilsevel is there. I’d know that slight frame of hers anywhere, even covered in a heavy cloak. She sways a little as though under great strain. It’s like she’s battling some invisible force, pushing her way forward one determined step after the next. Her gaze is fixed on Nyathri, bound to the altar stone. I hear nothing, not even the faintest whisper of breath. The air is painfully still, almost sharp. But there’s song here in this space. Beyond my perception, louder and deeper than anything I can imagine.

“What is she doing?” I rasp, hardly able to bear speaking into that brimming silence.

She is finding her song, Elydark replies, tossing his head. She is seeking her name.

It cannot be. Ilsevel is human. I don’t care if she’s god-gifted—the blessing of the licorneir bond belongs to the Licornyn people alone. It is our grace, handed down to us from Nornala herself. No human can possibly hope to find a sacred soul-song, much less one as shattered as Nyathri’s.

Suddenly a knife gleams in Ilsevel’s hand—the very knife I gave her the night of our wedding. “Damn it,” I snarl, taking a lunging step forward. “I must put a stop to this.”

No, Vellar! Elydark turns his head sharply and blocks me with his horn. Let us see how it plays out. Let us wait and—

He doesn’t get a chance to finish. A voice bellows from across the chamber, breaking that melodic stillness with harsh discord: “Ra drothei!”

Kildorath appears in the doorway opposite me, mounted on Miramenor. He does not

see me, standing in the shadows with Elydark. His gaze is fastened on Ilsevel with predatory purpose.

She turns to him. Her cheeks drain of all color.

The next few moments happen in a tumult. Ilsevel dives for the altar, even as Kildorath urges his licorneir forward. I am already swinging myself up onto Elydark's back, bellowing: "Vulmon, Elydark!"

He springs into action. It's as though he's momentarily lost all physical form and become a bolt of pure soulfire, streaking across the Moon Chamber. Within a heartbeat, he draws alongside Miramenor, and I am hip-to-knee with Kildorath.

I have no weapon on me. It doesn't matter. With a roar I throw myself at him. He sees me in the last instant, and his eyes widen, but he's too late to put up any defense. My arms wrap around him, and we land hard on the ash-strewn stones, rolling as our licorneir part and gallop, each to one side of the altar stone.

Though stunned, Kildorath tries to defend himself. But now the weakness which thevelrahad inflicted on me reverses. Back in Ilsevel's presence, my strength is doubled, and any reticence I might have felt against striking my old friend is long forgotten. I pound his face, grab his shoulders, and knock the back of his head against the pavers. "I'll kill you if you touch her!" I roar.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

Kildorath's eyes spin, horror, agony, and fury mingled into one complex emotion. "Taar!" he cries. The sound of my name rather than my title on his lips gives me momentary pause. "Taar, did you not see? Don't you realize what she's done?"

At first his words mean nothing. They are mere noise in my head, lost in the thundering of my pulse. But as Kildorath holds up his hands, demonstrating submission, my vision begins to clear. I see the blood on his face, pouring from his nose, matting in his hair. I see the ash covering his cheeks and my own hands, gripping his shoulders. What have I done? Not since the virulium coursed in my veins have I turned on my friends with such violence.

I release him so abruptly, he falls back and hits his head again. Hastily I get off him, rise, and stagger back. Breath ratcheting painfully in my chest, I turn. My gaze instinctively searches for Ilsevel.

She stands by the altar stone, broken chaeora rope lying in snakish coils at her feet. Her eyes meet mine, wide with fear. The expression vanishes in a blink, however, replaced with defiance. As though it doesn't matter to her that she's doomed Nyathri to an eternity of torment and sundering.

I exhale painfully, my ribs tight around my heavy heart. I should have known. To bring a human into the Hidden City was to invite disaster. I cannot imagine a worse disaster than this. And to think I could have spared Nyathri, had I not been weakened by this cursed bond.

For the first time the thought flashes through my head: I should have left her to Lurodos.

She seems to read my mind. Her face pales, and some of that stubborn defiance falters. Lips parting, she draws a shuddering breath. “Warlord?” she says. Then, “Taar!”

I hold up a hand. Gods, I can’t even bear to look at her. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“I couldn’t let you kill her.” She comes toward me, still gripping that knife, though her hands are shaking. “She’s not lost, not yet. Not entirely. I think I can—”

“You are a fool.” The words fall from my tongue like the downward stroke of a blade. “You know nothing. Nothing about our people, about the licorneir. You know nothing about our songs, our ways, our most sacred traditions. Did you think you could thwart the will of Nornala herself?”

Her eyes are so wide, so dark. At first she doesn’t understand what I’m saying. But I see the moment when comprehension dawns. She draws back a pace, as though I’ve struck her. I almost feel as though I have. Thevelraburns my arm savagely. But I won’t apologize.

“Your life is forfeit,” I say. “You’ve broken Licornyn law and proven yourself a traitor. The elders will call for an immediate sundering of our bond.” I take a step toward her, lower my head, and snarl the last words into her stricken face. “They will slit your throat, Ilsevel. And there’s nothing I can do to prevent it.”

29

ILSEVEL

Suddenly I am a prisoner once more. Surrounded by enemies, far from all help. And before me stands a stranger. A warlord of unmatched brutality, towering over me in

menacing power.

Everything which has taken place between us—every stolen moment, every tender touch, every explosion of bliss and united song—fades away. There's nothing left but encroaching darkness and the wrath burning in his eyes.

I take a stumbling step back. Though the velracord burns so bright I can almost see it taut in the air between us, a rush of self-preservation tells me to turn, to flee. I begin to pivot, but movement erupts on all sides of the chamber, along with a cacophony of voices speaking words I cannot understand. Taar's voice booms above the rest, and whatever he says sounds harsh to my ears. Unicorns and riders close in on me. I look for escape and even start to dart between two of them. The riders dismount at once, catch me by the arms, and hold me in place. I scream, wordless, struggling to turn and look back at Taar, still hoping to glimpse again the protector I've come to trust.

But the man standing before that altar stone is someone I do not know.

Onor Gantarith appears at his side, speaking urgently. Taar answers in a series of growling words and gestures sharply with one arm. What is he saying? Is he giving orders for my immediate death? Are these my last breaths, my last heartbeats? Gantarith shakes his head and speaks again, gripping Taar's shoulder. Taar turns away. His eyes refuse to meet mine.

Movement draws my gaze to where Tassa and Halamar appear in one of the shadowed doorways, staring into the domed chamber. Tassa's eyes are wide with shock, while Halamar looks on with habitual stoicism.

Gantarith speaks again in a final burst. The only word I understand is, "Luinar." Taar curses bitterly. Then, turning, he calls to Halamar, who springs forward and salutes his king. Taar's voice is too low for me to hear, but I see him gesture to me and the two Licornyn riders gripping my arms. Halamar nods. He strides across the chamber

toward us and beckons silently.

They begin to drag me away, feet scraping against stones. “Taar?” Terror bursts from my lips in a little bleat. “Taar! Where are they taking me? What is happening?”

He bows his head, long hair falling across his face. Just as my captors haul me to the far doorway, just before I’m yanked into the shadows out of sight, he looks up. His eyes meet mine across the distance. The look in them is so black, it could blot out the sun.

“Taar!” I scream. My last sight of his face is a sudden shock of pain just as his knees buckle. The veil between us flares again, so sharp and hot, I scream. But the two Licornyn riders drag me down the passage with relentless footsteps. The pain increases, like someone stabbing me over and over again. If I feel it this harshly, how much worse is it for him?

My view of the domed chamber is blocked by the bulky bodies of two unicorns, following behind their riders. Halamar leads our strange procession. He moves swiftly through a dizzying array of dark passages where only stray ilsevel blossoms offer any illumination. We step out at last into daylight on some part of the mountain I’ve not yet seen. Confused by pain and terror, I can hardly make sense of anything.

A small circular wall of stones swims before my eyes. A well—and they’re dragging me straight toward it. Halamar stands beside the low wall. Are they going to throw me down there? Is this how they mean to kill me? To drown me in the dark?

“No!” Survival instinct jolts through my veins. I haul against my captors’ grips, writhing, twisting, little caring if I dislocate my own arms in an effort to get free. I won’t be tossed down that dark hole. I’ve spent my whole life fighting for freedom; this will not be my end. “No, no, no!”

The last word bursts from my throat, not in a shout but in a sudden flood of unrepressed song. A single note, deep, raw, and reverberating. Full of power.

That power shoots out from me, like a streak of soulfire. It whorls around me then darts out in two branching streams, straight for the two unicorns. Like lances of light and sound, those streams pierce their chests, glowing bright inside as though their hearts are suddenly made luminous. That light builds up their necks, into their heads, and bursts from their horns in two new streams of light-song, multicolored and searing with heat.

The bolts strike the men holding my arms. They drop like stones at my feet.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I stand there. Shocked to stillness. Staring down at those still figures. Are they dead? Did I kill them? No, they're breathing, I think.

Slowly I lift my gaze to the two unicorns. They're as astonished as I am, their hearts still vibrating with the force of that song. Tongues of soulfire lick across their flanks. They look from their fallen riders to me. Their eyes are deep as the night sky, filled with dancing flame.

Pivoting on heel, I prepare to run and run and run and run, I don't know where as long as it's far from here. I lift my foot, ready to take the first step.

Halamar looms before me. Big, terrifying, and untouched by whatever force felled the other two. He stares down at me, his stoic face broken in an expression of terror. He raises a fist. "No, wait!" I cry, lifting my hands.

Too late. His blow strikes me across the temple, and I know nothing more.

30

TAAR

Elder Halaema's eyes are fixed on me as I pace back and forth across the dirt floor of my dakath. She sits cross-legged on a mat by the central fire, her pose serene but her gaze shrewd.

The main chamber of my home feels crowded just now, with Onor Gantarith seated to one side of the elder, and Tassa keeping to the shadows but observing all. Halamar

stands still before the others. Firelight plays across his face.

“And you’re sure of what you saw?” I demand, my voice limned with pain. Though the initial stabbing of thevelraat my bride’s sudden departure has dulled somewhat, it continues to throb every so often. I hate how weak I feel, my legs trembling with the effort to keep my body upright. Yet I cannot bear to sit. Nervous energy bubbles in my veins.

“I’m not sure Isawanything,” Halamar says gravely, his face forward, but his eyes following me. “I heard something—the human’s voice. She cried out in a strange way. One might almost say shesang. There came something like a vibration in the air, and both Birenthor and Vomyar dropped like straw dolls.”

“Magic,” Elder Halaema growls. “This proves she is a Miphata. Sent by her kind to spy on the Hidden City, to weaken us from within.” She eyes me narrowly. “She must have used enchantments to ensnare you. That’s why you didn’t see it right away.”

Part of me believes her. Part of me feels that only sorcery could have driven me to take leave of my senses the way I have over this woman. It’s the only explanation for the rage even now churning in my gut.

“That’s impossible,” I say, careful to keep my tone level, to betray nothing of the murder straining against my better instincts. “I’ve never once detected the faintest hint of Miphates magic on her. She is gods-gifted; she informed me of that herself.”

“And you didn’t stop to question whether or not she lied?” Halaema raises a hand as I begin to protest. “It doesn’t matter. Whether it’s gods-gifting, Miphates magic, or some dark new form of necrolipha, she revealed her powers and used them to attack our people.”

“I would like to point out,” Halamar rumbles, his head inclined respectfully, “that

neither Birenthor nor Vomyar was hurt. They were but momentarily stunned. After the fact Vomyar complained of a slight headache, nothing worse.”

“And Vomyar will lament over a hangnail,” Tassa mutters from her corner of the room.

Elder Halaema shoots her a warning glance before turning her attention back to Halamar. “What does it matter? Who knows what worse she might have done to them if you weren’t there, good Halamar?”

He tilts his head slightly. “But I wasn’t influenced by her power. If it was a spell she cast, it did not touch me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she used licorneir magic.”

“What?” I’m not sure who barks the question first. We all stare at Halamar, shocked at the mere suggestion.

He continues calmly. “The vibration in the air reminded me of the velrabond—of the power passing from one soul to another. And just before Birenthor and Vomyar fell, both their licorneir suddenly dropped their heads, horns pointed at them.”

“You’re saying she turned the licorneir on their own riders?” Onor Gantarith says, horrified.

“I’m saying that she—a human—influenced them.”

“But that’s impossible!” Gantarith shakes his head vehemently and turns to the elder. “The licorneir bond is sacred to Nornala, bestowed by her grace only on the people of Licorna. That bond is far too pure to be corrupted by human influence.”

Even as the priest protests, however, I remember another time when Ilsevel joined

with a licorneir in an act of power. I would not be here today if Elydark had not found her, and if she had not used her profound gift, mingling her voice with his to draw me back from the darkness of virulium.

“She is gods-gifted,” I say again, and catch Onor Gantarith’s eye. “You know this. You heard her singing in the Moon Chamber. I told you then that she can hear the songs of the licorneir.”

“And I told you,” he responds sharply, “that such songs were not meant for human ears. I never dreamt that, along with hearing them, she might somehow manipulate their song.”

With an effort of supreme will, I keep the swelling rage in my breast in check. “She was afraid for her life. She acted out of self-defense.”

“And she might have killed our people in the process,” Elder Halaema inserts. “The next time, she very well might.” I turn to her, but she holds up a silencing hand. “I know you want to believe your warbride, luinar. You’ve grown attached—few men wouldn’t, bound by thevelraas you are. But there’s no way of knowing if these powers of hers are truly a gods-gift or something else. Some new, darker power of the Miphates, drawn from the Rift and warped to their purpose.”

“She’s not like that,” I say. But even as the words leave my mouth, I remember that confession, tumbling from her lips.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“Mage Artoris would not have been at the Temple of Lamruil were it not to me.”

“I loved him.”

The first time I saw Ilsevel, she was with that man. Who's to say they weren't colluding from the very beginning? She might have been plotting to entrap me from the moment I first set eyes on her, all in a bid to get closer to our most secret and sacred places. And was I so easily duped? Did my hunger for her make me such a ready mark? Even that moment when I saw her fighting him could have been part of the scheme, intended to arouse my sympathy for a lovely, helpless maid.

It comes to me suddenly that she did enspell me that night. Briefly, or so I thought. When I sought to take her captive, she opened her mouth and began to sing, momentarily freezing me in place. Could it be that she affixed a deeper spell at that time? One I could not so easily shake as the temporary stupor? One that drove me compulsively to fight for her, to lust for her, to bind myself to her despite every rational thought?

“Taarthalor.” Halaema's voice brings me back, my gaze locking with her. She's used my name rather than my title, reminding me suddenly of the boy I once was, trailing after her and her mighty licorneir, hoping for even a glance of her favor. “Taar, remember, thevelraclouds your thoughts. You cannot be blamed for not seeing the truth sooner. Even now you desire to protect her. Your noble spirit does you credit.” She leans a little forward, her old skeleton crackling. “But even if you believe her powers are from the gods, she broke Licornyn law. She turned loose a hearttorn licorneir, damning her to endless separation from Nornala. If this does not prove to you the evil of her very nature, the worthlessness of her heart, I don't know what

will.”

More protests leap to my tongue. I cannot bear to hear Ilsevel described in these terms. Did she act rashly, foolishly even? Yes, but not out of any evil intent. She truly believed she could help Nyathri. “She . . .” I clear my throat painfully. “She did not understand.”

“And does the sacredness of our laws depend only on the understanding of those who keep or break them?” Onor Gantarith rumbles. “The law is the law.”

I turn on the priest, fists knotting. “So you will kill her?” I force the words through my teeth.

“Yes,” he replies. “Human though she is, it gives me no pleasure. But it must be done. We must punish the crime she has committed and, more importantly, free ourluinar from her thrall.”

I take an aggressive step toward him. Only Halamar’s hand, appearing suddenly on my shoulder, keeps me in check. Gantarith sees the truth in my furious eyes and flinches. But he does not break my gaze.

“Yes, yes.” Halaema reaches out to pat the priest’s hand with her wrinkled old fingers. “This is what must be done. Ourluinaris suffering even under this small separation. He must be free of her.”

My breath is tight, and thevelra around my arm screams with pain. “When will this take place?” I demand.

“The appropriate time,” Gantarith answers, “is the turning point of one day to the next. Let the evil be ended and the new day greeted in purity. So midnight tonight.”

My gaze flashes to the curtained door and the late-afternoon light splashed across the floor. How many hours until midnight? How many hours more will I know this bond to her, this connection of souls which I never sought but which I now find myself so loathe to break? It feels as though the very seconds are racing by, faster than I can count them.

Halaema rises, slowly and with much creaking and groaning, assisted by the priest. Then she totters toward me, unintimidated by the fury so obviously brimming in my soul. “Do not fret, luinar,” she says and pats my cheek with her withered hand. “Thevelrais confusing your mind. You will feel much better once the bond is severed. In the meanwhile you must do us all a favor and stay here. Away from the human, away from the ceremony. You will feel sick, I know. But it will pass. Tassa here will look after you. She’s a good girl, loyal to her brother.”

I struggle to draw breath. “You mean to make Ilsevel march to her death alone?”

The elder shrugs. “You may choose to bear witness, if you believe it the right thing. But thevelramay make things . . . difficult. You could end up acting in a way that you will regret come dawn.” She looks into my eyes, the wrinkles on her forehead mounding. “For the safety of everyone, it would be better if you stayed away. But the choice is yours, dear boy.”

She turns then and totters for the door, leaning heavily on Onor Gantarith’s supporting arm as she goes. “I’m sorry for what has happened,” she calls back over her shoulder just as she reaches the entrance curtain. “I believe you meant well when you chose to rescue that creature. But humans cannot help being the monsters they are. Her true nature was always going to reveal itself. We must be thankful she caused no greater harm than she did.” With that she releases her grip on Gantarith and steps through the curtain on her own, leaving it to swing shut behind her.

The priest turns to me. There’s something uneasy in his eyes, something raw. “It is

for the best, luinar,” he says. But this time he sounds as though he’s convincing himself.

“Have you done this before?” I ask, my voice low.

He doesn’t pretend to misunderstand me. He holds my gaze for a count of ten breaths before lowering his lashes and shaking his head.

“But you will do it tonight? You will slit her throat. Spill her blood. Under the watching eye of Nornala.”

“It is what the law and the elders demand,” he answers. “She has betrayed Licorna in the bitterest way, damning one of our own licorneir to eternal torment.” He lifts his eyes to mine again, and firelight gleams off what one might mistake for a sheen of tears. Damn him. Damn him and all his remorseful nobility.

I put my back to him, pace to the far side of the dakath chamber, where the shadows are deepest. Behind me, I hear the curtain move as Gantarith departs, leaving me with Halamar and Tassa. I can feel the two of them exchanging glances, silently asking each other how best to comfort me. But I don’t want comfort. The pain searing up my arm and churning in my gut is the only thing keeping me steady.

“Go,” I say, my voice a low growl.

Silence answers. Then, ever faithful and obedient, Halamar moves. I listen to his heavy footsteps as he exits the dakath. No doubt he will take up position just outside, weapon at the ready. Whether guarding or imprisoning me, I cannot say.

Tassa remains where she’s seated on a cushion near the south tent wall. She pretends to be working on a tablet-weaving, her fingers nimble and quick with the long-practiced movements. But though her eyes remain fixed on her task, her attention is

entirely on me.

“You should leave as well,” I say at long last and heave a great breath. “There’s nothing for you here. I don’t care for company just now.”

Her face uncharacteristically mild, Tassa carefully condenses the three small square tablets that make up her handloom and coils the woven length she has already produced so that it will not snarl. This task complete, she sets the whole to one side and lifts her eyes to meet mine. “What are you going to do?”

