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For: Judy Taylor
A dear and steadfast friend,
who helped me get through every
Chapter, page, and word
My heartfelt thanks...

Chapter One

FOR THREE NIGHTS Suzanne dreamed of snow and of a pale bloodstained moon casting its cold light across a gleaming expanse of white, stretching endlessly to the horizon. She knew it was a sign, an ominous foretelling that haunted and unsettled her. And this particular night, wild with shrieking wind and driving rain, only heightened her unease and kept reminding her of the disturbing dreams.

Normally, she favored cool, rainy nights as the best time for writing. A mug of cocoa and her favorite shawl wrapped around her shoulders helped set the mood for hours of intricate plotting. The night encouraged the development of exotic, fascinating characters—what every science fiction author strove to accomplish.

She really shouldn't be working at her computer. Storms always made the monitor flicker. Power outages were frequent in such a rural area, which shut down her computer and plunged everything into darkness. Suzanne always kept a fire burning in the wood stove. It often consoled her as she contemplated restoring all her work after the sudden loss of power. The cheery flames also warded off any sinister shadows and seemed to dispel the menace of writer's block.

But, not tonight. The wind sang of omens, prophesied peril.

Her Siamese cat, Legolas, jumped onto her lap and pushed his head into her hands, demanding a scratch behind the ears. The proud cat shared her small house—hidden in the woods—and earned his keep by making sure the resident rodent population stayed at zero. He was a sleek, inscrutable creature, an elf-prince trapped in the body of a cat, swathed in fur the color of smoky champagne, with eyes like cobalt glass.

Elegant and aloof, Legolas lived up to his Tolkien namesake. He rarely meowed—not a typical “talky” Siamese. When he wasn't hunting, he took lengthy naps draped across the top of her monitor, one paw dangling over the side. Conversations were comprised of subtle eye contact, an occasional twitch of whiskers or a disdainful yawn. Sometimes Legolas' tail would snap with irritation or, languidly curl and uncoil, conveying his utter boredom.

Suzanne stopped trying to type and studied her lordly pet. “I'm not going to get this manuscript finished in time, and Lorraine is going to kill me.”

One eye opened to a mere sapphire sliver. *So ?*

“You're not being very helpful,” Suzanne complained softly.

What do you expect me to do?

“I expect you to be sympathetic, understanding.”

Legolas flexed the single dangling paw, unsheathing five miniature sabers that gleamed in the firelight. *I am. I'm here. Isn't that enough?*

Yes, it was enough. It ought to be enough. At least the cat understood her success and her need for solitude. Whereas David had not ... The look in his eyes, his angry bewilderment and selfish indignation would forever torment her. David had wanted her to be his *wife*, not a celebrity. Snarled within the tangle of his hurt pride and jealous disdain, Suzanne soon realized being *alone* was easier ... and safer. She never had to worry about restoring her battered heart or surrendering her misplaced trust.

Sighing, Suzanne got up and padded into her small, dimly-lit kitchen hunting for a snack. The wind had picked up again, beating the rain against the glass. Looking outside the living room window, she noticed her numerous bird feeders swinging wildly in the strong gusts, spilling out most of the seed. She was tempted to bring the feeders inside, but decided against it. It was too cold and the wind too threatening. She'd clean up the mess in the morning after the storm was over.

Finding nothing that appealed to her, she turned back to her computer, hands chafing against her upper arms to ward off the chill. The computer offered no consolation to her writing dilemma. Suzanne's editor had given her two weeks to complete her newest book, but it would not come to a satisfying end. The nearly finished manuscript sat in her computer like a malevolent toad, mocking her, daring her to break its

evil spell.

She should quit and go to bed, but the wind troubled her and she knew the strange dreams would only disturb her sleep.

The jagged glare of headlights through the rain-wet window startled her. She rarely had visitors. Those who did visit were by invitation or they called first. She moved to the door and pulled a small pistol from its hiding place behind a large Boston fern. Suzanne wasn't stupid. A single woman, living alone in a remote wooded area of Washington state had to take precautions. It was either a well-trained guard dog, or a gun. The gun was cheaper and it couldn't pick a fight with Legolas.

Almost before the visitor knocked, she hastily put the gun away. Through the narrow window alongside the door, she recognized the familiar black and white SUV with its crown of lights on the roof. It was Dane McKenna, the local county sheriff. She opened the door, letting in a fierce gust of wind and a blast of icy rain. Dane quickly stepped inside. Water ran from his heavy jacket, pooling at his booted feet.

"Wild night, huh?" he said with a wry grin.

"Yes. What brings you here? Is something wrong?"

The tall sheriff shook his head, causing more rain water to slide from the plastic cover protecting his hat. "No, nothing's really wrong. I just got off duty and I thought I'd stop by and see ... well, you know, see if you were okay."

Suzanne hid a knowing smile. It was painfully obvious that Dane liked her—which she had to admit was rather nice. He was a well-muscled, heavily-armed guardian angel, who, by his own determination had decided to keep watch over her. Several times she had noticed him cruising through the tiny mountain town of Black Elk, catching speeding tourists or stopping drifters who were begging for money or a ride.

The first time she actually met Sheriff McKenna he had stopped her and politely informed her that her car had a broken left tail light. And, he knew who she was, right away.

"I've enjoyed your books, Miss Jennings," he'd said. "Read every one of them."

From that day, Sheriff McKenna had become her self-appointed champion-at-arms, which made sense to her writer's mind. Dane McKenna was an archetype—she knew that from a writing class she had taken years ago. Sheriff McKenna was really a warrior, with tasks and quests, living by a strict code of honor. Suzanne took the liberty of putting him in her last book, arming him with a blazing sword and magic armor. After a fierce, bloody battle, he slew the foul priest-king of Dore's Mar.

If he had recognized himself in the book, he never mentioned it.

His nervous cough ended her daydreaming.

"Uh, would you like a cup of coffee, Dane? Or, maybe some hot tea?" she said, motioning for him to sit down at the kitchen counter.

"Okay. Thanks." He dipped his head and removed his hat, which she took and hung on the coat rack adjacent to the kitchen. He slipped onto the high stool and unzipped his heavy jacket.

"So, what will it be?" She tried to sound cheerful, mainly to keep her anxiety at bay. Alone with a sheriff

was still being alone with a big man who also happened to have a crush on her.

"Tea's good. It's easy." He passed a damp hand over his close-clipped hair.

"Okay."

Suzanne turned and pattered around her kitchen, filling the teakettle, setting out cups, spoons, and the sugar. She knew from past visits he liked sugar in his tea and coffee. "How long do you think the storm will last?" she asked setting a large mug and a tea bag before him.

"Reports say it should simmer down by late tomorrow morning, there's supposed to be a snowstorm next week. Strange weather for September," he said. "You, uh, need anything? You know, food or something?" Large, square-tipped fingers tore open the paper wrapper and dropped the tea bag into the mug.

"No, I'm fine. Had everything delivered a few days ago."

"Got all your firewood laid in?"

"Yes. Eight cords, last month."

Dane nodded, clearly pleased with her report.

Suzanne fixed her own tea, glad for the opportunity to keep busy and her mind off Sheriff McKenna's large, authoritative hands. She poured the hot water into the mugs, and hunched herself onto the stool on the other side of the counter, facing him. They drank their tea in amicable silence.

"Actually, there is another reason why I came by."

Suzanne saw unease flicker through Dane's dark gray eyes. He reached inside his jacket and pulled something out from the inner pocket.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" He set the object on the counter in front of her.

The wind howled like a dying animal, pummeled the rain-drenched glass.

She stared at the unfamiliar object, uncertain how she should answer him. It looked like a paperweight, a round, flat medallion about two inches in diameter that gleamed in the low lamp light.

"Amazing," she murmured.

It appeared to be made of pure white marble with a smaller, inner medallion of polished black onyx imbedded flush into the white. She picked it up, cradling it in her left palm. With a light fingertip, she traced the outline of the dark red symbol inserted at the very center, shaped like a raindrop. Upon closer examination she realized it looked more like a blood-red teardrop. So simple. An elegant thing, smooth and cool in her hand.

The coolness turned cold; a sudden numbness seeped through her hand, burning her fingers, like touching frosted glass on a winter day. A disturbing image flitted through her mind: blood and endless snow. She almost dropped the medallion. Instead, she gingerly placed it next to her tea mug.

She looked at Dane, noting the intensity of his gaze. "Where did you find this?" she asked.

"I didn't find it, it was given to me."

"By whom?"

Dane shook his head. "Damnedest thing ... I've been a cop for ten years, a Marine before that and I've never seen anything like this."

Suzanne sensed this was going to be a long story. She scooted off the bar stool and hurriedly added more wood to the stove. Once back on her perch, she gestured for him to take off his jacket.

"So, what happened?"

Dane set his jacket on the spare stool next to him then took another swallow of tea. "You know Splitrock Bar, that biker place out east of town? Up the old logging road?"

"Yes." Suzanne had driven by it once on a Saturday afternoon excursion. The building had originally been a forest ranger's station, built back in the 1930s as a WPA project. In the '50's it became a diner and gas station for loggers. Then, in the late '80's Curly Holmes bought it and turned it into a bar and hangout for bikers. Suzanne had seen Curly once or twice riding his Harley through Black Elk—a scrawny old thug in worn leather, with a ratty beard, bad teeth, and stringy gray hair tied down with a red bandana.

"About two hours ago I got a 9-1-1 call from Curly ... which surprised me. I've rarely had to go out to his place. Curly usually keeps a tight lid on things. He's got a shotgun under the bar and he'll use it if he has to. Anyway, when I arrived at the scene, Curly met me at the door. He was as white as a sheet, scared out of his mind. Curly's never been scared of anything ... he's a tough old sonofabitch. I mean ... uh, sorry."

"What happened?" Suzanne asked.

"When I went inside, six of Curly's customers—mean-lookin' guys—had cornered this big red-headed man against the wall. Except, get this ... he had a *sword*. And I don't mean one of those flimsy fencing swords either, but a seriously, dangerous weapon, like something a-a-a..."

"A knight would use?"

"Yeah. That's it. A knight's sword. Something like that."

Dane again ran a hand across his cropped hair. "At first I thought he was an escaped mental patient gone wacko, but he didn't look or act like he was deranged." Dane looked directly at her, his gaze unwavering. "He knew what he was doing."

An unsettled feeling flitted through Suzanne's belly. "Did he hurt anyone?" she asked softly.

"No. He lowered his sword and surrendered the minute he saw me. I didn't even have to call for backup."

Suzanne slipped off the stool, tugging her shawl more tightly across her shoulders. The chill had settled deeper into her bones. Or, was it because the rain seemed to beat more wildly against the window?

"Why are you telling me this? Shouldn't you be telling your superior ... you know, making some kind of report?"

"That's just it, Suzanne, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because, I let him go."

She turned back to Dane, shocked by the remorse she saw on his face—a warrior riddled with guilt for having made the wrong decision.

"You let him go?"

Dane rose from the stool. "Look, I know this sounds crazy, but you're the only one I can tell this to; the only one who might be able to make any sense of it. Suzanne, this guy wasn't from anywhere around here, and I don't mean Black Elk, or even the county. I think he's from—" Dane glanced upward. "You know..."

"You mean, from another world?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yeah." He shrugged. "That's the only explanation I could think of."

"Is that why you came here?"

"I thought you might know ... I mean, have some ideas—"

So, that was it. "Dane, I'm a writer! I write science fiction novels—fantasy stories. I'm not some resident expert on aliens."

Her rebuke caused a flicker of hurt to skitter across his face. Dane reached for his jacket and shrugged it on over his shoulders. "Sorry. I thought you might be able to help me figure out who this guy was. Christ, Suzanne, he was wearing a cloak and gauntlets. What if I had brought him in for questioning? What was I supposed to book him on? Carrying a sword? Besides, Curly didn't press charges."

Regretting her sharp remarks, Suzanne tried to sound apologetic. "Did Curly say where the man came from?"

"No. He seemed to think the stranger was trying to find someone." Dane looked down and shook his head, clearly regretting what he had done. "I don't know what I'm going to report. Maybe I'll just say some dumb kid had a few too many beers, got a little out of control and then apologized. I could say I let him off with a warning."

Suzanne looked away, again hiding her annoyance. She ought to be flattered, but Dane had some nerve expecting her to help him rationalize his police procedures. She could no more do that than ask him to help her write her books. For once, her high estimation of Sheriff McKenna slid a notch. "I still don't understand how I can help you."

"You can't," he said bluntly. "I just wanted to know what you thought about all this. I value your opinion, Suzanne." The tormented look in his eyes suddenly made her truly regret her unkind feelings toward him.

She had not meant to hurt him. What would she have done if she had been in his position?

"I don't know, Dane." She shrugged helplessly. "Maybe it was all a hoax or a very bad joke. Maybe someone was trying to settle a score with Curly—someone from his past. Or, maybe it really was some crazy, hyped-up guy on drugs. Who knows?"

Dane nodded. "You're right. Maybe I'm making more out of this than I should."

She picked up the empty tea mugs and set them in the sink. "I think you need to get some sleep. I'm sure you'll have some answers in the morning." That sounded kind, conciliatory. Better than the way she had tried to appease David. It never mattered how she worded her apologies, she was always wrong, always stumbling into some new word-trap which David could twist to his advantage.

"Okay, but I need to let you know something else," Dane said, reminding her to stop dwelling the past.

The anxious feeling in her stomach rose again. "What's that?"

"This man—whoever he was—spoke to me."

"Wh-what did he say?"

"After Curly went back inside the bar, he handed me that medallion and said, 'Give this to the Wordsayer before the beginning of the tenth day.' Then he turned and disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean he just *vanished* into thin air?"

"No, he went up the little hill behind Curly's place and disappeared through that wide fissure in Splitrock." Dane picked up the medallion and handed it to her. "I don't know what a 'wordsayer' is, but you're a writer; you know about words. Take the medallion, Suzanne. Please."

She took it from him, more bewildered and disturbed than before. The raw coldness emanating from the stone had subsided, but its eerie power still lingered and she wondered if Dane had felt it, too.

Dane didn't ask her to get his hat. As he had done on previous visits, he plucked it from the rack in the adjacent hallway and set it firmly on his head. "Thanks for the tea. I hope I didn't upset you too much. Maybe we could get together sometime and talk about all this. Dinner ... or something...?"

Before she could think of anything else to say, she blurted, "Sure."

Dane touched the brim of his hat. "Goodnight, Suzanne. I'll see you soon."

He turned and left, shutting the door firmly so that the wind would not blow it open. When she no longer saw the lights from his car, Suzanne placed the medallion on the counter. The wind had done this, she thought suddenly. It was an omen, like a prophecy from an evil soothsayer that foretold of dark deeds and an uncertain future.

Suzanne sighed. This comes from an overwrought imagination, she chided herself. From writing about things that never had a source in reality. She had lived in the safety of fantasy worlds too long...

There was no use trying to write. She turned off the lights and went to bed. And ... slept, undisturbed by the wind or dreams of snow and a bloody moon.

In the morning, all that remained of the storm were high, gray clouds and the pungent smell of wet earth and pine needles. Suzanne dressed and ate a simple breakfast, then went outside to sweep up the pieces of her broken bird feeders and the wind-scattered seeds. Legolas followed her out, disdainfully avoiding any puddled water or muddy soil.

Disgusting.

"For your information, tigers happen to love water."

A whisker twitched. *Tsk. I daresay they love barkers, too.*

Suzanne avoided any further discussions with the cat. Legolas wandered off, apparently to look for some unlucky mouse or perhaps an errant bird.

After cleaning up the feeders, she returned inside to decide what she would do for the remainder of the day. Still unsettled, the mere idea of writing was out of the question; Lorraine would just have to wait, regardless of the deadline. Instead, Suzanne found herself studying the strange stone medallion and thinking about what Dane said to her last night.

...disappeared through that wide fissure in Splitrock.

Disappeared? Where?

He said, 'Give this to the Wordsayer before the beginning of the tenth day'...

Tenth day? From what?

I don't know what a 'wordsayer' is, but you're the writer...

Curiosity was a trait peculiar to Legolas and most of his kind. It was also true of writers, but curiosity could be dangerous. It meant she would have to leave the safety of her wooded sanctuary.

From a safe distance, she stared at the medallion still resting on the kitchen counter. It did not glow, but beckoned to her like an enchanted talisman—its presence compelling her to action. She fought the long-ingrained reluctance to leave her home. Beyond the secluded, green borders of her private forest, lay the uncertainties, the tiresome vagaries of dealing with people and the world in general.

I'm not really agoraphobic or afraid, she counseled herself. Just reclusive. Private. What's wrong with that?

The strange stone beckoned again. This time she picked it up, weighing its importance and cool power over her. She closed her eyes and shuddered, catching fleeting wisps of her dreams: bloodbloodblood and the hard brilliance of an icy moon. A man, with milky-blue skin, like winter dusk, howling in rage ... or pain.

Caution and logic be damned. Suzanne pocketed the marble stone, grabbed her purse and car keys. It was still early. There shouldn't be anyone hanging around Curly's bar before noon. She would find out for herself where the mysterious visitor had disappeared, then return home in time to work on her book. On her way out the door, she stopped. Legolas.

Foreboding knifed through her again. Without quite knowing why, Suzanne retraced her steps and hastily checked the cat's automatic feeder and waterer—used primarily when she went on the occasional book tour. They were full; the cat would be fine for at least a week. Besides, Legolas was an exceptional hunter.

Was she being prudent or unconsciously anticipating being gone longer than a few hours? Method and order were her strong points. So was caution. However, the sudden need to know what happened at Splitrock over-rode the last of her misgivings. Once in the car, she forgot about Legolas and Lorraine.

The road to Splitrock Bar was at one time a logging road, now a narrow, rarely-traveled highway that wound eastward, through the dense forest and over a low mountain pass. Die-hard hikers and rock-climbers knew of the route as did touring motorcyclists. Travelers with trailers and motor homes avoided the road since it was too narrow, full of twists and turns all the way to the next mountain town forty miles away. Curly's bar was only five miles out of Black Elk, but it seemed like she had driven for hours, deep into the forest, far from civilization.

Except for a battered van with illegible license plates, there were no other cars or motorcycles parked in front of Splitrock Bar. The van appeared as if it had been parked there for weeks—probably abandoned and Curly was too lazy to have it towed off his property.

Suzanne stopped her car and got out slowly, half expecting to see someone come out of the bar and yell at her for trespassing. But she saw no one, no one at all.

Behind the building, the land sloped upward toward the landmark for which the bar was named: Splitrock Pass. It wasn't a pass actually, but a towering granite rock, a monolith that had been split down the middle, making an enormous fissure wide enough to walk through.

An angry god had done this, she mused. Enraged after discovering his beautiful mortal wife had been unfaithful, the god had taken his axe and broken the rock in two.

Good stuff. She ought to be taking notes for her next book.

Drawn by its sheer enormity, Suzanne inched toward the rock, uncertain what she should do when she reach the fissure. According to Dane, the strange visitor had walked through it and simply disappeared.

Nah. It had been dark and windy. Dane had allowed his imagination to get the better of him. But at the opening, she stopped. The wind picked up again, tossing her hair across her face. She clawed the dark brown strands from her mouth and eyes, wishing she had brought along a barrette. It had also grown colder, much colder. Her teeth chattered loudly as she clutched her arms to her chest. She had foolishly left her jacket at home, thinking she wouldn't need it.

Suzanne thrust her hand into her jeans pocket, making sure the stone was still there. Her body heat had warmed it, but threads of cold flickered through her fingers. Satisfied, she braced her hands against each side of the fissure and looked through to the other side. She saw only trees and more forest stretching up the mountainside.

Where had that man gone?

She closed her eyes and took a step into the fissure. Then another. The wind lessened, and stopped. Her hands slid forward, touching the hard stone.

Another step. She dared not open her eyes, suddenly afraid she would see what had haunted her in her dreams—a snow-covered wasteland and that cold, white moon, covered in blood.

One more step. Her fingers found the sharp edges of the rock and she knew she had reached the other side of the fissure. Time to see where that angry god lived and find the man who was looking for a wordsayer.

Suzanne forced her eyes open and stepped into bitter cold and an empty, terrifying blackness.

Chapter Two

The Tenth Day

THE COLD STABBED like a thousand knives piercing her skin. Dazed, Suzanne huddled against a gray granite boulder and pressed the heel of her hand to her throbbing left cheek. A sharp wind whipped her hair across her eyes, cut through the thin fabric of her shirt. She grasped at the rough rock near her right elbow and pulled herself to her feet.

She was still in the mountains, but high above the tree line. A winding trail stretched out before her, leading downward through more raw-edged rocks and finally into the forest. Beyond, she saw a snow-covered valley, stretching far into the distance to the base of another range of mountains.

Another sharp gust tore through her clothes, making her shiver and her cheek ache. With tentative fingers, she touched the tender spot. She must have fallen when she stepped through the fissure.

A scabbling noise, like falling rocks made her whirl around. Behind her she saw two sharp granite pinnacles thrusting high into the sky. They stood like sentries guarding a pathway cut between them—a pass leading deeper into the mist. Panic caused her heart to thud in large, painful beats, her mouth turned to cotton wool.

It did not look like Splitrock Pass.

Turning back toward the pathway, Suzanne knew she had to decide quickly which direction to take. With no outer garment, food or shelter within sight, she wouldn't survive. The way through the stone pinnacles looked oddly familiar, but not the same, as if Splitrock Pass had somehow changed its shape.

Panic began to override her reason. Almost instinctively, she slipped her fingers into the pocket where she had put the medallion, reassuring herself it was not lost. Suzanne sensed the possibility that it might have value or meaning. Dane's strange encounter with the man who wielded a sword and demanded he find 'the wordsayer' could only mean that the medallion was of great importance.

Directly across the path she caught the dull gleam of something metallic embedded in the ground. Upon closer examination, she discovered the source was a plaque, bolted into a flat rock—a marker. She struggled to make out the message, written in words close to English, but rougher, cruder. The craftsman who made it had spent all his creative skills on the plaque itself, but knew nothing of spelling or lettering.

Thys plas marx wear the Messnjer vanish'd.

In honor, we r'membr hym, for he gave

The Book to the Bless'd Saint Kyrk.

She touched the rudely-spelled words, wondering how anyone could have made so many mistakes, almost as if a young child had written it. Messnjer. Messenger. Was it the Messenger who had given Dane the stone?

Another sharp gust made her gasp. Suzanne wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered violently. She would die out here and a voice inside warned that she may not die of starvation or of the cold, but of something far more ... sinister. She had no survival skills, at least not in practice. Doing research on survival was not the same as actually facing starvation or freezing to death.

It was then she heard them—horses, shuffling and snorting. Suzanne spun around and felt the blood leave her face, drain from her limbs. At least a dozen men sat astride massive horses, each animal saddled and harnessed in black. Gold and silver embellished their bridles. Heavy tassels hung from the bit rings, fluttering in the cold breeze.

Barbarians. They looked like warriors of some barbarian tribe, each wearing tunics of dark leather, embossed with metal plates and over their shoulders, heavy furs protected them from the sharp cold. Crested helmets of fantastic design enclosed their faces. All of them carried two swords slung across their backs. The hilts thrusting up behind their right shoulders served as a warning to anyone considering a confrontation.

But it was their leader who caught and held her attention. Like the others, he rode a tall, nearly-black horse. Intricately engraved gold and silver plates adorned the bridle and breast collar. Heavy blue tassels dangled from the bit rings and from both sides of the horse's head.

The man stared at her, never moving. His coarse black hair, touched with threads of white, fell in heavy waves past his shoulders. The late afternoon shadows sharpened the lines of his pale skin, accentuating the beard edging his jaw and trim moustache. He was all cold colors and dark hues—cruel black and midnight blue, winter white and brittle silver.

He nudged the horse closer and to her surprise, bowed his head briefly. “You are the Wordsayer?” he asked in deep, resonant tones.

Suzanne looked around frantically, panic-stricken. Her heart began to thud in frightened beats. The Wordsayer. The one the man in Curly's bar had been looking for. “I'm ... not sure I understand.”

He frowned slightly. A hint of bewilderment touched those piercing eyes. “*Youare* the Wordsayer, are you not? The prophecy stated that the Sayer of the Words would be here, in this place, ten days before the Eclipse.”

A huge man, with a patch over one eye, leaned across the space between their horses and spoke to the dark-haired leader in low tones so she would not hear him. The chieftain, or whoever he was, nodded in agreement.

“Perhaps the gods are testing us and our resolve.”

“The gods?” She glanced at the misspelled plaque. “Did the gods bring your Saint Kyrk to this place, or the Messenger?”

Alarm flared in the leader's eyes and in the eyes of those men close enough to have heard her. She'd

clearly touched a nerve.

"You can read the plaque?" he demanded.

"Yes. Of course." Suzanne took a step back. "Although it is badly misspelled," she added, trying to sound brave.

He glanced at his one-eyed officer. The silent exchange between them only served to raise Suzanne's fears. They did not appear pleased. She shivered violently and finally found the courage to speak.

"I am not sure what you and your men want, but I would ask if you have a spare blanket. I am freezing to dea—"

The barbarian leader shot her a frightening look and Suzanne took another step backward. She had breached some code or protocol and he was not pleased with her response.

He swung down from the horse and spoke to the group of warriors behind him. She saw movement, hands working, horses nudged back and forth until finally, the barbarian chief turned to her holding something in his gauntleted hands.

"This should keep you warm, my lady."

He held up a gray cloak, much too long for her, but more than adequate to ward off the cold wind. Hesitantly, she reached out and took the cloak from him. The warm texture of the thick wool felt reassuring, real, as she wrapped it around her shoulders, tugging the smooth edges together.

She glanced at her benefactor, who had been observing her actions with keen interest.

He nodded. "Warmer now?"

Suzanne returned his nod. "Yes. Much better. Thank you."

"Good. Then we must return."

He held out his hand and gestured for her to come closer to him. Suzanne stared at his hand encased in the black gauntlet, palm up, with the long fingers curving gracefully. What did he mean? Return where?

She found the ability to speak, a quavering, frightened imitation of her real voice. "No, thanks, whoever you are. I appreciate all you've done for me, but I should be going home. I'm not sure what this place is ... Thank you for the cloak. Perhaps you and your people should go on with whatever it is you need to do—"

Suzanne took another wary step back, now determined to head for the stone pinnacles. Something was terribly wrong. None of this could be—should be—happening.

The black-winged brows drew together in a stern frown. "But you are the reason we are here. You are the Wordsayer and you must return with us to Ironhold. We must hurry, my lady. Soon, it will grow dark."

"Ironhold? What is that?"

"It is the hold of Prince Akken'ar, Lord of san'Sorafel" the burly, one-eyed officer answered, gesturing toward the somber lord standing before her.

"He is *aprince*?" The wind buffeted her again, making the cloak billow around her knees. Suzanne clutched the thick cloth more tightly, now genuinely frightened. There were no princes she knew of, either alive or dead, who looked like him. This man belonged in folklore or myth—unreal and lost to legend.

The officer responded with a succinct nod. "We have traveled most the day to find you. Prince Akken'ar is right: we must hurry, my lady. We must return to the encampment before nightfall."

The pale lord stepped closer to her, head slightly cocked to the side. Curiosity and concern crossed his strong features. "We cannot stay in these mountains. There are too many dangers."

Suzanne drew back, uncertain what he was going to do, until she realized his attention was focused on her bruised cheek.

"You have been struck. Who did this?" Again, the wing-like brows drew together defining his sharp annoyance.

Her hand flew to her cheek. "Oh, uh ... it's nothing. I must have fallen. It was just an accident."

He remained unconvinced but gestured sharply toward the gathered horses. "We must go now. We have a horse for you. Can you ride?"

Cool rationale suppressed her fear for a moment. She wasn't going anywhere with this ... sinister-looking man, but as the sun dipped behind them turning the pathway gray and bleak, the shadows deepening to indigo, it suddenly occurred to her that there were probably wolves in these mountains.

"Well?" His gesture became more insistent, his expression harder, almost irritated. Obviously, he was not used to people questioning his authority.

Suzanne hesitated. Glancing over her shoulder she spotted the poorly written plaque and the mountain pass. She began to back away slowly. Her only escape was behind her, through the towering pinnacles. There *had* to be way to get home. Whoever Sheriff McKenna had seen go through Splitrock Pass, was probably not among these men. Coming here had been a mistake. She turned, gathering up the heavy folds of the cloak and ran for the twin rocks.

"Stop her!" she heard Prince Akken'ar order.

Terror raced up her spine, prickling at the base of her neck. The cadenced beat of hooves rattled on the hard-packed path. Suzanne didn't dare look back. The barbarian rider swung the big animal in front of her and halted, using the body of the horse to block her way.

Before Suzanne could turn around, she heard footsteps behind her, then felt a hard hand on her upper arm digging into her flesh, jerking her about so sharply she was almost lifted off the ground. She caught a glimpse of black brows sweeping over angry blue eyes. The scent of leather, fur, and the sharp tang of steel filled her senses.

"You will not cross the Pass! It is too dangerous. There are—"

Suzanne shook in his grasp like a mouse caught in a falcon's talon. His grip eased, fractionally, his tone

softened.

"There is no place in these mountains where you can hide. You will die, my lady. The cold and—" His hand relaxed to a gentle hold, then let go. He backed a step away from her and bowed slightly. "Forgive me. I meant no disrespect, but you must not run from us." He paused then gestured to the waiting horsemen. "Please, allow us to escort you to Ironhold."

She saw the determined intent in his gaze—no malice, no cruel lust. Prince Akken'ar had no intention of harming her and she really had no other choice. Suzanne nodded to her intimidating host and approached the group of horses. Her mount turned out not to be a patient old horse trained to tolerate inexperienced women, but a war animal, black like the others and heavily muscled. Suzanne felt the strong presence of the prince behind her. His fingers lightly touched her elbow and she caught herself in time before snatching her arm away.

"Can you ride?" he asked again.

"When I was a child, but on very old horses," she lied in a shaking voice.

She felt his breath flutter at the back of her neck. "He is quite steady. Do not be afraid."

The stirrup was too high for her to reach, but in a heartbeat she felt two hard hands about her waist lifting her up into the saddle; she, barely had the wits to swing her right leg over the horse's back.

Prince Akken'ar looked up at her, the shadows having turned his skin a pale milky-blue emphasizing the sharp cheekbones and fierce eyes.

"You will ride between me and General Zykov. If you become tired, you will tell me immediately."

Words not to be ignored. Suzanne nodded and clumsily gathered up the reins.

Akken'ar mounted his own horse and expertly spun it about. She heard General Zykov call out a command and the warriors parted, allowing the three of them to take the lead behind the two advance riders.

Creaking leather, the rattle of bit and chain together with the rhythmic cadence of hooves on the packed earth all combined in a strangely reassuring sound. The big horse she rode trotted along briskly until the prince's horse broke into slow canter, forcing her mount to do the same.

At first, Suzanne found the faster pace unsettling. She clung to the two in-curving horns of the saddle so tightly she felt her arms would break from the effort. She tried to relax but inexperience and fatigue made staying in the saddle an impossible task.

Prince Akken'ar at once noticed her distress and held up a hand, indicating they should slow to a walk. Suzanne hung over her horse's neck, panting softly.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not a very good rider."

"We will slow our pace until we reach the encampment. I will see to other arrangements for you, my lady."

Her host glanced at her, his meaning impossible to read in those chilling eyes. Other arrangements?

Suzanne shuddered and took a firmer grip on the saddle.

As the sun slipped behind the mountains, the air grew sharper, colder. Her breath came out in a stream of white vapor like that of the horses and all the men around her. From their saddle packs, the warriors mysteriously produced lengths of black cloth—wool, she presumed, and, after removing their helmets, wrapped it around their heads. Even Prince Akken'ar followed their example, leaving his eyes uncovered—cold and ruthless, missing nothing.

The slower pace made riding easier, but Suzanne could tell it did not put the prince at ease, nor the rest of his men. As the darkness grew deeper, the warriors grew tense, wary. Swords were drawn and all conversation ceased. The horses seemed to sense something sinister and moved along at a swift pace, making no sound except for the soft thuds of their hooves on the damp earth.

At a large clearing, Suzanne spotted what the prince had meant by 'encampment.' Set around a crackling fire were four large tents. A small table with two or three folding stools had been placed in front of the largest tent. To the rear of the camp, she spotted a picket line for the horses. A simple camp, meant to support about ten or fifteen people. Or so Suzanne guessed. It was not a hunting camp; there were no animal carcasses or any sign of trapping devices. There were no wagons or horses to pull them; no flags or pennons and no fanfare to announce their arrival.

The warriors dispersed without further orders and before Suzanne could decide what to do next, Prince Akken'ar stood near her heel waiting to help her down from the horse. She dropped the reins from nearly frozen fingers and turned toward him. His hands steadied her as she slid awkwardly from the saddle, until she stood facing him, dangerously close. She hunched her shoulders trying to appear as small and inoffensive as possible, not daring to look up.

"I'm fine. Thanks. Really, you can let go."

"You are shivering. We must get you into the tent." He let go of her waist and gestured toward the largest tent behind him. "It will be warmer in here."

At the entrance, he lifted the flap, indicating she should enter before him. To her amazement, the inside of the tent was spacious and decidedly warmer than outside. The ante chamber was furnished with only a simple table of black wood and a matching chair that could be folded for easy transport. To their right, an ornate brass brazier rested on a tripod of wrought iron, shaped and twisted to resemble three sleek serpents balancing the brazier on their heads. The brazier hissed softly, spreading its welcome warmth throughout the chamber.

Next to the table, she spotted a metal chest; it too, had been ornately embellished in brass and silver fittings. At the back, was another flap and Prince Akken'ar pulled it aside, again indicating she should enter. Once inside, Suzanne couldn't hold back a low gasp. Resting on a covering of richly designed carpets was an extraordinary bed—a low platform covered in thick furs and pelts. Another brazier at her left, larger than the previous one, glowed in the dim light of the tent. There were no other furnishings except a small trunk set next to the bed and on it, a candle-lamp glowed and flickered, casting shadows in deep, angular lines across the tent walls.

"You should be comfortable in here."

"Yes. Thank you."

He turned to go, then stopped. "Perhaps you are hungry? I will see that something is prepared and

brought to you."

"Oh, no. Please don't trouble yourself. I'll come out. Just give me a minute to—"

The prince nodded and without another word slipped out.

Suzanne moved about the confines of the tent examining everything. The smell of slightly damp wool and hides filled the chamber—not offensive, but reminding her that she was not living in an age or a place of indestructible synthetics or man-made fabrics. But where was she?

The most logical explanation was that she was dreaming, or it was a hallucination. But, none of this was a dream. She was awake and very much aware of everything around her. This *was* real, but an explanation for its reality eluded her.

At the bed, she reached down and pressed her fingers into the rich furs. The bed gave a little, attesting to the fact that the mattress was a simple pad stuffed with...? She couldn't be sure, but guessed it was probably wool or horsehair.

Pillows, covered in hides or smoothly woven cloth lay piled at the head of the bed. A dark, masculine bed. With a start, Suzanne suddenly realized this was Prince Akken'ar's bed. He had given up his own tent for her. Or had he?

A sliver of fear sliced through her belly. What if he intended to sleep here, too? The very idea made her heart race in uneven beats. Surely he would not do such a thing? They were complete strangers.

A polite cough from outside the tent alerted her that the food was ready. She slipped out to face a stern-looking guard who escorted her to the snapping fire burning at the center of the encampment. One of the stools had been placed near the fire and the guard indicated she should sit down.

Glancing about, Suzanne noticed their chieftain had disappeared, leaving her alone with six warriors, all staring at her as if she had suddenly sprouted another head or grown a third arm.

The man closest to her handed her a plate filled with a portion of savory-smelling meat and a chunk of bread. She took the plate and set it on her knees, uncertain if she should eat it or wait for them to sit down first.

"Please, eat, my lady." The warrior motioned for her to sit by the fire.

No forks. Not even a spoon. Suzanne picked up the bread, breaking off a smaller portion to use as a scoop. The meat, whatever it was, tasted delicious—mild and somewhat sweet. She ate hungrily. The fresh air and tiring ride had made her ravenous.

Six pairs of eyes watched intently as she ate. Finally, one of the younger men looked as if he could no longer contain his curiosity. "Are you truly the Wordsayer?"

Suzanne steadied the plate on her knees and looked up at him. "I have been told I am this Wordsayer, so I suppose I must believe it."

The warrior's brow furrowed, perplexed. "But, the prophesy has come true. Master Scribe Jonovar knew you would be waiting at the two pillars."

She didn't know what to say. A Wordsayer ... for what? These men looked at her so earnestly, as if expecting her to say something profound or informative.

"I—Perhaps your gods are waiting for the right time to tell me what it is I need to know."

The warriors nodded. Apparently, this line of reasoning satisfied them.

"Master Jonovar will know what to do," the man at her right pointed out with quiet authority.

Whoever Master Jonovar was ... a scribe?

She finished her plate and handed it back to the man who had given it to her. Smiling, she made an attempt at expressing her thanks. "It tasted delicious. What was it?"

The warrior grinned. "Vensin."

Vensin. Venison, maybe. For all she knew, it could have been anything from dog guts to snake meat.

The plate was replaced by a fine, black porcelain cup, filled with a dark, amber liquid. She sniffed it suspiciously.

"It is only dek tea, my lady. You will like it. It is good on a cold night like this."

Her tongue touched the hot tea. Like the meat, it was delicious. It tasted much like the tea she drank at home, only with a deeper, more satisfying flavor. Suzanne drank it down, feeling its warmth spreading through her bones, easing the bitter cold of the night.

"Would you like some more?" the warrior asked, holding out his hand to take the cup from her.

"Yes, please."

He refilled the cup and handed it back. "Dek tea strengthens the heart," he advised solemnly.

"That will be enough!" Prince Akken'ar's voice cracked over them, making Suzanne start so suddenly, she almost dropped the exquisite cup into the fire.

The six warriors sprang to their feet, rigid with fear and respect.

Akken'ar approached the campfire, scowling. Over one arm he carried his horse's ornate bridle, in his other hand, a thick, leather roll of something, like tools. He stopped and glared at the men.

"The Wordsayer is not to be annoyed with senseless chatter. She has come far and is weary. Attend to your duties."

It an instant, they were gone.

Anger made her bold. Suzanne stood, clutching the cup in both hands and faced the cold-eyed prince. "That was not necessary, m-m-my lord. They only gave me something to eat and some hot tea. They meant no harm and they weren't bothering me."

His frown softened as he dropped the bridle and the roll onto the nearby camp table. "I am certain, but

they are under strict orders not to speak to you until we reach Ironhold. The prophecy must not be disturbed."

"Prophecy? What is this 'prophecy'? I don't understand any of this. Who are you people? Where is this place?"

The prince studied her. Caution glinted in those extraordinary eyes.

"You are in Myloria, less than a day's ride from Ironhold—the great keep at san'Sorafel. We will be there tomorrow."

His words meant nothing to her. Suzanne rubbed her brow with a tired hand. "Ironhold is a castle of some kind?"

"I am uncertain of the word 'castle,' my lady," he said cautiously. "It must be a word in the Old Tongue and I do not recognize it."

An alarming impasse loomed between them: two people with the same language, yet unable to communicate. Suzanne studied him warily. The man was dangerous, volatile, and held absolute authority over these men and probably the entire country of Myloria. She had to assume 'Myloria' was the name of his country.

Her writer's mind strained to make any sense of what was happening to her. Simple, convenient explanations like time warps or an alternate universe were so easy to concoct in a novel. This was not a novel, nor a flight of imaginative fantasy.

This strange, frightening man might just as easily kill her as believe she was the Wordsayer.

"A castle," she explained, "is a great fortress, or a fortified building to defend the people within it, or those living near it."

The prince kept silent for a long moment, absorbing her words. "Ironhold is ... such a place." His eyes narrowed. "It protects my people from the dead ones, the *Others-of-Us*. The plain people call them scags."

"The scags are your enemies?"

He nodded, but the wariness deepened. "They are the creatures we fight. They are not human. They are ... the ones we must destroy, the defiled ones, the scags—those-who-will-not-die."

Even more confused Suzanne sat down on the stool and pressed her hand to her brow. It was no use. There was no rational explanation for any of this. Frustration and sudden tears threatened to shatter the last of her self-control. Fighting the urge to cry, she looked up at him. "I think there has been a great mistake. I am not the person you're looking for. I'm no Wordsayer. You must take me back to the mountain pass in the morning. Maybe I can go home from there." She shook her head. "I must be in some kind of time ... thing. I don't know what it is, but I don't belong here."

Suzanne rose and took a step toward him. "Please take me back. I am certain I am not the one you want."

