

# THE CHAMPION'S SQUIRE



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## **THE CHAMPION'S SQUIRE**

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# CONTENTS

<b>Map of Allentria</b>	<i>Page 6</i>
<b>Chapter One</b>	<i>Page 7</i>
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<i>Page 12</i>
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<i>Page 17</i>
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<i>Page 23</i>
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<i>Page 31</i>
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<i>Page 41</i>
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	<i>Page 50</i>
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	<i>Page 57</i>
<b>Chapter Nine</b>	<i>Page 66</i>
<b>About the Author</b>	<i>Page 73</i>

# THE CHAMPION'S SQUIRE

by

ELANA A. MUGDAN





## CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY THE DRACHVOLD ATTACKED started out like any other. The Lady Lyselle was not one for the outdoors, but her older sister Syrene had — after much badgering and use of rude words — convinced her to take a ride through the forest that nestled up against the back of castle Whitestone's cliffs.

As they rode their horses down the well-kept woodland path, the Lady Lyselle waved regally to the people who toiled in the trees, offering them words of encouragement and allowing them to gaze upon her lovely face, replete with a straight nose, creamy tan skin and glittering hazel-green eyes.

Syrene, meanwhile, was as obnoxious as always and challenged one of her servants to a magical duel. Of all the terrible, un-ladylike things.

The Lady Lyselle, as a proper noblewoman, refused to have anything to do with magic. She dutifully studied her needlepoint and dancing, and shied away at the prospect of using her powers. But Syrene seemed invested in making a spectacle of herself by continually demonstrating her uncouth wielding abilities.

They rode further into the forest and Syrene strayed from the path. The Lady Lyselle, not wanting to be on her own in the wild, followed.

"Syrene, why must you put me through this?" the Lady Lyselle asked, trying to keep pace with her sister. "If you attempt to make me use my magic again, I shall scream loudly enough for the Whitestone guards to hear, and they will come and rescue me."

"Oh, give it a rest. I just want to show you what I've been working on. Maybe I can knock some sense into you."

The Lady Lyselle didn't like Syrene's choice of words; usually it was not sense that was knocked into her, but rocks or mud. Syrene loved using her earth magic, but she lacked control.

Syrene jumped from her white mare and commenced with her magic wielding. The Lady Lyselle dismounted and sat upon a soft bed of emerald moss to watch the show. Syrene created flowers

with her magic and unearthed a beautiful pearly egg-shaped stone, almost as large as her head. The Lady Lyselle took it and put into her satchel as a keepsake.

After a while, the Lady Lyselle grew bored. She was ready to commend Syrene's hard efforts and return to the castle, for she'd had quite enough of the outdoors by that time.

It was then that Syrene accidentally dislodged a boulder from the side of a hill.

There were many small bluffs scattered throughout the forest near Whitestone—none so grand as the huge, pale cliffs upon which the castle was built, but enough to make the land seem mountainous at times. This particular cliff was small, but the boulder Syrene dislodged was large enough to throw the Lady Lyselle into hysterics.

"Calm down, Lyselle," said Syrene. "It's all right."

But at that precise moment, a drachvold poked its ugly, flat head over the top of the cliff, glaring at them with baleful yellow eyes. It opened its toothless mouth and hissed menacingly.

For the first time in her loud, outspoken life, Syrene was speechless. The Lady Lyselle did not have time to appreciate this, because the drachvold shrieked and flapped its bat-like wings, and spit a glob of its acidic stomach fluids at them. With cries of panic they raced to their horses and mounted up. Both steeds bolted back toward the safety of the stables, their riders clinging to them for dear life. The sounds of the drachvold followed them through the trees.

"Don't look back," Syrene called to her sister, wielding a clump of dirt and sharp rocks up at the drachvold. It spat acid at the debris, neutralising the attack.

They finally reached the gates of Indrath Whitestone. The Lady Lyselle and her frantic mare galloped past the woodsmen and through the portcullis. She tumbled gracefully off her horse into the arms of her servants just as Syrene skidded to a halt by the castle's entrance.

Whitestone had never needed to close its gates, for the castle had never been attacked. Syrene waved the last of the wood workers inside, then grabbed the ancient lever and gave it a good wrench, causing the heavy, wrought-iron bars of the portcullis to slam shut for the first time since the castle had been built.

The drachvold hovered on the other side of the gate, leering in at them, frothing at the mouth. Its slitted eyes roved over each



of the humans who stood frozen with fear in the castle courtyard. When its gaze fell upon the Lady Lyselle, it was all she could do not to faint.

"I fear it has come for me," she announced, her slender body shivering with the thought. "It shall take me to its lair and devour me!"

"We cannot allow the Lady Lyselle to come to any harm," cried one of the younger guards. The Lady Lyselle rewarded his kind words with a fleeting glance in his direction, and he beamed hopefully at her.

"Guards, at your ready," commanded the captain, a man who looked as though half his face had been hacked away in some former battle. "Wield on my mark."

The Whitestone guards—a pathetic force of six—lined up behind the portcullis and attempted to wield against the monster. It merely flew out of their range, high over the castle, circling round and round.

And there it stayed. Whenever an occupant of Indrath Whitestone attempted to leave, the drachvold appeared from the forest, screeching and howling and making a terrible fuss. It spat at the walls quite a few times, creating unsightly burns and holes in the flagstones. No one could go out or get in, and though the magic wielders in the kitchens could grow roots and vegetables, there was only so long that the Lady Lyselle could survive on such a bland, restricted diet.

"Father, we must do something," the Lady Lyselle implored one evening, after a fortnight of being cooped up.

"My dear, there is naught we *can* do," her father replied, taking her dainty hands in his old, gnarled ones and shaking his head, which was topped with a tuft of white hair.

"We could fight," Syrene suggested bluntly.

"Syrene, you know that our magic is all but useless against this monster. It battles us with a vengeance; when the guards wield against it, it uses acid against them. Only the metal of the gate and walls keeps it from destroying our home entirely. We must thank our lucky stars that our family was able to afford magically reinforced Galantrian iron."

"Then send someone for help."

"How would you suggest we do that, when it guards the entrance to Whitestone day and night?"

"Send someone small, unnoticeable—one of the younger

kitchen boys, perhaps—to sneak out when it's not looking. I've a few loyal servants who'd be willing to do it."

"How positively dreadful, Syrene," the Lady Lyselle gasped, appalled. "Have you no thought for the welfare of our serving staff?"

To her credit, Syrene looked ashamed of herself.

"Besides, if you keep sending kitchen boys out to their certain deaths, who shall grow food for us in our time of need?"

"I knew it," snapped Syrene, her face clouding with anger. "You don't care about anyone but yourself. If we weren't to have gone on that tour of the kingdom looking for suitors, you wouldn't even care that we're all trapped here, you pampered little—"

"Syrene, enough," their father interrupted before Syrene had the chance to get truly nasty. Her temper tantrums had been known to make the Lady Lyselle upset for sometimes minutes on end.

"The protective spells around Whitestone will keep us safe, but for how much longer, I cannot say. You are right when you say that we must send for help, but the closest town is Nuiid, and that is a hard ride of five suns. Besides, I can think of no one who would be willing to risk their lives to try to escape. But I have a better idea—we shall send out the messenger doves with cries of help across the kingdom."

"Father, who would come to help us?" the Lady Lyselle asked. "Indrath Whitestone is a small estate, and facing a drachvold is a deadly business. How shall we attract proper warriors to our cause?"

"With a proper reward, of course," their father replied.

"We have nothing to offer," Syrene reminded them, ray of sunshine that she was.

"Certainly we do. Now my child, you have seen nineteen years, and it's long past time for you to be married and raising children of your own. And you, my darling Lyselle—though you have only seen fifteen years, many brave warriors and wielders would gladly put their lives in peril if they heard you were seeking a husband."

The Lady Lyselle clapped her hands together, envisioning a brave warrior coming to save her. It was a scenario straight from the storybooks.

Syrene looked furious. "You'd offer me up as *bait*?"

"As a reward, dear one," their father clarified hastily. "And, as per the law of the Smarlands, the eldest must be wed first, to receive the dowry and inheritance due to her. So you are the one

we must turn to in our time of need, Syrene. The fate of Whitestone rests upon your shoulders."

The Lady Lyselle felt her happiness evaporate.

"Father, you can't. What about me?"

"Lyselle, the warriors who arrive to deliver us will see you and spread word of your loveliness throughout the Empire. I vow that you shall have a wealthy husband before the snows come."

"But you're sending out the birds saying that *Syrene*, and half of our estate, is the reward for our freedom from that wretched monster?"

"Yes."

The Lady Lyselle put her hands over her heart in a gesture of despair and sank onto the ledge of her window. "We're all doomed."

Her father and Syrene left after that, since the Lady Lyselle had not been feeling well, and also since Syrene had shouted and cursed and done a number of rude things for which she was now being punished.

The Lady Lyselle sat by her window and watched the drachvold make its rounds over the rows of corn and vegetables. The crops were now brown and weedy from neglect, since none of the farmhands could go outside. She gazed at the livestock paddock, which was all but empty. The drachvold had helped itself to Whitestone's store of sheep, cattle and swine.

She sighed. If her father worded the messages correctly then warriors would come, warriors who were handsome and brave and wealthy. They would fall in love with her, and they would whisk her away to someplace grand, like the Imperial Palace, where she would be treated like a proper princess. Things would get better. All that remained now was to wait.

But when the Lady Lyselle realised that she would have to wait for someone fool enough to seek her sister's hand in marriage, her heart sank. She would be waiting a *very* long time.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lord Sero Notari Wierrain, Commander-General of the Imperial Guard, was the first to see the boy stagger into the cobblestone courtyard in front of the barracks. He was not as young as runaways usually were. Children desperate to escape their families and prove themselves warriors were generally found in the range of ten to fifteen years; this youth looked to be a bit older.

"Taris," said Weirrain, snapping his fingers. Instantly Taris, the head groom of the Imperial stables, was at his side. "There's a lad needs help. See to it that his horse gets taken care of and find out what his story is."

Taris nodded his grizzled head and stalked out to meet the boy. Lord Weirrain watched from a distance, preferring to stay in the shade of the overhang of the barracks rather than go out into the scalding sun.

"Who're you?" Taris asked the boy gruffly, snatching up his horse's reigns. "How'd you get in here?"

The boy's round face darkened with a scowl. "Give me those," he said, snatching the reigns back. "I haven't come to join the Guard, if that's what you're wondering. I've come to speak to whomever is in charge, because I'm in need of help."

Though he sounded well-educated, the boy dressed as though he were a servant. And though he looked older and was solidly built, his voice still had the high-pitched timbre of adolescence.

"Now you see here, you bratty peasant—"

"Taris, be kind to our young guest," Weirrain reprimanded, finally approaching. He excused the groom with a slight nod of his head. Taris marched off, muttering under his breath about poor manners and shooting a sour glare over his shoulder at the two of them.

"My lord," said the boy, turning to Weirrain, "thank you. I need to speak to the person in charge of the Imperial Guard."

"That would be me," Weirrain informed him. "Commander-

General Sero Weirrain, of House Notari. Who are you, and what is your business with me?"

"Lord Weirrain." The boy threw himself into an awkward bow, his short, tangled black hair falling over his dirty face. "My name is—is Rael Grayrock. You won't have heard of me. I'm only a humble kitchen boy, but I come on orders from my masters, the rulers of Indrath Whitestone."

"Whitestone," Weirrain repeated, trying to remember his geography. "In the western Smarlands. Not a very large estate, am I right?"

"Um, no, my lord," the boy admitted, flushing a dull red underneath the grime of his travels. "I come with urgent news: there's a drachvold attacking Whitestone, and it is letting no one in or out. We're under siege, and we don't know how much longer we can last."

"If this drachvold is letting no one out," Weirrain put in smoothly, "how is it you've come to be here, boy?"

"I, um . . . well, I left upon orders from my mistress, the Lady Syrene," he explained, blushing still further. "I risked my life to exit the castle and evade the drachvold, but I managed it."

*Ah, thought Weirrain, he's enamoured of his lady. Dreaming of glory, no doubt.*

"This is a tragic tale indeed," Weirrain said aloud. "But why does it concern me?"

"Lord Weirrain, the Lady Syrene sent me with a message, a plea for help. We need a strong warrior to kill the drachvold. In return for his services, the warrior who saves us will be given half our estate, as well as . . ." The youth swallowed, then forced himself to go on. "As well as the Lady Syrene's hand in marriage."

"Hm," said Weirrain, stroking his neatly-trimmed black beard as he regarded the youth before him. "It seems to me that the Lord of Whitestone is killing two birds with one rock: he frees his lands from the drachvold and marries off his daughter as well, relieving himself of responsibility."

"The Lady Syrene is—! I mean, yes my lord. It would seem so."

"Nonetheless, it's a generous offer. Many warriors would leap at this chance."

"Really?" The boy looked astonished.

"Of course. I cannot promise you any of the men who are about to leave on tour, but I shall send one of the soldiers who have recently graduated from ranks, who will roam the country as

freelance knights and warriors. It will be an opportunity for them to gain honour and glory, make a name for themselves."

"Oh. Oh, well . . ."

It was hard for Weirrain to hide his smile as he watched the youth wage a battle with himself in his head.

"Well, I think I'd have to, um . . . inspect them. Get to know them first, and see who's worthy of such an honour as the Lady Syrene's hand in marriage."

"Are you quite sure you don't want to join the Guard yourself?" Weirrain asked, raising an eyebrow. "That way you needn't persuade anyone to save Indrath Whitestone."

For a moment, the boy's green eyes gleamed with excitement. Then his face fell and his fine, thin brows contracted in a resigned frown.

"Thank you for the offer, my lord. But in the time it would take me to learn enough of battle and magic to defeat the drachvold, I fear Whitestone will have fallen," he said sullenly.

"Suit yourself. Come with me and you shall meet our warriors."

Weirrain led the kitchen boy to the stables where the grooms took his mount, a small, good-natured white mare.

"This is a fine animal," Weirrain commented, running his hands along the mare's withers and down her front leg, feeling her ankle joint. She lifted her foot obediently for him to inspect her hoof. "A bit *too* fine for a kitchen boy, I'd wager."

