

# Swan-Song

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# 1 Prologue

## 1.1 The Tracker

Gwaeron followed the footprints until they abruptly vanished from all sight. Pausing for any other hints, he sniffed the air and scanned about, wondering what his keen eyes, nose, and ears will register of the panther he had been ordered to track. The chill breeze blew about him, making his long, fiery red shoulder-length hair whirl in the wind. He scratched his matching bushy beard and breathed a sigh of relief that his beard protected his face from the cold and that he had worn his thick, heavy furs made from the pelts of the various beasts he had hunted in Dûnhèasa with the Eternal Huntress' permission. No mortal had been able to track down Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon, suspected to have ascended to deityhood through questionable means and even Gwaeron, the god of tracking, brawling, and bears, was hard-pressed to even find any trace of the elusive creature. The fresh fall of needles and leaves from the pines and hardwoods made it even more challenging for him to find any signs. He knelt down, lightly sifting through the moist oak leaves and pine needles.

Silently, he vowed to avenge his friend, Thormald, the god of honorable warfare. It grieved the sturdy woodsman that the relatively young god, a brave knight who had served Ilberath, god of justice and honor, and had chosen to die honorably defending his greatest temple from enemy forces instead of fleeing or assassinating the High Priest of Solron, was dead. Thormald's sacrifice and unwavering faith and adherence to honor was rewarded and for about four thousand years, he was the god of honorable warfare and courage. He already missed the young god and it pained him thinking about how Ilberath, his sister, Yavanë, goddess of healing, and his closest ally, Galka, the ruler of the Sarkany, were grieving. Whoever or whatever murdered Thormald in cold blood was going to face the Council's judgement.

"Oh, Angharradh, if you only knew what happened to Thormald," he whispered to himself. Angharradh was like a daughter to him, a courageous woman who united him, the Eternal Huntress and the Triad against the Unnamed Terror, only to be despised by the Eternal Huntress later after Vhaerauk, Solron's predecessor, had sabotaged a message sent to the Sidhe, leading to many Sidhe deaths to fuel his own ambitions. It was only Angharradh's courage and ultimate self-sacrifice that allowed the forces of goodness to prevent Vhaerauk from turning Palindor into a mass graveyard. One day, he would see his daughter, now known as the Shadowhawk, again, but first, he had to deal with Iliiryana as the Council requested him to.

While he searched for any possible signs, he suddenly felt a presence behind him. Whirling around quickly and taking the dented pot he used as a hat and improvised weapon into his hand, he saw a short, dark, slightly purple-tinged woman with knee-length silver hair with a black streak down it. She was wearing a suit of jet-black leather armor and had a pair of lightning-sheathed scimitars in her hand. On the chest-plate of her armor was the symbol of the panther's paw superimposed on a bow. "Good to see I left clear directions for you, Gwaeron Hammerfist," she hissed at him. "Would be a shame if I lost the greatest tracker next to Cylithera Eaglestrike with such an easy trail. And thank you for leaking out the True Name of the Shadowhawk!"

"I have come on behalf of the Council to avenge the death of Thormald," he replied steadily, gauging her movements. The hair on the back of his neck stood up at the thought

of how he accidentally revealed the Shadowhawk's True Name to her. "You will not her."

Wordlessly, Iliiryana charged at him, scimitars drawn and ready to stab and slice the insolent woodsman. Answering her with a loud, bear-like roar, he brandished his dented pot and blocked one scimitar directed at him with it while his shield pushed the other aside. "Then you will join her! And Angharradh the Shadowhawk will finally die forever!" she snarled, her eyes glowing an angry red. With that, her hands moved in a blur of action, too fast for the mighty god of brawling to dodge or block.

This time, her scimitar sliced cleanly through his heavy shield, splitting the grizzly bear emblem with a foaming beer mug on top of it in half. Startled to see that someone had broken his legendary and unbreakable shield, his eyes only widened as she also cut the black dented pot, leaving him with a useless handle. Truly scared for the first time in eons, the god of brawling knew he would need a change of overalls, preferably into some brown ones with some yellow in front. Even in his fear, he roared furiously and charged at her, hoping his sheer brawn would give him a chance against the seemingly delicate creature. Dark fur sprouted all about him and he felt himself growing in size. He slapped as hard as he could with a gigantic paw and in her moment of reckless abandon, he was able to connect a solid blow to her head, knocking her down.

For a moment, Gwaeron breathed a small sigh of relief and began to run off, knowing that he would need assistance. Behind him, Iliiryana sat slightly dazed from the impact of the mighty bear's paw. She rubbed her sore head a bit before pointing a finger at him and mouthing a few harsh, spidery words. The grizzly bear suddenly felt as if he was running through thick mud and he found it next to impossible to think of anything coherent. Roaring in frustration, he tried to break past what felt like mud, but to no avail. In the meanwhile, Iliiryana fell onto all fours and sprinted towards him in panther form and leaped onto him, raking into him with her claws.

He tried to shake off the feline but her claws and fangs sliced through him and allowed her to cling onto him. Out of desperation, he willed himself back into human form, hoping the sudden transformation would disorient her long enough to give him time to escape. She continued up his back, hastily working towards the back of his neck and the bear shrank rapidly in a flash of light. With only a brief hesitation, she leaped onto him again and sank her fangs into the back of his neck. He tried to slap at her, but her jaws clamped onto him, not allowing him to breathe. It grew cold and dark for Gwaeron and the last thing he would recall was Iliiryana glowing with a blinding light as he felt energy flowing out of him.

## 1.2 Gilrain

Black Swan still recalled the day she acquired Ki-Riss, the cold iron bastard sword. She had chosen exile from the Sarkany for refusing to submit to the code of honor that Sarkany kept and instead serving Vhaerauk Deathmaster, the god of assassins. To gain Vhaerauk's favor, a petitioner in his service had to murder a follower of the Triad. In retrospect, she had chosen a bad target when she decided to assassinate one of the Elders she held a strong grudge against. That Elder had wanted her to marry a Flamekeeper, a defender of the geometric volcanic mountains of Pelda. She wanted to be free to explore and live her life without the fetters of ordered Sarkany society. Thus she made a pact with Vhaerauk.

She sneaked into the Elder's lair using her human form and a ring that allowed her to take

on a mist-like form. Just as she landed a pair of fatal strikes with her twin envenomed black daggers, the Elder woke up and pinned her to the wall with a word of power. "Bajnokys-Otthon, I hereby strip you of your name and curse you to become Gilrain to reflect your dishonorable Sidhe tendencies," intoned the Elder, fiery, metallic greenish blood coming out of his mouth. Once, Black Swan had been given the name Bajnokys-Otthon, the Sarkany word for "Champion of the Home" when it was expected that she would remain in Pelda as a defender along with Vezeto, the future leader of the Flamekeepers. "Until you regain your honor, you will be forever cursed to wander far and wide to match your new name." With that, the Elder fell dead and crumbled away into dust.

As soon as the Elder spoke the curse to strip her of her Sarkany name and give her a Sidhe name, Legoregebb and Ereny burst in. "We will take care of Gilrain from here," declared Ereny. Right behind the two Eldest was her twin brother, Szikla. He was next on her list of those to slay in the name of Vhaerauk after she had dealt with that particular Elder.

"Ugybed has already punished you by stripping you of your name and cursing to wandering, so we will not punish you further. However, we do see the day that you will regain your honor, and so, we present you with this blade, Ki-Riss, which will protect you from dangers even we cannot foresee. The blade will only break when its wielder breaks and its light will gradually return as you find your own calling and honor. Should you try to cast this blade aside, it will return to you," declared Legoregebb, gesturing with his clawed front paw.

A large, almost black, tarnished but extremely sharp straight-bladed sword appeared at Black Swan's side. On its hilt was a dull, triangular amber gem and the pommel was inscribed with the mark of a rose, lion, and dragon. Ereny then flicked a claw and the restraints Ugybed had placed on her dissipated, allowing her to stand up and move again. She drew the mighty sword and hefted it. "Excellent balance," she muttered. "But why?" she asked, puzzled at the situation. Usually a Sarkany who gave themselves over to a god like Vhaerauk was executed, not banished and given such a mighty weapon!

"Your brother petitioned for you and the remainder of the Triad has spoken on your behalf as well, to spare your life," replied Ereny, gazing intently at the seemingly puny human. Even in human form, Black Swan had the intense bronze-copper eyes common to the Sarkany, and her sharp, chiseled features only amplified her fey roots. Her short-cropped jet-black hair swirled about in the hot, dry wind of the cave.

"And I will follow you in your exile," said Szikla. "For good or for ill, I will also find my purpose in life."

"Ilberath and Yavanë have spoken and have given Szikla a call beyond even what we have planned for him. Thus we send him out of Pelda with our blessings, where he will be known as Caolle Anacalimë, the Bringer of Light from Afar. Whatever fate lies in store for you is now beyond either of us," said Ereny.

"Remember, Gilrain, even a rogue Sarkany who has forsaken our ways and honor, if the need is dire enough and a moment of purity shines through, his or her true form will return." Legoregebb lowered his head, allowing the tip of his nose to touch Black Swan's forehead. "May the Triad watch over you and may you return to the light." Then turning to Szikla and repeating the small gesture, he said, "May the Triad also be with you and may you bring honor to the Sarkany and Pelda."

### 1.3 A Leaf From Black Swan's Diary

It has been thousands of years that I have borne the sword Ki-Riss and I have yet to see the end of this punishment the Elders have placed upon me. Legoregebb, the Eldest One, told me that I would eventually return to the light. Already, I've revealed my true form to many – my dear friends Killer Parakeet, Tindariel Il-Kanan, and Ilithara N'Shad-Daermon as well as the Archmagi of the University and a whole host of Sidhe. Was that not enough? Apparently not, for my sword still reflects me as a dark shadow, that my redemption is not yet complete. My brother, Caolle, formerly known as Szikla, gave his life at that fateful skirmish at the Tindarn-Niniel, fulfilling his duty as a martyr to remind the Sidhe that the Sarkany are not merely moldering away. What is my purpose, if not to reveal the presence and vitality of the Sarkany? Was it not enough that I aided Prince Jeremiah of the Hin-Iril in banishing Herkos during the fall of the Rannarak Empire, even as he and many of my friends gave their lives to prevent It from terrorizing Palindor? Was it not enough that I prevented Solron from back-stabbing the rest of the pantheon during the Godsfall? What must I do?

I have spoken with the new Sarkany Lords, Galka-Ereny the daughter of Legoregebb and Ereny, and her consort, Oroszlan, a mortal-born Sarkany who chose his Tuatha roots. As I suspected, Galka is almost as hard-headed as her predecessors, having been raised in this stifling orderly place, but she does have a bit more insight thanks to her time with Oroszlan and living among mortals briefly. Neither of them are certain about what I need to do, but have hinted that perhaps they can petition the greater gods, for the Tuatha Lords are relatively low on the hierarchy, to free me from this blasted sword. Of course, the price isn't exactly light because they want me to help them and just about everyone else deal with a growing problem known as the Clawed Fury.

I know they want to use a more honorable approach, but I know Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon well enough. Honor will be futile, so I intend to assassinate her and with the power of Solron, the god of murder and intrigue, behind me, I will do my best to eliminate the threat. I will either slay Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon personally or I will die trying and I swear this oath in the names of Solron and Ildathra Shadowdancer for luck. It will be either Iliiryana or me this time.

## 2 Botched Assassination Attempt

Black Swan examined her companion, a tall spindly humanoid creature with unusually long legs and arms. It had large black vacant abyss-like eyes that filled much of its elongated, expressionless face and it seemed to be made from liquid silver. Despite its gangly build, it moved with a grace that rivalled the Sidhe. "Peromyscus, could you please take on something a bit less eerie?" she whispered to him. "I don't want us to alarm anyone else more than I already do."

Smirking at the robust woman, it said in a chill, almost disembodied voice that was neither masculine nor feminine, "Which one? The girly Hin-Iril prince you took a fancy to or the foppish Eldharin idiot you had to protect or something else? I'm surprised that parakeet friend of yours didn't bugger that Hin-Iril prince the way they were acting!"

She peered through the rainbow-colored glowing portal that stood before them. "Sidhe. Looks like Iliiryana's got a pretty good-sized army out at the Crossroads and she means

business after Imladrien and Tinúvion set her back. I wish that Alfar girl or that musical Sidhe just killed her, but I guess it'll leave us jobless if she did. And that fruit-cake friend of hers and his consort should've dried out the Crossroads a bit more for us."

"Very well, even if I know you do have a thing for those Eldharin and Hin-Iril men," said Peromyscus before allowing his form to warp. The gangly form squashed down a bit, becoming a bit stockier and the silver-grey skin darkened to a nut-brown. The abyssal black pools called eyes shrank and narrowed, becoming almond-shaped and developing sea-grey irises with slightly vertically slit black pupils. A somewhat feline face with a feral expression replaced the elongated, featureless face and the hairless head sprouted shoulder-length jet-black hair. The spindly build gave way to compact but well-defined muscles and a long tail grew from the base of his backbone. "How's this?" he asked, his voice now mildly snarling. As an afterthought, a silver mark in the form of a longbow with a panther's paw superimposed on it showed up on his forearm.

"Perfect," replied Black Swan, also having transformed. Her normally copper-tinged skin was now bluish black like the Dhaerow and her short-cropped jet-black hair was now a radiant silver and extended past her hips. She retained her muscular build, but her sharp, angular features had softened slightly and had taken on a more feline cast instead of its usual vaguely serpentine expression. Her eyes now glowed a faint red like a typical Dhaerow, knowing that the faint golden glow of a Sarkany's eyes would be enough to give her away. True, her hand and a half sword would not transform, but she made sure to conceal the pommel, which had the symbol of a flying swan on it. "Damn sword," she mumbled. "Not fighting with this," she added. "But I've got enough of those daggers I had Solron enchant for me before he ascended to replace Vhaerauk."

By now, the portal was glowing even more brightly and she motioned for the now disguised alien creature to follow her. They stepped through one at a time and despite her experience with crossing the various planes and realms, it never ceased to make her stomach feel a bit queasy. Apparently Peromyscus didn't enjoy the experience either, judging from the fact that he actually put a hand over his mouth and another hand on his stomach. The rainbow colored passage was perhaps no more than twenty or thirty steps, but to the nauseated companions, it felt like an eternity and then finally, they saw the brick arch that indicated the entrance into their destination.

The Crossroad, once so dry that the wind, neither chill nor hot, seemed to suck the moisture out of anything, was now flooded with stale, muddy water. There was a small fountain of water near the raised stone tablet that marked the center of the Crossroad. As always, all of the colors were muted and the mud held a very faint greyish brown tint while the pale sunlight filtered in from the numerous gloomy grey clouds above. High, seemingly unsurmountable mountains still surrounded the seemingly dead valley. Black Swan noticed that the lightning, the stars, and the sunlight were even more muted than before, yet she could feel her hair almost stand on end. She sniffed the air, taking advantage of her keen feline sense of smell. "Anger," she whispered. Then scanning again, she saw a large, moving mass coming from where the lightning continued to strike.

*I see we don't sink in the mud or the water. But I would've liked to have come out a lot closer to the Sidhe army.* Black Swan could feel Peromyscus' telepathic speech in her mind.

She sighed in agreement. *Well, only Tuatha lords and the gods can control where they land here at the Crossroad. We were lucky that we even made it to the stone tablet. Just keep going, there's a fledgling deity that needs to be done in before Palindor gets sent back*

*to the really bad times.*

Even with being able to walk over the mud and water without sinking, the stale air and the dry wind made them feel as if they were at least knee-deep in the mud. The occasional ghostly humanoid figure would absent-mindedly pass by them, either unaware of their presence or completely apathetic. A few of the ghostly figures were more focused in their journeys even as they sank further into the mud and water until they were knee-deep. The further these sinking ghosts continued towards one of the mountainous edges, the more solid they grew and the more difficult the journey became, but they persisted in going forward.

*Cheery place, isn't it?* Peromyscus looked around at the ghostly figures walking about. Many of the more substantial ones continued over towards the lightning wreathed mountains. *Well, we're in good company apparently. And what is it with the solidifying ghosts?*

*They're Tuatha-touched from various places heading home.* She at the thought of the large number of Tuatha-touched beings in worlds other than Palindor and Terrios. At least the influx from Terrios was over, save for maybe a few late-comers who struck a deal with their respective kindred to enter after their mortal "deaths". She suspected that Tinúvion and Imladrien were among them based on what she heard from Oroszlan and Galka.

Slowly they walked through the windy land, trying to ignore the somewhat stale, almost swamp-like smell. Gradually, they caught up with the rebel Sidhe army. Not far, a short, dusky-skinned woman with glowing red eyes, flowing silver hair, and a panther-like expression spoke in a clear, almost commanding voice. Black Swan noted that the four or five hundred that were standing at attention were all wearing the greyish armor that allowed them to blend into their surroundings and they all had the panther's paw and longbow symbol of the Clawed Fury on their dominant arm and on their armor. "We will reclaim the honor of Dûnhèasa once again in Terrios and Palindor! With your help, I will unseat Cylithera Eaglestrike as the Eternal Huntress and take her place. Too long we have allowed her to idle about while the Sarkany and the other deities take what is ours away from us!"

Loud cheers, howls and snarls filled the otherwise dead yet windy air. *She sounds like those Terrian politicians.* For some reason, Peromyscus felt a slightly uncomfortable sinking in his stomach. Nonetheless, he continued to take a survey of both the Sidhe army and the speaker, now revealed to be none other than Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon, the Clawed Fury herself. Anger and blood-thirst emanated from everyone, but there was also a sense of unity, one where even the most isolated and crazed of the Sidhe were willing to put aside their differences and need to be alone for a common cause. *I would hate to be a direct enemy of theirs.*

Black Swan continued to watch as well, focusing mostly on Iliiryana, hoping to find a weak spot in her armor or catching her while she was inattentive. She clutched a black-bladed dagger that she had dipped into one of Solron's venom pools. *Except she can actually back herself up, unlike Terrian politicians. She's the real deal. Yes, she's made mistakes, but she learns well. I'm going to see if I can position myself a bit better to see if I can do her in. I suspect that her death will cause them to revert back to being mere savages again.* Slowly, she made her way through the cheering, enraptured crowd.

A jaguar-like woman whirled about when she brushed against her ever so slightly. "Trying to see above the rest of us, eh?" she snarled, her claws extending out. It was true because a trio of tall, wolverine-like men were blocking the view of their leader.

Nodding in acknowledgement, she continued forward, while Peromyscus cheered with

the crowd. *I can't move any closer. Something blocks me. If I try, I think they'll catch our disguise.*

*You stay there then. If anything goes wrong, run back to the portal and warn Clawstaff.* Even without her voice, her tone was resolute and firm. In the years he had worked with her on espionage and assassinations, she had never sounded so grim. What kind of vendetta did she hold against this Clawed Fury to be that determined to defeat her or die in the attempt? He could only guess, but the ways of Tuatha were foreign to his kindred.

Steadily, she stalked her way forward, knowing that she had to focus both on her disguise and on Iliiryana. There were no obvious weak spots on the half-Dhaerow, now fledgling deity. Between her armor and the glow of enchantments that only Sarkany eyes could see, she saw no openings. Maybe she would have to resort to using her enchanted bastard sword, Ki-Riss, the blade that none have been able to resist. Iliiryana continued to speak to her soldiers, "Already, Firianna Celethorn leads in Terrios with the help of Berúthiel Maegliriel and Borondir Herúromen."

And then it suddenly hit Black Swan, a feeling of more than just a simple sinking in her stomach, but rather one that made her really wish she had brown pants on. She began to shiver and her hand trembled even as she slowly walked closer and closer to Iliiryana. *Be prepared to flee! This will either be success or failure! It will be Iliiryana or me this time!* With a quick mental alert to the calm alien being, she then struggled to keep her digestive contents inside of her and pushed past whatever invisible barrier that tried to hold her back. Focusing on getting within a reliable dagger's throw, she ignored the growing freezing pain in her back and chest. Finally, when she felt that either her heart would stop or that she would lose her lunch, she drew her black-bladed dagger, held it as steadily as possible and focused on Iliiryana, who continued to speak of the evils of the Sarkany and Alfar and the need to restore Dûnhèasa. With all of her strength, she hurled the envenomed blade at the woman's throat, the one piece in her armor that had any kind of weakness.

Straight and true flew the dagger, but instead of catching the half-Dhaerow off-guard, her hand merely reflexively caught the dagger in a smooth, fluid action. At the same time, Black Swan found herself kneeling down, wishing she could vomit from the intense turmoil in her stomach. *Go! Warn the others!*

Black Swan struggled to draw Ki-Riss, the black bastard sword, in hopes of defeating Iliiryana in straight melee. Once, she had battled Iliiryana, and the rogue Sarkany would've been killed, had it not been for her friends intervening. This time, she was alone, but sheer determination would give her an advantage this time. Sword in hand, she slashed as best as she could despite the physical weakness in her.

"No Sarkany can take me down!" cackled Iliiryana, almost madly. Turning to the assembled Sidhe, she shouted out, "Go, my minions, while I deal with this creature!"

"By the power of Solron, I will destroy you!" promised Black Swan, trying to ignore the urge to vomit. Why did everything involving Sidhe make her stomach rumble so badly? She charged headlong at her foe, sword-first, almost certain to impale her on the black blade. The dull amber gem began to glow a bit brighter, giving Black Swan a small measure of strength back.

Deftly, she deflected the mighty black bastard sword with her twin scimitars and leaped aside. Black Swan fell head-first into the stale mud, and while she attempted to clear her vision, Iliiryana chanted a few harsh words. A silver fire filled her hands and she hurled them at the rogue Sarkany's sword. The amber light irritated her and she wanted to dull

it, but instead of extinguishing it, the light merely grew very faint. "You will bow down to me!" said Iliiryana, stepping up to the Sarkany before striking the back of her head with the pommels of her scimitars.

"Never," said Black Swan as defiantly as she could. Summoning as much strength as she could despite the dizzy feeling from being hit so hard, she stood up to face her enemy. She thrust the bastard sword at her again in hopes of catching her off-guard, but the Sidhe was too quick for her. A deft gesture from Iliiryana froze Black Swan in her tracks once again.

Desperate for resolution, Black Swan roared a single wordless syllable in hopes of using her true form as she once did to take her friends away from the temple at the Tindarn-Niniel. While the paralysis disappeared, Black Swan's form remained unchanged but the bright golden light did make Iliiryana stagger back a bit. Taking advantage of that miniscule opening, she charged once more into her foe, sword lined up with the Sidhe's heart. The sword did indeed contact her and cut through the black armor and she could even see red blood pouring from the wound that began.

"I will have you this time!" hissed Black Swan. "You will die today!" She continued to thrust the sword deeper into Iliiryana, whose grip on her scimitars loosened and the deadly blades fell to the ground. The golden light surrounding Black Swan suddenly faded and the light disappeared from the amber stone in her sword.

The impaled warrior suddenly grabbed the sword and thrust it out of herself before wresting it away from Black Swan, utterly confused at the sudden change. "You cannot stop me!" cackled Iliiryana before wielding the black blade herself. She held the tip of the blade at Black Swan's throat. "I should kill you here, but I have something far better for you."

"I would rather die than serve you!" spat Black Swan, feeling weakness overtake her once more before finding herself kneeling once again. She tried to focus her thoughts once more and tried to think of another way to end the situation. Her eyes closed in rapt meditation and she faced the ground, intent on drawing whatever powers she still had left.

Iliiryana's eyes glowed a furious red and she commanded, "Look at your master when She speaks!" The defeated Sarkany tried to avert her gaze from the Sidhe leader, but to no avail when Iliiryana grabbed her face and forced her to look up. Still intent on keeping her eyes closed, she squeezed her eyes shut as hard as possible, only to find that they flew open on their own accord. Iliiryana's nails, now extended into feline claws, broke ever so slightly into her skin, but Black Swan was certain that she could easily go further in.

Determined to die before becoming a slave, Black Swan tried to struggle in hopes of either escaping or dying of blood loss, but the intense red light from Iliiryana's gaze stopped her. "That's a good slave," purred Iliiryana, continuing to gaze into Black Swan's eyes.

Head hurting from trying to resist her will, Black Swan could do little but yield to the Sidhe leader. She could feel Iliiryana probing her mind and she recalled how she was able to do it before when she was only the High Priestess of the Eternal Huntress. As a god of growing power though, there was literally nothing Black Swan could do. Gritting her teeth in a last attempt to fight back, she tried to think of anything useless to the Clawed Fury. Killer Parakeet's lousy attempts at jokes. Tindariel's drinking songs. "Where's my brown pants?" she uttered in hopes of distracting her, recalling one of Killer's favorite sayings.

Both amused and annoyed at Black Swan's feeble attempts to resist, Iliiryana knelt down, still gazing deeply into Black Swan's eyes. Her firm grasp around the Sarkany's face turned into a soft caress and Black Swan shuddered involuntarily at the sensation of the claws brushing against her face. Another shudder passed through the helpless warrior when she

felt a lithe hand on her shoulder. "I have far better uses for you than merely killing you," she purred in an almost seductive voice.

Sarkany eyes widened in terror at the sound of Iliiryana's voice, gone from furious cackling to something she thought she'd never hear from the Clawed Fury herself. Had she been able to speak, she would've had the nerve to at least mumble, "Oh crap!" Even more frightening to Black Swan was when she saw her pulling her closer in an embrace. Not even the thoughts of being imprisoned in Pelda for all eternity with clutches of eggs to attend to disturbed her this much! Even worse for her was when she realized that she was returning the embrace, even if it was under whatever enchantments Iliiryana placed on her. And then to top off the horror she felt, she felt cold lips brushing against her own, sending a sensation of lightning spreading through her body.

After what felt like an eternity to Black Swan, Iliiryana finally broke the kiss, much to Black Swan's relief. Still unable to do much more than just kneel before her, she wondered what would happen to her next. Failing the assassination attempt was bad enough, but being controlled and touched made her wonder what other cruelties Iliiryana was capable of. Iliiryana then took Black Swan's arm and placed her hand over it. For a moment, cold pain burned through her arm before glowing with a chill silver light, revealing the symbol of an outstretched panther's paw superimposed over a longbow. "You will serve me now, willingly or not. I would rather have you serve me willingly," whispered Iliiryana into her ear. "I dare you to defy me!"

Whatever force that kept Black Swan from fighting back vanished, allowing her to move normally. She felt her strength surging back through her veins and her mind cleared up once more, no longer compelled to gaze into Iliiryana's eyes. Angry and eager to avenge herself, she picked up her sword, ready to slay her once and for all. Then the worst pain ever seized her entire body and she collapsed onto the ground into a fetal position while the symbol on her arm glowed brightly. "Damn you, Iliiryana! May you spend eternity under Killer Parakeet's tail while listening to Zatherthalas Il-Kanan serenading you nonstop with his banjo!" she swore, thinking of what could possibly be the cruelest punishment ever.

"Spirited, aren't you?" sneered Iliiryana, slowly helping her up. "Maybe this might mellow you out a bit." She knelt before her again and pulled her closer in another cold embrace. As soon as Iliiryana kissed her again, the pain vanished.

"Eew," thought Black Swan, knowing the risks of thinking such a thought, but she still allowed it to form. Nobody was going to control her thoughts even if her actions were in check!

"Now, Gilrain, my slave, go and find out more about these other attempts on my life and if you can, slay Oroszlan and Galka," commanded Iliiryana. At the use of her True Name, Black Swan cringed and realized she was in even more trouble than she had ever expected to be. For someone as powerful as Iliiryana to know her True Name, it was practically having a leash around her throat at all times.

Obediently, Black Swan stood up even as her stomach churned furiously in frustration. "Yes, master," she spoke submissively.

Iliiryana then picked up the scimitars from the ground and handed them to Black Swan. "Use these and any other weapons you may have hidden on you against the enemies of Dûnhèasa. I will keep your sword for the time being and learn of its secrets."

Black Swan's heart raced when she witnessed Iliiryana taking Ki-Riss away from her. The amber stone in the sword was now dead and no light emanated from the weapon. *The*

*blade will only break when its wielder breaks and its light will gradually return as you find your own calling and honor. Should you try to cast this blade aside, it will return to you.* Legoregebb's voice rang in her mind, but she wondered what would happen now that the Clawed Fury took the blade from her by force and left her unbroken but fettered. She hefted both scimitars, testing their weight and balance before nodding to her.

"I will remain in touch with you. Remember, if you dare defy me, the pain shall return!" Iliiryana allowed herself to embrace Black Swan once again and kissed her even more passionately before vanishing and leaving the confused Sarkany alone in the Crossroads.

Without a second thought, Peromyscus had run as fast as he could away from the scene after the blade missed and Black Swan and Iliiryana were locked in combat. Already, he had contemplated fleeing as soon as Black Swan made that assassination attempt, but now that she was kneeling before the volatile goddess, he knew exactly what to do, at least as far as preserving his grey hide went. His unusually wide angle of vision allowed him to see that Iliiryana had grabbed the mercenary by the throat and appeared to be squeezing the life out of her. Running was not going to help for long considering the hordes of angry Sidhe that were now on the alert for a second intruder. He looked again and saw them gaining on him. The air was thin and so he willed himself into the form of a gnat. Not exactly the fastest of forms, but one that would allow him to hide until it was safe. He hoped that there weren't any gnat-eating Sidhe or other creatures as he shrank and vanished from their sight.

He wondered why Black Swan didn't want him to transform into something more discreet to start with. Then the weakness struck him and he found himself returning to his usual form. Angry shouts from the Sidhe mob indicated to him that he had been spotted, so he tried to get up and make as much of a dash as possible, only to trip and fall as his ankle twisted on him. Vines also surrounded him and he could hear high-pitched cackling nearby, that of a hyena-like man with a skull-topped staff. Before she could relish her victory, a golden form in the sky appeared. It clanged loudly and soared down, causing the hyena-man to whimper, and judging from the sounds of water trickling and the smell, to scare him. He then ran away as fast as he could, leaving Peromyscus tied up in the vines. A second golden form also appeared, flying towards the mass of Sidhe. Exhausted and drained by the Crossroad, he then passed out, only remembering loud, clanging words and intense sunlight striking him in the otherwise gloomy place.

### 3 The Parakeet Returns

Baelnorn Clawstaff, a hunched, almost bald elderly man with a long, scraggly white beard, grunted something incoherent before leaning heavily on his namesake staff. As he did, he felt the near-constant pressure in his stomach and looked around unconsciously. Nobody was there, but the ancient man still felt self-conscious that he had to break so much wind and that he was continually surrounded by the smell of rotten eggs because of this. He also burped loudly and his joints creaked loudly in the nearly dead-silent library. "Damn arthritis and gastritis," he mumbled. He had been reading almost non-stop for the last several days, pondering the rumors he had heard and the last several divinations he had made. A soft knock at the door made him look up and wheeze a bit. "Come on in!" he said in his cracked, wheezy voice.

The heavy, ornate wooden door slowly opened, creaking ever so slightly. Two women, both ebony-skinned with a slight bluish-purplish hue, stepped in. One was wearing a stately violet robe and had knee-length silver hair that flowed freely. Like the old wizard, she carried a staff, but instead of a gnarled wooden staff with a huge dragon's claw on it, it was a smooth one with a bright violet gem that glowed softly. Her face was ever so slightly wrinkled, hints of her advanced age that very few Dhaerow ever reached, but her intense violet eyes sparkled with a child-like mirth. Baelnorn motioned to the elder one, his wife Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon the Keeper of Secrets of the University, to come in. Next to her was a younger Dhaerow woman in a simple traveler's outfit and a pair of shining silver rapiers attached to her waist. The younger woman kept her hair in a neat bun and unlike her mother, had sparkling blue-green eyes that seemed to shift in color. She smiled and walked forward with a cat-like grace that rivalled even her ancient mother. Certainly Ilithara was not his biological daughter, but it always cheered up the otherwise cantankerous old man when he saw her even if he pretended to be annoyed at some of her antics.

