

BASTIAL FRENZY



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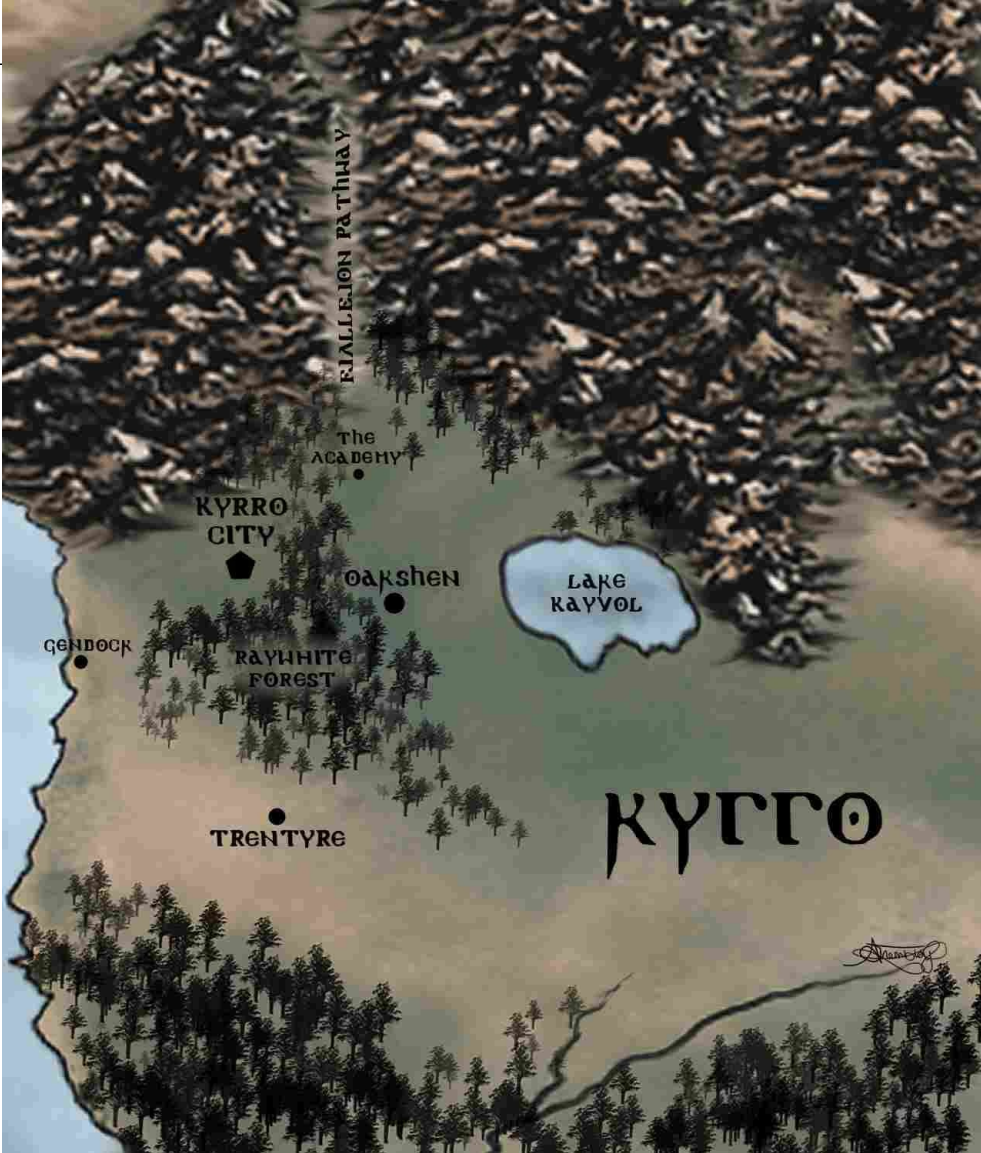
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Chapter 1:

CLEVE

What's keeping your secrets worth to you? The answer tells a lot about a man.

Cleve didn't know why his father's words came to him, until he realized his father was there. Cleve could see his face clearly. But when he sat up and felt Reela's arm slide off his stomach, the hazy image of his dream dispersed.

He kissed her cheek, and she smiled.

"I still want to sleep." She spoke without opening her eyes. Her palm slid up to his chest. "Don't excite Nulya. It took far too much psyche to calm her."

Cleve's horse was lying near the foot of the bed, taking up the entire floor.

Reela's hand slipped off Cleve's chest and her breathing became rhythmic. It was eerie how quickly she could fall back into a sound slumber.

Nulya stirred when Cleve set his feet down off the bed.

"Easy." He stepped over his horse to get through the door. Looking back into the room, he figured getting her out would be even harder than getting her in.

There was no place for Nulya besides in the house. After the battle last night, the uninjured spent hours moving the dead into wagons and pushing them to the appropriate cities so the fallen could be buried in their hometowns. A list of the victims went with each wagon. It was to be posted in the center of the city—the sole notification of who lived and who died.

Liaison Wilfre would bring a similar list to the Academy. On it would be the names of those who died in Kyrro City. Cleve felt fortunate the only family member he needed to worry about was Terren, the head of the Academy, and Cleve already had heard his uncle escaped harm.

Cleve kept expecting to run into him last night, as he and others worked by mage light to take care of the bodies. But Cleve never saw Terren. He wondered what his uncle would say when Cleve came by later, after breakfast.

Effie was in the kitchen when he came down the hall, sipping tea. He smiled at the familiar sight. It was as if he hadn't been gone. But then he realized she hadn't heard him approaching.

He cleared his throat before he got too close so he wouldn't startle her. She turned with a twitch. Then a smile formed.

"Breakfast?" Cleve inquired.

"Let me leave a note for Alex in case he comes by."

Soon they were walking to the dining hall. The sight of the Academy illuminated by sunlight was disquieting. Last night, most of the bodies were found on the west side of campus, around the student houses. Cleve and Effie avoided places where blood still stained the dirt, the blemishes seemingly in every direction they looked.

Effie spoke softly. "I don't remember there being that many bodies."

But Cleve did. "Most of them were Krepps," he said, trying to console her.

"Oh, that's right. Still..." She sighed. "I'm not looking forward to hearing the death count."