The boy looked down, scuffing his feet. "She actually belongs to the Lady Syrene," he mumbled.

"I thought as much. And your lady will not take ill to having her horse absconded with?"

"Oh, no, Lord Weirrain. I know she won't."

"Then she is a rare and gracious lady indeed," Weirrain said dryly. This Lady Syrene was probably quite a catch if the boy was so smitten, but Weirrain was certain no noblewoman would appreciate having a prize horse like this stolen from her, no matter how golden the intentions.

"What's the mare's name?"

"Deathcharger, my lord."

One of the grooms, who had been brushing the mare's travel-worn hide with a curry comb, had to stifle a fit of giggles.

"The Lady Syrene picked out the name before she knew what Deathcharger looked like," the boy growled indignantly, glaring at the groom, who schooled his face back into a smooth expression.

Once Deathcharger had been brushed and fed, Weirrain proceeded into the central training yard, where the recruits of the Imperial Guard were toiling in the sun. They passed the younger soldiers who had not yet graduated and continued to the other end of the barracks. There they entered a room where sat a group of perhaps two dozen men, all in the standard grey cloth tunic and leggings. The men, who'd been lounging about, straightened when Weirrain entered, jumping to their feet and saluting him.

"Commander-General Weirrain," they intoned respectfully.

"At ease," said Weirrain, gesturing for them to relax. "Warriors, I am here with a special guest. This is Rael Grayrock. He brings a dire message from Indrath Whitestone: a drachvold has laid siege to the castle, and its inhabitants need a champion to rescue them."

There was a murmur of interest throughout those assembled, most of whom hadn't had time or opportunity to prove their worth.

"As payment for this dangerous service, Lord Whitestone has offered a great reward: half his estate," — he waited for the excited whispers to die away before continuing — "and his daughter's hand in marriage."

More murmurs of interest. Some of the soldiers exchanged glances, wordlessly weighing the possibilities with each other.

"I hear she's beautiful beyond words," Weirrain added helpfully.

That got them moving. The assurance made those who had shown only a polite interest surge to their feet to volunteer for the job.

"What? I never said that," cried the kitchen boy.

Weirrain turned to him, his eyebrows raised in polite confusion.

"I never said she was beautiful at all," the boy insisted, looking concerned.

"Ah, my lad. Anyone worth the having is worth the fighting," Weirrain stated sagely. "And you are fighting quite hard for her."

The boy's scowl deepened, and a couple of the men laughed appreciatively. The youth wheeled around to face them, planting his fists on his hips.

"Fine. But Lord Weirrain promised that I could have my choice of warrior," the boy announced, to looks of scornful disbelief from the soldiers. "Therefore, I'll be staying for the next few days to find out more about your moral characters—I mean, mostly to find out how well you fight. To see which of you is the best warrior to accompany me back to Whitestone and save the Lady Syrene."

"This is ridiculous," said a tall, dark-skinned young man. "Why don't we just have a tournament? Then the process can be over by tomorrow and the winner can be on his way."

"And it surely won't be you, Flamedrol."

"Shut it," snapped Flamedrol, glaring around at whoever had insulted him.

"I'm afraid that young Rael has spoken," said Weirrain, shrugging. "So you'd best impress him if you wish for a chance at glory and fame."

"And a woman to adore you at night," joked an auburn-haired, blue-eyed soldier who reclined on a chair with his feet propped up on one of the tables. His comrades laughed appreciatively.

The kitchen boy, who was shorter than all the men in the room by at least a hand and a half, stepped forward.

"The Lady Syrene will *never* adore you, of that I'm certain," he declared. And with that, he marched out of the room in a huff. Raucous, jeering laughter followed him.

"You've got some competition there, Gavin."

"The kitchen boy's got dreams of a noble wife, too."

"You gonna take that sitting down, Swiftwind?"

"Certainly not," said Gavin Swiftwind, unfolding his tall, lithe body and yawning in a show of unconcern. "I'll teach him a thing or two, once I defeat that drachvold and claim the prize."

In a wave of commotion, the group of guardsmen surged out of the room, stirred to action by the fresh challenge. Weirrain watched them go, shaking his head.

"Ah, to be young," he said to himself.



## CHAPTER THREE

Gavin wasn't one to be trifled with. On the second sun of the so-called 'inspection' that the kitchen boy was conducting, he found the lad sitting on a stone bench, passing judgement on two soldiers as they sparred.

"So . . . Rael, is it?" he asked, sauntering over and settling down next to the youth.

Rael glowered at him. He had startlingly green eyes, but other than that he was plain, with a small, straight nose and a shock of messy black hair that obscured most of his round face. He seemed to be on the youngish side, for there was no growth of hair upon his cheeks.

"How long has this drachvold been besieging Whitestone?" said Gavin, when it became apparent that Rael wasn't going to speak.

"About a moon cycle now," Rael replied curtly.

"You have no wielders at the castle who can fight it? For that's the only smart way to fight a drachvold, you know: magic. If you attempt to use a weapon on it, you'll find yourself melting in a pool of acid before you know what hit you."

"I know that," snapped Rael. "I'm the one who had to get by it to come here."

"For the sake of the fair Lady Syrene," Gavin said innocently.

"Listen, don't go getting your hopes up over that," Rael told him. "She isn't fair, and I didn't come here for her sake."

Gavin nodded in a patronising manner.

"Well . . . that is, of course I *did* come here for her sake, but I didn't—oh, you know what I mean!" Rael folded his arms crossly and slouched back against the marble wall of the barracks.

"Just out of curiosity," said Gavin, crossing his arms in a similar fashion, "why do you think the Lady Syrene wouldn't adore me?"

Rael snorted in a rather offensive manner.

"Indulge me; why not?"

"The Lady Syrene is strong-minded. She doesn't want to get married. She can't stand the thought of being tied down in such a way, especially to someone who doesn't love her," said Rael. The sincerity in his voice would have touched Gavin, if Gavin had been a sentimental fool. Fortunately, he was not. "Besides, she'd never even *consider* you."

The audacity of this kitchen boy was really quite astounding. Where did he come from, thinking it was all right to speak to his superiors that way?

"You think so, do you?" asked Gavin.

"I know so."

"Well, let's make it a bet then, shall we? I'll go and defeat this drachvold of yours, then we'll let the Lady Syrene decide for herself if she desires me or not."

Rael barked a laugh. "And if she decides not?"

"Then I shan't force her hand in marriage," Gavin said with a careless shrug. Rael turned to him, suddenly attentive.

"Really? Do you swear to that?"

"On my honour as a warrior of the Empire of Allentria," said Gavin, raising his left hand and placing his right over his heart. "But I can't see why she would decide not. I'm an excellent warrior, an expert wielder, and—as I have heard from the ladies in the Imperial court—I am not disagreeable to their eyes." He flashed Rael an impish grin, revealing rows of straight, white teeth. Rael didn't meet the cheek with a frown this time; he was examining Gavin intently.

"Then I thank you, Lord Gavin," he said finally, inclining his head.

"It's settled. Let's go." Gavin stood and stretched.

"Um, wait . . . Lord Gavin—"

"Just Gavin will do."

"Before we go, I really do need to see you fight. The drachvold is very powerful."

Gavin nodded, unconcerned. "So be it. Flamedrol!" he cried across the sparring grounds to where Zandar Flamedrol was walking away, wiping his face with a towel.

"What do you want?" Zandar called back coldly.

"But he's all tired out already," the kitchen boy complained.

"Relax," said Gavin, waving a hand in Rael's direction as he strode out into the field, taking off his grey tunic shirt and flexing his muscular chest in preparation for the fight. "He's the best

wielder here besides me. Hold that, will you?"

He tossed the tunic at Rael's face. Rael caught it, spluttering indignantly.

"I want a wielding match," Gavin announced to the world at large.

"You're on."

Zandar tossed his towel aside and walked towards Gavin. They squared off against one another, each assured of his own skill. The rest of their peers stopped whatever they were doing and gathered around to watch.

"Give us a cue, kitchen boy," Gavin called cheerily, preparing a spell.

"You're an arrogant numbskull!"

"That's good enough," Gavin declared as he lashed out with his magic, attempting to knock Zandar off his feet.

Zandar leaped out of the way, then let loose a spell of his own. Fire streamed from his hands towards Gavin. Gavin conjured an air shield, and Zandar's flames streamed uselessly to either side of him as he ran forward.

"Have to do better than that," Gavin said as he slid under the stream of fire, jumped up and attempted to kick his opponent. Zandar blocked the blow with his hands and shot another stream of fire at Gavin's midriff. Gavin effortlessly wielded the air away from Zandar's flames, making the fire puff out lamely.

Back and forth they went, to the collective gasps of the spectators. Finally, Gavin saw his opening. He dodged a well-aimed blow from Zandar, wielded a current of air that made the other man topple backwards and lunged forward to point his fist directly at Zandar's throat. Zandar raised his hands in surrender as Gavin backed off to a smattering of polite applause. He walked back to Rael, sweaty but triumphant.

"There," he said, taking his shirt back from the boy. "Does that prove me worthy of this quest of yours?"

Rael nodded reluctantly.

"Excellent. When do we leave?"

They left that evening. Gavin knew they wouldn't get far in the failing light, but he was anxious to be on the road.

He had dreamed of exploring Allentria from tip to tip when he'd been young, but those aspirations had gotten sidetracked when he'd enlisted in the Imperial Guard. His heart had always yearned

to roam, which was why he hadn't joined the active ranks when he'd completed his training. He was a freelancer now, meaning he and his lance were available to anyone who needed him.

Before people called upon him though, he had to build a reputation. This opportunity was perfect: drachvolds were the nastiest sort of nasty, and if he could best one, it would truly be a feat to boast of. As for the promise of the girl, that was just one of the perks of the job, though he doubted he'd wed her. He had no interest in being tied down either, but he would prove that he was worthy of such a fair damsel. He would certainly prove it to the impertinent Rael, who rode by his side in moody silence.

The two of them plodded through the streets of Noryk in the fading sunlight, Rael on his small white mare—foolishly named Deathcharger—and Gavin on his huge black stallion, a trained warhorse named Kahn.

"So, how old is the fair and lovely Lady Syrene?" Gavin asked as they exited the huge golden gates of the Imperial city.

"None of your business," snapped Rael.

"On the contrary," said Gavin, "it's entirely my business. Am I not risking my life for her? I should at least know something about the woman you expect me to save."

"Well, how old are *you*?"

"One-and-twenty years, fastest graduate of the Imperial training program," Gavin announced proudly. "And the Lady Syrene is—"

"She's nineteen," said Rael.

Gavin tutted. "And not married off yet? My, something must be seriously wrong with her. Is she in truth dreadfully ugly?" Gavin, who found Rael's self-righteous anger amusing, had meant to provoke him again. Instead of becoming indignant on his lady's behalf, Rael grew subdued.

"Do you really want the truth?"

"Truth is subjective, kitchen boy."

"Well, in my opinion . . ." Rael took a deep breath. "Yes. She is ugly. Certainly not as fair as her sister, the Lady Lyselle."

"And yet here you ride, bringing a champion to defend her. You braved many dangers and travelled many leagues on her behalf. She'll have a charming personality to make up for it, I'm sure."

"No, Lord Gavin. She's actually a stinking rotter," said Rael, allowing a small smile to form on his lips. "You know how you hear stories of the pretty sister and the ugly sister, and in the end the prince or warrior or whoever goes for the ugly sister because

she's got a kind heart and a good soul? Well, this isn't that."

"Is she as calm and demure as her name suggests?" Gavin persisted good-naturedly, playing along with the game.

"The Lady Syrene? Goodness, no." Rael chuckled. "She once put worms in the Lady Lyselle's bed while she was asleep. And another time, in a fit of rage, she cut off most all of the Lady Lyselle's beautiful chestnut locks."

Gavin laughed loudly, slapping his thigh.

"A woman with some spirit. That reminds me of something I did to my sister when I was young," he said. "She claimed that I wasn't brave enough to climb to the top of a spindly old tree. Naturally I proved her wrong, and when I got to the top, I poured a sackful of mud down on top of her."

"Ah, that's good. I'll have to remember that one," said Rael, grinning. Gavin found that when the kitchen boy was like this — *not* being sullen or defensive — he was almost likeable.

They stopped for the evening at an outpost a few leagues from Noryk's walls. There was a small stable and an inn that wasn't much larger, and once their horses were settled in their stalls, Gavin and Rael entered the inn.

"Have you got a room for two?" he asked the innkeeper, who nodded. "Excellent. I'm on official business of the Imperial Guard, so I believe the room should be free of charge, but —"

"Wait!" Rael stepped forward hurriedly, his face set in a deep scowl once more.

"What's the problem?"

"I demand a separate room," Rael announced, as if he were not a mere kitchen boy, but, in fact, the Emperor of Allentria.

"This your squire?" the innkeeper asked in an unimpressed voice.

"In a manner of speaking," said Gavin.

"I'm *not* his squire. He's working for *me*, and I refuse to room with him!"

"I can give you two rooms, but the second one won't be free if the boy's not a full-fledged member of the Guard," the innkeeper said. Gavin was short on money so he shook his head.

"Young Rael is just being foolish. We'll take the one room."

"No," Rael persisted, wheeling around and stomping toward the door. "I will not room with someone like you."

"Someone like what, exactly?"

"Arrogant and stuck-up and full of himself and dumb and

rude—”

“Ah, kitchen boy, it’s a bit of a stretch for you to call *me* rude after that impressive string of insults,” Gavin retorted lightly.

“I’ll sleep in the stable if I must,” Rael threatened, opening the inn’s door. He hesitated with his hand on the door handle and looked back over his shoulder expectantly, as if hoping that Gavin and the innkeeper would gasp in shock and give him his own room out of pity.

Gavin shrugged. “Suit yourself. See you in the morning.”

With an angry growl, Rael wrenched open the door and stormed out, slamming it shut behind him.

“Foul temper,” Gavin commented. “We’re competing for the same woman, you see. He’s a bit sore about it. Doesn’t stand a chance.”

A passing serving girl hid a smile at his words and he shot her a wink. She giggled and bustled off. “Now tell me, would dinner and a drink also be complementary for a hardworking soldier of the Guard?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Gavin awoke with a headache the following morning, but in no way regretted the night's revelries. He whistled as he sauntered down to the stables, where he awoke Rael from a pile of hay with a friendly kick.

