

~ Prologue ~

Long before the Firstlanders came to dwell upon the fair land of Aldyran, a dark vision haunted the sages of the elves. This nightmare warned of a time when war and strife would beset all the peoples of the land.

A millennia old prophecy foretold: "The breaking is at hand. The Blade, the Heart, and the Pawn shall meet, and on that day the sun will stand still and the stars will no longer spin with time. The Beast will rise to seek his place among mortals. Stand well against the storm, and sages shall sing of thy glory into the mists of Eternity. Fall, and all shall blacken and fade."

Their dreams filled with darkness and death, the ancient seers kept faithful records of their visions. Lesser divinations told that one would come who would seek to shatter the locks that bound the most terrible of all demonkind to the dark abyss of hell.

Laws more ancient than even the immortal elves prevented the gods of Aldyran from interfering with the prophecy. Instead, wise Astarus and his beloved sister Astaru kept watch, waiting for the ones who would come to battle the darkness.

In the fullness of time, the Firstlander humans came to Aldyran and claimed it for their own, giving to it the name of Y'Myran. During the wars that followed, nearly all of the elves' ancient knowledge was lost.

Peace was achieved. Kingdoms rose and flourished. The peoples of Y'Myran forgot the past and strove toward a future of prosperity.

Deep within the halls of hell one remembered and waited patiently. His time would come.

A tall, dark-haired man stared across the green-topped forests of Y'Dan and cursed his fate. *I was so close.* The thought trickled through his mind as he glared at the trees. All of his carefully wrought plans had been destroyed.

He should have known that Istaffryn, the shadowy leader of the Cabal, a loose-knit criminal organization, was cannier than he appeared. He had seen through the charms and charades of the young assassin Kesdyn Nightblade and had banished him from the guild.

Angered that anyone would dare dictate the path of his life, Kesdyn had changed his name and his occupation. An old, wizened sorcerer had eagerly taken on the young man as an apprentice and instructed him in the dark ways of using pain and fear to make magick. From the ashes of the man that had been Kesdyn came Kasyrin Darkchilde. The young sorcerer quickly attempted to use his newfound powers to take control of the Cabal.

He had failed, again. With seeming ease, Istaffryn had foiled plot after plot of Kasyrin's. Darkchilde's final defeat came at the hands of a complete outsider to the Cabal, the Y'Dani warleader, Rhu'len DaCour. Drawn into a web of lies and death, Rhu'len had sworn to slay Kasyrin or die trying.

Pain lanced through Kasyrin's side and he swore again. Rhu'len DaCour's sword had been sharp enough to split him from stem to stern. The only reason Kasyrin was alive now was due to his loyal servant, Porthyros Omal. After watching his master duel Rhu'len DaCour and lose, the rat-like little man had waited until sundown and then stolen out to the field and filched his master's body.

An old witch had been threatened into making Kasyrin well enough to travel, allowing him to flee northward. Now, here he was in the mountains above Y'Dan, with nothing more than the clothes on his back and a dagger in his belt.

Prior to the duel, he had been banished — cast out of the kingdoms and branded an oath-breaker. No matter where he went in Y'Myran, he would always be on the run. With nowhere else to go, Kasyrin decided to head north to the lands held by the barbarians of Amyra. There, he would rest, heal and think. A plan. He needed a plan, if he was to have his revenge.

The need for retribution consumed Kasyrin. If it was the last thing he did, he would have his vengeance. All who had stolen the power and glory that should be his would die. One pale hand closed into a fist so tightly that the nails cut into the flesh of his palm. Blood dripped onto the snow as a whispered word was stolen by the wind. "Revenge."

"Revenge." The echo awoke the sleeper from his slumber. His eyes opened and he blinked. It had been a long time since mortal speech had been heard in this place. Puzzled, he breathed a word of power. Nearby, a mirror shimmered to life, revealing a snow-covered mountain scene. Outlined in the glow of the morning sun was a man whose face was carved into the hardened planes of one who has made an unbreakable vow.

::So it hath come to pass:: The demon rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. As he stroked, his eyes closed and a smile creased his features into an expression of pure satisfaction. The sudden, sharp bark of his laughter echoed around the chamber. **::Excellent::** Rising from his throne, Ecarthus strode out into his domain and began giving orders.

::Go, my slaves. Fly amongst the mortals and study their wretched lives. It is upon me to learn of those who would seek to thwart my destiny.::

The demon moved in front of the mirror once again. Extending one clawed finger, he delicately slit the palm of his hand and allowed three drops of his black blood to mar the mirror's surface. Eldritch power rippled the silvered glass. Golden light suffused it briefly and then it cleared. Ecarthus' lip curved into a snarl. Picturing the face of the greatest enemy of his children, the demon whispered a name.

::DaCoure.::

A shirtless man appeared in the middle of a forest glade. In his hands was an axe, which he was applying with vigor to a pile of wood. It was easy to imagine the same hands wielding a sword.

Ecarthus growled. Too many of his precious spawn had been slain by this mortal. He was dangerous. Rhu'len DaCoure would be among the first to block any of the demon's plans. Something would have to be done to stop him.