After they'd finished clearing the bodies, there'd been a long queue to use the showers in each bathhouse. So Cleve and his roommates had gone into their student house to talk as they waited. He

told them everything he could remember from his time in Goldram: the war fought by four armies with the psychic Elves building their own army to make it five; Rek's experience with the Elves including the scar they gave him; Jek Trayden and his terrible nightmares; Cleve's actions to help the Takary royal family and the gifts he received in return; the twin princesses, Jessend and Lisanda. He was careful to be curt when speaking about Jessend. He'd just reunited with Reela and didn't want her to get the wrong idea.

Reela had asked about her brother Rek, who must've stayed the night in Kyrro City. Cleve figured the Elf had survived, given that the Krepps retreated not long after the battle began. Though, both he and Reela were still worried to read the list of victims that was to arrive later.

It had taken some time for Cleve to get used to Zoke standing against the wall as Cleve and his roommates sat at the kitchen table with him and shared stories. The Krepp looked disinterested during the whole thing. But the Elf beside him was the opposite. Vithos became more excited to finally meet his brother the more Cleve and Reela talked about Rek.

Steffen was the most disconnected, even more than Zoke. Everyone knew he was grieving Marratrice's death. Effie and Reela often touched his shoulder or hugged him.

"Are you worried about Welson Kimard?" Effie asked as they arrived at the dining hall.

"Somewhat," Cleve admitted. The King had exiled him, and now he was back without permission to return. But Cleve was even more worried about what he would do to Welson now that he knew the King was responsible for his parents' death. In that moment, he felt as if he could contain his anger though he knew that might change the moment he saw Welson's face, more specifically his smile. It was what he remembered most from their conversations, the way the monarch smiled as he questioned Cleve about his father.

He was testing me. Cleve felt himself making a fist. He opened his hand to take his plate back from the server.

"Thank you for fighting," the woman behind the counter said. "Enjoy the food."

Cleve thanked her and followed Effie to a table.

"How was your night with Reela?" Effie gave him a knowing smile.

Cleve pretended not to understand what she was asking. "Good, though quite troublesome to get my horse settled. I need to find out where I can keep her."

"You left your horse with Reela?"

Cleve nodded. "Reela will be fine. Even after all the time I've spent with Nulya, Reela can get the horse to do what she wants better than I can."

"Oh, with psyche," Effie realized. She gestured with her fork. "You're more talkative than when you were last here."

"Am I?"

"You are. Whenever I talked with you before, I felt like you were always holding in a secret of some kind."

His father's saying came back to him. *What's keeping your secrets worth to you?* "I guess I was. But I was keeping it from myself as well. I had feelings for Reela, and I didn't even know it."

Effie squinted at him. "I'm still sensing something you're holding back, though. Is it about Reela?"

It's that I might kill Welson Kimard. Cleve folded his arms. "No."

"But it's something." Effie shook her finger at him as she laughed. "There's always something with you, Cleve."

"So you and Alex are a couple now?" Cleve had noticed them last night, with their lingering looks and caresses.

“Fine, change the subject. Yes.”

“I see.” Cleve had nothing else to add.

“What did Terren say when he saw you were back?”

“I haven’t spoken to him yet.”

Effie stared in silence.

“What?” Cleve asked.

“Why are you here eating with me, then?”

Cleve shrugged. “I was hungry.”

Effie laughed. “Don’t you think you should tell him you’re back?”

“I will. After we eat, I’m going to get more food and bring it to Nulya. Then I’ll ride her to Terren’s house.”

“Take Reela with you.”

“Why?”

“I’m sure she’d love to ride on the horse. Then Terren can see that you two are together.”

“Why does he need to see that?”

Effie giggled, more to herself. “He knows Reela, remember? We told you last night that we fought with your uncle on the Fjallejon Pathway and within the Slugari colony. He’s bound to find out about you two eventually. It’s better you just tell him.”

The idea of telling Terren seemed embarrassing. “Only if Reela wants to,” Cleve said.

“She definitely will.”

When Cleve returned with Effie, Reela was outside the house, petting Nulya. “I took her to get water from the faucet outside the bathhouse. But she’s hungry as well.”

Cleve fed Nulya the bread and carrots he got from the dining hall. “Do you want to ride her?” he asked Reela.

Her bright green eyes grew wide. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

“I’m taking her to Terren’s to let him know I’m back. You can ride with me.”

Cleve caught Effie winking at him before she went inside. He got on the saddle and helped Reela up behind him.

When Nulya was at a trot, Cleve could feel Reela bouncing around, her hands tight across his stomach.

“Is it always this bumpy?” she asked.

“Unless we go faster or slower.”

“Then go faster.” He could tell she was smiling from the way she spoke the words.

Soon Nulya was galloping down the dirt road along Warrior’s Field, Reela laughing in delight. Cleve couldn’t help but smile.

They passed many students and instructors. It was easy to tell who’d seen Cleve on his horse already and who hadn’t. As they passed by Liaison Wilfre, he shouted, “Stop!”

Cleve slowed Nulya and turned her. “Yes?”

Wilfre’s lips moved, but no words came out. His brow furrowed as he pointed. “Is that a horse?” His tone was incredulous.

“Yes.” Cleve could hear Reela stifling a giggle. She pushed her mouth against the back of his shoulder.

Wilfre’s jaw hung open. He scratched his head. “Where did you get it?”

“From Goldram,” Cleve said, hoping that would be the end of it.

“Goldram?” Wilfre’s eyes went to the clouds. “All the way across the Starving Ocean?”

“Yes,” Cleve answered. “May I go now?”

“Does the King know about this?”

“I’m sure he does.” *And soon he’ll summon me.* “I must be leaving, if you don’t mind.”

Cleve couldn’t tell if it was irritation or confusion that was creasing Wilfre’s forehead.

“Alright, go.” The King’s liaison waved them away. “But slow that horse.”

Arriving at Terren’s, Cleve dismounted and helped Reela down. Before Cleve could knock, Nuly whinnied, and Cleve heard his uncle from within the house. “What the Bastial stars is that?”

Terren opened the door a moment later. “Bastial hell! Cleve?” Terren grabbed him for a hug. “People were saying that you came in on a horse with a sword made of fire. I didn’t know what to make of it, but here you are!” Terren laughed merrily. “But what did they see to think you had a sword of fire?” His eyes fell to the sheath on Cleve’s belt.

As Cleve removed the Bastial steel sword and handed it to him, Terren gasped. His uncle was one of the few people Cleve trusted enough to hold his weapon.

“It’s so light!” Terren gave it a few good swings before handing it back. “Marvelous...and I see you brought Reela with you.”

“Hello, Headmaster Terren,” she said.