Gavin was in a good mood. Rael was not.

"I heard your awful caterwauling all the way from the stables last night," Rael complained as they set off across the barren waste that stretched out from Noryk into the Smarlands. "Do you drink often? It's a wretched habit."

"You're my mother now are you, kitchen boy?" Gavin's good mood was dissipating quickly in Rael's dour company. "No, I hardly ever drink. Which is why I'm still feeling it."

"Hmph."

Gavin had been celebrating the start of his first great adventure, something he was sure would be turned into an epic tale of heroism and grandeur. But by noon, when the end of the wasteland was still not in sight and Rael's stoic silence had grown tedious, Gavin feared it would end up being one of those boring tales everyone forgot about as soon as they heard it.

"When's lunch?" asked Rael, looking up at Gavin from the back of Deathcharger.

"Hm, let's see . . . probably not for another two suns. The innkeeper was averse to my request for free provisions for our journey, so we have nothing."

"Perfect. Just perfect. What are we going to do for food?"

"I'm sure they taught you some expert foraging techniques over at Whitestone. Go forage something for us."

"This is a wasteland, lagwit!" Rael gestured at the expanse of rocky ground surrounding them in every direction. "Where would I find anything we could eat? And besides," he added, becoming subdued again, "I never learned anything useful when I was at Whitestone."

"What?" The change in Rael's demeanor was enough to interest Gavin. "They gave you servant's training, didn't they?"

"Um, not exactly. I mean, I was trained in some areas, but nothing that would help me in the real world." Rael's face was full of resentment and disappointment. For a brief moment, Gavin felt bad for the youth.

"Well luckily, one of us is not completely worthless," he said. "I've a prize-winning aim with my bow and arrow. I'll teach you the art, and when we stop for the night you can go out and catch some game for dinner. Or try to, at least."

He expected Rael to take offence again, but the kitchen boy surprised him with a grin.

"That would be wonderful," said Rael.

Gavin smiled and shook his head. "You really ought to have taken Weirrain up on his offer to let you join the Guard. They're pressed for new recruits, and you're willing enough."

"I don't think they'd let me into the Imperial Guard, even if I'd wanted to join," Rael muttered ruefully.

"Why not? Past criminal record?" Gavin's feeble attempt at humor failed.

"No. I'm just not good at anything."

"Nonsense. Take my bow and we'll make a hunter out of you."

Despite all of Gavin's comical boasting, he *was* a good archer. And despite all of Rael's self-deprecating remarks, he turned out to be a fast learner. By the time night had fallen, they still didn't have anything to eat, but that was through no fault of their own. Rael now knew how to handle the bow and arrow, and could even draw the bolt back and shoot it—though his aim, as Gavin was quick to point out, could use a lot of improvement.

They passed out of the desert and into gently rolling hills blanketed with soft, yellow-green grasses. By the mid of their third day of travel, they were met with the wide expanse of the East Outlet river.

"If I remember properly, there are three bridges nearby: one north of the village of Vyntos and one south, and one that would lead us through the Gorgan Forest," said Gavin. "Where's Whitestone in relation to all that?"

Rael puzzled over this question.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I only know where Whitestone is in relation to Nuiid."

"What were you doing there all your life?" asked Gavin. "How



did you ever get to the Imperial Palace if your sense of geography is so poor?"

"Everyone knows where the Imperial Palace is," Rael shot back angrily. "Besides, whenever I came across someone I just asked for directions to Noryk. It was simple."

"Ah, what we do for love," said Gavin, shooting the younger boy a wicked grin. "We'll head for the southernmost bridge, since I think it's the largest."

As they got closer to the river, there was an opportunity to obtain food. Gavin found a berry bush and also managed to shoot a rabbit by the time they reached the bridge. They sat and prepared a fire to cook their lunch.

"I don't think this is the right way," said Rael, looking dubiously at the thick, tall trees on the far bank of the river. "The path I followed never went through a forest like that."

"Are there any forests near Whitestone?"

"Well, yes, but —"

"The Gorgan Forest is the largest forest in the western Smarlands. We're on the right path."

"I really don't think —"

"Look, kitchen boy — which one of us has a certificate of aptitude from the Allentrian Empire, and which of us doesn't know the way to his own castle?"

In furious silence, Rael spun around and sat with his back to Gavin, refusing to speak to him while the rabbit roasted. That was fine with Gavin, since Rael wasn't much of a conversationalist in any event. They ate in silence and then, saddling up Kahn and Deathcharger once more, they started across the long bridge.

"Gavin?" Rael, who had been trailing behind, called out worriedly when they were halfway across.

"What now?"

"I think we should go back." Rael had halted Deathcharger and was staring down at the rushing waters below him with a grim expression.

"I told you we're going the right way. Now stop delaying, or —"

"It's not that. I'm getting a bad feeling. There's something in the river."

Fine time for Rael to become squeamish. Gavin wheeled Kahn around and fixed the boy with a stern look. Rael was tugging on Deathcharger's reigns, forcing the small mare to back up.

"See here, there's nothing to be worried about. This bridge has been built to last and there's nothing in the river that I can't take care of."

Gavin's words didn't reassure Rael. In fact, his green eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped in horror, staring at something behind Gavin. Gavin looked upstream, following Rael's gaze, and barely raised his shield arm in time to protect himself from the hungry jaws of the water serpent that had lunged at him from the blue depths below.

His brass shield saved his life. It lodged in the back of the serpent's mouth as the long, sinuous river snake smashed into him, making it impossible for the monster to clamp its fangs into Gavin. But the force of the impact sent him flying from Kahn's back, and he was dragged down into the water on the other side of the bridge with the serpent.

Though it was the middle of the warm season, the East Outlet was icy cold. Gavin shuddered as he was submerged in its fast-moving, murky depths. The serpent hissed, emitting streams of bubbles from slitted nostrils, and thrashed its head, trying to dislodge the shield from its mouth. Gavin came dangerously close to being bashed against the rocks on the bottom of the river and he quickly unbuckled his left arm from the straps of his shield.

He came undone just as the serpent gave a violent shake of its head, and was tossed out of the water. He smacked down into the river upstream of the beast, and gallantly drew his sword. The hungry snake swam to meet him head-on.

Though it could not properly chomp down on him due to the shield in its mouth, one of its fangs tore Gavin's leg as it slammed into him. Instantly, the water became dark with blood. This put the creature into a feeding frenzy and it redoubled its attempts to force the shield out.

Gavin jabbed at the serpent and his sword burrowed into the iridescent blue scales near the monster's sensitive gills. It screeched furiously, twisting away from him. He thought the fight was over, but then the serpent played him a terrible trick: the whip-like end of its long tail wrapped around his injured leg, yanking him down once more beneath the river's surface, causing him to lose his grasp on his sword.

Shooting pains emanated from his wound as Gavin struggled underwater to free himself from the serpent's grip. With a snap that was audible over the rushing current, the serpent broke Gavin's

brass shield and spat the pieces away. Baring its fangs again, it drew him toward its gaping jaws. Gavin drew a dagger from his belt—his last line of defence—and wielded a pocket of air around his face so he wouldn't drown.

He prepared himself for the worst, when suddenly something else snaked around his chest and yanked him upwards. What was going on? Was there *another* serpent who wished to make a meal of him? At the same time, another something plunged into the water and wrapped around the serpent's mouth, clamping it shut. In its rage and confusion, the serpent's hold on Gavin's leg loosened and Gavin was tugged out of the water by whatever was wrapped around his chest.

He landed face-first on the eastern side of the riverbank. Pushing himself up, he looked around to see what had happened.

Rael, resplendent atop Deathcharger, was wielding against the water serpent. He'd conjured up two thick vines—one was acting as a muzzle for the monster, the other had just deposited Gavin on the ground in a heap. The serpent reared up in the river, towering over the kitchen boy. It snapped Rael's vine and opened its mouth wide, hissing furiously.

"No," Rael cried, throwing out his left arm imperiously and pointing at the snake. "*Go away!*"

The serpent idled in the water looking at Rael, who met its cruel gaze defiantly. Then, miraculously, it sank down, admitting defeat. Rael lowered his arm and watched the current carry it away.

"Rael . . . ?" Gavin said weakly. Rael's eyes fell on Gavin's injury. In an instant, he had dismounted and run over.

"What happened?" the boy asked, looking queasy at the sight of all the blood.

"Got me with one of its fangs." Gavin used his dagger to cut off the bottom of his grey sleeve. He turned the length of cloth into a tourniquet, tying it tightly around his shin above the gash. Then he cut his other sleeve and balled it up, pressing it to the wound to stem the bleeding.

"So you're a wielder," said Gavin, staring at Rael with new respect.

"Not a very good one," Rael muttered, his face pale.

"Are you mad? You just fended off a water serpent! You know how powerful those things are?" Gavin exclaimed, wincing as he held the makeshift bandage to his leg. "Where in the world did you learn to wield like that? Did you go to school?"

"No. I had a private tutor."

"You? But you're just a kitchen boy."

Rael's face regained some of its color as he blushed. "Oh, I mean — well, actually . . . the Lady Syrene taught me wielding."

"The Lady Syrene *wields*?"

"I know it's unladylike, but —"

"It most certainly is," spluttered Gavin.

Rael crossed his arms indignantly. "Well, if you have a problem with that, you may as well just go home right now."

"No, no—you misunderstand. I'm . . . impressed," Gavin admitted. "You rarely meet a woman who *wields*, and it's an even rarer occasion to find one who *wields well*." His esteem of the Lady Syrene rose substantially. Rael was silent, staring at him with an unfathomable expression.

"Tell me, how good is the Lady Syrene?" Gavin asked, checking on the gash. The bleeding had abated and he worked his leg to see if any serious damage had been done. His knee and ankle felt fine—he would heal quickly.

"About as good as I am," Rael said slowly. "Perhaps she's better," he amended, a touch of pride creeping into his voice.

"Better? Better even than you?"

"Can you walk?" Rael asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

"Oh, a trifle like this won't slow me down," said Gavin, biting back a groan of pain as he got to his feet. He made a show of walking unaided to Kahn, who had followed Deathcharger downstream during the battle.

Rael walked to the white mare and patted her soothingly before mounting up. He trotted over to stop by Gavin's side.

"Rael, I want to thank you," Gavin said as the two of them headed back up to the path that would lead them through the Gorgan Forest. "I'm in your debt now, and if there's aught I can ever do for you, you have only to say the words. If not for your help, I'd have been in real trouble."

"What, a clever and mighty warrior like yourself?" Rael quipped.

Gavin grinned down at the boy. "Where would every clever and mighty warrior be without his squire?"

"At the bottom of a river, I guess."

"Right you are, lad."

They rode in amiable silence for the rest of the sun. Gavin was extremely grateful to Rael, and was shocked that both the kitchen

boy and the Lady Syrene were competent wielders. But as he thought over what had happened, he grew suspicious; Rael had somehow known about the serpent's presence—how? Gavin had read accounts of people with a 'second sight', but he'd always believed those stories to be nonsense. And at the end of the battle, Rael had actually spoken to the beast, ordering it to leave. And the serpent had *listened* to him. What was that all about?

It seemed there was quite a bit more to Rael than met the eye.

When darkness fell, plunging the woods into a foggy twilight, the two of them stopped and made camp. Gavin took the opportunity to question Rael.

"By the way, how did you know that serpent was there?" Gavin tried to sound nonchalant, so as not to offend or frighten the boy. Unfortunately, it put Rael on his guard at once.

"I don't know. I've just always been able to sense things."

"Like a mind-reader?"

Rael shook his head mutely and pursed his lips.

"I'm not angry, I'm just curious," Gavin prompted after a long pause.

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?" said Gavin, surprised. "It saved me, didn't it?"

This argument seemed to appeal to Rael. He leaned forward, clasping his hands, apparently glad that he'd found someone to whom he could explain his powers.

"With people I can't sense anything at all. But with animals, I've always been able to tell where they are. It's how I managed to get by the drachvold—I just *knew* where it was, and I knew how to avoid it, and I knew I'd be all right."

"Fascinating," Gavin mused. "Can you tell what sorts of animals are around right now?"

"Sure. There's a couple of foxes in a den there," said Rael, nodding his head toward a copse of elms. "And an owl up at the top of that tree."

"Have you always had this power?"

"As long as I can remember. I never had to work on it like I have to work on my wielding. And it's helped me out of a few tight spots, I can tell you."

Gavin nodded and fell silent. Eventually Rael slipped into a deep slumber, but Gavin sat up late, thinking. He'd been saved by

a kitchen boy, and had been shown there were powers he'd never dreamed of, all in a single sun. It would have been enough to shake even Zandar Flamedrol's confidence, but Gavin took it in stride.

And he suspected that he and Rael were probably friends now.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Gavin and Rael trotted through the Gorgan Forest at a more leisurely pace than they had kept for the first leg of their journey, partially because Gavin was healing from his encounter with the water serpent, and partially because Rael suddenly didn't seem so fussed over returning to Whitestone.

Gavin continued to teach Rael how to handle the bow. Rael's aim improved, and since he was practicing on horseback, Gavin knew he would be a fair shot standing with his own two feet on the ground. Rael, for his part, was slightly more forthcoming and distinctly less surly. In the evenings when they stopped, the youth would go out to find them dinner. He never returned with meat, but always brought back a plentiful amount of berries, roots and animal eggs.

Gavin had a suspicion that Rael was reluctant to kill animals using his gift.

Since Rael was still quiet, especially when he was practicing with the bow and arrows, Gavin resorted to telling him stories of his own gallant deeds. He told about the time he had defeated Lord Weirrain in a jousting tournament and boasted of his exploits in the Galantrian rainforest, where the Imperial Guard had hunted the terrifying and deadly bogspectre . . . though he neglected to mention that they'd been unsuccessful in their search.

Rael always rolled his eyes at Gavin's flowery language and hyperbolic narrative technique, but Gavin could tell he liked hearing the tales.

"What of you, Rael?" Gavin asked one night as the two of them reclined against a log before their small campfire. "Any grand exploits from your past?"

"No," Rael said curtly. "I was confined to Whitestone for a long time. I wasn't allowed to go out and do all the things I wanted."