"Any further progress? Has Olorin granted you any insights?" asked Tanilthara, embracing her fragile husband despite his non-stop flatulence.

Sighing, he replied, "Yes and no. The prophecy of the Stellar Tiger has been broken by Imladrien and Legoregebb and Ereny have faded, leaving Galka and Oroszlan to rule in their places. However, even Olorin is unclear as to what has happened with Iliiryana. And all this occurred three years ago without any of us being aware." He winced at the mention of Iliiryana. Then turning to Ilithara, he asked, "What about word from your travels?"

"There's been a lot of woodsmen who've been losing their way and the orcs of Gruntheim have been struggling with this year's crops. The shamans report an emptiness in their prayers, as if Gwaeron isn't there for them anymore and their hunters have had no luck in finding any game either. Everywhere I go, people are having trouble tracking and finding their way. And then there's all these reports of bears and boars suddenly becoming aggressive, as if seeking vengeance. I'm telling you, there's something up," said Ilithara, concern lining her face. It pained the elderly wizard to see her that concerned. The last time she looked that serious was during the Godsfall War and shortly afterwards when many members of the University, including Killer Parakeet and Rusty, had given their lives to stop Iliiryana and the Unnamed Terror from taking over the Palindorean pantheon. And then there was the fiasco between Kestrel, Cylithera, and the previous Eternal Huntress, which only complicated matters further.

"Ildathra also speaks of sadness that she cannot explain, and Yavanë also mourns, not only for Thormald, but also for unknown reasons," added Tanilthara.

Suddenly, in a flash of light, a hunched, robed figure appeared before the trio. It wore a sparkling, iridescent robe that glowed with every color and leaned heavily on a bright white-wooded staff. The left side of its face was that of an elderly man with a blue eye, thinning white hair, and a goatee, while the right side of its face was that of an old lady with a brown eye and limp grey hair. Baelnorn placed a hand on his own chest as his heart began to pound wildly, making him faint and weak. "Olorin," he wheezed, wondering what was happening to cause one of the greater gods to appear in his own library. A resonant fart escaped from him, causing both Tanilthara and Ilithara to involuntarily wince.

Olorin spoke in a voice that was neither masculine nor feminine and rather flat. "I am afraid the time has come. History oft repeats itself. Just as you once attempted to wrest power from the pantheon, your daughter seeks to do the same. The living have fallen and

the dead have risen. Seek the risen ones.” With that, the god of pure wizardry, academic knowledge and scholarship dissolved into a burst of shiny bubbles that blew away in a breeze that appeared from nowhere. Where it once stood though was a pair of small figurines – one was that of a turquoise-feathered parakeet with a dented pot on its head and an axe in its wings, the other was that of a large wolf-dog mutt. Next to the figurines was a folded map.

Ilithara knelt down to pick up the figurines and the map. Opening the map and scanning through it, she said, ”Darn. Ocala, Florida. Institute of Environmental Sciences. Killer and Rusty are alive and are there apparently.” Nodding in agreement at her interpretation of the situation, Tanilthara and Baelnorn sighed. ”And unless you’ve got better plans, I’m going to go retrieve them,” she added.

Smiling for a moment, Tanilthara replied, ”We certainly won’t be able to maintain our cover as well as you in that world.”

The old man also smiled at the young woman before letting off a loud, odiferous fart that made him cough violently. ”Grand Arch-Mage and yet can’t do much of anything,” he mumbled. ”I wouldn’t last a day out there with the way they react to my health. This time, it’s a young Dhaerow’s job and we’re sending a young Dhaerow. One who knows that world a bit better than your average Palindorean and knows Killer Parakeet well enough to prepare.”

She was certainly looking forward to her trip to Terrios and finding her old friends and fellow mischief-makers. Plus she enjoyed her trips there with Kestrel, who thankfully familiarized her with Terrios. Maybe she’d even get an opportunity to play with those strange boxes that Kestrel referred to as a ”computer” and drive those mighty horseless buggies known as ”cars”. Even the gravity of the situation couldn’t dampen her enthusiasm for a journey out there. There were just too many interesting things for her to explore! ”Mom, Dad, when can you get the transport spell ready?” asked Ilithara eagerly.

”By the end of the week,” replied Tanilthara. ”Assuming that you and Black Swan brought the *right* herbs that last trip. I have a lot more confidence in you and her than when it was you, Killer, and Tindariel. Speaking of which, Black Swan has been gone for a long time with that slinky creature she calls her partner. I hope she has better taste than that thing, was much happier when she was fighting with Xenra over that Hin-Iril prince who seemed more interested in Killer than anyone else!”

”Those were the good old days,” wheezed Clawstaff. ”Prince Jeremiah with his high and lofty honor and Sir Judar with his earthy practical sense of honor. Dagnabit, when can we join our old buddies? We’re about the last ones left! At least Black Swan’s still alive, I hope, and I think Judar’s still around, even if he’s probably as decrepit as me by now!”

Nothing could stop a huge laugh from Ilithara at the memory of that adventure where she finally got to meet Black Swan for the first time. With the laugh, though, came back painful memories of being imprisoned by her half-sister, Iliiryana, and witnessing first-hand what she had turned into over the centuries. If anything could frighten the normally fearless adventurer, it was the thought of returning to the Tindarn-Niniel and facing Iliiryana once again. Not even Cylithera was that frightening to her!

Killer Parakeet woke up to find himself on a large, firm bed filled with pillows. Rusty, his faithful wolf-mutt companion, was curled up next to him and had taken all of the blankets for himself. ”Russ, gimme some too! Even parakeets get cold!” squawked the six and a half foot tall, three hundred pound parrot, tugging some blanket away from the snoring dog as

his dirty turquoise feathers fluffed up to trap in some more warm air. Then he saw that the light sources weren't candles but rather what looked like small orbs. Was he in some wizard's castle again? Or did Clawstaff decide to allow the students to use their wizard-lights in their rooms? Then he saw the strange-looking red lights with numbers on them. It read: 4:30 AM before the zero turned into a one. "Huh?" he mumbled to himself. Certain he had been drinking too much again, he went back to sleep and hoped he wouldn't have too much of a hangover.

*Iliiryana smirked evilly at him as she poised herself to plunge the ice-cold scimitar through him. Just as she was about to sacrifice him to Tindariel Dalithariel, a pair of red-haired ogre-like twins charged into her with their hockey sticks and distracted her long enough to give the parrot a chance to break free. In the distance, the giant albino mole-wolverine was shattering, smashing, devouring everything in its path. "Yuck, the Unnamed Terror," squawked Killer. Rusty was biting into it before it shook the huge dog off and grabbed him with its long, sticky tongue. Without a second thought, Killer grabbed his axe and dented pot and charged at the Unnamed Terror. The two Terrian football player twins, Chad and Chester, would have to deal with Iliiryana on their own.*

*Tindariel, too, had charged at the Unnamed Terror and shouted, "Frontier Justice!" at the top of her lungs before slashing madly at the monster that had captured Rusty. She and Killer both attacked the god of blind fury and hunger, intent on saving their canine friend. Not far away, little Kestrel was dueling with Cylithera Eaglestrike, the Champion of the Eternal Huntress, and by the looks of it, neither was making any progress and neither would surrender to the other. Suddenly, the Eldharin student and the students collapsed on the ground just as Iliiryana shouted out some harsh spidery syllable. The record-holder for failing wizardry classes was pretty sure that Iliiryana had cast a cantrip to create some flowers, making her wonder why. Paralysis made her realize that it was not what she thought it was and all she could do was swear non-stop while her feet were rooted to the ground and her arms felt like they were held back by chains. "Damn arcane lore classes," she thought. She did fail all of her arcane lore classes multiple times. The Unnamed Terror moved towards Tindariel and in anticipation of its next meal, it pulled the struggling mutt into its mouth before dropping him in. Then the tongue extended out to grab the muscular Eldharin woman.*

*Killer let out a hideous challenging shriek at the sight of his canine companion being eaten and of his best friend in danger. Without thinking, he lunged madly at the giant mole-wolverine, hacking away at the tongue as hard as he could with axe, beak, and claws. "You killed my buddy-o-pal Jeremiah three thousand years ago and you just ate my doggie! You're not gonna take my buddy-o-pal Tindariel either!" he squawked. Tindariel could do little more than curse and lay helpless under Iliiryana's spell.*

*The parrot felt the wet, acidic hot tongue wrap itself around him. Squawking in pain, he tried to bite and claw at the rubbery tongue, but it only created more acid that burned his feathers and skin. Iliiryana returned to where the mole-wolverine was, covered in human blood. Smirking at Killer, she said smugly, "Farewell, Uncle. I gave you the choice to help me by helping me to destroy my father, Baelnorn Clawstaff, but you chose death and so the Unnamed Terror will have you." With that, she threw a black-bladed curved knife that resembled a panther's claw into Killer's heart.*

*Blood poured everywhere and Killer's struggles stopped almost instantly before the Unnamed Terror swallowed him and let out a loud, noxious burp. One burp turned into several more and the creature began to writhe in intense pain before charging off this way and that.*

*Without warning, it combusted into a bright silver flame and melted into black goo that vaporized into smoke. Tindariel cried out when Killer vanished into the creature and summoning what was left of her strength, she forced herself to get up and pick up her longbow. Nocking her last arrow to the string, she took aim at Iliiryana, who was busy gloating at both Killer's and the Unnamed Terror's demise. With a whispered prayer to Gwaeron, the patron god of brawlers and bears, she loosed the arrow and struck Iliiryana in the arm. "Frontier justice!" she screamed at the top of her lungs before charging in at the half-Dhaerow woman. "It's Rebel Yell time!" With that, her eyes narrowed as her muscles bulged out and her yells became louder, more annoying to everyone within earshot.*

*And then Killer realized that after he got swallowed, he was witnessing the Unnamed Terror's destruction and Tindariel's berserk fury at Iliiryana from high above. Rusty was next to him and began to whine at the sight of one of the young students leaping in front of Tindariel to protect her from Iliiryana's spell...*

"Wait a minute, I'm supposed to be dead," thought Killer as he woke up groggily in response to the sunlight that filtered in through the blinds. "Unless that whole Godsfall war was just a bad dream," he added. Some things were just so confusing to the parrot, who was very smart for one whose brains were squished in such a thick skull.

He surveyed the room to see where he might've been. There were a handful of lamps with those strange orb-like things and the thing with the numbers was still on the night-stand next to the bed. He could see a closet filled with clothing and yet another closet where Rusty seemed to be bent over something. The second closet had a white chair-like thing that Rusty was drinking out of and two more basins, one that he recognized as a bath-tub and the other he was sure was some kind of basin to wash up in. Rusty's voice echoed in his mind. *Killer, there's a nice drinking fountain here. You can even refresh the water and it's got a good minty taste to it too. I haven't found the food yet but I'll bet if you opened that third door, it would lead us to food.*

Killer walked to where Rusty was drinking water and he leaned over to also drink. "Ooh, it even has a lid to keep it clean!" he squawked before pulling the little handle. The water in the basin poured out and fresh water poured in with a swooshing noise. He took a beakful of water and commented, "Good stuff, Russ. We oughta get Clawstaff to build one of these for us too!" Then turning around, they both spotted a table covered with food and the aromas of various cooked items permeated through the air.

Without even bothering to question the source of the food, both parrot and dog began to gobble up the ample food on the table. Not only was there plenty of all the foods they had smelled, there was also large tankards of dark beer, another open bathroom with an inviting-looking toilet, and a huge box that both Killer and Rusty recognized as the food-boxes that somehow stayed perpetually cold. *This is good! If I weren't so hungry, I'd be a bit more leery, but heck, I'm too hungry to care!*

Rusty finished his plate of bacon before trying to slide some slices off Killer's plate. Fortunately for the dog, Killer was too focused on eating fried roaches and drinking dark beer. Slowly, the dog's paw pulled a few large, juicy hunks of bacon off Killer's plate and he slurped up the pieces before Killer noticed. If there was anything that was in short supply to Rusty, it was bacon. He thanked whoever provided the feast for providing so many roaches so Killer wouldn't notice a few (or several) missing pieces of bacon.

After several minutes, Killer began to burp loudly. "Whew, that was good! Perfectly fried roaches with the perfect crunch to them! And that was some good beer! Dunno 'bout

you Russ, but I gotta lift my tail somewhere.”

*I'm going to wash down the meal with some water. Ya know, I don't drink beer like you do. Water might even do you good!* Rusty ran to the toilet and flushed it before drinking eagerly from the clean white porcelain bowl. For some reason, he felt really sluggish and lazy. Turning around to see how Killer was faring, he saw the parrot staggering about, probably from having enjoyed one too many pitchers of beer. Then Killer wandered out of sight, unable to walk in a straight line.

”Hey! Lookie here, we got dessert here too!” called out Killer eagerly. He opened a large white refrigerator to reveal several pies, cakes, dog biscuits, several bottles of beer and whiskey, and yet more roaches. With that, he tore into the refrigerator, heedless of the fact that his stomach was full. Rusty looked up from the toilet, flushed it, then ran over to the refrigerator and grabbed the fish-shaped dog biscuits and one of the pumpkin pies.

Rusty started belching and then Killer squawked, ”Ooh, lemme see if I can do better!” He let out a loud, noxious burp and started to eat another chocolate-coated roach and washed it down with some more beer. Several more slices of pumpkin pie and candied insects later, the room seemed to spin around Killer. ”Hmm, maybe I shouldn't have finished that twelve-pack!” The mutt, too, staggered about, confused and dizzy.

*Maybe we ate too much, too fast. Or there's something funny in the food.*

”Naw, it's the beer. Well, the pumpkin pie had run in it,” said Killer, trying to stop the world from spinning by hugging a nearby lamp before stumbling over to Rusty. Then darkness swirled around both of them. ”I think I'm gonna have a headache soon!”

*I don't feel so good. Was there any grass in here?*

”I think I need to make a deposit somewhere,” whined Killer, clutching his distended stomach. ”How could you make a withdrawal with that sagging gut of yours?”

*I was going to make a deposit too.*

Killer staggered around some more before returning to the bathroom and sitting on the toilet like a chair. The faithful and bloated mutt followed him, certain his friend was going to get into trouble. After seeing him seated precariously on the toilet, he pushed him off and led him to the shower stall and closed the door. ”Huh? I was gonna sit in my comfy chair!” whined Killer again.

*You're not dirtying the water source.* As soon as Rusty secured the gigantic parakeet in the shower, he crawled into the bathtub and curled up into a surprisingly small ball. All the while, Killer was squawking incoherently and then the sound of water flowing began.

”It's raining!” squawked Killer eagerly before yanking the door off the shower and staggering towards the toilet. Then he tripped on his own clawed feet and fell onto the ground, snoring. Rusty, too, began to snore loudly. Had either one remained awake long enough, a lone roach crawling around suddenly froze in its tracks and became a square white package labeled ”Extra Firm Tofu”. A tasty-looking fried potato wedge shuddered ever so slightly before turning into a shiitake mushroom and a pumpkin pie shook about before warping into a rectangular box labelled ”Natto”.

The gigantic parakeet opened up one beady black eye and wondered what was filling up his copious paunch to the point where he felt a bit nauseous. ”Russ, remind me to not eat so much at once,” he groaned before rolling over and staggering over to a nearby garbage can.

*Killer, you shouldn't have eaten so much. You always do this after gorging like that. Won't you ever learn?* The large mutt followed the huge parrot, feeling slightly nauseous

but not quite as bloated or sick. *You better not puke or I might have to really keep you off the beer.*

Killer Parakeet made a few gagging and retching noises, but nothing came up except for a loud, noxious burp. "Better, much better!" he squawked cheerfully, forgetting about his upset stomach. His tail suddenly lifted up as he let out a resonant and malodorous fart.

*Stop it before I find a cork!* Rusty turned away and ran back into the bathroom, tail tucked between his legs. Killer, on the other hand, was completely oblivious to the stink he produced. After all, he had a very limited sense of smell.

He then wandered back into the kitchen, wondering if there was more food for him. The only food left was some broccoli, some kind of white stuff in water in a box labeled "Tofu", a glass bottle of smooth brownish-red substance called "Red Curry Paste", and a bottle labelled "Nam Pla". There were several open boxes of other unfamiliar things along with tofu and half-eaten vegetables scattered all over the place as well, but neither dog nor parakeet had any recollection of consuming tofu or vegetables. He recalled Kestrel mentioning tofu on a number of occasions but he never got around to trying it. Tindariel had once told him that it was a squishy chameleon that needed the appropriate background. While he rummaged about hoping to find something more appetizing, one of the doors creaked open. Even Killer Parakeet had no desire to try the red curry paste or the mysterious brown liquid in the container of "nam pla". Just the smell of those two things was enough to dissuade him.

In walked a man and a woman, both clad in blue pants and grey shirts with a hand carrying a lighted torch. The man was heavy-set with a neatly trimmed black beard but had almond-shaped eyes like the Eldharin and the Sidhe. Unlike the Eldharin or the Sidhe, his eyes were deep brown. He also had a slightly golden tinge to his tanned skin that reminded the parrot of the regal Zineng Eldharin. Since when did dwarves breed with Eldharin or Sidhe to produce this? The man was certainly hairier than even the hairiest dwarves he had seen because at least he didn't see the dwarves' chest and back hairs through their clothing. Maybe a dwarf, Sidhe, and a bear had somehow been mutated by an evil wizard to produce this man who faced him?

Killer was relieved that the feathers under his tail were not white because there was something about the man that made him a bit uneasy. The woman was tiny and slender with jet-black hair like her companion and also had the deep brown almond-shaped eyes and a fox-like cast to her. What caught his beady black eyes most though was the fact that her right hand didn't match because it was bright silver and looked very mechanical. An involuntary shiver passed up the nearly fearless bird's spine. At least it wasn't something coming out from under his tail, which was a response he reserved for Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon and maybe Cylithera Eaglestrike. "Hey, got any real grub here besides weeds and this weird tofu stuff?" he squawked.

"What the frequency?" asked the woman in a clear, almost flute-like voice that made Killer think of some of the Eldharin operas he had been subjected to in his time as a professor at the University.

The man motioned for the woman to stand back and approached Killer. "Who or what are you?" he demanded in a baritone voice that also reminded him of Eldharin operas. Only Eldharin or other entities with truly beautiful voices were allowed to sing in the operas, a fact that Killer didn't appreciate until that time Kestrel took him to one in this world. Somehow, this man's voice had a soothing effect on him and his feathers lay back down, slightly calmer.

"I'm Killer Parakeet the Great, Hero of the Banishings! And Rusty, descendant of Huan of the Imlad Estel is in that room with the good water!" he squawked proudly, pointing at the large black and tan wolf mutt who was happily drinking from the toilet. "What about you two?" Both people tried to refrain from giggling at his outburst before their eyes widened at the implication of his name.

"Shit, Joanne was right when she said we'd have visitors," said the man. "I'm Vincent Gahan," he added. He reluctantly shook Killer's wing and sneezed at all the feather dust that came off him.

Also shaking his wing, the woman said, "I'm Tarathorn Gahan." Like her companion, she sneezed repeatedly from all of the dust on the parrot. "So why are you here?" She tried her best not to sniffle too hard, but she could feel her sinuses clog up and he reeked badly. A voice in the back of her head suggested that she direct the smelly bird to a bath, but she restrained herself, unsure of what would happen if she did so.

Bobbing his head to express his uncertainty, Killer replied, "Dunno, one day I was out at the bar with my buddy-o-pals Gwaeron and Russ and Jeremiah and then next thing I know, Gwaeron gets summoned to the Council of the gods and I wake up here with Russ!" He let out a bit of a hiccup and his tail lifted involuntarily before settling back down. The smell of rotten eggs and broccoli surrounded him.

Whispering to Vincent, Tarathorn asked, "I thought we were supposed to have a Dhaerow visitor."

"Maybe I heard wrong," he replied, shrugging.

"Dhaerow? Where?" squawked Killer, bobbing his head up and down again.

*Hey, who's these people?* Rusty bounded out from the bathroom, wagging his tail eagerly and sniffing both Vincent and Tarathorn. He tried to sit in between the two of them, unable to decide on who to snuggle up to first. Even being a descendant of both the wolves of Dûnhêasa and the hounds of the hidden kingdom of Imlad Estel didn't stop him from being like an oversized puppy at times. *I kinda like the imitation Gwaeron even if he is Sidhe and has a bit of an attitude and is almost as stupid as you sometimes. I really like the little Alfar girl, kinda reminds me of Ilithara actually. Speaking of which, where's Ilithara?*

Suddenly, Rusty started sniffing around on the ground and wandering around. "Uhh, ya need to empty the spout?" asked Killer.

*No, just smelled something. Dhaerow I think. And spell components.* Rusty then looked up into the air before trotting off.

A clear, musical voice called out from the distance, "Killer? Is that you?"

Both Vincent and Tarathorn looked over to see what Rusty was running towards. It was a slender, dark-skinned woman in dark blue overalls. She walked with an unearthly grace that made both of them think of Sidhe or Alfar and as she drew closer, they could notice her features. While her almond-shaped eyes were a bright blue-green and her ears were somewhat pointed and long, her skin was dark brown. Her hair was curly and black, making both of them wonder how someone of what they were sure was African could have the bright blue-green eyes. Contact lenses, perhaps? Despite her slender build, she still had the wide hips that many would consider a "ghetto booty". Killer broke the confusion by running up to her and hugging her, leaving a trail of dust everywhere. "Ilithara! I missed ya!" he squawked cheerfully. Rusty was also wagging his tail excitedly and trying to snuggle up to her. "By the way, nice disguise!"

Approaching the couple, Ilithara smiled at them. "I got word that Killer would be here.

And so we're no longer strangers, I'm Ilithara N'Shad-Daermon, although in this world I'm going under the name Michael Jackson." At the mention of her alias, a few giggles escaped from both Vincent and Tarathorn.

"What's so funny?" asked Ilithara, confused.

"First thing is Michael is a male name, the female version is Michelle. And then there was this pop star named Michael Jackson who went from being a black man to a white woman," started Tarathorn. "He was a bit nuts with his Neverland ranch and there were lots of rumors of him being a pedophile."

Suddenly, Ilithara grinned. "I remember Kestrel mentioned this character," she said. "Anyway, after exploring the beautiful Institute of Environmental Sciences and the city of Ocala and running into some of the weirdest characters, I'm supposed to get Killer and Rusty back to Palindor. Something's up, lots of reports of several gods vanishing and the Triad of Honor going nuts. Plus, Mom and Dad need to talk to you but something's blocking their powers. If the Grand Arch-Mage and the Keeper of Secrets can't get through, something's really bad."

"Wait a minute, explain what's going on," demanded Vincent, wondering what on earth this woman was talking about.

"It's complicated," she replied. "But what makes it relevant for you is that you may've put Iliiriyana out of commission for nearly three years, but she's come back."

"Crap!" declared the couple at the same time, then they looked at each other in amusement despite the gravity of Ilithara's news.

Killer and Rusty looked at each other, then at their long-time friend and then at the couple that greeted them. "I guess that explains a lot," squawked Killer, unusually thoughtful for a parrot of very little brain. "The whole thing with Gwaeron being a bit antsy and me having that flashback of when I died. Wait a minute, I shouldn't be around!"

Ilithara stopped the mutant parrot in what could've been a loud, painful soliloquy. "Killer, you and Rusty are coming with me, like it or not." Turning to both Vincent and Tarathorn, she said, "I might be able to transport you to with me as well. My parents would love to see you again, if you don't mind. I've never attempted to use their spell for more than two others, but I don't see why I can't pull it off."

"Parents?" asked Vincent, puzzled.

"Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon and Baelnorn Clawstaff. Well, Clawstaff is my step-father..." started Ilithara before Vincent's face turned beet-red.

Tarathorn tried to restrain her husband, but a few choice words escaped and he growled, "Not them again! They were the ones that got me and Ivan into the whole fuckin' mess!" With that he lunged at Ilithara, who merely stepped aside in a fluid, graceful action, causing the enraged man to bump into the over-sized bird instead. He merely looked at the stocky man and laughed while he sneezed at the excessive feather dust that rose up from the parrot like a dense cloud. "And Killer, you smell!" he added, fed up with the excessive odor coming from him.

*He's hot-headed like a Sidhe. I'm surprised he isn't supporting that witch with that temper of his. He's also a real idiot apparently, even worse than you! But he is right about one thing, Killer. You stink, can't you bathe once in a while? A bath might even make your feathers a bit nicer!* Rusty began to sniff around again and went back into the trailer before re-emerging with a large bone and gnawing on it. The parakeet merely bobbed his head up and down and started scratching at an itch on his back with his sharp clawed toes before

dealing with another itch close to the base of his tail with his beak. Everyone looked away in disgust at Killer, who merely shook off and spread feather dust everywhere.

Killer squawked before putting Vincent into a light head-lock, "Well, those two started a lot of trouble. They're also Iliiriyana's parents for real but yeah, don't take it out on the kid sister or on my poor brother. She's cool, if you're gonna beat up on someone, beat up the big sister." At the mention of brother, Tarathorn and Vincent both let out an incoherent squeak.

"Long story, but I'm sure Mom and Dad can tell you more later on if they feel like it. I think Rusty's getting bored of us talking, why don't we head out?" asked Ilithara, watching the huge mutt chewing eagerly on the bone.

Turning to each other, the couple began to whisper to each other in Thai, a language that neither Ilithara nor Killer could understand. "How much of a hurry are you in?" asked Vincent finally, holding onto Tarathorn closely. "There are a few little things we need to take care of."

Ilithara looked into one of the pockets on her overalls. "Well, it is urgent, but it's hurry up and wait, might be a few days while I refresh my mind on that incantation and set up a few things. So if it's not going to take too long, go ahead and deal with it because you're gonna be away for a while. And Killer, Mom sent you something so you can enjoy some time on Terrios without attracting too much attention."

"Yeah, we're not going to be able to hide that for long," commented Vincent, eyeing the giant parakeet. "Especially if we're going to keep him around for more than a few hours."

Digging around again in her pockets, the Dhaerow woman pulled out a plain black ring. "Put this on your toe, Killer," she instructed. Both Vincent and Tarathorn grinned quietly at the thought of Killer having a toe-ring.

Without hesitation, Killer lifted up a foot and hopped about, unable to balance himself until he grabbed onto the nearest stationary object, which happened to be Vincent. While Vincent sneezed and did his best to not inhale more of the parakeet's foul odor, Ilithara slid the ring onto one of his forward-facing toes. In a flash of light, the giant parakeet's form began to glow and warp. The zygodactyl parrot feet became human feet and the scaly avian legs thickened into powerful, muscular legs. The dusty feathers disappeared, while Killer's stance became more erect and his wickedly curve beak receded. Within several heartbeats, what was once a gigantic parrot was now a tall, heavy-set clean-shaven man with a ruddy complexion, beady dark brown eyes, and short dirty blonde hair. Much to everyone's relief, he also was fully clothed in a pair of blue jeans and a slightly stained white tank top that revealed his ample belly that hung over his pants.

"Not my choice exactly," said Ilithara. "Even Dhaerow illusions can cover so much out here, but seems strangely appropriate for you, Killer," she added, laughing.

"I feel funny," said Killer before realizing that he was no longer squawking, although he did bob his head up and down. "Hey, I got a working spout! And now I've got two separate holes for pee and poop!" he cried out, dancing about after putting his hands on his crotch and his butt. Rusty covered his face with his large paws and whined softly.

While the large man continued to prance about excitedly about not having to lift his tail for everything, the couple merely looked away in disgust and amusement at him. Finally, Vincent spoke up. "Killer, you better not do that in public. And you might want a real name like Bob Smith or something."

"Bubba seems to be a pretty common name here," suggested Ilithara once Killer stopped

his display. "It's non-descript enough, right?" A few giggles escaped from Tarathorn, while Vincent started to laugh loudly.

Finally, Tarathorn said, "Fits you well, Killer. And you do fit the Bubba stereotype with your looks."

"But I like being Killer Parakeet!" grumbled Killer. "Bubba Parakeet just doesn't do me justice!"

Looking over Killer, Vincent said, "Well, there are enough weirdoes who take on funny names for Killer Parakeet to work."

Later that day, after Ilithara had been poring over the notes that Clawstaff and Tanilthara had given her, Rusty began to whine softly. He pawed at the refrigerator before opening it, only to find tofu, vegetables, and a small amount of meat, mostly ground venison and some fish. Killer lay on the sofa, absently watching the television and rubbing his belly. "Hey Russ, is there any real food in there?" he called out to the mutt.

*Well, there's some deer and fish and that squishy white tofu stuff Imladrien likes.* Just then, the TV flashed to a commercial. Two men were sitting at a table with a red and white striped box filled with golden-brown lumps. They both had plates with fried potato wedges and baked beans and were removing the dumplings from the box one at a time, dipping them into a red sauce before biting into them to reveal white meat. "Get yourself some KFC boneless buffalo wings!" spoke an unseen voice in the television. "Available only for a limited time!"

With that, Killer shouted to both Ilithara, who was also looking in the refrigerator, and Rusty, who was still whining, "Hey, let's get some buffalo wings, they're not related to me at all! They're those big dumb cow-like beasts that Kestrel and those other Terrians used to talk about!"

Ilithara said, "Let me make sure." With that, she closed the refrigerator door and went over to a nearby computer and typed in the word "Buffalo". An image of a large, shaggy four-legged beast appeared on the screen. "Yup, should be ok for you. Plus it'll give us a chance to explore a bit and maybe even try a car. I've been wanting to drive one for a while, how hard could it be compared to activating lost artifacts? After all, they did leave their keys with us here." She held up a small set of keys, including one with a larger base with a stylized H and three buttons on it. "If I remember what Kestrel told me, this one is it!" she said, holding up the large key.

*Killer, I'm not so sure about this, maybe we should get Imladrien or Tinúvion. Remember that time Ilithara took us to what she was sure was a temple, that one with the golden arches, only to find out it was a place that served fried food that was great going in but awful coming out.* Rusty let out a small groan and rolled his eyes at both Killer and Ilithara.

"Rusty, don't worry, I studied up based on that last visit with Kestrel," she reassured the dog, patting him on the head. For some reason, Rusty still had a deeply sinking feeling in his stomach.

It wasn't exactly easy for all three hundred pounds of Killer to fit into the passenger seat of the small blue Honda Civic that Tarathorn and Vincent had parked near the trailer the trio stayed in. Rusty didn't feel any better in the back seat, but at least he was relieved to know that at least he could stretch out a bit. Only Ilithara seemed to be comfortable and after reading the manual in the car for a moment, she inserted the key into the ignition and turned. The car rumbled and shook at first, making Rusty whine for a moment. "It'll be

ok,” said Ilithara. Then she handed the manual to Killer. ”Let me know if anything goes wrong.”

Ilithara then squeezed the button and pulled the transmission from park to reverse. The car began to move ever so slowly backwards and then she pressed her foot on the larger of the two pedals beneath her, stopping the car. Realizing that it was the brake, she then put her foot on the other pedal with the same force, sending the car backwards into some saw palmetto bushes. ”Uhh, try the D,” said Killer, fumbling with the book.

She adjusted the transmission to the D and then stepped onto the gas pedal, this time more gently. The car moved forward, lurching a bit thanks to Ilithara’s irregular foot motion until she found a balance between intense acceleration and deceleration. ”Ok, think I got it. The rest should be easy,” declared Ilithara cheerfully, steering the car onto the bumpy road. The seat-belt light then lit and beeped. She looked around and pulled the seat-belt down onto herself, inserting it into the buckle. ”I remember something about Kestrel telling me how to do it.” The chest strap was across her front while the lap portion was over her lap. ”Killer, do the same.”

Killer pulled the belt only to find that it barely reached over his copious paunch. He tugged frantically at the belt, dropping the manual at his feet. ”It won’t reach!” he groaned.