“Please, Terren is fine. It’s good to see you again, Reela. I heard you and Effie killed many Krepps.” He turned toward the house, expecting them to follow. “Come in. I’ll be pulled away at a moment, but until then, tell me what happened in Goldram, Cleve. How did you convince Welson Kimard that you and Rek aren’t allied with Tenred?”

Reela paused rather than walk with them. “I’m going to get some breakfast and let you two talk.” She kissed Cleve. “Thank you for the horse ride.”

“Oh!” Terren exclaimed. “So you two...” He waved his finger between them.

Blood rushed to Cleve’s cheeks. But Reela merely smiled and wrapped an arm around Cleve. “Yes, though it took some persistence.”

Terren started to smile, but disappointment took over, sending his mouth flat. He seemed to be looking over their shoulders. “It seems as if we won’t have time to talk until later, Cleve.”

Cleve turned to find Javy Rayvender and five men clad in steel. He could feel his heart speeding up. Reela took his hand.

Terren came around Cleve. Approaching Javy, he said, “Please tell me the King needs to speak to me and not Cleve.”

Javy shook his head at him. “We’re here for your nephew.”

Terren slowly turned to meet Cleve’s eyes. “You didn’t tell me what happened when you spoke with Welson Kimard after returning.”

“I haven’t spoken with him yet,” Cleve admitted.

The dread he felt could be seen on Terren’s face. His uncle spun back to Javy. “This is an order from the King?”

“Yes, Cleve needs to see him immediately.”

Reela came forward. “I’m coming as well.” She looked to Terren, leaning toward him. “Please give me permission to leave the Academy.” Cleve didn’t know how comfortable he felt with her using his psyche on his uncle, but he knew better than to bring it up right then.

“The King won’t grant you an audience,” Javy interrupted. “Only Cleve.”

“But I’m welcome in the castle, aren’t I?” she asked.

Javy shrugged. “I suppose. It’s up to the headmaster.”

“It’s fine,” Terren said. “Just be back before nightfall. I can’t have you missing too much battle.”

training.”

Javy violently grabbed Nulya’s reins. “The horse is coming as well.”

“Easy!” Cleve almost snatched them from Javy’s hand before stopping himself. “Just be gentle with her.”

Javy grunted, but he did lighten up.

Terren clasped Cleve’s shoulder. “Don’t do or say anything without thinking it through,” he advised.

“Let’s go,” Javy said. “The King is very busy.”

For a moment, Cleve thought about leaving his Bastial steel sword with Terren. There was a chance the King would take it from him, as probably would happen with his horse. But he couldn’t make up his mind quickly enough, and soon he and Reela were following Javy toward the western gate.

With Javy ahead of them and five guards behind, Cleve asked Reela, “Why do you wish to come?” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Don’t use psyche to get a meeting with the King. The last thing you want is any trouble coming to you because of this.” *And Welson Kimard, like me, has been trained to resist psyche.*

“Don’t worry about me. I’m just going to make sure I don’t lose you again.”

Her stubborn tone worried him.

They walked four miles to reach Kyrro City. It was in worse shape than the Academy. The walls of many houses were marred with cracks, broken barrels and fragmented wood littered the streets, and there were traces of gore on nearly every surface—even some on the armor of the guards watching Cleve and Reela pass by.

As busy as everyone seemed to be, they still made time to stop and point at Cleve’s horse. Many of them must not have seen Rek’s mount as he fought against the Krepps the night before. Cleve wondered where the Elf was now.

Outside the castle in the center of the city, Cleve was made to wait. “Where are you taking my horse?” he called after the guards pulling Nulya away.

“She’ll be in good care,” Javy told him. “Stay here until his majesty is ready.”

More guards came to surround Cleve and Reela.

“What’s going to happen with Cleve?” Reela asked.

“That’s up to the King,” Javy answered.

It wasn’t long before a retinue of men clad in armor came around the side of the castle. Cleve knew Welson Kimard was in the center of them. They separated, and the King came forward, waving Cleve toward him. “Hurry, I don’t have a lot of time,” Welson said. “There’s too much to do.”

“Arrow!” someone shouted.

Two guards jumped on the King. Another one grunted as an arrow struck him in the arm.

“You let Krepps kill them!” shouted a man with a bow. He was drawing another arrow. “You hid in your castle as my sister’s family was killed!” His next shot struck one of the many guards now rushing at him. “Welson Kimard deserves to die!”

He was tackled to the ground, kicked and beaten until his struggles ceased. Then he was dragged to the castle, weeping and slumped in defeat.

The King was back on his feet. Cleve recognized Alex’s brother, Hem Baom, trying to move the monarch into the castle. “It’s not safe,” he said. “Please allow us to take you inside.”

Welson looked even more disappointed than the man who’d tried to kill him. His hurry was gone, replaced by utter sadness. He gestured for Cleve to follow him.

Reela walked beside Cleve as he entered the castle. The door was shut and latched behind them.

“It’s a pity that man must die.” Welson spoke with deep remorse. “We can’t allow anyone who attempts an assassination to live.” After a sigh, he turned to Reela. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Reela Worender.”

“You as well.” They shook hands. “How do you know my name?”

“I know you’re half Elf and one of the strongest psychics in the Academy, possibly in all of Ovir next to Rek and Vithos. I know you shared the same father with them. I also know you’re an ally. You’ve been investigated thoroughly.”

“I see,” she said.

Reela’s indifferent expression seemed to intrigue Welson, for he leaned in close and tilted his head.

“You’ve already assumed this?” he asked.

“I have.”

“But even though you’re an ally, I must speak to Cleve alone. In the meantime, I believe there’s someone who wants to see you.”

Reela smiled widely, already sensing his presence.

Then Cleve recognized Rek’s voice. “Hello, Reela.” The Elf stepped between a line of guards.

Reela practically jumped on her way over to hug him. When Cleve noticed Rek smiling at him, he only had time to nod and smile back before Welson whistled to him.

“Let’s go. There’s a lot we need to discuss.”

As Cleve followed the King up the stairs, he looked back at Rek and Reela. They were concerned for him, their eyes wide and mouths flat.

On the second floor, Welson brought Cleve down one of many hallways. He followed as the King turned and continued through the maze of corridors. Although most of the castle consisted of black ironbark wood, they soon were ascending a circular stone stairway.