"A servant's life is a hard one," Gavin agreed. "Warriors must

serve as pages and squires during training, and let me tell you, I had a terrible time. Some of the nobles I had to serve at the Imperial Palace—! The ladies were the worst. They'd always fawn over me and flirt shamelessly."

"What are you complaining about?" Rael grumbled.

Gavin smiled. "Could have been worse, I suppose. You're right. I served many beautiful and elegant noblewomen. But girls are all the same anyway; they only talk about clothes and gossip about each other. They bored me to tears."

"Oh yes, Gavin. You must have had *such* a hard life, with all those gorgeous women falling at your feet."

It seemed Gavin had touched another nerve. He suspected Rael was still angry about the situation regarding the Lady Syrene, and he regretted his callous words.

"Your time will come, Rael," he assured the boy in a conciliatory fashion. "You've just got to grow into yourself a bit more. Then they'll come flocking to you."

"And as for the Lady Syrene, what will happen to her when you see her? You'll wed her and toss her aside, because I can assure you, she's nothing like those ladies at the Imperial Palace. She's not beautiful or elegant."

"Ah, don't you remember our bet? I shan't force her hand unless she desires me."

Rael glanced at him, opened his mouth to make an angry retort, then sighed and looked back at the fire, the fight seeping out of him. Of course he remembered—he was just out of sorts because there was nothing about Gavin that Syrene wouldn't desire.

After a fortnight of travel, they emerged from the thick trees of the Gorgan Forest and found themselves looking down upon a sprawling farm village.

"Are these the lands of Indrath Whitestone?" Gavin asked, proud that they had made the journey so quickly despite his injury.

"No," said Rael, squinting at the cluster of houses. "And this isn't Nuiid, either. Where have you led us, you clodhopper?"

"Where have *I* led us? I'm not the one who had no idea where my own home was," said Gavin. "You live around here—why don't you tell me?"

The two of them bickered all the way down the sloping grassy hill until they entered the outskirts of the village. An old woman was working in front of her small cottage in the golden evening sunlight, mending a break in the picket fence that stretched around



her flower beds.

"Excuse me, good madame," Gavin called out to her. "We are travellers on our way to Indrath Whitestone. Where might that be?"

"I haven't heard of no Whitestone, my lord," said the woman, squinting up at them. "This is the village of Riyon."

Rael groaned.

"Great. *Riyon*," he growled, booting Deathcharger forward. "We're much too far south. By the time we reach Whitestone, the drachvold will have killed everyone!"

"Is that your squire, my lord?" the woman asked in scandalised tones, staring after Rael.

"Alas, no; he is merely my friend," replied Gavin. "Young Rael is in the lengthy process of learning patience and good manners even as we speak." And with a nod of his head, he trotted off after the younger boy.

They found an inn at the centre of the town, and Gavin used his charm and his occupation as an Imperial Guard to procure a room for himself at no cost. Rael once again demanded a separate room.

"Would you stop being ridiculous?" Gavin growled as the innkeeper pulled a face, indicating he wasn't going to give them a second room for free.

"I'm serious, Gavin. I'll sleep in the stables again. I'm not sharing a bed with you."

"We wouldn't have shared a bed, you stupid nit. You'd have slept in a corner on the floor, of course."

Rael was not amused. "Some gentleman you are."

"Ah, but you didn't hire me to be a gentleman, did you? I need only be the champion of Whitestone, an expert wielder and warrior who delivers the castle from the clutches of the evil drachvold." He glanced at the innkeeper to see if his impressive resumé had had any impact on the portly man.

"Extra room's still gonna cost yeh," the innkeeper grunted.

"No thank you, then."

"Gavin!"

"Rael, I'm not the one being obstinate, here," he reminded the boy lightly. Rael pursed his lips and fumed, clenching and unclenching his fists. "Come now. I'll get you some dinner as recompense, hm?"

They sat down and ordered some fresh stew from one of the serving girls. Gavin had just leaned back in his chair to relax when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Surprised, he glanced

around to see three burly, heavysset men lurking in the corner at the table behind him.

"Can I help you?" he asked a large, tan-skinned fellow with a poofy beard and moustache.

"Heard you were headed for Whitestone," the man said coldly. "Heard you were intending to be the champion who kills the drachvold and claims the reward."

"That's right."

"Well, here's a bit of advice for you, laddy," said Poofy-beard, leaning closer and leering unpleasantly at Gavin. "The drachvold is *mine*. A young snip like yourself would get killed before you even drew your sword. Do the smart thing. Turn around and go back the way you came. Leave the killing of monsters to *real* wielders." His two comrades bared their teeth at Gavin and cracked their knuckles.

"I'll have you know," Gavin said nonchalantly, "that I am a member of the Imperial Guard of Allentria. So before you lay down any slights, you ought to consider who you might be speaking to and show proper respect."

"The Guard is a joke," the unpleasant man scoffed. "No, you leave Whitestone to me."

"Are you challenging me to a duel?" asked Gavin, instinctively dropping his hand to his belt where he stored his dagger.

"Listen, pretty-boy. We want that estate," said one of the two hulking men. He had a bald head and a hairy chest, the muscles of which were straining under his leather jerkin.

"The reward's only for half the estate," Rael put in. Gavin closed his eyes. He knew that tone of voice, and it meant trouble.

"Once I'm wed to the lady of the estate, it won't matter, will it?" sneered Poofy-beard.

"The Lady Syrene would hang herself from the rafters before she would ever marry you, you ugly, reeking son of a trollop!"

Poofy-beard moved much more quickly than Gavin would have expected for a man of his bulk. In a flash, he leaned over to smack Rael upside the head. But Rael was also faster than his frame suggested, and he ducked out of the way.

"Impertinent brat," Poofy-beard exclaimed, shoving Gavin's chair aside and lunging toward the far end of the table, where Rael had resurfaced. Gavin stood from his chair and grabbed the scruff of the man's thick neck.

"I wouldn't touch the boy," he warned. "Else you'll have me to

deal with."

"So be it," said Poofy-beard. Gavin felt a sharp crack on his head, which caused him to release the large man. The bald henchman had hit him with an ale mug.

A serving girl screamed and dropped her platter as Rael darted past her, still eluding Poofy-beard, who growled something about teaching him manners. Gavin assumed that Rael would be able to fend for himself, and turned his attentions to the henchmen. They bumbled toward him like a pair of blind oxen.

Gavin ducked under the swing of Bald-head's arm and came back up with a left uppercut. Bald-head reeled backwards, only to be replaced by the other one, who growled at Gavin through yellowing gapped teeth. Gap-tooth got in a well-aimed punch before the innkeeper appeared, trying to break up the fray.

"Stop this at once!"

Gavin would stop, but not before he taught these thugs a lesson. He grabbed Gap-tooth and bashed his forehead directly into Bald-head's nose. The two of them went down, whimpering piteously.

Gavin turned to see that Poofy-beard had tossed aside a whole table in his attempt to get at Rael, who had backed into a far corner. Poofy-beard dove at the boy with a snarl, and for a moment, Gavin's breath caught in his chest. But Rael pulled a snarl of his own and gestured violently with both his arms. The floorboards splintered dramatically, to more shrieks of hysterics from the serving girls and other patrons. A thick vine whipped upwards, smacking into Poofy-beard and sending him staggering backwards. Rael made a complicated gesture and the vine wound itself around Poofy-beard's feet. The man tripped and fell flat on his back.

"Enough — out, out, get out of my inn!"

The innkeeper shoved Gavin toward the door, roaring at the top of his voice about how brawling was illegal and how Gavin would have to compensate for damaged property. Gavin pleasantly told the man to send the bill to Commander-General Sero Weirrain of the Imperial Guard. He gave Poofy-beard a kick as he walked out, Rael hot on his heels.

"The fool couldn't even tell it was those other fellows who started it?" Gavin asked with an incredulous snort.

"I can't believe this," Rael seethed, stomping off to the stables where, Gavin realised, both of them would now have to spend the night.

"See here, Rael, it isn't that bad. That brute didn't hurt you, did

he?" Gavin jogged to catch up with the boy, looking down at him with concern.

"It isn't that. How did they even know about Whitestone and the drachvold, anyway?" He stopped suddenly, his green eyes widening with comprehension. "Oh, they *didn't*."

"Who didn't? Didn't what?"

"Lord Whitestone must have sent out the messenger birds with news of the situation," said Rael. "Gavin, we'll have to hurry — Whitestone isn't a big estate, but any promise of lands will bring blighters like that numbskull from far and wide."

"You're right," Gavin agreed. "But there's nothing we can do about it right now. Let's get some rest, and we'll set off tomorrow bright and early. There's a ferry that'll take us across the lake. Then we can take the road north to Nuiid, and you know the way from there, so we'll be back at Whitestone in no time at all," he said, clapping Rael on the shoulder and striding into the stables. Rael nodded miserably and trudged after him.

Gavin found a large bale of hay opposite Kahn's stall and flopped down onto it. Rael poked around at the front of the barn in a morose manner, and Gavin soon fell asleep to his rhythmic shuffling.

He awoke again in the dead of night to the sounds of a muted fight.

"Whassat?" he mumbled, sitting up and rubbing the sleep — and hay — out of his eyes. There was no response, but from just outside the stable doors came the unmistakable sound of someone being hit.

Gavin was on his feet at once. He wielded a preemptive air shield around himself, then drew his dagger from his belt and crept forward, peering out of the doors. The three thugs from the inn were outside. They were clustered around a struggling person. The victim was gagged and his hands had been bound together. Gavin recognised the shock of dark hair and the servants garments, though the familiar white tunic and brown vest were hanging in pieces, as if the men had ripped them apart to see if he had any money.

Poofy-beard lashed out and Rael crumpled as the man's boot burrowed into his side. The next moment, Poofy-beard had been laid out flat on the ground — Gavin had wielded a bit of condensed air and had walloped him in the face. Confused and surprised, Bald-head and Gap-tooth looked around, suddenly fearful. Bald-

head dropped Rael, who fell to the ground with a thud, curling in upon himself.

"How dare you accost an honourable young squire?" said Gavin, more furious than he had ever been before. He wielded another fierce gust of wind which blasted into the henchmen, throwing them off their feet and sending them crashing into the stable fence.

"Honourable, you say?" Poofy-beard stood and made a movement with his arms, and a large, sharp rock smacked into Gavin's air shield, nearly puncturing it. He was glad he'd had the foresight to wield one, otherwise his skull would have been split open.

"He's got more honour than the three of you and your families combined," Gavin retorted, moving forward to stand over Rael's shuddering body. He wielded a current of air around him, making it look as though a miniature tornado encircled the pair of them. Poofy-beard began backing away. Panting and bloodied, Gap-tooth and Bald-head crept after him.

"You'll see how much honour *he* has," Poofy-beard called, laughing derisively.

Gavin bombarded them with sharp whips of air as they ran off into the gloom of the night. He didn't stop wielding, nor did he look away until he'd ascertained that the three of them were gone for good. Then he spun around and dropped to Rael's side. Rael was shaking with silent tears. He wrapped his arms around himself and because his shirts had been torn, Gavin could already see the swelling on his forearm where one of the henchmen had hit him.

"Come on, Rael," said Gavin, trying to prize apart the boy's arms so he could assess the damage.

"No."

"Let's get you up." He grabbed Rael to bring him to his feet, but Rael was being obstinate, trying to get away from him. "It's all right, they've gone. Did they steal anything? Did they—" Gavin stopped talking abruptly. Rael twisted out of his grasp and crawled for a few paces until he collapsed on the ground again.

"Rael—?"

"What?" Rael wailed from where he lay, cringing at the sound of Gavin's astonished voice.

"You're not a kitchen boy," Gavin said slowly, aghast. "You're . . . a kitchen *girl*!"

The revelation unsteadied Gavin and he swayed on his feet,

stepping closer to the girl who huddled before him on the ground. Rael — *she*, whoever she was — held the remnants of her shirt around her and nodded slowly.

"I can't believe . . . all this time, I had no idea," Gavin exclaimed, staring down at her in wonder. The two of them regarded each other for a long, very awkward moment. Then Gavin remembered himself and shook his head.

"What am I thinking? We've got to get you cleaned up. Here," he added, taking off his grey tunic and handing it to the girl, who snatched it from him and wrapped it around herself.

He helped her to her feet, then walked her into the barn once more, dragging the stable doors shut behind them. He wedged a broom through the handle so no one would be able to gain entrance without alerting them. Gavin found a lamp and lit it with his flint. Once its light was steady, he went to go sit by the girl.

"Firstly, are you all right?" he asked, still unable to believe this girl was Rael.

"I'm fine," she snapped, scowling. "Just because I've suddenly turned out to be a girl doesn't mean you need to fuss over me, you trog."

All right, she was *definitely* Rael.

"I didn't mean—I'm concerned, that's all," he said, matching her scowl for scowl. "You, up against three men who were all twice your size?" He shook his head, thankful that he'd been in time to stop them from whatever devilry they had intended. "So who are you, really?"

"Um . . . Raela."

"And what is Raela's relationship to the inhabitants of Indrath Whitestone?"

"I'm actually the Lady Syrene's personal handmaiden," Raela explained. "I've been her servant for as long as I can remember."

"Which explains the deep-seated loyalty to your lady," said Gavin. "But . . . part of it doesn't add up. When you were a boy—I mean, *dressed* as a boy—I thought you had come on this quest for love of the Lady Syrene. Why were you so defensive about her?"

"I have a right to defend her. I know her better than anyone else. Besides, when her father offered her up like that as a bribe, she confided in me that she really *would* kill herself if she were forced to marry the first idiot who could defeat the drachvold. So I said I would do whatever I could to help her, and she sent me off to, well . . . to find someone worthy, who maybe she *would* be able to

marry. Someone she'd approve of. A champion who could not only deliver Indrath Whitestone, but deliver the Lady Syrene from her oppressed life."

Gavin was struck by the words and felt oddly touched by Raela's explanation.

"Am I to understand, then," he said, "that you find me to be worthy of the Lady Syrene?"

Raela blushed and fidgeted with Gavin's tunic, making a show of rearranging the grey folds around herself.

"Of course not. But you were the best choice. *You* said you wouldn't force her hand in marriage once you killed the drachvold."