The half-light of the fire turned Prince Akken'ar's pale skin to chiseled marble, his eyes to blue-black

obsidian. It was impossible to tell if he was angry or just as confused. "But you can read."

Suzanne blinked, not quite believing what she had just heard. "Of course, I can read. Can't you?"

"Only the scribes are permitted to read the texts and the sacred books of the ancients. I can read the manuscripts of common knowledge, but that is all."

"You are a prince. Aren't princes permitted to read books?"

He scowled.

Dismayed, Suzanne shook her head. She'd trampled on another protocol.

"The manuscripts of common knowledge are for all people," he said with a trace of indignation. "It is a great privilege to learn to read them."

"I see." Confused, she tried another tack. "You're looking for someone who can read?"

"The prophecy stated the Wordsayer would arrive at Knife Edge Pass, ten days before the Red Eclipse."

"The 'red' eclipse?"

He looked up and pointed at the moon. "Once, every two hundred and fourteen passes of the sun, the lesser red moon begins to cover the white. It is the sign, the fulfillment of prophesy—the coming of the Wordsayer."

Suzanne studied the pale orb and did indeed notice a dark mass hovering near the outside rim of the moon. There was no way to tell if the smaller moon was truly red, however Suzanne felt certain Prince Akken'ar would never invent such a story. But, two moons? Splitrock Pass had catapulted her farther from home than she realized. If she wasn't on Earth ... ?

Prince Akken'ar looked back at her, his expression, again, unfathomable. "We found you at the Pass and you can read. You must be the Wordsayer."

He had almost convinced her. What if it were true? She'd heard the conviction in his voice and seen hope in the eyes of his warriors. A Wordsayer. Someone to read for them. That was easy enough. Maybe this would all be over quicker than she realized. Just read something for them and get back to her own world.

Suzanne sighed, exhausted. "I'm very tired, now. Perhaps I could lie down?"

The disturbed, unconvinced expression left Prince Akken'ar's gaze at once. He nodded and stepped aside, permitting her to enter the tent. "You must rest. In the morning, we leave for Ironhold and I will make other arrangements so you will not have to ride."

Too tired to find out what that meant, Suzanne passed by him into the tent. Just before she lowered the flap, she suddenly remembered all that he had done for her.

"Thank you, for everything. You've been very kind." She didn't know what else to do, but attempted an awkward curtsy. "I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment. Good night."

He bowed. "Not a disappointment, my lady. A surprise. Good night."

Suzanne slipped into the sleeping area and pulled off the heavy cloak. Exhausted, she sat on the bed. The brazier had made the tent pleasantly warm, but the coals would not last all night. She pulled back the magnificent fur covering and slipped under it. The soft edges tickled her nose as she burrowed into the pillows and closed her eyes. In spite of her exhaustion, sleep did not come easily. Fur and leather filled her senses. Suzanne felt surrounded by the rich scent of the forest and of ... him. It was his bed. Every way she tossed and turned, she inhaled him—a dark, pervasive scent—the warmth of sandalwood mixed with the cold, bitterness of steel.

When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed of a flawless white moon and of a man, bathed in its shimmering light. He held a sword high above his head, the moonlight turning the blade to gleaming silver. A defiant war cry escaped his lips, until she saw his tears of rage and despair running down the translucent planes of his cheeks—tears as red as the sinister moon now dominating the sky.

Chapter Three

The Ninth Day

SUZANNE AWOKE TO the sound of snow being brushed off the roof of the tent. She wasted no time getting up and putting on the cloak, grateful for its extra warmth. Looking around she noticed someone had entered the tent during the night and placed the black table and folding chair next to the bed. On it she spotted a beautifully inlaid wooden box and another candle-lamp. The grain of the box was smooth to the touch, the inlays made of lighter woods and hammered silver. Inside she found an exquisite hand mirror, a matching hairbrush and a tiny brush, a toothbrush she presumed, nestled within its depths.

Someone had also left her breakfast: more of the bread, slices of pale cheese and a small pot of tea.

She ate quickly then hurried outside to find the encampment nearly gone. The other three tents had been dismantled and packed on several horses tied to the line at the back of the camp. The fire had long been smothered out. A few gray cinders and ashes still smoldered sending a faint, acrid odor into the morning air.

It had snowed during the night. Several inches covered the ground and draped the trees in a thick mantle of white.

"Good morning, Lady Sayer." Prince Akken'ar's voice caused her to turn. "You slept well?"

In the bright light of day, he looked less sinister than the previous afternoon. The blue eyes were not as cold-looking. Even the hue of his skin seemed less pale; the faint touch of color made him appear not quite as threatening.

"Yes, thank you." Suzanne sketched another curtsy. "I see I am the last one to get up. I'm sorry. I'm making everyone late."

He held up a hand. "There is no real hurry. We will reach Ironhold this afternoon. As long as we are inside the gates by dark."

"Inside the gates? What happens if we are not?"

"The scags avoid the day. They hide from the strong light of the sun. They favor the dusk and the twilight."

"Oh." Suzanne looked around, uncertain what she should do next. While she had no idea what 'scags' did, exactly, she decided to heed Prince Akken'ar's warning.

"You will not be required to ride." He gestured to one of his men standing nearby, who turned and hurried away. "You will travel by sleigh. It will be more comfortable for you."

Suzanne watched, astounded, as a sleigh drawn by four black horses glided into the encampment, each horse, like the others, harnessed in black with deep blue tassels fluttering from their bridles.

The sleigh was like nothing she had ever seen, a magnificent creation, lacquered in deepest blues and touches of gold, gleaming in the wane morning sun. The runners, curving upward, high in front and sweeping back under the framework of the sleigh, burnished like two finely-tempered sword blades. A glass canopy, constructed in three large sections joined by elaborate hinge-work had been designed to protect the occupants from the wind, while allowing them to see their surroundings. It was a masterpiece of craftsmanship.

A stern-faced driver held the reins in his large, capable hands keeping the ardent team in firm control. The sleigh moved forward then stopped directly in front of her; four of Prince Akken'ar's men jumped to hold the horses' heads.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"I sent for it last night." The prince gestured toward the side panel of the sleigh, now opened to allow her to climb inside. "You will be more comfortable than riding a horse."

"You sent for this? You had your men go all the way back to your castle, last night, to bring this for me?"

A troubled look flickered across his lean features. "Of course, but if it is not acceptable, Lady Wordsayer—"

"No. I mean, yes, it is more than acceptable. It is overwhelming."

The prince drew back, his expression now more deeply perplexed. "You are the Sayer of the Sacred Words. It is our duty to see you are escorted safely to Ironhold."

Suzanne looked down, forming her next words with care. "What if I'm not the Wordsayer? Why can't you simply take me back to the mountain pass?"

Alarm flared in his eyes. He took a step toward her, hand outstretched as if to stop her from fleeing the encampment. "It is not possible. Everything has been prepared for your arrival. The prophesymust be fulfilled. It is vital—"

The strength of his words forced Suzanne to reconsider her situation. Prince Akken'ar appeared clearly distressed by her threat to leave. And if his expression was any indication of his intent, she knew she would never be returned to the pass. While it was not stated, Suzanne realized she was, in a way, his prisoner as well as his guest, totally at his mercy. She had no idea where she was, no idea how she had come to this place, but the enormity of his situation touched her. She saw it in his eyes—the haunted

desperation. Prince Akken'ar had gone to great lengths to find her, perhaps risking his people and their very lives to fulfill this strange 'prophecy.'

Suzanne met his gaze and nodded. Without another word she clambered into the sleigh.

* * * *

BY MID DAY the long trek had taken them down the mountainside, through thick, dark forests heavy with snow, and onto a high, sweeping plain. Once free of the trees, the driver called to the team and the four great horses broke into a ground-eating gallop. They flew over the snow, mile after mile, cutting through the soft white drifts, northward, on toward the place Prince Akken'ar had called Ironhold.

Suzanne gazed at the strange, silent world outside of the sleigh. The leaden sky hovered above them like a sinister warning. Occasionally a ray of sunshine would burst through the clouds, sending shafts of golden light over the vast plain.

Akken'ar's warriors flanked the sleigh keeping an ever-watchful eye on their surroundings. The prince had positioned himself immediately to the right, abreast with the driver, an angle which afforded Suzanne the perfect view to study her mysterious host. He rode easily, keeping pace with the others. She watched, fascinated as the blue tassels dangling from the horse's bridle and breast collar swung and danced with each rhythmic stride.

Only narrow bands of gold cloth, tied just above the elbows of his fur cloak, distinguished him from the others. However, the warriors paid him marked deference. No one rode directly in front of him, or to his right. The one-eyed general kept his horse far ahead of the sleigh, riding with the escort.

Finally, they stopped for a rest near a wide stand of snow-laden trees. Prince Akken'ar dismounted and shoved his horse's reins into the hands of nearby warrior, then proceeded to open the glass canopy to help her out.

The cold had forced him to keep the black wool wound about his head, leaving only his eyes visible. With a free hand he tugged down the cloth from his mouth. "You must not go far, Lady Sayer."

Suzanne stepped away from him and clutched the cloak closer to her throat. "I wasn't planning on going very far, sir ... uh, my lord." She hesitated then said, "I have a name, you know. It's Suzanne ... Suzanne Jennings."

"Very well, Lady Suss ... sunn." His soft stumble over her name forced her to smile a little.

"It's Su—Zan," she corrected cautiously.

He frowned, his firm lips pressed into tight line. Annoyed by his mistake, he renewed his efforts to pronounce her unfamiliar name. "Lady *Sussann* ."

Suzanne decided it not worth the effort correcting him again. She swallowed and looked away avoiding his eyes. "I just need to stretch my legs a bit."

"You must not take too much time ... with your—"

She nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. Suzanne turned and hiked up the hill to the closest grouping of trees. Two wary-eyed warriors were right behind her, sent along as escorts. The noise of their boots crunching through the snow was a constant reminder of their presence and did nothing to ease

Suzanne's mounting sense of foreboding. She still had no real idea what these men expected of her. While the long ride had given her time to study her fierce escorts, no clear explanations came to her.

They looked like barbarians, men from a dark and violent past, but they spoke English—clear, nearly unaccented English. Their swords were forged of tempered steel, not crude iron. Try as she might, Suzanne could not recall when tempered steel had been discovered and put into common use in Europe.

This was not Europe.

The biting cold made her tired and edgy. She wanted an explanation and solid answers as to why she was here, but more importantly, *how* she got here.

Looking up at the jagged range of mountains from where she and the others had just descended, Suzanne studied them from a new perspective. The trees were no different from those she knew, Douglas fir and various species of pine, but the mountain range itself began to look familiar, like she *ought* to know what range it was, or where it belonged on a map.

The warriors kept a discreet distance as she slipped behind a large tree and gathered up the heavy cloak. She finished her bodily needs quickly, not wishing to remain a moment longer within the sharp watch of her menacing guards.

As she smoothed down the folds of the cloak, Suzanne stared into the thick brush nearby, suddenly unable to move. Yellow eyes set in a mass of hairless flesh glared back at her from an ancient, scabbed face. The ears were withered knots against a desiccated skull seamed and scarred from countless wounds and disease—a being, barely human, but not quite an animal. A ghastly scream escaped its blackened mouth—a rotting maw with a slavering tongue and sharp, jagged teeth. The being lunged at her with large bony hands, missed, and fell down into a bundle of filthy, scabrous rags.

Her own panic-stricken scream filled the cold air as she stumbled back, trying to find footing on the slick snow. Suzanne turned and ran down the hill toward the sleigh and the waiting Mylorians.

"Help! It's a ... something is in the woods!"

With their backs turned politely to afford her more privacy, the two guards, startled by her shrill cry for help, pulled their swords and began chasing the creature.

It was right behind her, having managed to get to its feet and running much faster than she realized. Terror raced through every vein like liquid fire. The heavy cloak became a hindrance, twisting and snarling between her legs, making escape almost impossible. She heard the rising cry of outrage from the waiting warriors below and fleetingly realized they had abandoned the horses and were racing up the hill to reach her and the creature.

Her toe caught the hem of the cloak. Suzanne screamed again and fell to her knees then toppled forward. The icy snow rasped against her bare hands and bruised cheek. In that terrifying moment, a hand closed around her left ankle.

"No! Oh God, help," she sobbed hysterically. Survival overrode all other thought. The ghastly hunter was determined to kill her and Suzanne fought its relentless pursuit with every fiber of her being. She struggled to her hands and knees, scrabbling for a handhold in the snow. Behind her, she heard the creature grunt, the bony hand tightened on her ankle.

Mylorians swarmed over it like a pack of wolves. She heard the bright 'shing' of swords being pulled from scabbards and the dull hacking noise as the blades cut against flesh. At last, the hold on her ankle lessened enough for her to kick free.

Rolling over, Suzanne sat up and scuttled backward, pushing against the ground with her heels. The mangled limb fell from her ankle and slid down the hillside; no blood spilled from the severed opening. She gagged on bitter bile, fighting the sudden, overwhelming nausea. Looking up, she spotted the creature still struggling to reach her, clawing the snow with its remaining hand and arm, while the Mylorians hacked it to pieces. To her horror, the thing would not die, but kept on crawling, impervious to the warriors' brutal attack.

From the severed stump, a new limb began to rapidly reform, pushing out from the ragged shoulder wound. Sword cuts that would have killed an animal the size of a horse, failed to stop the creature. Gabbling and howling, it kept on crawling, determined to reach her, until she saw Prince Akken'ar stand directly above its head, sword raised. In one sweeping stroke, the sword came down and severed its head from the ruined body. The hideous creature stopped.

Suzanne clutched her stomach, determined not to be sick. Every part of her trembled with terror. The creature's head lay not six inches from her foot, brackish blood oozing from what remained of the neck, defiling the pristine whiteness of the hillside.

Prince Akken'ar plunged the stained blade in the snow, cleansing off the vile blood, then reached above and behind his right shoulder to re-seat the sword into its scabbard. His already pale face had turned whiter than the snow itself.

"Are you unharmed? Did it bite you? Its bite can be poisonous."

Shock must have made her deaf as well as dumb. She couldn't answer him.

Frowning, he kicked aside the severed head and knelt down next to her. "Are you injured?"

"N-n-no. Just scared to death."

"Return to the sleigh at once. We must be inside the gates of Ironhold before nightfall. I do not wish to frighten you even more, but they favor female flesh."

Suzanne's trembling accelerated into uncontrollable shaking. She couldn't move. Looking into the prince's face, she saw his concern for her and his deep-rooted loathing for the creature he had just killed.

"What was that thing?" she asked.

"That," he said grimly, "was a scag."

* * * *

THE JOURNEY NOW took on an intense urgency. As the sun lowered behind the mountains, the pace increased and the horses began to labor through the deepening snow. The barbarians stopped briefly, several times, to let the animals rest, but Suzanne was not allowed to get out of the sleigh.

Only once was she approached by one of the younger warriors who offered her something to eat. Permission had been granted for him to open the glass panel and hand her a slice of thin, cracker-like bread and another piece of pale cheese wrapped in a cloth. She took the food gratefully, but noted the

caution in the warrior's expression. Suzanne tried to speak to him but realized he would not linger any longer than necessary. Looking up, she soon understood the reason for his reluctance.

Arms folded across his chest, Prince Akken'ar sat on his resting horse watching the entire exchange. His deliberate, unwavering stare sent chills up Suzanne's spine, making her shrink back into the cushions. She ate the food in silence, eyes lowered, not daring to return his stare.

Another wave of panic rose within her. What were they going to do to her? She still had no answers as to her whereabouts. Nothing she had seen correlated to anything she knew; none of it made any sense. The hideous thing that had attacked her was something she couldn't begin to comprehend. It certainly wasn't an animal, but in that moment when she looked at it, face to face, Suzanne had glimpsed something close to human intelligence reflected in those ghastly yellow eyes—a growing evil struggling against a millennium of ancient memories.

Suzanne also knew Prince Akken'ar's warriors would never take her to the mountain pass again—the only way she knew to return home, back to Black Elk and her life.

She heard the whip snap and the sleigh jerked forward. Without stopping, the Mylorians galloped their swift, black horses on and on into the dusky afternoon, due north, skimming over a wide road of beaten snow. They swept past shuttered villages, its inhabitants kneeling by the side of the road, their heads bowed respectfully. Prince Akken'ar did not stop but acknowledged them by raising his hand, or sometimes nodding his head.

As the sun turned into an orange disk, burning weakly through the thickening clouds, they turned east and down a steep slope. The tiring horses sank up to their haunches in the deep snow. One last curve around a high, rocky escarpment and Suzanne saw their destination. She couldn't help but lean forward and stare in utter amazement at the massive structure before her.

Walls at least thirty feet high formed what Suzanne guessed to be a perfect square around a city, a gleaming fortress with towering spires at each corner like finely turned minarets thrusting upward into the darkening sky. Four rows of steel spines had been embedded into the walls near the top, jutting downward at an angle—a menacing defense against any enemy who dared climb up to penetrate the city.

The sleigh stopped outside the enormous bronze gates, waiting for them to be opened. The horses pawed the snow and tossed their heads, impatient to be inside. Suzanne peered upward and saw more warriors manning the ramparts, each carrying a long, wicked-looking spear.

General Zykov shouted something she could not make out, and slowly the great doors began to swing open.

Prince Akken'ar's horse danced and jiggled, obviously knowing food and rest were just inside the walls.

When the gates opened, the animal bellowed and reared, eager to finish the journey, but Akken'ar curbed the horse and spun him about to face the sleigh. He jerked the black cloth away from his mouth and spoke to the driver. Suzanne could not hear him, but did manage to catch him glancing her way. His expression was unreadable, but he acknowledged her with a brief nod. Then, turning his horse around again, he signaled the entire escort and led them into the city, san'Sorafel, place of his fortress, Ironhold.

As the sleigh entered the city, Suzanne caught glimpses of its inhabitants—exhausted-looking, serious people—who looked at her with keen interest. After bowing to Prince Akken'ar, they stood on tiptoe, peering over and around one another to catch a glimpse of the 'Wordsayer.' Suzanne wasn't sure if she was supposed to acknowledge them. She decided to smile and wave, but the sleigh and the escort sped

by so quickly, she wasn't certain if anyone saw her.

Ironhold had been built on a hill, almost in the exact center of the city and flanked by a stone roadway or ramp. It had been built in a gradual upward incline from the level of the city, turning in a series of four switch backs, which were wide enough to accommodate the sleigh and the horses. At the top, another set of gates opened to a great inner courtyard and at the far end, a sweep of stairs led to the fortress itself.

The magnificent sleigh glided through the gates and finally halted before the steps. Prince Akken'ar dismounted and opened the glass canopy. He held up gauntleted hands, waiting for her. For an irrational instant Suzanne didn't get out, reluctant to submit to his touch. The sleigh was her last physical link to the mountain pass. Would she ever get back? Would *he* ever allow her to return? She dared look into the depths of those blue-black eyes and saw only expectancy.

She placed her hands lightly on his furred sleeves and felt him swing her around to the base of the steps. Whether deliberate or not, Prince Akken'ar set her down much too close to him, forcing her to avert her gaze. He did not relinquish his hold on her waist for a long moment. His grip tightened and she sensed his burning stare. Suzanne swallowed and looked up through her lashes. The night had once again cast his milk-white skin into deep shadows and cold, dark angles.

"I think it best if you would let me go," she murmured. "Your men—"

Akken'ar said nothing but released his hold on her waist. Taking her elbow, he guided her to the entrance of Ironhold.

A cluster of men waited at the top of the stairs, soberly robed, their long hair tied at the nape of their necks with colored cording. A short man, portly with age, stood at the forefront, his robes hung in glossy folds of white and deepest maroons. Upon seeing Prince Akken'ar, he bowed, as did the others.

"Your Highness, welcome home. We became worried." He glanced at Suzanne. A tiny frown puckered his fleshy brow. "And ... who is this?"

Prince Akken'ar bristled. "This is Lady Su-Zanne Jen-Nengs." He clipped each syllable sharply. "The Wordsayer, Master Scribe."

The scribe's eyes widened. He turned to a slender man at his left, also wearing white and maroon robes and whispered something. Turning back he said, "Of course, we had no idea ... we did not realize the Wordsayer might be a woman. This is astonishing news, my lord. But are you certain?" The scribe paused, brows arched expectantly.

Suzanne sensed the prince's growing annoyance.

"She is the Wordsayer as the prophecy states," he snapped. "We found her at Knife Edge Pass, near the marker to the blessed saint."

The surprise on Master Jonovar's face was replaced with a cool, superior look. Suzanne watched him struggle to hold back a biting and probably unwise retort. He clearly did not agree with the prince.

The slender man standing next to Master Jonovar cleared his throat. "Might I have a word, Highness, in the matter?"

Prince Akken'ar nodded, dismissing the Master Scribe with a sharp glance, then turned his attention to the other scribe. "Very well?"

"Your Highness, Master Jonovar's skepticism is not without some merit. The lady ...," He smiled and nodded in Suzanne's direction. "Let us say, no one suspected that the Wordsayer would be a woman. None of the texts indicated as such. This perhaps raises more difficulties."

"The only difficulty is your unwillingness to accept what is obvious!" Prince Akken'ar glared at the two sober-faced scribes. "Do not forget it was *you* who sent me on this venture to bring back the Wordsayer. We have eight days until the Eclipse, eight days to find out what the Text says and how to defeat the undying ones. I suggest we make better use of our time. It serves no purpose arguing about *what* the Wordsayer should have been!"

The prince turned away from the scribes and gestured impatiently toward the open doors of the keep. "I am sure the Lady Wordsayer is exhausted..."

Silenced, the scribes bowed and stepped back allowing the prince and Suzanne to enter into Ironhold's great doors. There would be no further discussion. She had no other choice but to follow him. His long purposeful strides forced her to take hurried trotting steps to keep up. Once out of earshot of the scribes, Suzanne finally found her courage and her tongue.

"Listen, Your Highness ... my lord, I think I have a right to know what is going on here," she said a little breathlessly. "I deserve an explanation."

He did not slow his pace, nor did he look at her. "And you will. The first and most important step has been taken: we have found you in time. The next is for you to open and read to us the words in the Sacred Text. This will tell us how to defeat the scags."

"You mean that *thing* you killed in the forest?"

He nodded grimly. "There are many more besides that one. They gather in eight days; we must be ready for them. You will tell us how they are to be defeated."

"Me? But—Your Highness, I don't know anything about how to ... to *attack* something. I'm not a soldier. I mean, a warrior," she amended. "I'm just a—" She didn't have the nerve to tell him.

"But the Text will tell us. You will read the sacred words."

Suzanne shook her head confused. "But, why don't you read this sacred book yourself? Why not those scribes?"

He stopped and glared down at her, the black brows joining in a disapproving line across his forehead. Suzanne sucked in her breath and stepped back. She'd never seen that kind of look before—menacing, terrifying.

"It is forbidden for anyone but the Wordsayer to open or read the Text!"

She swallowed. "All right, I'm sorry. I've broken another one of your rules. I'll read your Text."

Akken'ar paused and looked aside for a moment as if gathering his thoughts. His voice softened. "I, too, am sorry. Forgive me, Lady Wordsayer, I am tired." He passed a weary hand across his temple, then

over his hair. "And, you must be tired, too."

"Yes."

"Then I shall make certain you are made comfortable." From behind him, Suzanne watched as a reed-thin young man stepped from the shadow of a pillar and bowed. His dark brown hair had been smoothed back from a wide brow and brushed neatly over his shoulders. Having heard the prince's remarks, his expression was expectant, helpful. He again bowed to Prince Akken'ar, then to her.

"I shall see to it, Highness."

"This is Nathan, my lady, the Master Keeper of Ironhold. He will make all the arrangements for your comfort. If you will excuse me, I have much to do." He bowed, spun on his heel and headed down a darkened corridor, with General Zykov right behind him together with a handful of stern-looking officers.

Nathan smiled. "We had not expected a lady."

"So I've noticed." Suzanne found herself liking Nathan immediately. Instead of brusque, hardened manners like those of the prince, Nathan was poised and calm, unaffected by the turmoil of the great keep.

She looked over her shoulder toward the entry and noticed the scribes still clustered together, talking quietly among themselves. "I don't think your Master Jonovar was very pleased to see me. I'm sure he expected someone like himself.

"Ah, Master Jonovar." Nathan nodded. "You must remain cautious around the Master Scribe. He is the Wordkeeper and very powerful. He is feared throughout Myloria and beyond."

"Who is the other scribe with him?" Suzanne nodded to the huddled men.

"That is Master Eika, the Keeper of the Library. He is also very powerful like Master Jonovar, but a wise, kindly man and well-thought of."

"It looks like Master Jonovar and the prince do not get along."

Nathan smiled again and gestured for her to walk with him into the interior of the keep. "Prince Akken'ar and the Master Scribe are wary allies. Master Jonovar is required to advise and guide the prince in all matters both intellectual and holy. He keeps guard over the Sacred Texts and the common knowledge."

"And, Master Eika?"

"Master Eika is bound to guard the Library where the sacred texts are kept. He also speaks the holy words in the temple, for the ceremonies to the ancestors and the gods."

"I see."

Master Nathan didn't offer any more information, but hurried through the keep, past soaring, arched ceilings and walls lined with ancient banners and terrible weapons of war. Suzanne shuddered. The rows of bristling swords and deadly spears were not rusting antiques, but gleaming and sharpened, ready for a warrior's hand.

The corridor led to a wide staircase to their right. Suzanne stopped and looked up, following the sweeping curve of the balusters rising into the upper areas of the keep. More weapons, this time crossbows and shields hung in orderly rows along the outside wall of the stairs.

Crossbows, swords, and medieval weaponry? A time jump to the past? Nothing she saw related to the castles she had visited in Europe or anything else she had studied on the subject. The weapons did not *look* European and the people she had met certainly did not dress like medieval Europeans. No chain mail and no heraldic markings.

"What's up there?"

"Your rooms, Lady Wordsayer. You will be safe there. I have already sent for a lady's maid to see to your every comfort." Nathan again gestured for her to proceed. Suzanne gathered up the cloak and began climbing the stairs. The cold mountain pass where she had begun this strange journey now seemed a lifetime ago. And, there was no way back. Resignation began to override her rising panic. There had to be an explanation and a reason why she had been chosen to help these people.

Well, why not her? Did it matter? For a hysterical instant Suzanne thought of Alice, who had never questioned *why* she had fallen down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. She simply accepted it and got on with the adventure. But Suzanne was not in Wonderland and her adventure had nothing to do with White Rabbits or Cheshire Cats.

Abandoning her foolish literary metaphor, she followed Nathan up the wide stairs to a long hallway. From the walls sprouted clusters of brass candlesticks holding thick white candles. The soft flames cast ever-deepening shadows as she followed Nathan to her room.

He stopped before a door made of blackened oak, deeply carved and embellished in fantastic designs.

"I have requested Miri to attend to you. She is quite young but a capable girl." He gave the door a gentle push, opening it wide enough for Suzanne to step through. "If you wish, she will bring you something to eat. There is a cord by the bed." Nathan paused, looking at her expectantly.

"Nathan, will you answer a few questions?"

He looked at her startled but pleased. "Yes, of course, if I can."

"Where am I, exactly? I mean, where is san'Sorafel? Which country is this?"

Nathan blinked rapidly for a moment, digesting her questions. "San'Sorafel is the largest city in this province."

"And, which province is this?"

"Myloria," he answered promptly.

Suzanne felt a sickening knot form in her stomach. Still no conclusive answers. Finally, she dared to ask what she had been dreading to find out. "What year is this?"

Again, Nathan blinked. "The year? Oh, you mean what sunpass it is."

"Sunpass?"

He smiled at her ignorance then made a little spinning motion with his finger. "You know, the earth spins and passes around the sun, every three hundred and sixty-five days."

Her eyes widened. "Then you know about orbits and planets. You know about the solar system."

"Of course!" The young man looked genuinely astonished. "I've read almost all of the common texts. The Ancients left us that information."

She felt the blood leave her face. "Who were the 'Ancients'?"

"Those who survived the Five Cataclysms. We owe everything to the Old Ones. They saved as much as they could." He shrugged. "Of course, they didn't save everything. Their machines are gone now."

"Their machines?" Suzanne heard herself whisper, horror rising with Nathan's casual explanation.

Nathan lowered his voice. "Yes, their machines ... their great machines, their thinking machines and the others—the ones that moved by themselves. It is forbidden to speak of them." He frowned. "But they were all destroyed. It's just as well, they were dangerous, evil. The blessed saint said it so well: 'One cannot rely on thinking machines, for they steal one's intellect and rob him of his humanity.'"

"How many sunpasses has it been since these cataclysms?"

"Oh, a long time, my lady. This is the sunpass one thousand-sixty."

"I see."

Mistaking her prolonged silence for dismissal, Nathan bowed to her. "Goodnight, Lady Sayer. Rest well." He turned and disappeared down the darkened hallway.

Suzanne pushed the door open with her fingers and stepped into the room. More candles lighted the gloomy interior revealing walls paneled in burnished wood. A great tester bed, draped in green, black, and gold tapestries, stood against the left wall and dominated the chamber. To her right, a cheery blaze burned in a small fireplace made of a gleaming black stone. Too tired to notice anything else, Suzanne crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

Nathan's words still sent waves of shock and nausea through her entire body. She pressed her forehead into her palm, trying to make sense of what he had said and to quell the growing, sickening dread. She didn't dare suspect ... to believe.

One thousand sixty years, sunpasses, she corrected herself, from some kind of cataclysm. Is that what she had just seen during their journey to the keep? The legacy of a nuclear winter from a millennium ago? And, those wretched beings? God, what were they? Some biological, genetic nightmare?

One thousand sixty years since ... when?

Chapter Four

The Eighth Day

"MY LORD, NO one could have known the Wordsayer would be a woman. You are too hard on yourself. It was an unknown factor, an error anyone could have made."

Master Eika was trying to look reassuring but it had no effect on him. Akken'ar stopped pacing and glanced at the expectant faces of Master Eika and Master Jonovar. General Zykov stood at the far side of the room, leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest. They were all tired, especially Akken'ar; it was very late, well past the mid of the night.

"We should have taken some precaution. We should have at least thought of it."

"My lord," Zykov interjected, "the lady appears unharmed from the journey. She will recover. I understand she is sleeping soundly. Let us wait until the morning to decide what should be done."

"An excellent idea," Jonovar agreed. "I will then question her and perhaps learn who she really is."

Akken'ar cast a sharp look at the Master Scribe. "She is the Wordsayer. There is no need to question her."

Master Jonovar rose from his chair, decidedly distressed. "Highness, I do this only to protect you and the Sacred Text. How can we be certain who she says she is? The lady may be a fraud. She could be quite dangerous."

"You think the Lady Wordsayer is *dangerous*, a threat to Ironhold?" Akken'ar made a disgusted noise in his throat. "Don't frighten me, Scribe. *I found* her huddled against a rock, freezing to death!"

"Has it occurred to you that she may be a spy?"

"A spy!" Akken'ar thundered. "For whom?"

The Master Scribe shrugged. "The Heldi Wolves perhaps. Or, the rangemen."

"I seriously doubt the Wordsayer has any knowledge of the Heldi or contact with the rangemen."

"Nonetheless, I must urge you to permit at least a brief questioning."

Akken'ar frowned, the kind of frown that usually left most of his subjects quaking. "I will not tolerate any of your intimidating tactics. Am I clear, Scribe?"

Master Jonovar bowed his head submissively. "By your will, my lord."

General Zykov cleared his throat. "I don't suppose anyone wishes to hear the opinion of a tired, old warrior, but I will give it anyway. I believe she *is* the Wordsayer. Why else would she appear at the Pass, knowing how to read the Messenger's marker? Only the Wordsayer would know this."

"But she admitted not knowing if she truly was the Wordsayer," Akken'ar muttered. He resumed his pacing, rubbing a tired hand over his beard.

"The gods may have done this deliberately so she would not be influenced by anyone," Zykov continued. "You must give her the chance to prove herself, my lord."

Akken'ar stopped. "Then what?" he asked sharply. "What if she is not the Wordsayer?"

Master Eika, who had been silent a long while, sighed and cast a questioning look at Master Jonovar. "Then, we have a guest on our hands who cannot help us. However, she is a rather lovely guest, I might add."

The general nodded. "It has been a long time since I have seen a woman like her. In the old days, she'd have been worth a fortune in trade gold."

Prince Akken'ar said nothing for a moment then said, "Get some rest. We will speak of this tomorrow. By the gods' teeth, it is already tomorrow!"

Zykov and both the master scribes rose and filed out of the prince's private chamber, leaving him alone to ponder their words and advice. Slowly, he made his way into the bedchamber and slumped onto the edge of the bed. Too tired to call for his manservant, he pulled off the tall riding boots and fell back, arm across his eyes.

Eika was right, so was Zykov. She was lovely, so lovely he almost forgot she was the Wordsayer.

The Wordsayer is a woman!

Why did he not think of this? There was no excuse. A foolish, foolish mistake—a dangerous oversight. And the Pass ... perilously close to scag territories. If the scags had found her first? He dared not think what might have happened.

Tomorrow, Jonovar would question her and he would be there to make sure the zealous Master Scribe did not use his usual intimidating tactics. Akken'ar knew of too many innocents who had been forced into false confessions, or had lied in order to save themselves from punishment.

But what if she was not the Wordsayer? Or, maybe some enemy spy—an operative for the scags sent to infiltrate their forces and gain some kind of advantage? A Heldi spy? Akken'ar immediately dismissed that notion. It was not possible. He had seen the fear in her eyes and the confusion. She clearly did not understand what was happening to her.

She can read.

Well, so could he, but Akken'ar had also recognized a keen intelligence about her, a knowledge far beyond his own. If she could read, she could tell them what was in the Sacred Text, maybe even how they were to defeat the scags.

He felt himself slip deeper into an exhausted sleep, too weary to rouse himself and undress. He prayed to his ancestors and the gods for pleasant dreams instead of the nightmares of war and madness.

In the half-world between sleep and wakefulness, Akken'ar conjured up the memory her slight form. He remembered the feel of her body between his hands, warm and so unbelievably soft. The fragrance of her dark hair nearly drove him mad. Even her name sounded soft, tasted sweet.

Susanne.

By the gods, was he that far gone? So lost he lusted after the woman who would save his people and stop the endless fighting?

Prince Akken'ar tried unsuccessfully to push aside the vision of the Wordsayer's face and slender body. He couldn't fight the desperate need for sleep or his empty soul's hunger for something beautiful. He gave into it and slept, drowning in endless dreams of her.

* * * *

SUZANNE AWOKE TO the sound of running water. Still wearing the gray cloak over her own clothes, she eased out of the sumptuous bed and followed the sound coming from the left of the fireplace. She peered around the narrow doorway that led into a small room made entirely of green marble and in the center, a bath tub like none she had ever seen. It looked like a great copper fish, the tail curving up playfully over its back. Water poured out from two long taps protruding from the marble wall, filling the hollow 'back' of the fish.

A young girl bent over the tub, testing the water as it streamed over her fingertips. She caught Suzanne watching her and straightened, blushing.

"I was just drawing a bath for you, my lady. I hope it is to your liking?" The girl bobbed a curtsy and waited.

Suzanne slipped into the room, gawking at the extraordinary tub and the plain-faced girl now anxiously clutching a towel in her work-chapped hands.

"Yes, of course. What a surprise. I had no idea you had ... bathing rooms?"

"Oh, yes. Prince Akken'ar insists on all the modern conveniences."

"I see. And you must be Miri?"

Miri's blush deepened. "Yes. Master Nathan told me I was to attend to you, Honored Wordsayer. Those were his instructions; he was only following orders from His Highness." The girl curtsied again, head bowed.

"I assume no one would dare question the prince's orders," Suzanne said a little wryly.

"Oh, no!" Miri again busied herself with the bath and the towels while Suzanne undressed and slipped into the warm water.

It felt heavenly, even if she was sitting inside a copper fish. After the long, tiring journey in the dark and cold, the heated water seeped into her aching bones like a soothing balm.

Miri bustled out of the room then returned shortly with fresh under garments and a gown of a deep wine-red color. She laid them carefully on the little cushioned bench set near the tub. She smiled at Suzanne. "Shall I scrub your back, my lady?"

"Yes ... thank you."

The young maid found a large sponge and bent behind her and began soaping Suzanne's back with large, gentle strokes.

"That feels wonderful, Miri."

"It is my pleasure. It has been a long time since we've had a lady guest in Ironhold. And, since you are

the Wordsayer, it is an honor."

Suzanne struggled with her newly-found celebrity and realized it would be difficult to converse with the girl. Several questions raced through her mind and although the maid was eager to please, Miri was not the one to press for too much information. "Your prince, Ah-Ka ... Ka-Something...?"

"Akken'ar," Miri prompted.

"Of course, sorry. He rules this entire city?"

"He has ruled san'Sorafel and all of Myloria since he was a very young. His father was killed, fighting the skags."

Suzanne felt a light chill streak up her spine, recalling her ghastly encounter in the woods. "The skags are your enemies?" she asked.

Miri stopped sponging her back. "They are worse than enemies, my lady. They are filth, the Undying Ones from the darkest days of the Cataclysms. They must be destroyed. All of them!"

The young maid's vehemence startled her. "Have you lost family to the skags," Suzanne asked.

Miri resumed washing her back. "Yes," she said bitterly. "My parents."

"I'm so sorry." Suzanne didn't know what else to say. Losing a loved one to those hideous creatures was bad enough, but to lose both her mother and father...? It was too horrible to contemplate.

After bathing, Miri helped her into the gown made from a plush, velvet-like fabric designed for warmth as well as beauty. The sleeves were a bit too long, as was the hem, but the girl proved deft with a needle and thread. In a few moments, she had adjusted the sleeves and hem so that the gown conformed to Suzanne's figure almost as if it had been made for her.

"I hope you don't mind wearing Princess Kiamma's clothes, but there are none else," Miri said shyly.

"I don't mind. Please thank her for me," Suzanne said while twisting and turning before the tall mirror, deciding if she liked wearing a floor-length dress instead of jeans and comfortable sweaters. Her own clothing would, undoubtedly, be taken away for washing. With a start, she suddenly remembered the marble medallion Dane had given to her.

Suzanne reached for her jeans, fumbling through the pockets, searching for the stone object until Miri's voice stopped her.

"Princess Kiamma is dead, my lady. The skags killed her, too."

A new streak of alarm shot through her. Suzanne stared at the solemn-eyed Miri.

"You must *never* go outside the gates alone, especially at night," the young maid said in a soft voice. "*Never.*"

Suzanne nodded. "Very well. Do these skag-creatures live near the city?"

"They are everywhere, but they hide from the daylight. The sun hurts their eyes and burns their skin, but

if they're hungry enough, they will kill anything even during the day." She nodded toward the narrow window at the back of the room, heavily barred in iron. "And you must stay away from the windows, especially at night. The skags are bold and fearless when it is dark. Princess Kiamma, the prince's own wife..." Miri looked down, biting her lower lip to hold back tears.

Sobered by her words, Suzanne resumed her search for the medallion. Once her fingers touched its cool, smooth surface, she hastily pocketed it in the deep folds of the gown before Miri saw it. Finally she said, "I had my own encounter with a skag on the way to Ironhold."

Miri looked up at her, surprised.

"Fortunately, Prince Akken'ar and the others killed it in time."

"So, it is true," Miri whispered.

"What? What is true?"

"He said you would come ... that you would escape *The-Others-of-Us* , so that you could tell us how to destroy them."

"Who is 'he,' Miri?"

The girl looked confused. Her large, soft-brown eyes filled with uncertainty. "The blessed saint, of course. He said you would come and teach us t-t-the way to stop them."

Miri's next words chilled Suzanne's blood to ice.

"The blessed Saint Kyrk told us you would come, at the time of the Red Eclipse."

* * * *

HER SUMMONS CAME not an hour after she had a light breakfast of a brown bread and honey, a slice of mild-tasting cheese and more of the dek tea. Dressed in Princess Kiamma's beautiful gown and swathed in a warming shawl, Suzanne followed Miri down the sweeping staircase, past the rows of bristling weapons, then down a long corridor until they stopped before a heavy oak door much like the door to her bedchamber upstairs. Miri knocked timidly and stepped back to allow Suzanne to pass.

"I cannot enter, my lady."

"Why not?"

Miri shook her head. "Because it is not permitted."

The door suddenly opened and Miri dropped a hasty curtsy. "Forgive me, Lady Sayer. I will attend to you later, when it is" She glanced at the sour-faced young man standing in the open doorway. "I ... I ... Forgive me." Flushed and stammering, Miri again curtsied to the scribe then to Suzanne. Without another word, the maid turned and fled down the corridor.

The scribe bowed stiffly from the waist. "Please come in, Honored Wordsayer," he said, beckoning her to enter.