There was only one room after the twisting stairs ended, and two guards snapped to attention as the King passed between them. Cleve could hear someone coming up the stairs behind them. Shortly after he entered the room, the tall and pale psychic who he’d met the last time he was in the castle brushed by his shoulder, taking a spot beside their ruler.

Welson sat with a long table between him and Cleve, a chair waiting on the opposite side. Welson gestured at it. “Sit.”

Cleve did. Then he heard the door close behind him. He turned to find the two guards now inside, standing in front of his only exit.

Cleve wondered if he’d be able to lie now that he’d trained with Rek. *But I’ve never practiced that* he realized. It was the detection and resistance of psyche that Cleve had learned so well, not getting away with lying. He decided he’d better test it sooner rather than later.

“What has Rek told you about me?” Welson asked.

“Nothing.”

Welson didn’t even need the psychic. He shook his head at Cleve and said, “Don’t lie to me. I don’t have the patience for it.”

Cleve regretted not choosing something else to lie about, something easier to get away with. He still didn’t want to reveal what Rek had told him about his parents’ deaths, though, not until he knew whether the psychic could detect his lies. He thought of what else Rek had said.

“He told me you blame yourself for this war,” Cleve said. “He told me about an incident—a battle over the discovery of an island. I don’t remember the details.”

Welson began to nod, so Cleve stopped.

“That was only two years after my coronation. I was seventeen when that battle happened. That

your age, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I made a lot of mistakes. I didn't have my father's guidance as I should have." Welson went silent as he glared, waiting for Cleve to say something.

But Cleve chose not to, not yet. He wasn't ready to admit Rek had told him about Welson's crazy belief that Cleve's father was the one who killed Welson's father. It was madness, and just the King hinting at it made Cleve angry.

At Cleve's reticence, Welson forced a sigh and continued. "Our relationship with Tenred was already deteriorating before that incident. I thought my father's murder might've been Tegry Hiller doing, so I ceased all trading with them. For two years they tried to negotiate new trades, mostly of ironbark wood for their metal. But out of spite, I never agreed. Then when I found out they were sailing around Ovira and exploring the many islands nearby, I became interested in doing the same. I put warriors on the boats I sent out, equipped them with weapons, and told them they could kill me from Tenred if they believed a battle was likely to occur over valuable land or resources."

Welson shook his head. "I trusted their discretion too much. There was a battle when one of my ships and one of Tegry's arrived at the same island. But there were no warriors on their ship. There was some royal blood, though—Tegry's nephew was the captain. He was killed in combat. When I heard the news, I thought of it as a victory. It was payback for my father. But then the assassination attempts began, poison in my food, attackers in the night, that sort of thing."

The King stood and lifted his shirt to expose his side. Cleve saw a scar that looked to have come from a blade.

"Tegry never claimed responsibility, but it was clearly his doing. I knew it was only a matter of time before we'd be at war, so I started my own assassination attempts. I sent my own spies. When the war finally began, Tegry and I had been preparing for over a decade. Now there are spies everywhere. I just wish I'd known he was going to get the Krepps involved. But it's too late for regret, which brings me to why you're here."

Welson stood and paced behind his chair. "When Rek joined the battle and I saw firsthand how many Krepps he assisted in killing, I knew then that I was wrong about him and you. But there are other worries I have besides your allegiance that need to be alleviated before I can accept your return. What else has Rek told you about me? Did he mention anything about your father?"

Welson looked away from Cleve for a moment, his eyes locking onto the stone wall where a painting of his father stared back over folded arms.

Cleve felt the foreign tingle of psyche. It was like a light scratch of fingernails across his thoughts. He tried to push it out and put up his wall, but this psyche was already on the surface of his mind, not deep within him. It was different from the way Rek pained him or twisted his emotions. This touch of psyche was so light it felt as if Cleve was trying to use his hand to grab motes in the air. Still, he tried to lie as he did his best to force it out.

"He said nothing about you and my father."

The psychic clicked his tongue. "It's not the truth," the sickly pale man said, his voice like a creaking door.

The King wasn't surprised. "What did Rek tell you?" he asked, still looking at the painting. "Just be honest."

Knowing he couldn't lie, Cleve realized the time had come. He drew a slow breath. "He told me everything he knows."

"He shouldn't have done that." Welson spoke as if apologizing for the behavior of a family.

member, reminding Cleve that Rek and Welson had grown up together under the same father. Councilman Kerr had even called them brothers.

The King finally sat again. Glancing over Cleve's shoulder at the guards, he said, "Please leave me alone." He turned to the psychic next. "You as well."

When they were gone, Welson leaned over the table.

"You must have secrets, Cleve. Aren't there things you know or feel that would be harmful if let out? If not, you must at least agree that there are some secrets better kept hidden?"

"Of course," Cleve answered.

"And do you have any regrets...any mistakes you've made in moments of foolishness or childishness?"

"Everyone does."

"What happened with your parents was no mistake, but I do regret it, and it must be kept a secret. I'm sure you don't need me explaining why the public shouldn't know."

Cleve couldn't help but stand. Gritting his teeth, he said, "Because it would create panic to find out their leader murders people without trial."

"Sit." Welson spoke firmly. "And quiet your voice."

Cleve's body screamed to remain standing. But he fought against it and sat. It felt like he was holding his breath as he remained there, and that relief would come only when he stood and started to yell at the man who'd ordered his parents' deaths.

Welson continued. "No trial was needed. It was clear your father was the one who shot mine with a long-range arrow as my father stood on the balcony of this castle."

Cleve barely managed to get out the words without shouting. "That's not true."

"It took *eleven years* of information gathering, Cleve. I was certain. Eleven years. You realize how long this was for a man of fifteen to wait for justice?"

"Whatever you found led you to the wrong man. There's no way—"

"It was your father!" Welson slammed his fist on the table as he interrupted Cleve. "You will not speak back to me!"

Welson reclined, shaking his head as he sighed. "It's frustrating that no matter what I say, you refuse to believe the truth." He leaned forward. "But it *is* the truth. Dex Polken murdered my father."

"Who's the archer you sent after my father? Who killed him?"

"There were three archers, all dead now. Your mother or father killed two of them, and the one who survived must've been involved in other matters, for he was found murdered himself later."

Cleve didn't realize he was letting his skepticism come out as he stared at the King...until Welson rolled his eyes.