An idea began to glimmer in the demon's mind. It was only the barest seed of a plan, but brought to fruition, it would yield a bloody harvest. To that end, he sent more of his servants into the realms above to wait and watch. Soon they would act, and in that action, bring about his greatest desire.

::I will be free.::

~ Chapter One ~

Leaning heavily on makeshift crutches, a rag-covered figure slowly hobbled down the road. Muddy snow hindered the traveler's progress as she struggled to drag her splinted right leg through the thick slurry.

Home. The word drew the traveler along the road like a harlot's call.

A light sleet fell, churning into the grimy road dirt and forcing the transient to fight for every step through the slick, slippery morass. Muffled imprecations peppered the air each time she stopped to pull her twisted leg from the muck. Coming almost too late, the thundering of hoof beats caused the figure to bite off one sharp curse.

Throwing herself into a mound of snow that bordered the roadway, Azhani Rhu'len silently insulted the rider's ancestry back to his Firstlander mother's choice of footwear.

As she watched the horse gallop by, Azhani pushed greasy black braids away from her face. Her eyes narrowed dangerously when she noted who was perched upon the horse's back.

In one hand, a dark-cloaked man clutched the reins of his mount. His other arm was wrapped tightly about an unconscious, scarlet-robed body draped haphazardly across the horse's neck. The rich crimson color of the velvet robes, coupled with a flash of teardrop-shaped tattoos on a pale, bruised face, told Azhani that the man had just broken one of the most sacred of Y'Myrani laws. Frustrated by her injury, the former soldier pushed herself up and considered her options.

That was a stardancer. I'd recognize those robes anywhere. I have to help. The burn scoring the warrior's face coupled with shooting pains in her leg begged her to reconsider her thoughts. Who was she to involve herself in Y'Myrani affairs, anyway? The border was so close that she might have already crossed it. She was outside the realm of man's law — this was the borderlands where nothing was sacred.

Nothing but your oaths, warrior.

Once, she had been the warleader to the kingdom of Y'Dan. Now, Azhani was an exile. Yet though she no longer served a king or his people, the oaths of loyalty she had taken ran too deep to break. She could not allow the rider to succeed in his crime, not while she still drew breath.

Sparing a prayer to the goddess Astariu, Azhani tossed one of her makeshift crutches aside and stripped the other down, revealing an ash longbow. Under the layers of her rags was a quiver of steel-tipped arrows.

She took a deep breath and then plunged into the thicket at the side of the road. This section of the forest was familiar to her and she hoped that she remembered the trails correctly. It had been many years since Azhani had traveled its green depths, but her memory served her well. A shortcut was hidden just behind some trees on her left.

Ignoring the pain that ignited as soon as she put pressure on her bad leg, the warrior loped across the snow-covered ground. A quarter candlemark later, she broke free of the forest ahead of the horseman, but not by much.

It took only heartbeats to string her bow and nock an arrow. Quietly, she waited, breathing shallowly to control the agony shooting up her leg in fiery waves. They were close; she could feel the thud of the horse's hooves in the balls of her feet. One breath, two, and then the stale, acrid stench of sweat tickled her nostrils.

Rounding the bend in the road at a gallop, the horse thundered past the spot where Azhani was hidden. The rider cracked a stick against the animal's heaving flanks, attempting to inspire more speed. Sweat mottled the horse's light brown hide and its eyes were starting to roll in panic. The rider turned his head to scan the road behind him and Azhani made her move.

A single arrow hissed through the air, striking the man in the shoulder with enough force to knock him and his hostage off the horse. Screaming in fear, the animal reared and then galloped off down the road. Azhani ignored it, hobbling up to the kidnapper with another arrow readied in her bow. Struggling to sit, the man cursed loudly and reached for the arrow that had knocked him from his mount. Not far away, his victim lay in the dirt, moaning softly.

"Don't move, lawbreaker!" Azhani said evenly. The irony of the situation did not escape the exiled soldier as she watched the kidnapper. Out of the corner of her eye, she quickly glanced over to where the stardancer had landed. *Is that a woman? Yes, I think so. She's breathing, but I'll lay odds that her skull will ache like a beast later.*

On hearing her voice, the man looked up and swore vehemently. Five feet away, the rag-covered, bow-wielding figure looked more like a crazed wild woman than a serious warrior. Yet her aim had been perfect, stopping his flight with one shot. Anger twisted his features and he reached for his dagger.

As soon as she saw his face, Azhani growled. Branded deeply into his left cheek was the mark of the Cabal. Long-nurtured hate for the clan of villains, murderers and thieves bubbled up inside her. As he went for his weapon, she loosed the second arrow, pinning his other shoulder to the ground. With a wild shout, Azhani twisted the bow around and smashed it into the kidnapper's knees. The sickening crunch of bone, followed by a tortured scream of pain, was music to her ears.

Placing the tip of the bow against his temple, she angrily demanded, "Who are you, lawbreaker? Why have you harmed one of Astariu's chosen?"

He mumbled a reply and she frowned, then tapped her bow against his head none too gently. "Speak up, scum."