*Try pulling it slowly.* Rusty let out a little whine before staring out the window. The mutt prayed that Ilithara wouldn’t get them killed while attempting to drive this strange device. Nausea began to overwhelm the dog and in desperation, he put a paw on a button on the door near the window. The window opened and he stuck his head out, throwing up and feeling greatly relieved.

Considering the wolf-mutt’s advice, Killer relaxed his tugging and let the seatbelt return into the device before pulling it slowly. This time, he was able to get it to reach around him comfortably before Ilithara helped him insert the buckle into the appropriate location. ”Ok, hold on, here we go. Time for some buffalo wings at KFC!”

While the car lurched about on the road, several on-lookers stared about, wondering what was wrong with the driver. ”Watch it asshole!” cried out a scruffy man driving a patchy blue pick-up truck that emitted sparks everywhere. Ilithara had nearly collided into him and only her quick reflexes with the brakes saved them from a near-accident. ”In case they ain’t got them in Africa or wherever you’re from, a stop sign means stop!” With that, he drove off in a huff.

”Killer, could you look up things like where to stop and stuff?” asked Ilithara, now making sure that there weren’t other drivers about to crash into her.

*We’re gonna be in deep dookie.* The mutt whined yet again.

”Uhh, red lights, stop signs, at least if I read this right,” replied Killer. Then turning to his canine companion, he said, ”Russ, you got me here, we’ll be ok!” All Rusty could do was gulp and stick his head out of the window.

An hour and several wrong turns later, the trio finally spotted the red and white sign with the letters ”KFC” on it. Cautiously, she looked around for somewhere to park the car. With some fumbling around and horrified onlookers, she finally was able to park her car into a wide stall with blue lines surrounding it. ”Ok, safe to come out, I guess,” she said, pushing down on the brake, engaging the parking brakes and turning the key to turn the car off.

Woozily, Killer stepped out of the car with Rusty, who staggered from nausea for a moment. The warm, damp air didn’t help the mutt’s mood, but exiting the car did. *I’m not going in there.* Rusty pointed his nose towards a sign that read: NO DOGS ALLOWED.

*You and Ilithara can cause all the trouble you want, but I'm gonna let my stomach settle. Just bring me back something good like potatoes, buffalo wings, and whatever those cheesy things Kestrel used to cook were.*

"Ok, but you're gonna miss on some fun and yummys," said Killer, petting the wolf-mutt before sauntering in with Ilithara alongside him. Several people glanced over to the heavy-set man and smiled, amused at the rapport between him and Rusty.

More eyes focused on Ilithara, and as she noticed, most of the eyes were from males. She merely smiled back at them before following Killer into the restaurant. Some of the men whistled at her, leading to one heavy-set balding man in a greasy tank top being hit over the head with a large purse by his strong, matronly wife almost as large as he was before she dragged him by his shirt back to the car. "You ain't gettin' any of that," said the woman. "You sure ain't gonna be messin' with anyone but me!"

Once in the air-conditioned restaurant, Killer plopped himself down onto a nearby table. "They do it like at the inns and taverns, right?" he whispered to Ilithara.

Looking around, she noticed people standing in line and ordering their food one at a time. "You stay here and stay out of trouble, I'll order the food and then we can feast," she said. Then she stood in line behind a very muscular woman with shoulder-length blonde hair that was tied in a neat braid. As soon as she got into line, a wiry man with glasses, short black hair, and scruffy facial hair stood behind her.

After a handful of iterations of "What would you like?" followed by whatever the person ordered and then followed with a "Is that for here or to go?" and an exchange of money and trays of food, it was Ilithara's turn. She looked up at the menu above and at the pictures, thinking quickly.

Finally she answered the cashier's questions as they came up. She hoped that Killer would like her choice of side dishes. "I'd like the thirty piece boneless buffalo wing bucket with potato wedges, mashed potatoes, baked beans, and macaroni and cheese, all super-sized," she said confidently. It was something she remembered seeing on the television before and with Rusty wanting the leftovers, it would probably be a good idea.

"For here or to go?" asked the pimply-faced teenaged boy who couldn't help but look at her. "And would you like drinks with that?" he added, trying to not stare at the exotic customer.

"Here. Yes, two large drinks," she replied, smiling. The boy then placed two large plastic cups with the red and white KFC logo on them onto the tray.

"Drinks are over there," he said, pointing to the soda fountain near where Killer sat. She glanced back, noting that Killer was actually behaving himself and breathed a sigh of relief. "By the way, nice hair color, what kind of dye did you use for that?"

Thinking quickly again, she replied, "Lab accident plus light hair runs in the family." Her stomach turned slightly, realizing that her illusion wasn't holding up as well as she hoped. As long as Killer didn't return to parakeet form, she was fine. After all, a dark-skinned woman with silver hair and bright green eyes was an attention-grabber, but not as much as a gigantic parrot! Her food arrived almost instantly and she walked back to where Killer was sitting.

As soon as he saw the red and white paper bucket that Ilithara brought, he let out a cheerful whoop and opened it up. "I'll get our drinks," she said, going over to the soda fountain. She looked at her choices. Mountain Dew. Pepsi. Root beer. Sprite. Iced tea, both sweetened and unsweetened. She also saw a container of ice and put some into

each cup before deciding. She thought to herself, "I better get Killer the root beer, I'll get myself some Mountain Dew." The Mountain Dew was a fluorescent yellowish green liquid that fizzed, while the root beer was a deep, rich brown. "Darn, should've gone with the root beer, but maybe this Mountain Dew will be good. Dew from the mountains should be healthy."

She returned to the table, where Killer had already torn into the potatoes and boneless wings. "Buffalo is good!" he exclaimed cheerfully, also scooping up large helpings of beans, macaroni and cheese and mashed potatoes. "So yummy!" he said between bites. Then he took a swig of the root beer. "Hmm, kinda sweet but not bad!" he declared. "A really unique beer!"

Ilithara quickly decided that the food was good after a forkful of the various items she ordered. On the other hand, the sweet, fizzy concoction known as Mountain Dew didn't quite appeal to her. It was just too sweet for her and there was just something weird that made her feel a bit jittery. Wondering if this was a Terrian specialty that they enjoyed, she continued to eat, making sure Killer didn't accidentally spear her with a fork while enjoying the macaroni and cheese or the baked beans. The biscuits that came with the meal were also tasty in both her mind and Killer's mind. "Ya know, I can see why Kestrel came to us built like a dwarf warrior. This food is just so good!" she said.

"Buffalo and sweet root beer, that's some good stuff!" said Killer yet again, burping loudly.

The wiry, dark-haired man with glasses, who sat at the next table and a book titled *Forest Mensuration Techniques and Theory*, turned to Killer and Ilithara. "Very tender and tasty chicken, isn't it?" commented the man with a heavy accent that reminded Ilithara of the accent many of the hill folk in the northern part of Tuonela had. It was also similar to the one that Kestrel's family had. Combined with the dark, slightly slanted almond-shaped eyes and the relatively flat nose and black hair, she was convinced that he was probably of similar, if not the same, roots as Kestrel, who identified herself as Korean and Japanese.

"Chicken?" asked Ilithara incredulously. She could see Killer's face turning bright red, recalling all the incidents of poultry and fowl being served to him at taverns and inns while he was in parakeet form. Killer was obviously struggling to restrain himself and he continued to eat the potatoes and pasta noisily, as if to screen things out of his mind. "I thought it was buffalo."

"Funny one. They're called buffalo because they're from Buffalo, New York," he said, laughing a bit, thinking that Ilithara was just joking around. "But they are pure chicken."

Suddenly, Killer spat out the buffalo wing and stood up. He roared in fury, "What? I've been lied to?! I ate my thousandth cousin thinking it was some big dumb beast of burden? Liars!" With that, he overturned the table, sending food everywhere, while the wiry man ran in terror and called for help. Killer then grabbed a chair and whirled about, inadvertently knocking Ilithara down. At that moment, the people watching the huge man throwing a temper tantrum witnessed a sudden transformation from the stereotyped "Bubba" to a gigantic turquoise-feathered parakeet.

*You idiot! You just blew your cover and maybe Ilithara's too! And now you've cost me a tasty meal!* Rusty charged in through the door, heedless of the commotion he was going to cause and tried to knock the giant parakeet down to stop him from causing further damage. In the meantime, several uniformed police officers also ran in, pointing their guns straight at Killer. Ilithara groaned in pain at the sudden headache Killer inadvertently inflicted on

her before seeing the police aiming their guns at him.

"Madam, are you all right? Did this monster try to assault you?" asked one of the policemen, a muscular man with a large, droopy brown moustache that reminded her of a Knight of Arnor.

Thinking quickly again, Ilithara staggered up and replied, "No, he just threw a tantrum. I've got the situation under control."

In the meanwhile, Rusty was salvaging as much of the spilled food as possible, finishing off the last of the beans, potatoes and the pasta, knowing that Killer would throw a fit if he saw him eating chicken. He also slurped out the last of the drinks in both Killer's and Ilithara's cups. The brown liquid in Killer's cup tasted good to him, albeit sweet, while the bright yellow-green liquid in Ilithara's cup made the wolf mutt feel sick to the stomach. *Killer, next time, we confirm with a real Terrian. I told ya Ilithara sometimes lacks a bit of common sense. How else ya explain that incident at the Tindarn-Niniel or that time she nearly got ya executed by those Hin-Iril priests or the time she accidentally activated that crystal that took us to that demon's lair?*

"You do realize that he can be taken in for assault and disrupting the peace, right?" said the policeman, confused at Ilithara and Killer.

With a quick gesture of her hand and a disarming smile to the police and a handful of witnesses, including the wiry man who mentioned chicken, she said, "Don't worry, it's all right. I'll make sure I pay for the damage and it won't happen again." A small wisp of violet light left her hand, surrounding everyone in the restaurant and slowly, the crowd stepped back calmly. Ilithara continued to focus, hoping that her concentration would hold and that she'd buy them enough time to at least get away. Digging through her pockets, she pulled out her wallet and looked for money. Unsure of what would be appropriate, she removed five hundred dollar bills and placed it on a clean table that wasn't over-turned during Killer's outburst. Hopefully Vincent and Tarathorn would understand! Killer's parakeet form also disappeared, shifting to the appearance of a heavy-set toddler, effectively a miniature version of the huge man he was coming in.

The lead police officer then pushed a button on a device at his hip, pulled it closer to his face, and said, "All clear. Incident has been resolved peacefully." The device beeped a handful of times before static-like noise filled the room.

With the crowd calmed down, Ilithara led Killer and Rusty out and into the car. "Sorry about that, never thought there would be a place called Buffalo that those things were named after," she said to Killer.

"Still they're liars!" grumbled Killer, crossing his arms and pouting. "At least they had good beans and potatoes and cheese noodles and sweet beer! Might come back again and just not order chicken!" he added on a more cheerful note. Rusty merely whined in the back of the car, knowing Ilithara's driving was going to make him regret drinking that brightly colored drink she got.

As if that weren't enough, there was a small note written on the windshield of the car. She opened it up and read it. "Parking violation, four hundred dollars." Then it hit. Hard. She felt an urgent sense of fullness in her bladder and her vision began to blur and shift randomly, making her feel dizzy and nauseous. Rusty also sniffed around and whined before making sick gagging noises out of the open window.

*I have to pee! Much more and I'm just gonna go here!*

Killer merely burped contentedly before saying, "That was good except for the chicken!"

Can't they label things right? Hey, lemme try that Mountain Dew drink!"

"Killer, no!" groaned Ilithara, slapping the parrot but too late. He downed the entire cup of Mountain Dew and continued to burp noxiously. Then the smell of rotten eggs overwhelmed the car and all Ilithara could do to not cause any more trouble was to open the window and whisper an airy incantation to clear the air.

Vincent paced about in frustration after Ilithara finished talking about her day in town. "At least you two didn't get arrested, but next time, be a bit more careful. And thank you for not totalling the car, even if you did get that big parking ticket and that warning! You could've been arrested for driving without a license or worse yet, a fake license! Don't park if you see blue lines with the wheelchair symbol in it, it's for handicapped! Even if Killer could qualify with his little pea-brain," he sighed, relieved that at least Ilithara managed to drive the car well enough to not have anything worse than a few extra scratches from scraping against the curb. "And Killer, you might just want to stick with what REAL parakeets eat like seeds and vegetables and fruits!"

"But I wanted some buffalo wings or strips like Kestrel used to make with real buffalo or cow!" whined Killer, leaning back on the reclining chair, enjoying the fact that he didn't have a tail to worry about. He was still in human form, although he could tell that Ilithara needed a break from maintaining the enchantment. She had returned him to his "adult" man size after they returned to the Institute.

Sitting next to Vincent on the couch, Tarathorn said, "Well, Killer, next time just ask and we'll find something for you. Or there's plenty of non-bird stuff in our place like fish, pork, beef, tofu, and vegetables." She rubbed the back of Vincent's neck, knowing he was often sore there, especially when riled up. Killer's face scrunched up at the mention of tofu.

Laughing, Ilithara said, "Well, just a few more days I think then we can get out of here. Oh, any recommendations for pizza?"

Both Tarathorn and Vincent looked at each other, then at their guests, especially Killer, who had the remote control to the television in his hand and was flipping channels randomly if he wasn't playing with the volume. Killer suddenly stopped playing with the remote and his eyes fixated on the commercial. "Pepperoni, sausage, ham, double cheese, a thick cheesy crust, garlic sauce, and no nonsense! Come by Gorilla Pizza and see what real man food is all about!" spoke the unseen voice on the television as close-ups of a large slice of pizza with oozing mozzarella cheese and plenty of meat mesmerized Killer.

"Pizza doesn't use bird products, I hope," grumbled Killer, drooling. "At least when Kestrel made it, she never used bird product!"

"Well, they do occasionally put in chicken or turkey for their pepperoni and sausage, but ham is almost always pig unless they say it's turkey ham. Maybe if you got ground beef, ham, and anchovies on your pizza, you'd be safe," suggested Tarathorn.

In a loud, booming voice, Killer roared, "What's with all the eating of my kin?! I don't eat monkeys and apes, at least, not knowingly! If it's safe, let's get some pizza here, I want some grub!"

Vincent and Tarathorn both hoped that Ilithara would get the spell ready soon because they weren't sure if they wanted to deal with Killer's appetite much longer. His feather dust was also so bad that they had to vacuum the place daily just to even make the place remotely tolerable. "Killer, this time, we'll have the pizza delivered here," sighed Vincent, accepting that Killer and Ilithara were more of a liability away from home.

"Yay!" said Killer, his voice returning to a squawk as Ilithara's focus shifted away from maintaining the shape-shifting spell.

"And Killer, I'm gonna leave you as a parakeet until we go to town again," said Ilithara, shaking her head. "I'm not like Mom or Dad."

## 4 The Archmagi and the Knights

Baelnorn Clawstaff stood up from his plush cushioned seat and sighed before emitting a handful of scraping farts and coughing. He thumped his namesake staff on the ground and called out in his wheezing voice, "Order! The Council to Counteract the Clawed Fury has begun!" The murmuring in the room stopped, although whether by his feeble declaration or the stench of his flatulence it was unclear.

*Where's the corks?* Rusty whined softly even as Tarathorn petted the mighty canine reassuringly. Killer also rubbed his companion before his tail lifted up on its own, leaving yet more of a stench around the mutt.

Leaning over, Vincent whispered to Tarathorn, "Where's the window?"

"Too far," she agreed, trying to recall the word to let in a fresh breeze. Before her memory could dig up any incantations, Ilithara pulled out a fan and focused on it. The fan then began to move on its own, wafting the stench out of the room along with making sure the robust, muscular woman nearby couldn't light a cigarette.

The tall, muscular woman glared at Ilithara with her piercing sea-grey eyes and growled, "If you weren't a buddy-o-pal, I'd Frontier Justice ya!" She was somewhat tanned with lines of care on her face and her short-cropped raven hair had strands of white and silver. Next to her was a large sword and a long, dark-wooded longbow with a quiver filled with dirty white- and turquoise- feathered arrows next to it. On her belt were a handful of pouches and a large flask and she pulled out the flask, sipping from it before putting it back on her belt. Then her almond-shaped eyes noticed the group that had just arrived. "Killer! Rusty!" she called out, running towards them and ignoring the fact that Clawstaff had called for quiet.

"Tindariel, I know you miss your friends, but we have urgent matters to deal with," instructed Tanilthara, who stood next to Clawstaff and was continuously fanning him with the fan that Ilithara had enchanted. Ignoring the ancient Dhaerow woman, she pulled up a chair and sat with Killer and Rusty.

The room quiet once again, Clawstaff announced, "We have many urgent matters to resolve, all revolving around my daughter, Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon, who threatens to plunge Aetheria and Terrios into darkness in her quest to gain full supremacy."

Both Vincent and Tarathorn let out a gasp at the mention of Clawstaff being her father. "Shit, did they have Viagra or Cialis or did he just build her?" whispered Vincent to Tarathorn, trying to find some humor in the situation. Nonetheless, his stomach still sank to the floor. It wasn't much of a surprise to either of them that Tanilthara could be Iliiryana's mother, but Clawstaff fathering anything was more than a stretch of their imaginations.

A robust copper-skinned woman with jet-black hair streaked with strands of silver and bronze looked intently at both Vincent and Tarathorn. Although she was in a simple brown tunic and leggings, the copper amulet around her neck was inscribed with a rose, lion, and a dragon-like creature, marking her as a Knight of the Tuonela. Next to her was a tall, heavily

set man with dirty blonde hair with some streaks of grey, a day's worth of growth on his face, and brown overalls. He appeared to be chewing something studiously and periodically spat a brownish colored liquid into a goblet. The knightly woman lightly elbowed this man, who blushed sheepishly. Like his companion, he looked intently at Tarathorn.

"Vincent, that's Andraste and Billy-Joe," whispered Tarathorn to Vincent, pointing to them. She smiled to both Andraste and Billy-Joe, who smiled back.

Then Clawstaff continued. "We must together decide how to handle the growing threat of the Clawed Fury. But before we decide, let us update each other on our findings so we can make a logical decision. First, let us hear from the Knights, starting with the Knights of Q'adim. Speak, Sir Judar ibn Rasoul and Sir Zorhan al-Asad." He pointed to a heavily scarred green-feathered parrot with a plain grey turban on his head and a young man with jet-black hair, a square-trimmed beard, and a serious expression that made him look significantly older than his years. Next to the giant parrot was a shield with a lion, eagle, and oak tree inscribed on it, while the young man had a bronze amulet around his neck with the same symbol.

The parrot stood up and said in a surprisingly un-squawky voice for one of his kindred, "I am Judar and Zorhan and I come on behalf of the Q'adim. Not long before we chose to make this journey to Farnsdale, our prayers to Thormald have gone unanswered and our healers have been having difficulty healing the sick. Yes, they can still do basic healing, but plague has stricken our nation and our neighbors, the Sindenganor and the Turishad, and we can do little but try to ease the suffering. There have also been sand-panthers, jackals, and coyotes attacking boldly and nothing has been able to keep them in check, as well as our trackers and hunters being found slain, all branded with the mark of the longbow and a great-cat's paw. Sir Zorhan here has been a rare survivor of one of these attacks." Turning to the young man, he said, "Please show them the wound."

Nodding to his fellow knight, Sir Zorhan lifted the tunic, revealing a scar shaped like a longbow with a panther's paw superimposed on it. It glowed with a faint silver light and was outlined in a faint trace of blood. "This was from one of the sand-panthers while I was on patrol with my fellow knights. I was the only one who lived, and only because Sir Judar had bravely fought them off on my behalf."

While Judar and Zorhan had been talking, Killer and Rusty glanced at each other. "It's Judie!" squawked Killer to Rusty, heedless of the noise he made.

*I know, you feather-brain!* Rusty nudged Killer, trying to get him to quiet down. *Shut up, we'll catch up with him later!*

Ignoring Killer's outburst although eyeing his fellow parrot with a look of both nostalgia and confusion, Judar continued. "Thus I ask of the Council for help figure out what has happened to both Thormald and Yavanë."

Turning to a pair of men sitting next to the Knights of Q'adim, Clawstaff said, "Sir Dîrahel Wyrmsbane and Keldor Crownguard, Knights of Arnor, what do you have to report from Arnor and the Tindarn-Niniel?" One was a slender man with reddish brown hair and the other was muscular with red-blond hair. Both had the large, drooping moustaches that marked the Knights of Arnor.

Suddenly, a greyish cylinder of light formed in the room, not far from where Clawstaff sat. The light then faded, revealing a tall, naked (except for a breech-cloth), lanky grey-skinned creature. It had an expressionless face with abyss-like pools for eyes and an elongated head. The torso was stretched and thin with what looked like ribs sticking out. Slowly, deliberately

it moved, flowing yet discreet in its actions. All the while, the black eyes never blinked and continued to stare, almost piercing anyone who lined up in its gaze.

"Peromyscus!" gasped Clawstaff, clutching his heart. "What of Black Swan?"

"That is why I'm here," it replied in a disembodied, flat voice. "Instead of me talking, I will show you what happened." With that, it closed its abyss-like eyes, concentrating deeply.

*Steadily, she stalked her way forward, knowing that she had to focus both on her disguise and on Iliiryana. There were no obvious weak spots on the half-Dhaerow, now fledgling deity. Between her armor and the glow of enchantments that only Sarkany eyes could see, she saw no openings. Iliiryana continued to speak to her soldiers, "Already, Firianna Celethorn leads in Terrios with the help of Berúthiel Maegliriel and Borondir Herúromen."*

*And then it suddenly hit Black Swan, a feeling of more than just a simple sinking in her stomach, but rather one that made her really wish she had brown pants on. She began to shiver and her hand trembled even as she slowly walked closer and closer to Iliiryana. Focusing on getting within a reliable dagger's throw, she ignored the growing freezing pain in her back and chest. Finally, when she felt that either her heart would stop or that she would lose her lunch, she drew her black-bladed dagger, held it as steadily as possible and focused on Iliiryana, who continued to speak of the evils of the Sarkany and Alfar and the need to restore Dûnhèasa. With all of her strength, she hurled the envenomed blade at the woman's throat, the one piece in her armor that had any kind of weakness.*

*Straight and true flew the dagger, but instead of catching the half-Dhaerow off-guard, her hand merely reflexively caught the dagger in a smooth, fluid action. At the same time, Black Swan found herself kneeling down, wincing in agony and retching from nausea.*

*Black Swan struggled to draw Ki-Riss, the black bastard sword, in hopes of defeating Iliiryana in straight melee. Once, she had battled Iliiryana, and the rogue Sarkany would've been killed, had it not been for her friends intervening. This time, she was alone, but sheer determination would give her an advantage this time. Sword in hand, she slashed as best as she could despite the physical weakness in her, only to find herself at Iliiryana's mercy...*

As soon as the image from Peromyscus' memories faded away, Vincent suddenly felt sharp pains in his back, causing him to grunt and groan. Tarathorn involuntarily grasped her wrist where the silver hand joined her arm. For a moment, the panther claw and longbow symbol of the Clawed Fury showed through on Vincent's forearm, even through the thick, dark hair that grew on his arm. His arm began to twitch and he felt rage building up in him, but as soon as Tarathorn put her hand on him, the energy subsided and the mark faded. Tarathorn then kissed him lightly on the cheek and he returned the kiss, knowing that focusing on her would keep his darker Sidhe tendencies in check.

"And Peromyscus, these are the two who were able to send Iliiryana into retreat," said Tanilthara, noting that Clawstaff had crept out of the meeting hall discreetly and left a rather foul odor behind him. She pointed towards both Vincent and Tarathorn. Several pairs of eyes then focused on the couple, including Tindariel's eyes, which showed an expression of pure confusion.

Gazing intently at both the willowy woman and the bear-like man, Peromyscus said in its dry monotone, "If you do not mind, I would like to explore your memories for further analysis so that we can figure out how to handle the threat known as Iliiryana." Cringing involuntarily at the thought of being touched by the strange creature, both Tarathorn and Vincent shrunk back, with Tarathorn hiding behind her husband.

The Knights of the various orders looked at Peromyscus in disgust and distrust, unsure

of the creature's motivation. "Clawstaff, are ye to trust that creature?" demanded Judar. "What will ye do if it's in alliance with Iliiryana?"

Clawstaff tried his best to hold in the outburst, but it still escaped, causing everyone in the room to do their best to refrain from covering their noses. Frustrated, Tanilthara and Iliithara both waved their hands and chanted softly. Old Clawstaff's blood-red robe glowed faintly and relieved, he continued. "I will deal with the repercussions myself, if it comes to that. In the meanwhile, Peromyscus is our best bet and no amount of narrative from Imladrien and Tinúvion can give the details it needs. If nothing else, it will show us what they beheld. Please, Judar, trust him as you trusted me and Killer and the rest of the old Adventurers' Association as you did in ages past!" Judar turned to Killer and squawked something. Smiling at his old friend, Killer replied in parrot. Tindariel's eyebrows lifted in both amusement and concern, while Rusty merely put his paws over his face.

Moving with that unearthly yet mechanical grace, Peromyscus walked over to where Vincent and Tarathorn sat. The hairs all over Vincent stood up on end, while Tarathorn felt electricity building up in her blood. Watery words began to form on her tongue and she could sense Vincent's tension as well, knowing that the same energy was inside of him. "Do not worry, this will not hurt," said Peromyscus in that flat, disembodied voice. The whole time, its eyes were fixated on Tarathorn's form. It placed its cold, grey, slender hand on her forehead.

While the creature touched her, Tarathorn felt something poking, prodding her mind. She wanted to shield her mind and began to think of anything other than her memory of her time at the Crossroad with Iliiryana and Vincent, but those thoughts kept returning to her. Dungeons and Dragons games with Vincent, Ivan, Alaska, and Poncho. Pursuing Kiora across the Veil with Aeondar. The first time she caught Oleg microwaving his filthy socks in the faculty lounge. Facing Vincent in the Stellar Tiger form. Meeting Captain Greywolf's other half for the first time and being horrified at the hairy man. Flooding the Crossroad with a spell she meant to merely shield herself from the Stellar Tiger's claws. Titrating acetic acid against an unknown solution in quantitative chemistry and watching the contents of the buret glow with a navy blue light. Watching Vincent nearly get slain by Iliiryana when he defended her. A silent scream passed through her and she felt very faint before the creature took its hand off her forehead.

"Ugh," she groaned. She rubbed where Peromyscus had touched her and what must've been one of the worst headaches she ever had struck her. Vincent leaped up from his chair, ready to strike the creature at Tarathorn's request. "It's ok, I just have a nasty headache. Kinda feels like the dentist drilling in the skull instead of my teeth." Still uneasy, Vincent sat down, but continued to glare irritably at both Peromyscus and Clawstaff.

"My apologies, Imladrien. I should have warned you to relax your mental defenses because resistance will cause you to be uncomfortable," said Peromyscus. Then turning to Vincent, he said, "Your turn, Tinúvion. Relax and let your guards down." With that, he placed that cold, dry hand on Vincent's forehead.

Despite the warning, Vincent could feel his mind do its best to repel Peromyscus' prying. Ivan being mortally wounded by his and Tarathorn's arrow. Being walked in on in the bathroom by a fellow ballroom dancer with ulterior motives. Tarathorn's hand being cut off by Iliiryana. The Geekster concert where an over-zealous male fan leaped onto the stage and tried to kiss him. Iliiryana trying to force him and Tarathorn to worship her. Poncho's pet cockatiel trying to steal some pizza from him during a Dungeons and Dragon game. Alaska

inadvertently getting him into trouble with Dr. Arboles. His head began to hurt and the room started to spin around him. Electricity continued to surge through him and before Peromyscus could remove his hand from his forehead, the burly man let out a mighty roar. Lightning flashed about and Peromyscus leaped back several feet, dazed.

"Oh shit," swore Vincent, rubbing his head.

"My apologies, sir. I should have been more cautious with the Sidhe," he apologized, grasping his burned hand. "I forgot that Sidhe have some automatic defenses from my powers." All the while, his face remained blank and expressionless, leaving everyone wondering if he was at all upset. Even his voice betrayed no hints of emotion. "Plus I do have enough to give everyone else a composite of what you have experienced of Iliiryana." Only at the mention of Iliiryana did even the slightest note of fear attempt to show up.

Tanilthara then motioned for Peromyscus to approach her. "Some of the people in this Council didn't take so well to your mental probing, so I thought I'd project the memories in a way as to not trigger mental defenses," she suggested.

Semi-transparent three-dimensional images began to form in the center of the room. A slender, athletic young man with raven hair, dark almond-shaped eyes appeared and in his hands was a dark-wooded longbow inscribed with runes of courage and inspiration. Tarathorn's form, albeit a younger version without the silver hand, also materialized. In the image's hand was a navy blue and silver metallic object with cables and things projecting out in seemingly every direction. "It's one of those fake bows I heard about from Ilithara and Kestrel," whispered Tindariel.

The images of Tarathorn and Vincent then shot at a gold-scaled creature, a Sarkany, and both hit him in the vitals, sending him crashing. The two then abandoned their battle to tend to their fallen friend, but not without exchanging more magical blows. Then Iliiryana, the dusky-skinned half-Dhaerow daughter of Baelnorn Clawstaff and Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon, taunted Tarathorn in her moment of grief and the two circled each other about in combat. Finally, the crazed woman cut off the girl's hand and Vincent rushed in to defend his companion, only to have his back shattered. In her moment of despair, Tarathorn then chanted words of power that allowed her to remove a bead from Iliiryana's chest and release the stored energy, reviving Vincent and the recently killed Tuatha Lord, Aeondar.

After the memories faded from the room, voices murmured amongst each other. "That evil witch!" roared Tindariel, thumping her fist on the table and putting a new dent into the wood. "We gotta Frontier Justice her for that, making them fight and almost kill each other and then messing them up!"

"And that's exactly what she's going to expect now that our plans have been revealed. She will be on guard," said Clawstaff, lowering his head. His robes rustled a bit, but thanks to Tanilthara's spell, no odor escaped. "We need to be subtle and out-wit her if we are to stand a chance."

"Or maybe we can do something so obviously stupid to her that it'll catch her off-guard," suggested Ilithara. "Black Swan once told me that Iliiryana was able to probe her mind and figure out exactly what she was going to do, but it seemed like Killer and Tindariel's minds were beyond her. No offense, of course, but maybe thick skulls will do better than brains. As you once said, Tindariel, never send a Dhaerow to do an ogre's job!"

Peromyscus' vacant face surveyed the room after pondering Ilithara's comments. "She has a very good point. She's so crafty and calculating that she may overlook what comes across as obvious stupidity."

Clawstaff sighed and coughed. "Well, it is obvious that intelligence and finesse have backfired on us. Perhaps Ilithara is right, even if her idea defies all logic."

"Logic to a power-hungry Archmage who also aspired to be a god, mind you," added Tanilthara, smiling at the elderly, flatulent wizard. "If it makes sense to you, it'll make sense to Iliiryana and if you don't understand it, it won't make sense to her! Oh, the poor girl, I wish there was some other way to bring her back from insanity!"

"If you ask for my recommendation, I propose that I take those most affected, namely followers of the late Gwaeron and Thormald, to speak with the gods at the Crossroad and then send a team to deal with Iliiryana as appropriate. I highly suggest that I take some of the thickest-skulled members of this Council, no insult to anyone's intelligence, of course, but it seems that the thick-skulled are truly resistant to Iliiryana's mental powers," said Peromyscus flatly, eyeing Killer and Tindariel with one eye and Billy-Joe and Judar with the other.

Growling and bristling, Tindariel shouted, "You callin' me stupid, freak?" She waved a meaty fist at Peromyscus.

"No, just thick-skulled and resistant to Iliiryana," whispered Ilithara. "You're special, Tindariel."

Andraste stood up and boldly said, "I will go, as it seems most fitting representatives of the gods slain by the Clawed Fury should speak with the gods at the Crossroad. I will go on behalf of Thormald."

Without thinking, Judar stood up despite the ache in his back and declared, "I, too, will follow, also for Thormald."