Suzanne acknowledged his bow with a slight nod then turned to enter the dimly-lit room. The chamber

was not large and had few furnishings. A black wood table stood adjacent to a fireplace, the fire itself supplying most of the light for the room.

Dark tapestries lined the walls, each depicting in graphic detail what appeared to be the destruction of several cities and all the inhabitants. Suzanne squinted at the tapestries, at once fascinated and horrified.

In the first, the earth appeared rent, torn in half by a massive earthquake. Cities were consumed within a gigantic chasm, lost forever in a boiling, wild sea. The second tapestry depicted exploding volcanoes, with rivers of fiery lava engulfing more cities and hoards of fleeing, terrified people. In the third tapestry, Suzanne made out what looked like a great ball of fire striking deep into the earth, causing massive tidal waves and more devastation. Water swallowed up what remained of the land in the fourth tapestry, but the fifth and last tapestry sent a chill up her spine.

Interwoven into the heavy fabric, she saw clearly the designs of metal canisters, broken open like monstrous eggs spilling out their deadly contents. The faces of the dead and dying revealed the last and most terrible effects of the Cataclysm. After having endured earthquakes and volcanoes and the deadly aftermath of an impacting meteor, the final chapter was ultimately manmade. The people in the fifth tapestry died by diseases too terrible to contemplate.

With exquisite skill, the artisans had captured the torment of anthrax and a dozen other chemically induced diseases. Pock-marked bodies, blood that poured from mouths and noses; bodies wracked with pain, all revealed the last moments of the damned—those remaining few who had survived the destruction of the earth only to endure the most ghastly death. Their eyes showed it, the incomprehension, the horror and ultimately their defeat. The end of the world. Hell on earth. The apocalypse.

Suzanne choked back a sob, glad the room was too dark for the others to see her shock and grief.

"So, you have seen the days of the Five Cataclysms," Master Jonovar spoke from the back of the room. He stepped forward into the soft light along with Master Eika, the one-eyed general Zykov, and the brooding form of Akken'ar.

The Master Scribe nodded for her to sit at the table. "Please be seated, my lady. *We* have a few questions."

She looked at the prince whose expression was unreadable, but he simply gestured to the chair where she should sit.

Suzanne didn't like any of this and hesitated. Master Jonovar's small black eyes narrowed to sinister slits, his mouth formed into an uncompromising thin line.

"What do you want of me?" she asked warily. "I never asked to come here, you know, and I think *I* deserve some answers."

"Of course and rightly so." Jonovar gestured to the others. "But, *we* have a few questions to ask of you first." He attempted an insincere smile. "Truly, only a few simple questions to clear up this misunderstanding."

"There is no misunderstanding," Prince Akken'ar cut in sharply. "She is the Wordsayer, as predicted by the blessed Saint Kyrk!"

"Please my lord, allow me to make my inquiries. It will only take a moment."

Akken'ar turned away, arms folded across his chest. His silence prompted the scribe to proceed.

"Our prince, Akken'ar, says he discovered you at the entrance to Knife Edge Pass. If this is true, may I ask how you got there?"

Suzanne weighed her answer carefully. If she told the truth they'd never believe her, but to lie ... There was no telling what they would do to her if she fabricated a story.

"I'm not sure myself," she said. "I was ... walking through the woods, quite alone."

"And before that?" the Master Scribe prodded.

"I was with a friend. We dined together, then he showed me something."

The scribe's black eyes again narrowed to penetrating slits. "What did he show you?"

"An object. He did not know what it was so he gave it to me."

"And where, may we ask, did your friend get it?" Master Eika asked.

Suzanne studied the gentle-eyed Master of the Library and decided she could trust him. "—From a man, a mysterious visitor. He carried a sword and threatened a few people with it. My friend tried to stop him."

As odd as it sounded, *it was* the truth, she consoled herself. At least a credible version of the truth. They'd never believe the actual details of the story: the stranger in Curly's bar and Sheriff McKenna's late night visit. Suzanne sensed that all they were really interested in was how a woman could possibly be the Wordsayer.

Master Eika and Jonovar exchanged meaningful glances. Finally Jonovar asked, "Would you happen to have this object?"

"Yes, of course." She reached into her pocket within the deep folds of the gown and removed the stone object, then placed it on the table before them.

The reaction was immediate. Both Master Jonovar and Master Eika stepped back, drawing in their breath in astonished gasps. Even Akken'ar's eyes widened.

"The Tearstone," the young scribe whispered reverently.

Akken'ar leaned over the table, scrutinizing the strange black and white stone with the blood-red teardrop at its center. "This *is* the Tearstone." He glanced at her, his gaze turning from astonishment to profound respect. "Then, you truly are the Wordsayer."

Master Eika clasped his hands tightly before him, his head bowed. "Forgive us, Lady Wordsayer, we meant no offense."

The young scribe had already dropped to one knee, causing Suzanne acute embarrassment. "The blessed Saint be praised," he said fervently. "The prophecy has come true!"

Master Jonovar said nothing at first, but his face remained expressionless; cold annoyance flattened his gaze. Seeing the Tearstone had not changed his mind and Suzanne knew she faced more than just a disbelieving old man. She had penned too many villains not to recognize an enemy.

The small room grew uncomfortably quiet until the low fire popped and hissed as a burned-out log collapsed into ash.

Jonovar pursed his fleshy lips, a white eyebrow arched skeptically. "So, it appears we have found our Wordsayer." He bowed. "Your pardon if I have appeared ... doubtful of your identity. We have awaited your arrival for a long time and must be certain we are entrusting our most sacred relics to the right person."

Suzanne lifted her chin, finding more courage than she had ever known. "I have great respect for the written word, Master Scribe. I will not violate your revered relics."

Jonovar returned her even stare. It was clearly not the answer he expected and Suzanne knew she had just crossed the line from an unwelcome stranger to adversary. Master Jonovar did not like her. Only duty and his obligation to honor the prophesy of their saint kept him from openly challenging her.

Master Eika cleared his throat. "If we are satisfied with the outcome of this interview, I believe we must prepare for the reading of the Sacred Text."

"Agreed," Akken'ar said briskly. "We haven't a moment to lose."

Suzanne felt the color rise to her cheeks. "Just a moment. It is my turn to ask a few questions."

The Master Scribe frowned. "What questions can you possibly have, Honored Wordsayer? You were found in the exact place and time as written in the prophecy and you have the Tearstone. Those were the only requirements specified by the blessed saint."

"Except that you did not expect the Wordsayer to be a woman?"

"You are, I admit, a surprise," the Scribe answered.

Akken'ar bristled. "Let her ask her questions."

Jonovar held up an apologetic hand. "By your will, Highness. By all means, my lady. Ask your questions."

"Who is the Messenger?"

"Perhaps, I can answer that question," Master Eika said smoothly. "The blessed Saint Kyrk sent many messengers, but the First Messenger is most revered. It was he who found the Sacred Text, which had been stolen from the blessed saint. He returned it, but was killed by skags at the entrance, the portal, to Knife Edge Pass."

"Why was the Text stolen?"

"Because the Sacred Text holds the answer to defeating the skags. All tribes and peoples are plagued by them; they are a scourge upon the land. The Text is sought by our enemies as well as those loyal to

Myloria," Eika continued.

"After I have read your Text, will I be taken back to Knife Edge Pass? Will I be allowed to return from where I came?"

Again, both scribes cast uneasy glances between one another and Prince Akken'ar. Another long silence filled the small chamber until the prince finally spoke.

"We are uncertain, my lady. The Messenger who had been sent through the Pass to find you, never returned."

Chapter Five

"SO, THE WORDSAYER is a female. Interesting. Does she know of us?"

"No, my master, she does not and she never will. I will make sure of it."

A ragged, diseased cough filled the dank chamber, echoing off the seeping black walls. "See that you do. I want no unpleasant surprises."

"However, she asks to be returned to Knife Edge Pass after reading the Sacred Text."

Another cough contorted into a tortured laugh. "Do as she wishes, it is of no consequence. Time is not a destination, but she does not understand that. Neither do you."

"True, my master, but I am only here to obey."

"That is because you are a fool, scribe. Now, get out!"

* * * *

WARNING BELLS PEALING from the highest towers of the city. A terrifying chill settled over san'Sorafel as its inhabitants silently hurried to their homes and barred the doors. Word had come that a large horde of skags lurked just outside the main gates of the city, waiting for the night. They were always hungry, especially in the winter. Indigenous creatures and wild game had long fled the forests surrounding san'Sorafel, forcing the skags to turn to their only source of food: humans and domesticated animals.

Akken'ar and six of his most trusted warriors galloped through the marketplace toward the west wall, as a handful of frightened children dodged from the horses' hooves. The remaining adults still lingering on the street, fled behind food stalls or into their shops.

The sharp afternoon wind bit into his cheeks and eyes, promising snow and a night of intense cold. The never-ending need for more time to prepare against an attack pressed upon him like an unwanted burden.

Akken'ar's horse skidded to a halt on the rough cobblestones just as he heard a wild cry above, a warning call from the Watcher. Around him, warriors and citizen-soldiers armed with swords, spears, and bows hurried up the ladders to their posts along the battlements. He slid from the saddle, shoved the reins into the hands of an attending lad, then raced up the stairs to the top of the corner tower. General Zykov met him, his face grim.

"How bad is it?" Akken'ar asked sharply.

"Bad enough. Here, see for yourself, my lord." Zykov handed him a small collapsible telescope.

He peered through the glass toward the nearest cluster of trees. The leaden sky, heavy with snow made spotting them difficult, but soon Akken'ar was able to make out movement and a glimpse of yellow eyes.

"How many did you count?" he asked Zykov.

"At least five hundred, my lord. Maybe more."

"Are there any others?"

"None that we can tell. I have Watchers posted at every tower. It appears this is the only horde."

Akken'ar shut the glass. "Strange, that there are so many of them. By tomorrow, there will be only seven days left until the Eclipse. All the skags should have gone to their gathering."

"The winter has come early, my lord. They are desperate and starving."

A disgusted noise escaped Akken'ar's throat. "Good. Let them devour their own."

The wind turned colder and the first flakes of snow slanted down from the gray clouds, skittered over the thick stone walls encompassing the city.

"It will be dark soon," Zykov said, scanning the horizon. "Everything is in readiness; I'll order the archers to set their fires."

Akken'ar nodded curtly. Only beheading or fire stopped the skags. He had seen too many of them rise to fight again and again, even after having succumbed to terrible wounds. Their unnatural long life and ability to regenerate flesh had made them an ever-present scourge. He knew he had wounded many skags, the same creatures his own father had struck down, long before Akken'ar was born. The skags lived on, more scabrous and vile than before—smarter, hungrier, and determined to devour anything they could find, living or dead.

The long row of smoldering braziers, set along the battlement, were re-kindled and the flames leaped to life, casting dancing light across the warriors' faces. The archers stepped forward, awaiting the command to ignite their arrows. They knew they were the first line of defense against the oncoming skags.

A flaming arrow to the throat usually stopped them, burning them to death before they could smother the fire. If they managed to get past the archers, the skags would use ropes, crude ladders, even themselves as a living pyramid to climb the walls of the great city. No sword or spear could stop them, at least not for long. Severed limbs re-grew, deep wounds closed and torn flesh regenerated in a few moments.

If they managed to reach the top of the battlements, only then were swords of any use. The archers stepped back and the best swordsmen moved forward, ready to sever their heads before the skags could enter the city. This was the only way swords could stop them.

The last dull light of day faded to dusk; the snow thickened. Akken'ar spotted movement in the dense stand of trees and heard the familiar high-pitched gibbering. No one knew if the skags were intelligent enough to speak a language, but somehow they communicated with one another.

"I can smell them," Zykov muttered.

"...enough to make a man puke," Akken'ar overheard one of the archers below say to his companion.

"Order the torches lit, so we can see them coming."

"At once, my lord," Zykov said, turning toward a junior officer standing nearby.

"And, General...?"

"Highness?"

"Send someone to escort the Lady Wordsayer to the sanctuary. It is safer there."

"As you will, Highness."

Akken'ar again focused his attention on the cluster of black trees, watching for any sudden movement. He should have thought of the Wordsayer the moment he knew about the skags and chastised himself for leaving her in the dubious care of Master Jonovar. Fortunately, Master Eika's presence would temper the Wordkeeper's determination to question Lady Suzanne any further about the Tearstone. That she even possessed the relic had been a complete surprise and only confirmed her identity as the Wordsayer. But it troubled him that the blessed saint had chosen a woman for such a grim task. Had this fact been known, or had it been a part of the saint's design?

Akken'ar had never before questioned his duty concerning the prophecy—until now. Lady Suzanne changed everything. The weight of his duties had suddenly doubled when he found the Wordsayer. He must make certain she fulfilled her part of the prophecy by reading the Text. And she *must* survive. He would not allow her to suffer the same fate as his beloved Kiamma...

Zykov was at his elbow again. "We are ready, my lord."

"Good." Determination set Akken'ar's jaw, made him push all other thoughts from his mind except defeating the skags.

The huge torches along the ramparts lit the ground below in a dim, cold light. The far trees had melded into the darkness. Akken'ar covered his mouth and nose with the black wool helm-cloth and drew his sword.

The gibbering from the trees suddenly stopped.

"Here they come," Zykov said.

The horde emerged from the cover of the forest into the open, howling like crazed animals as they raced toward the walls of san'Sorafel. Whether running on two legs or scabbling on all fours, they moved faster than anyone thought possible—a mass of deranged creatures, clothed in filthy rags, and ravenous with hunger.

"Now," Akken'ar ordered.

"Fire!" Zykov bellowed to the archers.

Volley after volley of flaming arrows streaked through the pelting snow into the oncoming skags. Many fell, screaming helplessly as the fire ignited the rotting, dry cloth covering their bodies. But the rest kept coming.

Akken'ar watched as they came closer. Even after a lifetime of fighting them, panic still threatened to overwhelm him. He had become more adept at suppressing it, but watching the skags hurtle themselves at the walls of his city took all his resolve, all his courage.

"They've got ropes!" he heard someone shout.

He looked down. From below, he saw two of the larger-looking creatures scrambling up the backs of their comrades, who had braced themselves into a living ladder. Once standing on the shoulders of the top-most skags, they hurled loops of rope upward toward the iron spikes thrusting outward from the walls.

The archers responded with a furious deluge of arrows, striking the climbing skags. They fell to the ground writhing as the fire engulfed their rags, but one managed to smother the flames in the snow and again, began its climb up the living tower.

Akken'ar frustration rose as he saw the one skag manage to climb closer to the top of the wall and out of the archers' range. "Get your spears on it!"

The noise of clashing weapons, shouting warriors and the skags' high-pitched shrieks all added to the madness and confusion.

Zykov hurried up to him. "We're running out of arrows, my lord."

"How many left?"

"No more than a hundred."

Akken'ar nodded. "We must make every arrow count; none are to be wasted. Give the order. And Zykov, select four men. Have them search the city for any stored arrows or weapons that might have been overlooked."

"Done, my lord." Zykov hurried away, shouting to his officers.

The snow had subsided allowing the light from the torches to expose the chaos below. The onslaught slackened somewhat; the still-smoldering bodies of the skags struck by flaming arrows lay in black stinking piles scattered over the white ground. Many crouched or lay huddled together, panting and waiting for the hideous rapid-regeneration of limbs and wounds to finish so they might attack the wall again. Akken'ar knew the skags would not stop until they breached the city wall, or until every one of them had been killed.

A wild cry of alarm made him look down the line of archers braced along the battlement. In a single horrifying moment, one skag, straddling the shoulders of his comrades, managed to reach the lowest iron spike jutting out from the wall. Hanging by its arms, the full length of its body could be seen beneath its clothing—the maggot-white skin riddled with hundreds of battle scars and the scabs of disease. With impossible strength, it climbed the remaining spikes until it neared the top. A fury of sword cuts and swift blows from spears failed to dislodge it. With amazing speed, the creature reached up and grabbed the

sleeve of the nearest archer, dragging him over the side. The man screamed, desperately clutching the edge of the battlement and the hands of those trying to pull him back.

A single sword-stroke beheaded the skag and a well-aimed kick to its chest sent it tumbling the ground. But it was too late for the archer. In spite of his struggles to save himself, he too, fell, landing hard on the packed snow.

The skags howled their victory and immediately turned from the wall, descending on the lifeless archer and the headless body of their comrade. At last, they had what they wanted.

Akken'ar beat his fist against the stone wall. "No!"

He spun around and raced down the tower steps, firing orders to the officers closest to him.

"Get my horse. And I want six men—four swordsmen and two of our best archers."

General Zykov was at his heels. "What are you doing, my lord?"

"Open the postern gate," he snapped.

"This is madness! It is too late for the archer. The skags have him now."

Akken'ar whirled on the general. "What would you have me do? Let them drag him off?"

"The archer is dead..."

"That may be, but I'll not see one more of my people become a meal for those things!"

"My lord ... !"

"Cover us from above, Zykov. You know what do. Whatever happens, don't let any of them get inside." He swung onto his horse then nodded to his hastily gathered warriors.

Men at the postern gate—the small side door within the west gate, large enough for a single horse and rider to get through—suddenly pulled it open and Akken'ar spurred his horse into the cold night.

Surprised by seven men on horseback carrying swords and bows, the skags turned and ran for the woods leaving behind their wounded still crawling in the snow. Swiftly, Akken'ar and his swordsmen beheaded them, then turned their horses after the remaining skags.

They were faster than Akken'ar imagined—dragging the body of a tall man over snow and rough terrain—but the skags were no match for fresh horses and seven warriors determined to kill them. In moments, the seven descended upon the stragglers. The creatures were forced to drop their prize, but not without a fight. Growling and hissing they held their ground by forming a circle around the archer and their headless companion.

There were only a dozen creatures left, but even with the advantage of carrying weapons, Akken'ar knew the odds were still against them. The skags would attempt to kill their horses first, leaving the warriors on foot and a long way from the city gates.

The skag closest to him wasted no time with posturing. Enraged, it leaped at Akken'ar's horse, trying to

sink its teeth into the animal's throat. The prince fought to control the terrified horse as he struck at the creature with his sword. The remaining skags joined their comrade, leaping and snarling at the six other warriors.

The struggle seemed to go on interminably, as each time Akken'ar's men succeeded in wounding one of the skags, it simply dropped to the ground and waited until its wounds or missing limbs regenerated.

Finally, a fierce blow from his sword severed the skag's arms at the elbows, forcing it to relinquish its hold on his horse. It fell, gibbering and squirming to the snow. Akken'ar gave no mercy. He swung down and planted his foot firmly on the skag's back. In one stroke, he severed its head.

Akken'ar dropped to one knee, breathing hard, gathering his strength. Disgust filled him as he looked at the vile creature, its black-red blood oozing into the snow. How much time was expended destroying these things, he thought wearily. How many times must his people fight before the skags were destroyed? If only he could find a way to behead or burn them all at once.

He looked up in time to see his men decapitate the last of the creatures. Bloodied and weary, men and horses stood in the midst of the carnage, waiting for his orders.

Using his blade for support, Akken'ar pulled himself to his feet. "Get the archer," he said quietly.

Akken'ar mounted his horse, then motioned for the archer's body to be laid across the saddlebow in front of him. In somber silence, the warriors urged their horses into a swift walk, never once looking back.
* * * *

SUZANNE STARED THROUGH the barred window of her room, rubbing her hands against her upper arms. In spite of the warming fire, she felt uncomfortably cold. Maybe it was nerves or impatience.

At least she had *some* answers, but not nearly enough to satisfy. Both Master Eika and Master Jonovar had revealed only small pieces of information, dispensing each fragment like a rare jewel, as if too precious for anyone to have but themselves.

Suzanne felt sorry for Akken'ar—a powerful but weary man, caught between leading his people and his sworn duty to the Scribes. She had felt his simmering wrath in the chamber where she had been questioned. He clearly detested Master Jonovar and had only wary respect for Master Eika. Prince Akken'ar was a warrior, like Sheriff McKenna, governed by a strong moral code, but trapped by the strictures of duty.

A breathless messenger had interrupted Master Jonovar's interrogation with news that a horde of skags had massed outside the west gates of the city.

Akken'ar acted swiftly; the Wordsayer was to be escorted to her chamber and guards posted outside her door; the Scribes were to protect Ironhold—the sanctuary and the Library. Every available warrior was to take his post at the outer walls.

Two hours passed and she had heard nothing since. Suzanne glanced at the window again. It was dark and she now appreciated the importance of the thick iron bars bolted across the glass.

A soft knock announced Miri's return. She entered Suzanne's chamber carrying a beautiful outer robe made of deep green velvet, heavily embroidered in gold thread.

"I hope it will fit," Miri said shyly as she slipped it over Suzanne's shoulders. "You'll want to look your best for the ritual ... when the time comes."

A strange feeling came over Suzanne as she studied her reflection in the tall mirror set near the window. She didn't recognize herself. The robe, a garment made for a formal ceremony, made her appear poised and elegant and Miri's admiring gaze affirmed approval of her appearance.

Suzanne pulled the edges of the robe together to ward off another chill and ran an admiring hand down the intricate embroidery-work. She wondered who was the last person to wear such a beautiful garment. It was made for a princess. Or, a bride. "Was this Princess Kiamma's?"

"Yes. She wore it the day she was wed to His Highness."

"I should have known," she murmured. "Will he not be angry if he sees me wearing his wife's wedding attire?"

Miri shook her head. "No, my lady. I think not. It was so long ago. Besides, there is nothing else fine enough for you to wear. I think Prince Akken'ar will be pleased."

"How did the...? How did Princess Kiamma die?"

"I was only a little girl then, but my mother told me that the princess had gone riding one afternoon, outside the city gates. She had an armed escort, but they stayed out too long. As they returned to the city, the skags ambushed her and her guards. They were all killed, the horses too, and dragged off." Miri looked away, her eyes filling with tears. "The prince never found her..."

"I'm very sorry," Suzanne whispered, fully understanding the depth of Akken'ar's loathing for the creatures and the urgency of her task.

Another knock at the door ended Miri's recounting of Princess Kiamma's terrible death. The maid hurried to open the door. Outside were the two fierce-looking warriors and Master Eika.

"Forgive me, Lady Sayer, but His Highness has ordered that you are to be escorted to a safer place. It is vital that you come with me."

"Are the skags inside the city?" Suzanne asked anxiously.

"No. The prince is only taking further precautions. Please...?" Eika gestured for her to follow him.

Suzanne gathered the magnificent robe closer to her and hurriedly followed Master Eika through the dark keep. She saw no other warriors except the two escorting her and the scribe, and assumed all the others were fighting skags. It occurred to her how thinly stretched the prince's resources were. No wonder he was so anxious for her to read the Sacred Text.

Master Eika turned down a wide hallway that joined the main part of the keep to a separate wing. The corridor looked much older than the keep itself, its high windows were cracked and broken allowing small birds to nest in the cornices and crevices near the ceiling. It smelled musty like damp stone and mold. There was something else, something she could not quite name ... a familiarity. At one time the corridor must have been an architectural wonder, a hallway in a great building or ... a library.

The keep must have been a library, she reasoned—at least, a part of what was left of it. There was no escaping the reality of her situation. She *had* traveled forward in time to witness the outcome of a terrible natural disaster that had occurred over a thousand years ago.

Master Eika stopped suddenly. The ancient corridor ended, opening into a large open courtyard paved in flat gray stones. There was no garden or pattering fountain to break up its cold severity. Snow filtered down from the black sky, coating the stones in a thin layer of sparkling white. Colonnaded passageways encircled the courtyard on all four sides and directly across from Suzanne, another opening led up a dark stone stairway, deeper into the keep.

"We go this way," Master Eika said, indicating they should turn left. Half-way down the open corridor, the scribe stopped before a pair of double doors, scarred and battered with age. The two attending guards took their positions on either side, while Eika produced a simple brass key and opened the right-hand door.

"Is this where I will read the Text?" Suzanne asked.

"No, my lady. This," he said opening the door, "is the Library. It is safe in here."

She stepped inside and gasped. From floor to ceiling, on every wall were books, hundreds perhaps thousands lining the shelves. Two long tables of old mahogany, polished to a high gleam had been placed in the center of the room. A few chairs, battered with age, had been placed before the tables. The ancient fabric covering the seats, was faded and riddled with holes; the stuffing protruding like dirty straw. Large Turkish carpets, shabby and threadbare, lay over a wooden floor that creaked with every step.

"I thought, Lady Wordsayer, you would care to see our second-most valuable treasure." Eika moved around her solicitously and gestured to the nearest bookshelf.

Suzanne approached the shelf, overwhelmed by what she saw and awed that so many books had survived. She cocked her head sideways and scanned the titles.

"These are the common texts, sometimes called the manuscripts of common knowledge," he said.

She ran a light finger over the spines of the shelved books. Akken'ar had read some of these; this was the source of his knowledge and education.

Titles on farming, animal husbandry and wood-working tools met her probing gaze. Looking up to the next row, she saw more books, some in other languages, but all on non-technological subjects: saddlery and harness-making, stone masonry and carpentry, but nothing on electronics, machinery or communications. There were a few texts, old to her, on printing and bookbinding, but all written before the advent of electrically-powered presses.

Master Eika seemed pleased, almost proud of himself as he showed her the remainder of the library. "I hope this meets with your approval, my lady. I have striven to keep everything in order and in good repair. Every sunpass, apprentice scribes assist me for many weeks restoring or copying a few of the texts ... some are so fragile."

Suzanne strolled through library, continuing to scan the titles. No literature or fiction, but a few volumes of Shakespeare. She noticed a distinct lack of history, theology or philosophy books. There were, however, plenty of books on nature and natural studies, but nothing on the hard sciences: chemistry, physics or advanced mathematics. It was as if someone had deliberately excised all materials on

technology and its correlated skills. There were some texts on astronomy and a few books on ocean life lining the topmost shelves. But most curious of all, there were no books on reading, writing, grammar or spelling.

How did these people learn to read and write?

She noticed Master Eika's expectant expression. "I can see you are doing a marvelous job keeping the library in such excellent condition. I commend you and your assistant scribes."

The kindly scribe looked pleased and somewhat relieved as if he had passed some kind of test.

"However, it seems curious that there are no volumes on ...," Suzanne shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "History, for instance."

Master Eika turned a shade paler. "History," he said, almost in a whisper, "is forbidden."

Sensing the scribe's hidden terror, Suzanne lowered her own voice. "It is forbidden? Why?"

"Because it is the directive of the blessed Saint Kyrk. He instructed us that the past is no longer important; that only some things were necessary to remember. Remembering the past only stirs up discontent and disappointment."

Suzanne nodded knowingly, but said nothing. Censoring and suppression. Nothing new, but sadly out of place, particularly in a time when all the knowledge and information from the past was so desperately needed.

She glanced at the rows of books. At least *some* were saved. "Tell me, Master Eika. Did Saint Kyrk select these books for you?"

Eika brightened. "Oh, yes. Each text was carefully chosen. He made certain we had all we needed. The rest were discarded or burned."

It was difficult not to wince at such a casual dismissal. Burning books—in her mind the most insidious way to destroy knowledge. Like an extinct animal species or the loss of a spoken language, once a book was gone, there was no way to bring it back.

"And, who else reads these books besides you and Prince Akken'ar?"

Caution touched the older scribe's eyes. "Anyone may read these texts ... if they have that ability."

"I see." Suzanne saw Eika's reluctance and decided not to pursue the matter any further.

They turned by the sound of a sudden commotion at the door. Master Jonovar strode into the library red-faced and out of breath. Young Nathan stood at the scribe's elbow, his thin face white with fear.

"Eika, what is the meaning of this?" Jonovar asked angrily. "Why have you brought *her* into the Library?"

Chapter Six

SUZANNE BRISTLED AT the Scribe's insult and felt Master Eika's sharp embarrassment. The lines

were clearly drawn. Without Prince Akken'ar's presence or disapproval, Master Jonovar was free to reveal the extent of his dislike.

"How dare you allow her to enter this sacred place," he thundered at Eika. "Only those with authority or special permission may enter the Library!"

"Master Wordkeeper ... ," Eika started to protest.

"Silence!" Jonovar glared at the older scribe, then at Suzanne. His dark gaze flicked over her attire—at Princess Kiamma's velvet ceremonial robe—his annoyed expression dissolving into contempt. "I must ask you to leave, my lady," he said stiffly.

Anger overrode her fear of confrontation. Suzanne drew herself up taller, knowing the robe made her appear more courageous than she felt.

"Master Eika invited me into the Library as his guest. I will not desecrate it, if that is your fear, Master Jonovar! And—"

"That is beside the point," Jonovar retorted. "We are at war with the defiled ones. The Library must be guarded at all times, protected from possible contamination."

Suzanne clenched her hands into tight fists. Her chin went up. Voice raised, she interrupted the Master Scribe "...and, because the prince *ordered* Master Eika to bring me here, for my own safety!"

Momentarily silenced, Jonovar scowled at her. He jerked the folds of his maroon robe into place, his mouth compressed into a hard line of disapproval. "I, of course, did not know of this."

Master Eika cleared his throat. "Perhaps, if I were to explain?"

"There is no need for explanations, Eika. I understand everything completely." Jonovar pointed a warning finger at Suzanne. "But know this, I do not believe you are the Wordsayer. I make no apologies. His Highness and I are clearly opposed in our opinions. I shall challenge every effort allowing you access to the Sacred Text."

Jonovar whirled away from her and strode out of the Library, trailing behind him a pleased-looking Nathan and a handful of junior scribes who had been waiting in the hallway.

So much for her good opinion of Nathan, Suzanne thought angrily. Traitorous weasel.

She looked at poor Master Eika, still rattled by their confrontation with Jonovar. It was becoming quite clear that there were two camps of loyal followers: those obedient, or intimidated by Master Jonovar and those who followed Eika's more sensible, compassionate views—and all of them struggling for Prince Akken'ar's approval.

"I apologize for my colleague's unpleasant comments, my lady."

"No need. I have dealt with men like Master Jonovar before." Bullies, Suzanne silently amended. The Master Wordkeeper was a bully, just like David, who wielded intimidation and disdain like weapons. Her husband had been a master at it: the indignation, the outraged pride. How dare she be smarter than he, make more money than he, and parade herself around like some literary queen.

Tears stung Suzanne's eyes and she looked away so Master Eika would not see. Her extraordinary adventure into the future had now become a nightmare. After the imminent danger was over and after she had read their precious Text, she would insist Prince Akken'ar escort her back to the Pass. She did not belong here, this was not her fight.

Or was it?

Miri's stricken face when she revealed how Princess Kiamma had died and the hopeless look in the eyes of citizens of san'Sorafel when Suzanne had passed through the city still haunted her. And she could not dismiss Akken'ar's tormented, hollow gaze, barely concealing his rage and despair—a man who had struggled too long, trying to win a battle that would never end.

The shadows deepened in the Library. The lamplight cast a soft gloom throughout the room. Master Eika moved about the great chamber, adjusting the lamps and re-shelving a few books left on the tables. Suzanne detected a profound sense of sorrow emanating from the kindly Scribe. This was his domain, his cherished responsibility—his entire life had been devoted to keeping and protecting what was left of mankind's knowledge and wisdom. Master Jonovar's angry tirade had left him demoralized and defeated.

"Master Eika, why do you think Master Jonovar does not believe I am the Wordsayer?"

He turned to face her. "Jealously, my lady. Jonovar has been the guardian of the Text for most of his life. I am certain he feels it belongs to him, yet he cannot read it; he is not permitted to read it. I believe he feels that when he surrenders the Sacred volume to the Wordsayer, that person should be someone like himself, a person of authority and stature."

"And I am a disappointment, an unwanted surprise."

"Yes, since the prophecy repeatedly refers to the Wordsayer as 'he.'" Eika looked up at her. "You must not misjudge Jonovar by thinking he dislikes you because you are a woman. That is not true. I believe he is upset because now *hemust* surrender the Sacred Text and he does not want to do this."

"What about Prince Akken'ar?"

"The prince cares little about the prophecy or who reads the Text. His duty is to rid san'Sorafel of the vile ones by any means possible."

She eased into a chair placed at the end of one of the mahogany tables. "Do you believe I am the Wordsayer?" she asked softly.

"Oh, yes, my lady. There is no question in my mind. You have the Tearstone; that is the sign of your legitimacy. The blessed Saint Kyrk always kept the Tearstone in his possession until it was stolen from him. Since his time, none of the Messengers ever found it, nor did they return, except for the first Messenger who came back with Saint Kyrk's Text. Sadly, he died at the entrance to Knife Edge Pass."

"How many Messengers have there been?"

Eika shrugged. "Every two hundred and fourteen sunpasses a Messenger is chosen to go through the Pass to find the Wordsayer and the Tearstone."

A light touch of suspicion flared within Suzanne. "If the saint is dead, then who chooses the Messenger every two-hundred and fourteen years ... I mean, sunpasses?"

A long, uncomfortable pause lengthened between them. Master Eika nervously shuffled a small stack of books set on the table before him, not meeting her gaze. Finally, he said, "I believe it was Master Jonovar who selected the last Messenger."

"I see. And the Messenger he sent has not come back?"

"Yes, that is true. They never come back, my lady. They are taken to Knife Edge Pass, but once they leave, they never return. Never. Except for the First Messenger, so long ago."

"What happened to him?"

"It is believed the skags, the Others-of-Us, killed him."

Suzanne absorbed what Master Eika divulged. At last, some answers, but still not enough. If the original Messenger had found the saint's so-called 'Sacred Text,' then why wasn't it read at that time?

The sound of a distant horn interrupted her thoughts. Master Eika abandoned his attention on the stray books.

"Ah," he said. "They have been successful. The skags have been defeated. Come, my lady. We must hurry."

She followed the old scribe out the Library door, back through the crumbling corridor to the main part of the keep. The horn blared again, then several more could be heard from all over the city. A controlled excitement animated the escort guards as they hurried alongside her to meet their returning prince. Suzanne spotted Master Jonovar rushing through the throng along with Master Nathan, who saw her, but avoided her gaze.

The wind and snow had stopped. The only sounds in the still courtyard were the fluttering torches along the walls and upper battlements and the hard clatter of hooves on the wet cobblestones.

From the top steps leading inside Ironhold, Suzanne watched Akken'ar ride through the inner gate with six warriors behind him. Exhaustion riddled his lean features. Blood darkened the sleeves of his long tunic, his gauntlets and the edge of his fur cloak. At the base of the sweeping stairway, he halted and slid from the saddle. A dead archer lay across his horse's withers. Akken'ar bent forward and slid the body from the saddlebow, over his shoulder. With labored steps, he climbed the stairs until he stood face to face with Jonovar. Gently, he lowered the dead warrior until it lay on the top step.

Anger and resolve warred across Akken'ar proud face—his pale skin, translucent in the light of the night torches. He raised a warning finger before the Master Wordkeeper's astonished eyes. "Not one more," he said menacingly. "Not one more man dies for those things."

Master Jonovar said nothing, but Suzanne felt his mounting annoyance.

Akken'ar pointed to her. "Before this night is over, the Lady Wordsayer will read the Text. Tomorrow we end this, once and for all."

Jonovar bowed. "Assuredly, Highness, but perhaps we should discuss—"

"There is nothing more to discuss, Master Scribe. She reads the Text, or I will!"

Both Jonovar and Master Eika gasped. Even the warriors standing at the base of the stairs and those gathered in the courtyard looked shocked.

"That is blasphemy, my lord!"

Akken'ar did not answer Jonovar, but moved around him and motioned for two men standing nearby to attend to the archer. He turned and approached Suzanne. Cold determination smothered any trace of gentleness in his blue-black eyes. "It is time for you to fulfill your part in the prophecy, my lady. Will you do this?"

It was on her lips to force a promise from him, to insist he return her to the Pass once she had read the Sacred Text. It was her last chance, Alice's only opportunity to escape Wonderland. But she could not. "Yes, Your Highness, I will do this."

Akken'ar inclined his head politely, then held out his hand to her as he had done when she had first encountered him at Knife Edge Pass. Dried blood and grime stained his black gauntlet. Suzanne watched herself in disbelief as she placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her inside the keep.

Guards, scribes and warriors followed them in orderly files as they made their way into Ironhold, through the ancient Library corridor to the inner courtyard. Akken'ar did not speak, but the pressure on her fingers was stronger. An unusual sensation shot through her, as if she had suddenly become his possession. Suzanne glanced up at him. Resolve had tightened Akken'ar's jaw, he kept his gaze fixed on their destination. She tried to think of something to say, something to ease his exhaustion and the thinly-disguised sense of despair.

"How many days do we have left, my lord?" she questioned in low voice so the other would not hear her.

"Seven, after tonight."

"Surely, the Text will have an answer."

"And if it does not?" he asked sharply.

"Then ... we'll think of something. There must be an answer. There *must*."

Akken'ar stopped and looked down at her, his expression unreadable. "You think there is an answer?"

"Yes. Yes, there is," she said with more conviction. "We are smarter than they are and have the means..."

We. As she watched Akken'ar absorb her words, she realized he had interpreted her use of 'we' to mean the two of them. Together, they would find an answer to defeat the skags.

He bent to her, his black brows sweeping together forming a disbelieving frown over his eyes. "I pray the gods you are right, for the sake of *all* of us." A trace of smile touched the corner of his mouth. "Nonetheless, I value your conviction, my lady."

Before she could respond, Akken'ar raised her hand to his lips and brushed a light kiss across her fingers. Fire danced up her arm burning her astonishment into awareness of his powerful affect on her.

Suzanne inhaled a soft gasp. Akken'ar was not only a prince fighting for the survival of his people, but a dutiful man, struggling to conceal the ardor she saw in his intense gaze.

They resumed walking, this time Akken'ar's hold on her hand tightened. They crossed the courtyard and climbed the steps to the great hall, the sanctuary of Ironhold. She gazed upward, astounded, at the soaring vaulted ceiling. Made entirely of gray stone, the sanctuary resembled a cathedral but lacked any indication of religion—no stained glass, no pews, altar or pulpit—its grim grandeur recalling only the form, a shadow of a long-lost memory.

A single balcony flanked each side of the hall and rows of narrow windows cut into the stone walls offered the only source of natural light. Several torches fluttered from their black-iron brackets bolted into the supporting pillars that led to the raised dais at the far end of the hall.

At the top of the dais, Suzanne counted five ornate chairs placed in an open semi-circle, with the center chair, carved from black and green granite, placed between the other four. She gathered her heavy skirts with her free hand and accepted Akken'ar steadying help as they climbed the steep steps to the dais.

Behind them, Master Jonovar and Master Eika, hurried to their places at the left of the throne. General Zykov took the chair placed at the far right; the remaining chair, next to Akken'ar's, was hers. Suzanne sat down cautiously, perched on the edge and clasped her trembling hands in her lap, hoping no one would notice.

Akken'ar did not sit but stood at the edge of the dais, arms folded across his chest, waiting for the great hall to fill with warriors, apprentice scribes, and those who lived within the keep. They looked at him expectantly, eyes filled with curiosity and hope.

"The Wordsayer has been found," he began. "I have brought her here to read the Sacred Text. Tonight, we will know what the blessed Saint Kyrk has written. His words will help free us from the tyranny of the skags."

A long silence ensued, no one moved, until Master Jonovar rose from his chair. "Good people, I must commend His Highness. He has done a great thing for us, during a time of terrible peril. All of us within Ironhold and the citizens of san'Sorafel long to find a way to destroy the skags. The prophecy tells us that the Wordsayer will help us with this great undertaking, but I fear that time is not yet upon us. As good and kind as our lady guest may be, I do not believe she is the one who the blessed saint has chosen for us."

Unease stirred through hall. Angry muttering rose from a row of warriors standing at the base of the stairs.

"If she's not the Wordsayer, then who is?" one cried out.

His comrade nodded in agreement. "The Eclipse is in seven days. Who'll read the Text if she doesn't?"

"This is blasphemy!" Jonovar pointed to the warrior who had spoken. "It is sacrilege for you, for any of us to *listen* to the holy words spoken by this woman. She is stranger, an Unaccepted. Are you willing to risk the contamination of your inner life? The blood of your soul?"

The rumblings rose into sharp outbursts. One apprentice scribe cautiously raised his hand. "What proof do we have that she truly is the Wordsayer?"

"She has her proof," Akken'ar said.

The troubled scribe said nothing, but was clearly unnerved by Jonovar's words.

An archer at the back raised his voice so all could hear, "I say we see her proof!"

A chorus of "yes, let us see it," and "let her prove who she is," filled the great hall, sprinkled with a few feeble protests from the lesser scribes, those loyal to Master Jonovar.