Hate-filled brown eyes looked up into hers and he smiled mirthlessly. "Dance in hell, bitch." Dark blood bubbled up and spilled over his lips. His eyelids fluttered shut and he went limp.

"Astarus' balls!" Azhani dropped her bow aside and reached for his collar. Ripping open the tunic she was just able to see a light burn mark where one of the Cabal's coin-sized amulets had rested. The mumbling had been the trigger spell to release the poison into the man's bloodstream. She was too late.

Growling, Azhani stood and counted to ten. When that did not bring relief from her rapidly growing anger, she kicked the kidnapper's body, forgetting about her injuries for just the briefest moment. The pain was like a blast of icy water in the face, and she collapsed, whimpering brokenly. Fresh blood seeped through the rags binding her leg, staining the snow. Black spots obscured her vision as she panted, trying to will the pain away.

"Shyvot!" Azhani spat, and then picked up her bow and shook it angrily. "Twins cursed mace-wielding wet-nosed excuses for pathetic soldiers!" she shouted at the uncaring trees. She forced herself to roll over, pounding the ground with a fist as fresh pain brought tears to her eyes.

The warrior searched for something to distract her from the pain. Glancing over at the stardancer, she was heartened to see that the woman was still breathing.

"Though she's not likely to be grateful for that," Azhani muttered, noting the way the woman's body was heaped on the ground. "I'm betting that whatever rescue she prayed for, it was not by an oath-breaker." *She probably didn't think she'd be kidnapped, either, warrior. This is one of the goddess' favored servants, not some fluff-headed princess.*

Azhani gritted her teeth and slowly, one inch at a time, crawled over to the body of the kidnapper. Without regard for the still-warm skin under her fingers, she ruthlessly searched the corpse, seeking clues to explain why he had broken the kingdoms' oldest laws. Those who served the Twain, stardancers and starseekers, were deemed sacrosanct by noble and peasant alike. To even consider harming one of the gods' own made the former warleader's stomach twist into painful knots.

Finding nothing but a bag of mixed coins, a vial of poison and two knives, the warrior pulled her arrows free and stowed them back in the quiver.

She kept the plain dagger but left the wicked, hook-bladed knife that was the signature weapon of a Cabal assassin on the body. For a long moment, Azhani considered the vial of poison. One drink and she could finally be out of pain. It was tempting. Too tempting. With a determined grunt, she smashed the vial against a protruding tree root. As she watched the toxic liquid sink into the earth, she secreted the pouch of gold under her rags.

Even though the kidnapper's clothes were cleaner than hers, nothing in creation would convince her to don the garb of an assassin. She had no desire to come under the scrutiny of the dark gods who favored those who slunk in the shadows and preyed upon society. That baleful gaze had already wreaked too much pain and havoc in her life. Using the body to push herself upright, Azhani stood and hobbled toward the softly groaning stardancer.

A soft whicker from behind caused Azhani to turn. The horse had returned and was standing only a few feet away, sides heaving from exertion. Limping slowly toward him, Azhani spoke soothingly while reaching for the horse's bridle.

"That's a good lad," she whispered. Her hands came into contact with the slick leather and she reached up, scratching his head. Nodding in pleasure, the horse sighed. Upon his bridle were the starburst markings of Astariu's healer aspect, which led Azhani to surmise that the animal belonged to the unconscious priest.

"All right lad, let's see if you were trained properly," she said warmly. "Support." The horse immediately lowered his head, making it easy to grasp his mane tightly. "Easy," she said, and took a step forward, toward the stardancer. With the aid of the horse, she crossed the road to the fallen woman. Upon reaching the priest, the warrior calmly said, "Kneel." The horse went down on its front legs, waiting for the next command. "Steady," she said, and steered herself against the torture she knew was coming. As carefully as she was able, Azhani lifted the dead weight of the stardancer's body to the horse's back.

Before the pain could overwhelm her, Azhani dragged herself up behind the priest. The added complication of the splint made finding an easy way to mount impossible. By the time she was situated, she had nearly blacked out from the pain. Throughout the ordeal, the horse placidly knelt, waiting for her next command.

Taking a deep breath to quell rising nausea, Azhani wrapped her arms around the young woman, taking care not to tangle her hands in the strap of the stardancer's haversack. The priest's head lolled to the side, revealing her face. Alabaster skin covered an angular bone structure. A mottled bruise shadowed the edge of her jaw, causing Azhani to wince in sympathy. Thick, wavy amber curls framed the woman's delicate features and brushed the tops of her shoulders. Tiny, graceful points topped her ears, proclaiming her half-elven heritage. She's beautiful, the warrior thought as she juggled the priest around until she was safely tucked against her body.

Fighting off dizziness, Azhani willed her stomach to settle. Once she could see clearly, she took the reins and directed the gelding to stand and head for the road.

Kyrian slowly fought her way to consciousness. Her first impression was of warmth, then movement and finally the coppery tang of blood. Shaking her head to try and rid it of the foggy sensation that kept her from comprehending her surroundings, the stardancer groaned. Her mouth was coated with a sharp-tasting slime and her head felt as though she had been drinking for a week.