"You must at least believe they're all dead. The three archers were waiting for your father as he came out of the Fjallejon Pathway. But they were surprised by your mother, who must've followed Dex without him knowing. I believe both of them knew there was danger when I sent your father into the Corin Forest. But he couldn't ignore a demand from his king. Your mother probably tried to talk her way into going with him, but he wouldn't allow it, so she followed him. Your parents managed to kill two of their attackers before being struck with an arrow." Welson paused to study Cleve's face. "What don't you believe?"

Everything. Cleve realized he no longer trusted Welson at all.

The King stood. "No matter. I didn't bring you here to convince you of what happened." He started to pace once more. "So long as you don't speak of this, I won't put you back in prison. You're too useful to be locked away while we're at war." He turned and looked through the tops of his eyes. "Yes."

you're forbidden to come into Kyrro City ever again. You must keep your distance from me. Am clear?"

Cleve nodded. "As long as I'm allowed to fight and stay in Kyrro, that's what I care about. That's all I ever wanted to do."

"You should thank me for sending you to Goldram. You've come back and brought a horse and Bastial steel weapon with you."

Cleve's heart jumped. He clutched the hilt of his sword.

"That's right. I know all about its value."

I won't let you take it. Cleve could feel his face exposing his desperation, but he could do nothing to suppress it.

Welson smiled, but it wasn't a friendly expression. It was the look that Cleve envisioned when he'd imagined trading his life for the King's, for there was no chance he would make it out of the castle alive after killing him.

"You can relax, Cleve," Welson said. "I've heard you're the most capable warrior in the Academy among the best of all my warriors. I wouldn't take away a weapon from such a fighter. But you'll use your Bastial steel sword *and* your bow for Kyrro."

With that, the King walked to a locked chest. He knelt as he produced a key from his pocket. For a moment, the monarch simply stood holding Cleve's black ironbark bow. He let its end rest on the ground, judging its height.

"The bows we've been making aren't nearly this large," Welson commented. Cleve's weapon was taller than the King. "Our archers have had too much trouble shooting them accurately."

Cleve stood to accept it. He investigated the weapon for scratches or other blemishes. To his surprise, he found none.

"No one's used it," Welson reassured him.

"Thank you." Cleve started to feel his anger withering. He forced himself to hang on to it.

"You're going to use it to kill one of the giant Slugari mages that lead the Krepps. You and Rek will be leaving shortly."

Cleve tilted his head. "You expect just the two of us to kill one of their leaders? Surely, he must be heavily guarded."

"You'll ride your horses to their camp. We learned its location while you were gone. It's been scouted. There's a mountainside you can use for cover. After you kill one of them, you should be able to escape on your horses."

Is he sending us because of our skill or because he doesn't care if we die? Perhaps both. "You don't need to send us off again," Cleve said. "We wish to stay and fight. You just said you're not worried about our loyalty anymore."

"You think I'm trying to get you both killed?" The King appeared to be insulted. Never had Cleve wanted to be a psychic before. But in that moment, he would've given a finger to know whether Welson was lying.

The King continued. "I'm trying to win this war. We meant to go on the offensive earlier, but the Krepps attacked. With that battle now over, we're planning to assault Tenred. I'm sending nearly my entire army there while you and Rek exterminate one of the Kreppen leaders...both of them, if you can."

"Why send Rek with me if your intention isn't to get rid of us? I don't need his psyche to shoot an arrow and escape on my horse."

"I'm doing it for your protection. His psyche may save your life. You never know what could

happen. Anyway, he knows where you're going better than you do."

Welson was waiting for Cleve to reply, but he didn't know what to say.

"So you'll do this for me willingly? I don't need to bring the psychic back in here to read your emotions?" Welson had an irritating smile.

"I'll do it."

"Good. Rek has already been informed and should be waiting outside the castle by the time you get there. Now is there anything I need to know about Greenedge before you go? What's happening on that continent? What did you learn from King Danvell Takary?"

There's a larger scale war than ours, and after it's over, the Takary Army's coming here to take Kyrro from your grasp.

"There's a war. It should last longer than ours by some years."

"That's it? Nothing to add?"

Cleve felt an itch on his forehead. He looked away as he scratched it. "That's all."

His heart started thumping when Welson approached with a scowl. "Are you sure?"

Could he already know about the Takary Army? Cleve didn't see how that was possible. "Yes. That's all."

For a moment Welson simply stared.

"You're not a good liar, Cleve. You're keeping something from me. What do I need to know about this war in Greenedge?"

"Nothing."

"Need I remind you that we're working toward the same goal?" Welson said. "We both want Kyrro to be safe. Don't let what happened between our families cloud logic. Kyrro and Tenred are at war because of incidents that couldn't be forgiven. There's no reason you and I need to be enemies as well."

Cleve was furious. How could Welson expect him to ignore what had happened to his parents?

Cleve gritted his teeth. "There's nothing else you need to know."

The King wasn't afraid, stepping forward instead of shrinking back. "If I find out you're keeping something important from me, you'll spend the rest of your life in a prison cell. Now go." Welson pointed at the door. "And if you speak about what happened with your parents to anyone, you'll be tried as an enemy for defaming your king with lies. Your father killed mine, Cleve Polken. I took revenge and I do regret it, but there's nothing we can do about it now. I'm sorry it has to be this way."

Cleve was already at the door by then. He turned for what he hoped would be the last time he ever had to set eyes on Welson Kimard. Then he slammed the door behind him.

Chapter 2:

CLEVE

Cleve was escorted outside the castle, where Rek and their horses awaited.

“Cleve, good.” Rek spoke with haste. “Let’s go.”

“Where’s Reela?”

“Inside the castle using the chamber pot. We need to leave before she comes back. I’ll explain later.”

“No, wait. I don’t understand. Does she know we’re leaving?”

“No, and if she did, she would talk her way into coming with us. I want to leave before that happens. There’s no reason to put her life in danger.”

Rek had one bag on his back and another in hand. With his other hand, he carried a birdcage containing a messenger pigeon. He handed Cleve one of the bags that had food and other supplies in it.

Cleve shook his head as he took it. “We should at least say goodbye.”

He couldn’t imagine how angry he would be if Reela and Rek left him without a word.

“I’m telling you, she’ll come with us if we wait. Let’s go.”

“We’ll just tell her she can’t.”

Anger crossed Rek’s face. With the scar the Elves had given him, he looked menacing in that moment. “Cleve, the moment Reela finds out what we’re doing, I won’t be able to convince her not to come. And you certainly won’t either. Haven’t you seen her when she’s demanding? She’ll get her way if we wait a moment longer. Now let’s go!”