"And I'm sure the fact that I'm a tall, good-looking young fellow didn't sway your judgement at all did it, Raela?" he asked, grinning at her.

"I won't dignify that foolishness with a response," she said disdainfully.

Gavin laughed. "Well, now I know why you always refused to room with me. Oh, blast—I made you sleep in the stables that first night. I'm sorry."

"Told you that you weren't a gentleman."

"Yes, and I quite deserved that. Though you did ask for it, the way you'd been insulting me."

"I never insulted you."

"You said I was arrogant and stuck-up and full of myself and dumb and rude, if I recall."

"Oh . . . well, that was before I got to know you," she explained, blushing an even deeper shade of red.

"Never fear. I've not taken your words to heart. I'm much too arrogant and full of myself to be upset by something like that," he assured her.

She smiled at him and he studied her face in the sparse lamplight.

"How did I ever mistake you for a boy?" he wondered aloud, shaking his head in disbelief. "Perhaps I *am* a bit dumb."

"You're not," she said quickly, looking down. "I bound myself pretty well. And I don't look very feminine. Or act feminine. Or sound feminine."

True, she was no waif, and her tan face was too round to be considered conventionally attractive. But Gavin, as he scrutinised her sparkling green eyes, was wholly unconvinced that she did not look feminine. Though she'd hacked off most of her black hair, it was still thick and shiny, and if she'd ever bothered to comb it out

of her face during their travels, he probably would have noticed straightaway that something had been amiss. Her small nose sat above her lips, which—when she had been smiling—were lovely. They were now pulled into one of her usual scowls.

"I think if you didn't frown quite so much, you'd be very attractive," he said candidly, before he stopped to think about the impact his words might have. Raela's head snapped up and she stared at him as if she thought he'd gone mad.

"I mean—well, come on, Raela, I wasn't being fresh. And I wasn't making fun, either. I said that only because of our relationship," Gavin said quickly.

"Relationship?" she repeated, raising her eyebrows.

"We're friends, aren't we?" he said, upset to discover that she didn't think so. "We've saved each other's lives. If that doesn't make us friends, I don't know what would."

"Oh," said Raela, tilting her head as if considering his words. Then she looked up at him and smiled again.

"Yes. I guess we are friends."



## CHAPTER SIX

They left bright and early the next morning, just as Gavin had promised, though neither one of them had gotten much rest. Raela's arm was badly bruised, as was the side where Poofy-beard had kicked her. They stopped at an apothecary as they left Riylon to get a healing salve—Gavin had to trade his dagger for that—and a new tunic for her.

After the ferry ride to the north side of Crystal Lake, they kept a much faster pace than they had through the Gorgan Forest, putting the horses on a steady cycle: walking three leagues, trotting two, cantering one, then repeating. That way, Kahn and Deathcharger wouldn't get too tired out.

Now that Raela's secret identity had been revealed, she wasn't so moody or guarded—or perhaps it was because they'd established that they were, indeed, friends. She scowled less and talked more, and Gavin realised that she had been so reticent only because if she'd spoken too much, it would have been clear she was a girl. She'd lowered her voice while posing as Rael and confessed it had been a strain on her throat.

Gavin had lots of questions to ask. It had been impressive enough for a young kitchen boy to go on a grand quest to save his castle, but it was even more so now he knew she was a servant girl.

"I feel trapped at Whitestone," Raela explained, as Kahn and Deathcharger walked along. Since they were in the slow part of the horses' cycle, Raela had asked to practice with Gavin's bow again. She now sat astride the small white mare, sighting down the shaft of the arrow she'd drawn back to her right ear.

"Remember to keep your left elbow a bit crooked, otherwise the quiver will scrape your skin off," said Gavin. "Trapped how?"

"Well, girls don't get taught anything useful, like archery." She let the arrow fly, and it zoomed ahead of them, burrowing itself in the middle of the road by the side of a large rock. "And I always got along with Syrene, but the Lady Lyselle—! She's a right shrew,

you know that? I shouldn't say it, but it's the truth. I can't stand her one bit."

"Is that so?" Gavin grinned down at her. "What makes her so shrewish?"

"Her voice, for starters. She squeaks like a rodent. Thinks it's cute or something." Raela snorted. "And then the way she's always so selfish. Always ordering everyone around and being bossy, even to me. And she *hates* magic, and refuses to use her own. I don't know why Syrene bothers trying to get her to branch out, because it's clearly a lost cause."

"It sounds to me like the Lady Syrene does it because she cares about her sister," Gavin observed. He had always been upset by his own sister when he'd been young, but he loved her all the same. That was just what siblings did: they hated each other. Occupational requirement.

"She does, I suppose. It's one of the reasons I'm here—Syrene wanted to make sure Whitestone and all its people would be safe."

"Even if it meant being forced into a marriage she didn't want," Gavin finished. Raela paused, then nodded slowly.

They had reached the arrow by this time and she dismounted, plucking it back up. Gavin's esteem of the Lady Syrene increased again. She had a good heart, doing a noble thing like that. And it was clear that she was kind to her servants from the way Raela spoke of her.

The suns passed quickly. Gavin and Raela chatted amiably when they had things to say, and during their silences they were content to sit side by side, enjoying the scenery that fled by them as they trotted along the well-worn path to Nuiid. Raela was no longer awkward or sullen—she smiled frequently and laughed often. Gavin continued to tell her stories about his adventures as a warrior of the Imperial Guard, and Raela, for her part, told him stories about the Lady Syrene.

In this fashion, they reached Nuiid after six more suns of traveling.

"I recognise where we are now," Raela said happily as they approached the town. "If we go west along the edge of the Gorgan Forest for another five suns, we'll see the cliffs of Whitestone."

"Excellent," said Gavin, spurring Kahn to a leisurely canter. "I'll race you to the inn."

Laughing, the two of them sped down the wide path that led to the village centre. Raela looked as though she were gaining

on Gavin, when suddenly she pulled Deathcharger to a halt. Nonplused, Gavin slowed Kahn.

"What's the matter?"

Raela didn't answer. She was staring at a message board plastered with parchments. Most of them were old and crumbling, but one was new, written in bright red runes. Gavin had a suspicion what it might be, and when he approached, he saw the announcement for himself:

HELP WANTED:

*Onne champion, warrior, knight or wielder who canst  
deliver the inhabitants of Indrath Whitestone by slaying  
a vicious and bloodthirsty drachvold moste brutal.*

*A five suns' ride west of Nuiid.*

REWARD!

*Halfe the entirety of the goodsome estate of Whitestone,  
and a betrothal to the virtuous noblewoman Lady Syrene.*

Below this was a poorly drawn picture of a drachvold that looked more like a bat with a snake tail and fangs dripping blood, and an even poorer drawing of the Lady Syrene—if that *was* supposed to be Syrene, and was not, in fact, a pig in a blue dress and fancy wig.

Gavin examined the parchment wordlessly, waiting for an explosion from Raela. Surprisingly, it never came.

"Well they've done a fair likeness of her," she said, ripping the parchment from the message board, revealing an ancient notice warning travellers about poisonous snakes living along the sides of the road. She crumpled up Whitestone's desperate plea for help and stuffed it in her satchel. "If this is what they've been putting on the papers they sent out, I'd be surprised if anyone shows up to battle the drachvold."

"Oh, Raela, that isn't nice," said Gavin, following her as she trotted off toward the town. "I know you're worried, but if the Lady Syrene is as strong-willed as you've described, even if someone's already slain the drachvold, I'm sure she'll refuse to wed him—unless he meets her high standards."

"Not bloody likely," muttered Raela. Suddenly she halted again. Gavin halted as well, and Kahn, who was getting fed up with all the abrupt stops and starts, snorted and stamped his hooves on the dusty road.

"What now?"

"I sense something." Raela became very still. Her green eyes widened and she tilted her head as if listening for something.

"You mean an animal?"

"Shhh," she hissed, putting a finger sharply to her lips. Gavin quieted obediently and looked around.

"I can't pinpoint where it's coming from," Raela whispered. "It's close by . . . and it's dangerous. But I don't—"

She was cut off as Deathcharger let out a shrill whinny and reared onto her hind legs. Raela was thrown from the saddle and deposited in a heap on the road. Kahn, who danced deftly out of the way of the white mare's flailing hooves, backed up enough for Gavin to see what the problem was.

A fat, banded snake was swaying ominously, fangs bared, preparing itself for another strike. Deathcharger had a distinct swelling with two puncture marks on her right fetlock. She was dangerously close to overbalancing on top of Raela.

Quickly, Gavin wielded an air shield around the snake, which lashed out viciously, but was prevented from striking again by the sphere of condensed air. He also wielded a cushion for the mare, gently pushing her back down to all fours. Then he dismounted, heading for the snake.

"No Gavin, don't," Raela coughed, getting to her feet and dusting herself off. "If it's a poisonous snake, we can't kill it. We've got to take it to an apothecary so an antidote can be mixed from its venom."

She limped over to Deathcharger, favoring her bruised side, and grabbed the reigns of the panicking horse. With a steady arm, she jerked Deathcharger's head down and stared into the horse's eyes. Gavin got the distinct impression she was silently communicating with the mare because Deathcharger quieted, though her breathing was still labored and the whites of her eyes were showing.

"You go on ahead with the snake and find the apothecary. I'll bring Deathcharger."

"Raela, you can't go on foot when there may be more of those snakes about, and you can't expect to be able to walk a wounded horse half a league on your own."

"Gavin, please," she said, looking up at him with watering eyes. "You have to go find the apothecary—I'll be fine."

Reluctant though Gavin was to leave her, he nodded. He carefully wielded the sphere of air containing the snake up to eye level. It thrashed around but couldn't break through Gavin's

magical shield. With one last glance back at Raela, who was murmuring soothingly to Deathcharger, he kicked Kahn to a gallop and sped off to find the apothecary, with the snake securely in tow.

Fortunately, the apothecary's store was marked with a large sign. It was situated on the outskirts of Nuiid, close to the forest, surrounded by overgrown briars. Gavin dismounted and tethered Kahn to a fence post in an area of short-cropped grass. If there were any more snakes about, the black warhorse would be able to see them coming and would squash them with his hooves. Then he wielded the air-caged snake in front of him and darted inside the apothecary's cottage.

The cottage was a dingy, poorly-lit place. Its walls were lined with wooden shelves, upon which sat hundreds of dusty potion bottles and ancient, gruesome-looking artifacts. A spindly old man in a set of black robes perched upon a stool behind the counter, grinding something with a mortar and pestle. In the corner, near a door which led to the back of the shop, a young apprentice sat petting a mangy cat.

"I need an antidote immediately," said Gavin, striding towards the counter. "My traveling companion's horse was bitten by this snake."

The old man glanced up at Gavin and the snake. He did a double take when he saw that the snake was still alive and was, apparently, hovering in midair of its own accord.

"Air wielder?" he asked. He had a soft, scratchy voice—the kind of voice Gavin would have imagined the snake to have, if it had been able to talk.

"Yes," Gavin said impatiently. "The antidote, please?"

"We must take a sample of the poison from the snake's fangs," said the man, rubbing his bony hands together and wiggling his eyebrows, as if excited by the challenge. "Caine, bring us our venom extraction kit."

Caine, the apprentice boy, leapt to his feet, upsetting the cat, and darted into the back room. He returned with a wooden box, which he set on the counter in front of the apothecary.

The apothecary rummaged in the box until he found a small ceramic bowl. He carefully placed this on the counter in front of him and then rummaged some more until he found a stretchy canvas covering, which he secured over the top of the bowl.

"Could you please hurry?" Gavin didn't know how much time Deathcharger had before the poison took its toll on her, and he was

also worried about Raela making her way down that road alone as dusk fell, poisonous creatures lurking in the long grasses at every turn.

"These things cannot be rushed," the apothecary scolded, squinting his black eyes at Gavin and wagging a finger in his face. "Caine, go and fetch us our ingredients."

Caine bowed his head and scurried off again. The apothecary turned to the snake and grinned, showing the few teeth that remained in his gums. He lifted the canvas-covered bowl slowly and held it out toward the snake, which hissed.

"Now, if you would be so kind as to free the snake for just a moment?"

Gavin looked skeptically at the man.

"You are the one who complained about wasting time, no?"

With a resigned sigh, Gavin let the air shield dissipate. The snake thudded softly to the counter top and turned upon the first thing it saw: the bowl. Its fangs punctured the canvas covering and Gavin heard venom splatter into the container.

"Enough," the apothecary said sharply, jerking it away from the snake. The animal reared back, preparing to strike again, but Gavin trapped it once more before it had the chance to do anything.

"Very good, very good; we could use an able wielder like yourself around here," said the apothecary, as Caine returned from the back with an armful of bottles. "We could train you and you could work for us when we travel."

"I'm already employed, thanks," said Gavin, trying not to sound too impatient as he watched the apothecary pick through the bottles, selecting ingredients and dropping them into the bowlful of snake venom. After what seemed like an age, the old man straightened and held up his concoction to Gavin, who turned his head away from the foul smell.

"Now, where is the victim?"

"Here," said a voice from behind them. Gavin turned around to see Raela standing in the doorway, ashen-faced. He was amazed she had made it all this way with Deathcharger.

The apothecary scuttled around the counter and out to Raela, Caine trailing in his footsteps, Gavin emerging last. He saw that Deathcharger was lying in the short grass next to Kahn, her sides sweaty and heaving. Raela went over and knelt by her side.

"Show the apothecary your foot," she said softly to the mare, putting a hand on the horse's side. Amazingly, Deathcharger

extended a shaking limb to the old man, who crouched in front of her to examine the bite.

"We shall have to bleed her," he said, producing a dagger from the folds of his robes with a flourish. "Caine, get some rope for us. We need her to be steady for this." Caine nodded and made to run back inside.

"No, I can hold her steady," Raela said quickly. "We can't waste any more time." She turned to the mare. "I want you to stay still. You're going to feel some pain, but it will save you, okay?"

Caine stared at Raela as if he thought she were mad. The apothecary, however, narrowed his eyes shrewdly at her, in a way which made Gavin feel ill at ease. The old man deftly made a cut between the two fang marks on the mare's leg. Deathcharger snorted and her eyes rolled but, as Raela had promised, the horse remained still as the apothecary poured the antidote into the fresh wound.