Astariu, remind me not to drink the ale in Kelderdon again, she thought muzzily, bringing up a hand to scrub at her face. To her surprise, she realized that she was on horseback, but another held the reins. She was also nowhere near Kelderdon. Instead, she seemed to be facing a small homestead in the forest. Just in front of the horse was a broken down fence line that ended in a gate. An overgrown path led to a cottage that would have been welcoming were it not for obvious signs of disrepair.

"What happened?" she muttered, reaching for her baton. The two-foot length of tempered steel still rode at her hip, carefully stowed in its dark leather sheath.

"Easy," said a deep, rumbling voice from behind her, while a large, calloused hand covered hers.

Kyrian craned her head around, meeting the hooded face of a dirty, rag-covered woman. Tightening her grip around her weapon, she barked, "Who are you and what are you doing on my horse?" Inside, she rapidly quelled a sense of rising panic. *Oh goddess, what have I done? I'm not that lonely, am I?*

A quick smile flashed across Azhani's grimy face. She's spirited, I'll grant her that. Not many would take that tone with me. Azhani dropped the reins into the startled hands of the stardancer and then tossed her bow to the snowy ground.

Dismounting, she nearly bit through her lip when her legs hit the ground. Grabbing for the support of the old fence, Azhani took several deep breaths, hoping the starbursts in her eyes would clear quickly. *Home.* She had ridden the horse, cradling the unconscious priest until they had reached the gates of a ramshackle, sprawling homestead.

A broken wall of stone encircled the deserted property. Upon seeing the obvious state of abandonment, Azhani said a silent prayer of thanks. Her entire journey north had been laced with the hope that nothing had happened to the place.

"Who are you?" Kyrian asked again.

"I am no one, my lady." Azhani sketched a curt bow and reached for her longbow. Grasping it tightly, she turned to hobble inside. "Thank you for the ride. Astariu guide your journey."

Totally confused, Kyrian called out, "Wait!" She let go of the baton's hilt. "You're injured. I'm a healer, let me help you."

Azhani glanced over her shoulder at the young woman. "It is not necessary, my lady, the injury is nothing that time will not mend."

"Time may do, stranger, but my hands and skill are keener than it will ever be," the stardancer said as she dismounted. "Besides, you owe me the tale of how we came to be doubling on poor Arun's back. I'm

certain that you were not among those sharing mugs of Gregor's finest last night at his daughter's handfasting!"

Azhani closed her eyes, reached up to pull back her tattered hood, and revealed her face. Looking up into the stardancer's almond-shaped green eyes, she grimly asked, "Would you give aid to an oath-breaker, healer?"

Kyrian hissed and drew back in fearful confusion.

Harsh, angular cheekbones prominently defined the hawk-like face. Her eyes were so blue that they contrasted sharply with the earthy duskiness of her skin. It was those eyes that caught and held Kyrian's attention, for they held the look of a warrior. Endlessly flicking from sight to sight, the woman's eyes captured everything from the flutter of a bird's wings to the rustle of grass as the horse browsed, searching for something to eat.

Thick, grimy hair clumped around the warrior's face and vanished into the folds of her cloak. Telltale pointed ears marked the woman as having elven ancestry, though she was not fully of the race. Below the corner of the stranger's right eye was a thick patch of dark scar tissue that stood out starkly against her brown skin.

Unconsciously, Kyrian's hand rose to touch the tattoo on her own face, as if seeking reassurance of its existence. Oath-breaker, the stranger had named herself. The horrible, puckered wound where once a noble mark of rank had rested gave credence to her words.

"Who are you stranger, that you bear the brand of an oath-breaker?" the stardancer asked in wonder.

It only took a moment's thought for the warrior to answer. There was nothing to lose, because a stardancer would not kill in cold blood. "I am Azhani Rhu'len," she said, bowing exaggeratedly. "At your service, my lady."

Kyrian's hand touched her chest as she stepped backward with a gasp. *I could kill her right now, and no one would care.* She had heard of Azhani Rhu'len, the Banshee of Banner Lake and former warleader of Y'Dan. For years, tales of the warrior's courage and skill in battle had spread throughout the kingdoms of Y'Myran. Now those stories went untold, replaced by the whispered horrors of her actions three months ago.

Y'Dan's king, Thodan the Peacemaker, had died in his sleep, and his son, Prince Arris, had inherited the throne. Rather than swear allegiance to the new king, Azhani had plotted to overthrow him. It was said that the young prince had stood before the Council awaiting his confirmation when the crazed warrior attempted to kill him. Arris had defended himself and had Azhani arrested. An investigation revealed the extent of her plan, and treason was only the beginning of her crimes. The Y'Dani warleader sought not only the new king's death, but his throne, as well.

King Arris had only one choice: sentence Azhani to death. But she had not gone to the gallows lightly. Choosing defiance to the last, she broke free of her jailor's bonds and attacked and killed Ylera Kelani, the elven ambassador. Compounding her crimes, Azhani demanded the rite of the gauntlet. The ancient custom allowed the warrior to face any who chose to pit their weapons against hers, until only one person was left standing.