I don’t speak. I can’t. I stalk to the fire and stare into it, wishing I could cast myself into the blaze. Perhaps the heat of real fire could distract from this burning pain in my arm and make me forget my crippling weakness.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“Gods above,” my sister curses softly and rises, silver earrings hitting her shoulders as they settle. She comes toward me, her stride slow but purposeful, as though approaching a wild animal that might lash out at any moment. “Taar,” she says sternly, “we both know you’re not going to let them kill that girl.”

I grip my forearm, squeezing hard. It feels as though the coil has wrapped around my heart now, that same searing burn blazing in my chest. Anger threatens to consume me: anger at Ilsevel for doing what she did. Why could she not listen to me? Why could she not leave well enough alone? An image flashes through my mind . . . Ilsevel, kneeling beside me on the bank of that river in the human realm. Using the tip of a knife to cut out stitches she’d given the day before. She hadn’t left well enough alone then, had she? We were done—parted. She was free to return to her own people, her path set toward a bright future without the warlord husband she’d never asked for.

But she’d returned. She’d hunted me down in my virulium-maddened state. She’d risked her life, many times over, refusing to leave me to my fate. It simply wasn’t in her nature to give up on me, to let me die. She pursued me relentlessly, with no regard for her own safety. She saved my life.

I’ve known my fair share of courageous women. Warriors and leaders, who face the brutalities of this life with clear eyes and set jaws. Ilsevel is no warrior. She is soft and delicate and spoiled, a far cry from the women of Licorna. But there’s something about Ilsevel’s stubborn determination that moves me. It’s one thing to be brave in the face of danger you’ve been trained since birth to fight. As far as I can tell, nothing about Ilsevel’s life has prepared her for the perils she’s encountered every moment since our first meeting. Yet, no matter the blows, no matter the unspeakable odds, she

never backs down.

And how did I reward her courage? By dragging her across worlds into the hell-stricken nightmare of Cruor, to hand her over to the clutches of a people who hate her mere existence.

Now she will die. In just a few short hours.

“Taar.”

I startle at Tassa’s voice. Lost in revery, I’d almost forgotten she’s here. She comes to stand at my elbow. Tall even for a Licornyn woman, she looks me almost directly in the eye, her gaze frank. She studies me by the firelight, searching the lines of my face for something she doesn’t find. At last she sighs and turns away. Her features, usually so stern and hard, soften unexpectedly.

“I’m glad,” she says, more to herself than to me, “that I had the chance. Even if it didn’t work out in the end. I’m glad I attempted the bond with Nyathri. I think Ashika would have appreciated it. And I can’t help wondering, if I’d tried a slightly different approach, could I have done it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I answer curtly. “She’s gone now. Fled to Cruor where hervelrhoar will be made complete. She’ll be damned like Mahra and all the others.”

“I know that.” Tassa bites her lip as though holding back a much sharper retort. When she continues, it’s in that gentle, soothing tone once more. “It would have been better for her to die than to end up like Mahra. And yet there’s a part of me, blasphemous though it may be, that is glad to think of Nyathri out there, running free.”

“She’s not free. Already the madness consumes her. There’s nothing of Nyathri left. Only her rage, her pain. Only her eternal sundering.”

The words tumble from my lips quickly, as though trying to outrace my own doubts. Because, if I'm honest, I too had wondered if perhaps there was . . . something. Something still alive in Nyathri's broken soul. Something I could not perceive, but which perhaps gods-gifted senses might. But what is the use of such utterly unproveable speculation?

Tassa sighs again and pats my arm. "I'm stepping out," she says. "I need to gather some of my own things, if I'm to keep watch over you tonight. Try not to do yourself a harm while I'm gone." So saying, she moves toward the door. Just as her hand touches the curtain, however, she pauses, looking back. "Taar, you know if you rescue your bride, they will no longer accept you asluinar. The unification you worked so hard for among the tribes will all come apart."

"I know," I answer roughly. "I know better than anyone."

"All right." She breathes out slowly then shrugs. "I just wanted to be sure you remembered." She pulls the curtain back, begins to step out, then pauses once more. "I hope you're happy," she says without looking my way. "Whatever choice you make."

With that she's gone. The curtain swings shut, and silence envelops the dakath. For the first time in I don't know how long, I am alone.

"Shakh," I whisper. Then I grip my skull, fingers digging into my scalp. If I could, I would wrench my own head from my neck and dash it into the fire. "Shakh-damn me, there is no choice! Not now."

I was lucky to convince the elders not to kill Ilsevel this morning, to give her a chance. Only for her to go and destroy that chance the very second opportunity presented itself. How could I have been such an idiot to think I could keep her safe here for an entire month?

I look down at my wrist, half-expecting to see blackened and burned flesh. Smooth, tanned skin meets my gaze, despite the pain. It will hurt when they kill her—no doubt, her death will be the worst pain I've ever experienced. But then it will be over. This bond, this false, foolish mistake of a marriage will be made as though it never was. Soon I'll forget the face of the stranger who was, for a brief time, my wife. Except . . .

"It's a lie," I snarl. "It's a damned, shakhing lie."

Am I brave enough to face the truth? To admit I cannot bear the prospect of her death? Even if she is not meant to be mine forever, how can I endure her being sundered from this existence entirely? Perhaps ours was not meant to be a lasting bond, but I want to know she's out there, somewhere in the worlds, alive and well.

Vellar, are you there?

My spirit shivers at the sudden interruption of Elydark's voice, singing into my head. Go away, I answer roughly.

In response my licorneir prods open the curtain door with his horn and thrusts his head into the shadows of the dakath. He never comes inside, not even in the worst weather, and looks strangely incongruous standing there. I will not go away, Vellar, he says in a tone of finality. You're going to need me.

Need you for what?

To help you rescue your bride, of course.

I curse again and turn away from him to stalk across the dakath. "I don't intend to rescue my bride," I say out loud.

This may have been my mistake. Elydark knows why I did not sing the words into his head. He knows I cannot lie via our soul-connection as easily as I can with my tongue. He makes a chuckling sound, musical and liquid to my ears. Then he tears a small trench in the dirt of my floor with one powerful hoof.

Very amusing, Vellar. Now shall we get on with our rescue attempt without further delay?

31

ILSEVEL

The walls are lined with stone and dry, but there's a little water down here at the bottom. Not well water, I think; simply gathered condensation. It's no more than a finger deep, and whoever placed me down here, made certain that my unconscious body was propped up so that I would not accidentally drown myself in it. But the dampness has soaked into my gown and cloak, and I can't seem to find a dry place to sit.

The discomfort isn't the worst of it, however. It's the not knowing. Is this the death the Licornyn people have planned for me? Did they cast me down here to slowly starve, sustained on nothing but rainwater for weeks? There are no bones to keep me company, no skeletons of past residents, so I suspect it's more of a holding cell. Which means they must still intend to slit my throat, as Taar said.

Memory of that awful knife held in the priest's old hands flashes across my mind's eye. Gods . . . will it be quick? Something tells me not quick enough. I've seen my fair share of animal sacrifices held down on altar stones, choking and struggling as they bleed out.

I begin to shake. I can't help it. I want to be brave, I want to be strong. I want to fight with everything I have until my last, gasping breath. But the waiting, the wondering, the knowing they will come to get me but not knowing when . . . it's pure torture.

I tried climbing the walls soon after waking. That was hours ago now, and the sun

was still high. But the stones were too smooth. Here and there ilsevel vines trailed, but they snapped too easily in my grasp. Now I sit in a puddle of water, surrounded by broken bits of vines and leaves. The remaining ilsevels are all beyond my grasp.

They begin to open now that the sun has set. Delicate petals unfurl to reveal the burning hearts in their centers, lighting up my prison in a faint glow. I try to listen for their song, which had seemed so loud to me last night. But fear throbs in my veins, drowning all other sound.

The shivering hours pass. Desperate for some distraction from my coming fate, I bow my head into my arms, which are wrapped around my upraised knees. If I force my spirit to sink deeper, to leave awareness of my present behind, I can almost hear the echo of Nyathri's broken song. It's not real, of course—she must be far from here by now, fled back across the river into Cruor. But it's something to focus on. I play back the dissonant melody, the broken trills and grating runs. There's still harmony to be found in there, I'm sure of it. The right voice, if nimble enough, could sing the notes needed to bring wholeness back. Almost, almost I can hear it . . . and in that almost is something so haunting, so otherworldly. Unlike any other song, wholly unique.

"Gods-damn," I mutter. Lifting my head again, I stare up at the patch of sky high above me. We'd been so close to connection, I'm sure of it. There was a true sympathy between us in that space of ache and loss in our souls.

Now? She's gone. And I'm here. Any song we might have sung is lost forever.

My wrist throbs again with sudden sharpness. I gasp, holding up my forearm to study under the ilsevel blossom's glow. I haven't felt the velrain a while, not since waking down here. It was almost as though the bond between me and Taar was already broken the moment he allowed those men to drag me away. I'm surprised to feel it again now, tight and suddenly straining. I twist my arm, trying to loosen the grip. But the feeling persists.

I tuck my arm back around my knees, squeeze my eyes shut, and try to ignore it. It's getting very cold down here, now the sun is gone. I'm parched too, but don't dare drink the stagnant water in which I sit. After a while I tilt my head back, gaze up at the patch of sky overhead. It's dark now; the stars are beginning to appear. Part of me wishes my captors would put a lid on the well and leave me in absolute darkness, for something about those distant stars feels like a mockery. Like they're laughing at me and all my foolish dreams. Who was I to think I deserved to escape my cage and fly? I was born for someone else's dominion, born to serve another's purpose. All my efforts to resist that destiny only resulted in the death of my sister.

But at least . . . a small smile pulls at the corner of my dry lips. At least I set Nyathri free.

Even as the thought passes through my mind, another comes hard on its heels. Did I really free that unicorn? Or did I damn her to eternal torment? My smile vanishes. For the first time since waking down here, tears form in my eyes, escape through my lashes. Why must all my impulsive bids for freedom result in so much harm? I deserve what's coming—the knife, the pain. Perhaps this is the gods' way of seeing justice served.

Ilsevel.

I scrub at my face with the heel of my hand. That voice . . . where is it coming from?

Ilsevel.

I look around me in the damp darkness. There's no one here; there can't be. But the voice seemed to speak directly into my ear.

Ilsevel.

I tip my head back. This time, it sounded as though it came from above—high above, among the stars. And yet it was just as clear and bright.

Ilsie.

My heart jolts. “Auræ?” I whisper, voice rough from disuse and cold. Scarcely any sound emerges.

Your work here is not yet complete.

Though I don’t know why, I pull myself to my feet. My damp skirts cling to my shivering legs, but I ignore the chilling sensation. Tilting my head back as far as I can, I gaze up at those distant stars. “Auræ!” I croak and press my hands to the stone wall. “Auræ, are you there? Don’t go, please! Let me die and come with you! Don’t leave me here.”

The gods hand out their gifts for a reason.

Your gift was no mistake.

Neither was your name.

I shake my head. The voice still sounds like Auræ but also not. It’s familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, like a song I heard once, years ago, and forgot that I knew.

You must keep fighting, Ilsevel.

For your freedom.

And for theirs.

“Why?” I shudder suddenly and lean my forehead against the stone wall. “Everything I do results in disaster.” A sob chokes in my throat. “It was my fault . . . my fault . . . my . . .”

The voice does not speak again. I sink to my knees, back into that freezing mud, and struggle to suppress the sobs clawing at my throat. Curse the gods who let me be born, who let me become the living disaster I am! What did all my petty rebellions accomplish? Only pain and death for others, including the most innocent person I know.

No wonder my father only wanted to sell me.

No wonder Artoris only wanted to use me.

No wonder Taar . . . Taar . . .

My fingers curl, nails clawing into stone.

No wonder Taar gave up on me.

Noise erupts overhead. I startle, pull away from the wall, and wipe my nose with the back of my hand. It’s been so long since I heard anything, at least anything of this world. I’d half wondered if they’d even bothered to post a guard, knowing there was

no chance in heaven I could escape this pit.

Now I hear grunts. Scuffling boots. The beginnings of a scream cut short. If I didn't know any better, I'd even say I heard a faint note of unicorn song. My heart jumps, galloping in my breast. I slowly stand, staring up at that opening, uncertain whether to hope or fear. This doesn't sound like priests coming to drag me away for sacrifice, but how would I know?

Suddenly the stars are partially blocked out by something dark. A rhythmic creak tears at my ears, so awful, I curse and cover them. It's difficult to see, but the silhouettes cast dim glows on a plank of wood which seems to be descending on a chain. It comes all the way down to eye-level and stops.

I stare at it. Then I look up, searching for signs of who might have lowered it. Whoever it is obviously means for me to sit on it, to grip that chain and balance my body as they haul me up. Will they cut my throat the minute I emerge? Would it be better to refuse, to remain down here until thirst and hunger drive me mad?

Hands trembling, I grasp the chain. It's bitingly cold against my flesh. I mount the plank and find my center of balance. There's a moment of tension. Then it begins to rise, faster than I expect. I seem to have left my stomach behind me somewhere, and the empty place in my gut churns unpleasantly. Three quarters of the way up, it occurs to me that if whoever is hauling the other end of this chain were to let go, I would not survive the fall. A little whimper tries to force its way past my trembling lips, but I bite down hard, refusing. The plank keeps on rising, and that patch of sky above keeps on enlarging.

At last I burst into open air. It's so cold and fresh and bracing, it knocks the breath from my lungs. I scramble wildly, grab the lip of the well wall, and very nearly tumble to my death. Desperation drives me, however, and I pull myself up and over to collapse on the ground on the other side. Movement catches my eye. I choke and

try to push myself upright, expecting to be grabbed by the arms and hauled away.

Then Taar's voice is there, and Taar's hands are on my shoulders. "Drink this, zylnala," he says, and holds something to my lips.

I grab for the cup and tilt my head back, eager for water. Instead, a mouthful of strong spirits burns my tongue. I gasp, choke, sputter. But the warming mouthful goes down to my stomach and shoots out through my veins. Fortified, I look up, trying to take in the moonlit world before me.

There are bodies. My stomach knots. Ten bodies of armed men and women, lying at odd angles. Dead? No, they seem to be both bound and gagged, which would be rather pointless were they corpses.

I turn to Taar, staring. "What have you done?"

His teeth flash in a grimace. "What I must," he says. "Come. You're not safe yet."

His grip is firm on my elbow as he pulls me to my feet. I collapse against his side, and he hastily slips his arm around me, holding me close. It's almost comforting. "Here," he says, and presses something into my hand. To my surprise, I find it's my knife, the one I dropped beside the altar stone after cutting Nyathri's bonds.

I try to catch Taar's gaze. "This is . . . The elders . . . Your people," I gabble, unable to articulate a complete sentence. Then, with a sudden surge of energy, I push against him, trying to break free of his grasp. "Stop! You've got to put me back down there! This will ruin you! Your people will never forgive you and . . . and . . ."

"And what?" Taar's voice is an animalistic growl.

I study what the moonlight reveals of his hard, dangerous features. "I don't deserve it.

I'm not worth it."

For a moment he looks as though he's going to answer. I find myself leaning toward him, hungry for his answer, either in agreement or argument. The suspense is dreadful, his silence enough to tear my heart in two.

"We don't have much time," he says at last, turning from me. "The relief guard will be here soon. We need to be gone by then."

I want to scream with pure frustration, to pound his chest with my fists and demand he answer me. But whatever burst of energy that drink offered fades too soon. I sag in his arms and stagger a few steps with him before my knees begin to buckle. Without a word he scoops me off my feet and starts running. Away from the temple, away from the pit. Down the incline of the mountain to where the trees grow more densely.

Elydark appears out of the shadows, his great bulk gleaming in the starlight. He sings something wordless that strikes my senses, a comforting note. Was he concerned for me? Surely not! He must hate me for compromising Taar like this. But he makes no protest as Taar puts me in the saddle then swings up behind me. It's so very familiar, being here with my stranger husband, his arms around me. I must fight the urge to lean back against him, weak with relief.

"Vulmon," Taar commands, and Elydark leaps into motion, racing at full speed down the mountain, through the trees. No horse would dare move at such a pace in the dark, but Elydark glides along, his massive hooves seeming scarcely to touch the ground, his mighty bulk weaving between trunks and avoiding low-hanging boughs with ease.

I look to the left, over Taar's arm, and glimpse the fires of the Hidden City, nestled in its valley below. My heart lurches, thinking of Tassa, of Halamar, of all those people who hate me so viciously. All those people whom Taar is leaving behind. Possibly forever.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

For hours we ride out from the mountains, retracing the journey we'd made only yesterday on our way to the temple. Taar doesn't speak, and I haven't the courage to interrupt his silence, not even to ask the most pressing question burning on my lips. But when at last I see the Morrona River shining under moonlight before us, I can't help shouting over my shoulder, "Where are we going?"

"The Tarh Plains," he answers, his mouth near my ear. "The Tarhyn Tribe lives there, and Chief Lathaira owes me for saving her life at the battle of Agandaur. Word will not yet have reached them of what's happened here. We may find temporary succor." He's silent again for some while before adding, "I intend to keep you alive until silmael then deliver you safely home as I vowed."

This is madness. I know it; he knows it. By saving me, he's risking his own life. The elders will not forgive him for this offense. And they are the representations of the eight tribes. How much power do the tribes and their chieftains wield over their king? Perhaps in the time of his father, things were different, but Taar holds onto his authority by a mere thread. If they turn on him, how much longer before they turn on each other? Will the Licornyn people and way of life survive the aftermath of the choices we've both made these last twenty-four hours?

My heart feels like a stone, sinking to my stomach. I can't bear to carry more guilt. "Taar," I begin, "put me down here. I'll go on my own. You've given me a chance, and no one could ask for more. I'll manage somehow, and you can—"

"Hush."

"No, you must listen—"

“Hush, zyl nala! I heard something.”

A ripple of song goes out from Elydark. I feel his unease like a prickling of gooseflesh. I hold my breath and strain my ears for some hint of whatever it was Taar and his licorneir have discerned, but I hear nothing over the rhythmic beat of Elydark’s hooves.

Then Taar growls, “They’re after us. Vulmon, Elydark! Go!”

I look back over Taar’s big shoulder, peering into the darkness through which we’ve fled. In the distance, like dancing sparks, three flaming points of light illuminate the night. My breath stops. I know that light: it’s soulfire, the flame of licorneir made visible to mortal eyes.

“Forward, Ilsevel,” Taar barks in my ear. “Keep your eyes forward.”

I obey at once, gripping the pommel of the saddle as Taar leans over me, forcing me to bow over Elydark’s neck. Elydark cannot burst into flame like the others, for his fire would consume me in an instant. Will that make him slower than our pursuers? His gaze is fixed on the river, his head outstretched as though to pierce the distance with his horn. But I can feel the others getting closer. Their songs, first too faint for me to hear, grow louder and louder by the moment.

We shouldn’t do this. Taar shouldn’t be forced to flee his own people. I should make him stop. Maybe I could slip from the saddle. If I don’t break my neck when I hit the ground, I could simply surrender myself to those riders. Something tells me it wouldn’t be hard to convince them that I’d used human magic to ensorcel their king, and maybe then Taar would be—

Black lightning rips the sky on the far side of the river.

My heart stops. Though I know it cannot cross the Morrona, the sight of that rent in the sky fills me with dread. I'd rather return to my damp little cell than face the un-song darkness that must follow.

"Shakh," Taar growls and sings something into Elydark's head. The unicorn hesitates, his footsteps faltering for the first time this night. A ripple of song rolls back from him to Taar. "Vulmon!" Taar roars out loud.