"There," he said, straightening and pocketing his dagger and bowl. "We have saved your horse. She will be fine by the morrow."

"Thank you," said Raela, relief flooding her voice.

"We must discuss a proper payment," the apothecary continued, turning around with a sweep of his robes and scurrying back into his shop.

Caine followed like a trained dog, but Gavin and Raela lagged behind, exchanging a worried glance. They were both thinking the same thing: neither of them would *have* a proper payment. These types of procedures were expensive. Gavin had a few copper coins stashed away, but not much else.

"We can kill this," they heard the apothecary say. He used his dagger to indicate the snake, which was still confined in its shield on the counter. "Young man, you may cease wielding." Gavin did as he was commanded and the apothecary raised the dagger above the creature.

There was only a fraction of a moment in which it became apparent the apothecary was not going to be quick enough. The snake had already leaned out of his reach and was preparing to strike. A poisonous bite was one thing for a horse in the prime of her life; it would be another thing entirely for the tiny, frail old man, who would likely die before another antidote could be mixed.

"Stop," cried Raela, stepping forward and holding out her arms. Both the apothecary and the snake froze. Gavin's jaw dropped—even though he had seen this trick of hers before—and Caine

gasped in awe.

"Don't you dare," she said to the snake. It turned its head and glared at her. She glared right back, then pointed to the door. Slowly, the snake twisted away from the apothecary and slithered down to the floor. It wound its way along the wooden floorboards, passed Raela and Gavin, and vanished into the grasses that led to the woods.

"We thought so," the apothecary hissed, staring at Raela with a greedy gleam in his eyes. "We could use someone like you in our business. We could train you quite well. We know many people who would pay handsome fees for your talents if you worked for us."

Raela came to herself at the sound of the old man's voice and looked up at him, startled. She realised the magnitude of what she had done; what she had just revealed to him, and she stepped back, suddenly afraid.

"I . . . I don't think so," she said, her own voice unsteady.

"But you are in our debt," the apothecary persisted, scuttling back around the counter to stand in front of Raela, peering at her as though she were some prize livestock he wished to buy. "We saved your horse, yes?"

"And she saved your life," said Gavin, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder in the direction the snake had gone.

"What else will a young person like yourself do?" the apothecary asked of Raela, ignoring Gavin's comment. "Find a husband, settle down to a boring life of cookery and sewing? If you join us, we will show you the world. We will bring you to the palaces of royalties who need their animals healed or trained by us. We can make you very, very rich." The apothecary reached out as if to grab her.

"My squire isn't available for hire," said Gavin, placing a protective arm around Raela's shoulders. "We can offer you anything else on our persons as payment, but she's staying with me."

The apothecary glared from Gavin to Raela and back again, dry-washing his hands and pursing his thin, sour lips. His black eyes narrowed and he sighed in resignation.

"Suit yourselves," he said, turning and moving back behind his counter. "We cannot make you do anything you don't want to. Now leave us. We are very busy, and you have delayed our preparation of tomorrow's orders." He gestured at them to leave his shop.



"Let's go," Gavin murmured in Raela's ear, pulling her outside. It looked as though they were getting off easy this time. Raela didn't need telling twice—she fairly ran out of the dark shop to where the horses were. Gavin looked back only once. The apothecary had picked up his pestle and was grinding ingredients once more, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Caine was nowhere in sight.

With much coaxing and cajoling, Raela got Deathcharger to her feet and walked her to the local inn, where she insisted upon staying with her mare in the stables. Gavin wasn't about to leave Raela alone again, so he stayed in the barn that night, too. They agreed to take turns at watch, partially to make sure that Deathcharger was recovering, and partially to keep an eye out for unsavory characters.

Gavin insisted on taking first watch to let Raela get some rest after the traumatic events of the evening. He woke her after two moon-lengths, then settled down upon a pile of canvas sacks, trying to get as comfortable as he could. He didn't think he would ever be able to get to sleep on such a horrid, scratchy bed, but the next thing he knew, he was awoken by the sun's rays shining upon his face through the cracks in the stable roof.

He sat up and looked around. Deathcharger was in her stall, still holding her right foot off the ground but looking otherwise recovered.

Raela, however, was gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“A girl of nineteen, though she looks a bit younger. Tan skin, short black hair, green eyes, wearing men’s clothes. Have you seen anyone like that?” Gavin asked desperately. The man he was talking to shook his head, twitched his horses reigns, and continued into the village of Nuiid.

Gavin angrily kicked a boulder, which accomplished nothing except for acquiring a collection of sore toes. He sat down upon the rock and tried to think rationally.

He couldn’t imagine why Raela would have left on her own. He thought she might have gone on ahead to Whitestone, which was why he was on the western road out of Nuiid searching for her. But she wouldn’t have left Deathcharger, and he didn’t want to believe she would have left him without so much as an explanation. Besides, he was her chosen champion, the one who would save Indrath Whitestone and the Lady Syrene. She needed him to defeat the drachvold.

Perhaps she figured that someone else would have already done the job, seeing as there were all those announcements floating around the Smarlands. But that *still* didn’t explain why she would have left Deathcharger behind – and in the middle of the night, no less.

Perplexed and worried, Gavin mounted up onto Kahn’s back and set off down the road again. Deathcharger, whose reigns were tied to the warhorse’s saddle, plodded along behind with only a slight limp. The apothecary had done his job well, and he’d done it for free. That made Gavin suspicious. Would the old man have tried to kidnap Raela just because he hadn’t been paid? It seemed like too much trouble to go to.

Then again, Gavin knew he didn’t understand the extent of Raela’s powers. If the apothecary believed she could get him money through her ability to communicate with animals, perhaps that would have been motive enough to steal her away against her

will. But Raela would have simply wielded against him and freed herself, which brought Gavin back to square one: he had no idea where she could be.

Around noon, he came across a pair of farmers with bushels of corn strapped to their backs, taking their goods to town. He hailed them and rode over, asking if they'd seen anyone by Raela's description.

"Haven't seen no one by them looks, and we been walkin' all morning, en't that right, Pa?" said the younger one, a tall, gangly boy with brown skin and a cheerful face.

"S'right," Pa said gruffly. "En't seen no one."

"Well, we did see *some'un*," said the boy, scratching his nose. "We seen a mighty strange black cart come 'long earlier. There were a buncha people in robes — mighta been dresses. Mighta been a girl under them dresses, mightn't there, Pa?"

"S'pose," said Pa, shrugging.

"Looked kinda like medicine robes, 'cept they was all black," the boy continued. "Dunno what they was doin', cause it en't the time of season to be travellin' in them sorts of fancy, heavy outfits. En't that right, Pa? Didn't them black robes look scorchin' hot?"

"Mm," Pa said noncommittally.

"I'm thinkin' they mighta — hey, where you goin'?"

Gavin had heard enough. If the black-robed apothecary and his black-robed apprentice were suddenly fleeing Nuiid, Gavin didn't need any more evidence: they had taken Raela in the night to exploit her talents. As to the question of why she hadn't wielded against them . . . he was an apothecary, wasn't he? He could mix up potions and poisons to prevent her from using her magic.

Gavin couldn't go at a faster pace than a trot for Deathcharger's sake — and that, only intermittently — but he didn't stop for anything. He gave the animals a rest when night fell, but the thought of Raela getting further and further away in the apothecary's cart made him anxious. The three of them rested for a moon-length before Gavin started out again.

They journeyed all through the night and morning. Gavin dismounted and walked alongside Kahn so the stallion would be able to rest his back for a while. They trudged westwards, following the road that snaked along the edge of the forest. Gavin followed subtle clues that told him he was still on the right track: a set of footprints in a soft patch of mud, splinters from a broken wheel's axle, a pile of manure.

Night fell once again, stretching across the verdant landscape, blanketing the rolling farmlands to his right and towering trees to his left in a cloak of velvety darkness. Still Gavin marched onwards. If he had been even the slightest bit less focused, he would have missed it. As he passed over a stream, a strange glint in the water caught his eye. He looked down to see a flickering reflection shining up at him and raised his blue eyes to the direction whence it came. There, sequestered in the woods, a fire burned, almost obscured by the thick undergrowth. Gavin debated whether or not to investigate. If it wasn't the apothecary then he would be wasting time. But who would go to such pains to hide out in the woods for the night, unless it was someone who had kidnaped a young girl against her will?

He left the road and walked toward the trees, tethering Kahn and Deathcharger a little ways into the forest to give them whatever small rest he could offer. Then he crept onwards alone, approaching the crackling sounds of the fire. He found a large bush and peered through its branches into a clearing. There was a black cart on the far side of the flames. A panel was open on its side and the apprentice boy, Caine, was busy arranging ingredients on the shelves within. Another black-robed youth, whom Gavin hadn't seen in Nuiid, was busy cooking something over the fire. He had dark skin and long, frizzy hair. The apothecary himself was sitting across from him, huddled on a stool with his eyes closed. And between them . . .

"Raela," breathed Gavin. They had dressed her in one of their ridiculous black outfits and she sat stony-faced, gazing into the flames, her hands bound together by coarse rope. Gavin felt a wave of anger surge through his body. Without even thinking of a plan, he stood up and crashed through the bush into the clearing.

"Sir, you have unlawfully taken my squire," he growled, wielding a current of air and binding the old man tightly in place. "I demand you release her at once."

"Gavin?" Raela jumped to her feet, looking astonished.

"She came with us of her own free will," the apothecary sneered in a strained voice. Gavin was probably squeezing the breath out of him, but he found he didn't much care.

"Then explain why her hands are tied."

"Gavin, don't—"

Raela never finished her sentence because Frizzy-hair had stood up. The boy was a fire wielder and he blasted a stream of flames at

Gavin. Gavin leaped out of the way just in time, dropping the spell that bound the apothecary. That turned out to be a mistake, because as he evaded another lash of fire and used a whip of solidified air to knock Frizzy-hair unconscious, he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his right shoulder blade.

He cried out in pain and fell to his knees, instantly losing his grasp on all of his magic. Agony spread throughout his body from that one point, a terrible icy, burning sensation that clawed at his innards and made every one of his nerves feel as though a knife were cutting into them. The apothecary had gotten him with a tiny dart laced with poison, and there was only one poison Gavin knew of that could cut a person off from his magic: *evasdrin*.

Swaying, his vision blurring and growing darker from the periphery inwards, he turned to look at Raela. She was the last thing he saw before he slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Gavin woke sometime later to a very unpleasant sensation. It felt as though something was digging into his stomach. He opened his eyes, squinting against the brightness of the sun and found that something *was* digging into his stomach: the pommel of Kahn's saddle. He had been slung unceremoniously over the back of his own horse and was now being walked along as a prisoner. Had the apothecary done this? He must have! And where was Raela now?

With a strangled cry he tried to get up and slipped right off Kahn's back onto the road.

"You lagwit," snapped a voice from in front of him. He turned to see Raela, sitting astride Deathcharger. "You scared me half to death when you came running into that clearing last night," she continued as he got up dazedly.

"I scared *you*? What about you, running off without telling me?" Gavin shot back, bewildered. "Why did you even go with them? What were you thinking?"

"They came in the middle of the night and got me with *evasdrin*," she said. "The apothecary wanted to make me work for him. I refused but then Caine showed me some sort of horrible poison, and they threatened to kill you and Deathcharger if I didn't go with them," she finished, dismounting and looking him straight in the eyes. "I was so worried, and I'd already been drugged, I wasn't thinking straight."

"You, a servant girl," Gavin said slowly, "were worried about *me*, a trained soldier of the Imperial Guard?"

"Well, of course when you say it like that it makes me look foolish," she said, blushing.

"Of course it was foolish. I had no idea what had happened to you!" Gavin strode over angrily to where Raela stood. She braced herself, sticking out her chin to prepare for a shouting match, and seemed quite surprised when Gavin pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Don't do it again," he said crossly, drawing away and taking up Kahn's reigns without looking back at her.

"I don't think I'd have time to. Whitestone is only another two suns from here," Raela told him as she re-mounted.

"How did you get away?" he wanted to know.

"Well, the *evasdrin* was mostly out of my system by the time you showed up. And when they attacked you, I figured the deal was off, since they said they wouldn't lay a finger on you if I went with them. So I ripped through my bindings and talked to them. Perhaps I shouted a bit and wielded a lot, until they saw reason and let me drag you off. I found Kahn and Deathcharger, and now here we all are."

Gavin shook his head. Would he never cease to be amazed—or humbled—in Raela's company?

The terrain became steep and hilly the next sun, and the evening after that, they saw Whitestone's gleaming cliffs in the distance. The castle perched at the edge of a precipice overlooking the farmlands in its valley, surrounded by the green blanket of the Gorgan Forest at its back.

"It's impressive for a small estate," Gavin observed.

"Home, sweet home," said Raela, and she sighed dejectedly.

"You don't sound pleased to be back. Worried about the drachvold?"

"It's not that. It's just . . . I've had such adventures on the road. I'm not sure I'm ready to go back to a life of sewing and strict 'no-magic' rules. I'm not sure I *want* to. It was so boring there."

"Adventures are what you make of them," Gavin said lightly. "And one can make anything into an adventure. I'm sure being back at home won't be so bad. You do have a certain knack for trouble—you should be able to find plenty of new adventures."

She didn't look convinced by his words.

"You know, Raela, you could go back and join the Imperial Guard. I'm sure with all your in-the-field experience you could skip being a page and continue on as a squire."

"Do they let girls join?" she asked skeptically.

"Not sure. You could be the first one to ask."

"And the first one to be denied," she said, though she smiled as she did so.

They figured they ought to spend the night where they were, because approaching the castle in the dark with a hungry drachvold circling above wasn't the wisest idea. Gavin caught some game and ate heartily, preparing himself for the fight that had brought him all this way. He retired early and fell asleep almost as soon as his eyes were shut.

He was awoken all too soon by Raela.

"Gavin, get up. We've got trouble. Other warriors have come to defeat the drachvold," she whispered.

He was alert in an instant, and together they snuck to the edge of the copse in which they had sheltered for the night. Gavin peered down the short hill that led to the green in front of Indrath Whitestone to see a group of people preparing for battle.