The banks of Banner Lake were drenched with blood by the time Azhani had won her freedom. With no other option, King Arris declared the former warleader an outlaw, branded her an oath-breaker and drove her from his city. There was now a bounty on Azhani's head. If the ragged, beaten and lamed woman before Kyrian truly was Azhani Rhu'len, then no one would condemn her for walking away.

Except for Ylera. She would have wanted me to help her, Kyrian thought sadly. *Goddess bless you, Ylera, your heart was so full of forgiveness.* Ambassador Ylera Kelani, of the elven kingdom of Y'Syr, had been a good friend of the stardancer while she was still an acolyte. Though they had not seen each other for many years, Kyrian still fondly remembered their long nights spent studying by the light of a shared fire.

When she had heard of her friend's murder, Kyrian had raged in helpless anger. She had been in western Y'Dan when Azhani's treachery had taken place. Kyrian found it a beautiful irony that she had been unable to save Ylera, but now had the chance to exact a fitting revenge.

Her hand strayed toward the baton once again. Kyrian struggled to push her anger aside, to see beyond the red haze that clouded her vision and into the heart of the woman standing next to the gate. Her hand flexed as she fought the desire to exact retribution on the person who had taken her one friend from the world.

It would be easy, a sibilant inner voice coaxed. She's already weak and barely able to stand. Just one or two well-placed blows and the bitch would be deader than last year's leaves.

Kyrian's hand wavered as her muscles twitched painfully. She closed her eyes.

Blood dripped from the end of her baton. Bits of bone and brain splattered the front of her robes and in the distance she could hear the sound of someone crying.

Nausea washed over her and she drew in a shuddering breath, forcing the terrible memories to fade. Her lips shaped the word *no*.

Azhani sneered as she watched the play of emotion that flickered across the stardancer's face. "Go, healer, and give your skills to someone who is worthy of their learning," she said harshly, and then limped away.

Opening her eyes, Kyrian watched as Azhani struggled to cross the yard, falling every few steps. Doggedly, the warrior would pull herself up and continue to hobble toward the door of the cottage.

She's in pain, Kyrian thought. I have to help her. She's in pain. The goddess teaches that those in pain deserve our care, even if they are guilty of terrible crimes. It is not for me to judge. That is Astariu's duty. I am her servant, and my duty is to heal.

Winching at the onerous direction her thoughts had taken, Kyrian was surprised by a burning ache that thudded dully in her jaw. She reached up and probed the skin, hissing at the tenderness. *What the...?* she thought curiously, reaching into the pouch at her side to withdraw a small silver mirror. A dark purple bruise covered one side of her face. *Ah goddess, how did that happen?* She frowned and searched her memories for clues.

The ale was cold, spiced with a hint of nutmeg and it tasted good on Kyrian's dry tongue. The last of the prayers for the handfasting ceremony had been spoken and she was thirsty enough to drink from a bog. Smiling at the sight of the newly fasted couple dancing in the center of the inn, Kyrian wandered outside with her drink and breathed deeply of the cool night air. A man who walked with an oddly unbalanced gait neared her and she reached out to assist him.

That's when she noticed the slightly strange taste of the brew, a hint of something that the nutmeg and alcohol could not disguise. Cursing softly, she tossed aside the mug and was shoving her fingers down her throat when a large fist came from nowhere and knocked her unconscious.

Kyrian rubbed her jaw again. *All right, so how did I get from there to here?* she wondered. Azhani had not been her attacker. She had caught just enough of a glimpse of the person's face to know that she had not been one of the oath-breaker's victims. Another memory intruded, this time of falling through the air and hitting the ground hard. Kyrian struggled to grasp it, to seize any details that her addled brain had saved. As she fell, she had seen a monstrous, bow-wielding form howl ferociously and leap on the man who had held her captive.

Looking across the yard to where the warrior was still struggling to reach the cabin, Kyrian realized that the bowman had been Azhani. There was a mystery here. Why would a woman branded as a traitor risk herself to save someone? Yes, that someone was a stardancer, one of the few whose gifts were so great that Astariu empowered them with the magickal ability to heal, but why should Azhani care? It obviously hadn't been to beg succor for her injuries, since she had scorned Kyrian's offer of aid.

Unless she's a really good liar. Again, anger rose.

She killed Ylera! The mental scream caused Kyrian to scowl fiercely. *She's evil. It's a trick. She saved you just so you would feel indebted to her.*

Unable to reach a decision, she stood unmoving as Azhani stumbled and crawled her way across the snow-strewn yard. The sheer amount of determination that it took to ignore what must be excruciating pain forced Kyrian to study her memories as closely as she could. Never, in all the tales she had heard about the near legendary warleader, had she heard a whisper of Azhani acting without honor.

What she could remember of the warrior's most recent actions agreed with the older tales, flying in the face of every rumor and story she had heard of the events of Banner Lake. Was this woman a monster, or was she a hero? Kyrian bit her lip, helplessly indecisive.

Azhani fell again, this time a tiny cry of pain forcing the stardancer to take a half step forward.

Help her, an inner voice urged Kyrian. You swore never to kill another thinking being. If you don't help Azhani now, you will surely break that vow!