Elydark tosses his head then redoubles his pace, speeding for the river. I scarcely have time to open my mouth, to begin to utter the protest bursting from the very depths of my gut. Then we splash down the river bank, and Elydark surges out into the water, up to his chest and deeper. Cold waves wash over me, dragging my body from the saddle. Only Taar's iron grip keeps me from being swept away. Elydark swims steadily forward, and for just a moment, I can see the moonlit landscape on the far side of the river, the broad plains and distant forests.

Then darkness falls.

"Go back!" I scream. The force of that un-song sweeps down on me like a crushing blow. Fighting, clawing, kicking, I try to throw myself from the saddle into the river. I'd rather drown than be carried into that pulsing hell.

But Taar's grip on me is relentless. "It's the only way," he shouts above the roar of the river and my own panicked voice. "Brace yourself."

I look back. Back at the far shore, where no hell has ever touched. Back to where three Licornyn riders on beasts of blazing fire pace back and forth, unwilling to pursue, unwilling to ford the river and enter hell, even if it means losing their prey.

Elydark's hooves touch the far embankment. The darkness ripples, bulges, that sense of straining membrane overwhelming as something reaches, trying to break through

and grab us. I feel it thinning, stretching, reality ready to shred.

At the last possible moment Elydark begins to sing. The song-light aura pours from his soul, streams out through the coils of his horn in a shocking blast. The darkness recoils, shrieking its un-song in hideous, multitudinous chorus.

I turn my face into Taar's neck and shoulder, shuddering. But as Elydark climbs from the river and enters the horror of Cruor, I listen to the sound of the unicorn's song underscored by Taar's deep voice: "It will be over soon. I'm here. I'm here, Ilsevel."

Then, in a whisper I almost miss: "I'll always be here for you."

I shouldn't feel this way. I mustn't. And yet I do. Even in this world, surrounded by evil, with enemies on every side and nowhere safe to flee, something in me knows I am safe with this man. It feels so wrong, so unnatural. I've never felt safe before, not with anyone. Even Faraine, whom I've always loved wholeheartedly, used her powerful gods-gift to manipulate me into accepting marriage to the Shadow King. And Auras, sweet and dear, tried to convince me to submit and accept my fate. No one ever stood with me; I've always been alone.

But now—Taar.

He didn't give up on me. He didn't throw up his hands and declare me too much, too little, too troublesome, too painful. He came for me. At the risk of everything: his life, his honor, his people. He's done nothing from the moment I met him but risk his life for me over and over again. Even when I least deserved it, when I disobeyed and betrayed him.

He shouldn't have done it. Gods-damn us both, he should have left me in that pit! What will become of him now? What will become of his people if they forsake the king who forsook them first? It all seems so great and huge and terrible.

Yet here in the dark, with hell closing in on all sides, and only a song to protect us . . .
with Taar's arms wrapped around me and his voice crooning in my ear . . . I am safe.

32

TAAR

Not in many years have I been so tempted to ignore the song of my licorneir and allow my soul to reach for the darkness which even now reaches for me. The last time was after Shanaera's death. In my guilt and sorrow over her loss, the draw of thevardimnarwas almost more than I could bear. It took not only Elydark's song, but also the restraining hands of Ashika, Halamar, and Kildorath to keep me physically at bay.

There are no such restraints now. As Elydark gallops into the stricken wilds, his song carving a path for us, the darkness seems to close in behind us, nipping at our heels. I hear whispers on the edges of my mind, like so many grasping fingers, eager to catch and pull me from the saddle. It's all I can do not to give in to them.

You have betrayed your people.

You have damned your soul.

You belong to us . . . to us . . . to us . . .

It would be so easy to slip from the back of Elydark's saddle, to let him gallop on, carrying his light and song with him, while the hell of Ashtari overwhelms and devours me. It is what I deserve.

But what would become of Ilsevel then?

I look down at her dark head, tucked against my shoulder, her face half-hidden by locks of snarled hair. If I give in to thevardimnar, Elydark will be hearttorn, lost to the wildness of his grief. The idea pains me, but it was a risk we understood when we formed our bond. We have seen it happen to others, and we know too well how easily the same fate may befall us. We've weighed the odds and chosen each other.

But Ilsevel? She didn't choose me. She didn't choose any of this. Thevelr does not affect her as it does me—my sudden death will not leave her crippled. She will, however, find herself alone in the wilds of Cruor with only a hearttorn licorneir for a companion. If Elydark does not kill her at once in a fit of madness, he will abandon her.

And the very nextvardimnarto strike will take her soul as it took mine.

So I set my spirit hard against the tempting voices and ride on and on. I did not rescue her only to abandon and damn her. I have my marriage vows to fulfill, and I will do just that. And when she is once more safe with her own kind, when we are parted, and I know I will never see her face again, then will I turn and face what I have done. Then will I accept whatever consequences the elders deem appropriate for my sin.

The darkness passes as suddenly as it came. One moment all-consuming—the next, gone. The sky is still dark, the world suffused in the gloom of pre-dawn, but by comparison it seems positively luminous. Elydark resolves his song. His hoofbeats slow, slow, and stop. He blows hard, emitting white puffs of steam from his nostrils. The physical exertion was nothing for a being such as he, but the spiritual strain of singing against the dark takes its toll. I sing a note of sincere gratitude along our soul-tether. He responds with flicked-back ears and a stamp of a hind foot.

Only then do I look down at the delicate burden in my arms. Ilsevel has not lifted her head from its resting place. Her shoulders are hunched, her arms wrapped around me, clinging fast. It is strange to see her like this. She has been afraid almost from the

moment I have met her, but fights so hard never to let it show. The terror of the vardimnar following her imprisonment is too much for her.

“Ilsevel,” I say softly, her name like a gentle prayer on my sinful lips. “Ilsevel, the danger has passed. We’re safe now.”

“Safe,” she echoes. Slowly she pulls away from me, and I begrudge the sudden cold patch on my skin. Tilting back her head, she gazes up into my eyes, and her face is so near mine, I can see the reflection of distant stars in the blacks of her pupils. “Is it true, Taar? Am I really safe with you?”

A rush of cold thrills through my veins followed by a sharp blast of heat. In that moment she isn’t safe at all. Neither of us is. Perhaps we haven’t been from the first instant we set eyes on each other, amid the fire and the screams of the ransacked temple. Did I want her then as violently as I do now? Maybe not. But the sparks were there, waiting only for the right gust of wind to fan them into an all-consuming inferno. How can either of us survive such a flame?

I cannot speak. Any word I might say is too dangerous. But neither can I stay here, with her nestled like this between my legs, with those eyes of hers imploring me to give an answer, either damning or cruel.

Choking on a curse, I dismount so quickly, I nearly knock her from the saddle in the process. She grabs a handful of Elydark’s mane. “Taar!” she bleats, but I turn away and march through the tall grasses of the plain into which Elydark has carried us, beneath that distant sky. It’s foolish to walk alone in Cruor. Any moment the Rift might open again, spewing hell. Just now I don’t care. My legs break into a run, carrying me farther and farther, as though I might flee wife, vows, honor, and kingdom and disappear into the unknown.

The velrapulls me up short.

I stop as abruptly as though reaching the end of a noose, gasping out loud and dropping to my knees. Pain shoots up my arm. I clutch the offending limb, squeeze hard as though I might break the bone. Maybe Tassa was right. Maybe this is no sacred marriage bond, and I am drothlar—cursebound. Are the gods punishing me for my failure to liberate my people all these long, dreadful years? Or is this merely some cosmic joke at my expense?

Finally I breathe out, lift my head, and look around at where we have come. The land here is not unknown to me, a few hours east of the Morrona. It's a lonely stretch of country, with plenty of dense forests in which we might hide from our pursuers. For I don't doubt that, the instant the vardimnar lifted, my brave Licornyn, led by Kildorath, will cross the river and hunt us down. If they find us, there will be no ceremonial killing of my bride, only swift murder. As for me? They'll bind me and Elydark in chaeora ropes and drag us back to the Hidden City to stand trial before the elders and the people we have wronged.

“Warlord?”

My shoulders tense. At the sound of her voice, speaking close behind me, the pain in my arm suddenly eases, but my chest tightens so that my heart struggles to beat.

She is silent for some while. Wind blows through the tall grasses in ripples which rush away before my vision for mile after mile under fading moonlight. Otherwise all is still. No birdsong. No distant howl of the zhorwolf. No ululating trill of the leokasas they bound in dappled herds across the sweeping plain. There is no life in this land save us.

“I'm sorry.” Her words, when they come, are soft as a breath. But the grasses seem to catch them and whisper them back and forth amongst themselves: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

“I would not have blamed you,” she continues after a moment. “If you had left me in that pit, I mean. I . . . I knew what I was doing. I chose to save her anyway.” She draws a little breath, and though I don’t look at her, I can easily picture how she pulls back her shoulders and sets her chin firmly. “I am prepared to face the consequences of my actions.”

I don’t turn. Don’t look. Don’t answer.

“I wish I could explain myself.” She takes a step toward me, then seems to retreat again. “I simply could not let her die. If I must die instead, so be it.” A little choking sound like a sob. She swallows and continues. “It’s probably too late, I know, but . . . but you could take me back. You could say it was the *velrath* that drove you. It’s probably true. If we turn around now, you could still make peace with the elders, and—”

“No.”

My voice is sharp, like a blade honed to a razor’s edge. It nearly cuts my tongue as it bursts from my throat. I rise to my feet and turn, looming over her. Her defiant eyes meet mine, but her cheeks pale at sight of my expression. Rage burns in my head in explosive bursts, one after the other. But not rage only. There is passion as well, far hotter, boiling in my gut and lancing through every vein.

“There is no going back.” I take several aggressive steps toward her. She starts to shrink but forces herself to stand her ground. “For days now I’ve been telling myself what is done can be undone between us. But it’s all a lie.” My hand begins to stretch out, whether to catch her by the hand or the throat, I cannot say. I stop myself, fist clenching. “The truth is,” I growl, “when I spoke those vows to you, I committed myself in some vital way that cannot simply be forsworn.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think I’d just declared undying love. But I haven’t. This is no lover’s confession, merely a statement of fact. Inconvenient and infuriating fact.

Ilsevel’s eyes seem to vibrate in her skull as she struggles to discern my features by the light of a few predawn stars. Her lips part, drawing in a strangled breath. Then: “Did you mean what you said? During thevardimnar?”

“What?” I frown and turn my head slightly to one side. “What did I say?”

“That you would always be here for me.”

Something in my gut twists. “I never said that.”

“You did.”

“No. Because it’s simply not possible.”

A flash of anger replaces the fear in her eyes. “If it’s not possible, why did you say it?”

I throw up my arms. “I never did!”

You did, Vellar.

Elydark’s voice rings in my head, startling me. I jerk my head up, gaze past Ilsevel to where my licorneir stands some twenty yards away, impatiently flicking his long tail. I heard you, he says, in that wordless voice of his. You spoke not in words, but your very soul cried out the truth you will not now admit.

I stare at him, aghast. Is he saying that Ilsevel heard my spirit-song? That she and her damnable gods-gift could discern what I never would have dreamed of saying out loud: that I do not want to give her up. Not now. Not atsilmael. Not ever. That I want to support and love her, to comfort her fears. That I want to be the one she turns to for every desire, every longing, every need.

It's just thevelra, I sing back to Elydark. It’s not real.

Thevelramay influence your actions, he replies relentlessly. It cannot dictate truth to your heart.

I grind my teeth. Whose side are you on, anyway?

He begins to answer, but I snarl wordlessly and throw up my hands. This startles Ilsevel, who staggers back several paces. Ignoring her, I pivot on heel and crush grass underfoot as I storm away. Not far, however. Thevelradrags me to a sudden, painful halt. “Shakh!” I bellow, shaking my fists at the sky.

Oh, gods, what have I done? All the threads of my life and being seem to unravel before me, and my fumbling hands can do nothing to catch and weave them back together. The alliance, the coming siege on the citadel, the very future of Licorna . . . I’ve compromised it all. And for what? For her? For . . . love?

It isn’t that. I don’t love her. I can’t. These feelings which have taken root inside me over little more than a week couldn’t be love. It’s nothing but a bizarre combination of lust and responsibility, and yes, some admiration as well. Not to mention the inevitable attachment that must form from having saved her life and being saved by her in return.

But to call it love is impossible. I knew Shanaera for years before I dared admit what my heart was trying to tell me. Only fools believe in an instantaneous connection. And those who act on that belief live to regret it.

No, I don’t love Ilsevel. I simply cannot bear the idea of my life without her. Which isn’t the same thing at all.

I tilt back my head, gazing up at the stars. They seem so much farther away on this side of the river. It’s as though thevardimnar keeps them at bay. Can Nornala even hear our prayers from this land? Would I know what to pray if she could?

Slowly I turn and look back to where Ilsevel stands between me and Elydark. Her arms are wrapped tight around her body, her cloak blowing in a sudden breeze. Her face is turned away to one side. She looks so small, so lost. And yet her expression, in profile, is as stern and defiant as ever. How this woman pushes me, challenges me at

every turn! If she doesn't make me want to tear my own heart out in fury, she makes me want to tear her clothes off in passion. I've never known anyone who simultaneously so infuriated and inflamed me.

But it's not love. Surely not. She could never be the partner I need, never be the queen Licorna requires. She could never—

Suddenly Ilsevel's hands drop to her sides. She takes several staggering steps back as though struck, then pauses, tilting her head to one side. She seems to be listening to something. Thenext instant she cries out, her hands upraised as though to ward off some invisible assault.

“Ilsevel?” I take a few steps toward her. “Ilsevel, are you—”

To my surprise, she gathers up her skirts and breaks into a run, heading north, toward where the ground rises and falls in a series of low hills, scattered over with dark patches of trees and undergrowth.

“Ilsevel!”Galvanized, I take off after her, my long legs soon overtaking her smaller stride. I catch and turn her around to face me, gripping her upper arms fast. “Are you mad?” I demand. Fear laces my voice with harshness. “You can't go running off like that! What if thevardimnarstruck, and you were too far away for Elydark to protect you?”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

She doesn't hear a word I say. Straining against me, beating my chest with her fists, she shouts over and over again, almost unintelligible in her panic. Only a few words manage to get through: "That song! I must find that song!"

Elydark draws near, his soul bright with concern. I catch his eye, and he tosses his head. I hear something too, he says.

Is it Nyathri?

I'm not certain. I think . . . His nostrils flare, and a shiver of fire flickers down his neck. Something is very wrong out there, Vellar.

Everything is wrong in Cruor. But to see Elydark distressed like this is enough to put me on my guard. "Hush, hush." I shake Ilsevel a little to force her to look at me, catch and hold her frantic gaze. "We'll go together. We'll find this song of yours. Understand?"

She bites her lip, then nods. Still trembling, she allows me to assist her back into the saddle. When I mount behind her, she moans as though in pain and leans far over Elydark's neck. I feel the urgency in her spirit; Elydark feels it too and responds by leaping into motion before I give him the command. I grabhold of Ilsevel for balance, pull her back against me. She ignores this, her gaze fixed ahead, her hands wrapped in handfuls of mane. She seems to be guiding Elydark, who responds to her silent direction without question. For the first time I feel like a passenger on my own licorneir. I do not hear whatever this song is that drives the two of them, but the unease in Elydark's soul increases to distress and then to fear.

We come to the top of a small rise just as dawn begins to pink the horizon to our right. I look down into the shallow valley below and see the first of the dead licorneir.

My heart stops.

It lies pinned under an enormous net. A chaeora net—I recognize it immediately without conscious thought. The dark fibers braided with licorneir hairs seem to devour what little light there is in this shadowed place. The licorneir struggled valiantly, limbs and head all twisted and tangled up in the weave. The great beast lies still now, however.

At first I can do nothing but stare in horror. All sense seems to have gone out from my body. Even Elydark's song is stilled, the dread with which his spirit had hummed obliterated in a moment of shock.

Ilsevel, however, leaps from the saddle and rushes down the incline, staggering, falling, rising again. Racing for that carcass. I shake off my stupor and dismount quickly to hasten after her. We reach the dead thing at the same time, our footsteps slowing as we draw near.

It's a wild licorneir. I can see all the signs of velrhoar: the skeletal frame and burnt-out flesh. But I've never seen one like this. Along with the suffering of the hearttorn state, this beast has been pierced in numerous places and drained. All the blood is gone from its body, leaving it an empty husk. Someone has further desecrated the corpse by shearing its mane and tail.

"Who did this?" Ilsevel whispers. She kneels beside the body, trembling hands reaching out to the once beautiful head.

Elydark appears at my shoulder, his head bowed and solemn. I look at him, sharing a knowing glance. We both know who must have committed this act. Only the

Licornyn know how to braid chaeora ropes, but no Licornyn would dare defile a licorneir's corpse like this. No living Licornyn, that is.

"Ilsevel," I say. "We must leave this place. Now."

She doesn't seem to hear me. Looking up from the first carcass, she spies another not many yards away. I have already seen it and seven more besides, all revealed in the light of the rising sun. This valley is littered with dead licorneir.

"Come." My voice is stern with command. "We can do nothing for them. Let us go before—"

"She's still alive!" The words rip from Ilsevel's lips in a sob. She turns to me, eyes shining with horror and hope. "She's still singing, Taar!"

Before I can prevent her, she sets out running again, making for one of the netted mounds not twenty yards away. "Stop!" I cry and launch after her, hand outstretched. I take no more than five great strides, when the ground all around us ripples, erupts, and crimson-cloaked figures rise like corpses from their graves.

33

ILSEVEL

An explosion of un-song assaults my senses.

It's so abrupt, so extreme, for a moment I believe thevardimnarhas fallen, and we somehow missed the warning signs of black lightning in the sky. I scream at the shock, stagger to a halt, and brace my legs. It's all I can do, not to fall to my knees.

As though from a distance, other senses thrust at my awareness. Red cloaks flash

before my eyes like blood spewing from a wound. A stench of rot in my nostrils, a taste of iron on my tongue, and somewhere, faraway, Taar's voice shouting my name. But all of that seems to belong to a world quite apart from the one I inhabit. Here, in this world, there is only song and that dark intent which shreds it, disintegrates it, and renders it not.

Elydark's furious bugle brings me back with a painful jolt. The pure power of licorneir song shoots like fire through my soul, momentarily purging the un-song. I gasp, my dizzy vision whirling around me. The world is upside down and inside out, a confusion of movement and violence I can make no sense of. Before me in the grass lies a net of those black fibers which I had seen binding Nyathri on the altar stone. It seems to writhe like a mass of living snakes, but after a series of blinks, I'm able to force my mind to see it for what it is: knotted rope, black and white. Pulsing faintly with more of that hideous un-song.

Another blink, and I'm able to drag my awareness into the present. I remember now the figures throwing back coverings of those woven nets, under which they had lain hidden while Taar, Elydark, and I approached. In the deep gloom of pre-dawn, I'd run past them without noticing, my attention consumed by the broken unicorn song I pursued. Tossing them aside, a host of crimson-cloaked figures had emerged, radiating an intense pulse of un-song. It's like they are pieces of the vardimnar itself, clad in human shape.

I know who they are: the undead. The silent figures who accompanied Artoris to the Temple of Lamruil. He had brought only ten, but there are more now. In my stunned state, I cannot count them, but I think there might be thirty or more.

They ring us in: a circle of figures around me, another around Taar, and a third penning in Elydark, cutting us off from one another. Those who watch me make no move to attack. The others are more active, for Taar and Elydark both put up valiant fights. Taar is unarmed, his sword still sheathed to Elydark's saddle. My heart twists

at the realization, knowing he will soon be cut down.

