

## TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

### I

**“Twenty-four hours?”**

**“That’s correct, Kalifax. At sunset tomorrow, you will be brought to the public square and beheaded for your crime. Twenty-four hours, you elven bastard. Use it well.”**

### II

**My name is Karan Kalifax Iraltis. I am--or was--a Prince of my people, the Kalay’n elves. For years my people have been outcasts--spurned by our elven brethren; hated by the human kingdoms; and scorned by the dwarves. Even the Lesser Races (minotaurs, orks, gnomes, Nightstalkers, ghouls, goblins--races no civilized being cared about) considered us beneath them. The fact that we are ostracized from the human, dwarven, and Lesser Race circles is of little concern to us--these days, no one allies with people of other races. It is the fact that our own brothers--children of Geyanna, goddess of the forests--have turned their backs on us that hurts us the most. Why do they not care? It is difficult to tell--the relationship between the Kalay’n and the other elven tribes is as it has been for millennia--even the oldest amongst us does not remember the reason. According to legend, when the races were young, before the Great Conflict of the Races, a small group of Kalay’nika elves angered their emperor by committing a heinous crime, although just what that crime was is no longer known. These elves--male and female--were outcast from the Kalay’nika and forced to seek refuge in the forests, apart from all the tribes, apart from all the races. This small group became the Kalay’n (the shortened form of the father tribe’s name, a sign of disgrace).**

**And so my people lived their lives in solitude. Survival was--and is--the largest problem; since the Kalay’nika had cast us out, all the other elven tribes were obligated to spurn us as well. And as for asking aid from the humans or dwarves or anyone of the Lesser Races--we had too much pride to admit we need help from anyone not an elf. And so my people became a race of bandits, stealing what we need from cities. We lived by thievery for thousands of years. When any of my people were caught, justice was swift--and justice took many forms, depending on who was dispensing it--human, dwarf, elf, and so on.**

**Over the years, then, in order to avoid being caught and punished, my people developed a new discipline, which is still very much alive to this day. From the moment he begins to walk, every Kalay’n boy is taught this**

art--an art we call Kij'isti, a Kalay'n word which means "silent motion." It is the art of moving silently, within the shadows, so that one is invisible to the eyes and ears. We are proud to say that any Kalay'n thoroughly trained in the art of Kij'isti can be placed on a field of small, loose pebbles in the dead of night, wearing a suit of armor three sizes too big, and festooned with tiny bells, and walk a straight line without making a sound. We are able to move all throughout the land silently, making us ideal thieves, spies, or assassins--which many of my people have been hired to be on many occasions. You see, the political climate in our world is none too stable. As I mentioned before, many millennia ago, the land of Mowendale--the land we live in--was torn apart by a Great Conflict of the Races. Here, too, no one is sure just what began the Great Conflict, but the legends we tell our children say that it began when a king of one of the human tribes became offended after losing at a game of Kiess--a game of elven invention--to the emperor of the Kilme'eani--one other of the elven tribes. The human king rushed back to his people and gathered his armies and attacked the Kilme'eani. The dwarves aided the humans, and the elves all banded together (except for the Kalay'n, of course--we were by this time outcast from elven society) to fight this common foe. However, the alliance of the elves didn't last long, for apparently the rest of the elves became angered at the Kilme'eani for bringing this trouble down upon them. Soon, with the inevitable involvement of the Lesser Races, the conflict degenerated to a total free-for-all, with everybody killing anybody not of his tribe on sight. After many years the bloodshed ceased and became instead an uneasy deadlock. Each race turned its back upon each other race. It was considered a heinous crime to have any sort of relationship with anyone not of your own tribe or race. Trade between the individual nations evaporated, and so society in general degenerated to our level--the world began stealing to survive. Kalay'n warriors were hired and paid--in secret, of course--to teach members of other races Kij'isti. Many did, charging high prices and offering sloppy lessons. Some were paid highly, some were killed. The punishment for any crime was death. Cooperation between races was a thing of the past.

### III

Such was the political climate of our world when I was born, and such was the political climate throughout my life. I grew up on Kij'isti tactics, learned to use a longbow and use a broadsword, and became most adept at the art of camouflage. Then, on my three hundredth birthday, I was given my coming-of-age present.

In elven society, regardless of tribe, the three hundredth year is known as the Kab'hilyana, the Year of Manhood. It is a time when elven males are expected to take a wife or two and become fathers and masters of their

houses. At Kab'hilyana, the men are told that they must begin providing for their forthcoming families and making a name for themselves in society. They also receive a coming-of-age present, given by their eldest surviving male relative. The present varies according to family--sometimes a new longbow, sometimes a shield, sometimes a Kij'isti suit--a black skintight uniform with a blood red facemask.