Kyrian's resistance crumbled. Whatever Azhani had done in the past, she wasn't going to do harm now, not as weakened as she was.

I have to do this. I will not wash more blood from my baton.

"Guard," she whispered, knowing the horse would raise the alarm if something bigger than a rabbit came near the gate. Striding quickly to Azhani's side, she declared, "I don't care if you're a rimerbeast's mutant spawn, I'm going to help you." She knelt by the warrior's injured side, offering her shoulder for support.

Azhani looked up at the stardancer, disbelief clearly written on her harsh features. "Is this a trick? Are you going to stab me just as soon as I turn my back? You could, you know." The warrior's harsh bark of laughter made Kyrian regret her earlier thoughts. "I'm as weak as a kitten."

Taking the initiative, Kyrian wrapped one arm around Azhani's waist and waited for her to grab hold. "You are injured and I am a healer. It is my sworn oath to offer aid to those in need. You would not have me be an oath-breaker, would you?"

Coldly, Azhani looked up, meeting the open gaze of the stardancer. All uncertainty was gone and what remained on Kyrian's face was gentle concern. The acidic comment on the warrior's tongue dissolved unspoken. Looking down at the snow, she mumbled no and settled her arm on Kyrian's shoulder.

The stardancer was surprisingly strong. Beneath the slight appearance was a compactly muscled body and she easily lifted the heavier, taller woman, standing steady until Azhani had found her balance. The pair began to take slow, steady steps toward the cottage.

"I would not dishonor you so, my lady," Azhani added softly, after catching her breath.

"Good. Now, is that a door, or do I need to have Arun kick in the window?" Kyrian asked, nodding toward the front of the house.

Despite herself, Azhani laughed. "It's a door." Reaching up, she fished around the doorframe until she found a loosened bit of wood. After a gentle tug, it came free, revealing a rusty key. "This is my home, such as it is." The warrior took the key and began to fumble with the lock.

"Home? I thought you lived in Y'Dannyv," Kyrian said.

"I did. This is my father's homestead. I grew up here in the borderlands." Nodding to the north, she added, "Ride about five days travel that way and you'll hit the foothills of the Crest of Amyra. If you go that way," she indicated the other direction, "you'll end up back in Y'Dan. Satisfied? No laws to break here, because there aren't any."

With a sudden rusty screech, the lock popped open. Kyrian took the handle and gave it a good turn, opening the door. Seasons worth of dirt and dust exploded outward, causing the stardancer to cough and fan the air in front of her face. Kyrian blinked several times, trying to see into the dimly lit room.

Debris littered the floor; not an item of whole furniture remained. A musty odor clung heavily to the room, and Kyrian recognized a variety of animal prints in the thick dust. Dirty cobwebs stretched across the ceiling, draping down into their faces as they slowly entered the cabin.

"I thought you said that you lived here," Kyrian said uncertainly as she helped the injured warrior into the room.

Azhani used her bow to push some of the larger clumps of debris out of her way. "I do. Now."

"Why is there nothing here?" Kyrian gestured around the room at the mess. "All that remains is garbage," she finished, shrugging curiously.

"After my father died, raiders took everything that wasn't nailed down," Azhani said as Kyrian lowered her to the ground near the hearth. "The last time I was here, I locked up to keep the larger animals from making this place uninhabitable."

Kyrian smirked as she looked around at piles of rodent droppings. "I suppose it worked to some extent."

"It was all I could do at the time," Azhani murmured.

"It will do," the stardancer said. Carefully, she inspected the fireplace, seeking any blockages in the flue. "May I borrow that?" she asked, pointing at the longbow.

Azhani wordlessly handed over the unstrung bow, wincing as the stardancer used it to poke and prod at the chimney until several ancient nests fell into the hearth, sending clouds of dust and soot flying.

Coughing and wheezing, the warrior snatched her bow back when Kyrian offered it to her with a sheepish grin.

"Sorry," the stardancer said as she gathered piles of broken twigs to lay out a fire. She gave the debris a considering glance. Most of the trash would burn and the rest would go into the middens. Clean up would be easy. *Is it too much to hope that there's a broom around here somewhere?*

Once there was a small fire going in the hearth, Kyrian knelt next to the warrior and said, "Now, let me look at that leg."

Azhani had drifted off into a light doze, but came awake quickly when the stardancer spoke. She attempted to swing her legs around toward Kyrian, but her badly damaged leg had frozen in place. "I might need a little help," she admitted gruffly, trying to force her legs to move.

Gently, Kyrian helped her to reposition herself so that her legs were stretched out. Tiny gasps and mews of pain escaped as Azhani moved, but she did it, collapsing to the floor when Kyrian signaled she could stop.

The stardancer eyed the haphazard bandages critically. Calmly, she reached into her haversack and withdrew a small knife and began to cut away the cloth that held the battered splints in place. When the wood and rags had fallen away, she sucked in a breath at the revealed wound. A mottling of bruises covered Azhani's entire leg from the knee down. Thick yellow pus oozed from torn putrefied flesh and white ends of damaged bone thrust up through the wound. Large knots of torn muscle indicated that the bones had been broken more than once.