Cleve immediately realized Rek was right. If Rek wouldn’t be able to stop Reela from sharing his saddle, Cleve definitely wouldn’t be able to either. He couldn’t bring himself to physically force Reela off his horse, and that’s what it would take after she found out what they were doing.

Cleve got on Nulya’s back and steered her toward a group of guards that had a quiver for him. As he took it, he asked, “When a young lady comes to the front of the castle looking for us, can you explain where we’re going and let her know we’re sorry?”

“We will,” one guard answered.

Then they were off, galloping through the streets of Kyrro City. People could hear them coming and quickly cleared from their path.

Cleve couldn’t get the image of Reela out of his mind—she probably was just then finding out that they’d left. Next she would hear what he and Rek were doing and how dangerous it was. It would cross her mind that she might never see them again. Then she would become livid. She would figure out why they’d chosen not to tell her, but it wouldn’t matter. It wouldn’t make her feel any better.

“Will Reela forgive us?” Cleve asked, steering his horse alongside Rek’s.

“She’s not one to hold a grudge, though I’ve never done anything like this.”

“What did she say about your scar?”

The corner of Rek’s mouth scrunched. “She wondered how I got it. I told her all about the Elves I met, about their rules against psyche, how they wanted me to swear an oath never to use it again. She was disgusted. I told her about the war there, and how you might go back when you’re done here.”

Cleve nearly fell off his horse. “How did you even know that? Can your psyche be that strong

pick up specific thoughts?" Cleve felt his old distrust creeping back in.

"I didn't know that from psyche. I guessed it from the way you've spoken about what happened at Greenedge. I know you would like to cure the young man as well, what's his name?"

"Jek Trayden."

"But I don't know how you expect to do that. You told me it's too much Sartious Energy that's causing his vicious nightmares, right?"

"There's a chemist who might know of something...Steffen Duroby." Cleve figured Rek probably knew the name, given that Steffen and Reela were friends from childhood. "Have you met him?"

"No, but I know much about him," Rek replied. "He might know of something, indeed."

I just hope I get the chance to ask him. Cleve began to wonder what his chances were of coming back alive after killing the Slugari that led the Krepps. Rek had told him about Doe and Haemon on the boat ride back from Greenedge. If their magic really was as strong as Rek said, they could use a Sartious Energy wall to block the arrow if they saw it coming.

"So you and Reela are together now?" Rek asked.

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell her about Jessend?"

"There's nothing to say," Cleve stated, figuring his long talks in bed with Jessend would only make Reela jealous.

"You don't think she'll want to know that a Takary princess wanted to marry you?"

Oh, that. "I'm not sure. If I do go back to Goldram, Reela might worry it would be for Jessend."

"I don't think she would, and you know Reela—she'll find out anyway if you try to keep it from her."

They spoke for hours as they rode, stopping briefly to eat and let their horses rest when the sun was overhead. Cleve realized then that Rek hadn't told him if he wanted to stay in Kyrro or go back to Goldram when the war was over. So he asked.

Rek took the question with a slow breath, lifting his arms to stretch. A worried expression crossed his face.

"I'm not sure," the Elf said. "I still haven't met my brother, Vithos. I would like to speak to him about it when we have a chance. And of course there's Reela. I would hate to leave her, though I do want to finish what we started in Greenedge."

Cleve hoped Reela would come with him, though he wasn't sure she would want to, especially now after they'd left her at the castle without a word. His stomach churned. The thought of her being angry with him was far worse than his own anger for Welson.

He liked the anger toward his king. It felt natural. What was strange was when he thought of forgiving Welson. During their conversation, the idea had come, but he'd rejected it.

Cleve planned to hold his grudge for the rest of his life. Who was Welson to claim that Dex killed his royal father? Cleve knew that Dex would never have done that. *And even if he was willing, my mother never would've let him go through with it.* Welson must've had the wrong man.

Now he wants me to forgive him? It was absurd. *Only a king would expect someone to forgive him for murdering his parents, pure delusion. Would Welson forgive the man who killed his father? Not in five lifetimes.*

Still, the anger might've been forced. Did he want to be angrier than he really was? He chose not to think about it.

Rek told Cleve that the Krepp encampment was along the eastern side of Kilmar, about a one hundred fifty-mile ride. On horseback, that wasn't too far. At their comfortable pace, they probably

could make it in four days.

Four days, Cleve reflected. Eight or nine days before I'm back. Could be more if there are complications. It seemed too long a time to leave without even letting Reela know. Then a dreadful thought came. *She might not be there when I get back. Welson said he's sending his army to Tenred and it's an eight-day walk just to get there.*

There was a good chance Reela wouldn't go with them, being a first-year student at the Academy. But Welson said she's one of the strongest psychics. Cleve began to worry if she might be in more danger going to Tenred than if she'd come with him and Rek.

"Did you know Welson is sending troops to Tenred?" Cleve asked.

"I did."

"Don't you think that'll be just as dangerous for Reela?"

"The first-year students won't go," Rek said. "Welson can't leave the cities or the school without any able bodies to defend them."

"Did he tell you this?"

"He said he'll leave it up to Terren who stays and who goes. And I know Terren. Only the three years will be required."

Cleve had forgotten that Rek and his uncle were friends. He'd never seen them together. It was strange to reminisce back to that evening they'd talked about Rek, when Cleve found out his uncle had signed him up to live with three strangers, one being a psychic. He'd never been more terrified.

He told me that Reela wouldn't be anything like Rek. But soon she'll be just as strong. For the first time in months, Cleve felt scared of Reela. *Can I really share a bed with her?*

He shook his head. He knew the instant he saw her again, the silly fear would be gone.

A voice nagged him. *If we do see each other again.*

Rek informed him there was a group of scouts not far from the Krepp encampment. "Welson advised me to meet with them for information about the best place to shoot from. They move frequently, but they're somewhere around here." He pointed to a spot on the map about ten miles west of the encampment. "We're leaving the bird with them as well. If the Krepps start to march, they'll let the King know."

"We haven't been in Kyrro one day and we're already leaving again," Cleve complained, expecting Rek to share his annoyance.

"Be strong. We'll return."

Rek was right. Cleve wasn't feeling himself. It was the confusion over how he should react to his king—the man whose orders Cleve must follow blindly, no matter what the ruler had done. It was weakening Cleve, slowly breaking down his walls.

"I just wish I could prove to Welson that it wasn't my father who killed his."