Akken'ar motioned her to come forward. Suzanne rose from her chair and approached the edge of the dais. A sea of expectant faces looked up at her, eager to see her proof.—From the folds of Kiamma's beautiful robe, Suzanne produced the Tearstone and held it up high so everyone could see it.

"The blessed Saint Kyrk be praised," a warrior whispered, awestruck. He swiftly dropped to one knee and bowed his head. Several of his companions followed his lead, until General Zykov rose from his chair.

"She is the Wordsayer," he said in a loud, rough voice. "And any warrior under my command who does not accept this fact will answer to me." Slowly, Zykov knelt, pressing his right fist to his breast.

The remaining warriors hastily complied, as did more of the scribes and various servants throughout the hall, until only a handful of Jonovar's faithful remained standing.

Suzanne felt the heat of embarrassment flush her face. Her legs trembled, threatening collapse at any moment. This was not what she expected; warriors should not be kneeling to her.

Akken'ar tossed a nod to those who still remained standing. "What other proof do you need? Accept what you have seen, scribes. The Text will be read by this lady, tonight."

The remaining scribes hesitated, then knelt, accepting Akken'ar's decision. Only one refused.

"Master Nathan, I advise you to think carefully before you make an unwise decision. I do not need your approval since I have the proof." Akken'ar glanced at Jonovar. "All you must do is choose to whom you will give your loyalty."

The Master of the Keep licked his lips. His gaze darted from Master Jonovar to Prince Akken'ar. "I—I do not believe she is the Wordsayer, Your Highness, but I accept your decision."

"Good." Akken'ar turned to Master Jonovar. "Bring the Sacred Text.

"This is an abomination! I will not—"

"Will you see us all die by the defiled ones, Wordkeeper?" Akken'ar's question roared through cavernous hall. He pointed to Suzanne. "She is the only one who can read the Text; she is the only one who can help us. The skags have been stopped, for a short time. When the Red Eclipse passes, they will be back. Will you risk our lives because you do not *wish* this lady to be the Wordsayer?"

Suzanne barely breathed as she watched Akken'ar turn away from the red-faced Master Scribe and slowly sat down on the green and black throne. Silence hung in the great room like a gathering storm. No one spoke.

"Bring the Book," Akken'ar said wearily.

Choleric with rage, Jonovar stormed down the dais steps, pushing his way through the kneeling warriors. A large, ornately-carved cabinet, a tall chest made of black wood stood under a small alcove to the left of the dais. With a key hung around his neck, the Master Scribe opened the lock and swung open the doors. He bowed slightly, then reached inside and pulled out something wrapped in a length of red cloth. Jonovar again bowed over the bundle, turned and climbed the dais. He stood before Suzanne clutching the cloth-wrapped book, hatred glittering in his small black eyes.

"It is our most precious object, my lady. Do not damage it."

Suzanne dipped her head slightly, hoping Jonovar would accept this as a gesture of courtesy and conciliation. She took the bundle from his outstretched hands and gingerly unwrapped the cloth.

It was a diary, a shabby journal, bound in a flimsy hardboard cover. Age had deteriorated the pages to yellow tissue; the entries, all in pencil, were almost illegible.

She handed the red cloth back to Jonovar, then faced the people still kneeling before her.

"Please rise."

Suzanne opened the frail book to the first page and began reading. "March 27, 2015. The fires have died down now and the water has receded, but it does not make traveling any easier. Word has filtered back that if we can reach the higher elevations, we can escape the worst of the contamination. But I fear for Margaret. She is very ill and I do not think she will make it to the mountains, and I am clumsy handling horses. They do not pull the wagon evenly since they used to be riding horses and are unaccustomed to the harness. I suppose I should be grateful. I am one of the few who could afford what horses were left ... "

"April 5, 2015. It is colder since we are now in the mountains. At last, we have passed through the burned lands. The open ground still smolders in some places, but the road is good, not broken up or melted down. We should reach the summit in two weeks."

"April 11, 2015. Our little caravan has stopped for a few days at a small clearing. The grass is still green here and the horses can eat. The water in the creek is a little muddy and Vandervelde says we must boil it since we've run out of iodine tablets. Margaret rests, but the sores on her skin are worse. I know she will die soon, but at least we will bury her where there are flowers. She always loved her garden ... "

Suzanne stopped reading and looked up at her transfixed audience. Horror and pity riddled their faces. A young servant girl leaning against a pillar wept softly into her apron.

"April 14, 2015. We buried my darling Margaret today. She died in her sleep and I am thankful for that mercy. I wish I could grieve, but I can't. It is a relief when they die peacefully. Too many have suffered horrible deaths."

"April 27, 2015. We have almost reached the summit. The air is fresher. Vandervelde is becoming impatient. Most of the men dislike him and I keep clear of him. However, he's the only one who knows what to do. He knows about survival."

"April 30, 2015. Someone spotted a buck and a few of the men who have guns have gone after it. We need the meat. We're running out of canned goods and the children are hungry. Vandervelde says we

must be careful eating game as it could be contaminated, too.”

Depressed, Suzanne stopped. No wonder history had been banned, the books burned. She glanced back at Akken'ar who sat attentively, elbows planted on the arms of the throne, his fingers laced together under his chin.

"Shall I go on, Your Highness?"

"No. It is only a diary. It is clear the Text cannot tell us how to defeat the skags."

Suzanne stood helplessly on the dais, uncertain what she should do. Disappointment pervaded the great hall. Jonovar appeared to be struggling with a combination of regret and embarrassment. And Master Eika looked shocked.

The Sacred Text, so revered for so long had proven to be useless, merely the pitiful journal of a man who had survived the Cataclysms long enough to see his wife die of some ghastly disease—undoubtedly from exposure to biological or chemical contaminants. As Suzanne looked at the people filling the dark hall, she realized that some of them were quite possibly that man's descendants.

She thumbed through several pages, noting they contained more of the same kind of information: a journey of survivors, making their way through the mountains to some unknown, safe haven.

Jonovar stood at her elbow and bowed politely. "Forgive me, my lady. I did not realize..."

She shook her head. "No need. I am just as shocked and disappointed as you. Here."

She held up the Text, ready to close it, when something fluttered from inside the hollow of the book binding. She bent down and picked up a sliver of paper, much folded and creased. "Wait. What is this?"

Those who were about to leave stopped and turned back.

Suzanne unfolded the ancient paper. It was written in the same hand as in the diary, but in ink.

"September 15, 2040. Vandervelde is crazy. No one knows what he's doing. We've put up with his erratic leadership for twenty-five years. I've hidden this final message inside my diary, hoping someone will find it before Vandervelde does. If I'm caught he'll kill me ... "

"I'm going. I'm going back to the Pass and this time I'm going to get help. We've got to stop those things ... Maybe I'll get lucky and find that 'Wordsayer' Vandervelde keeps talking about. I've got the Tearstone; I'll need it to get back. The guns are useless since there are no more bullets. I stole a sword from the armory. No one will miss it. If I'm lucky I won't have to use it. If I can get through, I'll try to bring back some kerosene, maybe gas. It's the only thing that works, if you can find enough of it."

"It's a long way to the Pass. I hope I can remember where it is."

Heart pounding, Suzanne fumbled with the diary, and flipped through pages to the last entry. She had to know if the writer of the journal was talking about the same place—if Knife Edge Pass was the same as Splitrock.

Her voice shook as she read the last, hastily scribbled entry.

"May 7, 2015. Finally, we've arrived at the summit. I am filled with renewed hope. Vandervelde believes once we get through the pass and down the other side of the mountain, we'll be safe. However, we'll have to leave the wagons behind and pack everything on the horses' backs. I saw the pass this morning. It's too narrow to drive the wagons through it. It's a giant granite rock, split in two."

Chapter Seven

The Seventh Day

SUZANNE REMAINED AWAKE long into the night; she hadn't even undressed for bed. She paced the confines of her room reliving the events of the day: the Library and Master Eika's information about the Messenger; Prince Akken'ar's return from fighting the skags; and the astonishing revelation in the Sanctuary Hall. The Sacred Text was not sacred at all, but a simple diary. It wasn't even the diary of Saint Kyrk.

She had seen the disgusted look in Akken'ar's eyes. A thousand years had been wasted while waiting for someone to read a book that revealed no solution, no answers to their desperate situation.

The little paper that had fallen out of the diary offered some intriguing clues. The note, written twenty-five years after the last entry in the diary, revealed an angry man, fed up with 'Vandervelde.' He was going back through the Pass to get help and was taking a sword with him. He was also going to look for the Wordsayer.

Suzanne sat on the bed, overwhelmed by what came to her next: the writer of the diary was undoubtedly the Messenger. The *first* Messenger. He had to be the same man Sheriff McKenna had encountered at Curly's Bar. And Splitrock Pass was a portal. That meant the Messenger had come back to Suzanne's time, before the beginning of Cataclysms.

Fear knotted her stomach. Suzanne had plotted too many books not to recognize where this kind of story led. Somehow, Vandervelde had discovered that Splitrock Pass was a time portal, a way back to the beginning of the Cataclysms and had kept it a secret. The author of the diary discovered this and decided to take matters into his own hands. He would get help.

One word in the note held Suzanne's attention: kerosene. *Kerosene works the best ...* Against skags or Vandervelde? Was the Messenger going back in time to look for kerosene, or discover where he might find it in his own 'present'?

The word haunted her, tormented her. Kerosene. Burn. Fire. Kerosene burned...

Suddenly, she knew she had to find Akken'ar. She jumped down from the bed and hurried out of the room. The corridor was eerily dark—only a few clusters of candles illuminated stairway, down to the central part of the keep.

At the hallway entrance leading to Akken'ar's chambers, two guards stood watch. Suzanne approached them warily.

"I know it's late, but please take me to Prince Akken'ar. It is very important I speak with him."

One of the guards bowed to her. She recognized him as one of the warriors who had first acknowledged her as the Wordsayer.

"I'm sorry, my lady, but His Highness does not wish to be disturbed."

"I'm certain, but this is extremely urgent. Please. I beg you."

The guard hesitated, then looked at his companion, who nodded slightly.

"Very well. Follow me."

Suzanne hurried after the guard, running to keep up with him.

"He's not in his chambers, my lady. He is still awake, worrying about tomorrow ... well, today."

She said nothing, but made herself run faster in spite of her heavy skirts. The guard turned abruptly to a stairway leading downward, lit by finely-wrought lamps instead of candles. At the base of the stairs, a glass door opened into a large airy room, filled with plants and flowers. It smelled of damp soil and water-rich vegetation. An atrium. A lovely greenhouse made of glass panels within a beautifully carved framework.

At the far side of the atrium, she saw Akken'ar leaning against the glass, forehead pressed into his upraised arm. Past caring, past hope, every line of his tall form conveyed the weight of his terrible burden. Gone were the furs and swords. He had bathed and changed, his black hair brushed back from his brow fell in heavy waves across his shoulders. He wore a tunic to mid-thigh that nearly met the tops of his tall boots.

The guard bowed again, then shut the door.

"My lord?" she called.

Akken'ar pulled away from the glass and spun around. Alarm swiftly changed to surprise. "Lady Suzanne? I'm honored by your presence, but mystified..."

She approached him, then curtseyed. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I have been thinking about what occurred in the great hall and that note left in the Text." She looked up at the curving glass over their heads. The moon gleamed like a silver disk in the black sky. "What a beautiful atrium."

"It was my grandmother's," Akken'ar said. "They say my grandfather had it built for her. She loved flowers and this was the only safe place where she could grow them."

"An extraordinary gift. He must have loved her very much."

"My mother also found solace here, as did my—" He looked away.

"I'm sorry, you must miss Princess Kiamma very much."

He turned from her, arms folded across his chest. "Yes, but I lost her a long time ago, when we were very young. Sometimes I can scarcely remember what she looked like but I miss her presence, her ... gentleness."

He, too, looked up through the glass to the night sky. "I do not know what to do, my lady. I have fought the Others all my life. I beheaded my first skag when I was fourteen. And now, it is almost too late. The

Text has proven to be worthless and I have no answers."

"That is why I wanted to speak to you. I may have an idea."

Akken'ar turned toward her, arms still across his chest. She saw the skepticism in his eyes. "You have an idea?" He inclined his head. "Very well, I'm listening."

"Your Highness, you will recall the note that fell from the Text? There was one thing he wrote that I keep thinking about ... kerosene. Do you know what kerosene is?"

"No. Is it a word the Ancients used?"

"Yes, but it is not the word itself that is important, but what it is ."

When Akken'ar didn't answer she took a step closer to him. "Kerosene is a liquid that burns, like the black ooze you use to keep your torches burning."

Reading her thoughts, he said, "The black water was used at the last Red Eclipse, but there wasn't enough. The skags escaped."

"Very well, but Master Nathan told me the day I arrived about the machines of the Ancients—the ones that moved by themselves. Surely you must know of them."

"Yes, but they are forbidden."

"So was reading the Sacred Text." She watched closely as he absorbed her words. "Kerosene and other burning liquids like it, made the machines work. Do you know where there are any machines left?"

"In the south, there is a place. It has many stone roads. It was a city, I think."

"If you know where to find the machines that moved by themselves, then we might be able to find the liquids that burn. Lots of it."

"Enough to burn the skags?"

"Enough to burn san'Sorafel to the ground."

She saw his breathing quicken; hope glimmered in his eyes.

"How far is it to this city?" she asked.

"Two days, maybe three."

"Then, we have four days to find kerosene and return to Ironhold."

"And three days left before the Eclipse," he added. Restored hope flared into excitement. He closed the distance between them and caught her by the upper arms. For the first time, she saw him smile. "Now we will destroy them."

"Yes, we will."

This close, Suzanne suddenly felt engulfed by his presence. His eyes widened and she glimpsed the suppressed longing struggling against honor and responsibility. He released her arms and stepped back.

"Forgive me, Lady Suzanne." Elation was swiftly replaced with his former deference.

"There is nothing to forgive. You did not offend me, Your Highness."

He clasped his hands firmly behind his back. "Nonetheless, I should not have ... It is late and I will speak with Zykov and the others. Plans must be made immediately."

"Will you not rest, my lord?"

"No. I will rest later." His austere expression softened momentarily. Amusement tugged his firm mouth. "We ... have much to do."

Suzanne returned the smile, holding the sweet moment between them for as long as possible. "Yes, we do."

* * * *

THE FOOD TRAY crashed against the rotting plaster, turning shattered raw eggs, wet bread, and smashed fruit into a collective muck oozing to the floor.

"How could you make such a stupid mistake? Fool!"

"Your pardon, my master, but no one knew there was another message inside the Text."

"You should not have let her read it or the book. Now she will piece together our grim little puzzle. The Wordsayer is an intelligent woman. Unlike you, she *knows* the meaning of what she has read."

"Every effort was made to stop her, but Prince Akken'ar intervened."

"Another fool," came the reply and a prolonged hacking cough that echoed through the dimly-lit chamber. "His time will come."

"What would you have me do, my master?"

"The woman must be taken care of soon. Make your plans and do it as quickly as possible. Time is running out."

"It shall be done, revered one."

"Go. And, scribe ... bring me something else to eat."

* * * *

BY DAWN AKKEN'AR had assembled a company of his best warriors and two sturdy sleighs that were used for heavy work. In the cold, hushed courtyard the only sound was the rattling of bits and the impatient stamping of hooves on the snow-packed cobbles. All was in readiness. Loaded into the first sleigh was enough food for the men and horses, supplies and water for five days. The second contained four large empty barrels. The Wordsayer had advised him that four would be enough to transport the mysterious 'kerosene' back to Ironhold. She had also instructed him that they must take lengths of cloth to tie over their mouths and noses. The substance was dangerous, highly flammable and poisonous. And

Akken'ar believed her. He had glimpsed the depth of her intelligence when he first met her at Knife Edge Pass. She not only knew how to read, but she had an unfathomable understanding about the past, before the Cataclysms. When the time was right, he would ask her about what she knew, but more importantly, where she came from.

In spite of himself, Lady Suzanne had captured his curiosity. Touching her, almost holding in his arms, had ignited long-forgotten memories of passion. His Kiamma had been dead for over twenty sunpasses; their time together had been brief, but it had been the only time in his life when he had been happy—and he longed for that feeling again.

"I hope there's room for me in one of those sleighs?"

He spun around and looked up as Lady Suzanne descended the steps. She no longer wore one of Kiamma's gowns, but her curious light-blue trousers that clung to her trim form—the same trousers she had worn at the Pass—and a woolen tunic that fell to mid-thigh. Someone had found a pair of boots to fit her small feet and the edge of her thick gray cloak swept the snow as she approached him.

"You need not risk your life on such a dangerous journey," he warned. "You have explained everything we need to know, my lady."

"Do you know what kerosene looks like?" she asked archly. "Or what it is stored in?"

Akken'ar frowned. "No, but I am bringing Master Nathan." He gestured to the young Master of the Keep sitting in the first sleigh. "He has studied your instructions carefully."

"Your Highness, you have only four days to find and return a highly flammable liquid that none of you have ever seen. Forgive me for asking this, but do you think you'll find it in time without me along to help you?"

He hesitated. To say yes would make him seem stubborn; to say no, might make him appear uncertain in front of his men. "It is a perilous journey. There may be skags."

"It is a risk I'm willing to take." She looked at him unwaveringly. "I can help you. Please let me."

It took him a heartbeat to relent. She was right. They would never find this substance in time without her help. He motioned for her to climb into the second sleigh, seated next to the driver.

He had forgotten how light she was as he lifted her into the seat next to Borkha. She gathered the folds of her cloak about her knees, then looked down at him.

"I'm ready," she said, pulling the hood over her head.

He tugged his own furs closer to his shoulders. "Hold tight. We travel hard. If we encounter skags, do what Borkha says."

She nodded and took a firm grip of the railing along the edge of the seat. Akken'ar swung onto his horse and signaled the lead warriors to ride out.

At last, the sky was clear. Bright sunshine glinted and skittered over the snow as they galloped south. The horses were eager and ardent after their confinement for so many days. By moving rapidly in the scalding daylight, Akken'ar hoped they would not be noticed by the skags.

They stopped three times, long enough to allow the horses to catch their breath and drink water. Akken'ar dared not let them rest too long. Sometimes, if they were desperately hungry, skags were known to attack during the day.

The first night, wary-eyed warriors stood guard in constant rotation; only three were allowed to sleep at one time. Even Akken'ar stood his turn at the watch.

Lady Suzanne slept in the sleigh, wedged between the driver's seat and the barrels—barely enough room, but at least the skags would be unable to see her if they came hunting for horses or the flesh of men.

When the first milky threads of dawn touched the east, they moved on, heading for the ruins of an ancient city, destroyed in the Cataclyms.

Into the second day, with six days left until the Eclipse, Akken'ar began to regret bringing Lady Suzanne along. The farther they traveled from Ironhold, the more vulnerable they became, especially her. Dread inched up his back, giving him chills even his warm furs could not subdue.

The skags favored female flesh; they would catch the scent of her first. No one knew why this was true, but ten centuries of attacks had taught them to hide the women behind their strongest barriers, beneath their deepest cover.

As the sun slipped behind the mountains, Akken'ar ordered them to stop near a stand of dead trees. He allowed a fire to be started, knowing it would draw skags, but he feared for Suzanne. The night promised to be bitterly cold and he doubted she would survive without the extra warmth.

Swords drawn, all of Akken'ar's men stood watch, even young Nathan. The night was bright and clear; the moon encircled by a frosted cloud.

Suzanne suddenly appeared at his side, clutching the folds of her cloak close under her chin. "Do you see them?" she asked softly.

"No. Not yet. But we'll know. The horses will smell them first."

"Have you ever been this far south of Ironhold before?"

Not taking his eyes from the surrounding gloom he said, "No. It has always been forbidden to travel to the cities of the Ancients."

"Forbidden by Saint Kyrk, I assume. Have you never questioned why it is forbidden?"

"Because the saint warned there were too many dangers: contamination of the inner self and the blood plagues." He flicked a sideways glance at her. "We are not fools, my lady. The blessed saint had good reason for forbidding travel to these places. Those who did, never returned."

He heard her draw in a startled breath. "Contamination ... Surely not after all this time," she whispered.

Akken'ar did not answer her but continued his vigilant watch. She stood by his side and did not leave for a long time. Finally, she uttered a soft "goodnight" and slipped away.

The remainder of the night passed uneventfully and near dawn, he gave his warriors a chance to sleep for a short time. Even he managed to rest briefly, but kept his sword within reach and one eye on Suzanne.

WHEN THE SUN shone brightly, Suzanne scrambled into the sleigh as the warriors saddled their horses. They had five days left to find the burning liquid and get back to Ironhold.

As they drew closer to the city, the lead riders were sent ahead to find the easiest route. They soon returned, galloping fast over a low ridge of hills.

Akken'ar ordered the sleighs to stop and waited until the approaching horses slid to a halt.

"My lord, it is just over that rise," the first warrior said, pointing in the distance.

"Are there any stone roads?"

"Yes, and the snow cover is still deep enough for the sleighs."

Suzanne braced herself as the horses jerked the sleigh into motion. Not much farther and she would see for herself what was left after a thousand years. Once they crested the ridge she gasped, loud enough for Akken'ar to hear. He reined back, riding abreast of the sleigh.

"Are you all right, my lady?"

"Yes, I'm fine." But she wasn't. She hadn't really known what to expect. Destruction, yes, but not to the extent she saw. Time and nature had obliterated the town to indistinguishable rubble. The snow had buried the crumbled buildings into soft shapeless mounds. Centuries of vegetation, weeds and leaves had choked the streets; winter-dead trees, thrust up through the cracked and broken pavement.

Only the sound of muffled hoof beats and the hiss of the runners broke the eerie stillness. The wind did not whisper through the ruins of crushed buildings, or sift through the drifts of snow. No birds chattered from a tattered wire or swooped above them searching for crumbs or seeds.

There were no scavenging animals either—no lurking feral dogs hunting for a meal. They must be dead, she reasoned. Either disease or contamination had killed them. Or, they had all been eaten.

Suzanne's heart felt like a knot of lead as they passed what once had been a school; vines and overgrown vegetation had smothered it, asphyxiated it like a monstrous snake, leaving behind the bones of bricks and coils of twisted, chain-link fencing.

Akken'ar's grim expression startled her. She knew he did not recognize anything—the buildings, the streets, the fragments of a once thriving little town—but he did grasp its meaning. This, undoubtedly was where some of his ancestors had lived and died. Suzanne held back a rush of tears. In some way, they were her ancestors, too.

They passed through the southern perimeter of the town, up a long climb to the crest of another ridge. Suzanne suddenly smelled the sea and thought she heard a seagull screech.

Borkha stopped the sleigh.

Shock silenced her. Suzanne stood up in the sleigh and gazed out over an ocean, a southwestern ocean, stretching as far as she could see. In the distance, she could make out the snowy caps of a few solitary

mountain peaks. What once had been part of an entire continent, was now under water. At the edge of the world, Suzanne finally allowed herself the bitter tears of unimaginable loss.

Chapter Eight

SUZANNE WAS NOT allowed to grieve for long. Akken'ar watched her, waiting patiently until her tears were spent. Finally, he nudged his horse alongside the sleigh and reached across the space between them to take hold of her hand.

"Lady Suzanne, it is only the sea. It has been here a long, long time." His eyes narrowed as he studied her for a moment, as if trying to read her thoughts. "The people who lived here have been gone for hundreds of sunpasses." He shook her arm a little. "They're *gone*, my lady."

She nodded and slowly sat down on the seat. "I know, but they must have died so horribly. The earthquakes and the contamination..."

"Could you have stopped it? Or kept them from dying?"

She shook her head.

"They are dead, but we still live. We must take what they left behind and survive. If we are to defeat the skags, then we must find the burning fuel."

Suzanne nodded, suddenly ashamed of her tears. Akken'ar and his men would not waste time mourning the past. They certainly knew of it, a cultural memory, but they had never seen the Cataclysms. Neither had she. All Suzanne had was the memory of her own lifetime and the ability to imagine the horrors of a monumental catastrophe that had occurred a millennium ago in Akken'ar's past.

She looked at him astride his horse—proud and determined. He did not need her tears, he needed her knowledge.

"You are right, my lord. I'm sorry. There's nothing more to do here."

He signaled his men to proceed, but continued to ride alongside the sleigh. She could tell he was trying to find something to say to her, something to ease her distress.

"What is kerosene stored in? Barrels?" he asked.

"Sometimes, but it is often kept in smaller canisters. I am hoping we'll find it in large metal barrels, called steel drums. If we can't find kerosene, then maybe gasoline."

"Gasoline?"

"Similar to kerosene; it also burns. Actually, it is ... was ... more common than kerosene."

"My lady, how do you know all this?"

"I have ... read a lot ... and ... studied," she said slowly, hedging. Now was not the time to explain that she was an author of fantasy tales, nor to discuss her theories on time travel. She barely understood how water boiled, much less the physics of traveling into the future. Besides, Alice never bothered explaining

to the White Knight how she fell through the rabbit hole.

"You've read many books?" he asked.

"Yes, more than my share." Suzanne sat up straighter in order to see clearly what she spotted in the distance. "Borkha, please stop the sleigh."

The big man obliged her, reining the horses to a halt. She held her hand to her eyes and squinted against the brilliant afternoon sun.

Akken'ar stood in his stirrups, his gaze following where she was looking. "What is it you see?"

"There," she said pointing. "That's where we'll find burning fuel."

It stood not more than a few hundred yards away, a trim structure made of cinder block and steel, standing alone in the middle of a snow-covered field. After ten centuries all the windows had been broken out and little remained to indicate it once served as the control tower for a small airfield. Trees and bushes had reclaimed the runways; the airplanes were all gone except one. Wind, sand and sun had scoured its painted color to bare steel. The tires had long since deteriorated, leaving the jet standing on its metal wheels, like rusted talons clutching the frozen ground.

One of Akken'ar's men looked up at the dead hulk. "What, by the gods, is that?"

"It must be the carcass of some kind of great bird," another said in an awed voice.

Suzanne heard Akken'ar make a disgusted noise in his throat. "It is a machine made by the Ancients." He glanced at her, seeking confirmation.

"Yes, it is. But, it was a very useful machine, used for transporting ... things." She saw his uncertain expression and decided not to elaborate; she'd let that one lie. Later, she'd *try* to explain flight, along with relativity and the big-bang theory. For now they needed to find that fuel.

A renewed sense of urgency forced Akken'ar and his men to hurry. The day was growing old and the shadows lengthened as they skimmed across the open snow heading toward a small building she had spotted at the far end of the field. All the warriors had drawn their swords. Akken'ar silently gave them instructions to fan out and look for skags, then helped her down from the sleigh.

The ancient metal building creaked and rattled in the late afternoon wind. Suzanne knew Akken'ar and his men did not like entering a building filled with the decaying remains of machines and equipment. Ingrained fear made the warriors tense and wary. Each bang and clatter caused by the wind, seemed to stretch their nerves, and made their movements taut and cautious. A building filled with large, unknown objects was also the perfect hiding place for skags.

It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the dim light, but as she inched through the hangar, she saw the last remnants of a civilization she recognized. Trucks, rusted-out hulks choked with dead weeds and dirt, had been parked in neat rows at one side of the building. A last-ditch effort to save what vehicles were left, she guessed. Maybe the survivors hoped to use them to get away.

There were no planes in the hangar—probably all of them used to get as many people out as possible. Which made her wonder about the single jet outside. Why didn't they use it to escape? A discouraging thought came to her: no doubt, there was no one left who knew how to fly it.

The light was fading fast and Suzanne made herself hurry, looking behind stacks of crates, on work benches littered with tools and under musty rotting tarps. Desperation began to mount. There had to be *some* kind of gasoline or fuel in the hangar.

After having thoroughly inspected the entire building for skags, Akken'ar's warriors began their own cautious hunt, poking swords into dark corners and peering into the hollow shells of the trucks.

"They certainly knew how to work metal," she heard Master Nathan say.

Suzanne had spoken to Nathan only a few times during their journey; she did not quite trust him after he betrayed her and Master Eika to Master Jonovar. Nathan kept a polite distance, rarely speaking except for the most rudimentary courtesies.

"So many machines and oddities like this..." he said. She heard a loud, hollow 'thunk' as Nathan kicked something. Suzanne hesitated for a moment; her heart began to pound in hard, nerve-wracking beats. Maybe...

She hurried across the hangar with Akken'ar close on her heels and tore away the filthy fragments of a plastic tarp from the object Nathan had kicked. "Bingo," she whispered.

"Bingo?" Akken'ar looked at her skeptically. "Is that another kind of burning fuel?"

Suzanne smiled to herself. "Never mind, Your Highness. When we get back to Ironhold, I will try to explain everything."

Under the tarp were six dirty, but intact, steel fuel drums. Suzanne knelt down and rubbed the grime away from the side of the drum. She could have wept with relief. In large, neatly stenciled letters was the term 'JET-A'—commercial jet fuel. She remembered that bit of information, a research fragment needed for her first book. And jet fuel was mostly kerosene.

"Is this what you are looking for?" Akken'ar asked, his gaze intense.

"Yes. This is a type of kerosene and there is enough here to burn hundreds, maybe thousands of skags."

Something close to joy lit his stern face and of the warriors standing close by. Akken'ar sheathed his sword. "We take all of it," he ordered crisply.

She held up a cautioning hand. "They are extremely heavy, my lord, and we have to make certain they are full." She bent down and caught the sharp, gassy odor around the plug to the bung hole. "Try to shake it," she said motioning for Borkha and another warrior to move the large canister.

With a little grunting and straining, they managed to tip the drum on its edge and moved it back and forth. A distinctive sloshing and gurgling sound could be heard coming from inside. Suzanne grinned at Akken'ar. "Take 'em away."

Some ancestor in the prince's past had been mechanically inclined, or a military mastermind. She saw perception fire in Akken'ar's blue-black eyes; he had grasped the meaning and the enormity of the situation immediately. Orders came swiftly: discard the wooden barrels; clear a pathway to the sleigh; bring rope and tackle.

After a brief discussion, the warriors worked out the logistics of loading all six steel drums into the sleigh. Urgency overcame their fear of machines. Piles of metal, junk and debris flew out of their way as the barrels were rolled out of the hangar. Suzanne stood back, not wanting to get in their way.

The sun was almost gone. They had to start their return to Ironhold this night, or they would miss the Eclipse. She hoped they had enough time. The six canisters weighed down the first sleigh deep in the snow, making it too heavy for the horses to pull. As she watched Akken'ar direct the final loading, she noticed he had recognized that fact and ordered the last two barrels unloaded and put into the second sleigh.

Twilight settled over the hangar and the ancient airstrip. They had not seen or heard any skags during their entire journey, but Suzanne sensed they might not be so fortunate going back. The wind picked up and she suddenly heard a soft scrabbling sound behind her. She hoped it was her imagination or the wind stirring something inside the hangar. The sound grew louder; she didn't want to call out if it was only the wind...

Suzanne spun around, a scream on her lips as she saw a pair of bright yellow eyes glinting in the dim light. She blinked and let the air out of her lungs in a relieved rush. On the roof of one of the decayed, old trucks stood a cat—a glossy black cat with a mouse clutched in its jaws. One cat. The only living thing she had seen since leaving Ironhold.

Fearlessly, the cat jumped down onto the hood and sat on its haunches, examining her with an unblinking stare. It dropped the mouse and surprised Suzanne by meowing—a conversational meow, much like Legolas. A lump gathered in her throat. Legolas. She'd almost forgotten about him ... and home. Her warm little house, the wood stove and her swinging bird feeders.

The cat meowed again and this time, Suzanne answered it. "Hey, kitty, kitty," she murmured. It seemed to like that as it jumped down and began rubbing against her ankles, purring loudly. She was tempted to reach down and stroke its thick black fur, but caught herself in time. It was not a house pet, but a feral animal, undoubtedly the last descendant of the last cats left in the town and it might bite her. Why a completely wild cat would be so friendly mystified her. The creature hopped back onto the truck and twitched its long tail. Suzanne turned her head to one side and peeked at the cat's posterior. A female.

The cat faced her, its big gold eyes bright with curiosity.

"Well, sweetie, how did you get here?"

"Yeowrll."

"Hmmm. A talker. Looks like you're in pretty good shape; plenty of mice to eat."

Another throaty meow and louder purring. The cat wanted to be petted and Suzanne reached out to scratch behind one velvety ear. Touching a cat was such an irresistible pleasure, but the pleasure didn't last long.

She heard Akken'ar call to her, "We are nearly ready, my lady." But, another noise made the cat bolt and vanish into the shadows.

"Hurry!"

Suzanne ran outside the hangar as the warriors finished tying down the last barrel into the supply sleigh.

The horses danced and snorted, eyes rolling with terror. They smelled them.

Beyond the hangar building, a group of skags crouched near a clump of bushes. Their eyes glowed with an obscene and malevolent light. It was impossible to guess how long they had been hiding, but it was clear they were hungry and had every intention of making the horses and warriors, their next meal.

The skags hissed and growled, showing their black jagged teeth. These were bigger and smarter-looking than the skag that had attacked her a few days ago in the woods. Layers of rags swathed their hands. Some wore the tattered remains of shoes.

Akken'ar grabbed her arm and nearly flung her into the supply sleigh behind the last two canisters. "Go!" he bellowed to the driver.

Both drivers cracked their whips and the horses sank to their haunches seeking a purchase in the snow and lunged into their collars, struggling to gain momentum with such heavy loads. The warriors drew their swords and spurred their mounts after the sleighs.

Black horses flew over the white ground. Fear made them panicky, almost uncontrollable, but constant galloping forced them to settle into the earnest business of running for their lives.

Suzanne glanced over the back edge of the sleigh. The skags were coming, fast. They could not outdistance a horse, but the teams were laboring hard to pull the sleighs in the snow. In moments the hideous creatures would catch up to them.

Akken'ar and four of his men slowed, allowing the heavier sleigh to race ahead. Flanking the second sleigh, they positioned their own horses like living shields.

Terror knifed up Suzanne's spine. Far from any help, their small company was alone on a bitterly-cold winter night, trying to outrun these relentless creatures. They raced together in a pack, scrabbling on all fours like mutant ape-creatures. They howled a warning and the first skag leaped at one of the warriors, grappling for a hold on the horse, while defending itself from furious sword-blows to its head and chest.

A strong thrust and the skag toppled into the snow.

Two more tried the same tactic, but Akken'ar's men were ready. One was swiftly decapitated; the other clung precipitously to the other warrior's left leg. Risking cutting his own limb, he hacked at the creature until both of its arms were severed.

The five warriors reined their horses abreast, closing ranks to form a tighter barrier between the skags and the sleigh. For a time, it seemed to work. The remaining creatures fell farther and farther behind, but the reprieve did not last long. The wounded skags regenerated. Refreshed, they came at them again, more determined to capture their prey.

The driver cracked his whip, calling on the team for more speed. Suzanne flattened herself against the side of the sleigh hoping to make herself as inconspicuous as possible, but was soon joined by young Nathan, who abandoned his precarious position next to the driver.

"Will we outrun them?" she shouted.

He shook his head. "The horses are beginning to tire!"

On and on they went until one skag managed to break away from the rest and leaped into the sleigh.

Suzanne's scream came from deep in her belly, a guttural cry of absolute horror. The crazed creature tore at the supplies with taloned hands, flinging boxes and tools over the side of the sleigh. It grabbed for her legs, tearing her cloak, then her jeans, ripping the fabric from her left leg.

Suzanne screamed and fought to shake off the loathsome creature. Even Nathan's attempts were futile. It reached for the young scribe and flung him aside like a rag toy, then came at her again. This time it managed to grab her by the ankles. Impossibly strong, it wrenched her on her side and dragged her to the back of the sleigh, tearing the last of the cloth from her leg. Its claws cut in the flesh just above her left knee. Burning pain shot up her leg. Suzanne knew instinctively it was a serious wound and that she was bleeding. On her belly, she strained to reach the ropes securing the steel drums, hoping she could hold on long enough for Nathan or one of the warriors to stop the skag.

The sleigh never slowed, then suddenly careened to the left. Above the noise of galloping horses and Akken'ar's warning cries, Suzanne felt the sleigh plunge downward toward the right, then skidded dangerously on its left runner. The weight of two human beings and a skag overpowered the sleigh. It tipped high on its left blade, hovered for a moment, then crashed heavily on its side. At the last moment she felt a hand at the small of her back, propelling her out of the sleigh.

Pain sang through every nerve as she hit the ground. Snow packed her mouth and eyes, but fear gave Suzanne the strength to crawl away until she collapsed and curled into a tight ball. The wind whipped over her bare flesh making her shake violently. In that awkward position, Suzanne looked back at the sleigh and the terrible sight.

The shimmering light from the moon engulfed the overturned sleigh and the struggling team. Akken'ar and his men jumped from their horses and surrounded the remaining handful of skags. Akken'ar fell on the one who had tried to kill her and with methodical precision beheaded the creature. He became a madman, frenzied with rage, hacking what was left of the skag into pieces. Exhausted, he stood panting over the bloody snow, then dropped his sword.

"Suzanne!"

She tried to respond, but she was so cold and her leg hurt like it was on fire.

Akken'ar spotted her and raced up the slope. He dropped to her side and gently turned her over.

"No. Oh, no," he breathed. He touched her face gently. "Can you hear me?"

She nodded, but couldn't answer him. Suzanne knew she was losing consciousness, but tried to focus on Akken'ar's intense, dark eyes. She heard the sharp sound of tearing cloth and felt pressure on her leg. Voices whispered and floated above her.

"...she's bleeding badly, my lord..."

"...we need to get her into the sleigh and keep her warm..."

"...the sleigh's been righted..."

"...Borkha ... the others ... waiting ahead ... made camp..."

Something warm and soft was wrapped around her and she felt herself being lifted, clutched tightly against scaled-leather. Akken'ar's heart thundered beneath her cheek as he carried her down the hill; his

voice, a harsh, desperate whisper, "Suzanne, don't leave me!"

* * * *

HE'D KILL THE little traitor. He saw him do it, pushed Suzanne out of the sleigh, right in front of the skag. If he hadn't been there in time ... When he got back to Ironhold, Master Nathan would be put in irons. He'd deal with Jonovar later.

Angry, Akken'ar urged his horse into a faster walk, but quickly reined him back. He hadn't the heart to push the animal any faster. All the horses were spent, exhausted; his men, nearly dead from the cold and lack of sleep. But they had the burning fuel. All of it. And no one had been killed. He glanced back at Suzanne's still, fur-wrapped form lying in the back of the supply sleigh.

Gods of my ancestors, he pleaded silently. Please, not her.

The sleigh had not been seriously damaged. Because of the angle where it had fallen on the slope, it had been relatively easy to right it. To everyone's relief, the fuel canisters were intact. The team horses were shaken, but none had suffered serious injury. Once calmed and allowed to rest, they were re-hitched to the sleigh and continued their journey.

Once they had caught up with Borkha, Akken'ar did not allow either horses or men to rest for the remainder of the night. Before dawn of the fourth day, they were on their way, heading north. If they didn't make too many stops and kept a slow but steady pace, they might make it back before the third day.

Exhausted as the warriors were, they still kept a wary eye out for skags. Not all of the creatures had been killed when the sleigh toppled over on its side. The large, determined ones had been beheaded. The smaller creatures, two or three, had fled into the woods. Although no one knew for sure, Akken'ar suspected the smaller ones were females.

He ventured another glance at Suzanne. He saw her lashes flutter and her hand moved slightly. She still lived. He hoped the skag had not bitten her. Those wounds swelled rapidly and the pus ran. If not treated quickly, Suzanne could die—and he would never forgive himself if that happened.

There was much about the Lady Wordsayer he did not understand—her strange words and the unsettling feeling that she *knew* something, many things. Where had she learned about the 'kerosene' and how did she know where to find it? She troubled him and at the same time he found her intriguing. Except for the fact that she had been seriously wounded the previous night, it had been enjoyable, no, intensely pleasurable, holding her in his arms while carrying her back to the sleigh.

* * * *

AS THEIR JOURNEY wore on, Akken'ar began to notice more and more familiar landmarks. The wind had died down, but it was still unbearably cold. The horses were panting now, even at the walk. Heads down, they struggled for each plodding step. Although they were getting closer to Ironhold, if the skags came again, they'd all die, horses and men. They were too weary to run or fight.

Suzanne still breathed and Akken'ar silently praised the gods and his ancestors. They had been merciful. If she could hold on until they reached the keep...

One of his men suddenly called out, "My lord, look!"

Akken'ar halted his horse and scanned the horizon. He couldn't be certain, but it looked like torches

heading their way. "Draw your swords!"

Skags did not carry torches since they feared fire, but men did. Who were they, riding this late into the night? Heldi Wolves? A tribe of rangemen?

He drew his sword and waited. He had no strength left, neither did his warriors, but at least they would die fighting men.