"Wasn't this set?" Kyrian asked in indignation as she began pulling out the tools of her trade.

"Didn't have," Azhani gasped, "much time." The whisper-light touch of the stardancer's warm fingers had sent daggers of pain up her leg. "I was in something of a hurry to leave Y'Dannyv."

"So it's true then, what they say?" Kyrian asked conversationally, as she ground several herbs together.

Azhani didn't answer.

Kyrian looked up and stared at the warrior, but Azhani wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Why?" Kyrian whispered. "Ambassador Kelani and the soldiers — you killed them. Why, Azhani?"

Still no answer came.

Sighing sadly, Kyrian stood and walked to the door. Arun amiably cantered over when she called out to him. When the gelding poked his nose through the doorway, he got a snootful of dust and sneezed loudly, causing her to softly chuckle. She removed her saddlebags, bedroll and extra blankets, and thanked the gods that her nameless kidnapper had thought to steal her horse too.

She dug out a pot, scooped up some snow and set it on the fire to melt. "I'm going to have to set your leg. It will cause you a great deal of pain." Her voice was tinged with regret.

"I know," the warrior replied dazedly. Lurid red spots flickered in front of her eyes as waves of pain and nausea threatened to render her unconscious while cold chills wracked her body.

Kyrian noticed Azhani's hands opening and closing spastically and made a soothing noise. "Not much longer now. Once this steeps, I'll put you to sleep and you can rest."

"No. I'll stay awake," Azhani said weakly. "Don't waste your magick on me, healer."

Kyrian poured the herbs into the pot of water and stirred them with her knife. "It's my decision to make, warrior. The magick is yours whether you will it or no." She propped her bedroll behind Azhani's head. "Close your eyes and try to rest. I'm almost ready."

While Azhani relaxed into the softness of the woolen blankets, the stardancer briskly set to work. Quickly, she searched the bottom floor of the small house. In the storage area, she found a battered broom hiding in a darkened corner. Smiling as she claimed her prize, she returned to the main room.

"Looks like the bandits forgot something!" She triumphantly displayed the ratty broom for the warrior.

Azhani grunted in amusement. "Trust a stardancer to make a treasure out of a broom."

Kyrian shot her a bright smile, and then dropped the broom to hurry over to her pot, which was boiling rapidly. "My apologies, but this is going to taste like the bottom of a chamber pot." She made a sour face as she used a piece of clean linen from her haversack to filter the steaming drink into a mug. "On the bright side, you'll feel much better."

Azhani sat up and sipped at the tea, gagging at the extremely bitter taste. "You don't honey coat the truth, do you?" she asked while coughing and gasping.

"Why should I? If I had said that it tasted like ambrosia, would you have believed me?" Kyrian asked, raising one eyebrow in curiosity. "Beyond that, after tasting such a brew, would you trust my skills as a healer?"

The warrior chuckled ruefully. "No, I would not, to both questions. I have dealt with my share of surgeons, my lady." She blinked her eyes. As she had suspected, there was something in the drink to make her drowsy. "I said I wanted to stay awake," she said in protest as the herbs took effect.

Kyrian caught the mug before it slipped from nerveless fingers. "I know, warrior. But I need you still to work this healing," she whispered as Azhani drifted off into the dream realms. "And I'm afraid that there'd be no keeping you steady once I set that first break."

The surgery on Azhani's leg took several candlemarks. Kyrian was appalled at the extensive damage and knew that she would have to spend at least one session using Astariu's gift to repair the bones. Otherwise, the warrior would never walk properly again.

Kyrian's hard work had not gone unrewarded, though. With the necrotic tissue cut away, the angry red lines of infection were slowly receding and allowing good blood to flow through the leg. Kyrian was quite pleased. The warrior's leg had an excellent chance of survival.

While Azhani rested peacefully, Kyrian kept busy by cleaning the small cabin.

The interior's a wreck, but at least the structure seems solid. It's cold today, and winter has barely settled on the mountains, Kyrian mused silently as she cleaned.

The cabin had three rooms. There was the hearth room where Azhani slept, a loft and a storage room. A door led from the storage area to the back of the house.

Wondering what was outside, Kyrian opened the door and looked. Not more than fifty paces away stood a small stable and paddock. She wandered out to the stable and opened the door, smiling when she saw that the inside was perfect for Arun.

The stable was not as dirty as the house, and it only took her a few minutes to clear out a stall for her horse.

"Here you go, Arun," Kyrian murmured as she led the horse through the door. As the day had passed, it had grown bitterly cold and she could tell that Arun was grateful to be out of the chill. There was a small hearth, which the stardancer cleared. Then she set a well-banked fire so that the horse would be warm all night.

Finally she curried Arun until his hide glistened in the waning sunlight. Leaving him with a bag filled with oats, she brushed her hands off and muttered, "Now, what else can I find?"

She yawned and almost missed the outhouse. Further away from the house than the stable, the ramshackle building squatted between two trees. "I should have found this earlier," Kyrian said as she opened the door.