The crimson cloaks don't seem intent on killing him, however. They use their weapons to fend him off and keep him imprisoned in their ever-tightening circle, away from Elydark. I see no wounds on his flesh, though they could easily have sliced him to ribbons by now.

I reach for my own knife at my belt. It isn't much, but the weight of it in my palm gives me comfort as I face those spectral beings. I spin in place, trying to get my eyes on all of them at once. Five crimson cloaks, all hooded so that their faces are hidden in shadow, surround me. There is no escape, no weakness in their defenses. The un-song pulses from each of them, an individualized horror of devolving. It seeks to drag me down into madness, pulling at my gods-gifted awareness. I shake my head harshly, then let out a furious scream, anything to block out that noise. I won't let them frighten me. Brandishing my little blade, I charge the nearest figure, who simply lifts an arm, deflecting my blow. A hand reaches out from under red folds of cloak. I catch a glimpse of rotted flesh before it plants on my chest and, with a single push, knocks me off my feet.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

I hit the ground, cushioned somewhat by the tall grass. I manage to keep my grip on the knife and yank it up, holding it before me. Gods, I hate how my hand trembles! Taar's voice bursts in a wordless roar somewhere behind me, followed by renewed sounds of struggle. But my vision is wholly taken up in that towering form stepping toward me, bathed in the sickly pale light of the rising sun. That rotten hand reaches, slowly, inevitably, like the hand of death itself.

Then all the world seems to freeze as a cold, clear voice speaks somewhere behind me: "It is unbecoming for a man to pull a sword on his betrothed. Some would call it ungracious, particularly in a king."

My stomach drops. That voice, though speaking out loud, carries in its every tone writhing and devouring un-song, which strips it of all that once may have been bright, even beautiful.

I twist around, push myself up, and throw hair out of my face. A figure appears through the morning mist. At first I cannot understand what I'm seeing, it's so great, so large, so pulsing with devouring darkness. My mind tries to tell me it's a demon, broken through the surging black from Ashtari to haunt this world.

Shutting my eyes, I force back the clamoring awareness of my gods-gift. Always such a useless gift, it's certainly not helping right now! Mortal senses once more dominant, I look again, and this time, I am able to see that which approaches.

It's a unicorn. Enormous, built like a bull rather than a horse, with mighty shoulders and massive hooves which send tremors to the core of the world at each step. It moves in a strange,unnatural gait, as though whatever animates its limbs doesn't quite

know what to do with them.

It's dead. I know it the instant I set eyes on it. Not just by the rotten flesh hanging from exposed bones, not just by the hollowed-out eye sockets and the stench of decay. This deadness is so much worse. Whereas the unicorns I have seen up until now, whether whole or hearttorn, pulsed with living fire-song, thisthing, this hulking carcass, seethes with un-song. It ripples through and around it, like liquid black ribbons, passing through the empty eye socket, out through the gaping nostril, in through exposed ribs, out through the gaping hole in the abdomen.

A woman rides this monstrosity. Her crimson hood is thrown back to reveal her dead face. Whatever color her skin might once have been is long lost, leaving behind bloodless gray flesh. Death-filmed eyes gaze out from sunken sockets, and rot eats away at her mouth and down an old wound along her jaw.

And yet one cannot deny her beauty, still clinging to her even after death. Or more than beauty—herpower. The sheer force and energy which once simmered in her spirit and glowed out from the core of her being. It's still there, still present enough that one can almost, almost hear the echo of what must have been a nearly overwhelming soul-song.

Now that song, like the song of the unicorn she rides, is unwound in coils, devoured and rendered nothing. Not broken—simply void.

Her dead eyes fix on Taar with such focus, I would almost believe she didn't know I was present at all. Taar stares back, his face gone slack, his eyes wide with horror so absolute, it transforms his face into that of a stranger.

In that moment I know who this woman is. Shanaera. The one who was meant to be Taar's wife. Looking at her now, even in death, I see how fate has robbed them both. She would have made a great queen. The force of her nature, the strength of her body

and will, is evident even now amid ruin and decay. What must she have been like in life, before her song was corrupted?

She reins in her hellish mount. Her rotten mouth twists in a half-smile. Though we are still surrounded by tall crimson cloaks, it's almost as though they've faded away, whatever threat they posed simply unimportant in the face of this woman and her menace. She tips her head slightly to one side, strands of lusterless black hair falling across her sunken cheek. "Well, beloved?" she says, little spools of black un-song underscoring her words. "Have you nothing to say to me?"

Taar cannot speak. The muscles of his throat tighten, but I'm not sure he even draws breath. Elydark, however, utters a vicious roar, rearing and tearing at the air with his sharp hooves. Shanaera turns her head sharply, the movement not quite natural, and her smile grows, revealing blackened gums. "Ah! A pleasure to see you once more as well, dear Elydark. Have you no more kindly greeting for an old friend?"

Elydark roars again. Underneath that sound, his soul-song resonates deep sorrow and loss. But there's aggression in that song as well. He will do anything to protect Taar from any foe, even one who was once dear to them both.

Shanaera lifts an eyebrow as though she's been insulted. She turns to Taar once more. "You should keep your licorneir under better regulation, beloved. Such behavior is not a good reflection on you."

"What are you doing here?" Taar's voice is a painful rasp of sound, like the words are clawing up from his chest.

"What? Here in this valley?" Shanaera spreads an arm, gesturing around at the dead carcasses under nets, slowly becoming visible by the growing light of day. My stomach drops as I turn to take in the sight. There are so many dead unicorns pinned under those awful nets. Twenty, maybe more, all drained of blood, their manes and

tails shorn. The wrongness of it rocks my soul. I wish suddenly that I had died last night. I wish that Taar had never rescued me, that he'd left me to that priest and his knife. Then I would not have had to live to see such evil.

"I should think it would be obvious," Shanaera continues mildly, un-song spooling from her tongue. "We're harvesting." In an ungraceful surge of limbs, she dismounts, strides over to the nearest netted carcass, and nudges it with her foot. "It's not as though they're good for much else anymore, these velrhoar beasts."

"Harvesting?" Taar echoes. "Harvesting what?"

"Their blood of course." Shanaera lifts her dead gaze and smiles at Taar's expression. "The blood of even a velrhoarlicorneir brims with heavenly purity and light. A potent magic source. The Miphates find it indispensable for survival in this land of Cruor they've created. How else did you think they powered their mage-paths?" She shrugs and looks down at the dead beast once more. "They used to struggle. Catching and killing unicorns for their blood is no easy task. That's where my people come in." She kicks at a bit of the rope netting, still tangled around the dead unicorn's limbs. "We've got our ways, haven't we? For subduing wild unicorns. Chaeora rope was a revelation to the Miphates."

Taar curses softly. Then: "You aren't Shanaera."

She looks up at him sharply. "What?"

"You aren't her," he says again. "She would never work for the Miphates. Not in life, nor in death."

Leaving the dead unicorn where it lies, she strides toward him. Crimson cloaks back away, making a path for her between them, and she walks right up and puts her face close to his. I can see now how they are well-matched in size. Though his breadth is

nearly twice hers, she is muscular and strong, even in her partially decayed state. She is a creature of pure ferocity, not to be suppressed by a mere grave.

“Maybe,” she says, her lips pulled back from her flashing teeth and rotten gums, “you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

I wonder why Taar doesn’t lunge at her, fight her with his bare hands. He’s unarmed, but I’ve seen him face greater foes. For gods’ sake, he just took on ten Licornyn guards together last night, didn’t he? But he seems petrified, like his very core has been turned to stone.

Shanaera tosses back her head and laughs. “Don’t worry!” she says, patting his cheek with her lifeless fingers. “We don’t kill all of them. Not right away at least. Those who are not too far gone tovelrhoar can be used for other purposes.”

She raises her hand and snaps her fingers. Immediately other dead unicorns appear, manifesting from the mist like they’re stepping out from another world. Three of them, all like the one she rode—songless beings, pulsing with un-song. Blackness ripples under their skin and drips from their empty eye sockets. It looks like the virulium madness I saw, first in the Noxaurians who attacked the temple, later in Taar, when he succumbed to that poisoned cut. I never would have believed such evil could take hold in unicorns. Surely their soulfire would simply burn it out! But these beasts have no souls, no fire.

Though I’ve managed to get to my feet, my knees buckle. The sight of such evil is almost more than I can bear, and the throb of un-song is louder by the moment. I want to scream and shout, want to tear myself out of this reality and escape to any other.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

“This is a defilement,” Taar says. His voice sounds very strange, like something in him has just died. “It’s a desecration of all Licorna holds most dear.”

“You’re one to talk,” Shanaera snarls, rounding on him. “I heard rumor you took for yourself a human bride andshakhedher, no less. I didn’t believe it at first. My betrothed, forsaking all his vows and binding himself to one of our enemies?” She turnsto me then, for the first time acknowledging my presence. “Only here you are. Alone in the wilds with a human woman. And not just any human—Larongar’s own daughter.”

“What?”

The word bursts from Taar’s lips, but I can scarcely hear it over the sudden pulse of blood in my ears. The ground has dropped out from under me. My knees buckle, and I sway heavily, trying to keep my balance.

Shanaera’s dead eyes turn from Taar to me and back again. Then she throws back her head and laughs. “You didn’t know? Well this is an unexpected delight! Did you think Morthiel would send one of his most promising mages from the safety of the citadel for just any human bitch? The Miphates do nothing without purpose, Taar. Which is more than I can say for you. You’ve always been impulsive to a fault.”

Taar’s eyes are on me. It’s as though he’s forgotten we are surrounded by his own undead people. Forgotten that we are likely to be slaughtered any moment and will be lucky if our bodies are too hacked up to be used fornecroliphonexperiments. No, he’s looking at me as though I am the most horrific thing ever to set foot in this horrific realm.

“Taar—” I start to say. But Shanaera strides toward me, dragging my attention to her. She circles me slowly, looks me up and down, then stops in front of me, narrowing her dead eyes as she studies my face.

“How did you like it, little princess?” she asks. “How did you like shakking my man? I wonder if his technique has improved. Not that I ever had cause to complain.” She drops her gaze to my bosom, my loins, then up to my face again. A sneer lifts the rotten corner of her lip. “Something tells me he held back. A puny creature like you couldn’t stand the true force of a Licornyn king’s passion.” She looks back over her shoulder. “Was it any fun for you, my love? Or were you too afraid you’d break her? Did you miss being able to unleash yourself with a woman your equal?”

Taar’s eyes are on me. I try to meet them, but it’s like staring into the burning face of the sun. I can feel the thoughts, the ideas spinning through his head as he puts together all the little pieces of my story I’ve dared to share with him.

Shanaera laughs again, a wild, manic sound. “Well,” she says, “maybe the little princess is more entertaining than she looks. Artoris was keen on shakking her too, said he had some unfinished business which he intended to resolve. But ultimately it’s the gods-gift she carries which interests Morthiel. That’s why he sent his best man to fetch her.” She shakes her head then, looking at Taar. “Did you not know? All Larongar’s children are gods-gifted. It was the reward the gods bestowed on him for slaying the dragon on Mount Helesatra, if the stories are to be believed. It’s all a bit of a laughingstock, and most of the gifts aren’t worth anything. Buthers”—she points a finger at my face—“might be made into something by a man who knows what he’s doing.” Her dead eyes gaze into mine, as though she would penetrate my brain if she could. “Artoris will be delighted at the return of his lost prize.”

An inhuman sound erupts in the air. Shanaera whirls about, startled, and I look beyond her to see Taar suddenly in motion, his mouth open, bellowing in fury. He ducks the reaching hands of the crimson cloaks, eludes a swinging blade, grabs the

arm of his nearest attacker, and, with a heave of muscle, throws him into two of the others. Elydark, responding to his rider's soul, lashes out with his horn, skewers an undead and tosses it aside. It picks itself back up again, red mage-light gleaming in the wound, but a temporary path is cleared.

Elydark rushes to Taar, who whips his sword from its sheath and pivots just in time to slice the head off the nearest approaching undead, hood and all. Others swarm him, but he fights with his whole body, slashing with the sword, kicking, shouldering, even butting skulls. They fall to his blows, but rise again, save for those he manages to decapitate. But they know their own weakness and don't give him opportunity for the killing stroke.

Shanaera gestures sharply toward the dead unicorns. One of them lurches into motion, plunging toward the fight. Immediately Elydark places himself between the hellish beast and his rider. He lowers his horn and meets the undead's charge. They clash like stags before rearing up and tearing at each other with their hooves. My vision clouds as my gods-gift surges forward, overwhelmed by the force of Elydark's soulfire song and that oozing un-song reaching out from the dead thing with hungry, grasping fingers.

I look down at the knife in my hand. It seems so small, so useless, and my understanding of how to use it next to nothing. But I can't let Taar and Elydark fight alone. Shanaera's attention is turned from me, watching the battle with grim glee. I can't cut her head off with this small blade, but maybe I could—

A piercing burst of broken song fills my head.

Despite the mayhem, the horror, I whip around. Everything in my soul and essence fixates on that new song, that sad, broken dissonance. I know it. I recognize it at once. Coming from one of the netted bodies, lying not too many yards from my position.

“Nyathri,” I whisper.

The next moment I’m running. The crimson cloaks are so busy throwing themselves at Taar, no one notices when I break from the throng and sprint through the tall grasses. I throw myself on my knees beside the net and am suddenly eye-to-eye with a burning, tortured gaze. It’s her—I freed her from the altar, and she fled back to Cruor and joined the wild unicorns, only to be hunted down, trapped once more under these awful, dark-woven ropes. Why did they not kill her like the others? Is it because she’s not as far gone tovelrhoar? Do they intend to make her like one of those un-song monsters?

I set my teeth. It won’t happen. I won’t allow it to happen.

“I’m here, Nyathri,” I say and set to work cutting at the net. My knife, which sliced through the ropes at the altar easily enough, struggles with this much thicker, knotted braid. The fibers give, but much too reluctantly.

“What the hells are you doing?”

Dead fingers latch hold of my shoulder, yank me off my feet. I scream as I rise, but don’t lose my grip on the knife. Even as I’m spun around, I lash out, driving the blade straight into a gray-filmed eye.

Shanaera stands over me, her mouth gaping in shock. Her fingers do not relax their grip on my shoulder, but her other hand rises slowly to touch the skin just under the socket from which my blade protrudes. “You’ve got a little spirit in you after all.” Her other eye flicks to my face. “But you’re not the queen Taar needs.”

“Maybe not,” I snarl and wrench the knife back out of her skull. “But at least I’m alive.”

I lunge for her throat without hesitation, driving all the force I possess into my arm. She blocks me easily and hurls me to the ground with a single backhand. Nyathri screams, struggling within the netting. Little spurts of flame erupt across her body. I turn to her, feel the heat of song against my flesh. Once again I've managed to keep a grip on my knife.

Shanaera steps toward me. "It would give me great pleasure to kill you, little one," she says. The words echo with the rasping hiss of un-song. "But Morthiel needs you. And we must keep the Miphates happy for the time being." Her withered hand reaches for my throat.

In a last desperate wrench, I roll toward Nyathri's thrashing form, toward her song. Soulfire washes over me, burning. I scream with pain even as I slash at the net with a final, vicious stroke.

The unicorn surges up in an explosion of flame that knocks even Shanaera off her feet. I throw my arms over my head as her fire bursts free and consumes me, an inferno of broken, furious dissonance.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:46 am

The flash of raw, red fire and hellish heat breaks through my battle rage, drawing my eye.

I look just in time to see the wild form of a hearttorn licorneir break free of one of the chaeora nets. Those dark fibers kept her fire subdued, but the heat, the energy, was all still there, increasing in pressure. Now liberated, that pressure erupts from the center of her being, a small core of light which expands to a blast strong enough to knock me from my feet.

I cry out. Somewhere nearby, Elydark roars just before a flash of pure magic races along our soul-tether and envelops me in protection. I land hard on one arm but roll and quickly pick myself up into a crouch.

The crimson cloaks lie scattered about me. Caught in the same blast, their cloaks are on fire, their putrid flesh roasted. Even as I watch, the red light of necroliphamagic bubbles across their rotten flesh, healing their wounds, restoring the reanimation spell to its original state. Some of them throw off their burning garments, and I see their faces for the first time—all faces I know, men and women who fought with me in Agandaur. Some are those who stood with Shanaera and clung to their virulium addiction. There is Nuviar, the one-eyed, and Minuvae, his ferocious wife. Riluan is with them as well, though the last I'd seen him, he lay spreadeagle on the Agandaur battlefield, blasted through the heart by a Miphates death spell. Black virulium poison had dripped down their faces in those final hours, warping them into fiends incarnate.

But the rest? These are people who were loyal to me. Good soldiers who fought bravely for the cause of Licorna. I recognize Kydroth, who used to sing as he fought, cleaving limbs and heads in tempo with his chosen song. And Jomaer, who could stir

up a hearty stew out of a little tough game and herbs scrounged from seemingly nowhere. Every one of those faces sparks another memory—Sairdara and Alavar, Varoris and Corymar. All long dead. All under the thrall of Morthiel and the Miphates.

Cursing, I get to my feet, sword at the ready. The undead are momentarily stunned, and now is my only chance to escape. Elydark! I sing along our soul-thread. He answers at once. I turn to see him hasten toward me, mane and tail flying. He sports an ugly wound in his shoulder, torn by the horn of that undead licorneir. Silvery blood runs in shining rivulets down his leg, but he pays it no heed. He draws near, and I prepare to leap to the saddle, then pause.

Ilsevel.

My heart stops.

I know the truth. Suddenly and with absolute certainty. I know who freed that wild licorneir. I know who is responsible for that blast of soulfire.

Turning from Elydark, I shoot my gaze through the struggling dead, straight to that place where the chaeora net lies smoldering. There. Her small body, lying on the ground. Smoke rises from her charred garments, from her blackened skin.

“No.” The word falls from my numb lips, like a prayer, a protest.

I don’t know if it’s the velrath that pulls me so viciously or my own sudden, all-consuming need to be by her side. Even if they had the strength to try, the dead could not have restrained me. I cross the distance between us so swiftly, my feet barely touch the ground, and collapse on my knees beside her in the ashen dirt. “No, no, no.” The words tumble from my lips as I lift her, as I draw her into my arms. Her skin is scorched. Red and black and raw. “Ilsevel,” I whisper. “Zylnala, can you hear me?”

She's alive—she must be. I would have felt the moment the veil broke. But she clings to this world by a thread. My arms shake. My whole body and being rocks with horror, with rage, with sorrow. I want to crush her against my breast, to force strength back into her by sheer will.

Vellar, Elydark's voice sings in my head, beware!

A shadow falls across me. I yank my head back and stare up at Shanaera's hideous form. Her face is half-burned away, caught as she was in Nyathri's expulsion of pent-up soulfire. But then necroliphaspell works fast, pulling her rotten flesh back to the way it was when she first returned to this life under its thrall. She sneers as she looks down at me and the woman in my arms. "She's useless now," she says. "To you. To Morthiel. To anyone."

I grind my teeth. I want to leap to my feet and throw myself at her, this abomination that was once the woman I loved. I want to take up my sword and run it through her gut, back through that same death-wound I dealt her three cursed years ago.

But that won't help Ilsevel. She'll die even as I spend my useless rage.

"I can heal her," I say. The words are fumbling and most likely false. But I swallow back the despair lodged in my throat and look down at Ilsevel's face, almost unrecognizable beneath those burns. "I can make this right." In the same breath, I send my voice rippling along the soul-tether to my licorneir. Elydark! Help me!