The torches came closer and he could see they were being carried by several horsemen, galloping straight toward them.

"Hold!" he shouted to his men. He raised his sword, when he spotted a banner streaming in the bright moonlight.

"My lord, my lord! It is General Zykov!"

Akken'ar lowered his arm and tilted his head back. "Ancestors, I thank you."

Chapter Nine

The Second Day

SUZANNE WOKE TO the sound of loud purring and something pressed firmly against her side. An experimental glance made her gasp with astonishment. A black cat lay curled up in a snug ball tucked under her left arm.

"Oh, you are awake, my lady. You've slept for a whole day and a night. At last we can all breathe easier." Miri pressed a light hand to her brow. "How do you feel?"

"All right, I guess. Miri, there is a cat ... a black cat, on my bed."

"Oh, yes, my lady. The men found her hiding in one of the sleighs. She is a sweet little thing. She followed His Highness right up the stairs when he carried you to your room."

"H-h-he didn't mind?"

"Of course not. He was very pleased. Cats bring good luck; everyone knows that." Miri stroked the soft black fur. "And, I believe she has brought you good luck. When you arrived, the Master Healer feared you would not survive that night."

Her maid smoothed the covers, then turned to leave. "I'll be back in a little while. Get some rest, my lady. The Master Healer advised that you try to put what has happened behind you."

Suzanne had little recollection of anything, especially what happened after the skag attacked her. Drifting in and out of consciousness, she remembered only bits and pieces: fragments of conversations; a fleeting image of torches; the sound of excited laughter.

She tried an experimental wiggling of her toes. They were still there. However, there was very little feeling in her left thigh. It had been firmly bandaged and she had been given something for the pain.

The cat uncurled and arched her back, turned around, and settled down in the other direction. Suzanne smiled and stroked her silky ears.

"Well, sweetie, I guess you really wanted to tag along, huh?"

It was a pleasant diversion petting the cat, reminding her poignantly of home and Legolas. Curious that the only one she missed was her cat. Suzanne didn't even miss her writing, but to be home with all that was familiar and comforting made her ache with longing. As mysterious and exciting as Oz had been, Dorothy still wanted to go home; so did Alice.

If I could just go home. I've done what they wanted. There's nothing else to keep me here.

Except for Akken'ar.

For ten years she had written fantastic tales, set on equally fantastic worlds, peopled with amazing creatures and extraordinary heroes. She had even written a county sheriff into one of them. But Akken'ar was not a character in a book, nor was he a literary archetype. He was a flesh and blood man, a survivor. Against the most terrible odds, Akken'ar had devoted his entire life to one purpose: protecting his people while holding on to the last fragments of civilization.

It didn't hurt that he was drop-dead gorgeous, either.

Suzanne winced at how easily she concocted such an inappropriate and frivolous description of him. That had nothing to do with it, she scolded herself. Or, did it? She had to admit she *was* attracted to him. His overwhelming need for information to help his people survive together with his elegant, dark looks made an intoxicating combination. There was the crux of it. While this was not her struggle, Akken'ar made her *want* to be a part of it.

Weary of her mental wrestling, Suzanne sank into the covers and tried to sleep. She dozed fitfully, in and out of wild dreams and strange images. When she woke again, Miri had just entered the room with a tray of broth, a little cheese and dek tea.

"Something to warm you up," she said smiling, setting the tray before her.

Suzanne scooted herself into a sitting position, rousing the cat. The curious feline investigated the contents of the tray and seemed particularly interested in the cheese.

"She likes you, my lady."

"Apparently so. I suppose I should think of a name for her." Dinah was the obvious choice for a black cat. Dinah was also the name of Alice's cat, the perfect name for a cat in Wonderland.

"Where is His Highness and the others?"

"Gone, my lady. All gone late this morning. They've taken those big barrels and left for the ring canyon. That's where the skags gather."

"Do you know why the skags gather there?"

Miri shrugged. "No one really knows, but after the night of the Red Eclipse, they go crazy for a time. That's why the prince was so upset when you read the Sacred Text. It didn't say anything."

Suzanne chose her next words carefully. "Miri, what happened during the last Eclipse? Was anything recorded from that time?"

The young maid wrung her work-chapped hands, looking decidedly ill-at-ease. "I wouldn't know about that, my lady. I'm just a servant. Only the masters and scribes can read such things."

"Can you read?" Suzanne asked, softening her tone.

"A-a-a little."

"Miri, I want you to do something for me. I want you to bring Master Nathan here. I want to ask him a few things."

Like why he pushed me out of the sleigh.

Miri bobbed her head. "I'll do my best. I haven't been downstairs since you came back, bein' so worried about you."

The maid hurried away leaving Suzanne sipping the hearty tea and scratching Dinah under the chin. The cat had taken to her like a puppy. Maybe Dinah wasn't feral at all, but had been near people or lived with them. Another intriguing mystery, but Suzanne had other things to worry about. Like walking.

She pushed back the covers and swung her feet out of bed, until her toes just touched the floor. So far, so good. The Master Healer, a doctor she presumed, knew his painkillers. She also knew her leg had been stitched up. A faint but pungent odor clung to the bandage. Something strong enough to numb the pain had been rubbed into the wound. Whatever it was, it was working.

Suzanne stood gingerly, putting very little weight on her left leg. She felt no pain, but decided not to exert herself too much. That's all she needed to do—fall down and undo what the Master Healer has so carefully patched up.

She limped cautiously around the room, first to the tall wardrobe across from her bed, then to the window and back. Still no serious discomfort. In fact, with a cane or stick to lean on, Suzanne felt certain she could get around, even negotiate the stairs.

At that moment, she heard a polite knock and Miri slipped into the room.

"Goodness, my lady! You shouldn't be out of bed, walking."

"It's all right, Miri. It doesn't hurt. Besides, I won't move around too much, but it does feel good to up and about."

Miri looked skeptical. "The Master Healer will not approve."

"Probably not. Will he coming around to see me again?"

"Oh, yes. He said he'd be by after mid day."

"And, Master Nathan? Did you find him?"

The maid looked down and began wringing her hands again. "That's just it. He can't be found."

"What do you mean, Miri. Where is he?"

"Something isn't right. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something wrong."

Suzanne sat on the edge of the bed, easing her bandaged leg into a more comfortable position. "What's the matter?"

Miri looked at her anxiously. "He's gone missing. They can't find him. They've looked everywhere."

"Maybe he went along with the prince and his men."

"Oh, no, my lady, that can't be possible."

"Why not?"

"Because the night you returned, His Highness had Master Nathan locked up!"

* * * *

"I'M DISAPPOINTED, BOY. You didn't do as you were told."

"I-I-I tried, master, but it was dark and the sleigh turned over."

"Poor excuses and shows the extent of your ingratitude. You forget too easily ... what I have done for you and your thankless family."

"No, master, I cannot forget—"

"Silence!"

"My master, I know the boy tried in every way possible to fulfill your wishes, but there were certain circumstances that prevented him, that almost killed him. He is a good lad and..."

"...about as stupid as you, old man, and the rest of your useless order." A disgusted sound echoed through the chamber. "Don't fail this time. Make sure your plan succeeds. I want her gone."

"We have gone over it carefully, exactly as you instructed. It cannot fail."

"See that it doesn't or I'll send the boy back to that stinking cesspool from where he came."

"Yes, holy one."

"And don't call me that, you groveling idiot! Now, leave. Both of you!"

* * * *

UNDER STRONG OBJECTION, Suzanne insisted Miri help her get dressed.

"You'll do harm to yourself, my lady," she protested.

"I promise I'll be careful. If you could find me some kind of stick to help me walk, I'll be fine."

The young maid assisted her into one of the lovely gowns that had belonged to Princess Kiamma, all the while muttering dire predictions under her breath.

Once Suzanne was dressed, Miri left the room, but returned shortly and handed her a gnarled, wooden walking stick.

"This'll do, my lady. It belonged to my grandpapa and helped him until the day he died."

Comforting thought, Suzanne mused, as she took the stick and hobbled ungracefully out the door. Negotiating the long, sweeping stairs was somewhat awkward, but she reached the main level of the keep and limped purposefully toward the corridor leading to the Library, hoping she would find Master Jonovar there. Astonished guards tried to divert her, but Suzanne was determined.

Through the cold, dark keep Suzanne continued her search, pestering tense-looking warriors and nervous scribes hurrying to their various duties. Finally, one young man escorted her to a large chamber door and knocked politely. Another scribe, an apprentice, answered the door and allowed Suzanne to enter.

It was a large, airy room, lined with bookshelves and a hearth at one end. A cheerful fire burned in the grate. In the center was a handsome black wood table with numerous papers and books scattered on its surface. Both Master Jonovar and Master Eika stood bending over the table, studying what looked like a map.

Master Eika saw her first and straightened. "Ah, Lady Suzanne. What a pleasant surprise. You are up and about, walking."

She smiled at the kindly scribe. "Yes, I am. A little clumsy, but I'm managing."

Master Jonovar looked disapproving. "You've had a nasty ordeal, my lady. I hope you're not being unwise."

"*I am* being careful, Master Jonovar," she said coolly. "I only came here to ask you a few of questions."

Jonovar spread his hands. "Very well. We are at your disposal, Lady Wordsayer."

Suzanne could see he was trying to be solicitous. She reminded herself that he had apologized to her after the reading of the Sacred Text.

"What has happened to Master Nathan?"

Master Eika cast an uneasy glance at Jonovar. "He is missing, my lady. We are uncertain where he is." He gestured to the map on the table. "As you can see, we are attempting our own investigation while His Highness is away."

"It is a map, the layout of Ironhold," Jonovar said.

Suzanne limped over to the table. "You mean, he might be lost?"

"Not necessarily. You see, my lady, the night you returned to san'Sorafel, Master Nathan was imprisoned. He was accused of ... how shall I say it? Pushing you from the sleigh."

"Well, he did." Suzanne said sharply.

There was a stunned silence as both scribes looked at one another.

"I can't believe that," Master Eika said.

"*Hedid* push me, Master Eika. If it hadn't been for Prince Akken'ar, I might not be alive today."

"This is infamous. How could Nathan do such a thing?" Master Jonovar asked.

"That's what I was about to ask you," she said.

"My lady, I am not your enemy. I find this whole business just as disturbing as you." Jonovar gestured to the map. "We believe Nathan was released from his imprisonment by some unknown accomplice and has gone into hiding. Master Eika and I were trying to deduce where he might have gone."

"Maybe he's left the city," she offered.

"Doubtful," Jonovar said. "With the Red Eclipse only a day away, Nathan would not be so foolish as to leave the city. No, he is here."

"Why would someone take the trouble of getting Nathan out of prison, if he could not leave the city?"

Neither scribe had an answer which made Suzanne all the more suspicious. There was something neither one of the Master Scribes was telling her.

"We will be conducting a thorough search of the keep, Lady Suzanne," Jonovar said. "Every corner in the city will be investigated, too. Rest assured, *wewill* find him and if he has committed this heinous act against you, I promise he will answer for it."

Suzanne felt only moderately reassured. She did not quite trust Master Jonovar. Nathan was, after all, his faithful underling.

"We will send word to you the moment we find him. Would that suffice?" Master Eika said courteously.

Suzanne knew when she was being dismissed, politely, and turned to go. There was little she could do here. Master Jonovar and Master Eika were not going to include her in their plans to find Nathan, nor permit her to ask questions about the last Eclipse.

She limped back to her room with as much dignity as she could muster. Her leg was beginning to bother her and she hoped the Master Healer would soon visit her.

A strange stillness settled throughout the interior of the keep. Many of the warriors and guards had left, either to fight the skags with Akken'ar or to defend Ironhold and the city.

Suzanne felt a chill permeate her bones and shivered. Ironhold was a dark, brooding labyrinth of buildings within buildings, as if grown from the inside out. The Library was at the core, and the Sanctuary Hall, constructed entirely of stone, was a secondary structure built to protect the inhabitants. Suzanne could only guess how old it was: five hundred years? Six? How soon after the Cataclysms had it been built?

As she climbed the sweeping staircase to the upper level, she noticed that many of the weapons hung on the walls had been removed. Akken'ar's warriors were preparing for the Eclipse and the madness that followed.

Outside her door, she stopped and leaned against it to catch her breath. Her leg hurt and she was exhausted from her clumsy limping. She entered the room, grateful for the warmth emanating from the fire, when she sensed something, another presence in the room. Suzanne spun around on her right heel and bit back a scream when she saw Nathan huddled near the hearth.

"Please don't cry out! I won't hurt you."

"How did you get in here? What are you doing in here?"

"I can explain everything..."

"Can you? You're supposed to be locked up. Who let you out?"

Nathan slipped behind her and pushed the door shut. "I beg you, my lady, please don't scream."

Suzanne backed away from him warily. "What's going on? Tell me now, Nathan, or I will call out for help. Master Jonovar and Master Eika are organizing a search; they'll find you."

"All right, all right." He held up his hands. "I'm sorry I frightened you, but you must listen to me."

"Very well. Why did you push me off the sleigh?"

"Because, I was told to." He looked down. "Please forgive me, my lady, but I had no choice. Believe me, no one was more relieved than I when I learned you would recover from your wounds."

She took a step toward him. "Then *why*?"

"I can't tell you that, at least not right now." He looked at her directly, his eyes filling with anguished tears. "There is something very wrong with this place, an evil that has been here before Ironhold was built. Few know of it; even Prince Akken'ar is unaware of what wickedness lives here. But it has gone on too long and no one has tried to stop it."

"What are you talking about?" she whispered, horrified by Nathan's confession.

"I can't tell you, I can only show you."

"Why would you want to show me?"

"Because you are the Wordsayer. You will *know* what to say, what to do."

"How can you be so sure of that? Nathan, for your information, I am no more a Wordsayer than you are." She threw up her hands and turned from him. "I'm just ... just *ascribe*, like Master Eika. I stumbled through Knife Edge Pass. It was an accident, a chance happening. How do you know there weren't others in the past, before me? Every two hundred and fourteen years ... sunpasses ... a Messenger has been sent—"

"No, my lady, you are the Wordsayer. There can be only one."

"What do you mean?"

"Because, there has been only one Messenger!"

Suzanne stumbled to the edge of the bed and sat down, too overwhelmed to speak.

"Master Eika has not told you the whole truth," Nathan continued.

"He told me a Messenger has always been chosen and it was Master Jonovar who selected the last Messenger."

"Master Eika avoided telling you to protect a myth, a legend that has no truth in it. Yes, Master Jonovar selected someone, an innocent youth, and sent him to the Pass on an empty mission. Only he never came back—none of them ever have. They're all probably killed by the skags."

"And Master Jonovar knew of this? Does Prince Akken'ar?"

Nathan shook his head. "No. Master Jonovar has always believed in the prophecy. He is innocent of any wrongdoing. And I do not believe the prince actually expected to bring back the Wordsayer. That is why you were such a surprise."

"Then, why was Prince Akken'ar waiting for me at the Pass if he didn't expect anyone?"

"Because he was fulfilling his duty as every prince of Ironhold has done since the Cataclysms."

"There's been only one, true Messenger?" she asked.

Nathan nodded slowly. "Only one."

Chapter Ten

MASTER NATHAN LED Suzanne through the ancient, dim corridor passed the Library, across the inner courtyard and up the stairs to the great hall. The late winter afternoon turned Ironhold grim and shadowy; its empty halls echoing the smallest sound. It was slow going as her leg hurt and with each step she gritted her teeth against the growing pain.

"Hurry, my lady," Nathan whispered.

"I'm going as fast as I can. I shouldn't be walking, you know ... thanks to you."

Nathan said nothing, but his shame-faced expression told her how sorry he was.

No one saw them; they hid in the shadows each time a scribe or servant hurried by. Once in the massive sanctuary, they were alone. No one ever entered it without permission, Nathan explained. Only the Master Scribes and their apprentices had free access.

They skirted to the right around the great dais, then into a corner at the very back of the hall behind an enormous arched column. Nathan stopped suddenly and searched the stone floor with the toe of his

boot. Finding an iron ring bolted into the stone slab, he pulled it up revealing a narrow stairway, curling down into the darkness. He took a candle from the large ornate stand nearby and gestured to the black hole in the floor.

Suzanne eyed the opening, then Nathan. "You go first," she said. "If I fall, you can catch me."

Nathan took the first few steps, turned and waited for her to follow. By bracing her free hand against the stone wall, she managed to inch down the stairs, one painful step at a time. The stone stairway curved downward on and on, deep into the belly of the sanctuary, with only a pinprick of light to guide them.

At the bottom, Suzanne stopped and bent over, rubbing her throbbing thigh.

"Can you go on?" Nathan asked.

"Barely. I hope I'm not bleeding again." Catching her breath, she nodded to him.

The tiny glow from the candle revealed only a hint of what lay beneath the great hall. Nathan led her through a labyrinth of passageways and chambers, past rows of shelves crammed with books. She hoped he knew the way back. For an absurd moment, Suzanne wished they had brought along a bag of crumbs so they would find their way out.

Another turn and they entered a room filled with very familiar-looking, and ancient, file cabinets. Then the realization of what she was seeing hit her: this was the lower level of an actual library, much more extensive than Master Eika's cherished chamber above. Sometime after the Cataclysms, the sanctuary had been built above these rooms and corridors. Ironhold was not only a fortress to protect a city, but had been built to protect what was left of an entire library.

"How many know of this place, Nathan?"

"Very few. Master Eika, Master Jonovar, an elderly scribe who is blind now, and myself."

"And His Highness?" she asked tersely.

"Regretfully, no, my lady. He knows nothing of this place."

"A great pity, Master Nathan. He and generations of Mylorian princes before him have not gained from the knowledge hidden in these chambers—the knowledge, perhaps, to defeat the skags."

"It was not my doing," he answered. "These chambers have been forbidden since the Cataclysms."

"Then why are you showing them to me?"

Nathan stopped and looked back at her, holding the candle high. "It is time someone knew, someone who can end this terrible wrong."

Through another chamber and a dank corridor, the young Master of the Keep finally stopped before a blank stone wall. He searched the wall with his fingertips until he found a certain place, then pressed. The wall swung away, revealing a narrow opening into a space even darker and danker than the chambers they had just passed through. Stepping into the passageway, Nathan reached for a feebly-flickering torch bracketed into the rock wall.

Suzanne eyed the black opening. For the first time, fear overrode any sense of curiosity. Instinct told her she was about to face something far more dangerous than skags. Nathan saw her hesitate and motioned for her to step into the passageway.

"You'll be quite safe, my lady, if you stay close to the wall."

Small comfort, she thought, annoyed, as she crept behind Nathan. The torchlight revealed a short tunnel that opened into a cavern, a high-ceilinged chamber chiseled from the rock. Moisture trickled down the dank crevices, smelling of decay and death. Four larger torches illumined the cavern in amber light and grim shadows.

Suzanne went no farther into the cavern. She stopped behind Nathan, clutching at the stone wall, too horrified to continue.

Thick iron bars had been bolted into the rock forming a large cage, a prison-like cell for one occupant.

"Oh, God," she whispered.

What lived in the cell stirred, shifting the position of its rust-riddled wheelchair with bony hands crippled into claws. Only strings of hair remained, dangling from a yellowed skull pock-marked from disease and extreme age. Watery blue eyes, set in a wrinkled mass of scabrous flesh, stared at her, fixated and unblinking. It wore clothes—threadbare, faded scraps hinting of random-patterned military camouflage.

Nathan coughed awkwardly. "My lady, *this* is the blessed Saint Kyrk."

The human-like creature attempted a grin, or grimace—fleshless lips peeled back from black, jagged teeth. "You've done well, boy," it said in a raw, hoarse voice, as if the words were being torn from its throat. It turned slightly, looking directly at her. "Not quite what you expected, eh?"

Suzanne somehow found her own voice. "*You* are Saint Kyrk? I thought you died, long ago."

"Regretfully, this is all that remains. A thousand years does not improve one's looks, I daresay."

Its attempt at humor almost made Suzanne gag. *This thing*, this wreck of ancient, diseased flesh was a man.

"Now, *I* will state the obvious: you must be the Wordsayer."

He studied her for a moment. "Have we met before?"

"Yes, master, she is the—"

"Shut up, boy!"

"Yes, I am the Wordsayer—at least that is the assumption made by everyone." Suzanne moved warily along the stone wall so she could fully see the hideous being in the cage. Anger filled her as she realized Nathan's deception. He had deliberately lured her into the lair of this monstrous creature.

It lived amidst fragments from its past—ironically, her own time. A battered roll top desk was pushed against the stone wall to the left. On it, rotten, uneaten food and stacks of papers and books gathered mold and dust. The tiny bones of rats and other vermin littered the floor. Behind it was a filthy cot. The

flea-bitten, ragged bedding hadn't been washed in years, perhaps centuries. Un-emptied buckets, reeking of waste had been placed to the far right of the cage. The flies had not found this wretched cesspool beneath the sanctuary, but the smell was overpowering.

"Your next question, no doubt, is why I am in here. What better place to keep a madman than in a subterranean prison ... for you see, my dear Wordsayer, I am quite mad."

Curiosity suppressed a sliver of her fear. "Who put you in here?" she asked.

"Myself! For my own good and for the good of my beloved ...*people* ." It grimaced at her again, then sobered. "You see, dear lady, there were three kinds of people who survived the Cataclysms." He looked at her askance. "I assume you want to know what happened. I know, I would."

Suzanne did not answer him, but merely nodded.

A manic gleam touched the saint's blue eyes. "After the fires had burned out and the earth stopped shaking," he said in loud, instructive voice, "the first kind died quickly of disease and biological contamination. Poor bastards. The second kind died a normal death, unscathed, but after a lifetime of struggling to survive. And the third kind prayed to die, but could not."

"Skags," Suzanne whispered.

"Such an ugly term. We prefer the *Others* . The Others-of-Us, because that is what we are."

Kyrk spun his chair around and wheeled to a small table set near the cot. He picked up something and hurled it through the iron bars. "There! The report. Read it! The painstaking, useless study on how human beings can live, undying, yet slowly change into ravenous, mindless monsters!" He pointed a skeletal finger at her. "Oh, yes, pretty Wordsayer, my metamorphosis is nearly complete. Soon, I'll be just like them."

Nathan picked up the ancient report, a thick, spiral-bound stack of yellowed paper and retreated swiftly next to Suzanne. He handed it to her; his face a mask, white with guilt and shame.

Kyrk watched the young Master of the Keep with a malicious gleam in his eyes. "Wisely done, boy. You wouldn't want to be lunch, now, would you?"

Suzanne tugged the report from Nathan's hands and scanned the faded blue cover. There was no date on it, but it had been done on a computer. Whoever had written this had made an attempt to unravel the mystery of the skags from a biological standpoint—perhaps even find a cure for them. She looked at the pitifully deformed creature in the cage.

"You have seen much in your long lifetime. Perhaps you knew Vandervelde?" she asked.

The saint's reaction was immediate. He whirled away from the table and wheeled to the other side of his cage. "Vandervelde! That arrogant fool. Nearly got us all killed!"

"You were with him?"

Kyrk looked at her, anger contorting his disfigured face. "Yes, we were with him. He was the one who knew everything; knew how to survive in the wild and how to build shelters. It was he who promised he would lead us east, over the mountains to a new life where we could start over. Except most of us didn't

make it.” Claw-like fingers reached for a small picture frame on the desk. He touched the faint image gently. “It took them all so fast ... there was no time to find an antidote. I buried my poor wife in the mountains.”

Suzanne's heart seemed to stop pounding for a moment. She took a hesitant step toward him, until Nathan caught her arm, cautioning her not to go any closer. “Then ... it was you who wrote the diary, the Sacred Text. You also wrote that note.”

Beneath the ancient, decaying flesh was a man who still had a heart, who clung to the shreds of his humanity. The mad light faded from his gaze.

“Yes, I did.” His ragged voice took a softer edge to it. “It helped me keep my sanity. I felt if I could just write down my thoughts, I could sort it out later. Vandervelde promised me that when we got to a safe place, I would have the time and the means to do more research—find a way to stop this terrible thing that was destroying so many people. Maybe, I would find an antidote for all the contamination and the toxins.” Kyrk slowly lowered his head to his hands and grew silent. A tear slid down his pocked cheek.

Suzanne thumbed open the report and read the title page. “‘Study on Prolonged Aging, Concurrent with Rapid Morbid Physiological Metamorphosis in Humans’, written by Dr. Andrew E. Kyrk. You wrote this, didn't you?”

Kyrk nodded. “Little good it did anyone. The city soon lost all electricity—no lights, no power. Food was scarce, all the livestock animals were dying and the water was contaminated. Those of us who could travel, packed what we had and headed east. Then, Karl Vandervelde showed up, formed a caravan and led us over the mountains to this place ... what was left of it. He should have known the contamination was on this side, too.”

Nathan, who had been listening to the exchange between her and Kyrk, cleared his throat. “I do not understand, Holy One. If *you* wrote the Sacred Text, the diary, then who was the first Messenger?”

Suzanne limped back to the rock wall where she found a small stool hidden in the shadows. Painfully, she eased down onto the stool, rubbing her aching thigh. “I can tell you that, Nathan,” she said wearily. “Your blessed Saint Kyrk was probably the Messenger, too.”

“No, Lady Wordsayer,” Kyrk said sadly. “Karl Vandervelde *became* that beloved legendary figure, the revered Messenger.”

“Vandervelde was the Messenger?” Nathan asked, incredulous.

The look in Kyrk's eyes swiftly changed from sorrow to rage. He slammed his fist on the desk. “No one elected him leader, but he controlled everything—who got the medicine, who got to eat! He even decided what books we could read and what we needed to know. He started to re-name everything, because the old names only stirred up bad memories. If you challenged him, you simply vanished, disappeared. But, after twenty-five years of him playing the self-appointed tin god, I'd had enough. I decided to go back to the west, through the Pass and find someone, anyone who could help me stop him. So, I stole his Tearstone, and a sword then left.”

The saint rose from the wheelchair and stood, clutching the prison bars with ivory-colored talons. Nathan backed a step, and Suzanne rose from the stool uncertain what Kyrk would do next. He began shaking the bars so violently, bits of dust and rock shattered from the bolts in the rock ceiling, as he began to shout. “Except, Vandervelde followed me! He tried to stop me, but I wouldn't let him. I was

going back."

Strength suddenly depleted, Kyrk sank to his knees. His hands slide down the bars until they fell into his lap. "I didn't mean to do it," he whispered to no one. "It was an accident. I warned him, but he wouldn't listen. So, I hit him and he didn't get up. And when he didn't get up, I had to think of a plan, didn't I?"

Suzanne stared at the pitiful ruin of a man kneeling on the floor, too appalled to say anything. Nathan looked at her. Fear and shock were deeply etched across his slender features. His entire world and all he revered was slowly crumbling with each word of Kyrk's tortured confession.

Finally she found the nerve to ask, "Did you kill him?"

Kyrk shrugged. "Vandervelde's disappearance wasn't my fault. I carried him into the Pass between the rocks. There was some shelter in there. I even gave him my sword. I made certain no one saw me either, but I couldn't stay there." He looked at her. "It was the wrong past for me, wasn't it? There was no one who could help me. Who'd believe me?" He laughed maniacally. "Who'd believe anyone running around with a sword, claiming he'd come through a time portal from the future ... a not very pleasant future. That's what it is, isn't it Wordsayer? An unexplainable anomaly. A time portal."

For a moment, Suzanne hid her face in her shaking palms. Had Vandervelde survived and was he truly Sheriff McKenna's frightened and lost 'stranger'?

Kyrk pulled himself to his feet, then settled into the wheelchair. "I made up the rest," he said matter-of-factly. "Kept alive a preposterous myth: our brave leader, our Messenger, who went to find help, but never came back. After a few centuries, it wasn't too hard to change that story. A Messenger would be sent to find the Wordsayer." He pointed at her. "I guess that would be you."

Suzanne found the courage to glare at him angrily. "And during all those long, dark centuries you kept alive a lie; gave these people false hope; had them living out their lives believing in a ridiculous prophecy while you sat down here, feeling sorry for yourself!"

"I gave them purpose!" Kyrk lunged to his feet, grabbing the bars for support.

"You did nothing, you disgusting coward. For a thousand years—a *thousand years*—you've wallowed in self-pity while generations died fighting *those things*—"

"They were human beings! They couldn't help what happened to them."

She took a step closer to the prison cage. "No, but you could have helped those who survived, the ones who have clung to life with their bare hands. It's too late for the *Others*, Dr. Kyrk. They're gone, they're changed forever." She took a step and pointed upward. "But up there, Prince Akken'ar is trying to end this madness, because if he doesn't stop them, we'll all be dead. You said it yourself: "the third kind prayed to die, but could not." Dr. Kyrk, the skags don't remember their human life; they don't even have a life now. They're completely mad ... like you."

Kyrk threw back his head and howled a wild, raw cry of despair. He shook the cage bars, writhing against them like a demented animal. "You were not supposed to come here! You will ruin everything!"

"Here, what is the meaning of this? How dare you upset the blessed saint!"

Suzanne whirled in the direction of that voice. A torch flared in the chamber, lighting the face of the

intruder. "Master Eika?"

"Grandfather!" Nathan gasped.

Faster than anyone could respond, Kyrk's taloned hand shot out and managed to snag the sleeve of Suzanne's dress, then her arm and jerked her against the bars. His right arm slid around her throat, pinning her against the cage in a vise-like grip.

Master Eika hurried into the chamber. "What have you done, Nathan? You were supposed to do what you were told."

"I'm sorry, Grandfather, but I could not," Nathan said edging back to the wall. He turned his tortured gaze on Suzanne. "Forgive me, Lady Wordsayer, but I had no choice."

"I beg your pardon, my master," Eika said, bowing to Kyrk. "I had Nathan released so he could complete his duty, as he was instructed to do."

"Shut up, you old fool," Kyrk said, tightening his hold on Suzanne's neck. "Get the keys, boy."

"No. I can't—"

"Get the keys, Nathan, or your precious Wordsayer dies."

* * * *

DURING THE LONG afternoon hours, late into the second day, Akken'ar oversaw every aspect of transporting the steel canisters to the rim canyon. Great care was taken to make sure none of his men were seen by the skags; it helped when it began to snow. The creatures could not see clearly during the day. Keenly sensitive to light, they had difficulty focusing and the fluttering snowfall made it impossible for them to separate objects, like trees from people.

However, Akken'ar took no chances. The entire mission was accomplished in complete silence. Except for the occasional snorting horse, no one, beast or man, made a sound.

It was not a particularly arduous task—unloading the containers of the volatile fuel from the work sleighs—but moving stealthily in broad daylight made it difficult. Akken'ar sent out several warriors to look for any possible sign of the skags. So far, they had seen nothing.

As the sun dipped behind the mountains, the five sleighs were gathered under a thick stand of pines.

Each sleigh had been loaded with dozens of smaller canisters in various sizes, filled with the sharp-smelling 'Jet-A' fuel. Every archer carried three small containers and each of his arrow points had been wrapped tightly with cloth that had been soaked in the fuel, then sealed in paraffin. Once lit, the fire would blaze hot and spread fast, making it almost impossible for the skags to extinguish it.

The rest of the fuel would be used to light straw and rags packed along the upper rim of the canyon, forming a flaming barricade the skags would not be able to cross. Once all the creatures had gathered below and the Eclipse had begun, the ring of dry tinder would be lit.

At the entrance to the canyon, hidden archers would launch their flaming arrows into the mass of gathered skags, forcing them to run up the canyon wall, becoming trapped by a sudden barrier of fire and another row of flaming arrows.

The most dangerous position was at the opening to the canyon. It was impossible to block or guard it, since the archers would be seen by the skags as they hurried through the entrance to witness the Eclipse. Only the best warriors, skilled with bow and sword would lie in ambush, waiting for the panicky skags as they fled the burning canyon.

By midnight all was in readiness. They had one day left until the Red Eclipse. Akken'ar and Zykov crept to the very edge for a glimpse of the canyon below. Long, deep, and narrow, it was the perfect trap for the unsuspecting skags. But the creatures were not stupid and when cornered, they were incredibly fast. Sensing any hint of danger, they would turn and flee, not even entering the canyon. Cornered without the advantage of fire, Akken'ar's men would be decimated.

He peered cautiously over the ridge. Only a handful of skags had gathered, huddling together in pale lumps of shivering rags and filthy, wild hair. Akken'ar felt no pity for them. By tomorrow night, he expected every skag in the canyon to be burned to ash.

Zykov tapped his sleeve and pointed to the opening. "More are coming. They're early," he whispered.

Akken'ar snorted softly, amused. "How would you know that? Were you here the last time?"

The general said nothing, but acknowledged him with a slight smile. There was no one still living who had witnessed the long-ago gathering of skags and very little had been recorded about the event. At that Eclipse, the ruling prince had tried to use the black water, the foul oily substance found in small pools to the east of san'Sorafel. It did destroy some, but there hadn't been enough of the black oil to kill all of the skags. This time, Akken'ar vowed silently, there would be enough to burn every single one of them.

A slight disturbance among the warriors below caused Akken'ar and Zykov to abandon their observations. A fleet-footed young archer hurried up toward them through the thick brush and trees.

"My lord," he whispered hoarsely. "You must come down immediately. There is someone, just arrived, who insists on seeing you."

"Who?" Akken'ar asked.

"I do not know who she is. A young woman, very frightened—hysterical. She will not leave until she sees you."

"Lady Suzanne?"

"No, my lord. She is a plain sort ... a servant, I think."

Akken'ar muttered an oath under his breath, but nodded to the archer. "Very well. I'll see her." He hurried down the snowy hillside, dodging the bushes and trees. Without a torch, only the moon lit his way through the dense woods. At the clearing he saw a group of warriors gathered around a single horse. The animal had been ridden hard. Its flanks were slick with sweat, heaving with each labored breath.

Akken'ar pushed through the gathered men, just as a small, cloaked figure slid from the horse's back and knelt before him in the snow. "My lord, I beg you, please come back to the keep!"

"It is Miri," one of the warriors said.

The girl looked up at Akken'ar. Terror riddled her plain features. "You must return to Ironhold."

He motioned for someone to help her stand. "Calm yourself, Miri," he ordered. "Tell me what has happened."

"Master Jonovar sent me. He said you wouldn't believe him and that I was the only one you'd listen to..."

"And what is that?"

"He took her away. That ... horrible*thing* ! I saw it. He's kidnapped her. He's taking her to Knife Edge Pass." Miri's thin body shook with uncontrollable sobbing. Tears ran down her red-cheeked face as she struggled to tell him the last of her message.

Akken'ar took Miri by the shoulders and gave her a small shake. "Who, Miri? Who has kidnapped Lady Suzanne?"

"Th-th-the blessed Saint Kyrk!"

Chapter Eleven

A COLD WIND buffeted Suzanne's back as Kyrk shoved her into the traveling sleigh. Nathan had been forced to take it from the stable while the remaining guards looked on, helpless to stop him.

The interior was small, but it had enough room for two. Someone, probably Nathan, had found her cloak and tossed it onto the seat. She hastily wrapped it around her shoulders and cringed against the leather cushions as Kyrk clambered inside. Sitting opposite her, the darkness inside the sleigh concealed his hideous form but did nothing to mask the ghastly smell emanating from his scabrous flesh.

She heard Nathan call to the team and the sleigh jerked forward. Kyrk leaned back and closed his eyes momentarily.

"Why are you doing this?" she demanded. "I thought you were going to kill me."

Without opening his eyes he replied, "I need you to help me get through the Pass. I know the shortcut—known it for a long, long time. Once we're there, we can go back."

"Back? Back to what?"

Kyrk opened his eyes. "As you discovered, Knife Edge Pass is a way through time. I intend to go back, where I belong. Where you belong, dear lady ... if you have a shred of sense."

"You can't. What if you're wrong? You were wrong the first time you went through. What if you go back to a different time?"

He glared at her. "Does it matter? As long as I can go back far enough." He held out his hands, gnarled and claw-like. "Then, I'll be whole again. Maybe I can do something—find a way to stop this terrible thing from happening."

"Then, you don't need me, Dr. Kyrk. Leave me here. I won't stop you."

"That's where you're wrong. I need you to guide me, to help me find my way around again."

Arguing with a lunatic was useless. Suzanne hugged the cloak closer to her, hoping someone in Ironhold was resourceful enough to find Akken'ar. He had to find her in time to stop this madman. Suzanne admitted Kyrk frightened her. When dragging her out of the cavern he had backhanded Master Eika, knocking him against the rock wall. The elderly scribe collapsed into a heap and Suzanne feared the old man was dead.

"You didn't have to hurt Master Eika."

"Eika is a witless old fool. He did not follow instructions, and that idiot boy, Nathan, is no better."

"How long have they know about you?" Suzanne ventured, hoping she wouldn't further rouse Kyrk's considerable wrath.

"All their lives, just like all the scribes in their family before them." Kyrk's grin was ugly. "It became quite an honor to be chosen as the saint's guardian. Of course, only two could be let in on my little secret. An extraordinary accomplishment, don't you think? Keeping my whereabouts hidden for a millennium, as well as the fact that I was still alive?"

"You're crazy," Suzanne muttered.

Kyrk laughed wildly, until a harsh coughing fit forced him to stop. "I told you that already!" he rasped.

Time slowed to a crawl as the sleigh headed through the deep woods to the Pass. Suzanne avoided any further conversation with Kyrk as he appeared distracted, lost in thought. What could possibly be going through a mind that old, that insane? After living so long and aware that he was on the brink of losing the last fragment of his humanity, that knowledge alone would make anyone mad.

Mad as a Hatter. It's time for Alice to leave the Tea Party, she thought wearily.

After what seemed like hours, Nathan stopped to let the horses rest. Kyrk eyed her menacingly—a clear warning that she was not to get out of the sleigh. In silence, she waited until they started moving again, refusing to speak to him.

Later, he said, "I'm not evil, you know. It's just that once I discovered I was changing, it became more and more difficult to concentrate on anything. I couldn't read or teach. In time, all I could think about was food."

"When did you realize you were changing?"

"A few years after I returned from the Pass. I went into seclusion, letting no one see me. At the first sign of the changing, they would've killed me."

"They?"

"The people living in san'Sorafel ... back then. Oh, yes, there were skags, not as many as there are now, but enough to terrify everyone. The trouble was, they knew the skags had been human and many were against killing them, fearful they might accidentally kill a 'relative.'"

"Except the skags didn't die," Suzanne said.

Kyrk didn't answer her, he didn't need to. He was the proof of a life lived far too long, now changing into something that would go on living as a mindless monstrosity.

When the sleigh finally stopped, Kyrk grabbed her arm and jerked her outside, making her stumble and fall into the snow. "Get up!" he snapped.

Suzanne fought the urge to scream as pain stabbed through her left thigh. Kyrk had no concern for her wounded leg or her pain. He dragged her to her feet and shoved her roughly toward the rocks. She looked up and saw the two pinnacles of Knife Edge Pass looming above them in the dark.

"M-m-master? What would you like me—?" Nathan's voice shook with terror.

"You'd better run, boy, or you and the horses might become dinner." Kyrk stalked passed the young man, then abruptly stopped and turned back to him. "You go back and tell your worthy prince that the blessed Saint Kyrk, after a millennium of seclusion and contemplation, has decided to return to his place of origin. He's not coming back so don't bother sending another Messenger!" His loud, cawing laugh filled the chill night air as Kyrk continued dragging Suzanne toward the Pass.

The biological change made him immeasurably strong; the skin of his hands felt like hard, clammy leather and he smelled of corruption and death.

"Dr. Kyrk, this is useless. Let me go!"

Kyrk didn't hear her, but kept on striding straight to the towering stones. At the opening, he stopped. "This is it," he breathed. "I'm going home. Margaret, I'm coming..."

As they stepped between the pinnacles, the wind began to gust, tossing Suzanne's hair and tearing at her clothes. Kyrk didn't feel it; he kept walking, half-dragging, half-pulling her through the Pass. With each throbbing step, she soon realized that the two of them might indeed, go back to her time, or his. *It was* possible, but as they drew closer to the opening at the other side, Suzanne was filled with dread. Would anyone be there to greet them? Curly? Dane McKenna? This shouldn't be happening. This was not the right time...

Once they stepped through, Kyrk stopped. The air was suddenly still and calm. Suzanne looked around, trying to see anything that looked familiar: Curly's bar, her car, the parking lot. But there was nothing. Just the forest and the glistening white snow.

Kyrk let go of her arm and stumbled forward a few steps. "Where is everyone? Where's the road?" He spun around. "WHERE IS EVERYTHING!"

Suzanne forced herself to limp to the nearest tree, shaking with pain and shock. Nothing had happened. They hadn't moved through time at all. They had merely walked between the rocks to another part of the forest. She stifled the urge to laugh. It didn't work; they hadn't gone anywhere.