(For females, the coming of age is a little different. Kab'hiliffa--Year of Womanhood--occurs at age two hundred seventy-three, and is thought to be the time when a woman is capable of bearing children. When she reaches Kab'hiliffa, the woman is presented to any man who has shown interest in her. If he chooses, the man will then take her as his wife--adding her to his K'heer. Once she has been wed, the woman is expected to bear children, to cook, clean, and tend house.)

I remember my Kab'hilyana very well--after all, it was only a few years ago. As Prince of my people I deserve a lavish ceremony, and I certainly received it. The entire community (or those of us who weren't raiding human and dwarven villages) turned out and cheered, dancing and singing my praises. A fair was held, featuring "Torture-The-Humans"--a game wherein the object is to make your human scream louder than your opponents--and dunking booths (especially fun--we use Dwarves, and they can't swim!). Sumptuous feasts were held, and there was much revelry and noise and fun. Then came the time for the official ceremony. Actually, that's the worst part of the whole thing--just a lot of elders speaking in Olde Elven (which nobody uses anymore) and praying to the gods and goddesses for the well-being and success of the Hilyana--me, in this case--and sprinkling water all over the place. Then, when they finished, the eldest surviving relative--in my case, my father, Emperor of my people--briefly recounted my life story and presented me with the coming-of-age gift. This was the part I had been waiting for.

Amid much music and shouting, the Royal Guard carried a large, solid-gold cage into the square. The cage was covered in a green cloth emblazoned with my family crest surrounded by the symbols of our gods and goddesses. They set it down in front of me and whipped off the cloth. There, inside the cage, wearing an iron collar around her neck and shackles on wrists and ankles, was a human female.

#### IV

What a gift! A human female! And just about the right age, maybe seventeen or eighteen human years, just past her Kab'hiliffa! A perfect start to my K'heer! I thanked my father profusely and prepared to retire to my rooms, with my present. The news was spread that I was going to

retire, and there were many loud guffaws and laughs from my friends--they knew what was coming!

I said earlier that it is considered a crime to become friends with someone of another tribe or race. That needs some clarification. It is only a crime if A) you are caught by a member of the race to which your partner belongs, or B) members of your race find you becoming romantically attached to a member of another race. Raping someone not of your race is not considered a crime by your peers, and having a human woman in my K'heer was not considered unseemly by my tribesmen--provided, of course, that I did not fall in love with her.

Alone in my room with my new possession, I smiled. I quickly stripped off my shirt and went to unlock her cage. I stopped for a moment and eyed the beauty. Her skin was pure alabaster, unblemished. Her hair was black as the raven's wing, and her lips red as blood. She needed no makeup to accentuate her beauty. My father and his friends had dressed her in a skimpy outfit that did little to hide her beauty--just the opposite, in fact, her clothing served to enhance it. The cage was large enough for me to stand in, so I went in and took my prize's hand. At my touch, she did not cringe and shrink away, which is what I would have expected. I peered into her eyes. They were distant, as though she had been drugged--although I knew she hadn't; although ordinarily no Kalay'n would think twice about drugging a human female, this one was meant for me and, as such, no one could harm her in any way. What could be the explanation for her look, then? Confused, not knowing what to do, I undid her manacles, then sat down, stroking the back of her hand, the fire in my loins dying quickly.

"What is your name?" I asked. When she did not reply, I asked again, this time in human. When I repeated a second time in human, she turned and looked at me--no, it was more as though she looked through me. Her eyes--her eyes were so very beautiful, black as the night sky, darker even than her hair. Her lips trembled, then she muttered something I couldn't quite catch. I leaned in, and asked her gently to repeat. "J. . . Ju. . . Julia," she said. "Julia of House. . . H. . ." she lost control and began crying. I held her close, feeling nothing except pity and a slight stab of fear. Was something wrong with her? No longer did I think about passion. Now I just wanted her to relax, to be comfortable with me. I slowly rocked her back and forth as she cried unashamedly on my shoulder. "Shh, shh, there, there, it's okay, my flower. I'll not harm you. . . Juhliah." The human name sounded strange on my lips. Her crying abated, and she pushed herself off me, using her hair to wipe her face clean.

"Th. . . thank you. I'm s-s-sorry. It won't happen again. . . m'lord." This last she said in a resigned voice, as she reached back behind her to undo

her outfit. I stopped her. "Wait. That's not necessary. You belong to me. Time enough for that"--I waved at my bed-- "later. Right now, I want to get to know you. Tell me about yourself. You are. . . Juhliah. . . of which House?"

She stared at me incredulously, then took her hands from behind her back and folded them in her lap. "House Braddenei, m'lord."