He appears behind me, head bent, horn angled toward Ilsevel's fluttering heart. I'm sorry, Vellar, he says, his song heavy with sorrow in my head. There's nothing we can do.

There is! I respond fiercely. The Star Children sing the songs of healing. We've done it before, you and I. We can do it again.

Not like this, he replies, shaking his head. Once there was a time, perhaps. But those days are long gone—

They aren't! You called me back from the virulium. I was nearly dead, but your song found me, restored me, healed me. I am frantic, desperate. I gaze up pleading into his eternal eyes.

But I sang with her, he answers gently, not you. And her voice is touched by the gods.

I grind my jaw to keep from cursing. I can do it. I can—

“Put the human down, Taar.”

I jerk my head up again, staring into Shanaera's half-repaired face. “Let me sing over her,” I say, my voice rough.

She raises a brow. The gray skin around her eyes tightens.

“I can fix this,” I say, heedless of Elydark's humming protests. “I can heal her. Then you can take her back to Morthiel, take her back to her own kind.”

“And what about you?”

I swallow hard, that knot of despair swelling so that I can hardly breathe. “I will submit to you, Shanaera. I will lay down my sword, surrender myself to your keeping.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

As the words fall from my lips, I lower my gaze back to Ilsevel, searching the scorched flesh for any sign of her features. Her eyes are closed, or perhaps she has no eyes anymore. There's so little of her left. But it seems to me that her brow is furrowed in that same, stern knot I've seen so many times.

Larongar's daughter.

Gods-damn me!

More questions tumble through my brain, every almost-answer only adding to my overall confusion. But I shake my head, let the tumult still. Of one thing I am certain: She is Ilsevel. My enemy. Myzylkala. The bane of my existence, the torment of my sanity. The woman for whom I have surrendered everything of worth in my life.

And I know—in a moment of terrible clarity—that I would do it all again.

Is this thevelrabond driving me still? Maybe. But I don't care. If this feeling inside is nothing more than magic compulsion, it's so entangled with my own heart, I can't tell the difference anymore. There was no compulsion when I bought her in that auction. When I took her before the young priest, offered my arm for the marriage cord, and willingly spoke those vows. Reasons, circumstances, feeble excuses, none of those matter.

I chose her. And, if the gods will be kind to me just this once, I will choose her again now.

"Let me heal her." I lift my gaze to meet Shanaera's gaze. "You will have both your

prize and my submission. What more could you ask?"

She snarls, flashing rot-stained teeth. "And if you fail?"

I can't fail. I won't.

"I'll surrender even so. You have my oath."

"Your oath means nothing." She spits the words, full of poison, full of pain. For an instant those death-glazed eyes of hers clear, and I see again the snapping light of the Shanaera I know gazing out from that rotten skull. I see her fury, her pain, her betrayal. I see the woman I loved, the woman to whom I promised my heart. What must it be like for her to see me like this, with my arms around another, begging for her life?

I draw a long breath. "You want Morthiel's prize undamaged, don't you?"

"I don't give a damn about Morthiel."

I must tread carefully. There is madness in her gaze. She has nothing left to lose, while I have everything. My very heart lies here in my arms, struggling to breathe through fire-seared lungs.

"Whatever you want from me, Shanaera," I say. "That is the price I will pay. Whatever you want. My death, my life, my body. What you ask of me, I will do. I won't fight you, I won't resist. You may slay me where I stand and carry my corpse back to your masters to be remade."

The words are anathema. To become like her, a slave of the Miphates? A weapon turned against my own people? There is no worse fate for me. But if it's the only way to save Ilsevel . . .

Shanaera's eyes are dead once more. Dead and calculating and cruel. "What of your licorneir?" she asks, flicking a glance at Elydark, who stands still by my shoulder.

I cannot speak for him. Though we are bonded, his life and soul belong to no one but himself. I sing my uncertainty into his heart. He looks back at me, a world of sorrow contained in his solemn eyes. If we give ourselves over to her, she will kill us. And worse.

Then I will release you, I say. I will end our bond, and you can flee this place.

A furious note vibrates through our soul-tether. Elydark shakes his head, and fire leaps to his eyes. Do not say such things, Vellar! I would rather be undead than torn from our bond. He sighs then and turns his great head to gaze out at the eastern horizon and the rising sun. He seems to peer into a far world, perhaps the heaven of his spirit's origin. A heaven he will never again see if he chooses to follow me into hell.

I will help you heal your Ilsevel, if I can, he says at last, the wordless song layered with meaning beyond mere language. And I will submit.

Tears stream down my face. I do not know when they started, nor can I recall the last time I wept. But I nod, accepting his sacrifice. Whatever fate lies before us, we will march toward it together, as we have always done.

I turn to Shanaera. "He will not fight you."

Her nostrils flare. She is silent for some time, studying me, studying my licorneir. I feel the precious moments slipping away, feel Ilsevel's life force growing fainter, fainter.

"Very well," Shanaera says at last, and motions to her people to stand back and give

us room. The crimson cloaks, their burnt flesh already repaired, stand in silent witness, their dead eyes expressionless as they watch me lay my wife out on the charred ground. Every little movement causes her more pain. A terrible moan rasps in her throat. The sound is like a knife to my heart.

What do I do, Elydark? I look up at my licorneir again. I have sung healing songs before, the last time on my wedding night, when I channeled Elydark's power from a distance to knit a small cut on my bride's hand. This is different, a daunting task far beyond anything I've attempted.

Follow my lead, Vellar. Elydark touches his horn to her heart. Sing with me.

His voice in my head begins to move, to swell, growing in layers of increased complexity. I see colors in my head, far more brilliant and multitudinous than any sights of this world. Closing my eyes, I press my hand to Ilsevel's chest, beside Elydark's horn. I rest my other hand on the licorneir's cheek and let my soul sink into the bright depths of our bond.

His fire leaps from him to me, covering us both in a sheen of flame. I feel our twin souls united, feel my own power linked with his, becoming something greater and more complete in the joining. I open my lips and let song pour forth untamed. My rough voice, mingled with his glory, becomes something beautiful, a channel of heavenly magic.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

A rushing torrent fills my body. I feel a thrill, like the moment just before a plunge, and let myself go, releasing restraint and letting the sensation take me. I'm tossed upon a wave of sound and exaltation, and I know then, in a way I have never fully known before, the power of celestial song, ancient and ageless, which resides inside this being. This otherworldly creature, who chooses to wear physical form and dwell in this world with me. In that knowledge, my love for Elydark deepens. I channel that love into my song, pouring it and everything else I've got through my hand and into Ilsevel's broken body.

O gods.

O Nornala, Gracious Lady.

O Lamruil of the Dark, and great wonder-working Aenerin.

O Divine Ones, in all your power and wisdom, you saw fit to link my life with that of this woman. Save her now. If I am worthy of any mercy, any grace, let it pass to her.

A sense of timelessness surrounds me. I may dwell in this space of song and prayer and hope and fear for ages or mere moments. But eventually my physical body can take no more of this power. I feel myself weakening, feel my voice faltering. It's simply too much, and I am too frail a vessel.

My voice cracks. The song staggers, begins to disintegrate. Elydark leans in, trying to pull it back into proper shape. I reach as well, but it's like grasping at wind. The harmonies break apart in my head, scattered back to the heavenly realms where they belong. The soulfire which surrounded me begins to dim, and the physical world

reasserts itself.

Blinking hard against the dazzlement still dancing on the edges of my vision, I look down at my wife, eager to see what our song has wrought. “Ilsevel?” I whisper.

Her face comes slowly back into focus. Her ravaged, burnt, agony-twisted face.

I shake my head and look again. No. No, this cannot be! Not after such a song, not after such an outpouring of magic.

I look up at Elydark. Sing again! I demand.

He backs away, sides heaving with exertion. I cannot, Vellar, he gasps. His fire is dim, his spirit-light burnt down like an ember. I gave everything. There’s nothing left.

It isn’t true. He can’t have given everything, because it wasn’t enough. Damn him, it wasn’t enough.

Sing again! I cry, sending my voice searing across our soul-tether. I command you! Sing, sing! Sing for me, sing for her!

But my licorneir shudders. Even in the face of all we stand to lose, he cannot summon more fire. He poured his very essence into that song, but it was insufficient. I was insufficient. I wasn’t strong enough, I could not channel it properly. It was too much power, and I could not control it, not with all the desperate prayers in the world.

A wordless cry rips from my throat. I bow over Ilsevel where she lies on that unforgiving ground. My tears fall on her scorched skin as I cradle her head between my hands. Where is she? Where is the valiant young woman I know in that ruinous face? She’s still there, still present, but only just. And the pain! She must be in so much pain. If only I could take it from her, if only I could endure it for her.

Shanaera's boots step into my line of sight, just beyond Ilsevel's head. Her voice hits me like a series of blows. "I never thought I'd live to see the day when the last king of Licorna would make a fool of himself over a human." Then she chuckles darkly. "I suppose I didn't in the end."

Then she reaches out. Her fingers latch hold of my head, twine in my hair. She yanks my face upright, forcing me to meet her eyes. "You failed. She's as good as dead." Her lips ripple back, revealing a rotten grimace. "You're mine, Taarthalor. And I will do what I must. I will make of you the king Licorna needs, from now to the end of all ages."

35

ILSEVEL

There is nothing in my existence but pain.

So much pain over every inch of me, every atom. The physical suffering isn't the worst of it, however. Though it is far more extreme than anything I have ever imagined, it is as nothing to the searing in my soul.

This, I think, with whatever is left of me capable of conscious thought, is hell. This is what the priests meant, when they spoke of eternal damnation.

I'm lost in a blazing world in which ongoing, broken dissonance clamors through every perception. This song—so broken, so burning—lashes my flesh and mind by turns. There's nowhere I can hide, nowhere I can turn for escape. There's nothing but a single pinpoint of light, which pierces my blindness, shining as though from a great distance.

Taar.

I don't know how I know, but that light feels like his soul, his song. I can't hear it, but if I could only get closer to it, perhaps I could catch hold of that melody and wrap it around me as a protection. With whatever strength I possess, I push my spirit toward that light, that infinitesimal glimmer in the vast expanse. It calls to me, desperate and so terribly distant. I try to reach out, but I have no hands here, no arms, no form. There's nothing but my pain. I strive to aim my consciousness, to propel myself, but the harder I push, the farther away that point of light seems.

Then it vanishes altogether. The pain, the heat, and the dissonance compound, flattening me under their weight. If I had the strength, I would curse that light for offering me even the momentary lure of hope. What hope is there for someone like me?

I am caged. Trapped in the same prison to which I was born, the prison I have spent my entire life fighting to escape. Since the moment I became aware of selfhood, of personal identity, I have fought like a wildcat to find some concept of liberty I could claim as my own. Now? The caging is complete. My own body has become a torture chamber from which only death can liberate me. But death simply will not come.

A sense of abandonment plucks at my awareness. Some part of me knows that my body lies discarded on charred ground in a valley of blood-drained unicorns and decapitated warriors. That Taar has left me, ridden away with a dead woman into some unknown future. That my seared lungs struggle even now to gasp agonized breaths, while wind flakes my flesh away in clouds of ash.

I struggle to remember my last few moments. An image of Nyathri appears in my head. This burning in my soul . . . is this what Nyathri suffers all the time? Is this the heart-torn state which drives her and the other wild unicorns mad? If so, I don't know how she bears it. Who could survive such an existence?

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

But this broken song isn't entirely Nyathri's. The unicorn's explosion not only scorched my flesh, it also unleashed something inside me I've been fighting for so long to suppress. My own song—my own brokenness. The guilt of Aurae's death and the deaths of all those priests, which always hovers just on the edge of my awareness.

“You know it's not your fault, don't you?” Taar speaks from my memory, the timbre of his voice adding to the dissonance of my soul-song. “You cannot bear the weight of your sister's death. It is too great a burden. It will crush you.”

It's a lie.

It's such a damned lie.

It is my fault. My weakness, my impulsive thoughtlessness. If not for me, Aurae and all those innocent souls would still be alive. I deserve to burn in this hellish soulfire. I deserve to remain trapped in this scorched corpse. I deserve this horror for as long as it holds me captive here.

Something moves in my blackened gaze.

Though I had thought myself blind before, I realize suddenly that there is darkness deeper than blindness. Branching fingers of oblivion streak across my mind in a flash. My soul jolts, like a startled heartbeat. If there's one thing I fear more than this burning song, it's what's coming—the un-song. The ruination, the intentional destruction of all melody and harmony and resonance.

That black lightning was just a warning; I know what happens next. I've got to get

away. I cannot stay here, alone and exposed in this valley of death. I need to . . . die. It's the only escape left to me.

With a supreme effort, I drag my awareness down into the confines of my body. I cannot see, but I can feel the scorched earth around me. Gathering all my will, I move one arm. Shuddering, ash-flaked fingers search. Where is my knife? It must be close. I used it to cut Nyathri's bonds, and it fell during the blast. It could be mere inches from my fingertips. If I can only find it, if I can only summon the strength to cut my wrist, maybe I can bleed out before—

Hell strikes.

After the burn of Nyathri's soulfire, this sudden cold is a shock. I did not think I would ever feel cold again. It's worse somehow. Worse than the fire, which at least I knew was alive in its destructive force. There is no life here.

But there is presence.

I feel it. Them. Singular and multiple at once. A being, a sentience, full of intent but without soul. A sensation of skittering creeps through my awareness, followed by the hissing of many voices. Voices without song, without soul.

Hands crawl over my body, slow and exploratory, heedless of the way they slough off portions of my burned flesh. I try to scream, but the moment my lips part, something slips in across my tongue, slithering down my throat, stealing even my last weak cry.

Hunger surrounds me, pulsing in the atmosphere. The need to devour, to make all that is intoun. Undone, unmade. Un-song. This is the horror which enveloped Licorna in the hours after the Rift opened twenty-five years ago. How many millions of souls were devoured in a matter of hours? Yet this hunger remains unsatiated. An eternal need for consumption.

And it's eating me.

I feel it, peeling away my outer layers, searching out my bones and marrow. Many hundreds of fingers, digging deeper and deeper, down to where my soul cries out and struggles and seeks to hide. I have nothing with which to defend myself except . . . except . . .

I don't know how I do it. Despair drives me, and I act on instinct, taking hold of Nyathri's broken song—all that burning dissonance. It is the only real thing here with me in the darkness, and though it is reduced to almost nothing, it flares to life when my spirit touches it. Pain shoots through my body once more. I welcome it—it's better than being madeun. With a surge of desperation, I wrap that song around me before unleashing it, lashing at the hellish dark with bursts of light-sound.

Hell retreats, surprised. Maybe this is how the wild unicorns survive in Cruor. Their hearttorn songs are too great, too powerful for this entity to devour. The pain of their tortured souls is the very thing which keeps them alive. I lash again, wielding that burning song like a whip. Triumph flares in my soul. Is this the secret then? Is this how I will endure? If there's anything I know, it's song, and I—

The thought breaks off as hell surges over me once more. My soul screams, my voice blending with the burning song in eerie harmony an instant before the un-song cuts it off. I feel it invading me. Raping me. Consuming me. I feel the nothingness unspooling my rage and rendering it naught. This power is far too vast for me! How could anyone hope to keep it at bay?

Sudden light bursts off to one side of my awareness.

I don't know how, but I'm conscious of my body once more. I cannot see anything—Nyathri's blast scorched my eyes. But I feel that pulsing red light with an intensity I cannot deny. Straining what little muscle and tissue I still control, I turn

my head toward it.

Like a burning star fallen from heaven, a sphere of light draws near, driving back the darkness, which screeches and retreats to make a path. The un-song writhes, tries to catch and smother that light, but it's far too powerful, and its source too ancient. A unicorn stands in its center, singing her eternal song.

Nyathri! I try to cry out. The un-song catches my voice, strangles it to nothing. But the unicorn shakes her head, tearing at the dark with her horn. It shrieks voicelessly, hisses, and retreats again, allowing her to approach me. At last she stands above my burnt frame, gazing upon me with eyes like balls of red sunfire.

That is not my name. The voice which sings in my head does not speak with words. It does not need to. The meaning is clear in the sound, in the arrangement of notes and the unpleasant dissonance that pervades her soul. Nyathri—it is not right. I have no name anymore.

I understand. I feel that namelessness myself, cut off as I am from all that made sense of the madness of existence. I sing my sympathy to the unicorn, a line of fiery music all my own. And though I have tried several times before now, for once I detect a moment of harmony between my voice and that dissonant song of hers. It's incomplete, but there's the faintest hint of lyric tonality.

The unicorn responds at once, startled. She did not expect that moment of blending songs. She turns, and I fear she will flee yet again, abandoning me to hell. Please, I sing, reaching out with my spirit. Stay with me.

The unicorn bows her head, as though her horn is suddenly heavy. Why did you save me? she asks.

I try to reply but cannot find the right melody.

Why did you save me? she repeats, thinking perhaps that I'd not understood the first time. Twice you cut me free of those hell-tainted bonds, both times at great risk to your mortal frame. Why?

Page 76

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

I don't . . . know.

Strange, but I feel as though I've had this conversation before. It's so familiar, and yet . . . and yet I don't recall where or when or with whom.

The unicorn sings a blast of cacophonous music, which says clearly my answer is inadequate. I feel her frustration, but I'm not sure I can offer anything better. I'm sorry, I tell her. I don't know what to say. I simply could not bear to live in this world knowing your song had gone out from it.

My song is broken.

But it is beautiful.

Your mortal body is broken too.

Yes. I know.

There was a time I could heal such wounds.

Despite everything I cannot stop the sudden spark of hope kindled in my breast. While a moment before I wouldn't have thought it possible, it seems I still want to live. What would it take? I sing. What would you need to heal again?

Harmony, she replies at once. A joining of souls more complete even than that which I shared with my last Vellara. When she says the name, there's a distinct lilt to it, and I know it is her own name for Ashika, the secret name shared only between the two of

them.

There's a gap in her song—it's been there all along, just outside my range of perception. A new line of melody must be inserted into that gap for her song to be made whole. She reveals it to me now in invitation. I hesitate. Who would have thought, after everything I've been through, I could find new ways to be afraid? But I am.

My song is imperfect, I sing. My harmony is broken.

Perhaps we are each the broken parts the other needs.

And there it is: the revelation I've sought from the beginning. I know now what was lacking every other time I tried to fix this velvet hoarse song. I could reach out all I wanted, with as much strength and earnestness as my soul could summon. But until Nyathri—or she who was once Nyathri—reached back, no harmony could be formed.

My spirit looks upon the unicorn, feels the song-soul of her vibrating through my gods-gifted awareness. Her fire is terrible, destructive, and wondrous. It nearly killed me—it might still.

But what would it be like to join my voice with such flame?

Almost before realizing I intend to do so, I begin to sing. My body is too broken to make a sound, but my gift was never contained in a mere physical form. If anything the limitations of tongue, throat, lips, and lungs only ever got in the way of the true song I was meant to sing.

My spirit opens wide, exhaling melody in a line of blue fire that stretches out from me toward that raw, red flame of the unicorn. This time she neither lashes out nor retreats. This time, though she flinches once, as though afraid of the connection and

all it might mean, she stands her ground and lets my song approach hers. They wind together—blue fire and red. The broken parts in the unicorn's song blend with the broken parts in mine until, abruptly, they become one. A triumphant symphony of sound and color and spirits joined. Red and blue flame explode in a purple light which fills up the whole of this spirit-space around us.

With a dreadful shriek, thevardimnarshudders and flees, dragging its darkness behind it. What a strange sight that is—hell turned on heel and running like a frightened little rat.How sad,I think, even as I ride that billowing sound, suffused in soulfire and glory.How pathetic and sad that un-song is when faced with true melody.