* * * *

AKKEN'AR GALLOPED BACK to Ironhold late in the night, uncertain what he would discover. The saint had kidnapped Lady Suzanne? It made no sense, the saint had died hundreds of sunpasses ago. When Jonovar greeted him at the entrance, the Master Scribe was in a highly agitated state, wringing his hands, his fleshy face, pale with shock.

"My lord, I am relieved you have come in such a short time," he exclaimed. "It is dreadful, dreadful. I

cannot begin to tell you what has happened."

Akken'ar removed his gauntlets as he climbed the steps to the keep. "The maid says that the *saint* has abducted the Wordsayer?"

"Yes, it's true. I know it sounds unbelievable, but it is quite true, my lord."

Inside, he and Jonovar hurried to a small chamber. Akken'ar removed his fur and swords while the Master Scribe sent for something hot to drink. Akken'ar was bone-tired and cold. The long hours in the saddle, fighting skags, and preparing for the Eclipse were beginning to take its toll. He dropped into the chair next to the fire and ran his hand over his brow. "Tell me what has happened to Lady Suzanne," he demanded.

Master Jonovar could not be still. He paced before the fire and related the most astonishing and horrifying news. Everything was retold with meticulous detail, even the mystifying fact that Lady Suzanne had come from the 'past.'

"After we found Master Eika, who was barely alive, my lord, he confessed everything. We have all been duped—generation after generation since the earliest days of san'Sorafel. The Messenger, the prophecy, everything. Knife Edge Pass is some sort of 'time portal'—I do not know what that means..."

For as long as he could remember, Akken'ar had heard of the Pass referred to as a 'portal' and like Jonovar, never knew what it meant. What did that mean, to travel through time?

The servant brought the dek tea and Akken'ar downed it swift gulps. He had no time to lose. If Saint Kyrk had taken Suzanne to Knife Edge Pass, he had a long ride ahead of him.

"You must speak with Master Eika before you leave, Highness," Jonovar said. "He made me promise that you would see him."

"Is he badly injured?"

"He took a nasty blow to his head. He is weak, but I am told he will survive."

When he arrived in Master Eika's simple chambers, Akken'ar was shocked to see the elderly scribe lying in bed with his head wrapped in thick, white bandages.

As soon as Eika saw him, tears filled the old Librarian's eyes. "Forgive me, my lord. Forgive me and my foolish grandson for deceiving you and Master Jonovar for so long. I ... I always felt I was doing what was right. The saint ... he had lived so long and knew so many things. It was a great honor for my family to serve him. But he is evil, my lord. A foul, monstrous creature. He is becoming a skag. He is dangerous and mad beyond belief. Please, you must find the Lady Wordsayer. I fear for her life."

Eika clutched at Akken'ar's hand with feeble fingers. "Take the shortcut to the Pass. I will tell you the way." Swiftly, the frail Librarian gave Akken'ar instructions.

Akken'ar wasted no time with sorrowful goodbyes and hurried to his horse. Only four other men could be spared to ride with him. Outside the western gate they found runner marks in the snow leading in the direction Eika had told him. Light from the full moon gleamed over the snow, lit the trail and made the sleigh tracks easy to follow. He knew they would soon catch up to them.

Renewed dread filled Akken'ar as they climbed the mountain. Master Eika said the saint was dangerous, mad, and he feared for Suzanne's life. He could scarcely imagine the blessed Saint Kyrk harming the Wordsayer; it was inconceivable. Yet, growing doubt troubled him. He had never fully believed in the so-called prophecy, but had yielded to the wisdom of the Scribes. If the prophecy revealed a way to defeat the skags, then he would do whatever they advised. To everyone's surprise, the Wordsayer turned out not to be what anyone expected: a beautiful woman. However, Suzanne was not only the prophesied Wordsayer, but the one who had found the way to conquer the Others. He owed the lives of his people to her; he owed her the renewal of his courage and his determination. He owed her his heart.

Ancestors, watch her, protect her. Let her be alive.

When they finally reached the Pass, they found the sleigh and a shivering Nathan huddled inside. He was unharmed, but Akken'ar saw the unfeigned terror in his eyes.

"He's taken her through the Pass, my lord. He thinks they are going to another time."

"Is he armed?"

"I'm not certain." Nathan scrambled out of the sleigh. "Please allow me to go with you. I feel responsible for what has happened. It is my fault she is here."

Akken'ar looked at the Master of the Keep and realized the young man wanted desperately to make amends for his deceit. "Very well, but stay behind us."

The six men approached the twin stones cautiously, swords drawn. No one had ever been through Knife Edge Pass before, it had always been forbidden. Akken'ar stopped at the entrance and peered through the narrow fissure. He saw only trees on the other side. Maybe the Pass, like the prophecy, was all a hoax. Yet, it was here he had found Suzanne.

They inched slowly through the stone opening. A light, icy wind fluttered his furs, stung his cheeks. At the far opening he stopped and peered into the other side.

* * * *

SUZANNE WATCHED WHAT was left of Dr. Andrew Kyrk deteriorate into complete madness. He stumbled through the snow in aimless circles, first muttering, then howling his confusion and despair.

"Nothing! There's nothing. Margaret, I'm sorry. I'd tried to save you ... ! But, I was tricked. Yes, that's it. I was tricked. Wrongplacewrongplacewrongplace! There has to be another Pass, I know it. I'll find it and then I fix it. I'll fix everything."

She sank against the tree, unable to stand on her wounded leg any longer. Watching Kyrk made her realize how terrible his affliction was and how frightening it must have been for the Others when they realized they were changing from a human being into an insane beast. Soon, Kyrk would lose the last of his humanity: his ability to speak, to reason, to feel compassion. What remained would be a kind of ghastly immortality and the endless need to hunt for food.

Suzanne clung to the rough bark, hoping it would give her the strength to survive, but she knew if Akken'ar did not find her in time, she would die. Strange, that she should be at the same place where she had begun this adventure. Ten days ago Akken'ar had found her, just on the other side of the rocky fissure. It seemed a lifetime ago.

She looked up. Kyrk had stopped circling. Something had caught his attention. Across the small clearing she spotted them, too. Her heart sank. Too tired to feel fear, she only hoped they would kill her quickly.

Kyrk panicked. He began backing away from the advancing skags. "No. No! You can't do this." He thrust out his deformed arms toward them. "See! See! I'm one of you, now. I'm your brother. Don't kill me!"

Suzanne struggled to her feet. The throbbing in her leg was excruciating now, but it didn't matter. The sudden instinct to survive overrode her pain. She had no weapon, but she wasn't going to die without a fight.

A bright, cracking sound, metal against metal, made her and Kyrk turn toward the stone fissure.

"Over here, skag." Akken'ar struck his two swords together again. "Fresh meat!"

Five more men appeared behind him, beating their swords and taunting the skags. The confused creatures stopped, then changed direction. Six humans were clearly more of a temptation than two. They flew at Akken'ar and his warriors, who fought furiously, cutting and wounding the creatures until they had the advantage. After several minutes of desperate fighting, all the skags lay decapitated in the snow.

Suzanne watched as Kyrk suddenly realized how he would eventually die. He backed away slowly from the bodies of the dead skags then turned toward her. "You're the cause of this," he snarled. Before anyone could stop him, he again grabbed her arm and began dragging her toward the Pass.

Akken'ar's men surrounded them, swords pointed directly at Kyrk. "Let her go," the prince warned.

"It's all her fault," Kyrk said wildly. "If she hadn't come, this would have never happened!"

"Let her go." Akken'ar took a menacing step toward Kyrk.

The saint tried another tactic. "You can't kill me," his voice changed from hysterical to a wheedling tone. "I'm the blessed saint."

Suzanne saw Akken'ar pause. Reverence for the memory of Saint Kyrk and loathing warred across his handsome features. "You are no saint," he said grimly. "You're a skag." He raised his sword for the final blow but stopped when someone pushed through the other warriors.

"Leave her alone, you monster!" In a blur of movement, Nathan rushed forward and jerked Suzanne out of Kyrk's grasp, pulling her back to the safety of the other warriors.

Surprised, Kyrk turned, stumbled, and unable to regain his balance, toppled forward onto Akken'ar's sword. Red, human blood gushed from his chest where the blade had impaled him. He looked down at the sword, astonishment riddled his deformed face. He struggled for a moment, then fell to his knees. Tears, either of sorrow or relief ran down his yellowed cheeks.

"Margaret, Margaret. Forgive me." Kyrk fell to his side, the bright stain of blood reddening the snow.

Suzanne held her breath for a long horrified moment. Kyrk did not move. There appeared to be no regeneration of the wound; he had not completely changed. The blessed saint was dead.

A shaken Akken'ar reached for his sword and pulled it free. "He was still a man," he said quietly. "We

will bury him here."

"Yes," Suzanne agreed. "He could not help what happened to him."

Akken'ar motioned for two warriors to take the body to the trees and cover it with snow. "After the Eclipse, I will send men to bury him." He sheathed both his swords and looked at her, then to Nathan. "My thanks, Master Keeper. You have saved both our lives. I am in your debt."

Nathan bowed respectfully. "No, my lord, it is *I* who has paid the debt."

"Highness, we must return," one of the warrior's said.

Suzanne took a painful step and stopped. "Perhaps, you could assist me...?"

In two strides he was next her, scooping her up into his arms. Exhausted, Suzanne gratefully wrapped her arms around his neck, allowing herself to go limp against him. He hurried toward the Pass, nearly running.

"You must not die, my lady," he said. "We still have much to do."

She smiled against the furs covering his shoulder. "We?"

Chapter Twelve

The Last Day

THE MASTER HEALER, a no-nonsense man with a shock of white hair tied back with a blue cord, re-examined Suzanne's leg and pronounced succinctly that she would mend if she did not walk on it for several days. He cleansed the angry wound and re-applied the strong-smelling ointment that helped deaden the pain, then bound it in a clean bandage.

Suzanne listened meekly to the Healer's scolding like a recalcitrant child: no more forays into the forest and no more confrontations with skags. She was to lie completely still for at least a day, then she could get up and *cautiously* move about. While he packed his bag, he instructed Miri to keep a watchful eye on her. The Master Healer left, leaving Suzanne drained and saddened. She had experienced so much within the last ten days, more than enough to fill a book ... a dozen books.

During the early morning hours of the last day, Suzanne lay awake pondering what would happen to the people of san'Sorafel. The death of Saint Kyrk had affected Prince Akken'ar and his people more than she realized. Generations of Mylorians had trusted the wisdom of their Master Wordkeepers and their Librarians, waiting patiently for the promised Wordsayer to come and end their struggles with the skags.

Like a dense fog in the early morning sun, it had all melted away. Kyrk no longer held the position of 'blessed saint' but of a fraud, and a malicious cheat.

This night, the night of the Red Eclipse, Akken'ar and his warriors would certainly defeat the skags; they had plenty of determination and more than enough fuel to end the threat. But what would happen after that? The skags would be gone, but what had they fought to save, to look forward to?

Master Jonovar appeared lost, a bewildered old man whose purpose in life had been shattered. His exalted task of keeping alive the memory of Saint Kyrk and the Sacred Text, now non-existent. And

poor Master Eika was too frail to be of much use.

Where did she fit into this bizarre plot? Akken'ar's words, spoken with such expectation the first day they met, burned in her memory: *But you can read ...* Yes, she could read and she could teach. Was that what she was meant to do, re-teach these people? Or, maybe she was just a cheat like Kyrk.

The writer in her balked at that idea. No, she had fulfilled the prophecy and therefore her purpose for being here. Now, she could return home and pick up her life where she left off. She had a manuscript to finish ... and a cat to feed.

Miri knocked and entered the room with a tray of food. Her usually cheery expression was sober and withdrawn. She set the tray before Suzanne, then began tidying the room.

"Miri, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, my lady."

"Yes, there is. What's troubling you?"

The maid stopped and looked down, avoiding Suzanne's eyes. "What will happen to us, now that the saint is truly dead?"

"I was thinking that myself, Miri. You will go on, living and doing what you have always done, except the skags will be gone."

She nodded. "Yes, but who will teach us?"

"Saint Kyrk never *taught* you anything. It is now for you to decide what you would like to learn and do."

Miri looked at her. "Who will help us do that?"

Suzanne shrugged. She could not answer her. She ate her breakfast in silence while Miri resumed her work. Finally, she asked, "Where is His Highness?"

"The Master Healer has ordered him to rest for a while. He is asleep, but this afternoon, he will leave for the canyon."

"Yes, tonight is the Eclipse."

Miri finished her chores and prepared to leave, when Suzanne suddenly knew what she must do.

"Would you be kind enough to get a message to His Highness for me?"

The maid nodded.

"I would like to speak to him before he goes to the canyon. Tell him I'll meet with him where ever he wishes."

Miri curtsied and was about to leave the room when she stopped and looked at her. "I know what I would like to learn, my lady."

"What is that?"

"To be like you."

* * * *

THE AFTERNOON PASSED quickly. A messenger arrived stating that Prince Akken'ar would be pleased to meet Lady Suzanne in the atrium. The message sent Miri into another gentle tirade of warnings. "You'll injure yourself, my lady, and the Master Healer said you were*not* to walk, under any circumstances."

"I know, Miri, but I have to do this. I must see the prince. Besides, my leg doesn't hurt and I promise I won't walk too far."

Miri remained adamant. "I cannot let you leave, my lady." Determined, the little maid planted herself in front of the door, refusing to budge.

Suzanne sighed. "All right. What if I have someone carry me down to the atrium?"

"I don't know ...," Miri said skeptically.

"Fetch Borkha. He's big and strong and I'm certain he won't drop me." Suzanne could see Miri wavering. "The moment I have spoken to the prince, Borkha can bring me back to my room and the Master Healer will never know."

Miri finally relented and ran to find the warrior who had driven one of the transport sleighs. Borkha was only too pleased to carry Suzanne to the atrium. Once there, she insisted he set her down near the window so she could stand looking out at the snow-covered mountains.

Shadows deepened and for a time Suzanne thought Akken'ar might not come, but then she heard the paneled door open and he stepped inside. He strode toward her, dressed for battle, his proud face unreadable. Something caught in Suzanne's heart, making it impossible for her to speak.

"You asked to see me?" he asked gravely.

"Yes, I did."

"This is the second time we have met in the atrium."

"It seems the ideal place where we can speak."

"Alone?" he finished, one black brow arched, amused.

"Yes, alone." Looking at him, standing so close, her courage began to fail. Suzanne turned away and clasped her hands together tightly. "I must ask something of you ... a promise."

"A promise? It has been a long time since I have been asked to keep a promise."

"Will you promise to take me back to Knife Edge Pass, after the Eclipse?"

He didn't answer at first and Suzanne was too afraid to turn around to look at him.

"I'm not sure this is a promise I would want to keep," he said.

"Why not?" She looked over her shoulder at him and saw he was entirely serious. When he didn't answer she slowly turned back to him. "My lord, it is time for me to leave. I've done what you asked—fulfilled your prophecy."

"Yes, but I do not want you to go. There is much more to be done. You have so much knowledge; you remember the past. You are the Wordsayer, you can teach us—"

"No!" Tears gathered in her eyes, caught in her throat. "Don't you see? I'm not a Wordsayer, I'm a fraud, just like Kyrk. I'm..." She shrugged helplessly. "...just a writer, a storyteller. I write books." There, she'd said it. Now let him ridicule her, tell her she had no business interfering with the lives of his people or their traditions.

Suzanne looked down, pressing her palm to her forehead. How could she speak to a man like Akken'ar, the kind of man she dreamed about, but could only exist in her books. "I don't belong here. I'm from a different time ... the past, before the Cataclysms."

"Master Jonovar has spoken to me of this traveling through the time. It is an impossible thing to understand, but I believe it is true. Why else would a woman like you be here?"

She looked at him through her tears. "I don't know," she whispered.

Akken'ar took a step closer to her. "I will tell you why: you were chosen."

"No, I was not chosen. It was something that happened by chance, an accident."

"Does it matter?" he asked. Akken'ar reached for her arm, clasping it in a gentle grasp. "Does it truly matter how or why you were chosen? I do not think so and I do not care. All my life I have prayed to the gods and my ancestors to find a way to stop the skags from killing my people. The Master Wordkeepers, since the time of Saint Kyrk, have promised that a Wordsayer would come and read the Text. The Text has proven to be worthless, but you still came, Suzanne. You *still* came."

She had never heard him call her by her first name and the sound of it on his lips was infinitely sweet.

"I do not want you to go, my lady, because my people need you." He hesitated; his gaze turned from hers. "And because, I need you."

Before she could answer, Akken'ar bent to her and placed a light kiss on her mouth. "I risk much ... ," he murmured. He straightened, then stepped away.

Suzanne fingers flew to her lips, touching the place where their lips had met. Astonishment dissolved the last of her tears.

"If you still wish it, I will take you to Knife Edge Pass after I return." Akken'ar did not wait for her to answer. He spun on his heel and swept out of the atrium, leaving her trembling and her heart in turmoil.

* * * *

IT WAS NEARLY dark by the time he left Ironhold and Akken'ar had pushed aside the memory of his meeting with Suzanne. But not all of it. His impulse to kiss her had surprised even himself. What was he thinking? It had been a long time since he had enjoyed the pleasure of kissing a woman, yet he had

wanted to kiss her even if she was the Wordsayer. She was still a woman and he had seen ... something passionate in her eyes that betrayed more than her bewilderment.

Akken'ar heeled his horse into a faster gallop. He could not allow himself to worry about Suzanne. The skags were gathering and there were many details to discuss with Zykov and his other officers.

At the base camp, the general greeted him soberly. "All is in readiness, Highness. The skags have gathered, but more are coming. I've never seen so many of them." Zykov made a disgusted face. "Stinking and writhing like maggots..."

"I need to see them for myself."

Guarded by six heavily armed warriors, Akken'ar hurried up the steep hill to the rim of the canyon where he, along with the others, dropped to his belly and peered over the edge.

Zykov was correct; hundreds, perhaps thousands of skags had gathered inside the canyon, a screeching, gibbering sea of demented beasts.

"Do we have enough fuel?" Akken'ar asked in a low voice.

"The Wordsayer assured us we had plenty. Besides, we tested some of it while you were at Ironhold." Zykov's single eye gleamed roguishly.

"And?"

"We poured a small amount on some dry wood. When we lit it, the flames jumped so high I nearly lost my other eye." Zykov grinned. "We've warned everyone to stand clear when the fires are lit. I don't want anyone burned, except them." He pointed to the skags below.

The night grew darker and bitterly cold. The pale moon shimmered like a great sightless eye. Akken'ar watched intently as a black mass began moving across the sky, slowly blotting out the brilliant light.

The warriors grew tense and the skags became increasingly restless. Their gibbering grew louder, shriller as the moon became completely eclipsed.

Akken'ar looked up in awe. Not for more than two hundred sunpasses would anyone see such a sight again and for a fleeting moment, he hoped Suzanne was watching this extraordinary event. As the darker body covered the moon, it took on a strange light of its own. The center brightened, reshaped until its design was clear: a red tear within black, the black within white—a bloody weeping eye. The Red Eclipse.

The skags screeching turned into a bone-chilling howl, rising above the canyon floor. They began writhing and dancing, arms extended above their heads reaching for the strange light in the sky.

This is where they renew their strength, Akken'ar suddenly realized. The unearthly light gave them the power to continue living on until the next Eclipse.

He signaled Zykov, who sent an archer below to the warriors at the opening of the canyon where the first attack would begin. Holding his breath, Akken'ar watched as the lead archer stood from his hiding place and sent a blazing arrow into the howling mob. The instant it struck the skag, flames burst into a scorching white blaze that consumed the creature in a matter of moments.

Akken'ar resumed breathing as astonishment filled him. There would be plenty of fuel to destroy them. And Suzanne was right, just as she promised: there *was* an answer, a solution.

A rain of arrows followed, striking the closely-packed skags turning the canyon into an inferno. The flames leaped from creature to creature, burning them swiftly. Panic-stricken, some tried to rush out of the canyon, but Akken'ar's best warriors were waiting. If the flames didn't stop them, swords did. The skags fell like ripe wheat under the scythe.

A few managed to escape the flames, but had no other way out but up the steep, rocky wall of the canyon. Enraged and wild, still under the influence of the Eclipse, they scrambled to the edge of the canyon, determined to evade the flames below. Akken'ar called to the warriors along the rim and they sent volley after volley of flaming arrows into the fleeing skags.

Zykov raced up to him, his face black with ash and smoke. "There are too many, my lord! I fear we won't hold them!"

"Light the rim. Even if they get through that, most will be on fire."

The general nodded and spun away, ordering the rim fires lit. The fuel, so desperately acquired, proved more lethal than Akken'ar expected. It consumed the skags quickly, but burned hotter and higher, turning the canyon into a cauldron of flame and smoke. What little vegetation still clung to the inner walls of the canyon only added to the inferno. It still didn't stop some of the skags from escaping.

"Don't let them get past you!" he called to the row of swordsmen placed behind the archers.

A handful of shrieking creatures broke through the encircling fire, unscathed. They were bigger than the ones left burning below—the strong ones, the bullies, who tossed their smaller companions aside in order to elude the flames.

The largest one spotted Akken'ar and scrambled toward him on all fours. It stopped and stood, man-like, hissing and growling, challenging him to fight. Akken'ar answered the challenge by drawing both swords from his back. This one would die the hard way, the old-fashioned way.

"Come on, you gibbering maggot." He cracked his swords together, taunting the creature.

The skag flew at him, snarling like a rabid animal. Akken'ar's swords flicked and parried, striking a knee, severing a hand, plunging into the creature's scabrous mid-section. It fell back, barely winded and squatted in the snow, waiting to regenerate. Akken'ar knew the skag's only tactic was patience. It would endure an endless cycle of wounds and regeneration, then attack again in order to wear its prey down until they were too exhausted to fight.

Breathing hard, he watched the creature wait for its hand to regenerate. Akken'ar had only moments before the skag came after him again. Swords poised, he went for the neck striking two blows on each side, but the skag was fast. The blows proved to be harmless as the creature jumped aside and attacked Akken'ar again, slamming him to the ground, knocking both swords from his hands. The skag pounced on Akken'ar's chest, mauling him with talons and its hideous jagged black teeth. He heard the stout leather of his tunic rip like paper, felt the protective furs torn from his body. He fought with every fragment of his strength, but he knew he wouldn't survive the attack.

Pain scorched through his left arm where the skag had managed to sink its teeth into him. In desperation,

Akken'ar beat his right fist into the skag's deformed face, again and again, shattering bones and blinding it in one eye. When he thought he couldn't raise his arm again, Akken'ar saw the flash of a sword blade. The skag's last sound was a surprised grunt as its head toppled into the snow.

In agony, Akken'ar rolled onto his left side, cradling the bitten arm against his body. Infection from skag bites came swiftly. He heard Zykov kneeling at his side.

"My lord, did it bite you?"

Akken'ar groaned and nodded. "Below ... elbow," he managed to gasp. "Did we...?"

"A complete victory, my lord. You have won!"

He sensed a flurry of activity, felt hands lifting and placing him on the back of a work sleigh. He fought to stay conscious, but the pain finally won. His last vision was the cold bloody tear on the moon.

* * * *

SUZANNE NEVER WENT back to her room. She remained in the atrium to watch the coming eclipse and anxiously await Akken'ar's return. Nothing could force her to give up her place near the tall window. She asked that a chair be brought in so she could sit while she waited. Both Miri and the Master Healer, Melchor, grudgingly complied with her wishes. Miri brought her a light supper, while Master Melchor lectured her on the dangers of over exertion.

"I'm not going anywhere, Master Melchor. I promise I won't walk. When Prince Akken'ar returns, I'll have Borkha carry me back to my room.

"Very well," the Master Healer conceded. "If you need anything, you have Miri fetch it for you."

Those inside Ironhold remained tense and worried. No one slept. The few remaining guards patrolled the empty corridors, too restless to remain in one place for long. Anxiety for the prince and the warriors at the canyon remained high.

Through the long night, Suzanne sat next to the window watching the slow progression of the Red Eclipse. At exactly the mid of the night, the dark mass—a large meteor fragment she presumed—completely covered the moon. Its odd shape and the haloed moonlight reshaped the image until she saw what she had dreamed the first night when she slept in Akken'ar's tent: the bloody eye watching over a snowbound world. She shuddered slightly. In spite of its rather eerie beauty, the Eclipse evoked a breathless sense of wonder. She took in the extraordinary sight, knowing she would never see it again.

Suzanne heard the atrium door open and Master Melchor slipped in to stand next to her.

"Remarkable, isn't it," he said.

"Yes. It's like nothing I've seen before nor will ever see again."

The Healer nodded. "Nor, I. We are indeed fortunate to see such a phenomenon."

Her thoughts turned to Akken'ar and his men fighting the skags. "Master Melchor, do you know why the skags gather every two hundred and fourteen sunpasses?"

"I am uncertain. Very few people have ever seen what happens inside the canyon. It was once thought that the skags gathered to breed during the Red Eclipse. But it was discovered long ago that skags are sterile. I discovered this myself when I cut ... er, examined one that was dead. Of course, it has been suggested that some of them go to the canyon to die. We just don't know."

"No one has ever witnessed it and written down what they saw?"

"Perhaps, but there are no records here in san'Sorafel. There may be a record in the other Libraries."

Suzanne almost jumped from her chair. "*Other* Libraries?"

"Yes, there are two remaining Libraries from the time of the Cataclysms, but they are far from here. One is east in the Old Mountains, in san'Jaxon. The other is north in Canda. It takes many weeks to get there. But, I have seen the Library in san'Jaxon. It is smaller than our Library, but contains many books we do not have." He leaned closer to her and lowered his voice. "I have even seen a few rare books on the machines the Ancients used. They had many wondrous things."

"Yes, they did," Suzanne said. "Does Master Eika and Master Jonovar know of these Libraries?"

"Oh, yes, but the journey to reach them is long and dangerous. And, with the skags ... You must take a boat eastward across the Sierra Sea to reach san'Jaxon."

Suzanne could scarcely breathe. Answers. She had real answers. Now she knew where she was. The west was under water, but eastward over the Rockies and up north, there were other cities that had survived. Most astounding of all, there were two more Libraries.

She looked up at the shimmering eclipsed moon. Somehow, it did not appear quite so sinister-looking. When Akkena'ar returned, she would ask him about the Libraries.

They continued to watch the eclipse until they both saw a strange flickering light coming from the north. Suzanne rose from the chair and stood next to the Master Healer. "That's fire."

"Yes, my lady. It looks like your burning fuel has worked."

"It's not 'my' fuel, Master Melchor; I just helped find it."

"If you had not helped find it, we would have never seen this extraordinary sight. It appears His Highness was successful. I doubt many skags survived that inferno. When the prince returns, the people of san'Sorafel will rejoice." He beamed at her.

As the night grew older, the eclipse moved out of phase, until only the brilliant moon remained. It was very peaceful in the atrium and Suzanne knew why the women in Prince Akken'ar's family loved it. It was the closest thing in Ironhold that reminded her of home—the soft greenery and flowers fragrant with rain and the rich, moist earth.

Master Melchor finally bid her goodnight. "I will return in a few hours, my lady, to see if your leg is troubling you. I must see that my surgery is ready and that my apprentices are awake." He smiled. "We have seen the Red Eclipse. Now we must prepare for the worst. I may have a few casualties."

An hour later, he did.

Chapter Thirteen

INSIDE AKKEN'AR'S AUSTERE bedchamber, Master Melchor applied another hot poultice to the prince's arm. Suzanne could see the skag bite had swollen rapidly, turning the skin to an alarming shade of red. Unconscious, Akken'ar groaned and fought against Melchor's apprentices as they struggled to hold him down.

"We shall have to open it," the Master Healer said in a low voice.

At the sight of the slim instrument, Suzanne had to look away. She couldn't watch as Master Melchor incised the wound, allowing the pus to drain into a towel. Fortunately, it was over quickly and Akken'ar did not appear to suffer. More poultices were applied, drawing the infection, but Melchor still appeared grave.

The prince began to thrash, becoming increasingly incoherent. Suzanne's heart cried out for him. After achieving his greatest victory defeating the skags, it was a cruel irony that he might not survive to realize it. Never had she felt so helpless and frightened.

Master Melchor turned to her. "My lady, would you have the servants bring more clean cloths and cold water. We must try to cool his fever."

Suzanne limped from the prince's bedchamber, giving swift orders to the attending servants. She paced about the room, frantically thinking of a way to help Akken'ar. He must not die! Not him, not after what he'd been through. It was such a simple wound, but a skag's bite was as poisonous as a viper's and the infection had spread quickly. If it had happened in her time...

Frustration made her angry and filled with despair. After a thousand years, mankind's cumulative medical knowledge had regressed to poultices and ointments.

Alone, she took the liberty of inspecting Akken'ar's outer chamber. Like his tent in the mountains, there were few furnishings attesting to the prince's affinity for simplicity. A rack of swords had been placed near the window. Next to it stood a magnificent table made from a dark wood that served as a desk.

There were a few items on it: a small stack of papers, an inkwell and pens, a book bound in black leather.

Suzanne picked it up and was surprised to discover it was a book of poetry, by a poet she did not know. She flipped to the title page and noted that the book had been printed a few hundred years ago—741 A.C. The poetry itself was simple, sometimes poorly composed and spelled, but filled with longing for peace and order, as 'in the beforetimes, when all was green and good.'

Suzanne read a few more pages, when the book fell open naturally to a much-worn section. Between the pages she found an ancient photograph, cracked and faded, but definitely taken before the Cataclysms. A tall, handsome man in a military uniform stood on the front lawn before a trim house, his arm around a smiling woman with dark hair and gentle eyes. In front of them was a little boy, about ten years old, dark-haired like the woman, but slender like the man. Susan turned the brittle photo over. In faded ink, someone had written, "My father, Major Tom Akkers and mom, Elise. July 4, 20.... "There was no name for the boy and the last two figures in the date were smudged.

Suzanne smiled. Major Akkers. Possibly Akken'ar's ancestor. And a military man. She carefully returned the precious photo to the book and set it on the table.

She jumped when two anxious servants entered the room carrying a stack of clean towels and a large pitcher of water.

"Thank you. Please take them to Master Melchor." She followed the servants into the bedchamber, making sure they obeyed her instructions. When they left, she approached the Healer. "How can I help?" she asked.

"My apprentices are exhausted. They've been up nearly all night and need some rest. You could help by sponging down the prince's skin. He's much too hot."

Suzanne nodded and sat by Akken'ar's bed, assuming one of the apprentice's duties. Akken'ar stirred restlessly, his head moving back and forth as he fought the fever. Suzanne touched the cool, wet cloth to the side of his face, his forehead and throat, hoping it would calm him. Tentative at first, she soon began sponging his skin with firm strokes, determined to bring down his body temperature so he could rest. His left arm was still an angry red, but not quite as swollen as it was before.

A sheet had been draped across the lower half of his body, allowing her and Master Melchor to place wet cloths over his chest. It seemed to help for a time, as Akken'ar's movements grew less frantic, but Suzanne could see it wouldn't be enough. The prince began muttering incoherently.

The Master Healer shook his head slowly. "I've done all I can. I've applied more kohr root ointment to the wound, but now it is all up to him."

"You can't give up so easily!"

"He's becoming delirious. I'm sorry, my lady, but I've seen these wounds before. The bite of a skag is nearly always fatal. We will probably lose him."

Suzanne stood, panic shattering her ability to remain calm. "No. I can't accept that."

"You will have to, soon, my lady. His fever is still very high."

She began to pace again, limping on her sore leg. Desperation made her grasp for the slightest thread of hope. If she could just go back, she might find something that would help him. Maybe something simple like aspirin. She stopped suddenly. She'd had a root canal last summer and there was a half a bottle of an antibiotic in her bathroom cabinet.

"I have to go back," she said.

Master Melchor looked at her, startled. "Your pardon, my lady? Back? Where?"

"To Knife Edge Pass. I have to go back through the Pass to my own time."

"That is madness! Master Jonovar told me of your claim about coming from the past, but..."

"I came through it once, I can go back again."

"You already did." The Master Healer stood and tossed a rag into a basin on the table by the bed. "Master Jonovar also told me what happened to poor Kyrk. Going to the Pass is useless."

Suzanne whirled on Melchor, fists clenched. "I'm not going to let Akken'ar die! Not if I can help it." She glanced at him stirring restlessly on the bed. "Keep him alive Master Healer, until I return."

Before Master Melchor could answer, she sped out of the bedchamber, hobbling as fast as she could to her own rooms. She had to find Zykov or Nathan; someone had to help her get to the Pass before it was dark.

Once in her chamber she tore open the wardrobe. She'd need her cloak and she'd have to wear the warmest dress, since her jeans had been torn to shreds by the skag.

How are you going to do this? her mind whispered. What if you don't make it? Master Melchor could be right; you could wind up like Dr. Kyrk—simply on the other side of the rocks.

I'm the Wordsayer, she thought angrily. I came from the past, I can go back.

Miri entered the room from the bath chamber. "You are here, my lady. How is Prince Akken'ar?"

"Worse," she snapped.

"Oh, I—"

"Help me change, Miri," Suzanne ordered brusquely.

"Ch-ch-change? I don't understand."

"Just do it, Miri. Please. I'll need the red velvet dress. It's the warmest."

"Where are you going?" Miri's plain face was a mask of worry.

"Home."

Without another word, Miri helped her change into the lovely dress that had once been Princess Kiamma's. Somehow, it seemed right wearing a garment that had once belonged to Akken'ar's wife, as if Kiamma were going with her. Suzanne reached for her cloak and swung it around her shoulders, then felt the pockets for her gloves. Her fingers brushed against something solid inside the folds of the dress. She had forgotten all about it; the Tearstone remained in her pocket since the night she read the Sacred Text. She pulled it out and looked at it resting in her palm. It had to be the key to her entire adventure. If Dane had not given it to her, she never would have stepped through the Pass above Curly's Bar, and she knew she didn't have it with her the night Kyrk dragged her back through Knife Edge Pass. This odd little object was going to get her home.

She shoved into her pocket and hurried out to find Zykov.

* * * *

ALTHOUGH WEARY FROM the fight with the skags, it took General Zykov and three warriors less than two hours to lead Suzanne up the shortcut trail on horseback to Knife Edge Pass. By the time they arrived, it was early afternoon. The snow was melting and the warmth from the sun was becoming uncomfortably hot.

The general helped her down from her horse. "Are you certain you don't want one of my men to go with you?" he asked.

"No, I must do this myself. Besides, I don't think your men would enjoy what they might see on the other side."

Zykov merely shrugged. "Hopefully, there are no skags."

"If all goes as well, I'm certain there will be no skags on the other side."

The general had voiced no opinion about where Suzanne had originally come from; he appeared not to care. What he clearly cared about was Prince Akken'ar surviving the skag bite. Suzanne tried to explain to him what she hoped to find, on 'the other side.'

"You find what it is that will help our prince. Later, we will discuss where you come from, eh?" He grinned at her, his single eye twinkling.

Suzanne handed the reins to Zykov. "If I don't return before the sun sets, you will know I have failed and that I can't come back."

Zykov nodded somberly.

"And, if Akken'ar survives, please tell him goodbye for me," she added. "And that..."

She dared not say anything more to the general or his men. Her tears were just beneath the surface. One word and she would collapse into uncontrollable crying. She turned and faced the two spires of Knife Edge Pass. It was difficult to imagine that eleven days ago, Prince Akken'ar had found her at this exact spot. The poorly spelled plaque was still bolted into the nearby rock.

Suzanne pulled the Tearstone from her pocket. Holding it tightly in her hand, she felt its familiar coolness chill her palm. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and stepped into the fissure. In eight steps she was through to the other side.

What if she was wrong...? Slowly, she opened her eyes, afraid of what she would see.

The first thing she noticed was that Curly's bar was just as she had left it and the snow had nearly melted from the parking lot. The second thing, was that her car was gone—undoubtedly impounded. Relief forced the air from her lungs in a soft whoosh. She'd made it; she was back.

Suzanne resisted the temptation to run back through the fissure to see if General Zykov and his men were there, but quickly squelched that idea. She dared not risk upsetting the strange anomaly or unbalancing the unknown force that allowed her to pass through time as if she were simply crossing the street. Beyond the massive rock formation was another world, hundreds of lifetimes away.

Wearing a velvet embroidered gown in the middle of Curly's parking lot looked decidedly out-of-place, but she needed to use the nearest telephone. The patrons inside Curly's bar would just have to have to get over it. Besides, she'd rather look like a character in *Hamlet*, than a biker babe.

The noise of country western music and the stink of cigarette smoke assaulted her the moment she stepped inside Splitrock Bar. All conversation ceased as the handful of customers gaped at her.

Well, at least she wasn't carrying a sword.

Curly stepped from behind the bar. "You lookin' for something, lady?" he asked.

Suzanne shook her head. Without using the respectful 'my,' the word 'lady,' coming from Curly's lips, sounded like an insult rather than a courtesy.

"I was hoping I might use your phone."

Curly pointed to the payphone in the back corner. She gathered her heavy skirts and hurried past bearded men wearing black leather with chrome chains dangling from their belts. Having not seen a telephone in over a week, the receiver felt strange in her hand, like a forbidden object. She punched 9-1-1 and prayed the operator would connect her to the county sheriff's office.

"9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

"Please connect me to the sheriff's department."

"What is your emergency?" the dispatcher asked again.

"I need to speak with Sheriff McKenna."

"I cannot help you unless you state your emergency."

Suzanne took a deep, calming breath. Idiot woman. "Okay. This is an emergency. Sheriff McKenna needs to come to Splitrock Bar before I take a sword and slit my throat." She slammed the receiver down and hurried through the bar, outside, into the blinding bright sunshine.

"Bad drugs," she heard someone at the bar mutter.

In less than ten minutes, Dane's gleaming SUV with its flashing rack of lights and whipping radio antennas screeched to a halt in front of the bar. Dane jumped out, not even slamming the vehicle door shut.

Suzanne had to smile. It was so good to see him again. At first he didn't recognize her. He stopped, then snatched the sunglasses from his eyes.

"God Almighty! Suzanne!"

"Yes, Dane, it's me." She ran up to him and almost threw her arms around his neck.

"When I got the dispatch, I came as fast as I could ... I mean, I didn't know ... I thought you were another nut."

"Close." She grinned.

He took in the gray cloak and the richly embroidered gown. "Where have you been? I mean, what's with the getup?"

"I don't have a lot of time, Dane, and I can't tell you everything, but you've got to take me home. Now."

He struggled to answer her for a moment. "Suzanne, you've been missing for over ten days. There have been search parties out combing the woods looking for you; you've been on TV. Everyone thinks you've

been kidnapped by some psycho serial-killer."

She held up her hands. "I'm fine. Really. Please take me home. On the way, I'll try to explain a few things."

Dane's worried look slowly changed to reluctant consent. "Okay. Get in. This had better be damn good!"

On the way to her house, she began by pulling the Tearstone out of her pocket. "It started with this, Dane."

During the short drive back to her house, Suzanne related the extraordinary events after she had gone through Splitrock. Explaining the Cataclysms was the most difficult and she could tell he was having trouble accepting it.

"That's pretty hard to believe," he said skeptically. "Especially the part about those ... skag-things."

She looked out the car window, watching the forest slip by. "I know, but it's true." Suzanne could scarcely understand it herself. The entire journey seemed like a strange dream. Perhaps it was. After all, she reasoned, Alice's adventure in Wonderland had been a dream.

When Dane stopped the car, Suzanne gazed longingly at her home—her refuge from the world. She opened the car door and slid out, but a sudden stab of pain reminded her that the wound on her leg was not a dream. Akken'ar's wound was probably worse. She had to go back.

She opened the door and stepped inside her house, feeling like a stranger who was just seeing it for the first time. But everything was exactly as she left had it, except the bird feeders were empty.

"The place should be okay," Dane said. "I kept an eye on it while you were gone."

"Thanks." Suzanne limped slowly into the kitchen and noticed that Legolas' automatic feeder was also empty. She hastily refilled it, hoping she would see her cat before she returned.

Dane headed back outside. "I'll wait for you in the car."

Finding the antibiotic took some time since she couldn't remember if she had left it in a drawer in her bedroom or stashed it under the sink in the bathroom. It was in neither place. She finally found it in a kitchen cupboard, behind the white vinegar and a tin of cloves. She checked the plastic container and noted the expiration date. It was valid, but how much should she give Akken'ar? She pocketed the bottle. She'd think about that when she returned ... if he was still alive.

Anxious to return to Ironhold, Suzanne hurried through house and out the front door. She stopped and turned around, taking in every detail of her charming little house, burning them into her memory like a hot iron. She might not see her home again.