Rek fell silent, staring ahead as they rode. They'd reached the eastern hills that wrapped around Kyrro, cascading off the Fjallejon Mountains. As Cleve followed Rek through, the evening sun was too low to reach them, putting them in shadow.

Cleve's mood dampened as he felt a chill. It was going to be a long four days if Rek wouldn't even share his anger toward Welson.

Chapter 3:

ZETI

Zeti had never known true loneliness. She'd begun to realize this more each morning, for it was then that she had time to think. No one would visit her hut that day, or any day in the future. But she could change that if she chose a *seshar*. The thought of someone being there when she woke was almost worth everything she hated that came with it.

As each day wore on, she busied herself with her assigned task of tending to the needs of the two Dajriks, and she forgot all about wanting a *seshar* until night came and it was time to return alone to her hut.

The giant creatures that looked to be made of rock ate as much as ten Krepps. But getting the Dajriks' weapons built proved to be far more difficult than feeding them. Doe wanted both of them to have a sword and shield, but the weapons needed to be proportional to the twenty-foot-tall creatures. Krepps had never crafted anything so difficult.

Zeti already had broken up several fights between the male Krepps in charge of shaping the metal. Each day they failed, their aggression worsened. When she reported this to Doe, he said he should've chosen female Krepps to do the job.

"Those Keenu picked to train the birds have already completed their task," Doe added. "So I've sent a message to Tenred about our attack. They can join us when I send the rest of the army to finish the Humans in Kyrro."

But the next day, Zeti heard that Doe had received such a terrible letter from their allies in Tenred that, in a fit of rage, he burned the Krepp who brought it to him. So when the massive Sluga summoned Zeti through a messenger, she decided to take her sword instead of her dagger, hoping Doe wouldn't be insulted by the sight of it on her belt.

She was relieved when she found Keenu there as well. Zeti stumbled in on the middle of the conversation.

"It must be a lie," Keenu insisted. "They just want us to protect them because they're cowards."

"What's a lie?" Zeti asked. She'd become comfortable enough around Keenu to pose questions without worry he would scold her, even though the chief of scouts was still her superior.

Keenu looked to Doe.

"Tell her," he said.

"Tenred sent back one of our pigeons with a message." Keenu's face twisted with anger. "They claim that our Krepps lost the battle in Kyrro."

Strangely, Zeti couldn't tell what she felt. This meant that her brother Zoke probably was still alive, but she'd wanted her fellow Krepps to win—no, she'd expected them to.

She buried her thoughts. It was pointless to speculate until she knew the truth.

"Why would they lie?" she asked.

"So we'll send ten thousand Krepps to protect Tenred's territory," Keenu said. "The King fears that Kyrro will attack them and his army will be defeated. Cowards and liars, all of them!"

Doe growled. His claws began to glow. "Shut your mouth, Keenu!"

Keenu crouched, his eyes steady on Doe's claws. Luckily, he cast no fireball, and the light faded.

“If they’re the cowards you say they are, then they would never risk lying to us,” he said.

Keenu and Zeti waited in silence, knowing that asking a question at this time could mean a burning.

“Soon after Haemon returns, we’ll send our entire army to Kyrro.”

So our other leader is still alive, Zeti thought. It means the Krepps he took to attack Kyrro must’ve fled rather than fight to the death. Respect for them will be gone when word reaches the rest of our army. It made Zeti eager to fight, to prove she was stronger than them. She would never retreat like a coward. She knew Keenu felt the same.

“I look forward to cutting off the heads of those that stand in our way,” Keenu said. When he sucked in drool, it became clear he was thinking about the taste of Slugari meat.

“Zeti,” Doe said. “Here’s my reply to Tenred. It tells them they can have one thousand Krepps as long as they agree to fight with us when our full army is ready. Give this to the pigeon handlers. They get back to the Dajriks.”

As always, Zeti did what Doe told her.

Sleep was calling her by the time the day was over. As she approached her hut, she heard someone within. Expecting her father, she drew her sword.

But when she peeled back the cloth covering the hut’s opening, she let out a breath when she saw it was Suba.

The Krepp who’d been like a mother to her laughed nervously. “What kind of Krepps are you involved with that you enter your own hut with a weapon drawn?”

Zeti sheathed her sword and smiled. “You’re here so late. Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I have something important to discuss with you. Will you swear you won’t tell anyone what I’m about to tell you?”

“I swear.”

Suba walked past Zeti and poked her head outside.

“No one’s around,” Zeti said. “Everyone’s asleep.”

Suba spoke with a low voice. “Not everyone.”

The seriousness in her tone made Zeti uneasy. “What’s going on?”

“Many of us are leaving the army, or tribe, or whatever this is that Doe and Haemon have created.”

“But that’s treason.”

Suba put her hand gently over Zeti’s mouth. “Keep your voice soft, young Krepp. Those words reaching the wrong ears could get me killed.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Zeti said.

“Come with us. About two thousand will be leaving with me. There are far too few wall guards to stop us.”

“Doe will send his fighters after you. It’s dangerous to try leaving.”

Suba had a sorrowful smile. “It sounds like you don’t want to come.”

Zeti shook her head. “I don’t, and I don’t want you to go.”

“I had a feeling, but I figured it was worth the risk to make sure.”

She grabbed Suba’s wrist. “Why are you leaving?”

“There are some Krepps old enough to have lived before Doe and Haemon came and all the tribes merged. They’ve convinced me and many others that life was better when we weren’t an army, when we were separate tribes of lower numbers. I’m sick of living here. Even if it means I never taste Slugari, I’d rather follow a Krepp than Doe and Haemon.”

Zeti couldn’t comprehend the feeling. She’d begun to respect Doe in ways she never thought possible. He was the hardest working and strongest creature she’d ever come across. He was her leader.

—everyone’s leader—and he deserved to be. *He’s going to bring us to the Slugari we crave. Zeti was confident. How can Suba not care about that?*

Suba unfolded a map of Ovira. “We’re going to be here, deep in Merejic.” She pointed to the northwestern edge of the continent. “They say there’s an abandoned Elven village there with buildings that are structurally superior to our huts, and there are plenty of animals to hunt.”

“I shouldn’t know where you’re going. Why are you telling me this?”

“In case you ever change your mind. Just don’t tell anyone we spoke. It’s best you pretend I never came to your hut.” Suba kissed Zeti on the forehead. “Goodbye. I must be going.”

“All of you are leaving tonight?”

“Yes, imminently.” Suba turned and parted the cloth shielding of the hut. She glanced back over her shoulder, waiting for Zeti, a pleading look in her yellow eyes.

“I can’t,” Zeti said.

Suba nodded. Then she was gone.

Zeti rested on her bed, distraught as she realized she wouldn’t be sleeping much that night.

Keenu was the only Krepp left that mattered to her. For the first time, she seriously considered asking him to be her *seshar*. She’d come to believe he was trying to help her when he’d offered to kill Paramar. She trusted him now. He was ten years her elder, but that wasn’t uncommon.

Her biggest issue was that his pointed face was shaped somewhat like Zoke’s. It was an uncomfortable thought, though she didn’t know why.

Perhaps because Zoke and I are more likely to fight against each other than be part of the same tribe again, and Keenu’s likeness to brother to me only reminds me of this.

She felt the tears coming when she thought of Grayol next. The image haunted her daily, her dead friend’s spiraling body slapping against the stone of the crumbling Tenred castle after the explosion.

At least she didn’t miss her father, Ruskir. Never had an argument felt so healthy, so relieving. She regretted nothing she’d said or done to him. She only wished it had happened sooner.

The next morning, everyone was talking about the “traitors” who’d abandoned the army during the night. Zeti had never seen so much spit in one day, though she wondered how many of the spiteful comments were exaggerated or even completely feigned. She had no idea Suba was so unhappy in the encampment. There had to be others.

In the afternoon, while Zeti was carrying two sacks of oats over to feed the Dajriks, Keenu approached her. He hollered at a nearby Krepp to help her.

“I don’t need it,” Zeti said.

Keenu smiled. “I can tell you don’t, but Doe wants to see us right now. I’m sure it’s about what happened last night.”

Hot fear filled Zeti’s chest. Would Doe ask her what she knew about those who’d left? If he found out she was lying...Zeti had a startling realization. *I’m a traitor for not revealing their location, for not letting Doe know they planned to abandon us. I could die for this.*

Keenu noticed her worry. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Did someone close to you leave?”

“I haven’t had a chance to check.” Luckily, Zeti had practiced lying to her father for many years. She knew she was good at it.

Then Zeti realized she wasn’t following Keenu toward Doe’s quarters. “Where are we going?”

“He wants us to meet him at the western wall.”

This, Zeti liked even less. The Slugari was so large, it was rare to find him moving about the encampment. He must have a strong reason to be at the wall.

At least Vithos isn't here to tell if I'm lying. Still, her heart was racing.

There was an audience of Krepps huddled near the wall. Doe spoke in a hushed tone to a few who were ranked high in the army.

"What's going on?" Zeti asked someone standing nearby.

"It looks like he's questioning many Krepps' loyalty."

As Zeti and Keenu maneuvered through the crowd, she saw dead bodies scattered throughout. She recognized some of them as wall guards. In a panic, she looked for Suba, hoping not to find her. She didn't get a chance to conclude her search before Doe called her over and pointed at the wall.

"Stand there with your back against it," he ordered.

She obeyed, careful not to say a word until asked a question.

"When did you find out that thousands of Krepps had abandoned the army, making themselves traitors?"

Not only was Doe waiting for her answer, every nearby Krepp watched. There were hundreds of them in view. For a moment, she couldn't speak. An onslaught of terror closed her throat, producing only one thought. *I'm not prepared for this.*

"Answer me!"

Zeti thought quickly. When would she have found out if Suba hadn't told her?

"This morning," she answered. "I heard Krepps talking about it."

Doe's silence made her second-guess her ability to lie. Could he tell her words weren't true? She wondered how difficult it would be to jump over the wall and escape without being killed.

Impossible, she realized.

"Did you have any knowledge of the plan before they left?" Doe asked.

"No. I didn't know."

Someone in the crowd blurted, "She's lying!"

Zeti recognized the male Krepp. He'd wanted to be her *seshar*, but she'd denied him. He'd pestered her, and eventually she'd insulted him in front of his friends.

"He's just saying that because he's angry I embarrassed him."

"Quiet, both of you," Doe said.

Zeti was surprised her leader wasn't angrier. But then she saw how sluggish his movements were and he turned to check on the Krepp in the crowd who'd spoken. *He's exhausted.* Zeti felt pity.

"You don't need to worry about my loyalty, Doe," she risked saying without being asked. "I'm not a traitor. I want Slugari meat as badly as any other Krepp, and I believe the Humans in Kyrro deserve to die. They killed a close friend to me. *Vantikar.*"

Although the word usually meant taking revenge on those who'd wronged you, it also could mean avenging the death of a friend or family member.

"See." Doe turned to the high-ranking Krepps behind him, nearly all of them male. "This is how a Krepp of rank should speak."

Zeti always assumed they were jealous of the favoritism she received from Doe, and the looks on their faces proved it.

"Keenu, you're next." Doe pointed his black claw at the wall.

Doe asked him the same questions. Keenu answered calmly, unworried.

It wasn't long before Doe was satisfied. He turned to his audience. "Even speaking about leaving now is punishable by death. If a Krepp comes to you and admits he's planning to leave, you must

report this or you'll be punished severely. Tell this to every Krepp you see. Now get back to your tasks."

The hundreds of Krepps dispersed. The encampment was even more bare than usual, for those that had gone with Haemon hadn't returned yet.

Maybe the cowards have realized the kind of welcome that awaits them on their return. They would be mocked, though Haemon would hear none of it. Zeti found herself wondering if Doe would mock Haemon when they were alone. But her leaders didn't tease, she realized. They scolded, yelled, and ordered, but never belittled.

And they're never happy, Zeti realized. Never content.

She wondered what Doe would be like once they finally took over the Slugari colony. Would he enjoy the victory? Was he even capable?

She found his determination inspiring. Half of Zeti's mouth curled up in a grin when Doe called her to speak with him and Keenu.

"I'm sending you both to Tenred with a thousand Krepps. Once you get there, speak with Nebre. Give her a sense of how likely those Humans are to fight beside us when we invade Kyrro again. If Kyrro doesn't attack Tenred a week after you get there, bring the Krepps back here."

"I'll do that," Keenu said. "But does this mean I'll miss marching to Kyrro?"

"No. We'll wait for your return. There's still more work to be done with the Dajriks' weapons, and we need to find out what went wrong with the army Haemon led. We might need to develop a counter to whatever strategy or weapon the Humans in Kyrro used to defeat them."

"When should we leave?" Keenu asked.

"I'll have a thousand Krepps ready by tomorrow morning."

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