The crescendo reached, our two spirits begin to drift back down into a simpler, calmer lyric of light, a natural exchange of one soul to the other. It's delightful, almost freeing. My mind catches on that word—freeing—and everything it means for me. All the sad years of my life I've spent struggling and fighting for a freedom I could never envision. And now . . .

Aurae.My sister's face appears before my mind's eye. Her face, her laugh, her screams of terror. That pyre which burns forever in my memory. That scorched prayer veil. I force myself to look upon it now, with this new song wrapped around my soul. And I realize that moment in time, and all the chains of guilt which accompany it, are part of this song. A dissonance which adds to the greater harmony of the whole composition. If I chose, I could let that dissonance grow and create greater discord.

But there are other choices now. I may also choose to accept. To let the darkness remain where it is, let the wound scar over and even heal. To let that moment, that pain, that guilt, becomepart of the ongoing song that is my life. Neither to be forgotten nor dwelt in.

The unicorn stands beside me in this space of acceptance. I feel her own guilt over

the loss of her rider flowing into me and back out again. We share that burden, share that pain. And in the sharing we take the first steps forward into a life forever changed.

I turn to the unicorn. She no longer appears to me as she did, burning red flame erupting from a skeletal body. Now the truth of who she was beneath the veil is visible once more. A delicate purple sheen of fire gleams from blue-black flesh and flickers from the corners of midnight-deep eyes.

What is your name? I sing.

She tips her head to one side, as though listening to a voice singing from far away, a voice even I cannot hear. Then she answers with certainty: I am Diira.

Diira, I sing back and wonder how that trill will sound when spoken with a human tongue.

And you, Diira sings on with confidence, are my Vellara. It's not the same sound she used when she sang of Ashika, but the song denotes a similar sense of claiming. I like it; it suits me somehow. Better than the name my father gave me, surely.

Suddenly Diira's soul quickens with tension. Your body will not last much longer.

I'm rather shocked to realize that I do in fact still inhabit a mortal frame. But the moment Diira says it, I find myself dragged back down, out of this spirit place, back into a body which is rapidly failing. My song struggles as a renewed surge of pain overwhelms me.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

Help me, Diira! I cry, not quite in song but in a surge of panic. Teach me the healing song!

A tremor of uncertainty ripples out from her. I gasp. Pain and my own mortality drag me down, down. Darkness closes in, and the soulfire light which had seemed so bright but a moment before begins to fade.

Then she starts to sing. A strange, complex melody that speaks of ancient times, of an age before this world was created. A song of stars and dancing constellations, a song of heavenly beings and celestial graces. It's devastating—I'm not sure where my own voice is supposed to fit. Then something inside me shifts. I don't know how to describe it: like a piece of my heart turns slightly and realizes what shape it was meant to be all along.

I sing. I sing as I have never sung before, first little trills of sound, then a greater melody, stronger, surer. It blends in with Diira's song so naturally, one would think they were born from the same source.

Slowly, fearfully, I let my awareness sink back into that body of mine. I must connect this song with that body if I hope to bring healing. The pain is so great, for a moment I can feel nothing else. Then faintly my ears detect a trace of song. It sounds different here, from this mortal perspective, filtered through physical senses. But it is still beautiful.

Diira's horn rests against my breast, the tip aimed straight for my heart. Flame encases my body once more, but not the flame which nearly destroyed me. This is healing fire, drawn from heaven itself. It is both like and unlike that healing power I

channeled with Elydark when I sang over Taar, only this song is fuller, deeper, and more perfectly harmonized. The difference between singing with another soul and truly being one.

A sudden inhale. A constriction of muscles. Then a gust of air from released lungs, expelling a sigh through parted lips.

I blink and slowly open my eyes. I can see again—see all the way up to the endless blue sky arching overhead. The sunlight, which had seemed so sickly before, now glows with brilliance unmatched. Or is that glow not from the sun at all, but from the mighty being standing over me, singing from the depths of her newly-repaired heart?

I gaze up at Diira. Glorious and shining, more beautiful than anything in this or any world. My heart swells with such an abundance of love for her, I cannot stop myself from opening my mouth and singing. By comparison to my song in the spirit-realm, this is certainly a poor thing, but compared to any other human voice it is a magnificence akin to that of angels. A true gift of the gods. My song and Diira's fills that valley of death with the hope of renewal. And just for a moment I almost believe I hear the voices of the dead unicorns singing back to us from somewhere beyond the veil of this world.

When the song eases at last, I look down at myself. My body is suffused in purple fire, but it doesn't burn. Instead I watch the scorched flesh and oozing blisters close up, reknitting into whole, healed skin beneath the tatters of my burnt dress. I lift my hands, turn them this way and that, admire the beauty of whole fingers. I touch my neck, my shoulders, my face, my hair. Gods! I have hair again!

Diira backs away a pace or two, lowering her head. Her song resolves, at least that which I hear with mortal ears. But I feel it still in the soul-tether now shivering in the ether between us, a constant hum of divine melody. Is it well, Vellara? the unicorn

asks wordlessly in my head.

It is well, Diira, I sing back.

Then I gasp. A sharp stab shoots up my arm and bursts in the back of my head. Now that the far greater pain of my near-death by burning is past, the *velrare* asserts itself with terrible force.

What was that? Diira asks, sensing my distress.

It's my husband. He's in trouble. Suffering. But not dead, I add to myself. If he was dead, our bond would be broken. Shanaera is keeping him alive for some twisted purpose of her own.

I scramble to my feet only to sway hard as the world pivots on its axis. Healed or not, my body has just undergone a tremendous ordeal and isn't ready for any sudden movements. I steady myself, close my eyes until the world stills. When I open them again, a gleam of metal catches my eye. Moving with a little more caution, I hasten to reclaim my dropped knife, slipping it into its sheath before turning to Diira.

I must find him, I say. I must help him. To be parted from me causes him terrible pain. Even as I say it, another stab jolts up my arm. It doesn't do me much good either.

Diira nods solemnly. We can follow the *velra* to him, she says. Then to my surprise—though in retrospect, I don't know what else I expected—she kneels. Hurry. Get on my back. I will carry you swiftly. There are none among the *licorneir* of this realm who can outpace me!

I stare for a moment at the blue-black, dappled back. A thrill bursts in my gut. It's as though somehow, something I was born for is finally about to take place. I feel like a fledgling eagle, poised on the edge of the nest, the whole wide world spread before

me if only I dare open my wings.

Breathless I climb onto that warm back, little heeding the fact that Diira is still burning bright with purple soulfire. I've danced in that fire, healed in that flame. I know for a fact that it will never burn me again.

Grabbing handfuls of mane, I find my center of balance as the unicorn rises smoothly to her feet. I hold up my arm and can almost see the shining cord stretched before me in a straight, taut line.

"That way, Diira," I say out loud, for the first time pronouncing her name with my tongue. It sounds strange, but I like it. "That way, as swift as you can."

As the unicorn leaps into motion, I bow over her neck and picture the rotten face of the woman who stole my husband. My jaw sets grimly. Time to steal him back.

36

TAAR

The undead licorneir move in an unnatural gait, all the grace of their being lost in death, though they've retained both their power and speed. The landscape slips past my vision in a blur. Though I know this land better than I know my own face, I can make no sense of it, no sense of the world, of reality. Pain dominates everything, and weakness turns my limbs to straw.

But the velvet around my wrist continues to burn like fire, deep down to the bone. Which means Ilsevel is still alive. Surely she must still be alive. I would know if she was dead.

"Let me kill her," I'd begged. The words had slipped from my lips even as the undead

grabbed my arms and dragged me away from Ilsevel's body. "Let me kill her, Shanaera. Grant me that mercy at least."

How could I leave her like that? The cruelty of it was beyond imagination. And what if thevardimnarstruck while she lay there, so helpless? That she should die of those burns was bad enough; I couldn't bear that her soul would be devoured as well.

But Shanaera had refused. "What? And cripple you still more?" she'd snapped. "I need you strong, Taar. I need you fit and full of rage, not weeping over a dead bride. No." She cast a last look over her shoulder to where Ilsevel's burnt remains lay abandoned beneath the uncaring sky. "Let's hope she survives long enough for us to accomplish our purpose."

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

With that she'd mounted her vile creature, spurred it into motion. We left the valley and the bodies of the netted licorneir and the headless corpses of the undead I'd decapitated in our struggle. And my wife. My burnt, suffering wife.

The other three undead licorneir carry Nuviar, Minuvae, and Corymar, who laugh in lunatic glee at their triumph, little caring for the companions they lost to my blade. The others—Kydroth, Varoris, Sairdara and the rest, at least nineteen in total—shamble in silent formation behind them, their faces blank, their spirits absent.

Last of all comes Jomaer, leading Elydark, who is hobbled with chaeoraropes. I feel the effect of those evil bindings on his spirit. Gods damn it! What possessed me to ask him to give up his freedom like that? And how could I let him agree? My only selfish thought had been for Ilsevel. I'd believed I could save her, that my will alone would be enough to draw the healing power of heaven to my aid.

Now she lies dying an excruciating death, while Elydark and I are led like lambs to our own slaughter.

“You know,” Shanaera says after what feels like many hours of silence, “when I first heard of your foolish marriage, I didn't believe it. That you of all people would form avelrabond with a human? It's laughable! And now look at you. Weak as a sightlesszhorpup.” She chuckles mirthlessly, glancing down at my bound body, slung like a sack of bones over her saddle. “Pathetic.”

Some warning instinct still functioning in the depths of my numbed brain perks up its ears at this statement. Who told Shanaera? Several times now she's intimated that she knew about my marriage to Ilsevel. But where would she have come by that

information? So few people know and none of them are connected to her.

An answer scratches on the edge of my understanding. In this moment, however, with the weight of sorrow, shame, and despair pulling me into ever-yawning depths, I cannot face it. Perhaps if there was some hope of surviving the next few hours it would be worth exploring, but now? The mystery might as well die with me.

I turn my head dully, looking back the way we've come, as though I could somehow send my clouded gaze all the way back to that valley and the wife I left there. Instead I see only the shamblers—the spiritless undead. Those faces I know, those comrades with whom I once fought for the cause of Licorna. How many more of my people have the Miphates taken into their cursed citadel? When the last of my living Licornyn riders join with Ruvaen to assault Evisar, will they be faced with an army of our dead friends?

As though in response to this dire thought, black lightning rips suddenly across the sky. My heart drops. I feel the pull of thevelra, even now trying to draw me back to Ilsevel, to protect her from this evil. But it's useless. I am many miles from her now. There is no help for her, no hope.

“Halt,” Shanaera says, holding up one hand.

The shamblers stop and sway weirdly on their feet, their empty eyes staring straight ahead. The other three urge their mounts closer to Shanaera's, and Nuviar shades his single eye as he peers up at the sky. “Should we bring his licorneir up?” he asks, casting me a swift glance. “He's not turned; he's still susceptible.”

Shanaera considers, rotten lips pressed in a line. Then: “No, keep them separate. I'll draw the sigil.”

She dismounts and, to my rising horror, pulls a vial of shining liquid from one of her

travel bags. I recognize the contents immediately: licorneir blood. Harvested just last night, unless I miss my guess. My stomach knots as she proceeds to pour a thin line of the star-bright blood into the ground, drawing careful shapes. Though I do not understand it, I know it is Miphates spellwork. No Licornyn would ever willingly learn such craft, nor can I imagine brutal Shanaera perfecting it to such a degree that she could render a proper sigil in blood on dirt. It must be part of the Miphates' control over her, instilling skills where there should be none.

She finishes the work just as the darkness hits. One moment I am surrounded by hell—the next, strong hands grab me, pull me down from the saddle, and shove me into a circle of shining starlight, simmering with the memory of song. It's not as powerful as Elydark's sphere of protection. But it's certainly better than nothing.

I kneel in the center of that sigil, my body bowed and broken. Thevelrapulses. I concentrate with all my being on that pain, waiting for the moment I know must come—the moment when thevardimnarswallows up Ilsevel's soul, and I lose her. Forever.

But though the darkness continues to churn and roil, though the hunger pushes against the boundaries of my feeble protection, still the break does not come. Somehow she lives on. Is it possible I missed it? That the horror of thevardimnarsimply dulled the moment of sundering? No. Thevelraremains alive. Throbbing, burning, draining me of strength with every passing moment. But alive.

A figure appears in the darkness before me, silhouetted by the sigil's glow. For a moment I think it's Ashtarath herself, appearing from the depths of her hell to claim my soul. The next moment, however, my vision clarifies. Shanaera stands before me, studying me with her dead eyes. I force myself to meet her gaze steadily, though another jolt of pain brings a grimace to my lips. Strange—I dreamt so many times over the years of a chance like this. Of seeing her again. Had the gods permitted it, I would have leapt at the opportunity for one last conversation, to beg her forgiveness,

to reassure her of my ongoing love despite all that happened between us.

Now that the longed-for miracle is here, I want nothing more than to take up my sword and put an end to this grotesque half-life of hers once and for all.

She smiles a little, as though reading my thoughts. “Did you know,” she says in a hauntingly conversational tone, “that Morthiel found his reanimation spell worked more effectively on subjects saturated in virulium?”

I don’t answer. I merely look at her, refuse to break her awful stare.

“They’ve been trying for years to reanimate humans, of course.” She steps into the sigil and crouches before me. Reaching out, she pushes a stray lock of hair out of my eyes. It’s such a familiar gesture, half-forgotten in the three years since her death. My skin crawls in response. She draws her hand back and rests her elbow on her knee. “But humans are such frail creatures. Licornyn, they’ve found, are better, due to our fae blood ancestry. We’re built stronger, better suited to such strong magics, which tend to burst the corpses of human subjects just as they begin to move about.” Her lip curls. “It’s a bit grim to watch.”

I draw a long breath through my teeth. “I didn’t know you’d become a student of necrolipha.”

“Oh gods.” She rolls her eyes. “I don’t give two shakhs about any of the Miphates’ little games.”

“What do you care about then?”

She tips her head to one side. “The same things as ever, my love. Restoring Licorna to the Licornyn. Driving humans from our realm.”

“You’ve got a strange way of showing it.”

She laughs at this. It’s eerily like the laugh I used to know, with that little hitch at the beginning before giving way to a loud bellow. But it’s not the same. The Shanaera I knew laughed rarely, but when she did, it was with real mirth. This creature laughs too often, and there’s always a coldness to the sound.

The vardimnar breaks. Suddenly, completely. Where there was darkness, there is now late afternoon sunlight, so bright it nearly drowns out the glimmer of the fading sigil. I gasp at the abruptness of it. Tension I’d not realized was bracing my frame goes out from me in a rush, and I nearly slump to the ground. Frantic, I reach out along the velra, searching for the break I know I will find.

But I don’t find it. The velra remains intact, stretched and searing, but unbroken. Which means Ilsevel is not dead. Impossibly and yet undeniably, she is still alive out there. My heart lurches, whether with relief or horror, I cannot say. Did the vardimnar pass over her because of her suffering state? It seems unimaginable, for the darkness of hell claims everyone within its grasp, and yet . . .

“Get up.” Shanaera grabs me by the shoulder, hauls me to my feet. She kicks the lines of fading unicorn blood, blotting out the sigil, before dragging me back to her undead unicorn. I cast a glance back to where Elydark stands, head low and still hobbled in those awful ropes. I want to cry out to him but cannot summon the will.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

We ride in silence. Even Shanaera's people have swallowed their manic laughter. They are as dull as the shamblers now, their dead eyes fixed ahead without purpose but with unrelenting drive. I'm woozy, sick in both body and soul, drained of all vitality. It's difficult to pull thoughts together. I'm vaguely surprised they haven't killed me already. Surely it would be easier to haul my corpse around, for then they wouldn't have to bother protecting me from thevardimnar. Perhaps it's because of Elydark. If I'm dead, and he's hearttorn, they will never succeed in bringing him back to the citadel.

I grit my teeth. Whatever happens, I cannot let them do to Elydark what they have done to these undead licorneir. Despite his protests, it would be better for him to end upvelrhoar than like these. If possible I must find a way to end my life and free him of our bond.

"There." Shanaera's voice breaks the silence for the first time in many hours. She points ahead across the bare landscape. "Our destination." She pats my back like she would a dog and croons, "Not much longer now, beloved."

I lift my heavy head, peer through a fog of exhaustion and pain. The setting sun shines dull rays on the stone walls of Rothiliar House, standing at a little distance—the same empty manor in which Ilsevel refused to shelter from the storm, which ultimately drove us into the shepherd's hovel. My stomach knots. I hastily retreat from that memory. Better to sink back into the pain-haze.

I come to again at the sound of undead licorneir hooves sparking against stone. I look up to find we've entered the once-graceful courtyard of Rothiliar. "Get him inside," Shanaera barks. Rough hands yank me to the ground. I haven't the strength to stand;

my legs simply collapse under me. “Useless,” Shanaera hisses, her disembodied voice breaking through the cloud of my confusion. “But we’ll soon remedy that. Go!”

Elydark cries out to me. Our soul-tether vibrates with the intensity of his dread, but the chaeora ropes hold him fast. I turn my head, try to catch a glimpse of him over my shoulder. The shamblers gripping my arms hasten me along too quickly into the waiting shadows of Rothiliar.

The inside of the manor feels like a tomb. Twenty-five years now it’s stood vacant, the family who once dwelt here long ago swallowed up in the first wave of thevardimnar. In my addled state, I feel as though their ghosts are watching, silent and solemn, from doorways and behind dust-heavy curtains, from the gallery above the entrance hall. Everywhere I look, I expect to glimpse phantoms. But there is nothing. Only more shadows.

“Tie him between the pillars there.” Shanaera’s voice echoes strangely in that cavernous hall. “Be certain you secure him fast. We can’t have him breaking free.”

How she thinks I’ll break free of anything in this weakened state, I don’t know. I would laugh at the notion outright, had I the energy. Instead I sag in the arms of my captors as they bind my wrists and my ankles, spreading me out like a star between two tall, fluted pillars. Is this how they mean to kill me at long last? It seems quite the production for something that could have been done so simply hours ago. But who am I to complain?

Shanaera’s face is half-hidden in the gloom of the hall. The remains of daylight splash through the western windows and spread in long bars across the hall floor, but little of it reaches her. She stands before me, a dark apparition, studying me in silence. I roll my head to meet her gaze. I won’t cower before her here in my last moments. She will not have the satisfaction of seeing fear in my face.

Something trembles up my right arm. Thevelragives a sudden pulse of warmth that floods my heart. It startles me because, for the first time in many hours, it isn't a pulse of pain. It's more like . . . relief. But it can't be. There's only one thing that could ease my suffering and restore strength to me now, and that's impossible. But when another pulse flows up my arm and into my heart, I can't help dragging in a gasp of air. My muscles quicken, and I strain suddenly against the chaeora bonds securing me.

“Morthiel seeks to make himself like the fae kings of Eledria.”

Shanaera's voice drags my attention back to her. I blink, struggling to piece together what she just said even as another pulse ripples up thevelra. Unaware of what's happening to me, she touches my jaw with the tip of one finger. “He believes,” shecontinues in that same musing tone, “the only true limitation on humanity is their mortality. According to him, if humans had the immortal lives of the fae, they would dominate all worlds.” Her rotten mouth twists. “Pure hubris, of course. But his experiments have proven . . . interesting.”

She turns from me then and saunters across the hall. Her three companions stand off to one side, their faces unaccountably nervous. Four shamblers entered the hall with us, and they stand at odd intervals around the empty chamber, swaying slightly on their feet, their decayed faces slack. Shanaera moves to one of the nearby windows, and the light illuminates her in such a way, one could almost forget she's dead. The luster of her dark hair, the golden quality of her skin, is momentarily restored.