"I think we should get going," Dane called to her.

Suzanne clambered awkwardly into the large SUV and almost sat on a heavy black flashlight. Fumbling with her cloak and the heavy folds of velvet, she wedged the flashlight between her seat and the door.

"Okay, let's go back. I need to be there before it gets dark."

Dane hesitated. "I think we ought to get you checked out first ... have someone look at your leg."

She looked at him. "What do you mean? I can't go anywhere. I have to get back to Splitrock."

He didn't answer, but drove the SUV down her narrow drive to the paved road.

"Dane! You have to take me back to Curly's!"

"All right, maybe tomorrow," he said in a calming voice. "But right now, I think you should see a doctor."

"I don't want to see a doctor; I don't need to see a doctor. *Ineed* to get back to Splitrock. A man's life depends on it."

When he didn't answer, Suzanne suddenly realized what Dane was doing. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Suzanne..."

"You have no intention of ever taking me back." She folded her arms across her chest. "Some friend you've turned out to be." She glared at him, at his neatly pressed uniform, the shotgun bracketed into the floor of the car ... his badge. All the symbols of his job and responsibilities.

She watched him radio in his location then advise dispatch where he was heading. Evergreen Mountain Hospital ... and they had a psychiatric ward.

Furious, she sat helplessly as he sped through Black Elk. "You can't do this, Dane—hold me against my will. I'm not crazy and I haven't committed a crime." *Yet*, she thought angrily.

"I'm doing this for your own good. Once I get you checked out, you can do whatever you want."

"What I want is for you to drive me back to Splitrock Pass. Please, Dane."

"Let's get you some help."

Suzanne reached for his arm. "Dane, stop. I need to talk to you, right now."

The sheriff obliged her by pulling over to the side of the road and parking the car. He turned in the seat to face her. "All right. I'm listening."

"But you don't believe a word I've said."

"Suzanne, I want to believe you, but—you've got a great imagination..."

Her voice turned cold. "You think I made this up, like some fantasy story I'm going to write. I didn't. How could I? Even in my wildest imagination, I could never have dreamed up what I've seen or what has happened to me." She looked away from him, too angry to continue.

He held up his hands. "Okay, let's say you *did* experience what you say happened to you. How do you explain this to everyone?"

"I don't. Why should I? It's nobody's business. Besides no one knows but you."

His silence gave Suzanne a low chill up her back. "This is really about that guy in Curly's, the one you didn't arrest."

"No, you don't understand—"

"Oh, yes I do! You've been wallowing in guilt since that night when you told me you let him go. Only this time, you're going to fix it—you're not going to let the wacko get away. Let me out of here." She reached for the handle and started to open the door when Dane reached across the space between them and grabbed her arm.

"Suzanne, you can't go. You're sick..."

Before she realized what she was doing, Suzanne snatched the flashlight and struck Dane on the side of the head. Dane collapsed against the steering wheel, a fine thread of blood trickling from his scalp.

For a horrified second, she thought she'd killed him. Suzanne pressed her fingers to his neck, finding his pulse. It was there, beating steadily, but he was knocked out cold. She'd just committed a serious crime—striking a law enforcement officer. Panic made her heart beat wildly in her chest. She looked around. No one had driven by, so hopefully no one had seen her.

She got out of the SUV and hobbled around to the driver's side. Dane was a big man and she knew she couldn't lift him. She pulled the door open and allowed him to fall against her. Clumsily, she managed to slide him out of the car and dragged him onto the wide shoulder, well away from the pavement. From the back of the SUV she found a blanket and a couple of clean, old towels. Gently she spread the blanket over him and made a pillow of the towels.

"I'm sorry, Dane," she whispered, tucking the edge of the blanket around his shoulders. "Please forgive me."

Suzanne clambered back into the SUV, and gunned it. No one would stop her since she was driving a sheriff's vehicle. Fortunately, there was very little traffic, but it wouldn't take long for the cops to find Dane and then come after her. And they would; they'd hunt her down like a rabid dog. First, they'd have to catch her. She roared up the old logging road toward Curly's at eighty miles an hour.

Five miles seemed like fifty. She looked in the rear view mirror. Maybe it was her imagination, but she was certain she saw the glittering lights of a law enforcement car chasing her.

The late afternoon sun winked through the trees as she tore into Curly's parking lot and slammed on the brakes. She had just enough time to get out of the car and hobble up the hill. After making sure she still had the Tearstone and the bottle of pills, she closed her eyes and ran into fissure.

Chapter Fourteen

AKKEN'AR WAS NO worse, but he was no better. His already pale skin was as white as the new snowfall outside the window. Dark circles under his eyes made him appear gaunt and wasted. His thick black hair lay in damp coils on the pillow.

The Master Healer gave Suzanne a wan smile as she entered the bedchamber. He had not left the

prince's side since she had gone to the Pass and he was exhausted from long hours without sleep. But the plastic bottle containing the antibiotic tablets fascinated him. He tapped it with a fingernail. "I have never seen a material like this; what is it? Glass of some kind?"

"No, Master Melchor, it is a man-made substance called plastic, undoubtedly something the former Saint Kyrk did not want you to know about."

"Amazing. I can see it is water-proof, won't rust, mold, or shatter into dangerous fragments like glass."

"Yes, but this particular kind of plastic can break or melt."

Melchor studied the small label on the container with keen interest, since she could not explain how the pills worked, what they were made of, or how many he should give Prince Akken'ar. "Extraordinary," he muttered. "Remarkable."

"It says you were to take two tablets every eight hours. What happened to you after eight hours?"

"Well, I was much better and I didn't need to take anymore." She saw Melchor's brow furrow, perplexed. "Believe me, Master Healer, they work and they ought to work on Prince Akken'ar because he's never had anything like this in his system before."

Melchor nodded. "Indeed. Very well, we have nothing to lose. Let us give him two and wait for the results."

Although restless and incoherent, Akken'ar was somewhat aware of having to swallow two of the tablets. While she held his head, the Healer managed to get a cupful of water down his throat.

Master Melchor sagged into another chair on the other side and leaned back, eyes closed. Soon, he was nodding off, but Suzanne was too restless to sleep. Her conscience prodded her.

She realized she could never go back to her cottage. Once Dane regained consciousness, he'd place her on his personal, most-wanted list. She went from being a slightly eccentric writer to a potential cop-killer. The thought was unsettling. She hadn't meant to hurt Dane, but he refused to understand her predicament or help her. In reality, the incident had happened centuries ago and Dane was long-dead. Some consolation.

Suzanne turned her attention to Akken'ar. He had stopped thrashing and lay quietly, asleep. She touched his brow and noted that his skin was cool and dry. The fever had broken. At least now she could forgive herself for knocking out poor Dane. The sheriff had probably gone to his grave, cursing her memory. Well, so be it. All that mattered was Akken'ar's recovery.

She regretted not bringing her wristwatch; she had no way of knowing how much time had passed. Too tired to worry any longer, Suzanne tucked her feet under her and leaned against the back of the chair. She couldn't sleep, but was content to watch Akken'ar rest and contemplate her options.

It might not be so bad living here, she reasoned. With Master Eika's help, she could reorganize the Library and perhaps find a way to teach everyone to read and write ... correctly. A daunting task, but a satisfying one. Enough to fill a lifetime.

It was dark when she awoke to the sound of soft muttering. Master Melchor appeared to have heard it, too. He leaned over the bed and pressed the back of his hand to Akken'ar's brow.

"No fever. I think he's just dreaming." The Master Healer uncovered Akken'ar's left arm and examined it closely. A broad grin lit up his stern features. "Look, my lady. Your tablets appear to have worked."

Tears of relief gathered in her eyes. The alarming redness was nearly gone and there was no swelling.

"I believe he will make a complete recovery," the Healer whispered. "But I will let him continue to sleep."

Akken'ar's muttering grew louder, more coherent. He turned his head from side to side; his voice became frantic.

"Kiamma, no. Don't go! Don't ... don't ... !"

Master Melchor shook the prince's shoulder and patted his cheeks. "My lord, my lord! Wake up! You are dreaming."

He awoke with start, arching upward from the bed, his eyes wild with fear as he stared at the Master Healer. "What ... is happening?"

Melchor calmed him with a quiet voice. "You had a bad dream, my lord. Go back to sleep." He pushed him down gently. "Go back to sleep."

Akken'ar's breathing eased and the frenzied look left his eyes. He fell back onto the pillows and in moments was asleep.

Suzanne looked away. Her initial joy, seeing that he would survive, had flattened into despair. Now, she had her answer. Even though he had been dreaming, Akken'ar still loved Kiamma ... and always would.

Too many years of staying in seclusion, hiding in the sanctuary of her home, away from emotional involvement had left her an empty, soulless husk that had forgotten what it meant to love someone. Foolishly, she had blamed it all on David. But retreating had been easy. She thought she'd never again have to experience the pain of a broken heart. It had been safer dreaming up and writing about men who never existed, but lived, larger-than-life in her imagination.

And yet, here he was, a living, breathing man beyond anything her imagination could ever invent. It had taken Suzanne ten days to fall in love with Akken'ar and only now did she realize it was too late. His gentle kiss in the atrium had been her last chance. It didn't matter anymore where she lived out her dry, little life: in her own time, penning stories to fulfill fantasies for herself and others; or here, in a time and place where she would always be respectfully held at arms length as the revered Wordsayer. Could she live her entire life like that?

Akken'ar would never love her. When he awakened, she would hold him to his promise. She would go back, one last time, and face Dane McKenna's wrath and a lifetime of regrets.

Bitterly she reminded herself that Alice never fell in love while she was in Wonderland. Alice woke up and went home to her cat.

* * * *

AKKEN'AR STOOD NEAR the window of his private chamber looking down at the throng of gleeful townspeople dancing in the streets. Victory over the skags had been complete—well, nearly complete. A

handful escaped, but they would soon be caught. For now, san'Sorafel was jubilant and although he had recovered from the skag bite, Master Melchor forbade him the rare pleasure of dancing. In a few days, Akken'ar would speak to the people of his city, proclaiming the victory and perhaps declare a ceremonial day of celebration. Master Jonovar had suggested that idea and the people would certainly approve.

Akken'ar flexed his arm. Suzanne's tablets had worked. In a week the bandages would come off. The wound did not hurt, but there would always be a small scar where the Healer had lanced it. Another battle scar, along with all the others...

He heard a polite knock. "Enter."

General Zykov entered and bowed. "Highness, I have the final report from the canyon rim."

Akken'ar turned around. "Excellent. Let me hear it."

"The fires have finally died out; the new snowfall has helped extinguish it. Several work teams have been organized to bury the skags and cover the entire canyon with earth and rocks. I have also ordered small detachments of warriors to search the surrounding forests for any skags that might have escaped. Some got away, but we'll find them."

Akken'ar nodded. "How many men did we lose?"

"Only six. Several were wounded or burned, but they'll pull through. It appears you were the only one who sustained a bite wound, my lord."

"No doubt, I was the most deserving," he said sardonically.

"The fortunate news is that we have two barrels left of the burning fuel."

"That's good news. When the spring comes, I want more forays to the forbidden lands. Every barrel of that fuel must be found, in case we fight more skags, and anything else that might be useful."

Zykov chuckled. "The forbidden lands are not so forbidden now, eh?"

"Those lands are the places where our ancestors lived. I believe they would have wanted us to have their artifacts, their tools and machines. We will take them and learn how to use them again. We will make a better life for our people."

"Then, Saint Kyrk was wrong?"

"Saint Kyrk was no saint. He was a frightened, insane man who became a skag."

Zykov remained silent for a moment. "I have another report which does concern Saint ... er, Kyrk."

Akken'ar looked at the general skeptically. "I'm listening."

"A detachment was sent out to find and bury Kyrk's body. Something quite strange has happened, my lord. It was never found."

"They never found Kyrk's body? It was near the Pass, buried in the snow. You could not miss it."

"I know, but one of the warriors I sent had been with you the night Kyrk was ... When he died."

Troubled, Akken'ar turned from Zykov. "I saw him die. The sword went completely through his body."

"But he had become a skag, my lord."

"No! He had not completely changed over. He still had the ability to reason, to speak. Besides, we waited to make sure the wound did not regenerate." He looked at Zykov. "Kyrk was dead; I know it."

The general shook his head. "I have no other explanation. Perhaps a wild animal dragged it off."

Akken'ar did not like the explanation, but it was the only one that made sense. It nagged him for the rest of the day. Kyrk was dead. He had to be.

* * * *

WITHOUT THE FEAR of skags, the hunters of san'Sorafel began making plans to search for game.

They would have to journey far since there was little game, if any, in the nearby woods. Winter had barely begun and while there was plenty of salted drymeat and fish, the hunters were determined to find fresh meat before the severe weather set in.

Still wary of any remaining skags, a large hunting party left early the next morning, escorted by six battle-wise warriors who carried bows and arrows as well as swords. They also carried in their packs a small container of the fire fuel, as they now called it.

Life within the keep slowly returned to normal. Except for Masters Jonovar and Eika, those who lived within Ironhold fell into their familiar routines. The two Master Scribes found themselves in the uncomfortable position of trying to find new purpose to their work.

After recuperating from his head wound, Master Eika began the enormous task of opening the library below the sanctuary and cataloging all the books. At first, Master Jonovar did not approve but finally relented. He soon took it upon himself to find all the books written on the history of the Ancients. He would make a thorough study of the past and compose the first definitive book on the events before the Cataclysms.

It pleased Akken'ar that Lady Suzanne decided to assist them. She would always be honored as the Wordsayer, the one who read the Sacred Text and discovered the way to defeat the skags. He owed everything to her, including his own life. Master Melchor told him of her journey through the Pass, back to her own time to find the mysterious 'antibiotics' that helped heal his arm. The Master Healer also showed him the curious round box and the white tablets.

"If we could find more of these, we could cure anything!"

"What are you suggesting? That the Wordsayer make more journeys through Knife Edge Pass to find things from her time and bring them to us? She is not a hound, Master Healer. Besides, I do think we should be interfering with forces we do not understand. The Pass is dangerous and I will not risk her life running errands for you."

"But she has the way to help us! She can restore knowledge, vast amounts of information that has been lost for centuries. Please consider this, my lord!"

He whirled on Melchor. "No! She has risked her life helping us destroy the skags. That is enough. Do

not push me on this matter. Lady Suzanne will not be asked to do anything more. She is the Wordsayer; she has fulfilled the prophecy." Akken'ar glared at the Master Healer. "You have my permission to leave."

* * * *

TWO DAYS LATER, Akken'ar summoned Suzanne. He asked to meet her in the atrium because he knew she liked being among his grandmother's flowers. The atrium had become a special place where they could speak alone and not be interrupted by anxious scribes or annoying courtiers.

The morning sun streamed through the lustrous paneled glass, filling the atrium in tawny warm light. This time, he waited for her.

The door opened and Suzanne slipped in. Dressed in a dark green dress with gold embroidery across the shoulders, he suddenly realized it had been Kiamma's. Seeing it on any other woman would have made him angry, but the hunter green suited Suzanne. For once Akken'ar abandoned his strict code of deference and allowed himself to appreciate her as a woman and not as the Wordsayer. Two weeks ago he had lifted her down from the traveling sleigh and savored the feel of her between his hands, her fragrance filling his head. Watching her hurrying toward him brought the memory back into sharp clarity. If he could have that moment again...

Suzanne curtseyed to him. "I came as fast as I could. Master Eika was having me read a passage from one of the new books he has recently discovered."

"I am certain he appreciates what you are doing for him and his beloved Library." Akken'ar smiled slightly. "I fear we shall never see him again; he is lost in all those books."

She nodded. "Yesterday, I had to remind him to eat. And Master Jonovar is obsessed with finding historical records before the Cataclysms."

"Do you think he will find them?"

"Oh, yes. The original Library was quite extensive. I believe it was connected with a university."

"A uni..vers...?"

"University. A school for higher learning; very advanced and technical." She returned his smile. "The Master Scribes will not be seen again for a long, long time."

An awkward pause hung between them. Akken'ar struggled to say the right words, but she saved him the trouble.

"You wanted to speak to me?" she asked.

"Yes. It is my intention to keep my promise to you. When you are ready, I will take you back to Knife Edge Pass." He watched her face closely. Her dark, lustrous eyes were unreadable. Only the slight tightening of her mouth hinted ... disappointment?

"Oh," she said softly.

"Of course, if you wish to stay."

"Oh, no. I mean, thank you, but I think I've overstayed my welcome long enough." She attempted another smile, but it faded quickly.

Akken'ar took a step closer to her. "You don't have to go, my lady. You will always be welcome in Ironhold."

"I know, but I think it would be best if I returned to my world in my time. It seems so far away now, like remembering someone else's life."

"Very well. We will leave in the morning."

She nodded. "I'll be ready."

"There is one more thing I need to tell you. Kyrk's body was never found."

Suzanne's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"General Zykov believes a wild animal dragged it off. I'm not so certain."

"But, he was dead. I saw it. Dr. Kyrk could not have survived that wound. The sword went completely through his chest."

"I know, but I am uneasy. When we arrive at the Pass, I will go with you through the opening to the other side."

"All right. But I don't think anything will happen. Even if Kyrk did survive, he can't go back to my time without the Tearstone."

"Still, we will take no chances. Suzanne, I do not understand how this happens, but there is a chance we may disturb it. If Kyrk is alive, he must not follow you through the Pass."

"You're right." She looked up at him, her eyes filled with gentle mischief. "Maybe this will give you a chance to see where I come from."

"I would like that very much."

She turned to go. "Goodnight, Your Highness."

He bowed slightly to her. "Goodnight, Lady Wordsayer."

Akken'ar watched her move slowly toward the door. The soft whisper of her skirts brushing against the floor wasn't enough to silence the brittle sound of his shattering heart.

* * * *

BRIGHT SUNSHINE SKIMMED over the fresh snow, lifting Suzanne's spirits as Akken'ar helped her onto her horse. At least it would be a beautiful day for her journey home. Legolas would be happy to see her; after some loud complaining followed by a plate of his favorite cat food, he'd hop up onto her monitor and take a nap.

Which reminded Suzanne of her unfinished manuscript. Her editor had probably torn up her contract by now. She'd have to concoct some kind of excuse Lorraine would believe. Well, she *was* a writer.

Another thought was more sobering: Dane. Some wildly amusing lie might convince her editor, but not Sheriff McKenna. The moment he discovered she was back in Black Elk, he'd have her arrested and hauled off to jail. Assaulting a law enforcement officer and stealing his car were serious crimes. She knew the police took great exception when it came to misdeeds against their own. If Dane didn't bring charges against her, the entire County Sheriff's Department would get a rope and find a tree.

Then again, her lawyer might get her off with a plea of insanity. Suzanne sighed. She could just imagine the jeers when she told her story to the jury.

At a wide place in the trail, Akken'ar had them stop and rest for a few moments. Suzanne turned in the saddle and gazed down at san'Sorafel and the four black towers of Ironhold. She would miss it and everyone she had come to know and care for. Dear Master Eika, tripping over the edge of his robe as he rushed up to offer his thanks; Master Jonovar, filled with his own self-importance, making pompous farewell speeches and Master Melchor, placing a gentle goodbye kiss her cheek.

Overcome with grief, Miri flung herself into Suzanne's arms, sobbing. She tried to comfort the young servant girl with half-hearted words of encouragement. "You'll be all right, Miri. Continue practicing your reading and help Master Eika with his books. He can't catalog the entire library by himself."

Suzanne picked up Dinah and cuddled the black cat. "Take care of Miri, sweetie, and don't let any mice into the keep."

"Meowrll."

The last to say farewell was Master Nathan. He bowed to her. "I hope you'll forgive me, my lady."

"Of course. I'm only sorry Dr. Kyrk had deceived you and your grandfather for so long. But he's gone and you now have the chance to correct the wrongs he has done to you and all Myloria."

Nathan bowed again. "Thank you, Lady Wordsayer."

Bittersweet goodbyes were always painful and Suzanne did not look forward to saying goodbye to Akken'ar. She turned back in the saddle and nudged her horse into a walk. Ahead, she saw the prince speaking to one of his warriors, making emphatic gestures with his left hand. He was well; the arm had healed completely. She could be proud she had been key to Akken'ar's recovery. She'd helped him defeat the skags. She'd done the right thing. As they drew closer to Knife Edge Pass, Suzanne wondered if she was doing the right thing, this time.

Chapter Fifteen

AS SOON AS they reached the Pass, the sun disappeared behind gathering gray clouds, casting somber light over the trail. Suzanne smelled the sharp tang of winter in the air and hoped she would make it home before it began snowing.

If she had been uneasy about saying goodbye to Akken'ar, it soon faded when she realized he had no intention of simply bidding her a sad farewell and riding away. He dismounted and handed the reins to one of the warriors, then helped her down from her horse.

"I have decided I will accompany you through the Pass. If something were to happen, I will be able to

bring you back."

She knew what he meant if 'something were to happen.' Although she doubted Dr. Kyrk had survived, she had no intention of questioning Akken'ar's decision.

He turned to his men and gave stern orders: if he did not return by dark, it meant either he would not be able to return, or Kyrk was still alive and had killed him. The warriors were to return to Ironhold and warn Zykov.

Suzanne said her hasty farewells and turned to Akken'ar. He mounted his restive black horse then reached down and pulled her up behind him. Settled firmly on the horse's broad back, she wrapped her arms around Akken'ar's waist and pressed her cheek into the pelts draped across his shoulders. He heeled the big animal into the Pass and once again, Suzanne closed her eyes.

The wind blustered and beat against the rocks. Above the noise she heard Akken'ar shout, "Do you have the Tearstone?"

"Yes!"

They were through the fissure in moments and at the far opening, Akken'ar halted the horse. Suzanne opened her eyes. A light coating of snow, like fine sugar, covered Curly's parking lot, and by the tire marks, it was fresh and very wet. Only two cars were parked in front of the bar alongside Curly's motorcycle.

For a long, quiet moment, she sensed Akken'ar was making a decision: whether to help her get down, or ride on. Either curiosity or compulsion made him nudge the horse onto the open expanse of pavement. Cadenced hoof beats were muffled by the snow, but loud enough for someone to hear. She held her breath. At any moment one of Curly's customers could come out of the bar and see them.

Both Akken'ar and the horse kept a wary eye on the cars. Neither had ever seen one. Suzanne could only guess what they thought they were.

"Ride left, toward the trees; there's a hiking path."

Akken'ar nodded and reined the horse into the woods and found the narrow path. It paralleled the logging road and she hoped they wouldn't be seen moving through the underbrush or trees.

She let her breath out slowly. So far so good. They'd jumped the first hurdle.

"Where does this pathway lead?" he asked.

"It goes for about three miles, then turns onto a back road. I think we'll be all right. It isn't uncommon for people to be seen riding horses through these woods."

Akken'ar said nothing but kept the horse moving at a brisk pace. Suzanne had to admire his trust; he had no idea where she was directing him.

At the turn to the back road he stopped. "What were those things we saw?"

"They're cars ... machines that move by themselves. They are used for transportation."

"How does this happen?"

Suzanne peered around his shoulder. "It's hard to explain. When we get to my house, I'll show you."

He chirruped to the horse and they headed onto the snow-dusted gravel road. They passed a few secluded houses, but saw no one, until they came to a paved street. This was the last hurdle. Her private drive was less than a mile away, but it meant they would have to ride on the side of the road.

Akken'ar studied the black pavement and the yellow stripe down the middle. "Which side is for horses?"

"Usually cars travel on the pavement. It would be best if we stayed on the side. Turn left again."

He obliged her and kneed the horse onto the dirt shoulder. This was the most dangerous leg of their journey. Not only were they out in the open, but on the wrong side of the road. At any moment a car could come by and scare Akken'ar's horse. She could see the headlines in the morning paper: Car Hits Barbarian on Horseback. Fugitive Captured. Akken'ar sensed her anxiety. He urged the horse into a smooth rapid trot, taking them closer to her house.

At a curve, she heard it: a car coming up behind them, fast. "Akken'ar, a car is coming. They are not dangerous unless you get in their way. Ride into that drive and wait till it goes by."

The horse heard it too and began to snort and jig. Akken'ar stayed firmly in control. He urged the animal into the private drive, much like hers that offered some protection from the oncoming car.

A pickup roared by filled with after-school teenagers, who hooted, hollered and gave them a wild thumbs up. The war animal stood stock still, snorting, eyes bulging at the disappearing truck.

"I assume there are other things that can be transported," Akken'ar said dryly.

They completed their journey, turning down Suzanne's tree-lined drive to her house. For the second time that week, she gazed longingly at her cherished hide-away—the mossy wood shingles, her bird feeders and hanging flower pots, the covered porch with her favorite rocker where she sat outside on warm summer nights.

She slid from the horse's back at the same time Legolas slipped around the corner. He was a bit thin, but otherwise in good shape. "Legolas!" She scooped the cat into her arms, burying her nose in his soft fur.

The cat purred loudly and butted his head against her chin, determined to get a scratch. *I'm sick of squirrels. And birds. Get me a can of tuna.*

Akken'ar dismounted and tied the reins to a pillar supporting the porch. "This is where you come from?"

"Yes. This is where the Wordsayer lives."

"I have seen houses like this," he said, "in pictures. But I do not understand why you live here all alone. It is too dangerous."

"It hasn't been dangerous ... until recently. Come in; I'll show you around." She found the spare key under a small pot of rosemary and opened the door.

Akken'ar ducked through the doorway into the main living area and stopped. It was the first time she

had seen him look astonished. He gazed around the room, taking in the stone fireplace, the television, computer, and the rows of framed glossy pictures, depicting the cover art for each of her books. She decided against showing him how the computer or the television worked, but he did have a keen interest in the cover art hanging on the wall.

He stepped closer to the rows of framed art work, examining each cover. One in particular caught his attention, which made Suzanne blush with embarrassment. She watched him carefully mouth the words of the title. It was one thing to imagine what a barbarian warrior might look like for a book cover, but entirely something else having the living example standing in her living room. By comparison, Akken'ar's fierce elegance made the "The Lord of Dores'Mar" look like a caricature, an exaggerated cliché.

Akken'ar tapped the glass covering the picture. "This Lord of Dores'Mar carries an excellent sword, but I do not understand why he is not wearing clothes or armor. He cannot fight without armor."

Suzanne looked away and smiled. So, the fictional Lord Kett was a poor warrior for not wearing hauberk, helm, and chain mail. At least her female fans didn't mind his bare, muscled chest. Too bad they would never see Akken'ar's.

"He's just a character in a book. He's not real."

Akken'ar nodded. "Ah." He moved on to the bookshelf in the short hallway adjacent to the living area. He scanned the dozens of titles. "You have so many," he exclaimed. "How is it that you have your own library?"

"Because books are easily acquired. There are stores ... shops ... that sell books. I can buy as many as I like."

She reached for a slim volume of Shakespeare's Sonnets. "Perhaps you will enjoy this..."

He took the book from her and riffled through the pages, reading a line or two. "You would give me this?"

"Of course."

He bowed slightly. "I am honored, Lady Wordsayer."

She placed a light hand on his arm. "In my house, I'm not the Wordsayer. Please, call me Suzanne."

"As you wish."

He set the book on a nearby table and followed her into the bathroom where she reached for the switch and flipped the lights on. He blinked rapidly and looked around for the source of the light. She pointed to the fixture in the ceiling then switched the lights off, then back on. He watched her flip the lights on and off a few more times.

"Here, try it yourself."

Akken'ar cautiously touched the switch then pulled his hand back. "It is not hot," he observed.

"No. It's just a switch that opens and closes an electric current."

"I have heard of electricity, though I have never seen it work." He turned the switch on and stared at the lights, awestruck. Off, on, off, on, off, on. He was utterly fascinated.

He noticed the bath tub. "For bathing, I assume. We have bathing rooms in Ironhold," he said with a touch of pride in his voice.

"Yes, but my bathtub is not nearly as charming as your copper fish!"

In the bedroom, Akken'ar did not inspect anything, but remained near the door, clearly uncomfortable standing in her private sleeping space. He did, however, notice the picture of her parents on the dresser.

"Those are your ancestors?"

She picked up the photograph. "Yes, my mother and father. They died several years ago."

"I, too, have a picture of my ancestors. It is important we remember them." He studied her silently; his intense blue eyes were filled with compassion.

Suzanne held his gaze for a long, breathless moment. They had both stumbled upon something they could share: the deep need for family.

He abruptly looked away and returned to her living room, where he stood before the window, arms folded across his chest, looking out over her lawn and garden. "I see why you love my grandmother's atrium."

"I enjoy gardening very much." She didn't know what else to say. All Suzanne could think about was him, standing in her house—a magnificent man, a warrior swathed in furs, bristling with swords.

"You have so much here," he said. "Your machines and books. I now understand why you wanted to return here. Ironhold is not what you are accustomed to..."

"But you, too, have so much." Words began welling up within her, spilling out faster than she could think. She moved closer to him. "Akken'ar, the world has not been lost, even in your time; you've made me realize that. Yes, machinery and technology have been forgotten, but it can be remembered! It can be realized again. Ironhold itself is a tremendous achievement."

He slowly turned to face her. His serious gaze changing from attentive to astonishment.

"After hundreds of years ... sunpasses ...*someone* remembered how to build with stone and mortar. *Someone* had the foresight to save the Library and its books. *Someone* knew the importance of keeping san'Sorafel safe by building high walls around it. Those are extraordinary accomplishments. Mankind has survived in spite of the most terrible catastrophe, against the most appalling odds." She gestured to the computer. "This is just a thing. It was invented once, it can be invented again."

Tears gathered in her eyes, thickened her throat. Last chance, her heart whispered. "It doesn't matter which world I live in ... a-a-as long as I can be with you."

In two strides he closed the space separating them and pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against him. "Come back with me!"

She clung to him, arms around his neck, burying her face in the fur covering his shoulder. She nodded

against him. "Yes. I-I love you, Akken'ar."

He pulled away and gently took her face between his hands. A finger traced a soft line down her cheek to her lips. "I have always loved you, Suzanne, from the moment I saw you at the Pass."

This time, Akken'ar's kiss was not tentative or polite. It was fierce and possessive, followed by more kisses that claimed her eyes, cheeks and throat. Suzanne responded eagerly, giving him every particle of her heart. She belonged here, in his arms, not hiding from the world or toiling over a computer.

When he finally released her, he said, "You will not regret leaving your home and all your possessions?"

Suzanne tenderly ran her fingers up the soft pelt covering his chest to the firm line of his mouth. "No. Never. But, perhaps I can take a few things with me?"

He nodded. "You must take the picture of your ancestors and whatever else you wish."

"My cat?" She grinned at him mischievously.

Akken'ar pretended to be stern. "Your cat? How do we carry a cat on horseback?"

"I'll show you."

He kissed her again, then released her. "I will bring in a saddle pack."

She slipped reluctantly from his embrace and watched as he hurried out the front door to his horse. Suzanne hugged herself, trying to contain her unutterable joy. The long, tiresome years of self-imposed seclusion fell away. She knew where she belonged. She was going home.

In the back hall, next to her pantry she found Legolas' traveling carrier, a beautiful rectangular bag, made from a densely woven tapestry and stout nylon webbing, allowing her cat plenty of room and comfort. It also had a nylon shoulder strap. Legolas would bounce a little, but he'd survive a short horseback ride.

"Here kitty, kitty," she called.

Legolas appeared from nowhere. She picked him up and nuzzled him. "We're going on a trip. Want to go with Alice down the rabbit hole?"

Of course. Rabbits are delicious.

She stuffed Legolas into the carrier with a handful of dry cat food. He'd find plenty of mice and other rodents in Ironhold. He'd also have a girlfriend.

Suzanne scurried to her bedroom, making a mental list of what she wanted to take back with her: her parents' photo, a few pieces of family jewelry, and some items from the bathroom. Gathering everything together, she placed them into a small backpack and set it by the door.

Akken'ar returned, carrying a leather saddle pouch which he opened and thrust her backpack inside. "Do you wish to take anything else?"

"Yes, a few books." She hurried to her bookcase and hunted for the ones she wanted to take: a book on medicine for Master Melchor and a thick volume on world history, with pictures. Master Jonovar

might be insulted by her offering, but he might also be grateful to have it.

A book on grammar and English literature for Master Eika found its way into the saddle bag along with the volume of Shakespeare's Sonnets. For herself, she wasn't sure what she wanted to take, until she spotted a small book on the top shelf—a child's book, worn and dog-eared from many readings—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She smiled to herself. She'd need reference material for her next trip down the rabbit hole.

With everything ready, she picked up Legolas' bag and looped the strap over her shoulder, then nodded to Akken'ar. She looked around one last time. How would this world remember her? A reclusive author who mysteriously disappeared? Or, a crazy woman who knocked out a cop, stole his car and hid from the law for the rest of her life? It really didn't matter. Once they entered Splitrock and came out on the other side, everything and everyone she knew would be gone.

"Let's go," she said softly.

Then, she heard it. A car. Tires on the gravel drive. Suzanne peered out the narrow window at the side of the front door and gasped. "Oh, no!"

"What?" Akken'ar was at her side. "What is wrong?"

It was a large, black pickup, polished to a high gleam with a CB antennae waving from the back end. Inside were two men; one she recognized.

"Akken'ar, you must go! Now!"

"Why? Who are those men?" He grabbed her arm. "Suzanne, what do these men want?"

She hastily gathered her thoughts. "One of them is ... was a friend. He's also a kind of warrior. He is a man who represents the law." Swiftly, she compressed what had happened during her last visit. "He wants to arrest me. He'll take me away to prison!"

"I will not let him take you," he said grimly.

She clutched his arms. "Akken'ar, no! He will arrest you too. He will think you are helping me. Go now, my love." She fumbled through the folds of her dress and shoved the Tearstone into his hands.

The engine noise stopped. Truck doors slammed shut. Male voices commented about the horse tied out front.

"Go! I beg you!"

Akken'ar said nothing but slipped away behind the wall in her kitchen.

There was a polite, but firm knock. Suzanne set Legolas' bag on the floor and opened the door.

"Dane. What a surprise."

"I was about to say the same," he said coolly. "Welcome back ... or home, Suzanne."

She had never seen Dane out of uniform. A denim jacket did nothing to hide his large frame nor the

aggressive tilt of his shoulders. She also spotted the small bandage taped to his forehead.

Dane's friend, an unassuming man with wispy ginger-colored hair and pale blue eyes, smiled thinly at her.

"Why are you here, Dane?" she asked, knowing full-well the reason for his visit.

"I'm off duty and I thought I'd stop by. Curly spotted you and gave me a call."

She took a deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry about what happened. I didn't mean to hurt you, but I was desperate. I had to get back—"

"I know, to your 'future world.'"

"So, are you going to arrest me? Do I get to call my lawyer?"

Dane shook his head. "No charges are being pressed, Suzanne. I just want to help you."

A sickening fear sliced through her belly. "Help me? What do you mean?"

"I mean, I want to help you get away from this ... guy." He jerked his head in the direction of Akken'ar's horse. "The guy who owns that stallion. The one you were seen riding with."

Wary, she backed a step. "Who I choose to see is my business, Dane. You have no right interfering in my private life."

"Maybe not, but I think you have a little explaining to do. You knocked me out and stole county property to meet up with this man. And you know what I think? I think he's got some hold on you. I think he's dangerous."

"That's crazy! I'm not being held against my will."

"Maybe. That's why I brought someone to talk to you." He gestured to the man standing next to him. "This is an old friend of mine. I've known him since we were kids. He and his wife are visiting from Seattle. He's a psychiatrist, Suzanne."

"Psychologist," the man corrected Dane with a smile. "I'm also a research biologist." He held out his hand to her. "I'm Dr. Andrew Kyrk, but most folks call me Andy."

The blood left her face; her limbs went weak. Suzanne stared at him in horror. This was Kyrk, before the Cataclysms. "Oh, my God."

Dr. Kyrk shrugged and grinned. "Well, not yet."

"He just wants to talk to you, Suzanne. He can help you with..."

"My delusions, my fantasies? I don't want to talk to him, Dane, or anyone else! Now, get out. Leave my house immediately!"

Dane's brow furrowed into a frown. "It's for your own good. You need help." He took a step closer to her and tried to touch her arm. "Where is this guy? Let me talk to him. Tell him to come out."

"I am here." The soft hiss of a steel sword escaping its scabbard filled the room announcing Akken'ar's presence.

Dane's eyes grew enormous as he looked past her, over her shoulder. "Jesus," he whispered.

Dr. Kyrk blanched and backed off the porch step.

Akken'ar approached them slowly, sword held in both hands and angled for attack. A deadly light settled in his blue-black eyes. "You will not touch her."

Dane held up his hands. "Okay, buddy. Let's not do anything stupid."

"I am not the stupid one. You dare threaten her? Get your sword, fool."

"Now, wait a minute, pal. You'd better be careful who you think you're threatening. I represent the law around here. I can have you arrested."

"Get your sword."

Dane looked at her. "Suzanne, talk to this guy. He's nuts. He can't come after me with a sword."

She turned to Akken'ar. "He's right, my lord..."

Kyrk's brows shot up. "You called him 'my lord?' Interesting."

"Akken'ar, *hecan* arrest you. Please go. Leave while you can."

"I have a matter to settle with this coward," Akken'ar said coldly, never taking his gaze off the sheriff. He kept moving forward, forcing Dane and Dr. Kyrk back into the driveway.

It suddenly occurred to Suzanne that Dane wasn't carrying a weapon, but he probably had a rifle in the truck.

Dane held his hands wide, palms out, as did Kyrk. "Okay, pal. Have it your way. Nice and easy."

"Untie the horse, Suzanne," Akken'ar ordered. "And get your things."

She picked up Legolas' carrier and scurried past Dane and Kyrk to the horse. The stallion knew something was up but it stood still, ears pricked forward, watching Akken'ar. She untied the reins and waited.

"What are you going to do?" she heard Kyrk ask Dane.

"Get on my CB and call for backup," he said, never taking his eyes off Akken'ar.

Akken'ar's lip curled slightly. "Call for help? Are you afraid to stand and fight, law warrior?"

"I'm unarmed. I don't have a sword." Dane stopped backing up. "I suggest you give it up, pal. You're only making it worse for yourself and Suzanne."

"Dane, let him go. He's done nothing to you!"

"He's threatened a law officer, Suzanne. I have every right to haul his ass in for questioning."

"Drop to your knees," Akken'ar commanded.

"A smart, smart-ass, too," Dane muttered, slowly sinking to the driveway.

"Bring the horse."

She led the stallion next to Akken'ar. He swung onto the horse's back, then held his free hand out to her. It was a little awkward with the cat carrier hanging from her shoulder, but she managed to wiggle up behind him.

"You can't get away, tough guy," Dane said. "There'll be cop cars all over the county. They'll bring you in on the end of a rope."

"They will have to find me first," Akken'ar retorted.

He nudged the stallion into a fast walk, boldly circling the horse around the truck. He halted next to the rear bumper and nodded at the antenna. "Is that of any importance?" he asked her.

"Yes. It's the CB antenna. Cut it."

Akken'ar brought his sword down and slashed the antenna at its bracket, sending it spinning into the grass. He continued circling around the back of the truck to the passenger side and spun the horse on its haunches so he could reach inside the cab.

With the tip of his sword, he pointed to the CB radio on the dash. "Is this the machine to call for other law warriors?"

"Yes."

She felt his shoulder muscles bunch as he leaned to the side and thrust his sword inside the truck cab, severing the coiled microphone cord in a short, hard stroke.

"You catch on fast," she heard Dane say.

Akken'ar made a disgusted noise in his throat. "I am not ... stupid." He heeled the horse around to the front of the truck where the two men were kneeling.

Dane glared at him. "You can't get far on horseback. I'll find you."

"I hope you do," Akken'ar said coldly. "In my world, I am the law."

He kicked the horse into a gallop, heading down the driveway to the road. Just as the stallion's hooves touched the pavement, the big animal stopped and reared, bellowing and shaking its head.

At first, Suzanne wasn't sure what was happening until she felt a slight trembling course up through the body of the horse.

The animal reared again and Akken'ar fought to control him. Suzanne looked around and saw the

ground begin to buck and roll.

"Hurry, Akken'ar! It's started!"

Chapter Sixteen

THE FIRST OF the Cataclysms had begun; Suzanne knew it, but uncertain if Akken'ar fully realized what was happening. He urged the horse onto the winding county road at a brisk gallop.

The wind had suddenly turned violent, tossing the trees, scattering leaves and debris across the pavement. She clung to Akken'ar's back as he reined the horse around fallen branches and windblown underbrush.

"Where is the turn off?" he shouted above the wind.

"Next right!"