Billy-Joe looked at his friend, and then he said, "I'm goin', gonna stay with Her Honor and I'm fixin' to give her some Frontier Justice and whup-ass for messin' with Gwaeron and Thormald!" He stood up next to Andraste.

"Me and Rusty are goin' too for Gwaeron! I got some family business to deal with and Iliiryana hurt another of my buddy-o-pals! Nobody messes with my buddies and doesn't get Killer Parakeet the Grape on their tails!" squawked Killer eagerly, halfway through gnawing on an unused chair set out for that very purpose, not realizing that he said "grape" instead of "great". Even the Knights of the Three Orders covered their faces to conceal chuckles that formed, as did Clawstaff and Tanilthara.

*Killer, learn how to talk without your beak full! And I don't think I should go, I have a very bad feeling about this. I'm half Sidhe wolf and half hound of Imlad Estel, remember? Iliiryana would have me like a puppet on a string and no offense with my Sidhe ancestry, but Peromyscus needs the thick-skulled in case that witch tries to brainwash someone.* Rusty whined at Killer before putting his head between his fore-paws.

"And I'll go too! I need to Frontier Justice that witch, she messed with Kestrel's mind, murdered Killer and Rusty, and tried to kill my mom!" roared Tindariel defiantly. "And I will speak for Arnor! We gotta have all three Orders!"

The two knights of Arnor, Keldor and Dirhael, glared at Tindariel and muttered amongst each other. "A true knight should go instead of that hulking drunkard," said Dirhael, pointing at Tindariel.

Peromyscus could only sigh at the response, but he looked at the volunteers. "Not with your functional minds, if I was able to reach in with those images readily, Iliiryana would be able to control you!" said Peromyscus matter-of-factly. "That is also why I will not take Sir Zorhan and Lady Andraste, as much as their hearts are in the cause as you are." Then

turning to Andraste, he said, "I know your heart is true, but your mind is too vulnerable to Iliiryana as well. If it comes to a call to arms or other situations, then yes, I will call upon you, but for now, I will not take you. Nor will I take hound of Imlad Estel, he has too much of the wolves of Dûnhèasa in him."

"So it will come to that, Killer, Tindariel, Judar, and Billy-Joe will accompany Peromyscus to speak with the gods," grunted Clawstaff, rubbing his forehead, wondering what will come of the world.

"Very well, Tanil and Clawstaff, we will return to the Crossroad as soon as you can prepare the transport spell once more. Unlike Black Swan, I cannot travel there unassisted."

*I guess your knuckle-headedness does come in handy every now and then. You better stay out of trouble or I'm gonna have to come in with Imladrien and Ilithara and the rest of them to haul you out by your tail!* Rusty leaned his head on Killer's lap while the monstrous parakeet patted him on the head.

"We'll make it out, Russ, then we'll find some good food again!" squawked Killer, hugging his canine companion. "And no bird products either, we'll have real buffalo and beer and bacon and bugs!"

*Just be careful, ya know how I don't like to let you go around unsupervised. Look at what happened when you went on that trip to visit the Hin-Iril with Ilithara and Ian! Or that time you, Tindariel, Ilithara, and Black Swan nearly getting killed by that witch! I'd call Iliiryana something else, but it's an insult to my mom and half of my litter-mates! If I were as thick-skulled as you and those knights, I'd go in a heartbeat to protect you. And whatever you do, Killer, watch what you eat. I don't want to hear about you turning into a pig or anything!*

While Killer continued to pat his faithful friend's head, the door to the little room opened up. Peromyscus stood in the doorway and Killer could feel those bleak, empty eyes focusing on him. "Dude, stop doing that!" whined the parakeet.

"It is time. The rest are already in Clawstaff's lab," said Peromyscus, never blinking or showing any emotion.

"Awww, bye Russ, you be good! No marking territory on Clawstaff's herbs or chewing on his staff." Killer bent down to hug his companion tightly while Rusty nuzzled his head against the dusty, smelly bird's chest.

*And Killer, you should've bathed instead of gone drinking and singing, but oh well, maybe your feather dust will keep Iliiryana's goonies off of you. You be good too and watch out for chicken!* Killer then stood up and followed the strange creature out of the room, all the while looking back at his loyal companion.

Winding through the long corridors of Parakeet Hall, Killer looked around at the pictures hanging on the walls. He chirped at the memories of his friends who first started the Adventurers' Association and the the University. There was the exiled Crown Prince Thorondir of the Hin-Iril who went under the name of Jeremiah Goldleaf and befriended the parakeet in ages past during the reign of the Rannarak Empire. The Crown Prince was a tall, slender man with shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes unlike the typical Hin-Iril, who were generally more robust and muscular. Jeremiah was also skilled with the rapier, diplomacy, and in a pinch, could summon arcane energies, although he tried to avoid it as much as he could. "I miss ya, buddy-o-pal, wish you could meet Tindariel and Ilithara and the Terrian kids. I also miss Xenra, even if she crept me out. I guess she's with ya, being one of those

who could transcend life and death.”

Then his beady eyes locked onto the picture of an obese, diminutive figure with a tall, pointy hat, multicolored robes with food stains, and over-stuffed pouches with both food and spell components. “Blip Whizgig,” recalled Killer, thinking about the portly gnome who was a master at creating illusions as well as a notorious prankster with a fascination with electricity. “I still wonder what that giant spider was thinking when you tried to scare it to death. And what the hell were you thinking when you did that hand-shake prank on that high priest of Athtar?” A tear dripped from Killer’s eye at the memory of the fat, gluttonous gnome who electrocuted the hordes of guards (and herself in the process, causing major explosions on the side) to give Jeremiah a chance to kill the Unnamed Terror. “You sure went out with a good bang!”

“I see you have many memories, Killer. Not many have the privilege of such worthy companions. Black Swan often spoke highly of you, even if she referred to you as things like ‘Bug-Trap’ and ‘Drunk Idiot,’” commented Peromyscus, showing uncharacteristic sympathy towards the bird.

“She was kick-ass,” squawked Killer. “We gotta save her before Iliiryana messes with her too much more! Even if she did try to do me in when we first met.”

“She did tell me of that mission because of someone’s jealousy of your friendship with that Hin-Iril prince,” replied the creature, its eyes twinkling for an instant in mirth.

“Yeah, we were quite the group in the day,” said Killer, feeling slightly better knowing that Peromyscus was indeed capable of some emotion, even if it still had that annoying, disembodied flat voice.

Then he looked up at the painting of a lithe human woman of northern Tuonela descent. She was clad in what appeared to be humble peasant robes and kept her hair in a very neat but simple top-knot. Like the humans of northern Tuonela or those just south and east of Q’adim or even the Eldharin of the fallen kingdom of X’indenganor, she was short in stature with jet-black hair, slanted deep brown eyes, and very delicately built with bones so fine that he was sure they’d break on contact. Yuki Haitakasan may have looked as fragile as a royal Eldharin courtesan from X’indenganor who spent more time studying or looking pretty than in combat, but she was trained in martial arts as nobody else he had seen was. Her fists and feet were just as deadly as his axe if she chose, yet she always presented herself with enough discipline to even inspire Clawstaff. “Dagnabit, the Unnamed Terror really wiped us out badly, but I guess you would’ve preferred that over the indignities of old age. Of course though, with your healthy habits and crazy discipline, you probably would’ve lived longer than those Eldharin or even other Tuatha!”

Peromyscus, Tindariel, Killer, Billy-Joe, and Judar all waited for Tanilthara and Clawstaff to enter the room. “Bloody magi,” grumbled Judar, glaring at the runes inscribed all over the floor. “And bloodier Iliiryana for starting this mess.”

Clawstaff hobbled in, leaning on his name-sake staff and clinging onto his stately wife, who mouthed a few silent syllables. Unfortunately, she wasn’t fast enough and a faint hint of rotten eggs still filled the room. “Dagnabit, can’t that old geezer fix himself up?” grunted Billy-Joe.

“Long story,” squawked Killer. “He would if he could though.”

“This is the day you must represent us well,” started Clawstaff after a loud, noxious burp that rivalled Killer’s infamous burps. “For all things logical and healthy, petition to the gods

and see if you can bring Iliiriyana to justice!”

Tanilthara pointed to the circle she had inscribed into the ground with what looked like shining white chalk. “Everyone stand in that circle,” she instructed, motioning to the companions.

With some hushed mutterings and groans, five of them tried to fit themselves inside of the small circle. “Steric effects,” squawked Killer apologetically.

“What in tarnation you say, ya fat chicken?” asked Billy-Joe with a dumbfounded expression at Killer’s wide vocabulary.

Tindariel laughed. “He’s just saying you’re fat.” She could feel her skin itch at having to touch the obviously unbathed parakeet. “And he’s not a chicken, he’s a parakeet, ya dim-wit!”

“No I didn’t! I just said we’re contributing to steric effects!” squawked Killer back after Billy-Joe threatened to punch him in the face.

A curt gesture from Clawstaff indicated to the companions to silence themselves as Tanilthara finished making the final marks on the hardwood floor. Content after comparing the marks with the large, moldering black tome, she nodded to her husband. Together, they began to chant spidery words that made everyone, especially Judar, wish they had some insect repellent on them. All the while, Billy-Joe was struggling to not sneeze with the two giant parakeets nearby. At least Judar kept himself clean and relatively dust-free, while Killer was absolutely filthy and dusty. It was then that Tanilthara’s eyes widened greatly part-way through the chanting.

The door to Clawstaff’s lab was ever so slightly ajar and a small grey mouse with a silver streak on its back and a black-tipped tail had run into the circle just as they finished the incantation. Before anyone could react to the little rodent, the companions vanished in a flash of bright red light, including the mouse. There was only a bit of sulfurous smoke left and some ashes where the companions once stood. Both of the Archmagi’s faces were shocked and concerned. “Iliithara,” croaked Clawstaff.

Tanil could only nod in agreement, hanging her head and holding it between her fine-boned, ebony-skinned hands. “Ildathra, along with any other gods listening, protect our daughter and those we sent.” The elderly wizard, despite the fact that he was farting yet again, hugged the stately Dhaerow woman.

## 5 Meet the Gods

Iliithara woke up with a massive headache, having sneaked into that teleportation ring at the last instant. Between her curiosity about the Veil and knowing that Killer and Tindariel would most likely need her help, she decided to use that ring she found not too long ago. Where did she find that ring? Was that the one someone left laying around in the University? Apparently there were limits on the carrying capacity of the spell, judging from the fact that she couldn’t find any of her companions and the fact that she was laying in chilly, sticky stale mud. Then she looked around to see what was around her, letting her intense green eyes focus a bit better.

The sky above her was inky-dark and scattered with cold, distant stars that were in patterns she had never seen before. The mud she was laying in had a dead brownish grey

color and a stale wind, neither warm nor cold, blew past her, swirling around and drying out her mouth. Yet the mud still remained wet and squishy when she grabbed some of it in her hand. "Weird," she said, her voice echoing in the wind, albeit with a cracked, faded sound. What little light that came in was muted and she could see mountains surrounding her in every direction. Without any clues as to where north was, she saw one side with lightning constantly striking, while another had hints of frigid moonlight and finally one with golden rays of sunlight that attempted to penetrate the gloom, only to be absorbed or refracted. Despite the gloomy feeling of the place, she pulled out a small vial from her pouch and took a sample of the mud, vowing to have her parents analyze it later. Or if they didn't have time for it, she could do it herself and hone in on her analysis skills.

"Ok, now where do I go?" she asked herself. The sound of soft footsteps alerted her and she whirled around, drawing her twin rapiers, both inscribed with the symbol of a dancing woman super-imposed on a moon. They normally twinkled with a soft violet-blue light, but this time they looked rather dull, as if Killer's feather dust had completely covered them.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a copper-skinned woman with short-cropped black hair in black leather armor and a pair of scimitars in her hands. Her shadow was vaguely feline, yet it retained a bit of a dragon-like shape. She froze for a moment, trying to release the scimitars from her hand and to speak, but her groan quickly turned into a bitter snarl. Wordlessly, she charged at the Dhaerow woman, who parried the scimitars aside before ducking and leaping away. "She sends Her regards to you. Come, join us, I have seen the light and now serve Her!" she said to Ilithara in a clipped monotone voice.

"Black Swan!" cried out Ilithara, recognizing her. "What the heck is going on?" She dared not strike her friend, only defend herself from her frenzied attack. With a deft parry, she deflected the scimitars, wondering what was going on.

Black Swan snarled again, revealing feline fangs before hesitating for a moment again. Ilithara could see her opponent's dark, intense eyes alternate between that slightly golden-bronze glow that many Sarkany had and the angry red glow that many Sidhe possessed. "Ilithara! Control!" croaked Black Swan when her eyes were more Sarkany-like before reverting back to the Sidhe-like fury. Convinced that something wasn't right, Ilithara only continued to block and dodge her attacks.

After a long exchange of blows, she misjudged Black Swan's movements and she focused instead on the scimitar that was threatening to chop her head instead of the one coming in from the side. As soon as the wickedly sharp blade connected, Ilithara let out a pained yelp even though the Dhaerow steel armor disguised as leather clothing turned an otherwise lethal blow into a merely painful one. Realizing that she was probably going to continue fighting no matter what, Ilithara started chanting airy syllables softly, hoping she was using the right spell. "Please don't let it be the one that neutralizes bad odors!" she thought as she spoke the ancient words.

Her hands and feet began to glow with a soft green light, as did her twin rapiers even as she continued to protect herself from the more aggressive rogue Sarkany. Something was definitely up because Black Swan was much more methodical in her fighting style and favored the bastard sword or dagger instead of the scimitar. In fact, Black Swan really disliked scimitars after that incident decades ago in the Tindarn-Niniel where her twin brother had been slain by Cylithera!

Her hands and feet now moving in a swift blur, Ilithara hoped that her increased speed would confuse Black Swan enough to knock her out and help her come to. Black Swan's

attacks grew faster and faster, keeping up with Ilithara's swift thrusts and feint with minimal difficulty. A high thrust, a low swing, all in a dance between the two swordswomen continued on. Suddenly, Black Swan spoke again, not in her own voice, but in a harsh, disembodied voice that Ilithara recognized as that of Iliiryana. "Renounce the ways of Ildathra or Black Swan will die!"

Like a marionette under a cruel master, Black Swan suddenly dropped to the ground, contorted. "Kill me before she does!" begged Black Swan in her own commanding voice, her eyes reverting back to a bronze-copper glow. "Her power over me is too strong!"

Then her eyes flashed red again and in Iliiryana's voice, she hissed, "Join me, sister, and we will rule a reborn Dûnhèasa together. I'll set you free from your own reckless ways." Black Swan began to twitch violently under Iliiryana's influence.

Thinking quickly, Ilithara struck the contorted woman in the solar plexus and head at the same time with the pommels of her blades. She hoped that her friend's skull was thick enough to withstand a good, solid blow to knock her out. Thanks to the speed spell she put on herself, she ended up hitting Black Swan about three or four times before she could stop. "Oops," she mumbled as she straightened out the now limp warrior. "I hope I didn't reduce her intelligence to Tindariel's level!"

"Ugh," groaned Black Swan at the sensation of a cold, wet towel on her forehead. "What the hell happened?" Her blurry vision registered a dark female silhouette over her and she could feel a chill, dry wind whirling about her even though she felt mud underneath her.

"You weren't acting right and I had to give you a dose of Killer Parakeet and maybe a pinch of Frontier Justice for good measure," replied an energetic, musical voice she registered as Ilithara. Then holding up three fingers, she asked, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Two... four... three... six... Black Swan couldn't really tell but she tried to focus. "Three," she finally said after the inky blue-black fingers settled down. "We need to warn the others, Iliiryana's acquired powers beyond even my estimates. She was immune to Solron's poisons and she read my mind like you can read Tindariel's mind when she's drunk or Killer's mind when he's hungry." The stars above her also stopped spinning, revealing their cold, stillness high above her. "What part of the Crossroads are we at?"

"Good question." Ilithara began to dig through her vest pockets, mumbling to herself quietly. "No, that's McMemnon and Memnon, nope, Parakeet Hall tunnels, nope, Taipalos, nope, Ocala, Florida, San Francisco, California, nope, don't think I got anything for the Crossroads." A surprisingly large pile of folded and rolled maps came out of her vest pockets. "Let's see what else I've got. The Tindarn-Niniel, nope, Dûnhèasa, nope, South Hayward Institute of Technology, nope. Oh wait, what's this?" she suddenly asked, pulling out a small yellow book and a thick black book. "Holy Bible? Crap, that belongs to Tarathorn and Vincent I think. And what's this? Vincent Gahan's lab notebook? Aldol condensation? I hope Vincent doesn't need it!" She flipped through both books' pages randomly, reading things aloud as they looked appealing. "Hey, you might want to look in the Holy Bible. Looks like some neat readings even if they use a funny version of Common," she handed the black book to her friend, who merely looked in confusion.

All Black Swan could manage at Ilithara's digging around in her pockets was a loud groan. "Look, we need to warn Clawstaff. Iliiryana's a bigger threat than anyone ever expected. She expects more assassination attempts," she said. Then her hands began to move towards the glowing scimitars on her belt. "Get away, Ilithara, your sister controls me

like a puppet!”

With a sudden red flash from her eyes, her voice changed to that of a snarling growl. “Surrender, Ilithara! Your attempts to stop me are futile!”

Wrenching herself mentally as hard as possible, Black Swan regained control for a moment. “Ki-Riss, my sword. If I can have it back, I’ll be completely free!” she cried out. “Or I’ll be her puppet!”

Sighing, Ilithara racked her mind. What was that spell? She chanted some airy words softly before pointing at Black Swan. Violet-blue strands of light surrounded Black Swan, tying her arms together. While Black Swan struggled against her bonds, Ilithara reached out and grabbed the twin scimitars. Electricity jolted her painfully, but she yanked them out anyway and threw them as far as she could. Just as the scimitars landed in the soft, sticky mud, bright bolts of silver lightning struck the ground and Black Swan broke free from her bonds. She tried to dash towards where the scimitars landed, but Ilithara quickly drew her rapiers in a fluid motion and tripped her before jumping on her back and sitting on her. “Don’t get them!”

Black Swan nearly threw the lightly built Dhaerow woman off but her eyes flashed back to their normal bronze-copper color. “You’re right,” she said. In the distance, the roar of an angry feline filled the air and a panther-shaped cloud escaped from where the scimitars struck the mud. “But as long as I’m here or wherever Iliiryana can reach, I’m a safety hazard even without those blades!”

“So, what happened?” asked Ilithara. “And where’s your regular sword, that really big one Tindariel called your ‘Whoop-Ass Sword’?”

“She has Ki-Riss. She’s trying to corrupt it into a blade of pure destruction,” she started before realizing that she had assassinated a handful of targets with it when poisoned daggers failed. “Well, when I do in targets with it, I have to do penance. It’s been a thorn in my side, but I’ve seen what she’s capable of and I refuse to let her get away with it.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Peromyscus told us and Clawstaff and Tanil sent a group to petition to the greater deities to warrant a capture,” began Ilithara before she was interrupted.

“Wait, who did he send? Iliiryana’s mental powers are devastating and only the toughest of minds can even think of resisting her!”

“Put it this way: Killer, Tindariel, Judar, and some bad cross between Killer and Tindariel named Billy-Joe, who’s representing the Tuonela.”

“What about the mutt?” asked Black Swan, concerned.

“No, the mutt stayed behind.”

“Then things may still yet be in our favor because Iliiryana cannot penetrate the densest of minds, at least not yet. Woe be unto us if she can penetrate their feeble brains!”

Finally, after catching her breath and recovering a bit of dignity after having Ilithara knock her out twice and then sit on her back, Black Swan stood back up. “You ok?” asked Ilithara, realizing that her friend was probably injured.

“Pelda,” she started. “We need to find Galka-Ereny and Oroszlan. They’re in danger, Iliiryana revealed to me that she wants to do them in, just like how I tried to do in an Elder I didn’t get along with.” She pointed towards where the sun appeared to be either rising or setting, but the staticness of the Crossroads made it impossible to determine which way things were moving.

Before Ilithara could start chanting, Black Swan said, “No, save up your energy in case

Iliiryana's followers try to stop us." Suddenly, in a loud, deep clanging syllable, Black Swan's robust humanoid form vanished and became draconian with golden scales with strong black and bronze highlights reminiscent of a swan. Her large, membranous wings shone faintly even in the dead light of the Crossroads. "I'll carry you," she added, motioning for Ilithara to sit in her front claws. Nervously, Ilithara sat in her claws, vaguely recalling that escape from the Tindarn-Niniel decades ago, when she was almost killed by her own sister in the name of Tindarien Dalithariel, the former Eternal Huntress. With that, Black Swan kicked down with her hind legs and flapped her wings, allowing her a swift lift-off towards the static sun in the mountains.

Billy-Joe woke up to the sight of the underside of a parrot's tail, most likely Killer's considering he saw dirty white and turquoise feathers along with some residues suggestive of digestive distress. Before he could summon the strength to move, he received a blast of malodorous fumes, causing him to cough and gag. "Dagnabit, I'm fixin' to Frontier Justice you!" he swore after he regained his breath.

"Killer, ya ninny! Ye always needed a cork like your brother!" roared Judar as he struggled to stand up. Then feeling the top of his balding head, he shouted, "Where's me turban?"

"This?" asked Tindariel, holding up the unraveled grey turban, revealing it to be a slender, supple grey rope that twinkled faintly in the clean, pure light. "I thought it was a really well-done coil of rope with a hook on it!" Judar only grumbled as he took the rope from Tindariel and re-weaving it back into a turban. Besides covering that balding spot, the Eldharin rope came in handy for many other things.

Killer continued to snore blissfully, emitting yet more foul odors and burping. Judar gave his fellow parrot a solid kick to the tail. "Huh?" asked Killer deliriously. "Russ? Can you bring the roaches?"

"Wait a minute, we're not at the Crossroads," commented Tindariel after looking up at the sky and noticing that the ground was hard, solid, and was in fact rather pleasant. "Or they really upgraded the place since my last visit with those kids."

Surrounding the companions were geometrically hewn walls with gold, bronze, and copper veins. The room was shaped like a large dome and on the ceiling was a mural of dragon-like figures. On one side of the room was a coat of arms with the symbol of a lion, dragon, and rose. "Tuonela!" gasped Billy-Joe. "I'll be darned. This ain't the Crossroads!" There was a stone door with runes on the opposite side.

As soon as Tindariel spotted the door, she ran up to it, pushing and pulling on it. "This door's gotta open," she grunted, ignoring both Judar and Billy-Joe's interest in the coat of arms. She kicked and punched at it. "Darn, we're gonna be needin' some Frontier Justice for this door!" She looked around in her pouches for some tobacco and her flask of whiskey. Both were gone. "Dagnabit, where's my tobacco and whiskey?" she roared.

"Dagnabit, mine's gone too!" Billy-Joe dug around in his pockets and found none. "I'm fixin' to Frontier Justice someone for takin' our supplies!"

Killer and Tindariel were both attempting to open the door, bashing and struggling against it, but to no avail. "Use your brains, ya big oafs!" called out Judar. "Let me look at those runes, maybe there's some instruction!" The two friends ignored the older parrot, instead choosing to try to force the door open.

Suddenly, when Killer and Tindariel stepped back and charged into the door at full-force, the runed door disappeared and two robed figures, a man and a woman, stood in the

doorway. The woman was solidly built with raven-black hair tied back in a neat bun and coppery skin and intense bronze-copper eyes. The man was tall and slender with spiked blonde hair with traces of gold and copper and his eyes flickered both blue and gold. Both gazed intently at the group in the room. Tindariel's eyes lit up in recognition. "Galka and Ivan!" she called out. "Er, Galka-Ereny and Oroszlan!" she corrected herself.

Judar and Billy-Joe stopped studying the walls and knelt down reverently before Galka-Ereny and Oroszlan. "You need not bow down to us," instructed Galka-Ereny, motioning for them to rise up.

"We were supposed to have one more, the S'vartalf. Where's Peromyscus? I was hoping to talk to him or it a bit more," said Oroszlan, nodding to Tindariel, remembering her from that meeting at the Crossroads years ago. "And I'm glad you're well, Tindariel. Sorry about taking away tobacco and whiskey, we can't have anyone intoxicated here in Pelda."

"If you weren't the Valiant Lion we revere, I'd Frontier Justice ya!" mumbled Billy-Joe apologetically.

"Pardon our lack of courtesy, but there was a strange mishap in the spell that was supposed to bring you to the Chamber of Decision. Perhaps something entered the circle that Baelnorn and Tanilthara had casted," said Galka-Ereny.

"That mouse," observed Judar, his beady black eyes lighting up slightly at the memory of that mouse running into the circle. "So what happened to that creature, that... thing?" Judar had a hard time finding a polite word to describe Peromyscus.

"Let us hope he landed somewhere safe," said Galka-Ereny. "In the meanwhile, rest and refresh yourselves. We will be holding a meeting with the other gods in the Chamber of Decision at dawn. If you seek any non-intoxicant, ring the bell and ask for it. There is a spring in the next room along with food and drink."

Ilithara held onto Black Swan's foot as best as she could even though she was certain that her friend would do everything in her power to not drop her. The landscape below her reminded her of those maps she had seen in Tarathorn and Vincent's trailer, those funny maps with little squares and triangles all over the places. She could faintly make out golden and green fields of various sorts and even the patches of water looked somewhat square and yet when she refocused her vision, everything looked smooth.

"Pelda. I haven't been here in millennia," commented Black Swan, her voice now clanging. "I just hope Galka-Ereny and Oroszlan will treat me with a bit more fairness. I'm not too keen on returning to Pelda but what we know is stuff they need to know."

In the fading sunlight, Ilithara allowed her eyes to shift into her Dhaerow vision, making the green vegetation look like various shades of red, with the healthier vegetation looking more intensely red and the less healthy vegetation taking on a dimmer cast. Water was black in Dhaerow vision and the stones and minerals took on various rainbow hues, depending on what they reflected. Black Swan became an intense white that almost blinded her, forcing Ilithara to return to her normal vision. "Forgot that hot objects are bright," she said to herself.

"Don't use your Dhaerow dark-vision too much in Pelda unless you want to be blind," joked Black Swan, overhearing Ilithara. "And make sure you don't start checking out random things. It's not one of those random expeditions Killer wants to go on when he's bored of teaching history. I better not hear about you picking locks just to make sure things are secure or anything about you browsing in inappropriate books!" she instructed on a more

serious note.

While trying not to appear to be sulking at the thought of not being allowed to take a closer look at things, she then looked ahead at the large mountain they were rapidly approaching. The scorching, dry wind blew past them, making Ilithara feel thirsty. She reached into one of her numerous vest pockets to pull out a bottle she took from Killer before he attempted to eat it. After twisting the plastic cap off, she downed the entire bottle of water. "How much longer?" Hopefully it was not going to be too much longer or she'd either have to relieve herself or need yet more water. "And how much metal is there in the soil and rock? It looks like the mountains are made of copper and bronze but how do they support those scraggly little trees?"

"Just a bit more. It's the ores in the soils and it's not exactly healthy for plants but my ancestors did breed them to survive all the stuff. They say that a lot of these trees were planted by Alfar and Sidhe who had lived among us, just as Sarkany taught them the craft of metallurgy, this was long before my time. Anyway, I'm sure Oroszlan and Galka-Ereny will explain that to you after we deal with the serious stuff."

Still thirsty, Ilithara pulled out another container from her vest. It was a blue metallic object she had also appropriated from Killer before he attempted to gnaw on it to get at whatever smelled good to him. She shook the container, trying to identify where to start to opening it based on the sloshing noises and any clanking or metallic sounds she heard. Looking at it closely, she then saw what looked like a lid. Guessing that counter-clockwise would do it, she turned it that direction, loosening it to reveal that the lid was also a spacious cup. Some light brown milky liquid was inside and it had a fragrant, sweet aroma. It was the same stuff she saw both Tarathorn and Vincent drink regularly, so she figured it was safe. She took a sip and decided immediately that it tasted so good that she drank the entire contents of the container. As it went down, she could feel a surge of energy buzzing through her.

After what felt like an eternity of making out different patterns in the ground to Ilithara, she felt an uncomfortable fullness as well as a sense of jitteriness. Her heart began to pound and she could feel her hands twitching erratically. It was very much like that Mountain Dew drink she experienced at that fake buffalo restaurant! Even her vision seemed to shift back and forth between Dhaerow dark-vision and surface vision, making the trees go back and forth between a brownish green and a sickly red. "My stomach hurts," she moaned, dizzy from the flashing colors beneath her.

"You didn't drink that coffee stuff, did you?"

"Is that the pale brown creamy stuff that's bitter-sweet?"

"Sometimes. In its unadulterated form, it's a deep brown bitter liquid Terrian humans drink, it's brewed from these beans. Supposed to give them more energy and they usually sweeten and flavor it to make it more palatable." The mighty Sarkany wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Whatever you do, don't let Killer or Tindariel drink it. While you were on that spying mission for your parents, Kestrel gave some to those two and they almost literally destroyed half a building."

Smiling, Ilithara's eyes lit up even as they seemed to wiggle independently of each other in their sockets. "Oh, that explains why mom and dad were fuming and why they closed the north wing of Parakeet Hall that time! And how much longer 'til we land? I'm gonna..." Before she could finish, she retched violently onto Black Swan's foot.

"You did that last time," clanged Black Swan, half-laughing, half-groaning. "Of course,

it might've been the bug-trap or drunkie too." Then reassuringly, "Well, we're just about there."

Not far ahead in between the pyramidal mountain and the two friends was a slender but still powerful draconic shape that registered as a rainbow of colors to Ilithara's eyes. Of course, under the influence of coffee, she wasn't sure what to believe any more. After all, the trees kept going back and forth between green and red! "And I have to pee really, really badly!" whined Ilithara. "Now I know how Rusty feels when he doesn't have somewhere to sniff around!"

Killer's beady eyes wandered about in their sockets as he looked at the murals on the walls. "Whoa, that looks like Black Swan!" he exclaimed, tugging on Tindariel's arm.

"Yeah, it is!" she said, pointing eagerly at the picture of the dark-haired humanoid figure standing before a circle.

"She's seen it all, knew her way back when your ancestors still lived in X'indenganor and in Rannarak! Ol' Judie here can tell ya about her back then too," laughed Killer at the memories the murals invoked.

Judar merely nodded and replied gruffly, "Aye, in me younger days. Used to travel with that dunder-head and that snake. Never expected that she was one of these Sarkany, always thought she was part S'vartalf with that snakiness to her with a bit of Sidhe for the looks. I never trusted that lass like you, Killer."

"That thar woman gives me the creeps if ya ask me," grumbled Billy-Joe. "And where's my tobacky and whiskey?"

"It's that grey thing that reported that gives me the creeps. Black Swan's cool, even if she is one of these dragon things and had a lame idiot of a twin brother!" said Tindariel. "Damn, why didn't she just Frontier Justice Iliiryana instead of trying to do the slimy murdering thing with slinky?"

They continued to walk forward through the hallway, a reddish or yellowish light marking every set distance. Judar's heavy dwarven-crafted armor clanked in time to his steps, while Killer's claws scraped against the stone and everyone else's boots thudded. The murals continued to show the history of the Sarkany in their orderly yet efficient manner. On the left wall, they seemed to be going back further in time towards the beginning of Sarkany history, while the right wall's events seemed to become more and more recent. There was an image of a tall, scrawny young man with wiry-like blonde that seemed to spike upwards on its own next to a athletic young man and a tiny, wiry girl, both with raven hair and slanted almond-shaped eyes. A copper-scaled Sarkany, a fox-like boy, and the all-too-familiar chill and feral form of Cylithera Eaglestrike was also next to them and the athletic youth had a longbow in his hand that was surrounded by a rainbow.

"Lhinhòme." Tindariel's eyes misted up ever so slightly at the mural. "Can't believe that little girly boy filled out so nicely and finally grew some hair on his face and chest like a real man!"