“What might eternal life mean for the Licornyn?” she muses. “No one else in all the worlds boasts the gifts we enjoy. No one else, not even the great kings and queens of Eledria, have bonded with licorneir as have we. Were we also as fearless as the fae, as unafraid of our own demise, what might we accomplish?” She turns then, teeth flashing in a grimace. “We could rid this world of the Miphates. And when that was done, why stop? Why not smite the blight of humanity from existence? Who would

stand against us and our licorneir?”

I cannot concentrate on what she says. Another jolt from thevelrafloods my veins with prickling warmth. It hurts, but like the hurt of a sleep-deadened limb coming back to life. I can't explain it. Could it be the bond has been severed? Was I mistaken all along to think a broken bond would break me in turn?

Shanaera approaches me again, pushing aside one of the shamblers who stands in her way. “Morthiel will be delighted when I bring him another virulium-laced body,” she says. “Regular dead make for poor subjects, but virulium reacts to the spell differently. It retains soul-essence, unlike these others.” She stands before me once again, her death-filmed eyes sharp with eagerness. “He won't question who you are. He doesn't concern himself with the people of Licorna, only with what they can do for him.”

With those words, she reaches inside her tunic and withdraws something. Something which, held up to the last of the fading sunlight, does not gleam but instead seems to catch that light and drag it into its depths, crushing and compressing it to nothing. A little vial of darkness.

Virulium.

“No!” I gasp. She has my attention, utterly and completely. I know what she intends to do now. She doesn't want me like the shamblers, a spiritless meat-bag to be ordered about at will. She wants to make me like her—a broken soul trapped in an animated corpse. She's been telling me as much all along, only my mind was too addled, my body too weak to understand. She's going to fill my veins with virulium, just as she and her people were filled at the time of their deaths. Then she's going to kill me and carry my primed remains back to Morthiel.

Roaring, I strain against the bonds. My strength is returning now, faster than before,

and though the chaeora ropes bite into my flesh and cut off circulation, the sudden surge is enough to make Shanaera take a step back. “Don’t be a fool, Taar,” she snarls. “Do you want to end up like these cretins? You must take the virulium. You must become like me. I know I’m not what I used to be, but I’m stronger than ever. And Morthiel is refining his work all the time. He doesn’t want eternal life as a walking corpse. He is determined to correct all the little imperfections, to make me beautiful again. He will do the same for you, all the while thinking he holds our will in his thrall. By the time he learns different, it will be too late. You and I will be as we once were, and not even death will be able to separate us.”

I strain again, yanking at the ropes. The power burning in my muscles is not unlike the rush of virulium, only brighter, hotter. If I could just break one arm free then maybe I could . . .

Shanaera reaches out. Her dead fingers brush my cheek, a tender touch were it not so chilling. “I wish I could have killed your bride,” she says softly, like whispering a lover’s secrets. “I wish I could have severed your bond. But I can’t have you too broken, or the virulium might kill you outright.” She lets her gaze run down my body slowly, shaking her head. “She will be dead soon. And you will forget her. In the ages to come, she will fade from your memory, a mere shadow from a distant time. Whereas our love will go on. Our love will be the foundation of a new Age of Licorna. No one will doubt then or in the centuries to come that we were meant for each other.”

She tips her head toward me, smiling. “But I will enjoy killing you, Taar.” She lifts the vial to the level of my eyes. “You wouldn’t begrudge me a little revenge after all these years, now would you?”

My whole soul fixates on the sliver of cut glass in her hand and that slice of oblivion contained within. The demon’s blood. Gods! How I used to crave it. In moments of quiet, I would dream of the taste and the surge of raw power coursing through my

veins. I could be kneeling in prayer while my heart longed for the darkness and the taste of blood on my tongue. Breaking free of its hold was the hardest thing I ever did.

Even the smallest taint from the edge of Lurodos's blade was enough to send me over the edge into bloodlust madness. An entire dose, after years of abstinence? It will flood my veins and burst my heart through my shattered ribcage.

"Don't do it, Shanaera." I shake my head as she pulls the stopper from the vial. "It will destroy me." I yank again at the ropes, muscles straining. "There'll be nothing left of my corpse for your Morthiel to remake."

"Well," she says, gently swirling the contents of the vial, "I suppose that's a risk I'm willing to take."

She lunges. One hand catches me by the back of the head while the other raises that vial to my lips. In the same instant, a sudden pulse of power rushes from the vial to my right arm. Twisting my head away from her, I grasp hold of the chaeora rope and pull.

The fibers strain—the pillar cracks.

Then the rope snaps in two.

I grab Shanaera by the throat. Startled, she drops the vial, which shatters on the floor. Virulium eats into the stone, and a dark miasma rises in hissing coils, but it sinks in fast and vanishes.

“No!” Shanaera chokes. Nuviar, Minuvae, and Riluan are in motion already, rushing to her aid. Riluan draws a sword, prepared to hack me in two. “Stop!” Shanaera cries, waving her arm to warn them off even as she twists against my grip. Riluan hesitates, gaze darting from her to me.

A crash sounds against the door, like the pound of a battering ram. Another hit, and the door bursts open. A blazing star incarnate erupts into the hall, soulfire radiating with roaring song. And clinging to the back of that star—suffused in purple flames, her hair blowing, her eyes shining with fierce songlight—my wife.

37

ILSEVEL

Taar!

My soul cries out at the sight of him, bound between those stone pillars but still very much alive. Until I laid eyes on him I simply couldn't know for sure, despite the tension in the velra. But he's here—he's here and whole and seems to be unharmed.

And he's got his one-time love gripped by the throat.

Diira and I rode through a small crowd of undead in the courtyard, who did not react or even seem aware of our arrival. But the dead inside the cavernous old manor are alert enough. Shanaera twists in Taar's grasp, struggling to break free. Three other undead, two men and one powerfully-built woman rush to help their leader. Momentarily shocked at my sudden arrival, they all turn wide eyes to gape at me and the flaming beast on which I ride.

I don't give them a chance to recover. Go! I sing into Diira's head.

She responds with a battle cry that could shatter glass. Charging into that hall, her hooves beat a swift percussion on the paving stones, a tempo in time with the song rushing from my soul to hers. The undead scatter at her approach, but not before her horn pierces one through the side and, with a toss of her head, sends him hurtling across the room. Without pausing Diira pivots and thrusts again, this time straight through Shanaera's chest. She screams obscenities, writhing, clawing, tearing at the unicorn's face in her efforts to get free.

Leaving her to her struggle, I leap from the saddle and rush to Taar's side. He stares at me like I'm a ghost. Which, considering my state of being at our last parting, isn't a bad assumption on his part. There's no time to explain just now, however.

"Are you hurt?" I demand, reaching out to touch his bruised and bloodied face.

His eyes widen at the brush of my fingers. "You're alive!" he breathes.

"Yes. It's a long story." I turn to look at the bindings securing his left wrist. "How are you—"

He catches my face with his freed hand, fingers slipping around to the back of my head. Before I can react, he draws me forcibly to him, presses me against his bare chest. I suck in a breath, my lungs suddenly far too tight.

“I thought I’d lost you.” His voice is a growl, spoken into my hair.

My throat thickens. “Me too,” I whisper. Temptation almost overwhelms me to rest there, to close my eyes, to let him hold me, let him protect and shield me from all the dangers surrounding us. But I didn’t come here to be rescued. This time I’m not the one in distress.

“Here, let’s get you free, shall we?” I say, planting my hands on his chest and pushing back.

“Watch out!” he roars. With a powerful wrench, he yanks me to one side just as a blade whistles through the air, missing my neck by inches. Still bound to the pillars, Taar pushes me roughly behind him. Quicker than thought he takes the length of dangling rope attached to his right wrist and lashes out with it. It wraps around the neck of the other undead woman. She drops her sword in surprise, both hands reaching to grasp the rope and pull it free. Taar yanks. She loses her footing, topples headlong to the floor. With a snarl, she starts to rise, one hand reaching for her weapon.

A hoof plants between her shoulder blades, flattens her to the floor. Diira’s horn flashes, pierces the corpse through the back of the neck. There’s a strangled cry, a brief moment of thrashing. Then the undead woman lies still.

Diira lifts her head, no blood staining her horn, and gives me a look. Are you hurt, Vellara?

I shake my head. She tosses her long forelock from her eyes, then whirls about, eager to pin down her next victim. I drag a breath into my lungs before pulling my knife from its sheath and turning back to Taar. He watches me, a stunned expression on his face. “What was that?” he asks, as I set to work cutting his bonds.

I open my mouth to respond, then shut it again. There will be time enough to explain if we get out of this alive. My sharp blade cuts through the last rope binding Taar's leg. Thankfully he doesn't press his question but swipes the corpse woman's fallen sword from the floor and, by some instinct developed over long years of training, raises it over his head.

Just in time—Shanaera's blade connects with his. He meets her gaze and holds it as he rises from a kneeling position. The air shrieks with the sound of steel on steel.

"You should have let me give you the virulium, Taar," she says. With a heave of muscle, she pushes away from him, backs up several steps, and assumes a battle stance. "Now I'll have to drag your sorry corpse back to the citadel untreated. You'll be a hollow shell, like all your people."

Taar's teeth flash in a grimace. "Ilsevel," he says, without taking his eyes off his foe, "get Elydark."

Then he lunges. Sword crashes against sword as he rains a series of powerful blows down on her. Shanaera blocks them, her feet moving as nimbly as a dancer's, using her lighter build to her advantage despite his superior strength.

I don't want to leave him. Gods save me, I just found him again! But I'm no use in a fray, and Elydark might give Taar just the advantage he needs. A curse on my lips, I turn away. Diira! I sing.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

My unicorn meets the crash of an undead man's sword with her horn then drives him back into the wall. He hits it hard, stunned, and she takes the moment to look back at me. I beckon. There's a flash of resistance along our soul-tether; she hates to leave a fight. With a snort, she leaps to my side, once more kneeling so I can scramble onto her back. We've got to get Elydark, I sing.

She acknowledges this with another bugling cry as she surges back to her feet. I have just time enough to grab a fistful of mane before she leaps into motion, speeding back to the hinge-sagging door through which she just burst. We emerge into the glare of the setting sun, which casts long shadows across the courtyard.

Elydark sings out, drawing my attention to where he stands hobbled beneath a bare-branched tree. The four undead unicorns surround him, their hulking forms a terrible sight. They sway where they stand, unaware or uncaring of the fight taking place inside. Their lifeless eyes seem to stare off into realms and worlds far beyond this one, and un-song ripples beneath their flesh.

Elydark, by contrast, struggles against the evil black ropes binding his legs. He throws back his head, eyes rolling. "Quick, Diira," I say out loud, pointing. She turns her head, takes three steps.

Suddenly the dead surround us. All those lifeless, spiritless forms which had stood by in the courtyard without interest when we rode through, are now in motion, as though someone spoke the command to awaken them. Swords and knives in hand, they throw themselves at Diira, slashing cruelly. She rears, taken by surprise, then swings her great head, knocking one dead man into another so that they both fall to the ground. Another undead slashes at her neck while it's bent. With a wordless cry, I

swing as far as I can with my knife and manage to cut a rotten cheek.

The dead man turns his head sharply. His empty eyes cannot quite seem to fix on me, but he knows I am there. He knows I am his intended prey.

The next instant his hand latches onto my throat, and he yanks me from Diira's back. I scramble at his arm, trying to pry free of his grip, even as my feet kick and struggle to find the ground. Diira gallops on several paces before turning, head-down, ready to charge my captor. But five more undead throw themselves bodily at her, clambering on her back, her neck, tearing at her with nails and teeth. I reach for her with my mind, but then my whole vision is taken up with a dead man's gaze.

He stares down at me, as though staring into my very soul. There's no life in him, but there's something else—something dark lurking behind the windows of his eyes. A spell or a spirit, I cannot say. Whatever it is, it isn't him anymore, whoever he once was.

A face flashes across my mind's eye: Ilanthor.

The fingers around my throat tighten. I don't know if I can do what I must, not when I'm unable to breathe. But then my gods-gift was never about my voice, was it?

I open my mouth and let song pour forth. Not a song for the ears, but one of pure spirit. Instantly my connection with Diira flares, and a stream of power pours out from her soul into mine, strengthening the song. It's like the one I sang with Elydark when we healed Taar. It's like the one I sang for the dead Ilanthor on the brink of that cliff in the Wood Between. Most of all, it's like the song Diira sang over my burnt body. A song without words, a song of pure force and spirit and life-giving energy.

The dead man blinks. For a moment I see only more death in his gaze. His fingers relax, tense again, tremble.

Then, to my relief, he releases me and staggers back five paces, shaking his head as though to ward off a swarm of bees. I keep singing, pouring that power straight from my heart, channeling everything Diira gives me. When I sang this song to Ilanthor, it was with my human voice, and the effect was brief and faulty. Now pure fire emerges from my throat, translating the music of celestial beings into a physical world. It becomes a whip of flame, which I lash around the undead man, wrapping him from head to toe, until the man himself is no longer visible.

Then he is there—not the undead with his unseeing eyes and that sense of otherness peering through. No, this man is clear-eyed, his face bright with sudden life, despite the decay spread across his tortured features. He stares around, confused, his mouth opening and closing slowly. His gaze lands on the dead attacking Diira.

Everything in him, as a true man of Licorna, reacts. He leaps forward with a bellow of rage, grabs the nearest undead, and flings him to the ground.

Encouraged, I intensify my song, let it spread farther, from one man to the next. Once I find the knack of it, it's easy enough—song always wants to fill whatever space it enters. One by one the undead stagger away from Diira, looking down at their hands before turning to each other in mingled wonder and horror.

Diira, shuddering from the assault, bleeding from several wounds, but otherwise whole, shakes her body and trots to my side. You've called up their spirits from where they were buried, she says, her voice admiring and a little surprised. I've never seen such a thing.

Neither have I. I don't understand it; in this moment, I don't particularly want to try. Will they help us? I ask.

I don't know. It can't hurt to ask.

So I sing a new variation on the song, adding a note of question. Immediately the undead—at least fifteen strong—turn and, still moving with the awkward strides of dead men and women, hasten to Elydark, as eager to set him free as they were to save Diira from each other. But the dead unicorns stand in their way. Massive and menacing, they form an impassable wall, complete with spike horns aimed forward in defense, between us and the bound Elydark.

Help him! I sing.

As though responding to a command, the undead throw themselves at those corpse beasts. The unicorns toss them aside with violent thrusts of their horns, and their hooves gash flesh and smash skulls. But the dead men and women rise again. Red-light of Miphates spellcraft mingles with the fire of my song in a bizarre glare of magic force.

I can't wait for the dead to break through that defense, however. Turning, I mount Diira, using all my strength to heave myself up onto her back. Go! I urge, and she leaps forward, dodging and weaving through the battle. One of those awful horns tears at her shoulder, but she pushes on until we reach Elydark's side. I leap to the ground and make short work of the binding ropes with my knife.

The blast of fire from Elydark's soul is nearly equal to that explosion from Nyathri which so nearly killed me. I throw up my arms in defense, but this time, there is no need. Diira's fire surrounds me in protection, and the heat of Elydark's pent-up power rolls over me, harmless. It does, however, knock flat both the dead warriors and the dead unicorns. They sprawl across the courtyard, like so many autumn leaves sent tossed in a hurricane gale.

Roaring, Elydark does not pause for thanks. With a heave of powerful muscle, fire lashing from his mane and tail in longtongues of flame, he leaps over the fallen unicorns and races across the courtyard.

Before he can make it to the manor door, however, four figures tumble out into the fading daylight. Elydark skids to a halt. My heart jolts in my throat. Taar!

Two of the undead grip Taar by the arms, dragging him between them out the door. Shanaera follows. She grips a sword in her hand and trails the blade behind her so that metal screeches against stone. She looks out at the mayhem in the courtyard, at all her fallen people.

“Enough of this!” she cries. Hoisting the sword, she points the blade straight at me. “If you want your husband alive,” she snarls, “you’ll surrender at once.”

I stand frozen, feet braced, my voice momentarily silenced. The two undead gripping Taar’s arms force him to his knees. Shanaera raises her sword above her head, eyes meeting mine. One stroke, and his head will roll.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” she says. “I want him whole. He’s useless to anyone chopped into little pieces. And I want you as well, little princess. Morthiel thinks your gift is the very key he’s been searching for to perfect his spell.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

While she speaks, four other figures appear in the doorway behind her: undead with blank faces. They were too far away to hear my song before. But now?

“If I present you to Morthiel,” Shanaera continues, “he will be so grateful. And gratitude is a useful tool, as I’m sure you know. So why don’t we find a way to make this situation rather more tenable to all and sundry?”

I look at her again and see the un-song whorling through her spirit. Whatever she might once have been, whoever the woman was that Taar loved, she is long gone. Which is why I feel no compunction about what I do next.

GO! I sing.

A burst of soulfire explodes from my chest, my throat, my heart. Diira’s power surges through me, lashing out in tongues of purple that touch each of the empty souls in that courtyard. Including the four standing directly behind Shanaera. The undead lurch toward her from every angle. The four at her back grab her arms and yank them back before she can make the killing stroke.

Shanaera is no mean warrior, however. She wrenches her sword arm and lashes out at the dead. One blow strikes off two heads, which roll down the front steps even as the headless bodies disintegrate. By then, the other undead have crowded in. They hurtle bodily at the two figures holding Taar’s arms. His captors scream in horror as they are overwhelmed, torn to pieces. Taar shakes himself free and stands apart from the fray. His eyes flash to meet mine for an instant.

Then he throws himself at Shanaera.

She sees him coming. She sees something in his face and, perhaps for the first time in a very long while, she is afraid.

Springing free of the swarming dead she flees across the far side of the courtyard, shouting commands as she goes. The four dead unicorns, having risen once more, lumber into motion, galloping after her. Elydark, still raging, bears down on one of them. His horn pierces its chest, and it utters a terrible screech before disintegrating in a burst of black motes like ash. Diira takes down another with a similar blow, but the other two reach their mistress. Shanaera swings up onto the back of the larger, faster beast and bows low over its neck as it carries her from the yard.

“Vulmon, Elydark!” Taar bellows, and his unicorn lopes to his side. Arm muscles rippling, he heaves himself into the saddle, and the two of them race after their prey.

“Taar, no!” I cry and take ten running steps after him before coming to a stop. There’s nothing I can do but watch him disappear, chasing after her. After Shanaera.

Leaving me behind.

38

TAAR

Elydark hits his stride as we leave the courtyard behind. His speed is tremendous, all that power which was trapped inside during the hours of his bondage suddenly expelled in a rush of flame and fury. I mold my body to his, and we become one being of pure, rushing wind.

Shanaera is in my sights. Her undead mount is a massive thing. Even in life it was no match for Elydark’s speed, and now? We will run them down; I am sure of it. We will draw alongside them, and with a single slash of my blade, I will end the life of

this abomination who wears the face of the woman I loved.

She looks back over her shoulder, strands of straggled hair whipping across her dead eyes. Though there are still many lengths between us, our eyes meet in a moment of electric connection. I feel her fear, her pain, her rage, her sorrow. I feel the roiling burn of virulium madness, the source of both her death and her ongoing existence in this hellish state.

But I feel as well, in that brief exchange, the heart of the woman she once was. The valiant warrior, willing to give up everything for the cause she believed in. Even me. Even her own soul. I gnash my teeth. She cannot be allowed to go on like this. I owe it to the Shanaera I knew to put a stop to this curse, to set her free.