"Judging by the bones scattered on the lawn there's already one or two who are dead by the drachvold's doing," Raela said darkly. "And that one is the newest would-be champion," she added, pointing to the tallest man who stood in the midst of the preparations, allowing himself to be armored by his servants. Gavin gave a start as he recognised him.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't old Poofy-beard," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Who?"

"That's the man who accosted you in Riyon," Gavin reminded her. Raela's eyes narrowed as well, and when she finally recognised him, she drew in a sharp breath of air and stood up.

Gavin grabbed her arm. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to kill him," she growled.

"Come now, Raela. You're going to parade down into a group of warriors on your own, unarmed?"

"You don't think he deserves it?" she asked, trying to pull herself from his grasp.

"That's neither here nor there," Gavin said delicately, since he knew it would be very unbecoming to say that Poofy-beard deserved to rot in a ditch. "But we've got to have some sort of a plan, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, but he's a powerful wielder. He might just have a chance of beating the drachvold and I don't know what I'd do if he did,"

she groaned.

"Well then, we shan't give him that chance." Gavin tossed his head, shaking his auburn hair back from his brow, and straightened his grey tunic officiously. "I'll just have to go down there and challenge him."

*"That's your plan?"*

*"Brilliant, isn't it?"*

*"It's idiotic, is what it is."*

Gavin shrugged and went to saddle up Kahn. He was down to his last weapon now, which was his lance. His sword and shield had been lost to the water serpent, his dagger had gone toward buying Raela a new shirt, and he was all out of arrows. His long lance, lightweight and sturdy, tipped with a barbed iron point, rested in its cradle at the back of the saddle, and now he took it out.

"Raela, don't take offence to this, but I'd prefer it if you stayed here," he told her as he swung himself into the saddle and began suiting up, stuffing his hands into his stout gloves and buckling his neck guard around himself. "This is what you hired me for, and I've vowed to do my job as champion of Indrath Whitestone. It's my fight, and I get to dictate the rules – and the rules are for you to keep out of the way."

"What if you need help?" she rejoined. "I've had to save your life a fair number of times on this journey, Gavin Swiftwind, and don't you forget it."

"If I need help, then all rules are revoked, and you have the right to murder Poofy-beard and kill the drachvold in any way you see fit," said Gavin, giving her a sweeping bow from Kahn's saddle. She didn't look amused. In fact, she looked very upset.

"I'm serious," she said softly.

"As am I," he replied. "I may be proud, but I'm no fool. I don't want to die just for the sake of glory and honour. If I'm dead, I won't be able to enjoy it." Then he looked down at her, and all his lightheartedness vanished. "But I'm also serious about you staying out of trouble. You're not going to be hurt on my watch, nor can I afford to be worrying about your safety and wellbeing when I'm fighting."

And with that, he heeled Kahn out of the cluster of trees, for he found that he could no longer look Raela in the eye. He hefted his lance and made a beeline for the group of people.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

When Poofy-beard spotted Gavin, he wasn't pleased.

"I see you didn't take my advice. You've come riding to your death, have you?"

"Sir, I was hired directly by one of the inhabitants of Indrath Whitestone to be their champion and to defend them," Gavin announced. "You are on my employer's lands without permission, and I demand that you leave at once."

Poofy-beard laughed and drew a sword from his side. "I've got as much right to be here as anyone else, laddy," he said gruffly. "And I've got more than a right to claim these lands, for I am Endrick the Awful, and in the Eighth Age Whitestone's grounds belonged to *my* family. My ancestors were evicted from the valley when the castle was built and ever since we've lived in squalor. I will take back what's mine, I shall claim the prize and the woman, and I shall kill anything that gets in my way."

Poofy-beard—Endrick the Awful, as he called himself—shoved his servants aside and grabbed the reigns of his horse, a deep-chested grey gelding with huge hooves and angry eyes.

"In that case, I challenge you to a formal duel," said Gavin. "No magic, just weapons and our own wits. Whoever wins is the one worthy of facing the drachvold and winning the estate and the hand of the Lady Syrene."

"Ha! You'd not last a moment against me," boasted Endrick, maneuvering the gelding past Kahn and towards the centre of the open green.

"Care to prove it?" Gavin whipped his lance down, blocking Endrick's way. Endrick growled and slashed at Gavin with his sword, but Kahn, well-trained warhorse that he was, danced out of the reach of the blade.

"With pleasure," snarled Endrick. He kicked the gelding forward, and the horse reared with an angry snort, lashing out with its impressive hooves. Gavin heeled Kahn out of the way again and

turned, jabbing at Endrick with his lance.

They traded a few fierce blows and it was all Gavin could do to prevent himself from wielding. If he broke the rules first, not only would it be dishonest, but Endrick the Awful might begin to use his earth magic, and Kahn would be in serious trouble then.

A shrill and haunting call echoed through the air and the servants of Endrick the Awful scattered in fear, running toward the far end of Indrath Whitestone. The drachvold had heard the commotion. Time was of the essence, now. Gavin struck again and again with his lance, but Endrick fended him off. He'd heard the feral call of the monster too, and he grinned maliciously. He reigned the gelding back and, to Gavin's astonishment, sheathed his sword. What was he doing?

Suddenly the ground beneath Kahn's feet erupted. Endrick the Awful had broken the agreement, and had wielded up a column of the white stone upon which the castle was situated. Kahn whinnied and unbalanced at the sudden appearance of the wall of rock before him, throwing Gavin from his saddle. Gavin tumbled into a roll to soften his fall, but felt his shoulder wrench painfully as it hit the roiling ground controlled by Endrick.

The drachvold was visible now. It had been roosting atop one of the castle's far towers and, upon waking to find that humans were in its territory, had been put in a foul mood. It soared around the side of the castle, shrieking. Gavin knew that drachvolds had poor eyesight in the light—being nocturnal predators, the sun overwhelmed their sensitive eyes. Perhaps if he remained still, he could avoid notice. That was not to be, for Endrick the Awful—raving lunatic that he was—turned and hailed it.

"What ho, savage creature! Come to me and try your luck against my blade. You, like all my opponents, shall fall!"

*Because you cheat*, Gavin thought furiously, scrambling to his feet and transferring his lance to his uninjured arm. The drachvold roared and zoomed toward them. The beat of its wings upon the morning air battered at Gavin's eardrums.

While Gavin was distracted by the approaching monster, Endrick spurred his gelding forward and brought his sword swishing down, intending to behead Gavin where he stood. But not for nothing was the youngest graduate from the of the Imperial Guard of Allentri—Gavin reacted quickly, wielding an air shield so Endrick's sword glanced to the side of his head and conjuring a whip of air that yanked the horrible man from his saddle. Now

they were both unmounted. Endrick made a violent gesture as he leapt to his feet, and Gavin's footing was upset by the other man's earth wielding. He found himself flat on his back again, with the point of Endrick's sword hovering above his heart.

He was saved by the drachvold. It was upon them now and it stretched out its back legs, grasping for the two humans. Endrick was forced to go into a sloppy dive roll to avoid being snatched up by the beast and as he did so, he lost his grip on his sword. Both Kahn and the gelding bolted. No animal in its right mind would stand its ground against an angry drachvold, no matter how well-trained they were.

Gavin could hear horrified shouts from within the walls of Indrath Whitestone, meaning that its occupants had realised what was happening. No sooner had he struggled back to his feet than he almost lost his footing again as he felt the earth beneath him moving. The ground snaked up around his legs and torso, binding him so tightly that he couldn't move. Endrick was offering him up as bait. The man hoisted Gavin into the air, waving him around before the hovering drachvold.

"Come, get your breakfast," Endrick called, and the drachvold obeyed. Attracted to the moving target, it shot toward Gavin.

Gavin summoned all his strength and formed a thick shield around himself. *Thwack!* The drachvold slammed up against the shield. Sweat formed on Gavin's brow as he struggled to maintain the spell. Confused and incensed, the drachvold retreated. Gavin was safe, but only momentarily. He wasn't sure he could conjure another shield that would hold against the massive beast.

Endrick the Awful, meanwhile, was up to some new form of treachery. He had produced a bow from the cloth quiver on his back. Now he drew a black arrow and nocked it. He sighted, aimed and fired at the drachvold. The arrow burrowed itself deep in the animal's side and it bellowed in pain. Endrick laughed and drew another arrow. Gavin watched as the drachvold floundered in the air, trying to gain altitude to get away from whatever had wounded it. But Endrick did not sight on the drachvold again — he sighted on Gavin.

Gavin almost didn't conjure the blast of wind in time to divert the missile. As it was, the arrow grazed his cheek, drawing blood, but at least it hadn't burrowed itself in his brain. Gavin summoned more blasts of air and directed these at the pillar of earth which held him prisoner. As he assaulted his encasement, he felt it crack under

the powerful blows of condensed air. One more direct hit and the earth around Gavin crumbled. He fell heavily to the ground, only to find himself face-to-face with Endrick the Awful.

"Die, foe," the bearded man cried, and thrust his sword into Gavin's chest.

Or that's what he would have done, had the barbed tail of the drachvold not plunged through Endrick's heart instead. The drachvold had dropped down over the two warring humans, enraged by its injury. It had stabbed Endrick in the back, and the force of the blow had caused its tail to slice clean through the man's burly chest.

Endrick the Awful perished with a startled look on his face and he slumped to the ground when the drachvold yanked its tail free. It made a retching sound, indicating that it was about to vomit its acidic stomach contents down upon Gavin.

He dove out of the way just in time. Behind him, he heard a splatter and sizzle, and the spot of ground upon which he had just lain melted away. He lunged for Endrick's sword and blindly whipped it around at the drachvold. A satisfying thunk and the sound of the monster screaming in pain told him he had managed to hit one of its legs. His moment of triumph was ripped from him when some of the drachvold's blood splattered down upon him—he'd forgotten their blood was acidic, too.

The dark liquid burned his right arm and side, gnawing into him. He gritted his teeth against the pain and dodged a well-aimed jab from the drachvold's tail as it passed over him. Now both his arms were wounded. He would never survive out here in the open. He sprinted for the cover of the trees and heard the drachvold follow. While Gavin plunged into the undergrowth, darting around bushes and briars, the drachvold simply rammed its way through the treetops, splintering branches and sending debris crashing down upon him.

Gavin came to an open clearing and stopped, whirling around. He wielded with all his might, creating two currents of air. One wrapped around the drachvold's neck, strangling it and holding it tightly in place. The other, he wrapped around himself and propelled himself upwards, swinging the sword in front of him as he did so.

The creature's volatile tail whipped upwards in self-defence, deflecting Gavin's killing blow. More acidic blood splattered him painfully.

The drachvold tore free of his spell and lashed out at him with one powerful wing, knocking him down to the ground. Endrick's sword flew into the shadows of the woods and Gavin hit the forest floor hard, feeling like he'd cracked a few ribs. He looked up. The drachvold landed in front of him, and in the yellow glint of its eyes, Gavin could see his own death. The creature opened its gaping, toothless mouth one last time to spray him with acid, to finally end it.

Then there was a shout, and it closed its mouth once more. It looked away from him and focused its attention elsewhere. Gavin turned his head weakly to see who his saviour was.

It was Raela. She moved forward, locked in a fierce staring contest with the beast. Though it glared at her approach, the wounded drachvold made no move to attack.

"Leave him alone," said Raela, her voice shaky but her hand steady as she pointed at the monster. Gavin laughed, hoping he didn't sound hysterical. Raela's powers were great, to be sure, but he was certain that bullying an angry, wounded drachvold would not end well.

To his great astonishment, the drachvold began backing up, away from where Gavin lay amidst the pine needles and moss. Its bulging eyes flashed and it hissed ominously, but Raela wasn't intimidated. She tilted her head, as if she were trying to listen to someone who was very far away, all the while approaching the monster.

"Raela, get out of here," cried Gavin, his voice tight with worry and pain. He was beginning to feel faint, and he pressed his left hand to the injury on his right arm that had been caused by the drachvold's blood.

"Don't worry," she replied, not looking at him. When she was within ten paces of the monster, it hopped toward her, and Gavin's heart nearly stopped beating.

"Raela, *no!*"

But the drachvold still didn't attack. On the contrary, it spread its left wing out, offering its injured side to Raela. She grasped the black arrow shaft just as Gavin had taught her to do on their travels, and with a quick, smooth movement, ripped it cleanly out of the creature's side, avoiding the dangerous blood that coursed from the wound. The drachvold let loose a terrifying roar of pain, but didn't move. Gavin watched the entire time, amazed.

"What else did you need?" asked Raela. The drachvold bobbed

its head up and down, looking ridiculous. "Oh, no," she gasped. "I had no idea." She wheeled around and ran toward Gavin. "I have to leave," she said breathlessly, with unshed tears shining in her green eyes. "I'll come back at once, I promise. Stay *right here*," she added, as if he could go anywhere in his current state.

She vanished without another word of explanation, sprinting through the trees back toward Indrath Whitestone. Gavin tried to call out after her but could only manage a strangled gurgle. He glanced at the drachvold, which lurked in the shadows at the far end of the clearing, scrutinising him with its bulbous eyes. At least it didn't seem interested in killing him anymore. Thank goodness for small miracles.

He lay there for what seemed to be a Ten-Age. Every moment that he remained alive, he grew less panicked. He didn't know what had just happened between the monster and his squire, but he found that he trusted Raela. She *would* return, and she'd have found a way to save this whole messy situation, too.

Sure enough, the sound of someone crashing through the underbrush met his ears, and Raela reappeared, clutching something to her chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she approached the great beast. It growled and shuffled around expectantly. Raela knelt slowly before it and laid down a large, smooth, pearly stone. With a surprising tenderness, the drachvold reached out with one foot and grasped it.

"We'll never bother you or your eggs again," she promised, standing up and bowing to the creature. "You're safe now." The drachvold tensed its hindquarters, spread both its ribbed wings and leapt into the air. It cleared the tops of the trees in one mighty flap, and then it was speeding away to the east. Raela stood in the sudden silence of the forest, watching it go.

"Raela . . . ?"

"Oh, Gavin!" Quick as a flash she was kneeling at his side, staring at his numerous injuries in horror.

"It's not so bad," Gavin assured her as she ripped off part of her sleeve to place on his right arm, which was bleeding the worst. "What I'm more concerned about is what just happened between you and the drachvold I was supposed to kill."