"And, please, don't call me 'm'lord.' My name is Karan Kalifax Iraltis. Call me Kalifax."

"All right, Kal-li-fahkz," she said, sounding out each syllable.

"House Braddenei?" I asked. "Is it a big one?"

"My father is King of the Northern Peoples, m'lo--Kali-fahkz."

I whistled. So my coming-of-age present was a Northern princess! "How long since last you saw your family?"

"Not long. A few days is all. I was walking down the street just before sunset--my father decreed that we must all be home safe before sunset, to avoid. . ." I nodded. "Go on."

"All of a sudden these. . . black shapes dropped out of nowhere! I didn't know what to do! They had be bound and gagged before I could even think to scream! I. . ." Here she began to cry again. She threw herself at me and began crying on my shoulder. Even as I comforted her, I couldn't help but smile--she had just described some of my dearest friends, members of the Royal Guard, using their Kij'isti mastery to claim my present. And yet, as I thought that, I couldn't help but feel angry--suppose that some other elven tribe had done that to my sister? I stroked her back and lightly kissed her ear. "I'm sorry," I muttered. Hearing this, Julia tensed up, but after a second she relaxed again and began stroking my back. "They treated me fine, fed me well, gave me baths every so often--then, this morning, they scrubbed me good--they had some eunuchs do it I suppose--" I didn't know what a eunuch was, but I assumed she was using the human word for K'held'ieyn, a sexless servant. "Then they dressed me in this and put me in that cage, with those shackles. I didn't know what they were going to do, but I could guess. . . I just didn't care. I think I hoped you'd kill me quickly, or that I could just pretend to be somewhere else while you. . ." at this point she pushed away from me and stood up in front of me. She reached back and undid her outfit, despite my protestations. She held out her hand to me and helped me stand, then drew me to her and kissed me, hard. She led me out of the cage, over to my bed. . .

So began one of the most remarkable relationships in elven history, and one which would eventually lead to my downfall. Instead of just using Julia to satisfy my urges whenever I wanted, I got to know her. I married seven other women, all elves, and loved them all, but was never as close to any of them as I was to Julia. There was just something about her that I found alluring. It wasn't just her body, although that was without match in my K'heer--elven women are all alike; tall, blonde, and looking like they've been carved out of marble. No, it was more than that. Julia excited me because she was intelligent and not afraid to speak her mind, even though she knew full well that I had it in my power to have her mercilessly beaten, or even killed. And she was a huntress. We would spend many hours debating over different ways of hunting elk--longbow versus crossbow, different kinds of traps, things of that nature. Too, she began to affect the way I thought. In the past, when I saw an elven man kill a dwarf or rape a human woman, I thought nothing of it--would even congratulate him. But now, the sight of human women being raped and beaten began to turn my stomach. Not that Julia directly brought this change about, by telling stories of a civilized human world where rape and murder didn't exist--far from it. In fact, she often told me with pride about killings she had made. No, it was the fact that I had a human woman in my possession that led to my change in attitude. Spending time with Julia opened my eyes to something that I had been blind to from birth--humans were people, too. They laughed, cried, loved, hated, ate, slept, dreamed. . . they weren't that different from us, when you got right down to it.

As time went on, I began treating Julia less and less like a possession, or slave, or even wife; and more and more like a good friend. I spent most of my time with her, riding horses, engaging in target practice, and even the occasional wrestling match--which would inevitably end in an entirely different kind of wrestling altogether. And, as time went by I began granting her more and more freedom--dangerously so. I say "dangerously" because I was allowing her to go where she pleased pretty much when she pleased, and as a result ran a serious risk that she would be kidnapped or, worse, killed. I also found myself granting her more favors. Then, one day, a few years after my Kab'hilyana, she took me completely by surprise. I was in my bed with one of my elven wives, just relaxing, when she came in. I sent the other wife away and motioned to Julia to join me. She climbed onto the bed and kissed me, then snuggled in close, resting her head against my shoulder and twining her fingers in my long blond hair. "Kali-fahkz?" she asked (even though years had passed we still had trouble with each others' names).

**“Yes, my dove?”**

**“I have a favor to ask.”**

**“Anything. Ask and it shall be yours. More clothing? Jewelry? A K’held’ieyn, perhaps? Anything your heart desires, my dear, I will be more than happy to provide.”**

**“I want to see my family.”**

**I was taken completely by surprise, although in retrospect I guess I should have seen this coming. You see, elves are very close to their families--in fact, elven families are only separated by K’haade (Mistress Death. It is said that the last courtship any elven man will undergo is the one with K’haade). And I had been told that humans felt much the same about their families. I lay there quietly some time, considering. If Julia wanted to see her family, that meant that I would lose her, for as soon as anyone from her tribe saw her she would be rescued. She certainly couldn’t introduce me to her father--I’d be killed in an instant. And yet. . .**

**“Kali-fahkz?”**

**I didn’t answer right away, but rather stroked her hair and kissed her mouth. The beginnings of a plan were forming in my mind. . .**

## **VI**

**That night, I personally escorted Julia to the outer boundaries of her tribe’s home. As we approached, riding silently on our horses, I could sense Julia’s excitement growing (and along with it, my own sense of. . . what? Fear? Sadness at losing her?) When the lights of her city came into view she drew in a quick breath, then let it out silently. She looked over to me and smiled, tears in her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you so much.” We stopped our horses and dismounted. She turned to me. “I’ll only be gone a while. A few hours at most. You can hide in these trees, if you want. When I come back. . .” I held up a hand.**

**“You’re not coming back, Juhliah,” I said. She stared at me, confusion brewing in her wonderful eyes.**

**“What do you mean? Of course I am. I’m only going. . .” Again I stopped her.**

**“No. I am granting you your freedom. You are no longer my slave. You are free, my love.”**

She looked at me with uncomprehending eyes for some time, then those eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Kali-fahkz. . . you're serious! But. . . I love you! I want to stay with you!" But even as she said this last she was looking to her home with longing.

"Go," I said. "I will visit you. Don't ask how," I held up a hand, stopping her, "but I will come to visit you, I swear by Geyana. Now go!"

She threw herself into my arms and kissed me long and hard. Then she was gone.

## VII

Explaining the disappearance of my first (and favorite) wife was an easy matter--I put it on the head of one of the K'held'ieyn and had him hanged. The poor sexless servant was innocent, of course, but such is life. Nobody asked questions, partly because I was Prince of my people, but also because many of my brethren didn't like Julia that much. Certainly the rest of my wives were happy with her disappearance, as were many fathers of recent Hiliffa. I took another wife soon after I let Julia go.

As I promised, I intended to visit Julia. It would have been better if I had not made that promise, better if I had just let her go.

## VIII

Although the Kalay'n have been at war with anybody not Kalay'n since time out of mind, there have been occasional (secret) instances of friendship between one of my people and a member of another race. I myself had such a relationship--two, in fact. There was Julia, and then there was a man named Greywolf.

Greywolf was a hunter who lived and worked in the city of the Northern human tribe--Julia's tribe. He and I had wed one night, a few years before I met Julia, quite by accident. It was on a night when I was hunting a gryphen. Greatly daring (and rather foolish), I had tracked it to its lair and was preparing to set a trap for it when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, another creature, also setting a trap for my gryphen. Outraged, I jumped at the shape, and received a sharp kick in the jaw for my trouble. I recovered quickly, though, and launched myself at my aggressor, who, I discovered, was a tall, lanky human. We rolled about on the floor of the gryphen cave for some time, neither of us able to gain an advantage. Suddenly we were interrupted by a loud cawing sound--the gryphen had come home. Greywolf was taken by surprise, and hesitated--a hesitation I used to kick



him into the gryphen's path and make good my escape. However, when I got out of the cave, I realized that I had dropped my best sword, and had to turn around and get it. Greywolf was wrestling the gryphen and losing. I retrieved my sword and stood watching the contest. Then it occurred to me that, if the human died, the gryphen would want me next. Using my training, I climbed onto the cave walls and crept up to the ceiling, then worked my way along the ceiling until I was just above the gryphen. In one smooth move I dropped, swung around, drew my sword, and plunged it into the gryphen's skull, killing it instantly. I hopped to my feet and offered my hand to the human. He took it and pulled himself up, eyes wide.

"I'd heard stories of the elven abilities, but this is the first time I've seen them. Why did you not kill me as well?"

In truth, it hadn't occurred to me. "Waste of energy," I grunted. He smiled and held out his hand. "Greywolf. I would be honored if you would teach me, sir. I can pay you anything you like."

I stared at his hand. "What makes you think I'd teach you?"

"I couldn't say. I thought it was worth a try. For all I know you'll stab me in the back as soon as I try to leave. But we humans have an honor code. Most don't follow it, but I do. You saved my life. Even though you're an enemy elf, I pledge to do the same for you some day."

I regarded him for a moment, considering. After a while my mind was made up. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I said, taking his hand.

## IX

Thus began a most curious friendship. It was, of course, one that we had to maintain in absolute secrecy; a Kalay'n Prince caught in friendly situations with a human hunter would most certainly be killed, by either human or elf, and the same held true for Greywolf. Consequently we agreed to meet every fortnight at sunset in the gryphen's cave, where we knew we would not be disturbed (no sane creature would ever try to attack a gryphen on its home territory, and, gryphens being very territorial creatures, no other gryphen would attempt to roost there). I taught Greywolf the art of Kij'isti--without cheating him--and he paid me quite well in gold and silver. There was an edge to our friendship which I rather liked--an edge born of the fact that either of us, at any moment, might choose to dissolve the friendship and kill the other.

I had not seen Greywolf in some time, but rather felt that I could use him to aid me in keeping my promise to Julia. I sent a signal to him in our usual

fashion--we had trained a hawk to fly to each others' rooms on demand--and hoped he'd meet me there the night after I released Julia. He did not disappoint me.

"Kalifax! My friend! It is good to see you again," he said when I walked into our cave. He leapt up from his seat and embraced me hard, taking me by surprise (I hadn't seen him sitting there--he was getting better at Kij'isti all the time) and crushing the wind out of me.

"It's good to see you, as well, hunter," I said when I could breathe again.

"Tell me, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? I thought you'd forgotten me!"

"By no means, dear friend. But listen, I have news. Sit, sit! You're going to love this. Greywolf, my friend, I have fallen in love."

"Nothing unusual about that, is there? You're what, a couple of years past your Kab'hilyana, aren't you?"

"Yes. But this is no ordinary relationship, friend. This is a truly dangerous one. I am in love with Juhliah of House Braddenei."

Greywolf stared at me. I could see anger growing in his face. Clearly an explanation was in order. I told him the whole story--how Julia had been presented to me as a coming-of-age gift, how I found about her as a person, spent much of my time with her, and, just last night, released her. "But I promised her I'd see her again! I love her, Greywolf, and she loves me! But I can't just walk in and say hello! Her father would have me killed! Even if I had never lain with her, he would have me killed, just for being an elf! You see?"

Greywolf nodded. "And you'd like me to help."

"That is all I can ask. You know her, clearly. Can you get close to her? Good. Then all I ask is that you bring her to this cave tomorrow night, after everyone else has gone to sleep. Then return her in the morning before the wake-up call." In human cities, for some reason they pay a man to run up and down the streets each morning at a certain time, blowing a loud horn. "Please, my friend. Will you do it?"

Greywolf sat there silently for some moments before answering. "Yes. And, my friend, I wish you the best of luck in this most dangerous affair."

"Thank you, my friend."

## X

And so, every night for the next fortnight, Greywolf brought my love to the cave, and then, respectfully, waited outside and stood guard while we were together. Each night Julia would run into my arms, kiss me and tell me how much she loved me and how much she had missed me. Sometimes we would lay together, but for the most part we would just sit and talk, looking at each other. That fortnight was the most pleasant I had spent since I let her go. I never wanted it to end.

But sooner or later it had to.

## XI

One night, one and twenty nights after my first reunion with Julia, the whole dream came crashing down. I was waiting in the cave for her, as I had for the past fortnight. I heard horses' hooves and smiled. There were five horses, instead of the usual two, but I paid no heed to the extra amount. All I wanted was to see my Julia again. I stood up and waited for her to come in the cave. Instead of her entering, however, I heard her voice. "Kalifax? Come out here." There was a strained quality to the voice that I put down to tiredness. I wondered what she wanted to show me. I exited the cave, leaving my sword on the floor. . . and found myself attacked from behind. The attack came so swiftly that I had no time to even think before my arms were pinned behind my back and a dagger's point pressed against my throat. I could see Julia, sitting on her horse. There was a knife to her throat, as well, held by a man dressed in the armor of the Northern human army! Greywolf, too, sat on a horse, bound and gagged. The other three horses were unmanned, but I knew that their riders were holding me captive. The knight on Julia's horse spoke.

"Prince Karan Kalifax Iraltis, you are hereby charged with the kidnapping and rape of Julia of House Braddenei, Princess of the Northern Kingdoms. How do you plead?"

I had no chance to answer, because one of my captors kicked me behind my knee, causing me to crumple to the ground. I rolled and leapt up facing them, prepared to die fighting.

"I think that's a not guilty, Karl," said one of my captors to the knight on Julia's horse.

"Then I hereby decree that you will return to the Northern Kingdoms with us to stand trial. Men!" At Karl's command, the three knights who had

attacked me moved in. I fought--I wanted them to kill me! And I could tell that they wanted to kill me too. But human soldiers are very unlike elven soldiers. When the commanding officer gives an order it is obeyed to the letter. And this one had spoken. I was to be taken alive. They contented themselves with beating me nearly to death, then tied me up, kicking me and spitting on me every once in a while, and threw me onto one of the horses. Then one of them hit me in the head with his axe, and all was silent.

## XII

The trial was over quickly. The prosecutors presented two witnesses, Julia and Greywolf. Between them it was put on record that I had taken Julia hostage a few years back, but was forced to return her. But I still had her brought to me to satisfy my animal urges every night for a fortnight, enlisting the aid of a renegade hunter to do so. Julia, Geyana bless her, tried to clear my name, to set the truth on record, and for that I love her and am very grateful. But the human court didn't want the truth, they wanted my head. My defense advocate did nothing to aid me. The trial was over in a day and I was sentenced to a beheading in the city square the following sunset.

I was taken to the prison after the trial. I had my own cell, because if I had been put in a cell with any other prisoner I might have been killed, and the city people didn't want that. But there was a dwarf in the cell next to me. His name was Mek'takhken, of the Dil'ekho tribe, and his crime was a murder. He, too, was sentenced to death--his a death by hanging, early tomorrow morning.

He laughed when I returned to my cell after the trial. "So, elven scum, what'll it be? Burning at the stake? Gored by wild boars? Perhaps. . . perhaps they'll cut you up into tiny pieces and use you for fishing bait!"

"I am to be beheaded in the town square tomorrow at sunset."

Mek'takhken cackled. "Tomorrow! You have twenty-four hours to live!"

## XIII

Twenty-four hours, he'd said. Use it well. That I fully intend to do. I look around my cell. There has to be a way out!

The cell is a brick-and-mortar structure. I notice the mortar is old and crumbling. If I had a knife, I could chip away at it and open a hole fairly quickly. But they'd taken all my weapons. All I have is my Kij'isti uniform,

which I am wearing because I'd wanted to show it to Julia--she'd never seen it.

The uniform of a Kij'isti master is a skintight outfit that is loose enough to allow freedom of movement in any direction. The fabric is black silk reinforced at the seams with rawhide thread, woven in such a way so as not to cause chafing. The uniform is lined with thousands of pockets for all manner of small weaponry and magical components--Kij'isti masters being required, as part of our training, to have mastered a few defensive and attack spells. Only the wearer of the suit knows where each pocket is--even the most thorough search will only reveal half of them--because he can feel the objects in the pockets when he moves, although this causes no discomfort. The humans who had captured me had torn my suit in many places, searching for hidden pockets. But they hadn't found them all. And that means that I have a way out!

I hadn't had any weapons in the pockets--when I went to see Julia the only weapons I carried were my longsword and longbow. I felt no need for any more than that on my midnight excursions to see my love. However, on one of my previous visits, Julia had presented me with an amulet on a gold chain--her family symbol. "So that you will always remember me, even after. . ." I knew what she meant; elves live nearly ten times longer than humans. That amulet was the most touching present I think I had ever received. And it is going to save my life.

I find the pocket with the amulet, and draw it out. It is triangular, with half a circle poking over one side--like a pyramid with the sun rising over it. The points of the triangle are not particularly sharp, but they should work. I set to work, busily trying to chip away at the mortar, which gives way readily. This prison is probably more than six hundred years old.

As I finish freeing the first brick, not twenty minutes after I'd started, I become aware of someone walking down the hall. Quickly I put the amulet back in its pocket and try to cover up my work with my mattress. Just as I cover the hole, I see Greywolf walking towards my cell. His eyes dart this way and that, as though he fears being caught. That bastard. He had done nothing to try to assuage the judge, nothing to try to help me.

"Kalifax. I'm truly sorry, but there was nothing I could do." I don't answer, but just stare fixedly at his left shoulder. "My friend. Look. The judge would have sentenced you to death anyway. There was nothing I could do! Can't you see that?" I remain silent. Greywolf sighs. "Look, here's what I'm going to do. I can get you out of here, take you to see Julia. But that's all I can do, and I risk a charge of treason if I'm caught. But you are my friend, and I will get you out of here. After that. . ." I look him in the eye,

considering. What the hell. I'm a dead man anyway. I nod, briefly. Greywolf lets out a rush of air. "Good. Here's what we'll do. . ."

#### XIV

Three hours later, after sunset, most of the prison is asleep. Mek'takhken has been snoring loudly for the past two, and the guards are slowly nodding off. It's time. A black figure creeps towards my cell. Greywolf unlocks my door and gestures for me to come out. He is wearing his Kij'isti outfit, and utilizing his skills to the maximum degree. He and I walk slowly, silently down the hall to the door of the prison building, staying in the shadows. Once outside, he grabs my shoulders and says in a low voice, "Follow me. I will take you to your wife's room window, but then you are on your own." I nod, and we set off towards the Northern Castle. Julia's room is on the third floor, with a balcony and bay window. We climb up the wall, which is relatively easy given the wall's construction—all chipped stone with inches of mortar between the bricks, making for fantastic finger- and toe-holds. We drop onto the balcony without a sound, then Greywolf leans closer and whispered, "This is her room. I will get her attention, then I will leave you. If you should escape, I want you to promise that you will never, ever send the hawk again. The pledge I made at our first meeting is now fulfilled. I have been your friend, but from now on, we must be enemies. Do you understand?" I nod. Greywolf's eyes are filled with tears. "Then, goodbye my friend. And good luck." He embraces me quickly, then enters Julia's window. I hear muted voices; hers, then his. After a moment he jumps out the window, then aids my lady love in exiting onto the balcony. He flips me a quick salute, and then is gone.

Then Julia is in my arms again, and all thought of my trial and my upcoming courtship with K'haade flies out of my mind. She kisses me and says, "Why have you come here? You are to be killed next sunset!"

"A prison mate advised me to use my last day well, and I can think of no better way to spend my last day than in your company."

"But if you are caught you'll be killed instantly!"

"I'm going to die anyway. Please, let me stay with you."

Julia chews on her lower lip for a moment, then stands up and goes into her room, gesturing for me to follow quietly. I climb into her bay window and look around at the splendid room. It is a room truly befitting of a princess. She has a large canopy bed with a pink satin canopy and oak bedposts. The sheets are pink and silver, and made of finest silk. The

tapestries in her room are very beautiful. The entire room has a general feeling of peace. And, apart from Julia and myself, it is empty.

Julia walks over to her bed, then turns and faces me. She unties her bodice, and her nightgown falls open. She is naked underneath it. She shrugs it to the floor and opens the canopy. She smiles.

## XV

The first rays of the sun are just beginning to lighten the room. *Dawn*, I think. My thoughts linger briefly on the fate of the dwarf I met in prison. I wonder briefly if he is dead yet. I frown. Julia's musical voice interrupts my thoughts, asking me what's wrong. She lifts her head from where it had been resting on my chest, reaches up, and strokes my chin with one long, painted nail. I look down at her beautiful eyes, her gorgeous body lying naked next to mine in the bed. I shake my head and smile, banishing all thoughts of the dwarf from my mind as I kiss her. "Thank you, my love."

"But what will you do now?"

"I will stay with you. Can you not put a sign on the door? Get word to your chambermaids that you do not wish to be disturbed?"

"Of course, but what of you? You honestly think nobody will notice that you're gone? And when they find you gone. . ."

". . . They'll think I went back to my forest. They will know it would be foolish to try to attack my tribe, and the matter will be forgotten. Then, at sunset tonight, I will present myself to your father and demand to be allowed to die fighting."

"My father will never allow it."

"So be it. Then I die by that--what do you call it?"

"The guillotine."

"The gwil-oh-teenh." She laughs lightly at my pronunciation. "You humans and your impossible words."

"Us? What of elven language? All the ks and ilyans and silitalts. Terrible." I chuckle. She kisses my neck and says, "Now what?"

"Now, I must think of a way to get out of this."

**“Do you have to think right now?” she asks, moving her hand down my body.**

## **XVI**

**We spend much of the morning doing nothing at all, just lying together in her wonderful bed. With a start, I realize it is mid-afternoon, time to begin moving. I kiss her, then get up out of the bed. I gather my Kij’isti uniform from the floor and dress quickly.**

**“Will I ever see you again?”**

**"Perhaps. I can't send you the hawk. It would fly to Greywolf and then I would be as good as dead. I will think of something, my dove. Perhaps. . ."**

**"Perhaps you should take me with you, she says, getting out of bed. She walks over to a closet and pulls out a knapsack. It's full of articles of clothing. Nothing splendid, just rags. I shake my head emphatically. "Absolutely not. I cannot risk it. When you disappeared I blamed it on a hyew-nikh," I stumble over her word for K'held'ieyn, "and if I bring you back there will be trouble. I could be killed for falling in love with you."**

**She pouts. "But you're willing to die here."**

**"To die at the hands of your people, that is one thing. But to die at the hands of my own . . ." I shake my head.**

**This makes her angry. "So? I am less important to you than your damn honor?" she shouts.**

**"Shhh! Or I will definitely die!"**

**"Why should I care? You seem ready to die anyway! I. . ." her eyes fill with tears and she begins to cry. I take her in my arms and try to comfort her. The thought comes to mind of how similar this is to our first meeting. All those years, so much fun . . . that settles it. My mind is made up. "Very well, my love. You may come."**

## **XVII**

**It takes us only a few moments to be ready to go. Her bag is packed, and I dress her in a makeshift Kij’isti outfit from black rags that she stitches together. We open her window and prepare to scale the castle wall. I have to hold her on my shoulders, which makes the trip considerably more**



difficult. After many long minutes, we reach the ground. I turn to her. “Is there any way that we could get some horses?”

“Y-e-e-e-s, if we are very, very careful. There’s a stable just outside the castle. If we go back this way,” she says, pointing around behind the castle, away from the town, “we’ll come up to the stable’s back wall. I can distract the guard and you can steal the horses. Here, though. This may help.” She reaches into her bag and takes out a strip of cloth, which she ties around my head as a headband. “Too bad we can’t hide your sharp cheekbones, but this will hide your pointy damn elf ears and straight eyebrows,” she says, smiling. “Make you less obvious. Let’s go.”

We make our way around the back of the castle to the stables. I creep under the walls, which are a few feet off the ground, and inspect the horses while Julia goes around to the front and engages the guard in conversation. At least, that was the plan.

Instead, what happens is that I slip under the wall into the stable and right into the waiting arms of a Northern knight, who has me pinned before I could react. He is joined by seven other knights who take turns beating and kicking me. In the distance I hear screams, indicating that Julia has been taken prisoner as well. Hearing my love cry in pain rouses me from my shock. I fight back, kicking and punching, using all my Kij’isti fighting abilities, going for the weak points in the armor--the junctures between shoulder and chest, or at the hip joints. I manage to take down two of the knights, but the others are too much. I want to die fighting, but I hear one of them say, “He is to be taken alive. The King wants to talk to him.” The other knights seem disappointed at this, but they comply. They beat me until I am unable to move, then tie me up and carry me to the castle.

In the castle I am taken to the Main Audience Chamber. I am nearly unconscious, and am only vaguely aware of what is happening. I think that the King asks questions of the knights, and I think they answer. I think the Queen sobs with grief. But there is nothing vague in my mind’s eye about the King. He gets down from the throne and right in my face, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Just who do you think you are? How dare you! Your scum steal my daughter--my heiress, my sole child --and take her to your barbaric village, where you. . . subject her to your animal mating rituals! My daughter is soiled! And then, after she escapes, you continue to molest her! Even after we capture you, you still have to have her! I gave you a sentence of death, and by all the gods I will see you pay for your crimes!”

I am dimly aware of Julia rushing into the room. The King yells at her to leave, but she refuses. "You don't understand! I love him! He let me go, and I asked him to return. If you're going to punish him, you should punish me, too!" She runs to me and throws her arms around me, crying uncontrollably.

His Majesty becomes apoplectic at this. He screams for the guards to tear his daughter "off of that excrement!" She runs to him, pleading. She throws herself at his feet and begs for mercy for me. But he is silent, unmoved. "Nay, Julia. Clearly your time amongst these . . . these . . . savages," he nearly spits the word out, "has corrupted your mind. Nay, he shall be beheaded tonight. More, I shall make you watch. And afterwards, I shall have you whipped. This is the only way I can think of to bring you back to your senses. I have spoken."

## XVIII

I am ushered back to my prison cell and beaten a few more times. They leave me in there, bleeding, broken, while they set up the guillotine. An hour passes, I think. I can see the sun getting lower in the sky. Just as it sets, three knights come in and pick me up bodily, setting me on my feet, brushing me off. Using swords to prod me along, they force me out of the cell into the streets.

The streets are lined with villagers. At the sight of me they all begin screaming madly, hissing and throwing things. More than once, pieces of rotten fruit hit me in the chest, the face. I don't care; I don't see. All I can see is the guillotine.

I am escorted slowly down the long walk, past thousands of hysterically screaming villagers. At long last I reach the guillotine. I can see the King standing by the bench, next to a man with a black hood--the Executioner. And just beyond the King, clinging to her mother and crying freely, is my beloved Julia. At the sight of her I almost break, but I will not give the humans that satisfaction. I am determined to die with as much honor as I can--to die as a true Kalay'n elf Prince. The King stands over me and makes his pronouncement:

"For crimes against the Northern Kingdom, Prince Karan Kalifax Iraltis is sentenced to die by beheading. May the gods of Good and Justice have mercy on your soul as it begins its journey to Hell. Have you any last words?"

I raise my head proudly. "Do it now. The sun has set. Stop stalling." At my words, Julia lets up a cry that breaks my heart in two, but I will not let

myself lose my resolve. I lay down on the bench, needing no prompting. They force me on my back, presumably so that the last thing I will see is the blade as it comes rushing down. The King nods to the Executioner, who prepares to release the blade.

“Wait!” The cry confuses the Executioner, makes him hesitate. Julia runs to me and kisses me. “I love you,” she says. The King signals a guard, who moves towards her. “I love you,” she cries again as he pulls her back. “Always remember that!” The Executioner releases the blade.

Julia’s soft kiss on my lips. . .

Her tear-streaked, beautiful face. . .

A blinding white flash. . .

Darkness.