Billy Joe also smiled at that section of mural. "Tarathorn, she saved both me and Andraste from Lord Karolus. I wanted to catch up with her and get to know her man," he sighed. "If I dun catch up with her, I'm gonna Frontier Justice that slinky thing!"

While the companions mulled over the more recent artwork added to the walls, one of the shadows cast by the torches solidified before them and became a long, spindly, lanky humanoid. "Frontier Justice!" shouted out Billy-Joe and Tindariel simultaneously, charging

head-first at the grey-skinned creature with the expressionless face and abyssal black eyes. Tindariel was pretty sure he had a slightly colder aura than usual permeating the air around him, but Frontier Justice was more important than thinking.

Peromyscus merely crossed its arms in front of its chest in a gesture of peace. "I'm sorry if I startled you, but I wanted to make sure you didn't get lost in these tunnels," it said in its flat, emotionless voice that seemed to come more from its core than its mouth. Nonetheless, both Tindariel and Billy-Joe knocked it over onto the ground before falling onto its bony body. Tindariel let out a string of expletives as she felt the creature's bones poke into her and Billy-Joe's weight crushing her further into the creature.

"Dagnabit! Don't ya be scarin' us like that, we coulda Frontier Justiced ya like a boar-hog!" grumbled Billy-Joe, standing up and dusting himself off before giving Tindariel a hand in getting back up. He smiled and helped her dust herself off. Neither of them helped Peromyscus, who still lay on the ground.

Killer made a few incoherent hissing and twittering noises at Billy-Joe. His feathers also ruffled up and he spread his wings a bit in a slightly threatening gesture. "Killer, lad, calm down," said Judar, offering a wing to the S'vartalf despite his own aches and pains. "And same with you two, Tindariel and Billy-Joe. This isn't the time to be fighting amongst each other!"

Tindariel made a few twittering and chirping noises to Killer, who promptly made his feathers settle back down into their normal state even though his beady eyes alternated between focusing on Billy-Joe and Peromyscus. "And if you hurt any of my buddy-o-pals, creep, you got Killer Parakeet the Great to deal with!" he threatened Peromyscus, waving his dented pot at him.

Ignoring Killer's outburst, Peromyscus calmly motioned for everyone to follow him. "This way," it said. "I promise, I will not do that again." For some reason, none of the companions believed him.

Judar sighed and chirped at Killer. "I don't trust him any further than I can throw him, but we got no choice, lad. If he turns on us, well, may the Triad have mercy on him. And lad, this isn't the time for your tender spot to get all flurried up. Tindariel's a bonnie lass, but some things just aren't meant to be unless you get human form again."

"Fun-ny. Plus I'm not jealous, if that's what you're implying!" warbled Killer back.

"What's them birds sayin'?" asked Billy-Joe, wondering about the chirping and warbling between the two parrots. "They thinkin' of Frontier Justicin' slinky too?"

"Yeah," replied Tindariel distractedly, focused more on the mural. "Dagnabit, I could use something to chew on and some whiskey!"

While Killer and Judar chirped, squawked and twittered between each other with an occasional clicking noise, Tindariel and Billy-Joe continued to explore the murals as they walked onwards. Peromyscus merely continued walking, taking long-strided steps with its spindly legs that seemed to hold minimal flesh on it. "That's Tarathorn there!" exclaimed Billy-Joe, pointing to a diminutive figure on the wall with jet-black hair with a fox's shadow next to a taller, knightly figure, a hulking woman who looked disturbingly like Billy-Joe and a red fox.

"Twin sister?" asked Tindariel, noting the female version of Billy-Joe on the wall.

"Naw, that was me. Touched one o' them magi books and got me nads switched. Then Tarathorn fixed me back up and saved the Tuonela from Lord Karolus," replied Billy-Joe, embarrassed at that memory. "Was Billie-Joanna for a while. Couldn't ever get used to

peein' squattin' 'specially with them spurs for horse ridin'."

Suddenly, Killer burst out with, "I loved having a spout that works! Although having only one hole for everything was pretty convenient too!"

All Tindariel and Judar could do was groan at Killer and Billy-Joe. Nobody knew whether or not Peromyscus found it funny and they continued walking in awkward quiet aside from Killer's off-key whistling and occasional malodorous fart. "Almost there," Peromyscus droned monotonously in that disembodied, flat voice after turning to face the companions for a moment before leading them onwards again. The creature coughed, winced, and retched as he placed his hand on his chest. He then gestured for the companions to enter the Council chamber before walking off, presumably to clear out his lungs and possibly vomit from Killer's toxic fumes.

Oroszlan looked around in the Council Room and sighed at the empty seats in the chamber. Thormald and Gwaeron were noticeably missing, and in his short time as the Valiant Lion, Lord of the Sarkany, he had quickly gotten to be friends with both gods. Although Thormald was a bit aloof at first, he quickly warmed up to the new Lord of the Sarkany after realizing that he wished to carry on Legoregebb's wishes and hopefully improve upon them. It was obvious some of the gods were less eager to be at the meeting as well, but he and Galka had both relayed the messages with enough urgency to convince even the relatively irresponsible Gildharain and the otherwise busy and reclusive Huorn, god of history and accounting and twin brother to Ceanothis. Then the young god noticed that Ceanothis, the Sphere of Life, was also missing from the meeting.

Huorn, a thin, bald man in a black robe with a pair of huge, pince-nez glasses and a mammoth open book in front of him, looked up. "This better be fairly fast, I'm falling behind on my records!" he complained. "Everything needs to be properly documented and accounted for!"

"Where are Ceanothis and Peromyscus?" asked Oroszlan, noting the heavy-set woman's absence. Ceanothis usually manifested herself as a very large woman with a bulging belly with tree-bark for skin, leaves for hair, and typically showed all four seasons on her in some form or another.

"I account for life and death, not other gods or corrupt mortals like the S'vartalf!" whined Huorn.

"Dude, I think Ian was the High Priest of Huorn or something with all his whining about documenting records and taking notes," whispered Tindariel to Killer, elbowing the parakeet.

"Yeah, Ian did pray a lot to Huorn as well as Olorin," replied Killer, snickering a bit.

"And Ildathra is also missing," noted Galka, eyeing yet another missing seat.

Examining the room and the missing participants' seats, Oroszlan's voice clanged over the din that began to form. "We shall convene to stem the growing threat of Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon, the Clawed Fury. I know many of you have urgent business to attend to," he started, looking specifically at Huorn, who had pulled out yet another book and grown another set of arms to continue writing away furiously. "And many of us may have opposing views," he continued, this time eyeing Solron, a pale, white-haired man in black robes and a pair of rapiers at his side. "But I believe that this rash of recent murders and the sudden rise of Iliiryana is a grave threat to the rest of us. So for once, I ask us to put aside our differences and work together to deal with her."

A tall, robed figure, neither masculine nor feminine, stood up after Galka motioned in that direction. The figure had a calm yet focused expression despite the bandage that covered both eyes. "Justice needs to be served, for both of the gods known to be slain by Iliiryana served to uphold justice and honor, even if Gwaeron was a bit unconventional in his ways. This not for only for mere vengeance, but the cause of justice."

The matronly blue-robed woman with a gentle expression and grey hair sitting next to the robed figure stood up, paying no heed to the fact that Galka had not motioned to her to stand up and speak. "Ilberath, remember that justice must also be tempered by patience and mercy."

"You do have a point," replied Ilberath, nodding at Yavanë's wisdom. Even after millennia upon millennia of being the god of justice and just warfare, there were times that a reminder in patience were helpful. There was a time and place for swift, decisive, violent action but part of justice also involved knowing when to stay one's hand.

For several hours, at least in Tindariel's mind, the gods argued amongst each other about what to do about Iliiryana and how to deal with both Gwaeron's and Thormald's deaths. While Olorin, Athtar and Huorn were debating over the exact clauses of deityhood set up in past Council meetings, the mighty stone door to the Council chamber suddenly exploded open. A nearly naked Dhaerow woman with several jagged cuts marring her shining ebony skin, long silver hair, and iridescent eyes that flashed green, violet, and blue at different angles staggered in.

Struggling to speak, the woman could only say, "Iliiryana. Must retrieve Ki-Riss from her and return to its true wielder."

"I'm gonna Frontier Justice that witch!" roared Tindariel in outrage.

While Yavanë attended to the woman's wounds, she suddenly let out a sigh. "That blade inflicts wounds that not even I can fully heal without having the blade returning to its full light. I can only buy her more time and ease her suffering until that happens." A soft blue glow surrounded the wounds, stopping the flow of blood, but the jagged cuts remained partially open.

"That evil witch!" bellowed Billy-Joe at the sight of Ildathra, goddess of music and curiosity, in obvious pain. "We're gonna have to really Frontier Justice that Clawed Fury!"

With Ildathra bandaged as best as possible, the rest of the gods continued to talk amongst each other, seeming to forget the mortals that were in the Council chamber with them. Killer had fallen asleep in the midst of the long-winded conversations and was snoring loudly as well as emitting the occasional noxious fart. He had run out of unused chairs and other objects to gnaw and chew on. Apparently the gods paid no heed to the giant parakeet judging from their conversation. Billy-Joe, too, was snoring blissfully.

Bristling with anger, Tindariel stood up, fists clenched. Old Judar saw her and elbowed her lightly, whispering, "We're their guests, let's at least show some courtesy to them. I know it's been frustrating, lass, but Frontier Justice isn't going to cut it this time."

Ignoring the older giant parakeet's advice, Tindariel shouted as loudly as she could, "Damn this nonsense, what are we doing just wasting time? That's why we're in this fix! We need Frontier Justice, not long-winded meetings! Iliiryana doesn't wait unlike you guys especially Huorn and Athtar! And I don't know much about healing but I do know that those types of injury don't heal with dilly-dallying!" All the while, she shook her fist angrily at everyone, glaring at the gods despite the fact that she was mortal and they were not.

"Tindariel, I think that's a record for you," clanged Black Swan from her seat next to

Oroszlan. All this time she had been silent and resigned. "Yes, there is urgency and as long as Iliiryana has Ki-Riss, nobody is safe, but we have to be reasonably methodical at least even if you guys were the ones sent here for security!"

At that point, several of the gods stood up and began shouting at each other while Huorn continued to write frantically and Oroszlan and Galka tried to calm everyone down. "You never should have created Ki-Riss even to do away with the Unnamed Terror during the Banishing War!" spat Cylithera angrily at Ilberath. Cylithera no longer had the frightfully icy aura she normally carried, but she was still a muscular, dark-haired woman with piercing sea-grey eyes and an aquiline expression. One hand gripped her longbow tightly and her other hand prepared to nock an arrow to the string.

"What do you know of this, Cylithera? You were still a spoiled princess of House Il-Kanan when it all occurred!" accused Ilberath despite Yavanë's best attempts to calm the hermaphroditic god down. "What needed to be done was done. Had Ki-Riss not been given to Black Swan, the Unnamed Terror would never have been banished!"

"Who would've foreseen this whole mess?" moaned Olorin, a decrepit entity that was male on the left side and female on the right side. "Not even I had foreseen this, or I would've forbade Ilberath from creating Ki-Riss and allowing the Sarkany to hand it to Black Swan!" Black Swan could only put her head between her hands at the sight of the gods bickering amongst themselves.

Not at all daunted by the gods screaming at each other over whose fault it was that Ki-Riss landed in Iliiryana's hands, Tindariel shouted out again over the din with her strong voice. "You gods aren't any better than the rest of us! It's no wonder more and more people stop worshipping the gods! If you guys aren't going to be useful, then we're going to take care of this mess ourselves and get Ki-Riss back and fix up Ildathra and administer some Frontier Justice!"

Just as Ilberath was about to hurl a spear at Black Swan, Oroszlan shoved her aside. "Ilberath! This is completely unlike you!" he clanged over the din from the other gods arguing amongst each other. The spear narrowly struck his robe, tearing a large hole into it.

While Oroszlan helped Black Swan back up after knocking her over, Galka pointed and gestured to Ilberath. "This is a place of order, not mayhem!" she called out commandingly. The din lowered a bit at Galka's voice and they looked towards her, wondering what was going on.

"Perhaps we need to pay the mortals more heed!" spoke Cylithera. "Inaction has always plagued the greater gods like you. Tindariel, my daughter, is right. We have allowed ourselves to fall to mortal levels with this constant bickering. The people lose faith in us when we don't do what we promise because we're so busy arguing or getting murdered by a single madwoman. We can find fault later, first we need to make sure Iliiryana doesn't corrupt Black Swan's blade."

"Mom, you tell 'em!" bellowed Tindariel. Turning to Killer, whose beady black eyes had flown open, she said, "And Killer, I know they didn't serve grub but chairs aren't food!" There were several splintered chairs near the now awake parakeet.

"Are they done yet? I need my food and fiber," whined Killer. "Oh and aren't we supposed to be doing something besides sitting? And where did that slinky guy go?"

Billy-Joe, inspired by Tindariel's outburst, shouted, "If the Knights knew how ya'll in the Triad really behaves, ya'll are fixin' to lose a lot of worshipping'! Let's stop this here

yammerin' and do some doin' and administer some Frontier Justice!"

Huorn glared at Billy-Joe. "And you need to use proper grammar, sir. It is against all protocol, as are your outbursts. None of you have been allowed to speak."

## 6 Ilithara's Curiosity

As soon as Black Swan landed on the side of the mountain with Ilithara still in her claws, a pair of loud clanging voices greeted her. "Black Swan, what news do you bring?" asked Galka, concerned as she noticed the rather air-sick Dhaerow woman in her claws and the injured Sarkany.

While Galka motioned for Black Swan to come into the gigantic cave, Oroszlan gingerly guided Ilithara onto his claws, taking care not to make the already dizzy Dhaerow feel any worse. She staggered until her stomach could no longer handle the horrible substance known as coffee and a foul taste filled her mouth. Sensing her discomfort, he spoke a single syllable before placing a metallic claw in front of her. The copper-red glow eased the anger in her stomach, although her vision still continued to shift back and forth between the two light ranges.

"Coffee," groaned Ilithara. "That stuff is evil, tastes good but makes me sick!" Galka then gently pushed Ilithara into the mouth of the cave, knowing the light was aggravating her symptoms. Staggering in, she could feel relief at the much dimmer light, although the flickering torch-light still shifted between intense white and a more gentle orange-yellow. "My head... bumblebees!" Black Swan couldn't help but laugh at the usually robust Dhaerow woman who was the one who helped out her drunken and hung-over friends. It was now her turn to be the intoxicated one.

While Black Swan led her intoxicated friend into a quiet room away from the lights, another reptilian figure appeared from the semi-darkness. "Black Swan, meet us in the Chamber of the Elders after you take care of her," it clanged, revealing itself to be a male and motioning to Ilithara to follow him. After making sure Ilithara was safe in the cozy, dimly lit room Galka had set up, Black Swan headed back down the winding halls, wondering what lay in store for her.

The Chamber of the Elders was the same as Black Swan had remembered from when she was first cursed and banished. It was still lit by the glowing minerals embedded in the smoothly hewn coppery and bronze stone walls. Murals covered much of the walls, depicting significant events in the history of the Sarkany, including the recent passing of Legoregebb and Ereny and the ascension of Oroszlan and Galka. She winced at the image of herself in Sarkany form standing before the Elders and being banished. Still, though, Black Swan held no regrets for what she had attempted. "Does honor still mean little to you, Black Swan?" asked Galka, looking cautiously at her.

She merely nodded at the young goddess. "At least I'm not spitting at you like I did your mother and father," she replied curtly, trying to keep the memories from taking the better of her. "And do be careful to not come too close, lest Iliiryana's powers come over me again." She pointed to the empty scabbard on her back.

"Ki-Riss! That is indeed a grievous loss!" said Galka. "Then we have less time than we thought! When the rest of the Council arrives, we will want to hear your account. In the

meanwhile, rest and wait for your friends to arrive.”

Ilithara could feel herself floating really high above the floor. ”Ugh. Coffee. No more.” At least the place wasn’t shifting between intense greens and reds like it was earlier. Her stomach still groaned and swore at her for drinking so much of it, but at least she was no longer in danger of throwing up.

Gradually, the ore-studded walls faded away into greyish emptiness and then into a deep navy blue sphere filled with tiny, distant lights that seemed to pierce her soul. She tried to go back down to the ground, but it felt as if something was guiding her flight further and further into the ethereal void. ”Did I just die?” she asked herself.

”Ilithara, watch what unfolds below you,” said a female voice somewhat urgently. Although the voice was commanding and had a chill note to it, she still felt somewhat comfortable and familiar.

The starry mantle then dissolved into a large, white-stoned castle surrounded by green fields and gardens full of multi-colored flowers. A pink and white flag hung over it with a golden flower and an open book with a red ribbon in the center. ”House Il-Kanan,” gasped Ilithara, recognizing it from the time she had visited Tindariel’s family. ”Hey, it’s those ruins Killer and I explored that time!” she recalled, noting the golden statue of a unicorn and a foppish looking young man with a banjo riding on it.

She wanted to walk around and explore it but something stopped her from descending any further. Below, there were two children sitting in a secluded part of the garden, underneath a large-canopied cherry tree that was in full bloom. One was a short silver-haired dusky-skinned girl with a vaguely feline expression, glowing red eyes, and sharply chiseled features. The other was a tall, slender pale-skinned girl with piercing grey eyes and jet-black hair. Both looked about nine or ten human years and were wearing long, frilly dresses with stiff collars that made it hard for them to move very much, although the pale-skinned girl had the coat of the Il-Kanan family and the dusky-skinned girl had a violet-eyed cat embroidered on her dress, the symbol of the N’Shad-Daermon family. Ilithara fingered the amulet she wore under clothing which bore that very symbol.

”Look, Enladriel, we can’t just wait for this Angharradh to return. I’ve got it good compared to you because at least mother and father will let me handle the blade as part of my Dhaerow heritage from mother and elite soldier heritage from grand-father, even if it is only ceremonial. Much longer and you’ll be like that idiot brother of yours, Zatherthalas, that one who turned my idiot soldier uncle into a parakeet,” said the dusky-skinned girl.

The pale-skinned girl looked around and replied, ”Iliiryana, I trust Angharradh. She’s a knight of Tindarien and Gwaeron so she’s got to keep her word. Give her until the next full moon. If she doesn’t return by then, we can try to activate your father’s orb.”

No sooner than when she heard that, Ilithara’s jaw dropped. Enladriel did look a lot like a really young version Cylithera. ”Wait a minute, Iliiryana and Cylithera grew up together?”

”And by the way, I’ll do the activation. No offense, but after that incident, I don’t feel so good about you doing that,” said Iliiryana, smirking and scooting closer to Enladriel.

Enladriel merely nodded. ”None taken. Even a drunken ogre dung collector can do better than me in that stuff.” She let out a small laugh.

While the two girls whispered between each other, a third figure showed up. It was a young man with a wide-brimmed baby blue hat with a pink and gold feather sticking out of it. His long blonde hair cascaded past his shoulders and he wore a bright purple robe

with the Il-Kanan coat of arms embroidered onto it. On his back was a banjo that seemed to glitter in the sunlight. "Enladriel and Iliiryana! Nanny is looking for you guys so you can have your music and etiquette lessons! Can't miss the best stuff!" he said in a sing-song voice. His long, almost donkey-like ears, finely chiseled features, and slightly mulish expression reminded Ilithara of one other person she knew. Tindariel!

"Good grief, no wonder Tindariel's so special!" thought Ilithara, realizing that her great-grandfather and biological mother were siblings. "I see the strong family resemblance, thank the gods the Il-Kanans had enough sense to marry outside of the line after that one but they're still a rather special family, especially Tindariel!"

Iliiryana at this point glared at Zatherthalas and the young man could only turn away, whimper, and run. "That's the power of the Eternal Huntress there," she whispered to her friend. "Look, I think Angharradh is really more of a follower of Gwaeron than Tindariel. She offers real power while Gwaeron's just a big dummy who likes to bash things and make noise. I also overheard that somewhere up north in the Tindarn-Niniel, if we can find Her high priestess, we can become like the Sidhe after she reveals us our True Names to us."

Enladriel's eyes widened at the sight of her older brother running in terror from a seemingly harmless child. "I don't know about that. I'd rather be one with the bow. I'm scared to use those other powers after that incident at music."

"If we get to the Tindarn-Niniel, I can become the High Priestess and you can become the Champion. The Champion of the Eternal Huntress doesn't use any of those arcane powers is a true master of the bow and sword," said Iliiryana. "Plus you already shoot well enough to probably challenge whoever's the Champion now and maybe with more practice, you could challenge Her even."

Ilithara wanted to reach out to the two children, particularly Iliiryana, but some force pulled her away, sucking her back into the empty sky. Before she could figure anything else out, she felt herself crash into something warm, soft and fluffy. Her eyes flew open and she found herself back in the bed the Sarkany had provided for her. "Whoa, that was weird!" she said to herself, rubbing her head. She did feel refreshed, yet she wondered what was really happening. Was that real or was it just a random dream from the coffee? Did coffee have strange hallucinogenic properties as well as a good taste and other strange effects?

She bolted up and looked around at the ore-veined wall again. Her vision was completely back to normal even if her stomach growled violently. There was a black nightstand next to the bed with a softly glowing golden light and a bronze pitcher and a loaf of bread sitting on it. Without thinking, the hungry woman began to drink the earthy, mineral-rich water from the pitcher and eat the rich, dark bread that reminded her of the bread that Tarathorn and Vincent kept, something called pumpernickel. Strength and radiant warmth flowed back into her as she ate and drank and her stomach stopped grumbling at her.

Once she finished her meal, she walked up to the heavy stone door. It was covered in unfamiliar runes and there was a copper knob that was shaped like a winged serpentine dragon. As soon as her bluish-tinged inky black hand touched it, the doorknob grew warm before sending a slight shock at her. She ignored it and turned it until it clicked. "Where's Tindariel or Killer?" she thought, grunting and groaning in an attempt to open the door. Slowly it creaked open until it opened up wide enough to just barely let her through. When she tried to walk through into the muraled hallway though, another shock jolted her, sending her flying backwards. Shaken but unfazed, she tried again, only to get bounced back onto the bed.

Fidgeting around in her numerous pockets, her hand clasped a small ring. It was that same ring that allowed her to turn into a mouse and enter that circle. "Well, worth a try," she said and put it on her pinky finger. Electricity flowed through her and the surroundings grew in size again. For a moment, the bright violet light blinded her, but as soon as her eyes recovered from the light, she could see faint reddish hash-marks of light in the doorway. "Gotcha!"

The little silver-furred mouse darted out in between the hash-marks of light. Something smelled slightly singed, and Ilithara looked back to find her tail brushed against the light. "Someone must've accidentally locked the door," she thought as she started down the hallway. "Wonder which way now."

The sounds of heavy footsteps echoed throughout the halls and to her sensitive mouse ears, it sounded like they were headed to her right. The roaring bellow of "Dagnabit, I need my tobacky whiskey!" indicated to her that her ears were indeed right, that Billy-Joe and company were out there.

"You better not be leading us into trouble, you slinky thing, or we'll Frontier Justice you!" growled a female voice she recognized as Tindariel.

Scuttling as fast as she could towards the source of the sound, she hoped she had enough endurance to catch up with them. Yes, she moved quickly for a mouse, but her short rodent legs and tiny rodent lungs might not cut it for human and Sarkany-sized passages. "Keep on making noise, you guys!" she thought. "At least until I can catch up to you!"

Her whiskers began to quiver and she sniffed the air, wondering what triggered that reaction. A metallic smell permeated through the air and she heard an emotionless, flat voice whispering in the distance. "Black Swan escaped to Pelda with your sister. I will make sure she receives this sword."

Heart racing and stomach sinking, Ilithara let out a little squeak before focusing her little rodent ears to see if she could catch more of this creature's conversation. "Sounds like slinky Peromyscus," she thought, certain Peromyscus was part of the problem. For what felt like an eternity, she didn't hear anything else. Just as she was about to give up and try to catch up with her friends, the sound of very soft padding caught her attention as well as conversation from her friends.

"You sure he went to get Ilithara and not Iliiryana or more of those slinky guys?" squawked Killer's voice.

"We ain't got no choice, but I'm fixin' to Frontier Justice that thing if he lied to us," declared Billy-Joe's voice.

"By the Triad, he better be telling the truth," grumbled Judar.

"Why did Clawstaff send that slinky thing on a job for real warriors? If he causes any more trouble, I'm Frontier Justicing him!" roared Tindariel's voice.

The flat, disembodied voice then said from a different direction, "I'll make sure your sister doesn't interfere again. Those idiots won't know what hit them."

"Crap!" squeaked Ilithara, still in rodent form as she heard the quiet padding footsteps approach her. She sprinted as fast as she could towards where she last heard Tindariel and company, hoping to catch up to them.

The long passages seemed to twist, turn, dip and rise on her, confusing her little rodent brain. Frustrated at the limited capacity of being a mouse, she decided to risk Dhaerow form again. Squeaking the incantation to restore her normal form, the hallway shrank back to its usual size, although her nose continued to wiggle, having been used to sniffing the air.

Then looking around swiftly, she tried to recall the words to conceal herself from sight. With a wave of her hand and a few airy words, she could see her shadow fading to nothingness, indicating that she had gone completely transparent. "Whew, for a moment thought I was going to pull a Tindariel!" she joked to herself. Satisfied at her concealment, she listened for either her friends or those creatures.

"The girl is missing! She broke free from the wards somehow!" said the flat, disembodied voice not far from her. "Warn Her and I will find her before she disrupts the meeting!" Ilithara didn't need a second prompting to start moving as quickly as she could towards where her friends were. Padding along silently but swiftly, she clung to the walls, figuring she was less likely to bump into something inappropriate. "And she will not find it!" What was it? Ilithara's curiosity suddenly got piqued at the object the creature was alluding to.

Still pondering over what the disembodied voice was talking about, Ilithara continued to walk through the hallways, careful to be as quiet as possible. Aside from murals that depicted the history of the Sarkany, complete with a few panels dedicated to Black Swan and her twin brother's deeds, there wasn't much of particular interest to her. Her eyes wandered this way and that and her ears also swiveled independently of each other, hoping to catch traces of sounds. "Where's the forks?" she asked herself.

The passage divided into two branches several minutes later. The left passage was narrow and obviously for creatures smaller than the Sarkany, while the right passage was much larger and designed for the mighty Sarkany. "If I were a bunch of loud-mouths and walking tin cans, which way would I go?"

Instinctively, she knelt down to examine the ground for any possible hints despite the apparent lack of dust. "Darn Sarkany, they keep this place far too clean!" she thought. Nonetheless, she allowed her vision to shift back through different wavelengths and frequencies to see if her standard spectrum vision missed anything. A bright white glowing trail of drops going into the wide passage alerted her, as did multiple sets of footprints that glowed a faint red to her and followed the narrow path. "Wonder if the Sarkany have nosebleeds or something," she pondered to herself.

Even with curiosity driving her forward, she made sure to walk as quietly and discreetly as possible, just in case someone or something was after her. She was pretty certain that someone had a bad nosebleed but in case there was someone with a sharp object around, she decided to be careful. Several steps later, a single strand of silver hair caught her attention. Picking it up, she could see a faint glow that alternated between violet and green. The sounds of many people shouting and bellowing nearby as well as objects shattering and breaking.

Male and female shouts of "Frontier Justice!" confirmed her suspicions. Her friends were in there and apparently were causing some trouble, judging from Killer's shrieking and all the objects being thrown and hurled around in there.

"What are they doing? Did they just raid the ale keg or something?" she asked herself before making her way towards the noise. A knot formed in her stomach and for the first time in many years, she felt a strange sense of fear and dread in her. What was going on? Right as her nerves began to question her own decisions, she noticed that she walked into a dead-end.

"Huh?" she thought at the sudden dead-end. A small red crystal in the wall piqued her curiosity. Impulsively and forgetting the fear that bothered her, she reached out to touch the crystal. Heat flowed through the crystal, almost burning her hand were it not for her

swift reflexes and then it warped to form a hexagonal rune she had only seen once before. It flared a brilliant orange and the wall vanished, revealing a chamber full of books, maps, and random-looking trinkets.

Looking around to make sure she wasn't being pursued, she quickly decided that whatever was happening in the Council, there was a bit of time for her to explore a bit in this room. After all, there just might be something really interesting in this room for her to look at. Her eyes scanned the room, trying to decide what to check out first before she walked straight for the maps. Maybe there would be something that would help her find her way in this confusing place!

The first thing that drew her attention was a large golden book that lay on a stand in the center of the room. Walking towards it, her hands shook slightly in anticipation of what interesting things she could learn from reading it. As she opened the book, a burst of flame leaped out at her, lightly toasting her hands before she leaped away. "How inconsiderate!" she thought. Trying again, the book opened willingly in the middle. At first, the shining golden-tinged pages were completely blank. "Huh?"

Just then, fine-lined flames began to form in the page, illuminating the room and warming her up. "What the...?" she asked herself.

The sounds of yelling, roaring, screaming, and things flying around grew louder near her. "Frontier Justice!" bellowed Billy-Joe's voice followed by the sound of something shattering.

"Where is that girl?" spoke that disembodied voice she was trying to get away from. Soft padding grew louder and closer to her.

Her focus returned to the glowing script that was forming on the pages of the book. Despite the geometric nature of the characters, they still flowed with a grace that reminded her of flames in the wind. The runes then shifted and swirled about before her in a cloud before settling back down into the book. She looked at them again and they were now in the more familiar Eldar alphabet. Stumbling and trying to read the words aloud, she quickly realized she had no idea what she was attempting to say. The golden light then enveloped her and she could feel both radiance and wind filling her up. "Oops," she thought.

"I think she found our little present for her," said the disembodied voice. She could visualize the slinky grey creature just smirking evilly.

Energy crackled through her and she alternated between hot and cold, and her vision blurred and shifted between the color spectra. She looked at her hands, which were normally inky black with a blue-violet tinge but were now a myriad of colors thanks to her vision shifting around. Pink, purple, green, red, white, blue, grey. The room began to spin before her and she could feel herself being stretched and squished. "Whoa, this is really interesting," she said to nobody in particular. Flashes of light surrounded her and the book's runes shifted about in what she was sure was a thousand different alphabets and characters.

And then she noticed that instead of her usual voice, it sounded a bit flat and disembodied, very much like that creepy grey thing that Black Swan often hung out with. Despite her addled vision, she could see her hands growing even longer, narrower, more spindly, and the rest of her also felt more stretched out. Out of curiosity, she placed her nimble hands on her face, wondering if anything else changed. Much to her terror and amusement, her face had indeed elongated and then her hands went to her eyes, which were now much larger than before. "Eew," she said to herself. Her voice sounded even hollower, more distant than before! Pain suddenly shot through her as the energy continued to fill her, threatening to cause her to explode. For what felt like an instant, she was convinced that she was going to

both explode and tear apart.

"There she is, she's dead." The hollow, emotionless voice was the last thing Ilithara could hear before she felt herself floating above her body, no longer her usual self, but rather like that of the spindly grey creature inspecting her closely. "And what better way to sow further confusion than making it look like I'm the dead one?"