The stale scent of animal habitation greeted her and she wrinkled her nose.

"Oh that's wretched. This will never do." Even though it was late, she hurriedly returned to the cabin. Fetching the broom and a lantern, Kyrian went back to the privy to clean it. While she worked, the stardancer realized that she was going about her chores haphazardly. Laughing, she shrugged. Who would know if she didn't follow perfect protocol? The work was getting done, and that was what mattered.

Privy cleaned, she scrubbed her hands with snow and went back to the cabin. In the rear was a fenced off section which held a garden and a well. The broom handle doubled as a spade and she dug up a small bounty of vegetables. The well held clear potable water. Next to the well was a broken bucket in which she cleaned the vegetables.

"Thank you, Astariu," Kyrian whispered as she dried the last potato on her robe.

With her treasures in hand, she returned to the cabin. Inside, the firelight illuminated the stairs leading to the loft.

Her patient was still asleep, so Kyrian set the food near the hearth and headed upstairs. There she found the bedroom. Two pallets were built into the floor and a woodstove stood in the corner by a window. She strode over to the window to close the shutters and was surprised to find that the floor was not very stable.

I guess no one's been up here in a long time. I'd better be careful. In one section, Kyrian had to avoid a fist-sized hole where the wood had rotted through. She closed the window and quickly checked the stove. It was functional. Curiosity satisfied, she hastily made for the stairs.

"Don't need to add myself to the injured list," she muttered softly as she gingerly avoided the unstable floorboards.

Near the hearth, Azhani still slept peacefully so Kyrian decided to go check on her horse. Though she had given him grain earlier, it would not be enough to last through the night. Gorse grasses grew near the fence line and Arun was happy to eat everything she gave him.

While he ate, she searched the stable for more treasures. From time to time, the horse would look in his empty trough and then stare hopefully at his mistress, but nothing more was forthcoming.

Laughing, Kyrian shook a finger at the gelding. "Sorry boy, there isn't much to eat. We have to ration for a while."

Arun flicked an ear and huffed noisily.

"I know. But you'll survive," Kyrian said, smiling at the horse's antics. Arun was a good friend, smarter than most horses, and it showed in the way he responded her statements and actions. "I should go back to the cabin. Azhani will be waking soon." There was just one last section of the stable to explore and Kyrian decided to examine it first.

One corner of the building was piled almost waist high with bits and pieces of wood. The heap appeared to be the discard pile for a carpenter and Kyrian almost dismissed it as simply a great source of firewood until she caught a glimpse of something metallic.

Now what have we here? Curiosity outweighed any desire to head back inside and Kyrian pushed up her sleeves and began to move the wood around. In short order, she had uncovered an old trunk. Brass fittings gleamed dully.

Kyrian whistled in appreciation at the ornate carvings that adorned the lid of the box.

There was no lock, so she lifted the top and peered inside. A cloud of dust rose and caused her to sneeze repeatedly. When she was able to control herself, Kyrian smiled at the sight that greeted her. Folded neatly and wrapped in decaying parchment was a surprising wealth of blankets and clothing.

At the very bottom of the trunk, under the clothes, she found a final prize; a long, thin package shrouded in ancient silk. With a deft twist of her wrist, Kyrian flicked away the silken covering and stared at the naked blade of a finely crafted elven longsword.

Her vision blurred and for a moment, she could almost see blood dripping down the steel and puddling at her feet. Disgusted, she swallowed heavily. *I should just drop this into the well.* Kyrian closed her eyes to block out the memories. *I can't. I can't throw away a perfectly good weapon. Just because I don't use blades doesn't mean that Azhani will never want to swing a sword again.*

Thoughts of the warrior reminded Kyrian that she needed to check on her patient. Quickly, she rewrapped the blade and gathered the textiles into a bundle. For now, she would keep the sword. There was no need to hand it over to the injured woman right away.

Stardancers used no edged weapons other than the small knives made for eating, healing and other mundane tasks. As servants of Astariu's healer aspect, they carried batons, long stout rods crafted of highly flexible steel. The weapons were just as deadly as swords, but in the hands of a master, they could be used to disable instead of kill. The order firmly believed that death in the name of justice was the province of kings, not priests.

Kyrian had taken a life once, and that burden wore heavily upon her conscience. Seeing the sword reminded her of her oath and of why she had spent the last two years of her life moving from place to place, wearing herself out by trying to heal enough people to atone for the life she had ended.

Stopping to pat Arun one more time, Kyrian left the stable. The sun had long since vanished and a chilly, biting wind whipped her robes about her body as she hurried to the small house. She dropped her booty near the sleeping warrior and set her lantern in the center of the room.

Scavenged wood fed the fire, filling the room with warmth. A meager handful of jerked beef joined the vegetables in a pot of water that she hung from a hook over the fire. From her pack Kyrian took out a loaf of black bread and the remains of a crock of butter.

The loaf was a bit smashed and there was a crack in the jar, but it was intact enough to eat the contents. "Well, it's not a dwarven banquet, but this should make a tasty feast."

Soon, the aroma of food filled the room, chasing out the last remnants of decay and dust.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL