

# Fallen Kingdom

## By Tess Williams

### PART ONE

Come back to me, this is inconceivable

Breaking apart the ones you love

Hate runs deep for what you've done to us

Left alone through suicide

--I Won't See You Tonight Part 2, Avenged Sevenfold

### CHAPTER ONE

ELLIA:

Luffie breathed a stream of fire down on the nearest Akadian soldiers. I whipped out my sword and swung at as many of them that hadn't ducked out of the way. We came arching up back through the braches, which provided for excellent shelter against the soldiers below.

So far the battle was going well, much better than the one I'd just come from to the north. The Democedes forestland was proving to be a far better place to fight than their open, rice-fields--which made up most of their country. It also helped that there weren't any goblins in the

battle today, in other words, no wyverns, and without wyverns to attack us, chimera were veritably invincible.

With a quick heads-up to Luffie, she swung back down below the branches to fire down the middle of the Akadian's war party. Other chimera warriors were using the same maneuver, while Democedian troops were cutting the Akadians off at the edges.

Few in number, but deadly-skilled knife specialists and sorcerers, the Democedians were going to make the Akadians regret having attacked them this day.

"Ellia, don't let Luffie use her fire-breath so much," Gael shouted. I spotted him a few trees away; atop his chimera Yurei with his Cirali weapon, a mace in hand. "It'll weaken her too much, especially since she just learned. And anyways, the battle's nearly won."

"Quite different from Selket, isn't it?" I shouted, referring to the southernmost of the eastern countries, where Gael and I had most often fought. It seemed the Akadians were concentrating most of their power there, probably because the goblins were covering the north. But where the goblin's were, the first order Warriors fought, not third orders like me, or second orders like Gael, even though he was second rank.

Gael barely got a nod off before we heard an explosion below us. One of the Democedian sorcerers was surrounded by blue flames. He'd obviously misfired one of his spells, and from the amber light glinting on the ground beside him I didn't wonder how.

"I'll get him," I told Gael.

"I'll handle the soldiers," he replied. Luffie and Yurei dived towards the flames. Democedian soldiers, in their white, cloth garb crowded around to try and save the sorcerer. Gael warned them away.

I hovered with Luffie just above the sorcerer, flames on all sides of us. I called to him, but he was concentrated on his hands, trying to direct them to controlling the fire. I knew better than to think that he was going to be able to. The Akadians' newest weapon was much more effective than that.

I ducked as the closest Akadian soldiers launched more of the crystal stones towards us. I'd learned firsthand that when one of them touched you, they sucked away your powers. The fact that my ability was a birthright didn't keep me immune. Since my vanishing power was my greatest asset in battle; I was careful now never to get hit.

"Get the stone!" I yelled to the sorcerer.

The sorcerer shook his head in confusion.

I jumped down from Luffie, vanishing just enough to bolster my weight as I touched the ground. I dug through the leaves until I found the amber stone, then I threw it at the sorcerer's feet and handed him my sword.

"You have to break it," I said.

The blue flames still raged around us, but Gael had knocked down most of the nearby Akadians.

"Go on," I told the sorcerer.

With uncertainty, he raised my sword in the air, then struck down. The stone crushed to pieces and a thin gold smoke leaked out. It found the sorcerer's hands, then seeped back into his skin.

I watched the sorcerer take a deep breath, his chest expanding with the returning power. He aimed his hands towards the blue flames and with a wave they were gone.

Without the billowing of the fire, the sound of horns could be heard in the distance. Democedians cheered all around us, and I realized the Akadian's must have been calling for a retreat. The sorcerer bent over the shards of broken stone, which were now the color of clear glass. An entirely unbroken one laid close by to him. Having missed its target it was also clear.

Luffie dropped down from the sky above. I immediately put my hand to her neck and started rubbing behind her ears. "You were great, Luffie," I told her. I touched my forehead to her nose, our eyes meeting. I could see in them how exciting it had been for her to use her fire breath, but she was also panting from exhaustion. I closed my eyes tight.

I could have stood like that forever. The wild flurry of the battles I'd faced in so little time made me long for nothing more than stillness. I had come a far distance from my first battle in Karatel; the fact that the Cirali now acknowledged me as princess meant I was allowed to assist in the leading of the attacks--usually with Gael. But there was no sign of anything ending. The Akadians seemed as determined to destroy the eastern kingdoms of Ghand, Democedes, and Selket as they had been to destroy my homeland.

"Ellia," Gael called, drawing my attention above. "I'm going back to speak with the leaders. If you're ready, you should come. Perhaps we'll have better luck persuading them."

With a quick breath, I nodded. I fit my boot into the strap of Luffie's harness, then she took off to the skies after Gael.

#

The nearest palace of the Democedian rulers (of which there were many) belonged to Prince Kais, third in line for the Democedian throne. Of the six princes of Democedes, I'd met with him

the most times before. This was because he resided closest to the Akadian battlefield, and the way the Democedian's lived, each prince looked after his own land.

Of course since the princes were also brothers, they helped each other as often as not. Today, his eldest brother was present, and as a happy surprise, Prince Nain of Karatel with his wife, Selkie. Nain and Selkie had been saved by the Warriors in the battle of Karatel. Since then, they'd worked to travel the eastern kingdoms and try to convince the rulers to band against Akadia. This I did as well, but to pointlessness, for they refused as even to believe who I was.

"You ask the preposterous," Prince Vartus was saying, "To join with the Ghaunds? The Selkets? Democedes has always stood alone, and we will last out Akadia."

"Akadia isn't sparing a quarter of its solders on you," Nain said. "Most their men are in Selket, and their wyverns to the north. What will you do if the other kingdoms fall and you're forced to feel the full weight of Akadia?"

"We did well enough in this battle," Vartus said.

As he had most the discussion, Prince Kais simply rubbed his chin in contemplation.

"You had the help of the Warriors," Gael pointed out. He was calm as anyone, his arms crossed. "You would not have lasted otherwise. You neglected to inform your sorcerers of the Akadian's dispel-stones as we warned you to."

"As always, we appreciate the help of the chimera," Kais said. "But it does not indebt us to help the other kingdoms, and least of all to wage battle against the Akadian's in Karatel. That is not our fight."

"But their base in Karatel is what allows them to strike at you so easily," I said; I did not want Nain to have to defend on such a sensitive point. I knew what it was like to lose a country, but I couldn't begin to imagine how it would be to have your enemy then using it for further

harm. “If they lost their position in Karatel, they would have to march their soldiers half-way across the lands to reach you. Akadia is a week’s march at least.”

“We do not fear Akadia,” Vartus said.

“Then hear us out on behalf of the Princess, and Prince Nain,” Gael said, “The Warriors, all of us. We are your allies.”

“Last I recall, the Warriors kept themselves apart on their Isle, scarcely allowing foreigners to visit let alone playing the ally,” Vartus said, “And as for Karatel, its not been around long enough to call itself a proper country. On top of that, they have no granted animals.”

“We’ve no granted animals, brother,” Kais said, with some exhaustion. He’d fought today in the battle and showed clear signs of it.

“Democedes is one of the ancient kingdoms,” Vartus boasted, “That we have survived so long without granted animals is only to our credit. Karatel came and went. Admit your time is done, Prince Nain.”

“Insult me if you like,” Nain said, “and dismiss the Warriors who protect you, but Ellia is the heir of Shaundakul. I am at least ruler enough to know that royalty of Shaundakul is not to be dismissed. As for granted animals, none compare to the dragons. Even Akadia knew this.”

“And it is why they are now gone. Does the royal weight of Shaundakul truly still apply?”

“Brother,” Kais objected, his look reprimanding.

“Look,” I broke in, keeping a steady voice, “I care nothing of the ranks of rulers. Princes, not a century ago, my people helped yours to defeat the flame giants which besieged you from the west. We sent our finest dragons and would have done so again if you called. All I ask now is that you fight for your own sakes. Can you not honor my title simply for the bond of our past?”

The table grew silent, then Princes Vartus spoke.

“Convenient as ever: that one of the Cirali Warriors just happens to be the heir to the Dragon throne.”

“Keep your respect,” Gael warned.

And so here it was; we always came back around to this. Just when my title might actually do us some good, they called it into question completely.

“Vartus, how could you of all doubt me?” I argued. “Your very namesake was the reason I was able to join the Warriors. Vartus was a prince, but he chose to join the Cirali, just as I have. That does not mean I’m any less likely to be the Princess of Shaundakul.”

“I don’t see what there is to make it likely at all,” he countered.

Prince Kais broke in calmly. “This is the beginning and end of this subject,” he said. He addressed the table. “Our father does not acknowledge her, we do not acknowledge her. She cannot be the reason we got to war. We are servants to the throne.”

“Think for yourselves,” Nain exploded, tossing both his hands in front of him, “I’m a prince, but I wouldn’t have needed more than one glance at Ellia to believe she was Savras’ daughter. How can you hide behind the decisions of your father when your country is on the line?”

“This coming from the Prince who lost his entire kingdom before his father’s body had even settled in its’ grave,” Vartus pointed out. “Perhaps you should have questioned your decisions more often.”

“You go too far,” I told Vartus.

Selkie put one of her hands on Nain, though he hadn’t looked at all intimidated by the jibe, then she held the other out towards the center of the table. “Please, isn’t it enough to war with Akadia. Let us not war amongst ourselves.”

“There is only war to be made when men won’t listen to reason,” Nain said. But at Selkie’s frown, he looked as if he regretted the words. He put his hand over hers, then she leaned to rest her chin against his shoulder. Their silent exchange put my stomach in knots; it brought too much to reality everything that we were truly fighting for. I turned my attention back to the two Democedian Princes.

“Will you at least consider our advice to gather your people together? We’re better suited to protect you this way. You’re better suited to withstand Akadia yourselves.”

The two princes exchanged a glance. Their answer was the same as it always was.

CYRIC:

Tosch ran with blinding speed through a row of Ghaundian warriors. Thanks to the narrow ledge they’d collected on, he and I were able to knock half of them into the gorges on either side.

Gray stone mountains, caverns, and gorges made up the land all around us. Even though half of Ghaund was like this, the natives had a habit of forcing us to attack them in the highest and tightest mountain trails--all this so that our numbers couldn’t overwhelm them.

But that wasn’t going to help them today.

One of the soldiers Tosch had trampled past teetered on the edge of the gorge. I pulled my metal boot out of its strap, kicked him the soldier in the chest; he toppled down with a loud scream. A wyvern caught him mid-air, then proceeded to clamp down with its teeth and feast on the meal. It screeched and dived for its prize.

Without any chimera to fight--and thus no fear of death--the wyverns had gone wild with blood-lust this battle, treating it as little more than a game, and their goblins riders weren't doing much to stop them.

As my division poured in behind me to attack, one of the smallest wyverns mounted the only remaining open space on our platform. It sunk its talons into the rock, then began to snap at the final huddle of Ghaundian soldiers. The Ghaundians' native spears did little to fend the wyvern off. They backed into the cliff-face; this didn't keep the wyvern from pursuing them, my men close behind.

Of the Akadians' I could see, fighting across chasms on further passes and platforms, it seemed the battle was as good as done. Few Ghaundians remained; I doubted Artoras' division had allowed many to live.

"Leave them!" I shouted, to both my men and the wyvern, raising my sword towards the last of the Ghaundians. Tosch paced anxiously in place, unaware of anything but my instructions thanks to his blindness. While my men obeyed, the Wyvern didn't stop. He swatted a pair of the cringing Ghaundians out into the gorge.

The next time he tried to hit them, I was on the ground to block it, swiping against his claw with my sword. It coiled back with a hiss.

"I said, leave them!" I repeated.

I got a glare from the goblin rider, then he hissed much like his wyvern had, turned and led the creature off.

I regarded the Ghaundians, pressed as they were against the rock wall. They were dressed in their crude armors of animal skins or leather; there were women as well as men fighting.

My second came to stand before me.

“Have the survivors chained up and taken back to camp,” I ordered. “If they resist, kill them.” I said this loudly enough that the Ghaundians would hear me.

He nodded acknowledgement, then went about commanding men to do as I’d said. I mounted Tosch, and led him to the edge of the platform. I was on nearly the highest peak around. I could see well what was happening with the rest of the soldiers. Most of the wyverns were already headed towards the Peaks of Geryon, many carrying live prey in their claws. It was their homeland and while we were fighting close to it, the goblin riders used it as a base. It kept the wyverns strongest, and from their time fighting in the southern kingdoms, it was a necessary precaution. Too long away from their native land would and had made them weak. This was the reason they were currently allocated to Ghaund.

The largest of the wyverns, clad in gems of every shade from sapphire to ruby, dropped down from the clouds to land on the mountain peak beside me. The goblin commander, Garagos, sat atop him, the grey of our surroundings glowing in his pure-black eyes.

“We fight for you,” he said. “We defeat the Ghaundians. None have escaped.”

“I can see that for myself,” I replied, keeping my eyes on the crags. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and tell the other divisions.”

Garagos mocked a gag. “Goblin King does not speak with plain mortal man. He knows who rules. Goblin King speaks with you. We fight for you.”

I gave him a terse glance. “Goblin King” was the title Garagos had recently adapted for himself; it sounded as ridiculous as the idea of goblin royalty was. “In that case take your pack and scout ahead for more Ghaundian encampments,” I instructed. “Patrol the entire south border before you come back to report. If you run across any chimera, deal with them. I don’t want them getting through while you’re away like before. Be thorough.”

Garagos gurgled, the natural goblin reaction to chimera. “What of spoils?” he said. “Great war-lord will give us much? We need foods for wyverns.”

“Your wyverns got more than their share, Garagos. If they’re hungry, find them chimera to feast on.

Garagos grimaced at my shout, but then grew a satisfied grin. “Great Akadian is always wise,” he said. Then he bowed to me and led his wyvern back into the sky.

With a frown of distaste I looked back out over the battlefield.

Just one of many.

## CHAPTER TWO

ELLIA:

“But how could they have attacked again without any of the chimera being there?” I asked, my fists clenching in desperation.

I was standing in the center of the Warriors’ chamber, back on Yanartas. Three of the first-order Warriors’, including Elminster, Lodan, and Baraduce (who had just returned from Ghaund) sat around me in their high chamber seats.

“They must have come from the homeland,” said Lodan. “Since the wyverns have been flying in from the Peaks of Geryon, we have no way of knowing where they’ll appear next. We concentrated on protecting the Ghaundian capitol and what settlements we could. We defeated many goblins, but... Unfortunately most of the Akadians were with the wyverns when they attacked the western crag.”

Baraduce slammed his fist on the table. “Fools. If the Ghaundians would do as we say and collect their people in one place, we could protect them.”

“If only,” Lodan echoed. “Sadly we Warrior’s don’t seem to have the pull we once did to convince them of our strategies.”

“We’ve protected them enough in the past summer, haven’t we?” Baraduce went on. “If not for us, the Akadian’s would have destroyed the lot of them. They should do as we say before they all fall to Akadia.”

“Speaking of that. Ellia,” Lodan interrupted, “Gael mentioned that you would try again to sway the Demecedian rulers. From your silence on the subject, I assume it did not go well?”

I felt a deep weight of guilt. Then I went on to explain their negative reaction, even in light of Prince Nain’s presence.

“To the depths with them then,” swore Baraduce, “We’ll leave them to the Akadians and wait till they beg for our assistance.”

“If we waited for that, I think we’d more likely end up facing them on the Akadians side,” said Lodan, with them still assimilating foreigners as the war continues. Every captive they take becomes a potential enemy.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, biting hard on my lip. “I should have been able to sway them.”

Lodan frowned, but Elminster spoke.

“No one expects you to, Princess,” he said, in his slow, rhythmic voice. “Kingdoms will do what they must. It is enough that we help them.”

“But what if they fall to Akadia?” I asked.

Elminster thought about this, touching a finger to his lips. “Then I think we will find that Master Baraduce Nar is right when he says they will regret their decisions.”

I frowned. Though Elminster spoke calmly, it felt more dire to me than that. It *was* dire. Alright, it was true that very few chimera were dying, especially now that only first order warriors fought the wyverns--Akadian soldiers simply weren’t capable of taking down flying beasts and we’d long since learned how to avoid and quickly dispose of the harpoon contraptions. But I didn’t want to see the other countries destroyed, particularly not when it meant I’d grow even farther from ever saving my people.

“In any case,” said Lodan, “Elminster and I will be going back to Democedes in your place. You and Gael have been too long gone from Yanartas. Your chimera need time on the Isle or they won’t be good for *any* warring.”

Lodan Falster’s expression left no room for argument. I knew it was true anyways. It wasn’t just us, all of the Warriors had to come back periodically, switching out positions in the countries, for otherwise the chimera grew weak and ill.

I nodded.

#

When I exited the Warriors’ Chamber, the fresh breeze of Yanartas swept over me. I could hear the ocean waves breaking in the distance; the cries of seagulls filled the air. Now that it was fall, the trees of Yanartas had begun to turn colors. Leaves periodically fell, they decorated the deck around me now. Gael stood nearby with Yurei, speaking with three of his fellow warriors. Even though many of the Warriors had gone to fight, the constant switching back and forth to rest chimera (not to mention the resident Yanartians) kept the complex busy.

Gael waved a hand at me. “Have you been to see Lucian yet?” he called.

“No. Why?”

“He’s about to leave with your friend Estrid Larke. They’re on the south platform. They told Luffie to tell you,” he added.

I narrowed my eyes, then turned Luffie. She had her dusky-gold head cocked away from me, high and jutted, clearly feigning ignorance. With a sniff she glanced at me tersely.

She forgot that I knew what she was thinking; or as it was, feeling.

Ever since Estrid had bonded with her pink and cream chimera, Tris (one of the most definable families of cream chimeras from the volcano), Lucian's chimera, Arrin, had taken a liking to her. A liking to Tris, *not* Luffie. And while Luffie had never expressed an attraction to Arrin before that, she didn't do well with being left out, or un-preffered. It didn't seem to matter to her that neither of them ever excluded her from anything.

Without a word from me, she started walking along the bridge that led towards the south platform, each of her steps snootily denying that she felt anything on the matter.

I grinned wide and ran after her, overcome with delight for her personality--even if it was a little silly.

When we reached the south platform, Tris and Arrin were standing with a group of four other chimera. A half-dozen Warriors roamed about, most of them collecting weapons. My black-haired, sea-faring friend, Estrid Larke was standing with a five-foot long sword in her grip. To no surprise of mine, it was aimed towards my second order, first-ranked trainer, Lucian Denathar.

Luffie ambled over to Tris while I walked to my friends. Lucian saw me first and got a nod off, but his reaction caused Estrid to swing in my direction and he had to duck in a hurry to avoid being hit with the massive sword.

"Ellia!" Estrid greeted with a smile. "We're so glad you're back. Tris was beginning to worry about Luffie."

"How is she doing with her fire-breath?" Lucian asked, in true trainer's form.

"Very well," I replied. "Gael says she's a natural. She does well enough against Akadians."

"How was Democedes?" he asked. "Did the rulers..."

I shook my head before he could ask it. He frowned, but I shrugged it off. “What about Selket? How did you two do?”

Lucian crossed his arms. “The scorpions are another thing entirely. They’re remarkable against the Akadians’ cavalry. And without the wyverns, well, we’ve been nearly invincible in the skies.”

Scorpions were the Selkian granted animals, the only country out of the three eastern kingdoms to possess one. True to their name, they looked like giant scorpions. They reminded me a little too much of the over-sized arachnids Minstrel and I had almost been killed by for my taste.

“Sadly, Tris is deadly frightened of the scorpions,” Lucian went on.

Estrid lowered her sword to glare at Lucian, jaw wide. “I seem to remember Arrin being more skitterish than her.”

I looked over at Arrin and Tris, who were watching playful Luffie attempt to walk along the top of the railing. Arrin wore a slightly disapproving expression that matched his master well, while Tris’ features reflected something between awe and nervousness. I decided that both of them could very well have been afraid of scorpions.

“What about your sword?” I asked Estrid; interrupting what was almost another fight between her and Lucian. “Are you taking it out again? It must be your Cirali weapon then.”

Estrid frowned.

“No, this isn’t the same type,” she said. She raised the sword in the air, causing Lucian to duck back once more. “The one I tried before was a great-sword. And a flambard after that. This is a claymore.” She gave it two test swings. She had to hold on tight with both hands and plant her feet to even move it.

“They look sort of the same,” I said.

“They nearly are,” Lucian stressed. “All too long, too heavy, and too clumsy for a woman of her size to wield. I’m trying to convince her not to take it into Loone.”

“Loone?” I repeated, glancing around the platform of Warriors. “Is that where you’re going. What’s happened?”

Estrid dropped her sword. “Father’s finally convinced the town to rebel. Once myself and master “first-rank” here fly there, we’re going to form a strategy. The Akadians have had the boats quarantined for some time, but our plan is to free enough to help the citizens of Loone escape.”

“Will they come here?” I asked.

While Estrid nodded, Lucian said, “It hasn’t been decided yet.”

Estrid rolled her eyes and mouthed a “yes” to me.

I smiled.

“Master Lucian,” one of his Warriors’ called, “the group is ready to fly out.”

Lucian nodded, all business.

Due to the fact that the Cirali were so spread out, high-ranking, second order, Warriors like Lucian led groups of third or second order Warriors. This was why Gael now directed his own battles, whereas before he would have served as Lucian’s second. Now I was Gael’s second, and more often than not, Estrid flew with Lucian.

Lucian gave Estrid a look that said she’d better hurry, then pointed at me. “I expect you to still be here when we get back. And take Luffie to the summit.”

I nodded.

He waved and walked towards Arrin. Estrid hefted up her claymore, resting it over her shoulder. “Wish me luck, princess,” she said.

“Estrid, where are you even going to put that?” I laughed.

She trudged off towards Tris. Ever attentive, Tris slipped close as soon as Estrid was near. Luffie likewise came to stand by me. Estrid made a show of sliding the claymore into the back of Tris’ harness, so that it sat perpendicular to the ground and could easily be pulled out.

I shook my head, laughing. “I really think you should listen to Lucian and try something smaller.

Estrid scoffed. “If I should listen to Lucian Denethar once, there’s no telling might come of it. I’ll take my chances with my own sword.”

Lucian and Arrin were already in the sky, calling the Warriors.

“Good luck,” I told Estrid. “Be careful.”

She looked back at me with a smirk, her pale skin as bright as the sky around her. “When I get back, remind me to tell you something, alright?”

I nodded. She turned to the sky, Tris’ wings spreading out delicately, then they raced out in front of Arrin.

#

I found my dearest friend, Minstrel of Gilgatrox, in the armor far below the complex of Yanartas. Since the wars had started, he was often to be found here. He had become quite the smith, and a sort of inventor as well.

I passed the head blacksmith, Garin, with a wave; he pointed me on to Minstrel, who was working at the back of the shop. My gnome friend stood in front of the forge on a stool, holding a pair of tongs out over the coals. His three-foot form was weighed down with his usual leather armor and straps of odds and ends. Some sort of helmet was protecting his face.

I dropped my elbows to the counter beside him, leaning in. “What are you doing there?” I asked.

Minstrel jerked at my voice, then he set his tongs down and lifted the front of his helmet up so that I could see his oil-smudged face. He wore a smile as wide as mine.

#

Two hours later we were still in the armory together, though now in the basement section, where Minstrel did most his work.

“Well I did try to write a song at least,” I defended, while Minstrel and I laughed at my attempts to describe my eastern battles in rhyme.

“No matter,” Minstrel sang, “with a little work I should be able to transcribe it into a wondrously epic battle sonnet.”

“I don’t doubt your skills, Minstrel.”

We sat on stools, surrounding by workbenches. A number of gadgets and inventions, not to mention his usually stacks of song laden parchments, sat atop them. Along with his armory duties, Minstrel had taken on deciphering many of the mysterious dangers generated by the wars, including native threats, such as magical monsters, and inventions used against us by the Akadians. For instance, Minstrel had been the one to discover how to reverse the affects of the

Akadians' magic-dispelling stones by breaking them--which had resulted in Minstrel acquiring the powers a Selkian fire-mage for one very eventful day. He'd promptly transferred them to a dispel-stone, which was then returned to its Selkian owner.

"Speaking of skills," Minstrel squeaked, "have you discovered your Cirali weapon yet?"

I lifted one corner of my mouth dismally. "No. I've just been using a sword still. I'm worse with anything else I try."

"Perhaps the sword is your weapon then." He laughed. "I can think of a good many renowned heroes who used little more."

"I suppose," I drawled, "It's just, compared to the way Gael is with his mace, or the way Lucian is with his crossbow..."

"Oh yes," Minstrel agreed, "Master Denethar is greatly impressive with his crossbow. I wish that I might more often see him in active battle."

"It's a sight, just as much when he uses his crossbow, as when the Akadian's part before him." I paused. "That's why he's fighting in Selket now, you know, instead of Ghaund, because there are more Akadians. They still react to his appearance." I thought of Tobias, the late Captain of Akadia, with a sting of grief.

Probably because of the war, Lucian had not asked me about his death yet as he'd promised he would. I was glad he hadn't; as we grew closer I feared all the more now what it would mean. "I can't think of what it must be like for him, Minstrel," I went on. "He seems well enough, but it must be so impossibly hard, fighting against his own father's kingdom, and a father that he's never met."

Minstrel sighed. He plucked a few strings on the lyre beside him. There was a long moment of silence, then I felt his hand drop over mine. He patted it reassuringly. "Don't worry, lady

Ellia. So long as the Warriors fight for the eastern kingdoms, they will prevail against Akadia. The chimera are far too invincible.”

“Yes. I know you’re right,” I said.

But for some reason I felt daunting.

CYRIC:

I walked along the streets of Karatel, having just settled Tosch in his stable. He’d immediately gone to sleep, falling onto his side in the hay as he liked to (as no normal horse ever would). I couldn’t blame him though; we’d ridden through the night to get here. My division trailed behind with the captives and wouldn’t arrive for another day.

Soldiers roamed all round, carrying weapons, leading captives from the eastern kingdoms. Karatel had become everything that a first defensive fort should be. It had sickbays for injured soldiers. Large emptied buildings for sleeping quarters. Stables for the horses, but of course Karatel had also had those by the hundreds. And then warehouses, reserved for the captives and spoils that would be periodically sent on to Akadia.

Any soldiers on the road that passed me either gave me a respectful bow or averted their eyes completely. I found the armory beside the palace. The soldier guarding the door let me in without question. I took the dark steps down three levels, underground. I was too used to the descent to be slowed down by the fact that it was pitch black to me.

Finally, I saw the acid green glow that distinguished Belleraphon’s laboratory from the rest of the armory. When I arrived in the room, other lights and torches lit the dank space. Some blue, some red, some too bright to be natural fire. Lox’s large form stood on the opposite end, close to

Bellerophon's forge. Bellerophon himself--an unnaturally muscular Taeplian with an affinity for all the skill in invention that his country was famous for--worked close beside him.

I took two steps that echoed loudly in the tight, stone-bricked, chamber and Lox looked my direction. He grew a wide, pleased, smile, the type I was accustomed to receiving whenever I came back from battle. "Cyric, I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I didn't wait for my division. Artoras was with them." Artoras was one of Scanth's Lieutenants; he'd been fighting with me in Ghaund, even though Scanth was stationed back in Akadia. "We got news that there was trouble in Karatel." I stopped close to where they were working, beside the only regularly lit torch. From what I could spot of Bellerophon's work, he was smelting something over the forge.

"Karatel," Lox confirmed, "and Democedes as well. That fool Venoc couldn't be making worse decisions. He's lost all the ground the wyverns helped him gain before they went back to Ghaund.... But Democedes is of little consequence compared with Selket. So long as he keeps them occupied. Once we've dealt with the Selkians, we might be able to use the scorpions against the other countries."

"I thought things aren't going well in Selket," I said. "Not since the wyverns had to return to Geryon."

Lox lifted one brow. He gestured to Bellerophon, who was holding his tongs over a basin of water. "That's something we hope to change." Bellerophon opened the tongs and let the metal object they were holding fall in the water. A cloud of steam rose up and the water bubbled. Then he grabbed another instrument and scooped the metal object out of the pool. It looked like a simple brick, but silver, or perhaps lead; dark and light greys were swirled in together. He held it out wordlessly for Lox's inspection. I tried not to make a face; somehow I couldn't imagine how

a brick--particularly such a clumsily large one--was going to do much good against scorpions. Lox waved a hand of dismissal or approval, and Belerophon went back to work.

“So do you want me to go to Selket?” I asked.

Lox moved away from the forge; I followed. “No. I have another job for you. Like you heard, there’s trouble in Karatel. We’ve lost communication with one of the coastal towns, known as Loone. I sent a small company there to investigate, but they probably haven’t arrived yet and I’d prefer it if you were with them when they did. If the town rebelled, it’s possible the Cirali are involved. I don’t trust them to know how to handle it.”

“I shouldn’t wait for my division then?”

Lox shook his head.

I nodded. This would not have been the first time I’d done something like this. Because of how unnaturally fast Tosch was, I could move around the kingdoms with ease, and often ran errands for Lox on my own. “I can leave right away.”

“Be sure to at least get something to eat first, son,” Lox instructed, laughing slightly. Then he put his hand on my shoulder. I half-smiled.

Before I left I saw Lox and Bellerophon working over their brick-shaped piece of metal. They slid it into a weapon that looked something like an oversized crossbow. It was perhaps a little more threatening now, but I didn’t give it too much thought as I climbed back to the surface.

## CHAPTER THREE

ELLIA:

I lied on the deck outside my cabin window, a pile of blankets set out under me so that I could rest in the open air. It was late morning, but the sky was grey thanks to the rain. Luffie was beside me on the deck and we were protected from getting wet by a wooden awning. All around us the branches dripped, causing a therapeutic sort of jingling sound, while the wind blew softly past us. I was wearing one of my green Yanartian dresses. I fed Luffie bits of pomegranate seeds as I pulled them free. They were her favorite fruit, and fruit was almost the only thing she ever ate. Chimera of Yanartas generally preferred fruit and fish and disliked meat, but Luffie refused to eat meat entirely.

I tossed her another seed and she licked her lips, then I ate one myself. She was doing much better now that I had taken her to the mountain a couple times--not to mention that was where she slept. Having finished the entire pomegranate, I rolled onto my back and sighed, looking up at the green and yellow slippery leaves.

My mind started to wander...

Luffie let out a short growl. She threw the image of a burned down Democedian settlement into my mind, all its residents slaughtered, and my own thoughts of chasing a golden-haired boy through rainy woods vanished.

I felt a knot of shame in my gut, and turned back around with a swallow. It was hard to meet Luffie's eyes after such a slip. Thankfully I didn't have to--I heard shouting from outside my

deck. I sat up to see a half-dozen figures moving through the rain: from the south platform towards the dining pavilion. I could hear the two at the front arguing with each other, obviously Estrid and Lucian. She bounced after him as she usually did when trying to convince him of something.

Luffie and I shared a look. She let me know that she was going to check on Tris and Arrin, while I jumped off my bed and headed towards the dining pavilion.

I arrived just as Estrid, Lucian, and the rest of their group did, but before I could ask how the trip had gone, a much larger crowd of Katellians poured into the pavilion.

Lucian threw up his hands. "I told all of you to wait below," he said, half-soaked with a cloak hanging on his shoulders. Thinly-veiled irritation covered his features.

One of the Katellians, all of whom were muddy, gruff, and sun-burnt red, stepped in front of the others and replied. "Aye, but my daughter said we should come up to eat. We sailor's aren't ones to say no to food."

As half of the crowd begun making plates, Lucian turned his glare on the two Yanartians that had come with them. "Why did you let them up?"

"We didn't know what to do. They just ignored us. Were we supposed to fight them? They came with you after all."

"Don't worry, son," Estrid's father laughed. "We'll help you catch in fish what we eat." He threw his head back and laughed harder, then went to get food like the others.

My gnome friend Minstrel appeared beside me then. "What excitement is this?" he asked. "I could hear the ruckus from the ground below."

"I haven't gotten a chance to find out."

“Oh, Ellia, there you are,” Estrid suddenly greeted. She was just as wet as Lucian in her black and blue cloak. He spared a glance for me, but barely before going back to wincing at the group. Estrid grinned. “Can you believe my family is here? We made it out of Loone without losing a single person. I want you to meet all of my brothers.” Dropping her shapely brows, she turned back to Lucian, pointing a finger at him. “Did you hear my father say they’d fish for Yanartas? I *told* you they wouldn’t be a burden.”

Lucian chuckled darkly. “Fishing implies that they’re staying here. They’re not staying here.”

“You’re going to send them back to Karatel?” she countered. “Why did you bother saving them then?”

“They can go to Selket,” he offered. “They can go to the swamplands.”

“*My* family to the swamplands?” Estrid crossed her arms and scoffed.

Lucian frowned, his eyes going tight. “You seem to forget, time and time again, Larke, that Yanartas is a country of laws. Foreign peasants entering the city--let alone feasting in the Cirali dining pavilion--is absolutely forbidden. Are you determined to break every rule Yanartas has? I can’t think of any you haven’t.”

“You were willing enough to take me up the mountain when it was time for me to bond with Tris,” she said.

Lucian’s cheeks went a little red; I thought it was the first time I’d seen it happen to my solemn trainer. He glanced at Minstrel and I. Immediately we burst into laughter. He scowled even more darkly, though there was little real threat behind it. Then his name was called above the happy celebration around us, and he turned sternly to one of the first order Warriors, Baraduce Nar, who had just approached from the rain.

“I can explain, sir,” Lucian began, but Baraduce waved a hand.

“I couldn’t care less about such trivialities. I came to tell you that I’m taking a division of Warriors to Selket. There’s been a last minute threat from the Akadians. There’s no one else to aide them.”

“Let me go,” Lucian offered. He put a hand on his arm. “You just got back. You need to rest Ceras.”

“No,” Baraduce objected. “You’ve just returned yourself. You’re in no state to fly out. Besides you’ve got this lot to deal with.” He scoffed, obviously not envying Lucian. “Ceras has had long enough at the mount.”

I heard a roar behind me and turned to see Luffie, waiting out where the rain was pouring on her. Baraduce’s maroon and gold chimera, Ceras, stood beside her. One look at her face told me what she wanted, as if her constant pestering over the past days hadn’t.

“Baraduce, may I come?” I asked, nearly interrupting his last words to Lucian.

The ever-intimidating Baraduce gave me a glance-over. “Where’s your partner?”

“Gael,” I said. “He’s up on the mount with his chimera. He won’t be back until tomorrow.”

“How long have you been back in Yanartas?” he asked.

“Too soon,” Lucian interrupted. “She’s not been back a week.”

Estrid gave me an uncertain look.

“My chimera’s ready,” I explained to Baraduce. “She’s been to the mountain every night. She can breathe fire now, as well.”

Baraduce considered for a pause, then nodded gruffly. “We should be back by tonight anyways. I could use a second. So long as you can have your chimera saddled and ready on the east platform in ten minutes, you’re welcome to come.”

I nodded happily. I could feel Luffie's delighted approval.

Baraduce gave a final instruction to Lucian, then broke away from the pavilion.

"Honestly, you're as bad as Estrid," Lucian muttered to me.

"Now you won't be able to meet family," Estrid complained.

"You heard Baraduce. I'll be back by tonight." I patted Minstrel's head, then I waved to the rest of them before running into the rain.

"Don't forget to change out of your dress!" Estrid cautioned.

I waved a hand in acknowledgement. Anything, so long as it made Luffie happy.

CYRIC:

Tosch clopped his hooves crossly against the muddy earth of Loone. As usual, his anger had nothing to do with anything practical (like the fact that I'd made him ride across half of Karatel without rest), he simply didn't like that I'd lost my temper with the Akadian soldiers who guarded Loone. I didn't regret my actions; the idiots had deserved it.

The city of Loone had been completely trashed. I was standing in the center of their largest road. Well-fortified buildings made up most of the city. Where broken bottles didn't litter the ground, rotting fish did, or half-butchered farm animals, or ship parts. But all of this had happened long before the sailors of Loone had decided to rebel. Their plan had obviously been to sneak away on their boats, but the Akadian soldiers had caught them well before they could. The Akadians should have been able to stop some of them at least, but when it had come to swords, the infamous ghost of Tobias had appeared. Most Akadians had grown accustomed to seeing him appear in a battle, but the particularly stupid ones still allowed it to disable them to uselessness.

“Lieutenant Dracla,” Mork said respectfully. He was a soldier, the ruling sergeant of the division on its way to Loone before I’d taken over. “We searched the buildings. There are no Katellians. The Akadian peacekeepers have been whipped as you ordered.”

“Have the men clear out then,” I instructed, “I want to be back at the capitol by tomorrow. We’ll stop in Transem on the way to make sure this behavior isn’t spreading.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he said. He bowed, then he walked to the nearest Akadian soldiers and immediately they began speaking in hushed tones, full of wondering looks in my direction.

I was used to this behavior, I knew the sorts of things they said about me. Unlike Shaundakul, these opinions were ones of respect and envy. Sometimes fear. I could live with either.

I led Tosch away from the soldiers, up towards the largest of the buildings. Almost all the shacks were connected to this one. There were two torches burning outside its doors. Beyond the top of the cliff ahead, I could see the ocean. Clouds rolled along the distant horizon. The water looked never-ending, but I knew our greatest enemies lay beyond it.

My blood grew colder as I stared. Tosch whinnied and my attention fell back on the building. I grabbed the nearest torch and cast it on the roof. Within seconds it had ignited the space around it.

The town of Loone was left in ashes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

ELLIA:

A volley of arrows whipped past me as Luffie dived towards the ground to shower her fire-breath on the soldiers below. The flat Selkian landscape provided no shelter for the Akadians; it also allowed me to see absolutely everything that was happening around the battlefield. The high sun made the gold sand so bright that it was almost blinding. Eight chimera, including Baraduce and myself held the skies, while the Selkian's scorpions cast dark shadows below. Compared to most of the battles I'd been in in the past months, the number of Akadian soldiers was staggeringly high, but they had no granted animals helping them, and no goblins either.

Luffie made a show of spinning gracefully up into the sky. As we were about to sink back down, I heard Baraduce's voice.

"The Selkian's need help near their sorcerers," he told me. "They've got those blasted stones again. Take two of the third order Warriors and try to protect them."

"Yes sir."

"And don't allow your chimera to expend her energy on pointless tricks."

"Alright, sir." He turned his eyes below, then raced Ceras in that direction. Ceras was so large it seemed he could have blocked the sun out. With determined focus I flew by two of the Warriors I'd already been guiding, and called for them to follow me. Once they were in formation behind Luffie, I led us to a break in the Akadian's soldiers--where the Selkian's

sorcerers had gained ground until the Akadians had begun to pelt them with the dispel stones. Wisps of snakes and flames swirled all around; these were the spells cast by the Selkian sorcerers. Like the rest of their countrymen, the sorcerers wore heavy robes that covered most of their bodies, and many gold hoops and bangles that never failed to attract goblins. Where the stones hit the sorcerers, their spells flared out of control, or died out completely.

Luffie used her fire-breath on the greatest collection of stone-throwers. The chimera flanking me did the same. Because we'd surprised them, there was no fear of being struck ourselves, but thanks to their metal shields, we'd barely disabled any of them. Suddenly a large form of black and glittering jewel-like colors leapt from the Selkian side. It was a scorpio. A rider sat atop its back, fit into a harness. The scorpio was at least three times the size of Luffie. It craned its stinger into the air, then jabbed it down into the heart of the Akadians. Just before it struck, it let out a noise somewhere between a clicking and a hissing. It struck four more times, skewering an Akadian with each hit, then it snapped its pincers. With the distraction the sorcerers were able to break the stones and retrieve their powers, but then a large spear came from the Akadian's side. It cracked the scorpio's shelled chest. Another shot hit him. I rode Luffie close to the spearmen to stop them and suddenly they were aiming at the other chimera Warriors and I. Luffie clawed them away with her talons. I watched one raise his spear and take aim for the chimera beside me-

-

Then a rush of fire, like an ocean wave rolled over them. Through the flames, Baraduce and Ceras came soaring, having obviously caused the inferno. As the flames cleared, it was obvious few Akadian's had survived, but more were running in to replace the others. They shot at Ceras with spears and arrows, but his armor and even his hide was too thick for them to penetrate. He

hovered above them and Baraduce wore a smile as Ceras deflected all the projectiles with his claws.

I felt Luffie's body humming beneath me. As Ceras beat his massive maroon wings she suggested to me that he would perhaps be the sort of chimera worthy of her more particular attentions. I chided her for thinking such things in battle, then helped the other Warriors' pick off what Akadians had survived Baraduce's firestorm.

As Ceras swung down toward the largest remaining group of soldiers to use his fire-breath again, I couldn't help but pause to watch. Luffie looked on just as attentively.

Most of the Akadians gave up their shooting and ran as Ceras opened his jaw wide, but a group of them held their ground. Just as Ceras' fire struck the first line of soldiers I thought I saw a flash of silver cross the sky. Not a moment later, Ceras jerked back in the air, his fire-breath stopping completely. His wings snapped to his sides. He started plummeting downwards; only his momentum kept him moving forward, off to the side of the battlefield. I saw Baraduce try to get a hold on his reigns, but Ceras crashed into the ground without regaining control.

I had no idea what had just happened, but more quickly than I could think to tell her Luffie dove after them. I spared a glance at the soldier's that had held their ground against Baraduce. They held weapons that looked like nothing more than oversized crossbows, not the sort of thing that could take down a chimera. They took aim at the sky as Luffie and I landed next to Ceras. He was on his side, flapping his wings violently and scraping his taloned-paws against the sand. We were surrounded on all sides by empty dunes. Baraduce was pinned in his saddle, his body limp.

"Ceras, stop," I cried. "Ceras, what's wrong?"

He continued to dig into the sand. I tried to settle him and one of his wings grazed my cheek, causing a line of stinging pain that made me cry out. Ceras' eyes found mine at the sound and finally he settled, his wings pulling against his body. I expected his chest to be heaving as powerfully as the rest of his body was, but it was almost still, only jerking slightly. His muscles were straining around his neck. A putrid burning smell filled the air. I moved close to him and touched his chin. My hand was smaller than just one of his teeth. His red and gold-specked eyes were fading. "Ceras, what's wrong?" I asked. And then I saw a trickle of silver sliding out of his mouth. I tried to touch it and discovered it to be as hot as flames.

I realized now that his throat was engorged. I pressed my hand against it and was instantly burned. Chips of silver clung to my skin. Ceras attempted to take one last breath, then slumped into the sand, his eyes rolling shut.

My vision filled up with tears. "No!" I screamed.

Luffie roared out, nudging her head against Ceras' body. I heard a loud crashing sound behind me and then a cry. Not more than twenty feet away, another chimera had fallen. Its Warrior had his hands around its neck, screaming and trying to calm it. I wiped an arm across my face, then gave Luffie quick instruction to help me free Baraduce. She had to wrap one of her talons around his leg, but we finally pulled him free and onto Luffie's back. He had a terrible gash on his head; he was falling in and out consciousness. I mounted Luffie behind him, then rode towards the other Warrior. His chimera had already gone still.

I dropped down to the sand and called to him.

"He's dead," the Warrior cried, his voice anguished. "I could feel him suffocating. My chimera--"

An arrow whizzed between us. I looked to see a line of Akadians headed our direction. There were Selkians also, fighting nearby. I saw a flash of fire in the air and sickened at the thought that more chimera could be hurt.

“We have to get out of here,” I yelled to the Warrior. “We have to warn the others.”

The Warrior wailed. Another arrow rushed by us. I grabbed his arm and pulled him towards Luffie.

I pushed him into the saddle, until he finally mounted, barely maintaining his sanity. It didn't take more than a quick calculation of my mind to tell that this was all Luffie was going to be able to hold; she'd carried Minstrel, Estrid, and I before, but only a short distance, and Baraduce's weight, even with his leather armor, would have been the same as Estrid and I put together. I spared a glance for the Akadians behind me.

Luffie met my eyes fiercely.

“Quickly. Before the soldiers come,” I said. “Take him to the others.”

She dug her paws into the earth. “You can't carry all of us, Luffie. I'll retreat with the Selkians. I'll be alright.” She nudged her head into me.

“Go!” I screamed. Then I forced her forward with all of my strength. She finally broke into a run and took the air.

I had a moment to watch them fly up towards the remaining chimera, then I heard a hiss of wind and vanished as a spear launched through me. I reappeared and raced towards the nearest group of Selkian fighters. A scorio launched over my head, I had to drop and roll to avoid him.

I clashed with the nearest Akadian, unsheathing my sword and taking him down with one stroke. The next soldiers came at me together. I held them off with my vanishing power. Then I

heard a roar. I looked up to see if another of the chimera had fallen. I didn't get the chance to tell though before something hard struck the side of my head. And then everything went black.

CYRIC:

The palace chamber of Karatel was bright with guests and music. It resembled little its appearance in the time of the Katellians. The long chamber was now lined with statues, torches, and ornaments--collected either from other parts of Karatel itself or from the eastern kingdoms. There was a curved sword of Democedes hanging on the wall. A fine bear-skin of Ghaund. A golden shield from Selket. The slate walls and marble floor had been treated with oils so that they reflected everything around them.

For the event, two tables had been set up, spanning the length on the sides of the chamber and set with food and wine. Soldiers and women crowded the room, a band of musicians played in a corner.

But it was less of the pleasant spectacle Akadian parties were. The women present, while dressed in fine clothes and jewels, were from the only recently conquered cities, and having not yet been returned to Akadia, they lacked the influence that Akadian handmaidens provided. Many of them shirked attention--albeit unsuccessfully. The ones who didn't played their parts poorly.

I stood in the corner at the front of the chamber--where the less frivolous soldiers were grouped around the throne. Lox sat in this, wearing his usual full-plate armor, with a tabard of red and yellow buckled over it. Behind us an open deck looked out over the city. The setting sun cast a gold hue into the chamber.

I watched a soldier kneel before Lox, say a few words, then stand and walk away. Not long after this he looked my direction, lifted a hand and waved me over to him.

“Cyrice, this is a celebration, you should be enjoying yourself. Aren’t you happy with our success?”

“Of course,” I replied. He referred to the recently won battle in Selket, where despite having no wyverns, the Akadians had managed to take down four chimera. This was due to the invention of Lox and Bellerophon, and tonight’s celebration was in the master-smith’s honor. He stood nearby, his face for once lacking smudges, his dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. Though he held the attention of many crowding soldiers, he appeared as stoic as ever. “I suppose my mind’s just occupied.”

Lox frowned. “Still bothered to be going back to Akadia? Come, son--you’ve barely returned since the wars started. Even the strongest soldiers can’t fight constantly.”

I didn’t respond.

Lox leaned closer. “You know I need you there to support me, Cyrice. Once Scanth has left the city, there’s no telling what foolish plans the council might concoct.”

“I just don’t see why he has to leave in the first place,” I complained. The only reason Scanth couldn’t stay in Akadia was because the king and council wouldn’t allow Lox to single-handedly lead the war effort--which was foolish because he was a far better strategist than the other commanders. The three periodically switched, though Lox by far led the most--not to mention that even when he was out of power, Scanth and Venoc took their orders from him. It was just pointless posturing that Scanth had to come out.

Lox laughed. “Your preference for battle is one of the things I admire most about you, Cyric. But don’t worry, it won’t be long before I return, then you’ll be free to go where you like.” He raised his brows beseechingly at me.

I nodded.

He started to say something else, but before he could finish a soldier came to bow beside him. “My Lord, the spoils from the Selkian battle have arrived. Lieutenant Vallin has escorted them himself. He requests permission to bring them before you.”

Lox darkened for a moment, then grew a grin. “Well, this should lift your spirits, Cyric. Or at the least be enough to distract you.” Lox nodded to the soldier. “Send them in.”

As the soldier left, I walked to the edge of the marble deck, beyond the walls of the throne-room so that I was surrounded on three sides by open air. I could see them now, coming in through the south gate. A handful of torches flickered brightest along a trail of soldiers and Selkian captives--not nearly as many as there should have been, but Vallin wasn’t one to take prisoners. The interesting sight was the two metal cages rolling at the back, enormous, and inside of them held what could only have been three Selkian scorpions.

I thought with mild amusement that I hoped Vallin didn’t intend to bring them into the throne-room for exhibit. Then I walked back inside, where Lox had ordered the path from the door to him cleared. They would enter through the large double-door entrance that connected past a long hall to the streets of Karatel.

While the minstrel’s had stopped their playing, the mutterings of the chamber had only moving anywhere inside of watching such a procession.

Lieutenant Vallin entered first and most of the room cheered. My fellow Lieutenant was a man of forty years, with clean cropped hair, and a scarred face. As he strode forward a heavily

armored soldier flanked him and it didn't take much examination to see he carried the now infamous weapon which had the ability to kill chimera.

Lieutenant Vallin bowed before Lox. "Commander, I am happy to report that the west-lands of Selket have fallen."

"We've received the news," Lox said, forgoing ritual. "Since you've left your division and come all this way, why not show us the result."

I tried not to grow a smirk as Vallin's face paled over with confusion. I knew Lox hadn't been happy he'd come back with the spoils.

Vallin bowed, his face red, then he gestured to the soldier at his side. "This is the man who brought the leader of the Cirali's down. Its body was the size of a behemoth. But it took only one shot."

While the crowd muttered surprise, the soldier laid the weapon on the marble floor before Lox. Belleraphon displayed no reaction to his invention. Vallin's underlings had already begun to lead the spoils into the chamber. He presented a chest of Selkian bangles. Then four crates of scorpio jewels--which were never left embedded into their shells after the granted creatures fell. He presented a paltry number of Selkian captives, mostly sorcerers, all of them robbed of their powers by dispel stones.

It was the amber-colored dispel stones themselves that were of most worth, and I saw a number of Akadian soldiers eyeing them with envy--when they weren't eyeing the female captives.

"This is Rabaus," Vallin announced, leading forward a white-robed Selkian bound in chains. He had his head down, his lips drawn to a solemn line. He followed Vallin's prodding obediently. "He's one of the Selkian leaders. A famed strategist." The Selkian said not a word,

while Vallin crossed his arms and leered beside him. “He’s the rider of a granted scorpio as well.”

Lox leaned forward on his throne. “You must be a man of great skill, Rabaus,” he said. “Perhaps you could employ your talents for the use of Akadia?”

Instead of answering, Rabaus merely cast his eyes upon Lox. They were deep, and dark, like the shell of a scorpio. I didn’t envy Lox the look and before a moment had passed, Lox waved his hand away. “Perhaps not.”

Some of the soldiers closest to Lox laughed, and even I grew a smirk. Then Rabaus was ushered out of the way and another figure was prodded into his place.

She had pale, yellow hair, so long that it fell halfway to the floor. She wore the armor of a Cirali warrior, tight leather, with loose white sleeves. Her hands were tied in front of her, and her eyes were downcast, as Rabaus’ had been. Even though she was dirty, scratched up, and dressed in fighting clothes, her nobility and beauty was unmatched. I felt my heart beat faster, then she looked up at Lox.