"Gavin, I'm so sorry — this is *all* my fault," she said distractedly, shaking her head. "Right from the beginning I should have thought of it, but I never once bothered to try and communicate with the

drachvold. I thought it would just bite my head off or burn me with acid."

"Wonder what possibly could have given you that idea," wheezed Gavin, though now that the danger seemed to be well and truly over, he felt a smile growing on his face.

"But I didn't even *try*. I brought you into danger, I let it terrorise the castle . . . and all along, the drachvold only wanted her egg back, the egg Lyselle took from the woods on the day this all began," Raela explained, ministering to Gavin's wounds with hands that were neither as gentle or tender as his bleeding arm and side would have liked.

"She was just trying to be a good mother. When I communicated with her, she realised that she could explain all of this to me and get her egg back, instead of killing everyone in Indrath Whitestone."

Gavin stared at Raela with a newfound awe and respect. He shook his head, trying to clear it of its dizziness and scrambled thoughts, to wrap his brain around what had just happened.

"So, that's it? It's all settled?"

"Yes," she said, absently smoothing his hair back from his face as she inspected the scratch the arrow had left upon his cheek. "The drachvold won't bother us anymore, so long as we stay far away from her home."

"What are we going to tell Lady Syrene? And Lord Whitestone? They'll want the monster dead and done with, I'm certain—we can't just tell them that one of their kitchen girls told the drachvold to run along, and that it actually *listened*. They'll want proof that I killed it," Gavin pointed out.

Raela's face darkened in a scowl. He hadn't seen her scowl for a while, and his stomach sank. "I'm quite certain they'll be fine with whatever explanation we give them," she said. "Besides, you *do* have something to show for your troubles: a few nice scars, and the body of that idiot over there." She nodded at the prone form of Endrick the Awful, which was just visible through the trees on the castle green. "Those things combined will be more than enough to get you the prize you covet so dearly."

He hadn't heard that bitterness in her voice for some time either, and he looked up to find her gazing down at him. He opened his mouth to speak but before he could, he heard voices calling:

"Syrene! Syrene, come here at once."

"Our champion is injured. Get the castle healer."

"Syrene!"

"Oh no," whispered Raela. "Gavin, I've got to go. Don't move until the healer gets here."

"What? Raela, where—?" Before he could finish, she had vanished once more, running off into the trees.

Gavin lay on the ground, unable to move because of the pain. He listened to the hum of voices get louder and finally a group of people swam into view, the healer at the forefront. Gavin offered him a weak smile.

"Thank you," he said to the healer, who set to work on his side.

"Brave warrior, you have delivered Indrath Whitestone from the terror of the drachvold," said a portly man with a white beard and hair, who could only be Lord Whitestone himself. "How can we ever repay you?"

"Gentlepeople, I don't need much in the way of thanks. In fact, I'm sure you deserve a better champion than I—" Gavin began, but cut himself off when his eyes locked onto the tear-filled, hazel eyes of the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life.

"Lady Syrene?" he stammered, suddenly breathless. The young woman and Lord Whitestone exchanged worried glances.

"Syrene is indisposed at the moment," Lord Whitestone said apologetically. "I'm sorry for her behavior, but she . . . her temper gets the better of her from time to time. She refuses to come out just now."

"Did she see what I did?" Gavin persisted, wincing as the healer pulled a bone needle through the laceration on his cheek, stitching his skin back together.

"Oh, she saw every bit of it," the beautiful young woman assured him in a high-pitched, girlish voice.

"And still she won't grace me with her presence?"

The young woman shrugged. "Syrene is like that. But I, brave warrior, appreciate all that you've done for us. I am the Lady Lyselle."

"Oh, the shrew," Gavin murmured.

Fortunately, Lyselle didn't hear him. She was babbling on and on in the background, but Gavin was no longer listening. He was quite put out by this turn of events. Perhaps Raela hadn't just been being obnoxious all those times she'd insisted the Lady Syrene wouldn't adore him. Perhaps the Lady Syrene *was* extremely hard to win over. But of course, Gavin wasn't one to be trifled with. He'd show her.

"Please, I'd like to be taken to meet the Lady Syrene now," he



tried to say. But the blood loss had finally gotten to him and he slipped into unconsciousness, blissfully free of pain.

## CHAPTER NINE

The Lady Lyselle crept through the halls of Whitestone, stalking her prey. She had an inkling that she knew where he would be. When she rounded the next bend, she was proved correct. Her quarry, Lord Gavin Swiftwind, stood in front of Syrene's door. He took a deep breath, then knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Your savior and champion, Lady Syrene," he proclaimed grandly, making a dramatic bow to the door. "I wish to look upon your fair face and kiss the hand I have worked so hard to save."

He was met with only silence.

"Lord Gavin, my sister is still not seeing anyone," the Lady Lyselle said loudly, emerging into the hallway and gliding toward him. "But I am entertaining guests in the private dining hall if you'd care to join me for some tea?"

"You're doing no such thing," Syrene's muffled voice declared from behind her door.

"Oh? Am I not? Is that because you're about to come out and show your beautiful face to your champion, dear sister?" the Lady Lyselle asked innocently, widening her eyes and batting her long, dark lashes. Silence again. Finally:

"Do what you want! See if I care."

"The Lady Syrene is in such a temperamental mood of late," the Lady Lyselle explained in tones of false apology, placing her slender hands on Lord Gavin's muscular arm and guiding him away from Syrene's door. He looked back only once with an expression of puzzlement on his face.

The Lady Lyselle couldn't understand why he was so thick-headed about the whole situation. He had been promised Syrene's hand in marriage, but her father had already offered Lyselle in Syrene's stead—given the extenuating circumstances. Yet Gavin still had not given them an answer. She could only hope she'd be able to persuade him that *she* was the better candidate.

"Come right this way, Lord Gavin," the Lady Lyselle cooed, tugging him towards the private dining hall. He looked down and smiled.

The Lady Lyselle grinned smugly to herself. She would win him over yet.

That evening was interminably long for Gavin who, though he enjoyed *looking* at the Lady Lyselle, couldn't abide by her constant mindless chatter. He had managed to slip away from their tea party in the private dining hall only to be detained by Lord Whitestone, who dragged him down to the banquet hall for an honorary feast. *Another* one. Gavin had always liked being the centre of attention, but this was getting ridiculous.

It had been nine suns since he'd fought the drachvold, and for nine suns he'd been waiting to meet the fabled Lady Syrene whom he'd heard so much about. He felt as though he already knew her from hearing all of Raela's stories. He'd never expected she would *refuse* to meet him. Perhaps she was playing hard-to-get. Women often did that.

He also hadn't seen Raela for some time. He glimpsed her once walking through the halls, but when he'd hailed her she'd given no sign that she'd heard him, and when he'd run after her, she'd vanished. That was fine, he supposed, since he wasn't sure what he wanted to say, anyway.

Now he found himself wandering the corridors of the castle alone. Moonlight streamed into the halls through the open windows, casting squares of glowing light on the stone floors leading to the chambers of the Lady Syrene. His feet had brought him here unconsciously. Again.

Tomorrow he was going to announce to his hosts that he was leaving. He wouldn't accept any reward from them, not the land nor the marriage to either daughter. All he desired at this point was to see the face of the woman he'd worked so hard for.

He didn't know why he was so adamant about seeing the Lady Syrene. Was it because after all he'd heard about her, he had somehow grown attached to the idea of her, an idea that he couldn't let go of no matter how hard he tried? Or was it because of that foolish bet he'd made with Raela? Or maybe the problem wasn't seeing Syrene at all. Maybe the problem was that he wanted to see someone else, instead.

Knowing it was useless to stand in front of Syrene's bedroom

door all night, especially when he intended to head out for Noryk tomorrow, Gavin signed and turned to go back to his quarters. He had nearly gotten to the end of the hall when a creaking sound met his ears and he whirled back around, half expecting to see the elusive Syrene emerging from her room. What he saw instead was, in a way, much better.

"Raela!"

Syrene's serving girl jumped at the sound of his voice. She whirled around, dropping a tray of food with a clatter.

"Gavin?" Hurriedly, she bent to gather up her food, huddling in the shadows as much as she could.

Gavin dashed back down the hall. "Raela, I thought I'd never see you again," he said, as she grabbed everything and stuffed it back onto the tray, straightening awkwardly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you haven't been around. Always with the Lady Syrene, no doubt."

"Yes. And you can't go in," said Raela, moving to stand in front of the door to Syrene's chambers, which still stood ajar.

"I wouldn't dream of forcing entry. That's a nice dress," he added lamely, staring at her. "They give you servants very nice clothes here."

"I suppose," she mumbled, looking down at the blue silk, seeming abashed. "Listen, I was just bringing some food to the Lady Syrene, so . . ." She edged toward the open door, away from him.

"Oh. Right. Well, I wanted to tell you that I'm leaving tomorrow," said Gavin, looking deep into her green eyes.

"Why? Tired of waiting for my lady to meet you?" Her voice was defensive and abrasive, as it had been when they'd first started travelling together.

Gavin smiled at her tone. Since when had he become so sentimental?

"It's clear to me that the Lady Syrene does not desire me, as you originally claimed," he said, shrugging. "And there's nothing else here that holds my interest or strikes my fancy. At least, nothing I would presume to ask for. So, tell her I wish her all the best. And you, too. Take care of yourself, Raela."

She said nothing to this, for which he was both sorrowful and grateful. He was sorry to leave Raela, who had been a good travelling companion and a good friend. He was grateful she didn't

say anything because he was lousy with goodbyes, and he was already feeling an ache in his heart that he wasn't used to having there.

He walked away, leaving Raela in front of the Lady Syrene's door, still holding her tray of food. He went to bed and tried to sleep, but although he was tired, slumber did not find him easily.

The next morning, Gavin rose earlier than the rest of the castle and proceeded to pack his things. He sighed, thinking how dull it would be to return to the city. He might join the Palace Guard regiment just to fend off boredom . . . but then, of course, he'd probably be stuck there forever.

By the time he was done, the other inhabitants of Indrath Whitestone had arisen. He made his way down to the banquet hall where breakfast was being served.

"Ah, Lord Gavin." Lord Whitestone stood from his chair and spread his arms when Gavin entered the room. "Please, take a seat—the Lady Lyselle has saved you one."

"Thank you, Lord Whitestone," said Gavin, inclining his head, "but I'm afraid it's time for me to move on."

"What?" Lyselle sprang up from her chair, staring incredulously at him.

"I cannot stay in one place for too long; my heart yearns to explore new lands and go on new quests. As a freelance soldier of the Imperial Guard, I am honour-bound to my country to go wherever I am needed and defend those who are in danger. My work here is finished. I appreciate all you have done for me, but I must go."

"But you can't—" Lyselle cut herself off, and stared at a point beyond Gavin's left shoulder. Her pretty eyes widened. "What are *you* doing here?" she demanded.

Gavin turned and his jaw dropped. Raela had entered the room. Her black hair was combed and tamed, pulled back into an elegant little twist at the nape of her neck. She wore a loose green gown trimmed with elaborate gold lace, and her face was accented by the slightest touch of cosmetic paints, which lent themselves very nicely to her appearance.

"The Lady Syrene wanted to be here to wish her champion goodbye," she said softly. Her green eyes locked onto Gavin's blue ones. He waited for her to announce her mistress, but Raela only spread her hands in a sort of apologetic shrug.

And suddenly he understood.

"*You?*" he breathed. "*You are the Lady Syrene?*"

She scowled at him. "Not what you expected, is it?"

"Blood and bones, Raela — Syrene — I should say not!"

"I told you," she said, her face flushing and her scowl deepening.

"I told you I wasn't beautiful or charming, or any of those things. I warned you every single sun, and now you're standing there, gaping at me like a fish."

"What did you think I'd do? You spring yourself upon me like this —"

"Well, if I'd known this was how you'd react, I wouldn't have bothered to come down in the first place," she snapped, tears of fury forming in her eyes. She turned with a twirl of her skirts and began marching away.

"No! Goodness no, Syrene, you misunderstand," said Gavin, beginning to smile as he recovered from his initial shock. Syrene paused. "I am . . . happy beyond belief."

Everything made sense now — why she had insisted upon choosing her own warrior, why she'd been so adamant about Syrene's convictions (since she *was* Syrene, of course), and why she'd been so down on herself.

Slowly, Syrene turned and faced him. She scrubbed a tear from her cheek. "Really?"

"*Really?*" Lyselle echoed rudely. Both Gavin and Syrene ignored her.

"Lord Whitestone," Gavin began, never taking his eyes off of Syrene, "as a reward for my services, I would ask for your eldest daughter's hand in marriage." There were gasps from the assembled serving staff. Lyselle made a noise as though she were choking on something. "*If she desires me, that is,*" he amended hastily.

Syrene walked over and stopped right in front of him.

"I do," she said, and she raised herself up on tiptoes to kiss him.

Gavin wrapped his long arms around her and spun her on the spot. Syrene broke from their kiss only because she started laughing with delight.

"Why this . . . this is marvelous," spluttered Lord Whitestone, scuttling over to them and clapping Gavin on the back. "We shall arrange for wedding celebrations at once."

"No, father," said Syrene, still clinging to Gavin.

"No?" he repeated, perplexed.

"I don't think we're going to stick around here," she told him.

"Gavin's a busy warrior, you see – and we've got to be off to find our next big adventure."

So it was that Gavin Swiftwind and Syrene Whitestone left her father's estate, riding off on their mounts. They took only the clothes on their backs and food enough for five suns in their bags. They vanished into the sunset with smiles on their faces and hope in their hearts.

It wasn't what either one of them had always dreamed of; it was something new, something better. Syrene visited Indrath Whitestone as often as she could, each time bringing with her exciting stories about how she was being trained in an auxiliary manner by the Imperial Guard, about how she was thinking of buying her own land, and about all her grand exploits with Gavin. The two of them wandered Allentria from tip to tip together.

And it's been said that they lived happily ever after.

This book was an introduction  
into the world of

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ELANA A. MUGDAN is a writer and filmmaker based in New York City. She is described by her friends and family as “the weirdest person I know,” and wears that weirdness proudly on her sleeve. She likes dragons, as is evidenced by this book, and hopes that the world of Allentria will bring as much joy to her readers as it does to her.

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