*A statue of a woman in heavy armor seemed to stare at her intently as she floated down from who knows where. The armor shone with a radiant gold-silver light that refreshed Ilithara a bit. She looked closely at the statue and noticed the coat of arms in the center of her chest-plate, which had a lion, a red rose, and a crocodilian dragon inscribed on it. On one arm of her armor had a bear, the symbol of Gwaeron, and on the right arm was the symbol of a longbow superimposed on a howling wolf, the symbol of Tindarien Dalithariel, the past incarnation of the Eternal Huntress. Despite the grey stone of the statue, somehow she looked very familiar to Ilithara. There was nothing else in the chamber except for a mighty claymore sheathed on the knightly statue's back and a pair of flasks at her feet.*

*"Drink and live once more, Ilithara. They need you." The knight's voice intoned in the chamber and despite her somewhat deep, commanding voice, there were notes of reassurance.*

*"I'm dead?" asked Ilithara, puzzled. "Shouldn't death involve being stuck at the Crossroads in the mud and then walking out to the entrance to Ildathra's realm or wherever I've been assigned to go according to that stone tablet in the middle? Although it is pretty interesting to be here."*

*An image of a nubile, almost naked blue-tinged ebony-skinned woman formed in Ilithara's mind. Like her, this woman had long, radiant silver hair and brilliant blue-green-violet eyes that glowed with an optimistic light. Even the pained expression and the wounds that showed up suddenly on her did nothing to diminish her curiosity and cheer. "Ildathra," gasped Ilithara.*

*Ildathra lay on the ground, surrounded by a blur of many people. "What's going on?" asked Ilithara, turning to the knight.*

*The knight remained silent, but the blurry people began to take shape. Two were gigantic parakeets, one deep turquoise and one green. "Killer! Judar!" cried out Ilithara. Images of Tindariel and Billy-Joe also formed, both of them throwing chairs and other objects at the throng of entities making threatening gestures at the wounded goddess. Black Swan also showed up in her mind's eye, shifting between her draconian form and a more feline form, not completely unlike Iliiryana, while Cylithera was trying to yell above the din. An outline of a door formed in her mind as well and it was right where the large corridor had ended, where it seemed that there had been no entrance previously.*

*Without hesitation at the sight of her friends in danger, she took both of the flasks and began to drink eagerly. The first flask had a very mineral-like flavor that made her feel more grounded, which was a relief to her after floating in the air for so long. She didn't realize how thirsty she was until the cool liquid touched her parched lips and then she continued to drink as quickly as she could, determined to return to life. "Don't drink the..." started the knight right after Ilithara deftly opened the second flask and was ready to down the light brown, creamy contents.*

*Startled, Ilithara looked down into the container. It was light, brown, and somewhat creamy looking and smelled very familiar. Coffee! Her stomach groaned at the memories of her last encounter with coffee and she could feel everything hurting again. With a quick motion, she closed the container back up again before looking up at the statue of the knight.*

*"Then what?" she asked.*

*"Give this to Gilrain Turamarth, the one you know as Black Swan, when all else has failed. And Ilithara N'Shad-Daermon, remember that even more than ever, your friends need you, and that I, Angharradh Fatima Toel Ul-Estel ap Gwaeron, will someday return. Never give up hope for your sister, for one day, she will find peace, hopefully without the use of violent means."*

For the umpteenth time in just a few days it seemed, Ilithara woke up with yet another massive headache that could contend for the worst ever. Her brain throbbed in its skull and everything hurt. "Ugh..." she moaned before looking at herself.

She was still long, spindly, grey, and apparently, with those abyss-like eyes and that awful expressionless face. Slowly, she stood back up, noting that despite her humanoid look, it had extra bones guarding her lower torso. Instead of only her chest pounding and expanding and contracting as she breathed, she could feel it in her abdomen as well. "Two hearts and three lungs?" she asked herself.

Even with the extra organs inside of her, Ilithara didn't exactly enjoy the spindly form she was in. Out of curiosity, she visualized herself looking like herself again. Radiance coursed through her veins and she could see her grey skin returning to its natural blue-tinged ebony color and the spindliness becoming mere graceful slenderness. "Yay! I'm back to normal!" she thought as soon as she could sense that she had changed back. But was she going to suddenly become a S'vartalf again or was she just hallucinating from the effects of that book, which was now just sitting there, blank.

Quickly, she ran to where she had seen the hidden door in her vision with that knight. Was this the Angharradh that she had heard of in that other hallucination? Her pondering quickly came to an end as soon as she saw the outline of the door. Instinctively, she placed her hands on it and pushed inwards. The door vanished, allowing her to pass through into a room full of people brawling with each other and screaming.

As soon as she stepped in, everyone seemed to freeze in action, staring at both her and what looked like an identical copy of her. "I'm the real Ilithara!" she declared, pointing to herself.

"That is the S'vartalf in disguise!" said her copy, a faint blood-red glow surrounding her.

"Hey, she's glowing red!" shouted Ilithara, seeing the glow. Judging from everyone's confused expressions though, it seemed that she was the only one who could see it. "That Ilithara is fake! I'm the real Ilithara!"

"Heal... me..." moaned a naked Dhaerow woman with blood pouring out of her.

"Yes, heal Ildathra. Only her Chosen or a descendant of one could do it," urged Galka, straining her eyes in hopes of discerning any further clues. Neither she nor Oroszlan could tell the difference.

Both Ilitharas approached the wounded woman and placed their hands on her. Ilithara's hands glowed with a faint silvery violet light and some of the wounds began to close, but as the light flowed out of her, she could feel herself growing a bit weaker. The other woman that claimed to be Ilithara suddenly began to fade in color from blue-violet tinged ebony to dead grey. As soon as her skin began to fade in color, the now-revealed S'vartalf let out a wordless hiss and new wounds opened up on Ildathra.

"Frontier Justice!" bellowed Tindariel and Billy-Joe simultaneously, charging past various gods, some still bickering, some staring dumbfoundedly. Killer also followed them, shrieking

and squawking incoherently. Right behind Killer was Judar, huffing and puffing with his two-handed scimitar drawn.

Sensing its imminent death or at least heavy bruising, it pulled out a crescent-shaped knife from an unseen pocket and thrust it at Ildathra weakly right as three warriors tackled it down. Had Ilithara not reacted quickly, that would have been the end of the Shadowdancer, but instead the young Dhaerow knocked it aside and took the blade into her own arm. She let out a yelp of pain as the cold blade penetrated through her arm, sending a freezing sensation all around her. "I'm not gonna fail you after all those years of keeping me from getting into too much trouble!" she grunted, determined to use what was left of her life to save that of her patron goddess.

"Tell us what you know, creep, or we found a new chew toy for my buddy Killer," commanded Tindariel while both Billy-Joe and Killer restrained the slinky grey creature. It struggled as hard as it could in hopes of breaking free, but after Tindariel held her claymore at its throat, it reconsidered that course of action. A loud, noxious fart from Killer also made it slow down in its struggle.

"Whatcha eat, bird?" grumbled Billy-Joe to Killer, trying not to inhale too much of the obnoxious odor. It was obvious to Billy-Joe that the S'vartalf was suffering as it coughed and struggled to breathe. Resigned and much subdued thanks to the toxic gases from under Killer's tail, the S'vartalf sighed. Several more farts escaped from Killer and the already unhappy S'vartalf began to convulse feverishly and its eyes rolled to the back of its featureless, elongated grey head. The entire chamber filled with the noxious smell, causing some of the gods sitting closer by to retch miserably. Even Ooklid, the god of filth and decay, didn't reek this badly as Killer's toxic emissions!

"Oops," squawked Killer awkwardly. "Fiber."

"Laddie, you need to put a cork there!" said Judar. "And I'm a parrot like you with almost no sense of smell!" The older parrot then examined the spindly grey creature under both Billy-Joe and Killer. Turning to the S'vartalf, he prodded it none too gently with a sharp claw, taking care not to cut the rubbery-feeling flesh. One more burst of gas escaped from under Killer's tail and then he let out a loud, noxious burp.

The clamor in the room suddenly stopped and several of the gods began to stare at each other, puzzled at what they were fighting over. Ilberath put down the spear it was about to hurl over at Olorin, who was hiding behind Yavanë and hurling derogatory comments about the god of justice's intelligence. Cylithera breathed a sigh of relief as she came close to having to yank Gildharain and Athtar apart before they got into an even more massive fist-fight. "Iliiriana's arm is indeed long and powerful if she can send an agent to cause such confusion among us!" declared Galka, evaluating the mess.

Tindariel then ran to her friend in hopes of pulling out the blade out of her arm. "That slimy Peromyscus thing, shoulda Frontier Justiced him earlier but Killer got him finally!" she growled, cautiously tugging on the weapon. The blade felt frozen to the touch and she could feel lightning passing through her body. "No offense Ilithara, but your sister's a witch!" she tried to joke as she struggled to remove the blade from her arm. Ilithara collapsed onto Ildathra's body, now whole again although the young Dhaerow was now the one covered in wounds. The blade remained stuck in her arm and it looked like that Tindariel would have to cut her arm off to take the blade out. All the while, the dark-skinned woman grew paler while the blade glowed with a cold, blinding silver light.

A wordless cry from Black Swan made even Huorn leap up in surprise and pause in his

writing. "I'm falling behind!" he wailed before resuming his writing, determined to record every event. Nobody really paid any attention to the god of record-keeping.

Black Swan's draconian form shrunk to her humanoid form, but instead of her usual golden-glowing eyes, they glowed with a feral red light. She let out a powerful feline roar and leaped out at Oroszlan, intent on tearing him apart.

"Protect Oroszlan. I think she's here," wheezed Ilithara before passing out.

Oroszlan whirled around as gracefully as a massive draconian creature could, partially deflecting Black Swan's attack. His tail whipped around, striking her and knocking her away, but not without him leaving a pair of gashes on his back from her newly-formed claws. Coppery-green blood spurted out from where she slashed him. "Oroszlan, hold still!" clanged Galka, lashing out with her tail to knock Black Swan down.

Before anyone else could react, a streak of cold silver lightning flew through the air, striking Black Swan. Snarling furiously, Black Swan tried to slash at Galka's tail before falling down and bleeding profusely. Her red blood flowed with a coppery tinge that heated the air and turned green upon air contact. Cylithera sighed and looked at the wounded Sarkany, still holding onto her mighty longbow and ready to fire another lightning-wreathed shaft at Black Swan. "Daughter, Killer, Ilithara, I know she is a dear friend to you, but understand that she is no longer your friend, but rather a puppet of Iliiryana," said Cylithera, acknowledging the looks of outrage from Tindariel and her friends.

"No!!" wailed Killer, letting out a hideous shriek of fury. "Another buddy-o-pal killed!" As he prepared to charge at Cylithera, both Billy-Joe and Judar restrained the giant parakeet, although all they succeeded in doing was slowing down his charge to a turtle's pace.

Struggling to find the strength, Black Swan said, trying to ease the angry tension in the room, "I'll be ok as long as my sword is still intact. Looks bad but nothing worse than being farted on by Bug-Trap repeatedly without any ventilation. I almost pity that thing for having endured so many direct attacks from Killer." Her wounds then glowed with a golden light and the bleeding stopped. "But I will die if that sword gets destroyed and I'll turn into Iliiryana's puppet if she corrupts the sword. She can still control me periodically whenever I lapse... and Killer took care of one of her agents." She pointed to the motionless S'vartalf. The sight of Black Swan recovering made both Killer and Tindariel calm down.

The grey spindly creature began to tremble ever so slightly and Killer eyed it with his beady black eyes. "Killer, laddie, we're going to get some information out of it, so try not to get your tail too close to it just yet," instructed Judar, returning to the fallen S'vartalf and unsure if he wanted it dead or alive. The old parrot wondered if the creature did survive Killer's digestive distress. As much as he wasn't fond of these creatures, he did pity it for its suffering under Killer's tail.

It glowed with a cold, blue-silver light and writhed about wildly before dissolving into grey mist. The mist merely dissipated into nothingness but when the light faded, a body of some sort remained. It was an androgynous jaguar-like person with cold, feral features, eyes glazed over and wide open in death. "What in tarnation?" asked Billy-Joe, staring at the strange creature. "Sidhe or slinky thing or what?" The creature was naked except for a loincloth and had an amulet with the symbol of the Clawed Fury around its neck. On its unusually pale skin where there was no fur were a series of runes tattooed into it. Before anyone could step in to analyze the runes, they burst into a bright, freezing flame, consuming the body as well. A loud feline roar filled the room before disappearing.

As soon as the body vanished, the muddled gods shook their heads and stared about in

disbelief. Ildathra's wounds closed up and the blade vanished from Ilithara's arm although the gash still remained. "What in tarnation?" repeated Billy-Joe, even more dumb-founded than before.

Thinking quickly, Ilithara said, "I think Iliiryana used that creature, Sidhe or S'vartalf or whatever it is, to carry her spells all the way over here. There was some kind of book I stumbled across." Just then, Galka interrupted her.

"Book? What sort?" she asked, interested.

Ilithara recounted her misadventures, starting from when she had run into Black Swan at the Crossroads and describing her encounters with the flat, emotionless and slightly sibilant voices she had heard while trying to find the Council. "And then there was the book that momentarily turned me into one of those S'vartalfs. Did you know that they had extra internal organs?" she concluded. "Oh and they don't have much of a sense of smell either, more developed than Killer's obviously but not sensitive enough to be poisoned like that."

"Let us discuss amongst each other in light of Ilithara's findings as well as what the rest of have spoken of," said Galka, busy with Oroszlan's wounds. "Killer, Tindariel, Ilithara, Billy-Joe, and Judar, please step out while we debate."

Grumbling amongst each other, the friends reluctantly walked out. "And you better hurry up, Iliiryana doesn't move as slowly as the rest of you guys!" called out Tindariel. "Mom, you tell them! You know better than the rest of them, except for Gildharain and Black Swan!"

"I envy you, daughter," admitted Cylithera, looking at the entity accidentally formed from her flesh and that of a distant kinsman during a magical accident.

Once the friends stepped out of the vast chamber, a golden outline of a door formed before them. "Wait here," clanged Galka's voice from a distance. "I will let you know once the Council has come to a decision regarding Iliiryana, Black Swan, and the sword."

"Dagnabit, we need to be administerin' Frontier Justice, not waitin' for a bunch o' gods to be flappin' their jowls like idiots!" bellowed Billy-Joe, pacing impatiently and fidgeting with the pouch that normally contained tobacco.

Judar nodded to Billy-Joe. "Aye, laddie, but remember, they don't operate like we do. They got more things to worry about than we ever know." He lay back on the chair and stretched his sore joints out.

"My mother will knock some sense into their brains or at least deliver some Frontier Justice to idiots like Huorn," said Tindariel, trying to conceal the impatience in her. "And Killer, could ya stop that? The mirrored walls make it impossible for us to not see that!"

"Aww, but I'm itchy!" squawked Killer, scratching under his tail with his beak. He lifted his head up and his beady eyes began to wander about, trying to figure out the reflections on the mirrored walls. "Hey, where's the grub anyway?"

Despite the pain in her arm from where the creature had stabbed her, Ilithara cheerfully explored the chamber for anything interesting. The scar had become more jagged in the few hours since the wound closed and was beginning to take on a faintly claw-like shape. "Hey, Killer, I think I found some grub," she called out, pointing to a small box that appeared. "Maybe it'll also have something to relieve this pain, it's getting all cold."

"Lassie, you better rest up," said Judar, standing back up despite the creaking in his old joints. He examined the Dhaerow's arm carefully, wondering about the nature of the wound. "Clawed Fury. You better be careful lass, just because it closed up doesn't mean it's all

bonnie good.”

”I’m gonna have to Frontier Justice your sister,” growled Tindariel, also looking at Ilithara’s injury. ”Some things aren’t justifiable. Don’t know why my mom didn’t just smite her to bits when she had the chance.”

Billy-Joe busied himself the food that Ilithara found in the box. ”Stinky-Butt, get some grub while it’s still there. Same with the rest of ya’ll.” He beckoned to Judar to also eat something before picking the tastiest-looking bits of food to hand to Tindariel and Ilithara, who both smiled.

Killer’s beady black eyes narrowed slightly at having been handed what looked like the smallest ration, but he merely began to eat eagerly. ”My butt doesn’t stink! You stink!” squawked Killer at Billy-Joe defiantly. His tail lifted spontaneously as he let off yet another pungent fart that made everyone gag.

”No wonder you killed that S’vartalf or Sidhe or whatever it was,” joked Ilithara, waving her hand before mouthing an airy syllable. Normally that would’ve produced a breeze to dissipate the stench from Killer’s flatulence, but this time, no breeze came. Instead Ilithara’s hand glowed a faint silver and her wound opened back up, blood pouring out from her again. ”Oops,” she said, noting her injury.

”Lassie, lay still,” said Judar, looking around for something improvise as a bandage. Seeing nothing else that was quite suitable, he removed the turban from his head and wrapped it gently around her wounded arm. ”Sorry it’s the best I’ve got, I guess I’ve got to show my bald pate now.”

While the friends ate their meal with an unusually somber quietness, Ilithara suddenly began to moan and groan in pain. ”I’m freezing and burning,” she cried out and her intense green eyes began to glow a fierce, angry red.

”Fight it!” called out Tindariel, helping Judar to support the Dhaerow. ”Don’t let your sister screw you up too!”

Ilithara convulsed in pain despite Judar and Tindariel’s best efforts to comfort her. Killer and Billy-Joe knelt down by Ilithara, also intent on trying to comfort her, at least until Judar waved both of them back. ”She needs some air to breathe, laddies. Might want to guard the door in case something foul comes by.” Understanding Judar’s point, Killer and Billy-Joe stood up, looked at each other, then at the door.

As soon as they focused more on the door, it suddenly slid open. ”Frontier Justice!” roared Billy-Joe, charging out, ready to pummel whoever or whatever was coming in.

Black Swan deftly dodged Billy-Joe’s attack. ”The Council was surprisingly efficient,” she said dryly. ”Of course, Cylithera had a lot of leverage in it after Tindariel’s little outbursts and for once, the Sarkany actually advocated action instead of encouraging excessive debate. Maybe I misjudged that fruit-cake Oroszlan and that honor-clad Galka.” She took no trouble to conceal her general dislike of all things involving Sarkany, Dûnhèasa and Sidhe.

”So what’s the plan, lass?” asked Judar, still tending to Ilithara’s injury.

”The plan they had was... have us come up with one because they couldn’t agree. Cylithera and Gildharain were really pushing for going in and bashing in Iliiryana’s skull but those other gods kept talking about protocol and honor. So Galka and Oroszlan had to step out and decide to let us decide because gods like Athtar, Olorin and Huorn would rather debate than actually have anything done. Of course, we could let idiots like them decide but I think we’re going to do what we do best,” said Black Swan, smiling a bit more.

”Frontier Justice!” shouted Tindariel, Killer and Billy-Joe in unison. Judar merely sighed

at his companions' eagerness to administer Frontier Justice.

"Best durned idea we've had yet," he admitted, looking up.

Just then, Oroszlan and Galka stepped in, nodding at the companions. "Our blessings with you, regardless of what you choose to do. Our hands are tied by the protocol that binds us, but as non-deities, you can do far more than we can," said Galka, looking most closely at Black Swan.

## 7 Rûsvàlki

"Steric effects!" squawked Killer as Tindariel helped him buckle his armor on. She struggled to get the buckle in on the final hole.

"Fatso," mumbled Billy-Joe, who was helping Judar with his ornate but functional plate armor with the crest of the knights of Q'adim.

Tindariel shrugged as she tightened the buckles just enough to keep the armor on the massive parakeet. "No, he just takes up a lot of space like you."

Judar sighed at his companions. Even if Galka and Oroszlan could send them right to Iliiryana's doorstep, it was going to be too long of a journey. An especially odiferous fart from Killer only reinforced the notion in the old parakeet's mind that things were going to be miserable for a while. "Laddie, lay off the fat jokes, I'm just as fat as he is," he said after Billy-Joe struggled to get the last buckle on his battle armor.

Black Swan merely sat grimly in a corner, already wearing her black leather armor emblazoned with her namesake symbol. Her eyes glowed with a faint golden light as she contemplated silently. She barely looked up at her companion, only focusing on her daggers and at the mark on her arm, the symbol of the Clawed Fury. It flickered with a cold, bluish silver light that made everyone else shiver for a brief moment. As soon as she clasped the last bracer on her arm to cover the symbol, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"Lass, no matter what, we'll be on your side," said Judar reassuringly as soon as he could walk over to her. He forgot how hard it was to really move forward in his armor, but very few would laugh at the sight of a "waddling cauldron" or "steel tortoise" after being on the receiving end of a solid blow from a massive scimitar or greatsword. Most Q'adim knights favored somewhat lighter armor because of the hot, dry desert climate in the region, but even in parakeet form, Judar took pride in his dwarven roots. The dwarven knights of Q'adim may have been relatively slow-moving compared to their taller counterparts, but they were also the staunch defenders who could not be moved by anything.

"Thank you, Judar. I know you will. But it will be Iliiryana or me this time, that I swear by the gods," said Black Swan, looking up a bit before standing up and pacing.

"I'm always here for my buddy-o-pals," squawked Killer.

"Frontier Justice!" cried out both Billy-Joe and Tindariel simultaneously.

After everyone made sure their armor was on properly and their packs were supplied, Black Swan whistled. Both Galka and Oroszlan stepped in, expressions determined and grim but hopeful that perhaps this time Iliiryana could be stopped. "We will send you as close to Fury's Heart as we dare. From there, you will be in charge of your fates and hers. We send you with our blessings as well as that of the Council."

"Thank you, Galka and Oroszlan," said Black Swan, bowing respectfully before them.

As soon as Tindariel secured the last of the straps on Billy-Joe's armor (taking care not to touch him inappropriately), she whooped out, "Time for some Frontier Justice!" The whole time Killer glared at Billy-Joe, ready to bite or fart if he tried to do anything to Tindariel or if she asked for the mighty parakeet to do something about the human.

The human merely glared back at the smelly parakeet. "I ain't gonna do anythin' to your woman, ya fat chicken. I already got my eyes on Andraste, ain't one o' them cheatin' types. Tindariel's kin to me, with Frontier Justicin' and all," he finally said, hoping that Killer might treat him a bit better if he admitted his feelings towards the High Queen of the Tuonela. Judar nodded at Billy-Joe's statement as did Tindariel. Killer merely bobbed his head up and down in chirped something incoherent.

Judar chirped back at Killer, as did Tindariel. "Don't worry, Billy-Joe, they're just expressing their approval," said Black Swan, smiling for the first time in a while. "Are we ready to finally settle this with Iliiryana once and for all?"

Just as the friends were about to let out yet another whoop of enthusiasm to quell their fears, Cylithera stepped in and stood before Tindariel. For the first time, everyone could see the Eternal Huntress and her daughter standing side by side. Although Tindariel towered over Cylithera, who was fairly tall herself, it was still obvious who held the more commanding presence. Both women had raven hair and piercing sea-grey eyes as well as strong, almost feral, features that spoke more of Sidhe than Eldharin ancestry. Yet even as mother and daughter stood next to each other, it was obvious to everyone that they were completely different entities. Cylithera's presence did chill the room ever so slightly and her tanned skin did have a slight bluish tone that hinted at the coldness within her.

"I risk much by being here but I wish to speak with you, particularly to Gilrain Turamarth. First of all, I forgive you for the damage you and Caolle Anacalimë have wreaked upon the Tindarn-Niniel all those years ago. More importantly, Gilrain, I wish for you to take my scimitars with you," started Cylithera, removing the two sheathed scimitars from her belt.

"By the gods! Kharadrhas and Turangil!" breathed Judar before realizing that he was standing before a god, even if she was a lesser god. "The swords that Fîriel once wielded!"

Black Swan bowed her head respectfully before Cylithera, nodding to her in remembrance of the incident at the Tindarn-Niniel. "Why? This is madness, Iliiryana seeks those very blades!"

Tindariel looked blankly at her mother. "Uhh, why? We're not gonna administer Frontier Justice that way!" Killer and Billy-Joe also stared semi-stupidly at Cylithera for suggesting that Black Swan, an unwilling pawn of the Clawed Fury, wield the very swords she was after like an offering.

Smiling at her daughter, Cylithera merely said, "That's why I send you with those blades. An obviously stupid move, one that even Iliiryana probably won't be prepared for. Use them as a distraction to get Ki-Riss back."

"I think Frontier Justice is catching on," said Judar as he realized Cylithera's plans.

"Daughter, be brave and strong like the bear, make Gwaeron proud, and remember, Iliiryana may have slain him, but he will live on in those who follow his principles and ideals," she said to Tindariel before hugging her. Tindariel's normally fair face went scarlet for a moment when her distant mother did that. Even Cylithera showed a bit of reddening in her face, but she regained her frosty composure soon afterwards. "I will always watch over you even if we don't see eye to eye on many things." She then whispered an airy syllable

into Tindariel's ear. "Even you can use this should the need arise. It was the only spell I could ever cast properly when I was a girl so you should be able to use it too." For the first time, everyone saw what was a genuinely warm smile from Cylithera.

Then turning to the men, she said, "My blessings go with you and may you strike true upon Iliiryana's forces."

She handed both scimitars to Black Swan, who placed the sheathed blades on her own jet-black leather belt. When she touched the pommels on both weapons, she could feel cold and electricity passing through her. "Iliiryana or me this time," she swore. "I will not betray the trust you have placed in me, nor will I fail Galka or Oroszlan and all those the Clawed Fury have wounded. I will avenge Gwaeron and Thormald." Deep inside, Black Swan could feel herself trembling a bit.

Saluting everyone, Cylithera quickly stepped out of the room, knowing that she put her divinity at risk. By actively intervening despite the rules established by Huorn, she jeopardized her position as the Keeper of Dûnhèasa, but she couldn't just sit passively and follow the rules as the god of book-keeping dictated. If there was any god she hated more than the Clawed Fury and those seeking to tame the wilderness at all costs, it was a tossup between Huorn the Astral Accountant and Athtar the Celestial (or Infernal) Lawyer, who was also known as the Righteous (or Corrupt) Hand, god of dictators and lawyers. Athtar and Huorn often worked together to maintain rules, laws, and contracts, although Huorn had the final word on any disagreement unless he decided that he liked Athtar's arguments enough. She also risked a significant portion of her power by handing her scimitars over to Black Swan, but it was a risk worth taking. If Black Swan succeeded on her quest, the threat to Dûnhèasa would be reduced for the time being, but if she failed, everyone, not only Dûnhèasa, would fall under Iliiryana's power.

"I never thought I would have to sign that stupid contract that keeps my hands more tied than a prisoner's after I ascended. And already, they scrutinize my actions because of my actions in Terrios, but I will not sit still!" she thought. It was the burden of the gods to remain relatively passive after they had been far too active and controlling of the mortals that served them. She remembered that too well, when her predecessor did the same, but at the same time, it frustrated her to no end to do little more than send advice and answer some prayers.

"I guess we step through this here thing them Sarkany left here," said Billy-Joe, noting the portal, now glowing with a soft golden light.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get to it, ya ninnies!" growled Judar. "Usually it's lassies first, but this time, let the old man go first. If something's gonna happen, let it happen to me!" With that, he stepped through, vanishing from sight.

"Last one through wants to share a room with Huorn!" cried out Tindariel as she stepped through. Killer and Billy-Joe both dashed to the portal, only to bump into each other. Black Swan pushed them through and stepped in, closing the portal behind her.

The five of them passed through what felt like a dry whirlwind of colors. At first, they tried to walk, but the airy surface didn't allow them to tread normally. "I can fly!" squawked Killer as he flapped about.

"What was that story Kestrel was obsessed with? Peter Pan? Think happy thoughts and get some fairy dust?" laughed Tindariel. "Except there's no fairy dust, just parakeet dust." She sneezed, as did Billy-Joe whenever Killer flapped and flopped about in mid-air.

Black Swan and Billy-Joe had to grab onto Judar to help him move forward because he

wasn't as mobile as the rest of them. As they tugged him along, the old parrot grunted and grumbled. He wiggled a bit in his armor, trying to relieve a bit of chest discomfort. Was it from whatever he ate among the Sarkany? Or was it something more ominous? It seemed that his joints were creaking a lot more than usual and it was a bit harder to breathe, but he was sure it was more from the portal spell than anything else.

"You all right, Judar?" asked Billy-Joe, noticing Judar's obvious discomfort. "You look like you're fixin' to barf."

The old parrot sneezed repeatedly when Killer filled the air with heavy feather dust. Killer's tail suddenly lifted, propelling him forward, and Judar wanted to hold his breath in anticipation of what was next, but he was too late. Everyone coughed and gagged at the odor from Killer's fart. "And Killer, much more and we might have to put a cork back there," grumbled Judar. "Better save some for Iliiryana's goons or that Peromyscus thing if he turns on us."

As they continued to drift through the portal past random flashes of bright colors, there was a grey blotch ahead of them. "The door," stated Black Swan, recognizing it. "Be ready in case we land somewhere really bad." She had both of Cylithera's scimitars in her hands. They felt strangely comfortable in her hands despite the fact that she hated scimitars ever since that incident at the Tindarn-Niniel. There was a reassuring aura about them even as she felt lightning and ice in them.

*I am with you.* She could hear Cylithera's voice echoing in her mind. A second presence seemed to follow her, one she hadn't dealt with since that fateful day she ended up befriending Killer and his friends.

*I cannot help you much but know that when logic and instinct both fail, courage will get you through. I thank you for championing Cylithera, Thormald, and Gwaeron and risking all though you have little, if nothing, to gain from that risk.* That voice was that of the Shadowhawk, the rebel knight-errant who gave her life to remove the final Rannarak emperor from the throne, leading to the destruction of the Rannarak Empire. She shuddered a bit at memories of the Shadowhawk, but she steeled herself. The past was the past and now it was time to deal with Iliiryana once and for all.

With a strong heave, mostly from Tindariel, Killer, and Billy-Joe, the door opened up into what looked like a dark forest. Wisps of greyish-white mist surrounded them while the sky above was clear. A distant but bright crescent moon shone down, yielding a bit of reddish-silver light in the chill air. The stars also provided some light although something about them made even Killer wonder if they were being watched through the stars. "Darn if some big blobs of gas are watching us," squawked Killer after watching Tindariel stare nervously at the silver-studded navy blue canopy above them.

"Feather brain," mouthed Billy-Joe. "And Killer, shut up!" Judar could only sigh, knowing too much noise could easily attract attention of the wrong sort.

Cold winds howled through the trees, swirling about and scattering a mixture of broad leaves and needle leaves all about. Looking around, it seemed to the companions that even the trees and soil were brimming with a frigid anger and fury at something or someone. A large silver-feathered owl flew overhead, hooting threateningly at everyone before soaring down, intent on raking its talons on someone. Instinctively, Killer raised up his notched axe right before the owl swooped down onto the dented pot he used as his helmet. "Hey, that's my Potty-O!" shrieked Killer angrily, chopping the owl in half with his axe. "Nobody messes with Killer Parakeet the Great!"

"We need to move more quietly, try not to make so much noise," hissed Black Swan. She sniffed the air and looked about trying to figure out which direction to go. Just then, she doubled over in pain and clutched her arm. Teeth gritted and jaw set, she was determined to stay quiet and not let the pain disable her any more than it already did.

Iliiryana's voice cackled madly in Black Swan's mind. *So you think you could defeat me with Cylithera's scimitars? Bring them to me! See what you can do, my slave!* She fell to her knees, grunting in pain, eyes closed tight. A menacing cold light surrounded her, contorting her features with agony while her name-sake swan insignia shifted about, taking on the form of a panther's paw with a longbow superimposed on it.

"Lass, hang in there!" grunted Judar even as his chest began to hurt a bit more. The coldness from being here was not making him feel any better, but he spread his wings out as best as his armor would let him. He murmured a prayer. "Yavanë, if you can hear my prayer, please heal this warrior of the Clawed Fury's control."

Killer was gnawing on a nearby tree in nervousness. "Killer, stop that! You might get poisoned on them things," grumbled Billy-Joe, yanking the giant parakeet away from the sapling he was attacking.

"I'm hungry!" whined Killer. He staggered about, trying to follow the large moth that flew in front of him. His back was to Black Swan and his tail suddenly lifted, emitting a loud, noxious fart that reeked of rotten eggs.

As soon as the bird emitted the gas, Black Swan coughed but at the same time the Clawed Fury's symbol faded back into her personal insignia and she could stand back up. "I never thought I'd say this, but thank you for farting on me," she whispered, not quite able to breathe just yet.

"We brought the beans or something else to make us gassy, right?" joked Tindariel although it was also a serious suggestion. "Looks like Iliiryana can't handle that. Maybe we should all eat some of that stuff so Killer isn't all by himself in keeping her goons in check."