But then thevelraburns up my arm.

Stop! I cry to Elydark through our soul-tether. My licorneir comes to a halt, tossing his head, tearing at the earth with desire to continue the chase. I keep him at bay and gaze out across the distance as Shanaera, facing forward once more, urges her beast up a grassy incline. She reaches the crest just as the sun drops below the far horizon. There she pulls up her licorneir and looks back again. For a moment I see her silhouetted against the twilight sky.

Though I am probably imagining it, it seems as though she smiles in sudden triumph. She knows my weakness. She knows I cannot be far from Ilsevel. She only had to race me to the end of thevelra, no farther.

“Shakh!” I curse, even as Elydark paces beneath me. The temptation is strong to drive him forward, to continue this pursuit. But already weakness trembles in my limbs. If I go on, I risk too much. More than I am willing to lose.

She turns the dead licorneir’s head about and vanishes over the hill. The second

licorneir, which kept pace at her heels, trails behind. I remain where I am a few minutes longer, watching that empty space on the horizon, while the sky overhead deepens, and the stars begin to shine.

At last, with another curse on my lips, I turn Elydark's head around and urge him back to Rothiliar House.

The shamblers have gathered beneath a tree on the far side of the courtyard. All the life and spirit which had flared inside them at the summoning of Ilsevel's song has vanished; they are once more dead things made animate by dark magic. All wearing the faces of my friends.

I dismount Elydark and stand for some moments at his shoulder, my hand resting against him for support. We exchange song without words. There are no words for what I must now do. Then, stepping forward, I proceed to decapitate the dead ones. They make no protest. They do not even lift their sightless eyes to meet mine. Each stroke is followed by the thunk of a head falling. The bodies disintegrate before they hit the ground, leaving behind nothing but motes of darkness and the last red gleams of residual necroliphamagic.

When my task is done, there is no pile of corpses left in gruesome testimony of what took place here. It is as though the evil wrought by the Miphates was nothing but a nightmare, and now I stand in the waking world, beneath a star-strewn sky. With a sigh I lower my sword arm and tilt my head back, letting starlight bathe my face. For a long moment I stand like so, simply breathing. And that act is in and of itself a prayer of thanksgiving.

A gentle lilt of song draws my attention. I turn to see Elydark, standing with the dappled licorneir who Ilsevel rode in on. Is it Nyathri? She feels familiar, but also different. Some vital change has taken place, as it always does when a new velaribond is formed. Elydark touches her neck softly with his nose, singing to

her in a language not meant for other ears. Their souls glow, luminous in the deepening gloom. I cannot help a small half-smile at the sight.

Finally I turn and face the house. Face the front steps where a slender figure sits with her arms wrapped around her upraised legs and her chin propped on her knees. Watching me. Her brow is fixed in a stern little knot that makes my heart ache.

I approach her slowly, though she urges me to run. Somehow I know I must not rush whatever moments come next. She sits up a little straighter as I draw near but does not rise. She merely watches me until I stand several steps down from her, our faces level.

“Did you get her?” she asks at last, her voice terse.

I shake my head.

She curses softly and looks away from me, across the yard to where Elydark and the other licorneir stand together. “Do you think she’ll come back?”

“Not tonight,” I answer, my voice thick.

She presses her lips together tight, then nods.

“How are you here, Ilsevel?” The question hurts as it passes through my tight throat. In my mind I still see her as she was in the valley: burnt, broken. Struggling for each breath. There is no way she could have survived that, and yet . . . “How is it possible?”

She nods toward the licorneir. “It was Diira. Nyathri, as you know her, but that isn’t her name anymore. She came back for me, and—”

I cannot wait a moment longer. I’ve held myself in check as long as I can possibly stand, but no more. Before she finishes speaking, I stride up the steps, catch her by the arms, haul her to her feet, and pull her to my chest.

My lips crash against hers, hard—too hard, too brutal. Yet she does not pull away. A little whimper vibrates in her throat, and her mouth moves under mine, trembling with emotion. I place a hand on her face, tilt her head back farther, and deepen the kiss, while my other hand presses into the small of her back, molding her against my

body. She is so soft, so warm, so impossibly alive. It's more than anything I dared hope or pray for throughout the hellish hours of this infernal day. If I could capture this moment and spin it into eternity I would.

When I break away at last, it is only to lift my lips a fraction of an inch from hers. "I'm sorry," I rasp, my voice husky and strange to my own ears. "I must be the most gods-damned fool ever created for not realizing sooner."

"Realizing what?" she breathes. Her eyelids flutter softly.

"That I need you," I answer at once, cupping her cheek, running my fingers along the line of her jaw, her throat, feeling the softness of unburnt skin beneath my palm. "Like I need air in my lungs. That I want you more than any dream which ever tormented my worthless soul." My other hand cradles her face as I gaze down into those flashing eyes of hers. "That I desire never to be parted from you again, from this day to the moment I expel the last breath from my lungs."

She shakes her head. Tears shimmer between her lashes, spill over in shining trails. "Thevelra. . ." she quavers.

"This has nothing to do with thevelra." I lean in and kiss those tears from her cheeks, first one than the other. "I knew the truth from the instant I set eyes on you. In that temple, amid the fire and the death and the screams, I saw you. And I knew."

Gods, I never believed something like this could happen! How does such feeling burst spontaneously to life in the midst of so much darkness? My hand shakes as I stroke hair back from her face. "I didn't save you from Lurodos for some altruistic purpose. I took you because . . . because I wanted you for myself. I wanted you, Ilsevel. That is the truth, for good or ill. I brought you before the priest, spoke those vows, told myself it meant nothing, when in fact, it meant everything. Everything, do you understand? That is why thevelrais so strong. Nornala refused to let me escape

my own heart, even when I thought I wanted to.”

Ilsevel takes hold of my hands, pulls them away from her face. She steps back a pace, staring up at me. “But I was a stranger. I still am.”

“It doesn’t matter. My heart knows you. It knew you from the first. Only I was too stubborn, too frightened to admit it until . . .” My voice chokes, the horror of what took place this dawn still gripping me fast. “. . . until I saw you lying burnt in my arms. All but dead. Gods damn me, Ilsevel, I thought I would go mad!”

She does not resist when I draw her to me again, kissing her with ferocious need. I taste salt, and it sharpens my hunger. I need that touch, I need that proof of her reality here in my life. My lips pull and mold hers, while my hands press her against my body. I feel how easy it would be to crush the very life out of her. Yet her spirit is so strong, so vital, so far beyond the grasp of any power of this world. She is a being of pure fire. I want to bask in her glow.

“I love you.” The words spill out the instant my lips break contact. I kiss her again, briefly, viciously, before another torrent bursts forth. “I love you, Ilsevel. And I defy all the demons of Ashtari and the nine hells to take you from me again.”

There’s something in her expression, something I don’t understand. I hook a finger under her chin, tilting her face back, trying to make her avoidant eyes look at me. “Ilsevel?” She shakes her head, turning away. “Ilsevel, do you believe me?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

Her answer hurts. But it’s no more than I deserve after everything I’ve put her through. “I’ll prove it,” I say, careful to soften the roughness in my tone. “Whatever it takes and however long. I’ll prove it to you somehow.”

Though tears still shine in her eyes, she seems to be lit up inside with an otherworldly glow. Gods above, how did I not realize until this moment just how beautiful she is? “My father—” she begins.

“I don’t care.”

“Your people—”

“I don’t care.”

She bites her lip, dropping her gaze. Then, very softly, so that I almost wonder if I heard her: “I think I love you too.”

I tilt my head, brow puckered. “You think?”

She shrugs a little, half-catching my gaze. “It’s . . . frightening. To say it, I mean.”

“Yes.” I sigh. My chest feels too large, my heart too wild as it careens inside. “You don’t have to love me in return. Not if you don’t want to, not if you don’t feel safe. But I love you. And I’ll say it every day of your life if you will permit me to.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

I kneel before her then, clasping her small hands in mine. Moonlight shines upon us, like the face of Nornala herself. I draw a long breath, then let the words fall from my tongue in the ancient Licornyn language. As I pronounce them, they become song; a deep and abiding melody, as old as the stars themselves.

“With my faith will I honor you.

With my body will I protect you.

With my arms will I shelter you.

With my heart will I warm you.”

Does she remember? Does she recognize the cadence of the vows I made to her on our wedding night? I want her to hear it again, this time spoken from the depths of my heart.

“From this day forth, my mouth, my lips, my tongue,

My every waking breath,

Are dedicated to your pleasure and delight.

My life is yours,

And, should you require it,

My death.”

The velracord flares bright, briefly visible in the ether between us, shining and golden. Ilsevel holds up her arm, turns it to observe how the cord wraps her flesh, then looks at my arm in turn. Her face is wondering, awe-struck, as she beholds the miracle which has bound us for the last week, seeing it anew. It is no longer a sentence to be endured but a blessing beyond all measure.

She gasps suddenly and turns away, putting her back to me. Her shoulders quake, and I hear a sob break from her lips. I’m on my feet in an instant, stepping close behind her. My hands grip her upper arms, and I drop my mouth close to her ear. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t deserve this,” she whispers. “I don’t deserve your love. Taar, I—”

She breaks off in a yelp of surprise as I scoop her off her feet and into my arms. I stride up the last few stairs and through the broken entrance doors of the house into the cavernous hall within, leaving Elydark and Diira in the courtyard behind us. A stairway presents itself to my vision, and I run up it without pausing for breath on the landing. “What are you doing?” Ilsevel squeaks in surprise as she clings to my shoulders.

I don’t answer. I approach first one door, then another, kicking them open. At the third chamber, I find what I’m looking for—a large bed, a little dusty, bathed in a pool of moonlight.

Smiling, I look down into my bride’s upturned face. “I’m going to show you exactly what you deserve, myzynala,” I say. “And I will keep on showing you, until you accept it as truth.”

ILSEVEL

Still cradling me in his arms, Taar presses his lips to mine, softly at first, but with increased urgency, seeking to part them and gain admittance. I don't need much urging. I open for him, welcome his tongue as it slips between my teeth. He tastes of blood and ash and life, a combination I never knew could be so delicious.

I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him deeper. My own tongue dances with his as our lips shape and reshape our connection. He shifts me in his arms until I am fully upright, and I wrap my legs around his waist. His hands grip my buttocks, fingers tight, almost painful, but that lashing tongue of his drives all other thoughts from my head.

I pull back a little at last, desperate for air. His breath is hard and quick, and when I gaze down into his face, he looks like a man intoxicated. I brush strands of hair from his brow, searching his features.

“What are you looking for?” he asks huskily.

I don't answer. I can't say that I'm still searching for falsehood—that doesn't seem fair after that vow-song of his, sung on the steps outside. I should believe him. He deserves that honor at least, surely.

But the truth is, I can't believe him. It is simply impossible to me that this man, this magnificent, powerful being, would actually love me. After everything I've put him through, after every secret I've kept and every outright lie I've told!

And there's still the matter of his people. We both know they will reject me, might even kill me outright if they catch me. And kill him too for loving me. They don't even know the worst of it yet; they don't know I am Larongar's daughter.

I don't say any of this, however. Not here. Not now. Not with Diira's song still burning in my heart, and Taar's kiss still burning on my lips.

Instead I simply lower my lips to his once more. Softly, lingering. Almost questioning. He answers with such tenderness and restraint, like he fears he will frighten or hurt me if he lets himself go. I frown at that, Shanaera's voice suddenly echoing in the back of my head: "A puny creature like you couldn't stand the true force of a Licornyn king's passion."

Impulsively I suck his lip between my teeth and bite down. Hard. Hard enough to taste blood.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

A growl erupts in his throat even as his mouth twists in a smile.

The next moment we're on the bed, his great body on top of mine, a dominating force of nature. His kisses capture and claim, deep and bruising, and when I can take no more, he nuzzles against my neck, teeth grazing skin from collarbone to earlobe. There he nips me hard enough to make me cry out. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, drag my nails down his bare back to his belt.

Straddling me, he reaches behind, catches my hands, and draws them forward between us. Then he takes both my wrists in one big hand, pins them over my head. His other hand makes short work of my gown, ripping away the tattered remnants with abandon.

I gasp as his palm and fingers find my flesh. My body writhes, not in any attempt to escape, but in response to the lightning lashing through my veins. He pulls fabric away from my hardened nipples before taking them in his mouth. He bites playfully, but not so as to hurt. His tongue licks and teases, while his hand glides lower, slipping between my legs. I struggle, my wrists still captured in his grasp, and moan softly. My moan deepens, growing louder, wilder, as his fingers perform their nimble work.

"That's a pretty song, *zylnala*," he murmurs against my flesh. "But there's one I like still better."

He slides away. I gasp in dismay at the sudden removal of his weight and heat, then gasp again when he takes hold of my hips and pulls me to the edge of the bed. This time I don't lie back. I sit upright and grab hold of his head as he buries his face

between my thighs. My fingers knot in his hair, pulling him to me. His mouth, his lips, his tongue do their work, and I become a living flame, burning brighter and hotter. A being of force and energy beyond the confines of this world. He makes me come alive—no longer a feeble spark in the night, but a blazing star, full of song.

As the crescendo takes me, I throw back my head and let song burst from my core, a deep, throaty melody that shakes the walls and rattles the heavens themselves.

When Taar draws back at last, I am panting hard, shivers of delight dancing from my core through every extremity. He pants, his breath hot against my tender place, and his eyes flash, looking up at me. Sweat glistens on both our bodies. I let go of his head, pushing hair back from my own face.

Suddenly I know what I must tell him. “Taar—” I begin.

He lunges. His mouth overwhelms my heat yet again. A single lash of his tongue over my already throbbing center, and constellations explode in my brain. I cry out, falling back on the bed, falling into the gift he gives so generously. Within moments a second song bursts from my gut, from the depths of my very soul. And where the first song was life, this one goes muchdeeper still. A song I recognize, born from only one source, if I can just be brave enough to claim it.

Spent at last, gasping for breath, and unable to utter another note if my life depended on it, I put out a trembling hand and gently press his head back, away from me. He catches that hand, biting my fingers softly, but allows me to draw him up to me, stopping only to caress my swiftly rising and falling breasts with his tongue. Then he stretches himself beside me, propped on one elbow as he gazes down into my face. His finger traces my jaw, my throat, runs down my sternum to my navel, and his eyes follow its trail, drinking in every inch of me.

Finally his eyes meet mine again. And I think:He’s such a fool for loving me!It will

only cause trouble and pain. I should reject him—for his sake, if not my own. What a mess I’ve already made of his life, and how much worse will it get if I give in now?

“Taar,” I whisper tremulously.

He presses two fingers to my lips. “You don’t have to say anything. I require nothing of you, now or ever. You give as you like, receive what you wish. No more, no less.”

I take hold of his huge, scarred hand, turn it, and kiss his palm. Then I press that palm to my cheek and gaze up into his eyes. “I love you, Taarthalar.” The relief it is to say those words out loud is almost as beautiful as the expression of dawning wonder illuminating his face. “I love you . . . husband.”

Closing my eyes, I reach inside, down to where my gods-gift ever waits. That gift which hears a song and knows it completely, ready to be summoned and sung again with perfect timing and pitch at a moment’s notice. And what were those words he spoke to me on the steps in the moonlight if not a song? I may not know the Licornyn words, but I understand how they are meant to be sung.

So I sing the vows of a Licornyn marriage, as I never did on my wedding night. And while I may not get the pronunciation exactly right, when I open my eyes and see the delight suffusing Taar’s face, that is encouragement enough to continue.

“Vel-sa almar,” I sing, the words lilting, edged with light. “E luralma idor-hath.”

My life is yours,

And, should you require it,

My death.

EPILOGUE

Larongar Cyhorn leans back in his chair, the contents of his desk spread across every available surface. Several important documents lie pinned beneath a tankard of ale, but one sits before him, crisp and clean as the day it was signed. He studies it now: his own signature and the strange, illegible scrawl beside it: the Shadow King's mark.

The contract is infused with tremendous magic, pored over many times by the most decorated mages in his court. Were it truly and incomparably broken, the spellwork would have disintegrated the paper, rendering the agreement between Gavaria and the Shadow King's realm null and void. Yet it remains intact. Even his eye, unsuited to detecting magic influence, catches a gleam of power running between his scrawled name and the Shadow King's symbol.

Slowly Larongar lifts his gaze to the figure standing on the far side of his desk. Mage Artoris—he remembers the boy he once was, a gawky, arrogant lad, who thought himself above the will of kings because of his close association with that decrepit Miphato, Morthiel. Larongar had taught him a different lesson; one which stuck through the years, judging by the young mage's nervous twitching.

Larongar's lip curls faintly. "And you're quite sure of this?" he says. "She is dead?"

Artoris swallows with some difficulty. He did not want to be the bearer of these tidings. Only desperation could have driven him to his sovereign's presence once again. "It is certain," he says. "No one survived the sack of the temple. The fae left none alive."

Larongar's throat tightens. While he prides himself on mastering his emotions, on never letting sentimentality or attachment get in the way of the many responsibilities he must fulfill as king . . . this news hurts.

Ilsevel. Ferocious little Ilsevel—his own spitting image, were she lucky enough to have been born a man. Her gods-gifted voice often soothed him in times of distress, and her fiery spirit amused him when it did not drive him to tear out his hair in sheer frustration. Of all his children, she was the one in whom he could take real pride, a bright reflection on the House of Cyhorn.

The Shadow King had seemed quite taken with her when he came to pay his court. He agreed to the marriage and gave surprisingly little pushback on some of the more pertinent aspects of the alliance contract. Larongar had always known a daughter like Ilsevel would serve him well, but he'd never dreamed she would capture the heart of a man so powerful!

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:47 am

And what might Larongar have done in a few short weeks, when the marriage took place? The entire troll army would have been at his disposal, according to the terms of that contract. Now . . .

He frowns, his gaze turning back to the document before him. The spellwork simmers against his fingertips but shows no sign of decay. Strange. Ilsevel's death should have been enough to bring this alliance to an abrupt end. There must be something else, something Larongar doesn't yet see. An angle to be exploited.

"Your Majesty." Artoris's voice trembles slightly. Larongar growls, irritated, and flashes a one-eyed glare at the bearded little bastard. "With the talisman fallen into Ruvaen's hands, it's only a matter of time before the fae break through the obscuris and attack Evisar Citadel. All Morthiel's work—everything you and he have labored to accomplish over so many years—will be lost."

"You have defenses of your own at Evisar," Larongar says, drumming his fingers on the desk.

The mage's face is pale in the candlelight. "Much of Morthiel's magic is channeled into the Rift. There's little enough remaining for defensive spells."

"What about those undead ghouls of yours? Surely you've built up enough stock to hold out for a season or two."

"Not enough to defend against both Noxaur and the Licornyn King."

"The Licornyn?" Larongar snorts. "There's not enough of those damnable half-breeds

left to cause more than a mild irritation.”

Artoris’s jaw hardens. “We must have reinforcements, Your Majesty. If you believe in Morthiel’s work, you must find a way to salvage the alliance with the Shadow King.” He leans over the desk then, planting his palms. “You have other daughters.”

Larongar looks at the mage’s hands pointedly. Artoris removes them, folds his arms into the sleeves of his robe, and steps back. With a sigh, Larongar shakes his head. “The contract specifically names Ilsevel. I cannot simply substitute one daughter for another.”

Artoris hesitates. Then, dropping his voice to a low murmur, as though afraid of being overheard. “There might be a way.”

“Is that so?” Larongar rests an elbow on the arm of his chair and tilts his head with mild interest. “I’m listening.”

TO BE CONTINUED