Suzanne clutched Legolas' carrier tightly under her arm as the stallion careened onto the back road. Sensing Akken'ar's urgency the big horse lunged into a pounding gallop. The narrow road twisted and turned, plunging them deeper and deeper into the forest.

Around a tight bend, Suzanne saw the headlights of an oncoming car. A frightened-looking elderly couple, fleeing the oncoming disaster headed straight for them. There was scarcely any room to pass one another and the old gentleman behind the wheel slammed on the brakes and hit the horn.

The stallion skidded to a halt and rose on its hind legs, whinnying in terror. Beneath her hands, Suzanne felt Akken'ar's thundering heart. For a fleeting moment, she had to admire his extraordinary courage. Not only was he confronting a danger he had never dealt with before, but something he had always been taught to fear.

"You're goin' the wrong way, sonny!" the old fellow called out. "Radio says the epicenter's up higher."

Akken'ar fought to control the frightened horse, unable to answer.

"Thanks," Suzanne shouted. "We're meeting up with some friends down the road. We'll get out okay!"

The man waved to them. "Good luck." He nudged his car into the shoulder, eased around them, and sped off.

With the car gone, the horse settled into a tense canter, taking them deeper into the woods. The ground rippled again, shifted, then stopped. For several minutes, Suzanne didn't speak, fearful of upsetting Akken'ar. But they had to go faster. Dane had no doubt gone into her house to use the phone. Once in his truck, he'd head straight for Curly's bar, with half a dozen sheriffs' cars behind him.

At the cutoff to the hiking trail, Akken'ar again halted. "We can go no farther." He pointed ahead. The earthquake had split the ground open, making a shallow chasm. "Is there another way around?"

"No! We'll either have to go all the way back to the county road, or make our own trail through the forest. It's too steep in some places. I'm afraid we'll get lost!"

She heard Akken'ar growl under his breath.

He spun the stallion around, trotting him down the trail a few yards then turned back. "Hold on!"

He kicked the horse into a gallop heading straight for the chasm. Suzanne closed her eyes and held her breath. The animal gathered itself, launched across the gap, and landed hard on the other side. The air left Suzanne's lungs in a whoosh; Legolas yowled, protesting the rough ride.

On familiar ground, Akken'ar pushed his brave horse into a faster gallop. Suzanne had never ridden at a dead run; it felt like they were flying.

The wind rose to a wild howl and she heard the earth rumble again. If they were truly heading in the direction of the epicenter, the earthquake would get worse, maybe opening up beneath them. At the last turn, they broke through the trees into the parking lot. All the cars were gone, except Curly's motorcycle parked near the front door.

"You ain't goin' nowhere!"

Akken'ar abruptly halted the stallion; hooves skidded over the slick pavement. Suzanne heard the ominous click of a firearm being cocked. She turned toward the sound. Directly in their path stood Curly, sighting down both barrels of his shotgun.

"I said, you ain't goin' nowhere, mountain man! Get off that horse."

"What are you doing?" she called out. "We're just heading for the pass through Splitrock. You can't stop us."

"The hell I can't." Curly nodded to her. "Sheriff McKenna just called, warned me you two was coming. I'm makin' a citizen's arrest. You've caused a lot of trouble, honey. Now, slide down off of that horse ... real slow."

She shook her head. "I can't."

Curly took a step closer. "You get down from that horse, darlin', or I blow your boyfriend's head off."

"Do as he says, Suzanne," Akken'ar ordered.

"What? He's got a gun. He'll kill you!"

"Get down. I will take care of this."

Reluctantly, she gathered Legolas' satchel and slid from the horse's back.

"Run to the Pass, Suzanne! Go!"

Suzanne backed away a few steps, unwilling to leave him.

"Now that was downright stupid," Curly said angrily. "What're you going to do, mountain boy? You gonna pull one of them swords on me?"

Akken'ar dropped the reins and reached over his right shoulder. "No. Both."

Faster than the old biker could blink, the horse was almost on top of him as one of Akken'ar's swords swung down and knocked the shotgun from his hands. It clattered to the pavement.

"What the hell...?"

Curly stumbled after the shotgun, but Akken'ar was quicker. He threw his leg over the horse's neck and slid to the ground.

"Do not touch it!" The edge of his second sword slid under Curly's chin resting lightly against his throat.

The crusty old biker held up his hands. "Okay, okay, you sonofabitch. But you ain't gonna get away."

"I have heard that boast before. I have no intention of getting caught by you or your sheriffs." He stepped back and pointed his sword at the motorcycle. "Leave on your machine."

The sky thundered and Suzanne ducked. The ground began to shake again. Trees twisted and shook, some toppled over crashing across the pavement of the parking lot.

Curly needed no other encouragement. "You're crazy, man, just like that other guy." He held up his hands high and backed away to his motorcycle. Straddling the Harley, he kicked the engine to life and roared off down the logging road.

Akken'ar's horse suddenly became wild with terror. The stallion bolted, racing around the lot, trying to find a way to escape the noise and the heaving earth beneath its hooves. Akken'ar sheathed his swords and whistled. Whether by trust or good training the animal trotted up his master.

He swung onto the horse's back and held out his hand to her. "Hurry, Suzanne. Get on."

Shouldering the cat carrier, she sprinted across the parking lot. She reached up for him, but the ground trembled and the frightened stallion danced away from her. Akken'ar reined him around and again reached out for her hand. Suzanne tried, but it was impossible to get close to the excited horse.

Flashing lights and blaring sirens only added to the chaos. Three deputy sheriff's cars and Dane's pickup pulled into the lot. Six officers immediately took their positions behind their open car doors, rifles aimed at Akken'ar.

Dane stepped forward, carrying his own rifle. "Okay, Suzanne, it's all over. Tell your wild man over there to give it up."

She saw Akken'ar again reach behind his back and draw one of his swords.

"No, Dane, I can't."

"Can't or won't? He's a dangerous man. Why the hell are you protecting him?"

"Protecting him from what? Dane, he's not a criminal." She nodded at the other deputies behind him. "What are you going to do? Shoot him because he humiliated you and got away?"

Dane's eyes narrowed. "He's wanted for questioning."

Suzanne took a step closer to him, her anger rising. "What has he done, Sheriff McKenna? What law has he broken?"

"Damaging my truck." He licked his lips and looked away, avoiding her gaze. "And aiding and abetting a felon."

"What? You lying bastard! You told me you weren't going to press charges."

When Dane didn't answer her, she suddenly understood; she saw it in his eyes. "You're jealous of him, aren't you? You can't stand the idea—"

"Suzanne, this guy is nuts. I mean, look at him! He's a riding a horse and threatening everyone with a sword. He's a wacko, for crissake, living in his own fantasy land, like he's from another world."

"That's because he is."

Dane rubbed his hand across his eyes, exasperated. "Your 'future world' nonsense? You can't expect me to believe that bullshit story."

"You must believe it, because it's true! It's going to happen whether you like it or not. It's starting now. Can't you see it? The earthquakes have started!"

It was no use arguing with him. Dane was only interested in getting even. She whirled around and hurried toward Akken'ar and the wild-eyed horse. Let Dane and his over-eager sheriff-buddies try to stop them. They'd probably miss and shoot her in the back.

"Stop! Suzanne, *I order* you to stop and—"

Another rumbling echoed across the parking lot. The ground trembled, then began to buck and twist. She started to run.

"Suzanne!" Dane shouted again.

She heard him curse then order his men to withdraw.

"Suzanne, come back!"

There was no turning back. The ground began to heave more violently; the tortured pavement groaned and buckled under her feet. She looked ahead and saw Akken'ar trying to keep the stallion steady while the earth crumbled beneath its hooves.

She glanced over her shoulder. Dane's fellow officers were no longer interested in stopping them. Fearful for their own lives, four officers scrambled into two of the vehicles, turned around and sped away. One sheriff's car remained, manned by two deputies—both looked terrified.

"Suzanne, hurry!" Akken'ar called.

"Go," she shouted. "Go to the Pass. I'll catch up."

Suddenly an enormous boom reverberated around them. Suzanne ducked and covered her ears as she saw something explode into fire behind Curly's bar. The ground rolled again and a portion of the building

buckled, the timbers splintering like twigs. Shards of broken glass from the shattered front window hurtled across the pavement.

Dane spun around and ran toward the other officers. "Call for emergency assist ... get those damn fire boys up here! The propane tank's blown!"

Fire caught the old bone-dry wood of Splitrock Bar, turning it into an inferno. Suzanne watched, horrified as the flames shot over the building, gobbling up everything in its path. They'd never put it out in time. Curly's place would be reduced to cinders in minutes.

Billowing smoke and ash made seeing Akken'ar impossible. She raced toward the Pass, hoping she would find him. But once again, the earth's rampage stopped her. The rumbling increased, becoming a loud cracking sound. She looked down and watched as the ground split open—a gaping crack that grew wider and longer as it rippled across the pavement from one side of the parking lot to the other and into the trees, blocking her way to the Pass ... and Akken'ar.

She looked up and saw him on the other side of the chasm. "Go back! You can't stay here," she cried out. "This is not your time. Go!"

Akken'ar forced the horse to the edge of the crack. "I will not leave you here!"

"There's nothing you can do. Just go," she pleaded, sobbing. Tears streamed down her face. "Get away while you can. Please, Akken'ar. Go!"

She heard the tortured despair in his voice. "Suzanne, I—"

Another boom made the stallion rear and scream in terror. The powerful impact threw her to the ground. Flying wood struck her in the leg and the side of her head. Through the smoke and dust, she saw Akken'ar one last time. He would get back, he had the Tearstone. Tears glittered in his eyes as he raised his sword to her, spun the stallion around and galloped back through the Pass.

* * * *

SUZANNE AWOKE IN a hospital room. Her head felt like it had been stuffed with wet cement then wrapped in a wet towel. She touched the bandage around her head and noticed she a several other bandages on various parts of her body: her left arm, around her legs and on her right wrist. She looked like a war casualty.

A cheerful nurse bustled into the room. "Awake, I see? Good. I'm Nurse Joy."

Suzanne closed her eyes. Of course.

"How are we feeling this afternoon?"

"We feel like crap."

"Now, now. That's not the right attitude. You were very lucky, Miss Jennings. No broken bones, just some cuts and scrapes from the flying debris."

"Great." She looked beyond the nurse to the window. Akken'ar was gone.

"Are you hungry?" Nurse Joy asked with undiminished cheer.

Suzanne sighed. "I guess so."

"Excellent. I'll have some soup and Jell-O brought up right away. Do you want a soda? How about some nice ginger ale?"

"Okay." She couldn't look at the nurse. Her happy expression was more than Suzanne could endure.

For two days, Suzanne lay in the hospital bed, watching television while her wounds healed. The earthquakes had caused considerable damage throughout the county and the entire west coast. Seismic experts were stunned by the intensity of the quake and its magnitude. From Mexico to the Canadian border, every city and town along the west coast had suffered massive damage. High rise buildings and freeways in LA had collapsed. San Francisco's bay bridges were irreparably damaged. And what was left of Seattle's Space Needle would have to be torn down.

"It's not like you guys haven't been expecting it," she muttered to the television.

The residents of Black Elk had escaped reasonably unscathed. Because there were no large buildings, most of the damage could be repaired. But everyone was terrified. There were predictions of more earthquakes including 'The Big One.'

On the last day during her recuperation, Dane came by with an enormous bouquet of flowers. He looked tired as well as apologetic. He placed the bouquet on the table next to her bed.

"Hi, Suzanne. How're you doing?"

"Fine," she said coldly.

"May I talk to you for a minute?"

She looked away from him. "Do I have a choice?"

He pulled up a chair from the corner of the room and sat down. "I came to tell you how sorry I am ... you know, for what happened at Curly's."

"You didn't cause the earthquakes."

"No, but I made a mess of everything else."

She turned her head to look at him. "Why didn't you let us go while we had the chance?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess you were right ... I was a little jealous."

"Do you believe me now?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Tears oozed from the corners of her eyes. "He can never come back, you know. And I can't go to him. You remember that marble object you gave me? It's the key that allows you to pass between our time and the future. That's how he got back."

"He could come back here, if he's still got it."

"I doubt it. I'm sure he thinks the Cataclysms started there at Curly's. To him, I've been long-dead ... for a thousand years," she whispered.

Dane looked down. "I'm really sorry," he said softly.

"I know. Thank you for the flowers, but please go." She looked away again. "Just go."

Late that afternoon, she went home in Black Elk's only taxi—Marv Braxley's battered old Ford pickup. Miraculously, there was very little damage to her house. Some of her hanging flower pots had crashed, and inside, pictures and bric-a-brac had fallen off the walls. It was messy but not irreparable.

Dane found Legolas—carrier and all—and had taken him to a vet where he was looked after until she came home. Having the cat returned to her helped ease some of the pain.

Suzanne stood before her living room window, looking out at her garden—the exact spot where Akken'ar had stood—and listened to the sound of ... nothing. Emptiness. The hollow ring of loneliness.

Legolas began rubbing around her ankles, demanding to be picked up. She scooped him up and clutched him close to her heart. And wept.

* * * *

HOW MANY TEARS can you cry until you are empty? Suzanne asked herself that question a dozen times and never found a satisfactory answer. There were days when all she did was cry. Other days, she sat by the window and stared outside at the rain. All through October she did not leave her house. She had the groceries delivered, sent out the mail with the letter carrier, and refused to answer the phone. The answering machine picked up several calls the first week she was home. Most of the calls were from out-of-state writer friends, anxious to find out if she was all right. After two weeks, the calls stopped and Suzanne realized how few friends she really had.

Dane was as good as his word. He never came by and never called. The only person who persisted in trying to reach her was her editor. Suzanne made up an excellent lie and told Lorraine she had been ill. When the earthquakes came, she had been unable to use the phone.

One overcast afternoon, Suzanne sat down at her computer and finished the book. After she sent the manuscript off, she boxed up the computer and stored it in the garage. She would never write a fantasy book again.

Watching a lot of television kept her mind off her grief. The news was always the same: earthquakes, rippling around the globe causing massive destruction. By the first of November, expectation for another big earthquake hitting the west coast was on everyone's mind. Residents of Black Elk and the entire county began packing up and fleeing to lower ground, where they felt they would be safer than living high in the mountains. Suzanne did not budge. As long as she remained close to the Pass, she made herself believe she might someday return to Ironhold.

Splitrock Bar burned to the ground and the entire area, including the old logging road had been closed off. No one was allowed up there. The local newspaper ran a story showing the history of the old WPA building and how it finally wound up as a bar. Curly never returned.

There were a few ground tremblers in November, scaring the remaining residents in Black Elk, but for

the most part the earth remained quiet. Suzanne did not care one way or the other. The Cataclysms were coming; it was only a matter of time. Staying on the higher ground was the safest place. It did occur to her that she might die in the Cataclysms. That didn't bother her either. Her heart was already dead.

Another quake hit Seattle the first day of December, causing some damage—chimneys tumbled from a few roofs; there were some buckled streets and broken windows. The most ominous sign came a week later when NASA reported a gigantic meteor was on its way to Earth. In six months, it would either break up or impact the planet.

Through the long weeks of waiting, Suzanne came to the conclusion that her purpose as the Wordsayer was finished. She had helped Akken'ar and his people defeat the skags. Maybe the prophecy did not mean for her to stay in Ironhold; that she was not to be with Akken'ar; that he was meant for another. It gave her some consolation knowing that perhaps he had found someone else and was happy. But her heart whispered, no.

After the year changed, new fears rippled through the county. Several enormous quakes hit Portland, causing the Columbia River to rise to alarming levels. In Black Elk, a town council was called and for some unknown reason, Suzanne decided to go.

Those who remained in her tiny town were older residents, too stubborn to leave because they had nowhere else to go, and a handful of die-hards who refused to believe anything worse could happen. Jim Shelby, Black Elk's mayor, Earl Osgood, head of the local emergency services and Sheriff McKenna conducted the meeting in the high school gymnasium.

It had been several weeks since Suzanne had seen anyone and she was surprised by the warm reception she received from the townspeople. She sat in the back row on a hard metal chair and watched while the three men started the meeting.

"Folks," Mayor Shelby began, "this is going to be the shortest town meeting I've ever conducted. We've got just one item on the agenda: evacuation. We gotta get out of Dodge."

There were a few polite chuckles in the small crowd.

"Now, I'm going to let Earl and Dane give you the run down on what we've got to do."

Earl Osgood stood up and cleared his throat. "Well, I've got word from the emergency folks in Olympia that this area's going to be placed under a state of emergency, which means we have to get out. So, I'm here tonight to find out if any of you need help evacuating. I've been in touch with the Red Cross and other emergency organizations down in Mount Juliet, 'bout a hundred miles west of here, and they've got some places set up where you can stay for awhile ... and I don't mean camping on cots in a gym like this, but some nice places. The owners of a small motel have volunteered to take as many folks as they can."

"How long, Earl?" one of the men in the front row asked.

"Hard to say. At least till the state of emergency is lifted."

After a half hour of heated discussions, all the townspeople agreed to leave, except Ed and Lily Watson. No amount of pleading, reasoning or cajoling convinced them. Black Elk was their home, and home was where they planned to stay.

"You'll starve up here!" Mayor Shelby exclaimed.

"We've got plenty of food, water, and firewood," Ed replied, smiling. "I just picked up a brand new generator and some gasoline, so we'll be fine."

When the meeting broke up, Dane worked his way through the crowd to speak to her. "Well, what have you decided to do?"

"I don't know yet. I really don't want to leave."

"You could get trapped up here, Suzanne. The snow hasn't been bad this winter, but it could ... You'd never get out. You'd run out of food and water."

She sighed. "I know, but at this point, I really don't care. Whether I live here, or down in Mount Juliet, the same thing is going to happen."

"So that's it? You're giving up?" He put his hands on his hips. "You know, I used to admire you because you were so ... unique, so smart. You could write stories that took me away to fantastic places and exotic worlds. I used to skip going out for a beer with my friends after work so I could get home and finish one of your books. But now, I think you're about the dumbest woman I've ever met." He shook his head. "I'll be by your place in the morning. Nine sharp. You'd better be ready to go. Even if you think so little about saving your own life, at least think about saving your damn cat!"

Dane strode out of the gymnasium without looking back. Suzanne watched him leave, too astonished to speak. The tiniest spark ignited in her heart. He was right; she couldn't waste her life up here, feeling sorry for herself. Besides, it didn't matter where she lived as long as she kept her hopes alive.

She hurried home and started packing.

* * * *

DANE PICKED HER up promptly at nine. Suzanne noted with some embarrassment that he had his CB radio fixed and the antenna had been replaced.

She dumped one large duffel bag into the back of his truck, then climbed into the front seat with Legolas' cat carrier on her lap.

Dane grinned at her. "All set?"

"Yes. Let's go." She made herself not look back at her house.

It actually felt good to be on the road, *doing something*, besides moping around all day. As they drove, Suzanne's imagination and resourcefulness began to go to work. There had to be a way to get back to Ironhold. There had to be some kind of connection or detail she was missing.

"What happened to your friend, Dr. Kyrk?" she asked.

"Andy went back to Seattle with his wife, Margaret. He's busy trying to help people cope with all the devastation."

He'll be much busier soon, trying to escape and cope with his wife's death, she thought. He'll have to deal with Vandervelde, too.

Two hours later, Dane pulled into Mount Juliet, a small logging town at the base of the Cascades, right next to the Juliet River. They drove past two huge timber yards, filled with enormous stacks of cut logs.

At the end of a tree-lined street, Dane stopped in front of a small motel with a sign that said 'Welcome Evacuees.' After inspecting her room consisting of a bed, TV, tiny bathroom and a kitchenette, she turned to him.

"Thanks, Dane, for everything." She held out her hand to him. "I appreciate your ... wake-up call, last night."

He took her hand, but didn't shake it. "No problem." He looked around. "Not bad. You and Legolas should be okay here."

"So, where will you stay?"

"The local cops have got a place set up for me and some other law enforcement guys. Listen, if you need me ... uh, need to call me ... ," He shoved a scrap of paper in her hand. "That's my cell phone number."

"Okay. Thanks." She smiled at him. He really was trying to make amends and she couldn't be angry with him any longer.

Dane left, allowing her to settle in with Legolas. The imperious feline at once claimed the middle of the bed for a short nap. One cobalt blue eye peered at her through a narrow slit.

I intend to sleep here. Where you sleep is your problem.

"Don't worry, you conceited little thief. I'm going out for a walk and do some shopping. When I get back, I expect you to find another place to sleep."

The cat yawned disdainfully and curled into a tight ball.

I think not.

Suzanne slipped out and walked into Mount Juliet to pick up a few things: some groceries, water, cat food, a flashlight and a small radio. Every emergency kit should have a radio, she reminded herself. Maybe a little camp stove in case the power went out. Or a propane lantern.

It was evident that the residents of Mount Juliet had the same idea; the shelves in the market were just about stripped bare. She managed to get most of the things on her list, except for the radio and bottled water.

"Go over to Chuck's ... the Army/Navy surplus store at the end of the block," the check out clerk advised. "They've got all that stuff. You know, walkie-talkies, old military gear."

Suzanne thanked him and hurried into 'Chuck's Military Surplus and Hardware.' The place was crammed with camping gear, rubber boots, rifles, wicked-looking knives, gas-masks and stacks of empty ammo boxes. Numerous animal trophies hung on the wall, along with fishing nets, an enormous Australian flag and a bear skin. An entire helicopter blade hung suspended from the ceiling.

A large red-haired man wearing camouflage pants, an army-green tee-shirt and a baseball cap greeted her. Metal dog-tags dangled from a chain around his neck.

"Well, howdy, little lady. I'm Van. How can I help you?"

"Oh, hi ... uh, Van." She looked around cautiously.

"What are you looking for? How about some electric sock warmers? Need those when you go huntin'. Nah, you don't want those. We've got a special on hiking boots for ladies...?"

"Well, I just need a couple of emergency things ... you know, flashlight and radio ... some bottled water. I've just been evacuated from Black Elk."

Van held up a hand. "Say no more. I've got everything you need. I know all about survival. I was in the Army—Special Ops. We'll get you squared away in no time."

Van bustled around the store picking up various items as he went. When he returned to the counter he dumped an armload of things she had never seen before.

"Let's see here. We got your radio and batteries; small camp stove with extra propane bottle; waterproof matches; five gallons of water and iodine tablets for purifying it."

"Dried fruit packs, a dozen MRE's, and a jimdandy flashlight you can take with you in the shower or deep sea diving." He winked at her and set the amazing flashlight on the pile of stuff.

"Wow. Do I need all this?"

"Believe me, little lady, I guarantee you'll be glad you've got all these supplies."

"Okay."

Van rang up the items and placed them in two huge shopping bags. "I can have this delivered," he offered.

Suzanne gave him the address and the money. While he made change, she looked into the glass display case that served as a counter. Like the store, it was filled with a jumble of so many things you could hardly sort them out.

She saw something on the bottom shelf that made her stop breathing.

"What are those?" she asked pointing to the back corner of the case.

Van looked where she was pointing. "Duck calls."

"No, those round things."

The big man opened the case and pulled out the three small objects and set them on the counter in front of her.

Suzanne felt a sudden rush of tears gather in her eyes. She clasped her hands before her mouth, too overwhelmed to speak.

"Darlin', are you okay?" Van asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm fine. How much do you want for them?"

"Well, now, I'm not sure. They've been here in the store forever. Chuck may have picked 'em up; he's always finding weird stuff. Nah, I remember now. Some old geezer brought them in here years ago; sold 'em for few bucks. Booze money, probably. I don't even know what they are. Looks like coasters or paperweights to me." He shrugged. "How about three dollars?"

"Sold." She handed him the three bills and change for tax.

Van stuffed the stone objects into a plastic bag and handed it to her. "Here you go. Now if there's anything else you need, you just give me a call." He plucked a business card from the pocket on his shirt and handed it to her.

She took the card and read the name: Karl Vandervelde. Her heart began to pound erratically and her mouth went dry.

"Most everyone calls me 'Van.' Say, aren't you that famous author? The one that writes science fiction? I love that stuff." He snapped his fingers irritably. "Suzanne ... Suzanne Something?"

"Jennings. Suzanne Jennings." She looked at Vandervelde ... Kyrk's future nemesis. The two men hadn't even met yet.

"Sometimes I'm called ... the 'Wordsayer.'"

"'Wordsayer', uh? Kinda peculiar."

She held Vandervelde's gaze for a long moment before he glanced away nervously.

"It's a special name," she said. "An honorary name."

"Well, I'll just have to remember that, won't I?" He smiled broadly.

"Yes, you will Mr. Vandervelde. You will. Thank you."

She hurried out of the store on trembling legs, clutching the Tearstones to her chest.

Chapter Seventeen

ALL HELL BROKE loose the next day.

During the night, a new quake had severely weakened the dam ten miles up the Juliet River and caused major damage to large sections of the main interstate highway. Miles of pavement had been ripped to rubble.

After a restless night pondering how Chuck's Military Surplus and Hardware came to possess three Tearstones, Suzanne awoke to the sound of blaring horns and shouting angry people. She dressed and hurried outside. Many of the residents were trying to get out of the little town using every possible alternate route. Cars, lined up for miles, inched along the main street heading out of town.

Suzanne didn't know what to do. She had no car and no other means of transportation. Running back into her motel room, she crammed everything into her duffel bag and placed a loudly-protesting Legolas into his carrier.

Suzanne tried to think calmly. Leaving Mount Juliet for some other place was out of the question now that she had the Tearstones. There must be a way to get back to Splitrock Pass. But how? The only person she knew was Dane, who was no doubt, busy trying to keep law in order while everyone fled for their lives.

But he was her only hope.

She fumbled through her purse until she found the scrap of paper containing Dane's cell number. With trembling fingers, she grabbed the room phone and punched in the number then slammed the receiver down. The phone lines were dead. She had no way of contacting him and Suzanne bitterly regretted not owning a cell phone.

The manager must have one, she thought frantically.

Suzanne shouldered her bags and raced out of the room, past the Coke machine to the manager's office. Inside, she found no one manning the front desk. She beat the little bell on the counter until she almost broke it.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone here?"

The office area was deadly quiet. Everything looked in order: the room keys hung in neat rows from a peg board on the back wall; vacation brochures attractively laid out on the counter; the guest coffee pot on the side table was full of fresh coffee. But no manager. He and his wife must have fled, too.

Panic rose within her, smothering every other emotion. She had to get out. She had to find Dane. There was no other option but to hunt for him. She looped the cat carrier strap over her left shoulder, the duffel strap over her right and headed into town.

Cars were lined up bumper-to-bumper, jockeying for position as they crawled through the town. Suzanne scurried into the street, hopping between cars and over bumpers while keeping an eye out for anyone who looked like they were in charge.

At a major intersection she spotted four harassed-looking highway patrolmen trying to keep traffic moving.

She hurried up to the nearest one. "I'm sorry to bother you, but have you seen Sheriff Dane McKenna from Black Elk?"

"Sorry ma'am, don't know him."

"Where do you think I might find him?"

"You might try the airport. There's a bunch of county sheriffs evacuating hospital patients and handicapped folks."

"Where's that?"

The officer frowned and shook his head. "I believe it's about five miles south." He pointed behind him. "Down that route. Sorry. I'm not being very helpful, but I usually don't work this area of the state; I was called in from up north."

"Oh. Well, thank you anyway." Great. Five miles. It might as well be five million. She shouldered Legolas' carrier and picked up her duffel. Five miles really wasn't too far, she reasoned. If she didn't stop, she might make it in an hour or two.

Walking against the flow of traffic became increasingly difficult as more and more desperate drivers drove onto the shoulder or over sidewalks trying to get around the traffic jam. Suzanne walked across lawns and gardens just to keep out of the way, when she suddenly heard the loud, insistent blare of a honking horn. Looking around she saw Karl Vandervelde waving to her from inside his car, heading south ... toward the airport.

"Hurry up! I'll give you a ride."

Suzanne scurried across the street and jumped into his ... She did a double-take. It was a Humvee, a savage-looking vehicle, painted camo-green and bristling with radio antennas.

"Where are you heading?"

Van grinned at her. "How do you like my big bad girl?"

Suzanne slammed the door. "She's ... amazing."

"Yep. She's my darlin'." Van patted the dash. "I'm on my way to my sister's place in Walla Walla. Now, where can I take you?"

"Could you drop me off at the airport?"

"The airport? You won't be catching too many flights this afternoon." Van settled amber-colored aviator sunglasses over his eyes, then put his 'big bad girl' into gear.

"I know. Please, just get me there."

Vandervelde nodded and headed south, bouncing the monstrous vehicle over culverts and ruts, weaving in and out of traffic until they came to the end of the line of cars heading the other way. Once on open pavement, he hit the gas and his 'darlin' took off.

Suzanne kept silent during most of the trip, going over and over the extraordinary events that had happened in the last twenty-four hours—meeting Vandervelde and finding the Tearstones. It was more than just a coincidence; it meant something and she couldn't quite place it.

Traveling five miles took no time. Soon they were roaring down the road to the small rural airport, bouncing over pot-holes and broken pavement. Suzanne glanced at Van's profile. The man was enjoying himself immensely.

He brought the Hummer to halt in front of the terminal—a cracker box made of gray cinder block and glass. She managed to clamber out of the tank-like vehicle and set her bags on the ground. "Thanks, Van, for everything." She started to turn, then stopped, reached into her duffel and handed him one of the Tearstones. "Here, take this. A little thank-you memento. You might need it someday."

Van pocketed the Stone, then sketched her a salute. "No problem-o. I'll see you around, little lady."

"I hope so. Goodbye." She waved as he pulled away in a cloud of dust and gravel.

She'd never see Karl Vandervelde again, but in time, someone else *would* meet him—or, had *already* met him—under the most extraordinary circumstances. And, Vandervelde would need that Stone.

Suzanne found Dane organizing the evacuation by helicopter of the last patients from Mount Juliet's hospital. He looked tired and drawn from long hours of making decisions and giving orders. He came up to her, but did not smile. "How the hell did you get out here?"

"It's a long story. Dane, you must get me out of here. I need to go back to Splitrock Pass."

His exhaustion gave way to anger. "Are you out of your mind? Do you know what's happening? The dam upriver is on the verge of collapsing. The whole valley will be flooded. I've got to get these people out of here."

"I know, but I must get to the Pass. Please, Dane!"

"Suzanne, I need every helicopter to evac these folks out of here. You expect me to have one of those pilots take you into the mountains so you can go back to Never-Never Land? Hell, Suzanne, you can't even go back. Your barbarian friend had the Tearstone."

Dane turned to leave, but she grabbed his arm. "Yes, I can." She fumbled in the side pocket of her duffel. "I can go back because I have this." She opened her hand revealing one of the last two Tearstones.

He stared at it, dumbstruck. "Where did you get it?"

"From that guy in Curly's bar ... who gave ... who will give it, to you."

* * * *

SHE HAD TO wait another three hours until the last flight had evacuated all the patients and elderly residents from Mount Juliet.

Dane carried her duffel as they trotted across the grass to the waiting helicopter. They climbed inside and took their seats; she tucked Legolas' carrier between her feet. The chopper rose into the dusky, evening light, turned gracefully and headed east for the mountains.

Suzanne looked out the window at the diminishing lights below and made her last farewells to her time and everything she knew. How history remembered her, she really didn't care and in many ways it didn't matter. Whether she died in the Cataclysms or disappeared through a rock in the mountains, nothing would change.

She explained everything to Dane: meeting Vandervelde and finding the three Tearstones. It wasn't a coincidence, she explained. Now, she *had* to go back because Vandervelde was, indeed, the Messenger. It was he who would eventually lead Dr. Kyrk and the other survivors over the mountains to the east. It was Vandervelde who would quarrel with Kyrk about matters of survival and who should make decisions. It was Vandervelde who would follow Kyrk back to Knife Edge Pass and try to stop him from returning to the west where he would probably become infected, or infect others.

Dr. Kyrk, the blessed Saint Kyrk, had lied. It made sense. Already maddened with grief over the loss of his wife, he struck Vandervelde, thinking he had killed him and left him for dead in the mountains. Except Vandervelde didn't die. He found himself alive and wandering in the woods near Curly's Bar. That's when he had confronted Dane and given him the Tearstone.

Strange that she should be explaining events in the past tense, when they had yet to happen. But Dane believed her.

The helicopter climbed high into the mountains. The light was fading fast and the pilot became concerned they wouldn't find the exact location in time.

Just as the sun melted into the horizon, Suzanne spotted the ruin of Curly's Bar. There was one small area in what was left of the parking lot where the helicopter could land. When it settled onto the ground, Dane helped her out and ran with her to the opening through the Pass.

"I guess this is the last time I'll ever see you," he said.

"Same for me."

He bent to her and gave her a warm hug. "Goodbye, Suzanne."

"Goodbye, Dane. Thank you for everything. Thank you for giving my life back to me. Promise me one thing though: keep to the high ground. The highest ground."

"I promise."

"And, please take this, as a memento." She handed him one of the remaining Tearstones. "Who knows, maybe someday you'll want to find out where I've gone."

Dane grinned and pocketed the Stone. "Yeah. Maybe."

Suzanne hastily gathered up Legolas' carrier and her other bag. She couldn't look back; Dane would see her tears and she would probably see his.

She closed her eyes and stepped into Splitrock Pass. The wind was cool, brushing lightly against her cheek. She no longer heard the noise of the helicopter. On the other side, she opened her eyes. In the dusky twilight, the moon had already risen, its soft light shimmered across the snow-covered ground, lighting the trail to the valley below.

In a few hours, she'd be home.

Suzanne looked back at the pass one last time and noted that it didn't look anything like the jagged twin pinnacles of Knife Edge Pass when she had first walked through it. An unsettled feeling flitted through her. Odd.

The wind picked up and Suzanne shuddered. She didn't have much time to stand out in the cold and wonder about a rocky passageway.

She turned and began heading down the mountain slope, when she suddenly noted that the marker, the mis-spelled plaque imbedded in the rock, was missing. Who would have taken it? And the trail itself was

much wider than before—wide enough to be a road. Another streak of unease shot through her.

Fresh determination forced her to get moving. She settled her duffel and the cat carrier more securely over her shoulders, then set off down the trail to reach Ironhold by dawn.

The shimmering moon and her new, water-resistant flashlight lit the way as she trudged back and forth following the wide zig-zag trail downward until she stopped to rest at a clearing. From inside her backpack she pulled out a chocolate energy bar and devoured it in four bites. She licked the last crumbs from her fingers, hoping she wouldn't have to dip into her supplies until she reached Ironhold. Satisfied, she leaned against a tree admiring the cold beauty of the mountains.

A soft yowl made her look down. Suzanne knelt and un-zipped the top of the bag just enough so Legolas could poke his head out.

"You can't come out, Leggos," she said, scratching his chin. "You might run away. Besides, it's much too cold for kitties." Legolas purred loudly. Even having a peek at his new surroundings was better than the dark confines of the cat carrier.

Suzanne stood up and brushed the snow from her knees. She reached for Legolas' traveling bag and the duffel, then swung them over her shoulders. It was rather pleasant having the cat at her elbow, keeping her company as she slogged through the deepening snow.

But the contented feeling didn't last long. She sensed someone behind her and thought she heard footsteps.

Suzanne stopped, whirled around and aimed her flashlight where she thought she heard the noise. Nothing. Her heart began pounding in fearful, erratic beats. There *was* someone or something out there. She scanned the light beam over the ground and saw the prints where boots had scuffed and churned the snow. Genuine alarm flitted through her. Someone had been here recently.

She turned and headed down the pathway again, alert to the slightest sound. Legolas meowed plaintively.

"I know, sweetie, it's cold. But, we won't be out for long. Once we reach Ironhold, you'll be nice and warm."

Another noise made her stop. This time, the sound was much louder. She knew she was being followed.

"Hello? Anyone there?" she called out, feeling foolish.

Fear danced up her spine. She *was* being followed. Please God, not a skag.

A sudden roaring noise made her spin around. Twin beams of blue-white light bounced over the snowy roadway, coming straight toward her. The noise grew louder and the twin lights glowed brighter until they blinded her. She raised her arm to her eyes to block the glare. The engine noise subsided and stopped; the lights flicked from blazing white to spots of amber. She heard a car door slam. A man stepped in front of the left headlight.

"Well, dip me and fry me! I don't believe my eyes. Miss Jennings! How the hell did you get up here?"

"M-M-Mr. Vandervelde? I—was just—How?"

"Yep. It's me. How long's it been? Must be twenty-five years. 'Course, I'm a little worse for wear. Can't say the same for you. You haven't changed a bit. Looks like that jimdandy flashlight I sold you is still working pretty good, too!" He grinned at her.

Suzanne took a wary step closer to him. Still garbed in camouflage and a heavy winter jacket, he looked exactly the same, except his once wild red hair had turned entirely gray. A few lines creased his broad features.

"What are you doing up here?" she asked.

"Patrol. We're out looking for someone." He tapped his temple. "Poor guy has gone a little wacko. Thinks he's some kind of "messenger of God." He swiped an old sword and wandered off. Hasn't been the same since his wife died, right after the 'quakes. A shame too, since he did so much..."

"Wh-what did he do?"

"Well, Dr. Kyrk was one of those scientific types ... found a vaccine to counteract most of the contamination. But, he hasn't held up too well over the years. Mind's been goin' for some time." He waved his hand airily. "Course that's ancient history. You know all that stuff. Listen, why don't you get in m'darlin', over there, and we'll take you on back to town ... warm you up. You remember my big bad girl?" he said, gesturing to the massive Hummer behind him. "She's held up pretty well over the years. She's one tough babe." He slapped the fender affectionately.

Astonishment almost didn't allow her to breathe. The wrong time. She'd come through to the wrong time. Everything was different, changed. This was only ... twenty-five years after the Cataclysms. What had she done wrong? What had happened?

She heard the other car door open and a tall man climbed out of the Hummer. Like Vandervelde, he, too, was dressed in military camouflage and a heavy winter parka with a fur-trimmed hood. He stepped in front of the vehicle and pulled off his right glove. "Hi, I'm Sam." He held out his hand to her.

"Miz Jennings, this is my sister's kid, my nephew, Sam Akkers."

There was no mistaking the translucent white skin and the blue-black eyes. Her breath caught in her throat and she took an involuntary step backward.

"Well, he's not a kid exactly. He's 'bout as ornery as me, just a little younger." Vandervelde grinned.

There were no furs or swords—and no haunted look in those fierce eyes. The ghost of an aged photograph and a smiling boy standing in front of his father, touched her memory and her heart. Major Tom Akkers' son.

She pulled off her own glove and accepted his hand, warm and strong. He smiled at her and for an instant, a fleeting timeless moment, she thought she saw recognition in his eyes.

"Okay, we gotta roll out," Van said. "Temperature's dropping."

Sam Akkers dropped her hand. "What about Dr. Kryk, Van?"

Vandervelde shook his head. "We're not going to find him tonight. Besides, I hate to say this, but I don't

think there's much hope. It's too damn cold. We'll get some more men and try in the morning."

Sam reached for her duffel. "Here, let me take that." He swung the bag over his shoulder and gestured to the vehicle. "I see you've got your cat, too."

"Yes, I always take him with me, on all my adventures." She attempted a wry smile.

He opened the back door for her. "When we get back, you'll have to tell us how you got up here in the mountains, so far from civilization."

She looked at him for a long moment, taking in the astonishing familiar details of his proud face: the firm mouth and hard line of his jaw; the thick black hair just touching the collar of his coat and those fathomless eyes that seemed to see right through her, past time and memory.

"It will take a long, long time," she said.

A warm smile touched his lips. "I have all the time in the world."

Time for her to find out why things had changed.

Or maybe, why they had never changed at all.

Suzanne climbed into the Hummer and placed Legolas next to her. Both men slid into the front seats and slammed the doors shut.

"Okay, let's roll, baby!" Van called to his 'bad girl.'

The Hummer roared to life, spun around and headed down the road to the valley below.

Suzanne looked out through the windshield and saw the moon, gleaming and benevolent, its shining light leading the way ... home.

C.L. Scheel

"My sixth grade teacher encouraged me to write, but an opera star inspires me to persist, to stay with it."

Like most authors, writing has been a part of Christine's life for as long as she can remember. "If it is in your heart, there is no way you can ignore it or stop it."

Under A Warrior's Moon is her first published work in the science fiction/fantasy genre, and she has plans for two sequels. Having penned several works in other genres, Christine also intends to expand into the paranormal and eventually mainstream.

Born in Portland, Oregon, but raised and educated in the Pacific Northwest, Christine finally settled in Reno, Nevada and resides there with her family, a fluffy red chow-chow, and recently, an elegant, stuck-up black cat. Her interests range from horses to ballet; mountain hiking to opera. However, books and writing are closest to her heart.

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