"She got a good idea," thought Billy-Joe aloud. He still distinctly recalled how badly the spindly creature suffered when Killer had farted on it. If there were more of those Sidhe-like creatures disguised as those shape-shifting things, a bit of flatulence might not be a bad idea.

Black Swan paused, anxious to move forward. "Well, you may be right. Eat up, friends, and then we will make haste. Just make sure you don't need the brown pants," she said, understanding Tindariel's logic.

"Chew on that bark, it'll make you gassy!" squawked Killer, gnawing off pieces of the sapling he had attacked and passing pieces to everyone as well as passing plenty of gas. Reluctantly, the friends started chewing on the pieces of wood and could feel their guts begin to churn, except for Black Swan, whose Sarkany physiology didn't quite operate like theirs. "We better take some more of that tree," added Killer, whittling the tree into small pieces that everyone could carry around.

Feeling more confident at their newfound weapons, the friends pushed forward, following Black Swan who frequently sniffed the air before continuing onwards. "Can ya smell anythin' besides us fartin'?" asked Billy-Joe.

"Yes, one nice thing about the spell Iliiryana put on me is my sense of smell is almost as good as a Sidhe's and yes, you guys are all stinking the place up, but it's helping me from turning on you. Looks like it's protecting me from her a bit. Gods forbid if she finds a way around THAT," she replied, waving a hand for everyone to stop while she looked up at the sky.

Judar huffed and wheezed a bit, putting a wing across his chest, but he kept quiet, not wanting anyone to know of his pain. He recalled his grandfather and his father had the same problem towards the end of their lives and maybe the were-parakeet curse, further bungled by a certain bard named Zatherthalas Il-Kanan, did have a limit and that old age would finally get him. Suddenly, Billy-Joe noticed that the older parrot was struggling to keep up. "Ya'll, we better slow down a bit, dun think Judar here is doin' so good."

"Don't worry," he said in a slightly cracked voice. "I can do it, just this heavy armor and rheumatism, just like Clawstaff. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can feel better." He increased his pace again to show that old age wasn't quite getting to him yet. "Plus I'm more likely to die if we take too long," he added jokingly.

Continuing onwards, Tindariel pointed something out after what felt like several hours of straight marching. "It's too quiet here, like they're not home or something. We should've had to administer some Frontier Justice by now," she whispered as she scanned the dense forest, her eyes glowing red from using her Sidhe night-vision.

"She's right. There ain't anythin' out here yet," added Billy-Joe. "Somethin's fixin' to whoop us if we ain't careful. I reckon there's somethin' over yonder." He pointed towards a faint set of glowing lights in the distance.

"Onwards, then," instructed Black Swan. "Towards those lights. They're eyes, although I have no clue what they are. Just make sure we don't get caught. Sidhe, I think, but something's odd about them." She motioned for everyone to follow her.

"I reckon they're welcomin' us," grumbled Billy-Joe. "And we're announcin' ourselves." It was true. His armor as well as Judar's and Killer's suddenly started making a lot of noise. A strange reddish-grey mist surrounded them and left everyone feeling sluggish. Judar tried not to cough or wince, but the pain in his chest grew stronger before it went away again.

Black Swan sighed, knowing that Iliiryana's forces were probably indeed waiting for them. The red lights were also surrounding them and now there were chill silver lights that darkened the areas near them as well. "We still go forward," she said determinedly. "We're surrounded by them, I can feel it. It's a trap and we can only but go ahead and fight at this point." Her arm began to glow with an almost blinding light that was barely contained by her bracer.

"Judar, just a bit more and then you can Frontier Justice the bastards that support the witch that killed Thormald and Gwaeron," encouraged Tindariel as Judar huffed and puffed and grunted in pain. The old parakeet nodded and took a deep breath before continuing. The red mist didn't feel very good, nor did the act of taking that deep breath, but it did provide him with much-needed air. Breathing was getting pretty hard for him, but a bit of shortness of breath wasn't going to stop him.

After what felt like an eternity of marching forward in the mist, which was now glowing menacingly, brighter towards where Black Swan was leading them, a clearing suddenly formed in the woods. Nervously, Killer started nibbling on bits of the tree and the rest of the companions followed Killer's example. In the clearing was a blood-covered altar with a statue of a panther on one side and a woman with a longbow and a pair of scimitars at her hips on the other. Grisly scenes of humans being torn to pieces by beasts were carved onto the stone tablet behind the altar. "Yuck," squawked Killer. "Tindariel wasn't so tacky, nor is Cylithera. Even Herkos had better taste," he added.

While the friends waited for Black Swan's instructions to move further or to stay, the red lights grew closer. A pained yelp from Black Swan made everyone leap up, wondering

what happened to the Sarkany. She was doubled over, the bracers falling off her arms to reveal the mark of the Clawed Fury on her. Her normally dark eyes glowed with a feral red light and her face twisted and contorted, taking on more feral features. Screaming in what must've been unfathomable pain, she fell to her knees. The red miasma concentrated about her, glowing almost blindingly. Quickly, she placed her hands on the scimitars that Cylithera had given to her, wondering if maybe that would be of any help.

While Black Swan struggled to stay conscious through the pain and was hoping that the power of Cylithera's scimitars would protect her, the rest of the companions found themselves rooted to the ground. A group of naked men and women with scimitars and spears leaped out from the shadows. They had the slanted, almond-shaped eyes and the dark hair common to Sidhe as well as feral features that hinted at their totem animal, yet there was something different about them. Their skin had a slight dead grey tinge to it and their eyes were unnaturally large and dark and their builds were more spindly. "Shit, looks like some Sidhe got crossed with those slinky guys," said Tindariel, drawing her greatsword and hastily sticking another piece of the tree in her mouth. Her guts began to tremble and shake but that was what she wanted, preferably without having to look for brown pants.

The air was suddenly filled with the odor of rotten eggs, the result of everyone except for Black Swan chewing on the bits of tree that Killer had gnawed on. The magical bonds that held the companions down vanished in response to the sudden wave of flatulence. "Think gassy thoughts!" shrieked Killer gleefully, charging head-long into combat with his monstrous battle-axe.

Tindariel stood next to Killer Parakeet, while Billy-Joe and Judar watched their backs. "Frontier Justice!" screamed Tindariel as she swung her claymore at the nearest spindly creature, a female with vaguely feline features. For some reason, those unnaturally huge eyes bothered her, but for now, she was more interested in administering Frontier Justice than anything else.

Although her blade gashed the creature, it continued to attack, swinging its scimitars with speed and grace that Tindariel had only seen in Dhaerow and full-blooded Sidhe. Even with bright pink blood spurting out, it showed no signs of pain or weakening. Unsure of what to do, she hacked at the creature again only to see that everything was visual. Then her guts churned and she felt pressure in her stomach. As soon as she relieved the pressure, the creature made a pitiful gurgling noise before falling down onto the ground. For good measure, she stabbed the creature a few more times before hacking at the next one. "Frontier Justice!" she whooped. Judging from the intense smell of rotten eggs and the large number of creatures dropping to the ground, things were looking hopeful.

"Frontier Justice!" shouted Billy-Joe as he simultaneously farted and stabbed a spindly vulture-woman with his claymore.

Judar eagerly swung his axe at any that dared to approach him, ignoring the pain in his chest. "You're too old to be fighting, gramps!" taunted a jackal-woman as she thrust a spear into his chest-plate.

"Old? I'll show ye old!" roared Judar defiantly even when the spear thumped his chest hard. The armor showed no signs of damage except for a small nick from where the spear struck. The shaft broke, enraging the jackal woman.

In a magnificent feat of strength, she lifted the giant parrot and hurled him into the companions. Desperately, Judar tried to beat her as hard as he could with his axe and Billy-Joe tried to fart in hopes of weakening her, but it was too late when it did come out.

Judar crashed into Killer and Tindariel, knocking them down and leaving the old knight stunned and bruised. Sweat beaded on the jackal-woman's face and she heaved a heavy sigh before coughing and gagging pitifully. "The Clawed Fury will prevail!" she wheezed before her eyes clouded in death.

While Billy-Joe was catching his breath, he felt something penetrate his armor and into his side. "Crap," he swore. Sensing himself weakening from whatever hit him, he roared at the top of his lungs, "Time to use my Rebel Yell! Frontier Justice!" With that, he could feel his thick, corded muscles expand and the poison lessening. Angrily, he hacked at anything and everything that threatened him or his friends, hoping he could at least give them enough time to get back up or at least pass enough gas to poison the nearest enemies.

He could sense several more things poking him, but as long as he could maintain his Rebel Yell, he could keep going. "Whoever's listenin' lemme keep up this Rebel Yell so I can keep Frontier Justicin' everythin' here!" he prayed. He had no idea who he was really praying to or who would hear his prayer, but he knew it wasn't Gwaeron. Maybe Oroszlan or Galka could help him out in this situation or even Cylithera.

Tindariel tried to get up after being struck by a two hundred pound parakeet in armor that probably weighed at least fifty or sixty pounds, but a sharp pain in her leg made her think twice. The pain was so intense that her vision blurred. "Damn. Broken leg," she growled. "But I can still administer Frontier Justice!" Just then, as she tried to muster the strength to swing her blade at an oncoming scimitar, she felt several pokes in her side. The scimitar never struck, even though she expected to strike as she began to black out.

Killer, also shaken up from being hit by Judar (no light projectile, even by Killer's standards), could only squawk and shriek in outrage at seeing Tindariel going unconscious from pain and whatever darts were coming at her. Just then, he saw what was sending those darts in their direction. They weren't darts. They were thin arrows, thinner than even those weird arrows he saw while he was in Ocala. There were several archers lurking in the back. Screaming hideously and farting all the while, Killer mustered the strength to get back up while several of these alien-looking Sidhe-like creatures fell dead before him. "You hurt my buddy-o-pals!" With gusto, he swung his axe into any within reach until his axe broke when it contacted an unusually tough-skinned creature.

"You broke my axe and killed my buddy-o-pals!" he wailed. "Behold the wrath of Killer Parakeet the Avenger!" He removed the dented pot from his head and brandished it angrily, daring any to approach him. "I'll smite you with Potty-O!"

Just then, he felt something poking through his armor and into his skin. Several archers smirked at him as he staggered about in confusion, his beady black eyes wandering about randomly and independently of each other. Determined to protect his friends until he fell, the dizziness wore off as he steeled himself to keep on fighting. Knowing the power of his farts, he stuck the last of the sapling into his beak and started gnawing on it before farting with reckless abandon. Several more bodies lay near him, the result of fatal poisoning. Even Killer's enthusiastic fighting came to an end after several more arrows pierced him. The giant parakeet could feel himself falling to the ground like a massive sack of potatoes, but not before heaving one last massive fart that made even the semi-hidden archers cough pathetically.

Black Swan felt some of her strength returning as Cylithera's power flowed through her. Standing up after being helpless to do little more than double over in pain, she let out a wordless clanging challenge at the creatures. She brandished both scimitars high over her

head, hoping she was doing the right thing, but it seemed so natural to her. "For the honor of the Sarkany!" she cried out before charging in at the creatures that were moving in on the unconscious friends.

## 8 "I Give My Life..."

Ilithara sighed as she watched Killer, Tindariel, Billy-Joe, Judar, and Black Swan slowly walk away to where Galka had prepared the portal. "Who's going to keep them out of trouble?" she asked nobody in particular.

"This time, they're on their own, Ilithara. I know you want to go, but you must understand, your sister expects you. She doesn't expect them to go on their own. You said so yourself, only the thick-skulled have any chance against her, and you're also wounded badly," said Oroszlan. "If you need anything, feel free to holler and someone will get you whatever you need. In the meantime, I'm going to help your friends get ready for the journey."

The young Dhaerow sulked and pouted as Oroszlan walked out of the well-furnished room. True, there were many books in the room, including some with maps of exotic places and spells that had long been forgotten, but somehow, it just didn't feel right. Absently, she randomly selected a book with a night-blue leather cover and opened it. On it was a map of the Crossroad, including the stone tablet with everyone's destination written on it and a description of where the different Tuatha lands lay. "Cool!" she thought to herself, examining the map closely. For all the dead staticness of the Crossroad, she did notice a few patterns when she had been there earlier. One of the maps was a diagram of the stars, which seemed to never move from their places, at least if the description on the map was correct. "I just gotta find out where the others are going," she thought.

Just as Ilithara was ready to step out of the room, a stooped, balding, old man with thick pince-nez glasses and long, flowing pink robes stepped in. It was none other than Ian, Scribe of Huorn, the god of history and accounting. "I have been specifically sent to keep an eye on you by Master Huorn," he said in his creaky, snivelly voice.

She almost vomited at the thought of the annoying history instructor from the University being not only a devout worshipper of Huorn but also a Chosen One, a mortal proxy for the whiny god. Ian was a perfect match for the detail-obsessed, fussy god. "You still think you got authority over me, Ian?" said Ilithara sarcastically as she tried to step out the doorway anyway. Something blocked her, bouncing her back into the room. She tried this a handful of times, even mumbling an incantation in hopes of breaking whatever was keeping her trapped. A can of Mountain Dew appeared at her feet instead before vanishing again.

"I'm falling behind on my scribing!" whined Ian before sitting at a table, opening up his vast book and writing away.

Frustrated, Ilithara decided to look over Ian's shoulder as he wrote as hastily but legibly as he could. In the upper right hand corner of the page was the header "The Rûsvàlki." As soon as Ilithara opened her mouth to ask about who or what the Rûsvàlki were, the methodical scribe merely shrugged and nodded to the pages he was writing.

*The Sidhe are facing a growing schism amongst their ranks: those loyal to Cylithera Toel-Ul Thorondarien the Eternal Huntress and those loyal to Iliryana N'Shad-Daermon the Clawed Fury. About half have remained with Cylithera, holding faith in her that she will be able to wisely guide them through the upheaval that the Sidhe and Alfar are undergoing.*

*These loyalists have remained Sidhe, feral as ever, but with an unerring sense of honor and a willingness to compromise, to be able to make peace with those seeking to tame the land. To them, survival is the ultimate goal, with adaptation to a changing set of worlds as a means of making it through whatever may come. They do not wish to remain passive, but they accept that Dûnhèasa is no longer an isolated entity and that they can still remain wild and free and protect their lands even in the face of changing times without resorting to excessive bloodshed and violence.*

*The Sidhe who have chosen to follow Iliiryana have spat upon Cylithera's name, seeing her as too weak and corrupted by the influences of mortals, Sarkany, and Alfar. These Sidhe believe that the only way to protect Dûnhèasa is to convert or destroy all those who seek to tame the wilderness and end the Sidhe way of life. Iliiryana advocates not only protecting Dûnhèasa but also restoring it to the vast land it once was and expanding its borders far more than any other has ever taken them. Ultimately, she seeks power over the entire Palindorean and Terrian pantheons as well as all and any beyond those. The Sidhe who have followed her serve her without question, while Cylithera allows her followers to ask not only themselves but her, even if she still has a firm hand on her followers.*

*Recently, the Sidhe who have followed Iliiryana have been showing marked changes from their less aggressive kin. Where Sidhe were merely a feral and wild people who lived with the cycles of the land, those who follow Iliiryana have developed a much more powerful blood-thirst that goes beyond natural predatory instincts. Already, the more violently-inclined Sidhe have chosen to follow her, but now, something sets them apart even further. For the Clawed Fury has now unleashed the powers of not only the gods she has slain, but also from the S'vartalf, and bathed her loyal followers with the energy released from her experimentation. The S'vartalf are not a race to be taken lightly by the gods or anyone else, for while mortal, they hold a power that could threaten the gods if they cared enough. We are fortunate that the race of mercenaries and spies are more interested in exploiting mortals than taking power or we would be in grave danger. Combined with the blind fury of these maddened Sidhe, though, even I dread the results. Thus the Rûsvàlki (singular Rûsvàlka) were born, a fortnight ago under the crescent moon in Fury's Hold, Iliiryana's realm that she created once she slew both Gwaeron and Thormald.*

*The first Rûsvàlki, however, have been dispatched, as they seem to have a critical weakness that not even the Clawed Fury anticipated. The first Rûsvàlka was slain by Killer Parakeet's excessive flatulence yesterday in the Council Chamber. The rest of its party, a total of three, were similarly dispatched by Killer Parakeet and his companions. They also display a weakness towards the element of fire. Should Iliiryana learn the details of this fatal flaw in the Rûsvàlki and corrupt the sword Ki-Riss, I shudder to think of what will come to be under her reign. With the power of Ki-Riss, the Rûsvàlki will be immune to fire and even be immune to flatulence, and Black Swan will be a slave to the Clawed Fury forever.*

As soon as Ilithara finished reading the passage, she leaped backwards in shock. She let out a small squeak as well, but Ian was too deep in concentration on his writing to really notice her. "I've got to get to them!" she cried out before her arm hurt to the point where she had to sit back down, doubled up over her injury and passed out.

When she regained consciousness, she bolted up and paced about impatiently, trying to think of a way of escaping the cell from the apathetic scribe. "How could you just sit and write passively when there's stuff happening?" she demanded as she looked over his shoulder yet again. The portly scribe merely shrugged and continued to write methodically

but quickly.

*Killer Parakeet, Sir Judar ibn Rasoul, Sir Billy-Joe Strongarm, Alhanthra Tindariel Il-Kanan Toel Ul-Thorondarien, and Gilrain Turamarth set out on the journey to Fury's Heart, where they hope to thwart Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon the Clawed Fury. There, Killer discovered a tree that induces severe bursts of flatulence. Sir Judar's time may be close, his heart has begun to fail, but he still has the courage and determination of a lion. Slowly they journey, knowing something watches them from afar. The Rûsvàlki await them, as does the Clawed Fury. These Rûsvàlki are newly formed and still immature, but ready to slay those who seek to interfere with their master. Peromyscus is still imprisoned and under a geas so that he can do little more than allow Iliiryana to exploit him to form more of these corrupt Sidhe.*

As soon as Ilithara read the writing, she squeaked and made yet another dash for the door, only to get bounced back out. "Let me out!" she demanded.

Again, she tried to use one of the many incantations she had learned over the years. Waving her hand at the door, she spoke the words that would normally allow her to unlock doors that her tools wouldn't work on. The doorway glowed faintly and the energy bounced back at her, sending her back onto her bottom on the floor again. Frustrated after several more spells, she began to pound her fists. "Oroszlan! Galka! You've got to let me help my friends! Just because you guys are tied up by your contracts doesn't mean I have to be!" she yelled, hoping someone would hear her. Ian merely continued to scribe away. "Let me out, you loser!" she insisted again.

"I cannot except under dire medical emergencies," said Ian, still writing.

While she nursed her painful arm and her bruised bottom, she thought back to the days at the University, where she had to sit through many boring history lectures from Ian. Then it dawned on her that there were only two things that he would excuse because he did have a habit of sealing the classroom to prevent anyone from leaving early. "I need to pee real bad! And my arm hurts so bad, at least let Yavanë tend to my wound!" she begged. It was true, her arm did hurt badly. If pain wasn't a motivator for Ian to get off his stool, perhaps the prospect of a nasty mess or indecency would convince him to let her out like in the old days.

"Oh all right, I wouldn't want anything unsanitary to occur in here. Bad for writing, you know," said Ian in that annoying nasal voice. He waved dismissively at the door and said without even looking up, "Go and make sure to come back."

Gratefully, Ilithara dashed out from the room. There was a slight sense of something trying to pull her back in, but it was comparable to a bit of spider silk that she easily broke through. Looking around to see which way to go, she saw Cylithera standing in the shadows. She motioned for Ilithara to come over. It was then that Ilithara noticed that she didn't have her scimitars on her and she wondered what had just happened. "The others, how can I get to them? Black Swan needs this," she whispered almost incoherently, holding up the flask of coffee that was in her multi-pocketed vest. "They're in danger, I've got to warn them about the Rûsvàlki!"

Cylithera nodded to Ilithara and hissed, "Follow me. We must make haste to get you there. I saw what Huorn had written for the future." She briskly walked on, mouthing a syllable that made their shadows fade away. Ilithara vaguely recalled that syllable. She had used it once when Killer and Ian had gotten themselves arrested by a rather fanatic group of Hin-Iril many years ago.

Moving as fast as she could to keep up with the powerfully built woman, Ilithara wondered what the world was coming to. Her half-sister rising to goddesshood and killing off anyone she didn't agree with. Killer Parakeet returning to life. The gods being outright idiots in her book. Cylithera actually being civil to her. Tindariel being sober and tobacco-free for more than a day or two. Sidhe being magically crossed with S'vartalf to produce Rûsvàlki. Killer's excessive flatulence actually being useful for a change. What was going to happen next?

"Know this, Ilithara. What you do beyond this portal is beyond what any of us deities determine even if those idiots can write all they want about it. Drink this, it'll slow down the poison, perhaps long enough for you to fight it off or find a cure. I must go now, but know that you have my blessings as well as that of the other Tuatha lords and Ildathra," whispered Cylithera, handing her a small vial of bright greenish yellow liquid that bubbled and fizzed. She then became little more than a shadow that vanished.

The Dhaerow's stomach growled irritatedly at the thought of ingesting anything that resembled Mountain Dew, but she chugged down the vial anyway. Thankfully it didn't have that painfully sweet taste, but still, the taste of salt and limes didn't exactly appeal to her either. The pain in her arm diminished and she felt somewhat better, even if she felt slightly nauseous. "Well, guys, I'm coming to help ya!" she thought, stepping into the portal and hoping nobody caught her.

The residual odor of rotten eggs and unbathed parakeet encouraged Ilithara to push faster, knowing that her friends had passed through this very portal fairly recently. Walking was really difficult in the airy environment, so she instinctively began to swim through the air, which wasn't too much faster but was easier than being on both feet. No Rûsvàlki were going to hurt her friends if she could help it and hopefully there would be some interesting things out in Iliiryana's domain to explore! Why did Iliiryana have to be so mean to everyone?

*My blessings go with you, Ilithara, daughter of Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon. Should you succeed in thwarting Iliiryana, I will be whole once more, but should you fail, I will be done for and sadness will reign.* She could hear her patron goddess' words in her mind.

"I promise, Ildathra. I do this for Mom, Dad, all my friends, and for everyone. I just hope this won't be my last adventure," thought Ilithara, knowing this was one adventure that could seriously cost her not only her life, but also those of everyone dear to her. "And just don't rat on Cylithera, please, she's doing what she thinks is right." Prayer complete, Ilithara then swam/flew as fast as she could to the strange grey door that looked out of place in all the swirling colors about her.

As soon as she stepped through it, the door slammed behind her. She found herself in a dim forest with a thick, reddish-silver miasma that obscured her view a bit. One of the saplings around her was completely destroyed and she could hear faint noises that suggested battle. A pair of loud cries of "Frontier Justice!" resonated through the air in the distance.

"Tindariel and Billy-Joe," she said. "Time to join in on the fun, hope they left some Rûsvàlki for me to check out personally." She drew both of her silvery rapiers, allowing their faint blue-green light to help her cut through the misty darkness. "And man, the stars look almost as bad as the ones in the Crossroad," she added to herself after looking up through the dark, foreboding canopy above her.

Padding along through the forest as quickly as she could, she wondered why things were so quiet aside from the occasional yell of "Frontier Justice!" or "Nobody messes with Killer Parakeet the Grape, feel the wrath of Potty-O!" Then the cold silver-white glow of Sidhe

weapons caught her attention after what felt like a long walk through the dark forest with the hostile-looking sky.

"Must be those Rûsvàlki," she thought. She delved into her mind, trying to remember incantations that might come in handy for her and then she realized she forgot to get a sample of the sapling that Killer had destroyed. "Too late to get the fart wood, gonna have to do my best without it."

As she drew closer and closer, the smell of rotten eggs began to waft towards her. She could see faint, shadowy shapes of unusually lanky-looking Sidhe with bows ahead of her. Shifting her visual range, she could tell that they were still warm-blooded, even if they were Iliiryana's perverse creations. A soft hiss indicated to her that her presence wasn't completely unnoticed. "Get her!" hissed a woman with a spear. To Ilithara's eyes, she almost looked like a humanoid cobra crossed with a S'vartalf and then crossed with a panther.

Ilithara struck the woman twice with her rapiers, enraging the strange creature. The clanging of her blades combined with the more intense glow on both of her rapiers triggered a chain reaction of several roars and growls nearby. "Uh-oh," she thought. "Looks like I brought down the house!" she said, grinning even as her stomach clenched involuntarily.

She whispered a word she hoped would help her strike faster, more accurately and not something that would make her glow like a shining beacon. Her stomach began to churn violently again and the sensation reminded her of the not-so-distant incident where she had the coffee. "Oops," she said. Had her friends been around, they would have instantly ducked for cover or run in terror, but these were strange creatures who had never seen anything like her before.

*You NEVER want to hear Smarty Pants Pokey-Swords say "Oops", it's bad enough when any Dhaerow says it, but you hear that from her and it's Frontier Justice backwards on us!* Tindariel said that of her on numerous occasions and many others shared that sentiment after many near-death incidents during their explorations.

Nausea overwhelmed Ilithara before she felt herself warping and growing in size. "Double oops," she thought.

Several of the Rûsvàlki stared at her in confusion for a brief instant before shooting at her or charging at her with spears or scimitars, but when they moved, it was too late. Ilithara's nimble form exploded into that of a blue-green scaled dragon with silver markings all over her. She was indeed a dragon judging from how she felt large, membranous wings on her back, powerful legs, and just generally feeling really big. Yet she knew she was merely a dragon, not a Sarkany, who view ordinary dragons as humans view small wild animals. Still a bit disoriented, Ilithara tried to breathe whatever she had at the creatures, hoping that perhaps she became a fire-breathing creature. A loud, noxious burp escaped from her and she could smell rotten eggs. All of the creatures lay dead before her, overcome by her toxic belch.

Plowing through the forest in her newfound form, she only came to a complete halt when she saw the familiar glint of armor on the ground as well as an almost-blinding silver glow. In the midst of several scimitar-wielding Rûsvàlki was Black Swan in human form, slashing furiously at them with Cylithera's scimitars. Near the rogue Sarkany's feet were her friends, laying prostrate on the ground and moaning and groaning in pain. "I've got your tail!" roared dragon-Ilithara. For a brief instant, Black Swan looked up to see what arrived, then she deftly beheaded a Rûsvàlka that tried to stab her with its spear.

Ilithara inhaled deeply and wondered what she was about to get herself into now that

there were dozens of angry and confused Rûsvàlki about her. As soon as they started to charge at her and ignore Black Swan, she let go and exhaled quickly. Fire with a bit of a sulfurous smell came out of her mouth, incinerating everything in its path. The screams of dying Rûsvàlki filled the air, as did the smell of sulfur. Those that weren't burned quickly suffocated from the toxic smell of sulfur.

"Dragon-breath," muttered Black Swan, slashing at an androgynous tiger-like person that somehow escaped the effects of Ilithara's breath. "By the way, thanks!"

Just as Ilithara was ready to launch yet another foul-smelling fire attack, she suddenly felt herself shuddering badly. A cold light surrounded her and she felt herself weakening and shrinking back to her normal form. She staggered about, disoriented, wondering what happened. The air temperature suddenly dropped and a chill wind howled about her while a panther roared nearby. The few surviving Rûsvàlki howled and roared in glee, their ashen faces twisting in pleasure. Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon the Clawed Fury, their creator goddess, had arrived. It was almost time to make an offer to her in person.

"Sister!" called out Ilithara. "What the frequency is going on here?" In her time on Terrios, she had picked up some of Imladrien's speaking habits, including her use of frequency instead of a much nastier word that Tinúvion often used.

The humanoid panther smirked at her half-sister. Aside from the silver streak of hair on her head and those coldly glowing red eyes, there was little left of the half-Dhaerow woman in this form. "I see you have met the Sidhe that I've rewarded for their courage, although you've just unraveled a weakness that will soon be corrected," she sneered. "Bow before me and show some respect, both of you!"

Black Swan tried to fight the urge to bow down before Iliiryana, but her knees buckled down almost instantly after a sharp flash of pain that froze her mind. Ilithara, too, could only kneel down to avoid the agony Iliiryana inflicted on her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tindariel and Billy-Joe stirring a bit and Killer's eyes wandering independently of each other. With what little free will she had in her body, Ilithara motioned to her friends to lay still until the appropriate moment came. Then she noticed that the volatile panther-woman had taken on a slightly more humanoid face, revealing her half-Dhaerow, half-human ancestry once more, although her expression was as feral as ever.

If Black Swan had hairs on the back of her neck, they would've stood on end as she winced at the memories of her last encounter with Iliiryana. In her hands were a black-bladed hand and a half sword that Black Swan recognized. Ki-Riss! She growled and struggled against the pain, but to no avail as Iliiryana merely gazed into her eyes and forced her to continue kneeling. "Stay there, slave. You have done well to not only have brought me your blade but also that of Cylithera Eaglestrike, soon to be former Keeper of Dûnhèasa!" she whispered to the furious but helpless Sarkany.

"Whatever the frequency you're doing, you better think twice! Can't you be nice for a change?" asked Ilithara even though the very act of speaking out of turn hurt. She could feel the mark on her arm twitching violently and painfully.

Iliiryana struck Ilithara's head with the pommel of the sword, knocking her unconscious. "That is enough, little sister. I've had enough of your foolishness." She then turned to the surviving Rûsàlki and pointed to Killer, Judar, Tindariel, and Billy-Joe. "Do as you will these intruders! I will deal with the Sarkany and this Dhaerow girl."

Just as the feral creatures were getting ready to finish off the friends, Killer's tail lifted, emitting a cloud of foul odors. "Whee! One last one!" he squawked gleefully as the nearest

Rûsvàlki fell dead. "Killer Parakeet the Avenger is back!"

The giant parakeet shook off the last effects of the poisons in his body and began to swing his dented pot with more gusto than before, stunning several surprised Rûsvàlki. "Ooh and another one!" he chirped happily after another fart. "Nobody hurts my buddy-o-pals and lives!"

"Ugh," groaned Billy-Joe. "Fat chicken done farted on me again." He then looked around through blurry eyes and realized that it looked like another battle was going on. He still felt very weak from the poison, but the sight of Iliirya knocked unconscious and Black Swan being embraced by Iliirya forced him to forget that feeling. "I'm fixin' to give some Frontier Justice! It's time for my Rebel Yell!" he bellowed, charging at Iliirya furiously.

Tindariel, too, stirred in response to Billy-Joe's shouts. "Frontier Justice!" she screamed, also charging into Iliirya.

Black Swan cursed inwardly as the power of Iliirya's spell forced her to allow the crazed woman to embrace her. All she could do was hope that perhaps her friends would be able to pry her loose and possibly administer some Frontier Justice. The painful memories of her last personal encounter with Iliirya flooded her mind, as did the incident at the Tindarn-Niniel, where the crazed High Priestess was able to read her mind. And that was before she ascended to goddesshood through a mixture of forgotten lore and murder. "Please don't let her kiss me again," she dared to think, knowing she would be able to sense that.

"You'll not take my prisoner from me! Bow down before me!" commanded the Clawed Fury, suddenly dropping Black Swan to the ground when Tindariel and Billy-Joe approached, brandishing their claymores. Neither one of them slowed their paces despite Iliirya's commands. Without pausing, she dropped Ki-Riss onto the ground, wrested Cylithera's twin scimitars from Black Swan and slashed at both of them, leaving them weaponless. Just as she was about to slay both of them, the scimitars began to glow with a radiant bluish-silver light. One scimitar then became engulfed in golden fire, while the other flared into blue flames.

The flames burned into the Clawed Fury, causing her to shriek and drop the blades. "Grab that witch!" bellowed Billy-Joe, pouncing on her and hoping he could pin her down with his weight. As he did, Iliirya cackled madly, sending him flying over her towards a handful of Rûsvàlki.

Tindariel yelled at the top of her lungs, "Frontier Justice!" before also trying to knock Iliirya over. She lunged hard and struck her, knocking over, but not without taking several cuts and scratches as Iliirya clawed at her savagely. The moment Tindariel distracted Iliirya, Black Swan could feel the bonds on her vanishing. Quickly, she grabbed Ki-Riss, stroking the blade for a very brief instant. The amber gem began to glow very faintly again with a radiant light, but the blade remained a dull black.

While Black Swan focused on the blade to determine whether it had been corrupted, Tindariel struggled to keep Iliirya pinned down. Despite all of the blood she was losing, she was determined to at least go down after administering as much Frontier Justice as she could. "You better show my mom some respect! If it weren't for her, you'd be dead or senile like your dad by now!" she growled, kneeing Iliirya in the stomach as hard as she could. The only response she got was a harsh cackle and then a black glow surrounded her, making the mighty Eldharin warrior bleed even more.

As Tindariel felt herself bleeding to death, she could see Iliirya growing stronger, more muscular. "Your mother has failed," spat Iliirya, lifting the weakened fighter off of her.

"By the time I'm done with you, there won't be anything left to send to the Crossroads!"

Out of the corner of Killer's beady black eyes, he saw Tindariel being hoisted up and bleeding profusely. The parakeet let out a mighty challenging shriek. "Noooooooo! Don't die Tindariel!" Heedless of the Rûsvàlki hitting him with their weapons, the parakeet could only think of Tindariel. He bit Iliiryana's arm as hard as he could with his razor-sharp beak, hoping he could bite her arm off in time. The black glow, now forming tendrils, surrounded Killer as well, opening up several wounds in him.

"So appropriate that the two lovebirds die together without so much as a tiny shard to send to the Crossroad!" laughed Iliiryana wickedly.

"I've got to help them," wheezed Judar, just barely able to breathe from the intense chest pain. Still, he somehow summoned the strength to get back up and charge at Iliiryana with his sword. Just as Tindariel and Killer faded away from all view in the cold, black light, Judar swung his blade at Iliiryana's arm. At the same time, he murmured, "By Ilberath and Yavanë, let me save me friends even if this is me last adventure ever!"

Shocked at the holy blade striking her, Iliiryana dropped Killer and Tindariel onto the ground. Their blood pooled on the ground, but they were no longer fading away and were beginning to re-solidify again. Judar was not so fortunate when the black light engulfed him and he felt something in his chest exploding, but he refused to slash at her. Snarling viciously, Iliiryana's free hand became a panther's paw, claws out-stretched and she slashed at Judar, ripping through his armor and into his jugular vein. Already though, the old parrot was dead and he fell to the ground, his armor clanging loudly with one final death knell.

Ilithara regained consciousness to the noise of Judar's armor and she could see both Tindariel and Killer just barely alive and Black Swan in a deep trance with her blade in her hands. Billy-Joe was nowhere to be seen. "I don't want to have to fight you," she said flatly to Iliiryana, who had grabbed Cylithera's scimitars again. Both scimitars were now surrounded by a reddish-silver light instead of the lightning and fire they were usually associated with.

"Repudiate the ways of the Shadowdancer and join my cause!" offered Iliiryana, her eyes glowing brightly and her voice sounding inviting. It was hard for the young Dhaerow to not at least consider her half-sister's offer.

"You will not corrupt her," announced Black Swan all of a sudden, no longer in a trance and brandishing her sword. Then turning to Ilithara, she said, "This is my battle. Step aside. It's Iliiryana or me this time."

She wanted to protest to the seemingly cold rogue Sarkany. Iliiryana meant well, just that she was being misunderstood and that she made a reasonably good offer when the other gods had failed. "You're the corrupted one," she began until she heard her own words. Then somehow, something just struck her as being wrong, very wrong. She felt something in her vest pocket that was poking out. It was that bottle she was sure was just from a dream, the one that Angharradh had given to her. Things were indeed looking bad with dead and dying companions everywhere and a half-sister gone completely insane. "You might want some of this," she offered to Black Swan, who took it and opened it.

"Go ahead, drink it and see if helps. I'm feeling sporting," purred Iliiryana to Black Swan. "But nothing will prevent you from being my eternal slave or Dûnhèasa being restored to its true glory as it's supposed to be, not the little island Cylithera has shrunk it to!" She licked her lips in anticipation at Black Swan, who cringed and began to drink the contents of the flask.

The sight of Iliiryana flirting with Black Swan made Ilithara cringe involuntarily. "I wish we didn't have to resort to all this violence," said Ilithara, her sparkling blue-green eyes in tears and pleading for some chance of Iliiryana changing. It was true, while she was a skilled fighter and had to turn her rapiers or spells on others, she preferred to get them with pranks and tricks whenever possible. Killing was something she never enjoyed doing, but it was something she had been forced to do many times over the years.

Coffee! Black Swan winced at the drink, but she knew if there was ever a time she needed its effects, it was now. She chugged it down and handed the flask back to Ilithara, who looked pleadingly at her half-sister to do anything but get herself killed. "Iliiryana, we finish this now," said Black Swan grimly, holding her blade, which still had only the faintest of light.

Iliiryana made a harsh growling noise and any Rûsvàlki around stepped away, sheathing their weapons. "This fight is mine and mine alone," she ordered them. "You are to remain where you are unless threatened personally."

While the two women battled each other, scimitars against hand-and-a-half sword, Ilithara slinked over to where Killer and Tindariel lay. "Tindariel? Killer? Where's Billy-Joe?" she whispered, hoping that there were survivors from that fight. Without waiting for a response, she instinctively dug in her vest, hoping she had something potentially useful somewhere. Maps, Vincent's notebook, a Holy Bible, random forks and knives, a KFC napkin, a vial of some kind of bright purple liquid.

Continuing to fumble around, Ilithara overheard Killer chirp weakly. "Tindariel, I never told you this 'cause it's wrong and stuff with me being parakeet and you being Eldharin, but I love you." Killer's little confession brought a tiny smile to Ilithara's face.

"Killer, I never thought I'd say this, but I love you too," whispered Tindariel. Her mind raced as she remembered something Cylithera had told her. What was that word? Summoning all of her strength, she uttered the word with as much authority as she could. Both of their wounds closed up a bit, although they still both felt very weak. The only spell Cylithera could cast as a child was a healing spell? Tindariel tried to focus in hopes of mending them up until they were both whole, but all she could manage was to stop the bleeding.

"Where'd you learn that one? I thought you flunked spells completely," said Killer.

"Mom." Killer gaped in disbelief that Cylithera would be capable of casting a healing spell. Like Tindariel, Killer had expected Cylithera to have mastered a spell that involved giving her an even greater advantage in combat.

"You guys stay safe and see if you can find Billy-Joe if you can," said Ilithara. Black Swan and Iliiryana were locked in combat, neither giving nor taking any quarter, each one returning blow for blow.

Iliiryana mouthed a harsh, spidery syllable and motes of red lights surrounded Black Swan. "Bow down before me!" she commanded again, glaring at the rogue Sarkany.

Fighting the compulsion to submit to her whims, Black Swan whispered, "For life, for honor, for my friends! If this is my last battle, let it be, if it'll stop the Clawed Fury!" With that, she leaped up at Iliiryana, who hurled a ball of cold lightning at Black Swan, knocking her prone. Black Swan's whisper somehow carried over the noise of combat, silencing even the murmuring Rûsvàlki around her. Many wanted to charge in, but knowing that to disobey their master and creator was death or worse, they stood still.

Billy-Joe crawled out from under the bush he had been hurled into, bruised and scratched,

but relatively unharmed. "Judar!" he dared to utter when he saw the heavily armored parrot laying motionless. "No!" he whispered when he examined the old parrot and realized that he was dead even though there weren't many wounds on him. Then he turned to Killer and Tindariel, who were sitting nearby, not quite fully able to move.

"Billy-Joe, Ilithara went off again," whispered Tindariel. "Judar saved us, but that witch killed him." Tears ran down her face, as did on Killer's, as revealed by the stained feathers near his beady black eyes.

Hugging both the smelly parakeet and the warrior, Billy-Joe whispered, also with tears in his eyes, "It was his time. I saw it when he was strugglin' to keep up. At least he can rest in peace now that he did his part in makin' life that much more miserable for that witch." Then turning to the deceased bird, he said, "May the gods reward you right, you done deserve it."

"Black Swan, you can do it," breathed Tindariel. "I know you can give that witch some Frontier Justice. Wish I could help you though."

"If I could fight, I'd be up there with my buddy-o-pal!" chirped Killer softly. "Go kick some witch butt for me!"

"Frontier Justice that witch!" whispered Billy-Joe. All three friends were watching, mesmerized, as Black Swan and Iliiryana continued to exchange blows mercilessly.

Cylithera's scimitars, now engulfed in a dull red light and a light-sucking aura in the other, suddenly went past Black Swan's defense and into her ribs. Black Swan let out a wordless, clanging roar of pain as greenish blood poured out of her. Weakened at the massive loss of blood, she fell down flat, Ki-Riss still in her hands. "Let me have that blade so I can perfect the Rûsvàlki now that I have seen first-hand their mortal weaknesses," demanded Iliiryana. "Give me that blade and I will spare your life. If not, I will take it from you as I did before."

Looking up defiantly despite the pain, Black Swan merely shook her head as she struggled to get back up. "You may control my body, but I will not surrender to you," she said in a cracked voice.

"How about if I slay your friends before your eyes for your insolence?" cackled Iliiryana. With a deft whisk of her hand, Killer found himself floating in between the two women. Still weak, all he could manage was a feeble squawk as Iliiryana began to poke him with the red-glowing scimitar. Tindariel, too floated over to Iliiryana, as did Ilithara and Billy-Joe. She stabbed each in turn, laughing gleefully at the blood that began to spill.

Horror filled Black Swan as her friends, Billy-Joe included, were being drained of life by Iliiryana. Then she realized that Cylithera, too, was in grave danger with her blades being corrupted by Iliiryana for her own uses. "If by my life I can save my companions and stop this madness, let it be," promised Black Swan, getting up to her knees and holding the blade up, as if presenting the blade to Iliiryana.

"What in tarnation are you doin'?" roared Billy-Joe in his pain. Warm, wet blood poured from his side and he could feel himself growing weaker. "I'm fixin' to do my Rebel Yell if you ain't gonna Frontier Justice her!"

Feebly, Ilithara wheezed to Billy-Joe, "Bet she has a trick up her sleeve, hope she does it quickly before we lose Killer and Tindariel." Her bluish-green eyes fixated on Black Swan, wondering what was going to happen next. Death couldn't be that bad, could it? She just hoped that she wouldn't be doomed to an eternity of nothing to explore or tinker with.

"She better," swore Billy-Joe. He tried to watch the spectacle, but blood loss was making his vision blur and he felt incredibly cold and sleepy.

Iliiryana sheathed Cylithera's scimitars and reached out to grab Ki-Riss from Black Swan. "At last, this mighty blade is mine and now I have the power to make it do my bidding! I see you will be an excellent slave after all," she gloated. Black Swan merely bowed her head deeper and held the blade up for Iliiryana to take.

As she placed her hand on the sword, the dully flickering gem in the hilt flared into a bright golden light and the black blade shone with the power of a thousand suns. Black Swan held onto the blade to the best of her ability, concentrating on it as hard as she could. Iliiryana staggered about, blinded by the light, drawing Cylithera's scimitars and swinging blindly. She roared furiously as she struck her own altar and some nearby Rûsvàlki who were bold enough to step up to try and help their creator. "How could this be?" she shrieked angrily before spitting out a harsh syllable to restore her sight.

The light grew stronger, more concentrated, burning all of the Rûsvàlki and scorching Iliiryana's skin but leaving the companions unharmed. Instead, they grew more and more whole, their wounds closing up. Only Judar remained lifeless in the brilliant glow. "We can deal with her from here," offered Tindariel, intact aside from some bruising. "Stop, you'll kill yourself!" she yelled, noticing that Black Swan had grown extremely pale and her raven hair was greying.

Ignoring Tindariel, Black Swan forced herself up, still holding her sword aloft. Determined to end it once and for all, she stepped up to Iliiryana, who struck at her with Cylithera's scimitars repeatedly. Each attack got parried off by the mighty hand-and-a-half sword and soon Iliiryana found herself retreating ever so slightly. "Come on, kill me. You know you want to. You've said so yourself, you've waited millennia to do this," taunted Iliiryana, putting the scimitars down and baring her chest.

It was incredibly tempting for Black Swan to thrust the blade into Iliiryana, to end it all right there. She had been violated by this woman, witnessed the cruelty within her, and this was her chance to redeem herself in the eyes of her Sarkany. All it took would be a cut or a thrust of the blade to end the abomination that called herself the Clawed Fury, she who corrupted nearly half of the Sidhe population by melding them with the S'vartalf and murdered other gods for power. In Black Swan's eyes, this woman committed greater atrocities than anyone else she had encountered, other dark deities and herself included.

"Frontier Justice her!" called out Billy-Joe and Tindariel.

"Give her one last chance," pleaded Ilithara. "I'll take full responsibility if she does more horrible things in the future."

"Slay me and all will be clean," cackled Iliiryana madly, still exposing herself. "Purify the world as Cylithera did when she slew Eventhrel Thorondarien in the name of the Tindarien Dalithariel!"

Black Swan bowed her head once more, holding her weapon up. Heat flowed through her body as the radiant light engulfed her. "I won't," she said flatly. "Take my life, if you will, but I will not slay you. I cannot raise my blade against a helpless opponent but you have no power over me!" Her voice developed many clanging notes even as her hair went entirely white before everyone's eyes.

"Battier than an outhouse bat," whispered Billy-Joe, shocked at Black Swan's change of actions. "Ilithara, why in tarnation do you want that witch alive? She's your sister and all, but why?"

"I think she's gonna say 'oops' any moment," grumbled Tindariel. "This is the most serious one I've seen. Ilithara, if we survive this, you're gettin' Frontier Justiced with a side

of whoop-ass for givin' her that idea!"

Killer chirped something incoherent before squawking. "My guts hurt," he whined before letting off a loud, smelly fart.

Roaring like a mighty panther, Iliiryana then seized the scimitars again and charged straight into Black Swan, who offered minimal resistance but continued to focus her energy into the sword and stood her ground. Again, the scimitars struck her true, but the Sarkany refused to move. Inky tendrils surrounded Black Swan as well, further fueling her fighting frenzy. Instead of bleeding to death from the numerous wounds from the Clawed Fury, golden fire poured from her body with greenish blood that burned in the air. Black Swan suddenly let out a loud, triumphant clanging roar as her form suddenly expanded into the golden-scaled draconian creature she once was. Her sword, Ki-Riss, glowed with a light that energized the companions even as it continued to burn at Iliiryana.

"Whoever has not forsaken me, let it be heard that I give my life so that she may live. I forgive her now and forever," whispered Black Swan, still holding steady. "Take my blood instead of hers."

A cold iron manacles formed around Iliiryana's ankles and try as she might, she couldn't even dent the chains on her. Cylithera's scimitars slipped out from between the bars, landing before Black Swan's feet. "No! How could this be? Why couldn't you have just killed me? I can't stand to be imprisoned!" screamed Iliiryana furiously. She sent several inky tendrils out in hopes of snaring the life out of anyone or anything else, hoping to gain the strength to destroy the chains that held her. Cold iron was almost unbreakable for Sidhe, but unlike pure gold, it did not impede her powers.

The inky tendrils wrapped themselves around Ilithara, who tried to dodge them and hack them apart, but to no avail. The mark on her arm darkened and she could see the injury open back up and fester. Tindariel, Killer and Billy-Joe tried to break her free, but the tentacles also wrapped themselves around them. Killer, in particular, took the brunt of the tentacles to shield Tindariel from them. "You're not going to hurt or kill any more of my buddy-o-pals!" he shrieked defiantly even as he could feel the life flow out of him. Flailing about madly and biting whatever he could, he was able to set Billy-Joe and Tindariel free, sending them flying. By the time he could finally reach Ilithara, he could see her covered in blood and ichor, her eyes slowly glazing over in death. Desperate to free her, he bit the tentacles that held her, dropping her to the ground in the process. The last of the deadly strands wrapped themselves around the mighty parakeet. All the while, Black Swan could do little more than focus her powers and finally, an explosion of radiant light struck Iliiryana again, breaking off the tendrils and surrounding her in a cage made of pure gold.

Cursing endlessly, Iliiryana could do little more than flail madly in the gold cage. Tindariel knelt down before Killer and Ilithara and tried to use the spell that Cylithera had taught her, but to no avail. "Tindariel, I'm gonna miss you," squawked Killer feebly as his parakeet form began to melt away into that of a tall, stocky human in his late thirties with reddish brown hair and a bushy beard with hints of grey.

"I guess this might be the last adventure together for a while," whispered Ilithara. "But I'm sure we'll have more together in the future," she added optimistically even through the pain.

Black Swan lifted her head and nuzzled both Killer and Ilithara with her nose. "We make our final journeys together, as well as Judar," she said, her breathing heavily labored. "Tindariel and Billy-Joe, be strong. Your time to rejoin us will come, your stories have yet

to be fully told.” Drained of all her strength, Black Swan let out another roar before falling to the ground, no longer engulfed in non-consuming flames. Greenish blood poured to the ground and she feebly opened her eyes. Ki-Riss’ glow diminished as the life ebbed from Black Swan, but the amber gem continued to give a warm light.

Billy-Joe roared, ”You killed our friends, Iliiryana!” Angrily, he tried to bash the cage bars to get to her, but a massive shock sent him flying backwards. Tindariel, too, hurled anything she could at Iliiryana, furious at their companions’ deaths. Their cries of rage, sorrow, and grief shook the entire land, as did the outraged noises of the Rûsvàlki.

## 9 Epilogue

### 9.1 The Sentence

Standing in the gold cage before the Council of the Gods was especially miserable for Iliiryana N’Shad-Daermon, the Clawed Fury. Huorn opened up his massive book and read aloud. ”By the contracts we have established as the Council, we will now sentence our transgressor, Iliiryana N’Shad-Daermon, daughter of Tanilthara N’Shad-Daermon and Baelnorn Clawstaff,” he started in his nasal, monotone voice. ”She is guilty of the following crimes: stealing sequestered divine powers, murdering Aeondar, Gwaeron and Thormald, attempted murders of Galka, Oroszlan, and Cylithera, breaking the clauses of deityhood as established by the Council, refusing to sign the Contract of Deityhood, attempting to usurp power from Cylithera Eaglestrike the rightful Keeper of Dûnhèasa, causing deliberate mayhem in the Council, and creating the Rûsvàlki without authorization from the Council.”

The gods murmured amongst each other at the long list of crimes Iliiryana had committed. ”And while we are debating the fate of Iliiryana N’Shad Dearmon, we also will speak about Cylithera Eaglestrike, who openly violated the Contract. If you don’t mind my opinion, I advocate both be punished according to the Statues within Article 4, Section 4, Paragraph 10 for such blatant disregard for the rules laid out. Iliiryana’s actions also warrant punishments according to the Statues within Article 6, Section 9, Paragraph 1.” Several gods frantically looked in the books in front of them, trying to figure out what rules and laws Huorn was talking about.

”I propose that we execute her so we never have to deal with such an atrocity again!” declared Ilberath. ”An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. As for Cylithera, I recommend stripping her of deityhood and returning her to mortality. Yes, she saved us, but she violated the Contract. They cancel out.”

”No, Black Swan gave her life for Iliiryana. The blood debt is paid,” challenged Ildathra, once more whole. ”My Champion told me everything about both Cylithera and Iliiryana. Let Cylithera go, she is only guilty of following her conscience and she knew it was a risk that had to be taken.”

”I speak on Iliiryana’s behalf,” said Ceanothis, in her matronly form with leaves and vines barely covering her. ”What she did was in the interest of the land, which has been defiled unnecessarily by mortal hands. She acted with her conscience more than anything else. Surely, that must be worth something, as are her accomplishments in restoring much of the wilds on Terrios. I will not support any sentence that will fetter her any further! I also will speak on Cylithera’s behalf because she too, seeks to protect the land. Just as an

ecosystem needs its predators, it also needs its prey. Cylithera is the prey now, Iliiryana is the predator. For the sake of balance, let them be, forget the petty rules set up by Huorn!”

”And I will speak on her side because we do have a bit of an imbalance of too many goody-two-shoes and apathetic bums,” sneered Solron. ”She did break a lot of rules, yes, but why punish her only? Did Cylithera not also defy the Contract by acting on her own will and assisting those pesky adventurers and lead to Black Swan’s untimely death? I’d say punish Cylithera for excessively meddling against the clauses that Huorn brought up.”

Athtar stood up. ”I do not condone Iliiryana’s actions and I most certainly do not condone Cylithera’s actions. But because Iliiryana was outside of our jurisdiction, we should give her a lesser punishment as fit within the statues in Article 1, Section 1 than what Cylithera will get because Cylithera blatantly violated the Contract. And my friend Solron pointed out that we are rather unbalanced. Allow Iliiryana to remain as a deity so we don’t have so many on the forces of light. After all, does it not state in Article 1, Section 5 that there must be a fair balance, both in allocation of power and in numbers between the opposing forces?” Several of the younger gods rolled their eyes at the Righteous Hand (or as they preferred to call him, the Corrupt Hand).

”Partially agreed, yes, Cylithera, too, must be punished,” said Huorn in his snivelly, nasal, whiny voice. ”I also recall that by the clauses stated in Article 10, Section 5, Cylithera has gone beyond openly breaking our rules, although Iliiryana has committed crimes of utmost atrocity. Under Article 69, Section 3, these crimes she has committed weigh far more than Cylithera’s blatant disregard of the Contract.”

”I know we are divided on what to do with both Cylithera and Iliiryana, but we should not judge either so harshly. As Ceanothis said, Iliiryana acted in what she thought was best for Dûnhèasa, as did Cylithera. Their opinions differ and Huorn, is it not in Article 1, Section 2 that the deities, even the lowly Tuatha Lords, are to put their charges before their own interests?” said Yavanë, watching Ilberath closely to make sure the blind god of justice didn’t lose his temper and punch the wrong thing.

Galka and Oroszlan listened to the crossfire between their fellow gods and sighed, knowing that a debate like this could linger for weeks, if not months. As much as they wished to speak on behalf of Cylithera and help condemn Iliiryana, all they could do by the strictures of the Contract was listen, analyze, and if necessary, moderate. They had no vote unless a tie-breaker was needed, in which case they, along with Olorin, would debate amongst themselves and express the final verdict.

Ooklid, a blob-like creature with a thousand eyes that shifted about randomly on its brownish-pink body with greenish splotches, burbled, ”Punish them hard, they are illogical! Give them to me to experiment on! I want my land back from the Veil!” Just about everyone ignored Ooklid, the former god of technology and industry, now the god of filth and decay (and insanity). Once, Ooklid had been a highly respected god, but the aftermath of the Godsfall left it completely feeble-minded and only obsessed with decomposition, fungi, and dirt. Were it not for the vital role of decomposition and Ceanothis’ request for some assistance in handling these matters, the rest of the Council would’ve banished or even destroyed him. After all, even gods needed some help cleaning up every now and then and Ooklid served as a convenient and essential garbage disposal even if he were rather unpleasant to deal with from his stench. Solron tossed Ooklid an apple core after having finished eating the rest of the apple. The filthy god belched happily when he caught Solron’s gift.

Grinning eagerly, Gildharain suggested, ”Why not sentence Iliiryana to being part of the

Council? When Black Swan gave her life, it put Iliiryana's name in that darned Book of Contracts. So technically, she's no longer guilty of not being signed on the contracts and she's stuck following the clauses, including having to come to these boring meetings. And for Cylithera, why not just let her with maybe a week locked up with Huorn? She saved us, so why should we punish her with more than just a reminder of what trying to take too much control can lead to?"

Olorin, too, listened intently to everyone's arguments, weighing them cautiously. "Please let this debate go fast, I have some people I need to escort home!" thought the hermaphroditic god. Galka and Oroszlan shared the same sentiments, as did Ildathra.

Cylithera fidgeted uncomfortably, as did Iliiryana and while they glared daggers at each other, they made no motion to attack each other. Huorn continued to bring up various clauses and articles from the contract, stimulating debate and argument from everyone, particularly Athtar and Solron. Gildharain's eyes began to glaze over from boredom and frustration, while Ildathra sighed at the long-winded speeches from Huorn. At least Solron was a gifted and persuasive speaker, even if many others didn't agree with his perspective. It was a relief for the more impulsive gods that Iesu wasn't there to preach on top of drag on the debates, so busy was he on Terrios. On the other hand, having Gwaeron and Thormald around would've helped hasten the debates, particularly with Gwaeron's habit of offering Frontier Justice as needed.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of listening to arguments back and forth about Cylithera and Iliiryana, Olorin called out, "It is time for us to come to a decision. Please write forth your verdict and place it in this box before me."

Far away, in what was once the beautiful city of Memnon, in a secluded cave below the ground, Angharradh, known as the Shadowhawk, suddenly felt something rustling deep within her chest. "Gwaeron," she murmured to herself, though none would have heard the statue speak. "The time comes ever so close, yet ever so slow." She knew that Iliiryana had been set back yet again, but the Clawed Fury would bounce back again. The measures taken by the Council would only slow her down, buy them more time until they could figure out what to do with her.

When the time was right, they would liberate her from this statue form, helpless to do little more than speak to those who would listen and perhaps offer trinkets that would help. One day, the Five, five brave Terrians with the blood of the Q'adim, Tuonela, Arnor, and the various Tuatha, will find her and undo the curse that kept her immobilized. Together, with help from Cylithera, Oroszlan, and Gildharain, they would help keep Iliiryana in check. It was very unlikely that the threat of the Clawed Fury would completely go away from what she had observed from afar, but the least she could do was guide those who had the courage to protect others from her.

"I will seek each of you out when the time comes. Romelle Holgersson, Grace Xinthong, Lance Cano, Candace Rosales, and Kevin Starr. You will not be alone on your journeys, for I will reach out to others, but you have been chosen to be my Five Champions," she whispered, sending images of the lone statue into each of their minds. Already, she had reached out to Romelle, the eldest of the Five and she had chosen to accept the calling. "You will be the shining beacons of light in the darkness, the ones who will protect your fellow Terrians from the Clawed Fury and her Rûsvàlki," she promised.

Even as she anticipated the rise of her – and the Tuatha Lords' – Champions, she knew

Iliiryana would push her followers to try and break that prophecy. While the Clawed Fury herself was now bound by the Contract thanks to Black Swan's courage in the heart of Fury's Heart, that didn't mean that her followers would be bound. Firianna Celethorn, her High Priestess and Champion, was still a grave threat, as were her two highest officers, Berúthiel Maegliriel and Borondir Herúromen. Yes, she did want to personally get into honorable combat with Iliiryana face-to-face after that incident in the Rannarak Empire, but it was not her overarching drive. If Black Swan could ultimately forgive Iliiryana and even give her life to give her another chance, then Angharradh would do the same. For the time being, all she could do was wait, watch, and advise.

## 9.2 Reunion at the Crossroad

Killer woke up on some really squishy mud that smelled really bad to him. A stale wind whirled about him and he looked through blurry vision at the grey, dead landscape that he was sure had less topography than a flat mirror. Ilithara lay next to him, murmuring incoherently in Dhaerow, while Black Swan was curled up in her draconian form not far away. He then realized that something wasn't quite right about himself. He looked at what he thought were his wings to find that he had hands once more and that he no longer had the zygodactyl toes, but rather human feet. "I'm a man again!" he gasped. "I have a working spout again and two holes instead of one!" Then he looked at himself and realized something else when he noticed that he could see certain parts of himself.

"Ya ninny, put some clothes on!" growled a rather gruff voice. Killer looked around to see a powerfully built dwarf with a grey turban on his head and a long inky beard that was neatly trimmed. Unlike Killer, the dwarf was in full armor that no longer showed signs of heavy wear and tear. On the chest-plate was the symbol of the Q'adim knights, a lion, eagle, and an oak tree. "Well, laddie, looks like we've done it."

"Judar!" cried out Killer, hugging the old dwarf. "You're back to normal too! Was just getting used to you being a parakeet without the dust!"

"It's called bathing," grumbled the dwarf, looking around to see who else was there.

Gently, he knelt down to wake up Ilithara and Black Swan, who both opened their eyes at the noises Killer and Judar had just made. "Are we there yet? Did I drink Mountain Dew or something? I feel awful!" asked Ilithara, yawning and struggling to get up. Unlike Killer, she was fully dressed and armored. Her blue-green eyes scanned the landscape and she groaned. "Not here again!"

"Wait, I shouldn't be here!" said Black Swan, looking around. "Unless there's something really up," she added. "I should be in Pelda."

While the friends reoriented themselves, three more figures appeared from nowhere and the stone tablet near them began to glow. Tanilthara and Clawstaff appeared, as did Rusty. "Russ!" cried out Killer eagerly, glad to see his canine companion and hugging the wolf-hound mutt.

*Killer! You're back to being a human! Couldn't the gods have clothed you at least? That floppy thing is a tempting chew toy!* Rusty wagged his tail eagerly and nuzzled the large, bearded man.

"Wait, Russ, you're not dead, are you?" asked Killer, putting one and one together to make two.

"We are. Parakeet Hall went down in a rather spectacular explosion. The creatures called Rûsvàlki came down on us and ambushed us and we triggered the rune of ultimate destruction to save the rest of Palindor from them," said Clawstaff, no longer hunched over or flatulent. If anything, to Killer's eyes, he was the best he ever looked, still slender and frail-looking, but no longer like a decrepit old man as he was for the last several centuries after his botched attempt at deityhood.

"What about the others? What about those kids?" wondered Ilithara as she hugged Tanilthara and Clawstaff.

"Everyone else made it safe. Baelnorn and I had to activate that special rune we built once upon a time and Rusty got trapped in the cataclysm. Imladrien and Tinúvion almost didn't make it, but Rusty dragged them out before returning to herd any more stragglers. They were the last and Rusty couldn't get out in time," said Tanilthara sadly. "But we are at peace now. It is time for a new era in Palindor, one where new heroes can spring forth. Our stories are reaching a new chapter."

Even as the friends embraced each other in both joy and sorrow at seeing each other at the Crossroad, they looked about warily, knowing that Iliiryana's followers or worse could be anywhere. There were also other entities awaiting their destinies, mostly benevolent or at least ambivalent, but some possibly malevolent as well. Ilithara then leaped over to read the writing on the stone tablet to see if any of it made any sense to her.

*To Baelnorn "Clawstaff" Aurindale and Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon, eternal peace shall be granted to them within the Secluded Academy, to which Olorin will escort them personally. To Ilithara N'Shad-Daermon, because of her courage and convictions, shall be sent to Freedom's Spire, where Ildathra Shadowdancer will escort her personally. To Kealdhan "Killer" Aurindale and Rusty of the Imlad Estel, a choice lays before both of them because of a petition from Cylithera Eaglestrike, granted by Ceanothis, the Sphere of Life and Death. To Judar ibn Rasoul, a place in the Gardens of Healing is ready for him to finally rest his weary bones after millennia of service to the Triad. To Gilrain "Black Swan" Turamarth, a choice shall be granted to her because of her actions, not only of late, but through the millennia.*

"Then maybe it's not all over for you, brother," said Clawstaff, clapping his significantly larger and stronger twin brother on the back. Though the wizard still was balding, the hairs remaining on his head were now reddish-brown, not white. He smiled. "I'm just glad to be rid of this rheumatism, arthritis, and gastritis."

"So what do we do now that we know where we're supposed to go?" asked Ilithara.

"Wait, I suppose," said Black Swan, smiling as best as her crocodilian face would allow her. "There is still much to be done here and beyond, but others will have to pick up where we left off and clean up the damage we've done." She sighed at the site of the muddy Crossroad and the thought of Rûsvàlki running around on the loose.

Tanilthara nodded to Ilithara, smiling. "I know things are far from perfect anywhere, but while we wait, you don't happen to have a deck of cards or anything to help pass the time?"