

# WIT'CH STORM

JAMES CLEMENS



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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# WIT'CH STORM

Book Two of  
THE BANNED AND THE  
BANISHED

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For my most vocal and persistent supporters,  
my brothers and sisters

(and yes, I am going to list them all):

Cheryl

Doug

Laurie

Chuck

Bill

Carrie

---

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# FOREWORD TO WIT'CH STORM

*by Sala'zar Mut,  
novelist and playwright*

*(NOTE: Here follow the exact words written on the eve of Sala'zar Mut's execution for crimes against the Commonwealth)*

FIRST AND FOREMOST, I am a writer.

As a writer, I have come to believe that words should always be written in one's own blood. Therefore one would be careful what he or she chooses to write. Who would dare waste their limited quantity of vital fluid on mere flippancy and fictions? If words were pumped forth from one's heart, would they not always speak with the truth of that person's soul?

So though I write this with a cheap ink that clots upon my paper like the spittle from a dying man's throat, let me imagine it to be my life's blood that inks this parchment. And in some ways, it truly is—for from my cell, I can hear the executioner sharpening his knives upon his stone, a noise that slices as sharp as the edge he grinds. When I am done with these words, he will open up my belly so all can read what the gods have written inside me. I will become an open book. So let these words be both a foreword to this next translation of the Kelvish Scrolls and a foreword to the open volume my corpse will become when the sun next rises.

I am forced this night to write my story so that my dear wife, Delli, may die quickly under the axman's blade, rather than suffer and writhe upon the Stone of Justice. I write so she might die in peace. But as I told you before, I must be truthful with my final words. And the truth is that whether or not the quality of my wife's death hung on my actions, I would still write this foreword.

For you see, writing is not only my craft . . . but my life.

True, writing earned bread for my children and a roof over my family's heads, but it also nourished my soul. Words sustained me. Words were my heart. So how could I refuse one last time to tell a story—even if it's the story of my own damnation, a story to be used to frighten you away from the wonders inherent in the Scrolls.

I know I am to be an example to you students who hope to become Scholars of the Commonwealth. My death is to be a testimonial to the perversity and damnation that can lie within the text of the Scrolls.

So be it.

Here is my tale:

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Among the dank alleys of Gelph, I chanced upon a black market dealer in items arcane who offered that which was forbidden. He stank of spiced sweetmeats and sour ale, and I was apt to shove him aside. But the scoundrel must have spied into my soul, for he whispered an offer I could not refuse: a chance to peruse words forbidden from ages past. He offered me a copy of the Scrolls, preserved on the flayed skin of a dead zealot. As a writer, I had heard rumors of such a text and suspected I would pay any price for the chance to read its words. And I was right—it cost me dearly to wrangle the copy from the foul-toothed alley man.

By candlelight, I read the entire text over the course of four sleepless days and nights. I feared someone interrupting and snatching the copy from before my eyes, so I read without stopping. My beard grew stubbled upon my cheek, but I did not cease until the last word reached my tired eyes.

The first of the Scrolls seemed so innocuous I could not understand why it was banned. I raved that such a benign work should be kept from the people, but by the end of the last Scroll, I knew . . . I knew why the Scrolls were kept locked away from the eyes of the populace. This made me more than just rave—I *raged* against the injustice! And with the words of the Scrolls giving me power, I sought to bring the story to the people.

So I devised a plan.

I thought I could convert the Scrolls into a play—change a few names and places, twist the story a bit—and still bring its hidden magick to the people. But a cast member betrayed me. On the opening night of my play, I was arrested along with my troupe and the entire audience in attendance.

Of the two hundred people hauled away that rainy night, except for my wife, I am the last still breathing . . . but their wails yet echo in my head. Over the five winters of my imprisonment, I have shed so many tears that thirst is always on my tongue. Even as I write these words, tears smear the wick ink in black trails across the tan parchment.

Yet as much sorrow as the perusal of the Scrolls has cost my family and many others, in my heart I still cannot regret reading them. The Scrolls changed me with their words. I now *know* the truth! And that knowledge can't be cut from me by the executioner's knives. I will die with the final words of the Scrolls on my lips . . . and die content.

As a writer, I always suspected that words held a certain magick. But upon reading the Scrolls, I now understand just how powerful the written word can be.

Words can be the blood of a people.



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# POSTSCRIPT TO THE FOREWORD

*by Jir'rob Sordun, professor of  
University Studies (U.D.B.)*

WELCOME BACK TO the Scrolls.

Why, you might wonder, do we waste the first few pages with the dying words of a blaspheming man? Sala'zar Mut was executed by public torture and slow decapitation at New Welk Prison in Sant Sib'aro on the morning after he wrote the preceding foreword.

His death, dear students, is the first lesson to be pondered before one should continue through the Scrolls.

Did you believe Mut's words? Did you believe that words can be the blood of a people? That words can have some arcane power? Do not be ashamed if you did, for Sala'zar Mut was a skilled writer.

But let this be a lesson to you . . . Do not *trust* words.

Mut was under a delusion, a weakness of the mind caused by the untutored reading of the Scroll.

Let his *death* be the lesson here—not his words. Words did *not* save his life.

So, before you open the first page of this second book, you must know the following truth and harden your heart by reciting it one hundred times before the sun sets today:

“Words do *not* have power.

The Scrolls do *not* have power.

Only the Council has power.”

## Assignment of Responsibility for the second Scroll

This copy is being assigned to you and is your sole responsibility. Its loss, alteration, or destruction will result in severe penalties (as stated in your local ordinances). Any transmission, copying, or even oral reading in the presence of a nonclassmate is strictly forbidden. By signing below and placing your fingerprint, you accept all responsibility and release the university from any damage it may cause you (or those around you) by its perusal.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Place inked print of your  
right index finger here:

### \*\*\* WARNING \*\*\*

*If you should perchance come upon this text outside of proper university channels, please close this book now and alert the proper authorities for safe retrieval. Failure to do so can lead to your immediate arrest and incarceration.*

**YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.**

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## WIT'CH STORM

Birthered in fire  
and shadowed by the wings of dragons,  
this is the way the journey began.

OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, a winter's sun prepares to set into the blue of the Great Western Ocean. The sky above is not the rosy glow of spring, but a bruised jumble of purples, reds, and yellows. I sit at my desk and wait, as I have done every night since finishing the first part of her story last year. For the past hundred nights, I have watched the moon wax full and wane to a sliver several times from the very seat, a pen poised above parchment, unable to write.

Why? Why do I delay in continuing her tale? I know it is the only way to free me of the wit'ch's wicked spell. Only by writing her entire tale in truthful words can I lift her curse and finally die. So am I dragging my feet in a secret attempt to extend my interminable existence? Perhaps to live another century, or two, or maybe three?

No. Time destroys all illusions about oneself. Like water flowing through a chasm, digging an ever deeper channel, the passing of years has worn away the layers of my self-deception. This is the only reward her damnable curse has granted me: a heart that can now see clearly.

These days and nights of empty pages are *not* sprung from a desire to continue with my life, but simply from dread, a paralyzing fear for what I must write next. Some things even the tincture of time cannot soothe.

I know next I must tell the tale of her dark journey, a road blackened by the long shadow of the wit'ch. Yet I fear to put this story on paper. Not only will writing this account require unlocking and staring full in the face again the horrors that lay along the road, but also by placing ink to paper, it will make the legend more real, give substance and form to what is now only memory.

Still I must . . .

So, as the bright days and rosy sunsets of spring and summer fade behind me, I find within the

icy breezes and bruised skies of winter the will once again to write. This is the season in which I can tell her tale.

---

It is not, however, the same season in which her story begins.

Listen . . . Can you hear the ice breaking in the mountain passes as spring finally releases winter's hold upon the peaks of the Teeth, opening the way to the valleys below? Listen as the ice moans and cracks like thunder heralding the beginning of her travels.

And like all journeys, foul or fair, it starts with a single step . . .



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*Book One*

**DARK ROADS**

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# 1

ELENA STEPPED FROM the cave, pushing aside the leather hanging that kept the warmth of the mountain folk's morning fires snug within the cavern. Even though spring was already a moon old, here among the peaks the early morning hours were still laced with whispers of ice from the mountaintops. Free of the caves, the air smelled crisp, scented with pine and highland poppy, and this morning, a breath of warmth even hinted at the summer to come.

A sigh on her lips, Elena shook back the hood of her green woolen jacket and raised her eyes toward the mountains. Still tipped with heavy snow, they seemed to lean over her as if threatening to topple, and the roars from a hundred waterfalls echoed through the valley from the torrents of snowmelt. After a long winter, where both water and time itself had seemed frozen forever, the spring thaw was like a new birth.

Smiling, she took a step forward—but, as if to remind her that winter had not yet completely given up its grasp on the highlands, her heel slipped on a patch of black ice.

She cartwheeled her arms to no avail and landed on her backside upon the rocky trail.

Behind her, Elena heard the rasp of leather on stone as Er'ril pushed aside the cavern's apron to join her. "Girl, we can't have you breaking your neck before we even leave the Teeth." He reached a hand to help her up. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." With her face burning hot enough to thaw the ice under her rump, Elena ignored his hand and struggled to her feet on her own. "I didn't see . . . I slipped . . ." She sighed and turned away from his stern expression. Under black brows, his gray eyes always seemed to be weighing her, judging her every action. And why was it that he only seemed to acknowledge her when she was burning a finger on a flame or snagging a toe on an unseen rocky outcropping? She wiped a palm over her gray trousers, searching for her dignity but finding only a sodden spot on her backside.

"The others have been waiting a long time," he said as he slid past her, leading the way up the three hundred steps toward the pass where the rest of the party had gathered. "Even the wolf should be back by now."

Fardale, in his wolf form, had left at daybreak to survey the trails that led to the distant valleys. Meanwhile, Nee'lahn and Meric had been assigned to tack the horses and ready the wagon, while Tol'chuk and Mogweed hauled and inventoried their supplies. Only Kral still remained below, saying his final farewells to his mountain clan.

"If we hope to clear the pass by nightfall," Er'ril said as he climbed, "we must be off quickly. So keep your eyes on the stairs, rather than on the clouds." As if mocking his warning, a patch of ice betrayed Er'ril's own feet. His one arm shot out, and he had to hop two steps to keep his balance.

Afterward, as he glanced back at her, his face was a shade darker than before.

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“I’ll make sure I watch where I’m going,” Elena said, her eyes bowed meekly—but she couldn’t keep a grin from her lips.

Er’ril grumbled something under his breath and continued forward.

They managed the remainder of the stairs with care, each in a cocoon of silence. Elena, though, imagined both their minds dwelt on the same worry—the journey ahead, the long trek across the mountain lands of Alasea to the lost city of A’loa Glen. Somewhere in the sunken city lay the Blood Diary, hidden there by Er’ril centuries ago: a tome prophesied to contain the key to saving their lands from the black corruption of the Gul’gothal lord. But could they reach it, a band of travelers from different lands, each with his own reasons for pursuing this journey?

With much of the last several weeks spent plotting, planning, and outfitting the band of travelers, a mixture of relief at finally being under way and dread at leaving the security of the frozen passes swirled in each member’s breast. A heavy silence, like now, hung around the shoulders of everyone, except for—

“Ho!” The call from behind them stopped both Er’ril and Elena near the head of the trail. Elena twisted around to see Kral squeeze his huge frame through what now seemed a tiny opening in the granite cliff face far below. He waved an arm the size of a tree trunk at them, his voice rolling like a boulder through the canyon. “Hold up there. I’ll join you.”

With his back bent under a heavy pack, he bounded up the steps, taking three stairs with every stride. Elena held her breath and winced. She was amazed that more of the mountain folk didn’t break their necks upon the icy trail. But Kral seemed hardly to notice the slick stairs, his feet finding firm purchase with each step. Was it just luck or skill, she wondered, that kept the huge man from a deadly fall?

He soon drew abreast of them. “It’s a good day to be off,” he said, not even winded by the thin mountain air. He seemed to be the only member of the party to have no doubts about their journey. While the others had grown more silent with the approaching day of departure, Kral had swelled with nervous energy, anxious to leave. He was always rechecking their supplies, honing weapons, trimming the horses’ hooves, measuring the ice melt, or satisfying some other need for their departure.

Noting Kral’s wide-toothed grin as he joined them on the stair, Elena asked the question that had been nagging her. “You don’t seem at all bothered to abandon your home. Aren’t you a little sad to leave?”

Kral rubbed a hand through his thick black beard while his expression softened to amusement. “Spring is the usual time of our Scattering. With the winter passes now open, our people split into separate Fires and hike the trading routes. The clan will not unite again until the end of autumn. In truth, we call no place home. As long as there is rock under our boots and a heart in our chest, we are home.” He nodded them forward to the head of the trail.

Er’ril refused to move, though. “Kral, you speak the truth, as all your people do, but you leave much unsaid.” From his higher vantage on the hewn stairs, Er’ril stared the mountain man straight in



the eyes. “I suspect I know better what spurs your hurried desire to depart.”

---

“And what might that be, man of the plains?” Kral’s eyes narrowed slightly, the amusement on his lips fading to a hard line.

“When we first met back in Winterfell’s inn, you mentioned a prophecy of doom heralded by my reappearance among your tribe.”

Kral’s gaze darted away; he seemed to study the cracked ice on the stair.

“It’s not the journey ahead that excites your heart,” Er’ril continued, “but simply relief that I am leaving your people—and your clan yet survives.”

“You shame me with your words,” Kral mumbled to the cold stone.

“I don’t mean to. That’s not why I stopped you here.”

“Then why?” he asked sourly.

“To thank you.” Er’ril took a step closer and reached up to grasp the man’s shoulder as Kral’s eyes grew wide. “I’ve already thanked you for sheltering us and healing me of the goblin’s poison, but I never thanked you for the risk your tribe took in taking me in. You knew the prophecy, yet took me into your home.”

“You owe us no . . . thanks,” Kral said, stumbling with his tongue. “We could do no other. We are bound to the Rock and will not shirk our duty—or its burden of prophecy.”

“Still I owe you a debt, friend.” Er’ril squeezed Kral’s shoulder a final time, then turned around to lead the way up to the Pass of Spirits. “And we of the plains, too, know something of honor.”

Elena followed Er’ril, but not before noting the shine of respect in the mountain man’s eyes.

As they continued higher, toward the pass, Er’ril began to limp slightly on his right leg, the climb obviously worrying the bone struck with the goblin’s knife last autumn. The dagger’s poison had wasted the Standi plainsman to a hollow figure. Though he had quickly regained his muscle and form afterward, echoes of his injuries still persisted, especially with exertion. And Er’ril wasn’t the only member of the party bearing scars. Each member carried wounds—not all of them visible—from the first confrontation with the Dark Lord. And who knew what other battles were yet to be fought before the party reached the lost city?

Er’ril reached the top of the trail and stopped. His eyes were toward the open pass. “I still think the plan is foolhardy,” he mumbled.

Elena and Kral joined him.

The Pass of Spirits spread in meadows and gentle slopes away from them. Here spring had truly reached the highlands. Blooming crocuses spread in splashes of blues and whites, and at the edges of the pass, some flowers were even pushing right out of patches of persistent snow, as if spring itself were trying to shake its shoulders free of winter’s mantle. Besides the flowers, the pass teemed with

life. At the fringes of budding birch trees, the spotted red flanks of a family of deer could be seen, slowly working up the pass. Overhead a circling hawk screeched and dove into the green sea of meadow grass then sprang back out, something small and furred wriggling in its talons.

Er'ril's eyes obviously saw none of this. "Look at that wagon," he said. "It looks like a cheap tavern whore, painted and draped in bells to attract every eye and ear."

Near a small creek that murmured among mossy boulders, Elena spotted the herd of tethered horses grazing by a large covered wagon. The wagon's wooden sides were painted a burnt orange, and its canvas covering, stretched taut over a frame of bent maple saplings, had been stained dark blue with hand-stenciled white stars. Cowbells ringed its flanks, each painted a different color.

"I sort of like it," Kral said beside her.

Scowling, Er'ril marched toward the milling horses and people waiting nearby. "I should've just taken Elena by myself. Then we would not have needed this foolishness."

"It's been long decided. We all cast our stones," Kral said. "Besides the elv'in Meric—who wanted to abandon the entire journey—you were the only one who wanted to split up the group."

"We are too many. A smaller party could move more swiftly and attract fewer eyes."

"Perhaps, but if you should attract an enemy's eyes, you'll need the strengths and skills of all to keep the girl from the Black Heart's grasp. It is not just brigands and thieves we must protect her against."

"I've heard the arguments."

Elena had to half run to keep up with the bigger men. She spoke between gulps of air. "Uncle Bo warned us that we must stay together."

"I know, Elena," Er'ril said, slowing slightly to allow her to keep abreast of him. "I don't mean to disparage your uncle. He was a brave man. But the portents he attempted to decipher are tricky to interpret with accuracy. He might have been mistaken."

"He wasn't," she said firmly, and in her heart, she truly did sense the importance of keeping the group intact. Maybe in part because she had already lost her entire family: her parents burned to death by her own hand, her aunt and uncle slain by beasts of the Gul'gotha, and her brother Joach stolen from her by black magicks. So much loss would have been inconsolable without the support of those around her. After six moons together, this group had become a second family, united not by the blood of birth but the blood of battle—and she did not want to see this family sundered. "We must stay together."

"So we will," Er'ril said, but doubt rang in his voice.

"It's a sound plan," Kral argued. He pointed at the gaily painted wagon. "There stands our banner. Disguised as a small circus, one among many plying the warm roads of spring and summer, we will hide in the open. While searching eyes will seek for us along back roads, we will travel open and free, loud and noisy. Not only will this keep furtive eyes from looking too closely at us, it will

also earn us coppers and gold to replenish our supplies. I say it is a sound plan.”

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“Yes,” Er’ril said with sarcasm. “And you mountain folk only speak the truth.”

Kral harrumphed and patted Er’ril good-naturedly on his shoulder. “Ahh . . . I see your time among the clans has taught you a bit of wisdom.”

Close to the wagon now, Kral’s loud voice drew the attention of the others away from their final preparations. Nee’lahn turned her head from where she had been cinching a saddle atop a roan stallion. She raised a hand in greeting, then froze as her eyes settled on Elena. Blinking a few times, she dropped the currybrush she had in her other hand and crossed closer to them.

As she approached, Nee’lahn wiped a smudge of mud from her cheek while speaking: “Sweet Mother, Er’ril, what have you done to the poor child? Her hair!”

Elena, suddenly self-conscious, raised a hand to her shorn hair. Where once long auburn curls had draped past her shoulders, now only a coarse crop of hair that barely covered her ears remained. And that hair was no longer auburn, but dyed as black as Er’ril’s own locks.

“If we are to hide Elena within this daft circus,” Er’ril said, “what better way than to mask the girl herself? So . . . meet my new son.”

ER’RIL WATCHED THE others gather around Elena.

Amongst the thronging party, Tol’chuk’s bulk was like a boulder in a stream. Twice the weight even the huge mountain man, the og’re did not crowd too closely, seeming to sense that his massive form still unnerved the much smaller girl. Even though the creature was foul to the eye—with his leathered skin, fanged teeth, and hulking mass—Er’ril had grown to respect and admire the og’re for his calmness and intelligence. It was Tol’chuk’s quiet words during the oft-heated discussion of their plans that had finally persuaded Er’ril to their present course.

In contrast, dwarfed in the og’re’s shadow hid the quiet Mogweed. To Er’ril, the shape-shifter remained a blank slate. The skinny man with mousy hair and nervous movements hardly spoke a word and when he did, he talked so softly he could hardly be heard. Yet, as little as the si’luran man revealed through his manner and speech, Er’ril felt something oily and slippery about him. Even now as Mogweed studied Elena, darting quick glances from a few paces away, he struck Er’ril as being like a hungry bird studying a squirming worm. Er’ril could practically see Mogweed’s mind swirling with thoughts and plans he never voiced.

Whereas Meric, dressed in his usual white linen and billowy green pants, never kept his opinion to himself. The tall, silver-haired elv’in leaned closer to Elena, reaching a narrow finger to raise her chin, but his words flew to Er’ril. “How dare you touch her? You had no right to mar the beauty of our royal line in such a manner.”

“It was necessary,” Er’ril answered coldly. “Her disguise might just very well keep that precious royal line of yours still breathing.”

Meric released her chin and turned hard eyes on Er'ril. "And what of her mark?" He pointed to Elena's hand, where shades of ruby whorled in languid swirls. "How do you propose to hide her wit'ch's blaze?"

"My son will earn his keep at the circus by hauling and sweeping. And for these chores, he'll need a good pair of work gloves." Er'ril tapped his belt, from which hung a set of plain leather gloves.

"You propose to have elv'in royalty sweep and handle filth?" Meric's white skin darkened. "You've already made her a sorry enough figure with your ridiculous shearing."

Elena's face had by now flushed to match her ruby hand.

Meric knelt down by the girl. "Listen, Elena, you don't have to do this. You are the last of the elv'in king's royal line. In your veins flows the blood of lost dynasties. You must not ignore your birthright." He took her hand. "Give up this foolish quest and return with me to the wind ships and seas of your true home."

"The lands of Alasea are my home," she answered, slipping her hand free of his. "I may be descended from some lost king of yours, but I'm also the daughter of these lands, and I won't abandon them to the Gul'gothal lord. You are free to leave and return to your home, but I will stay."

Meric stood back up. "You know I can't return—not without you. And my mother, the queen, would not tolerate any harm coming to you. So if you persist in this foolish pursuit, I will be at your side to protect you."

Er'ril tired of this man. "The child is my charge," he finally said, guiding Elena away by the shoulder. "She has no need of your protections."

The wasp-thin elv'in ran a disdainful eye up and down Er'ril, then waved an arm around the pass. "Yes, I see how you protect her. Just look at the wagon in which you propose to lead her. You would have her travel like a vagabond."

Er'ril inwardly winced at the words, recognizing his own complaint from earlier. He hated to hear the same sentiment on the elv'in's lips. "It's not an unsound plan," he mumbled, knowing he was contradicting his previous words. "For centuries, I have traveled the roads myself as a juggler and showman to earn my keep. Its gaudiness will hide one plain girl."

"But just look at her hair," Meric moaned. "Was that necessary?"

Before either could speak again, Tol'chuk interrupted, his voice a rattle of rocks in his throat. "Hair grows back," the og're said simply.

Kral grunted his amusement and turned to Nee'lahn, who stood at the mountain man's side. "Well, it's settled then, lass. With Elena disguised, I guess you'll be the only woman traveling with this troupe . . . Of course, if you feel outnumbered, we could always pop a mummer's wig on the og're and call him Mogweed's sweetheart."

The petite nyphai woman swept back her long blond hair. "I don't think that'll be necessary. No if you're all done gawking at the poor girl, maybe we can finish hitching the horses and be under

way.”

---

“Nee’lahn’s right,” Er’ril said, turning his back on the elv’in. “The wet passes will be ice by nightfall and—”

“Look!” Elena said, pointing past everyone’s shoulders.

A huge black treewolf could be seen at the head of the pass, loping across the meadow toward them, a dark shadow in the grass.

“It’s about time, Fardale,” Mogweed mumbled under his breath. Er’ril heard the distaste in the man’s voice and sensed there was much unspoken between these shape-shifting brothers.

The wolf swept up beside Mogweed, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth. With his amber eyes aglow in the sunlight, Fardale fixed his brother with an intent stare. After several silent breaths, the wolf nodded his head slightly, breaking contact, then crossed to the nearby creek to slake his thirst.

“Well?” Kral asked Mogweed. “What did your dog say?”

Before Mogweed could answer, Elena scolded the mountain man in hushed tones. “He’s not a dog. You shouldn’t call him that.”

“He’s just teasing, child,” Er’ril said and joined Kral at Mogweed’s side. “Now what did your brother discover about the condition of the passes?”

Mogweed edged away from Er’ril, deeper into the og’re’s shadow. “He says many of the ways are blocked by fast and deep waters. Impassable. But the northernmost trail is clear of all but a few swollen streams.”

Er’ril nodded. “Good. Then we have an opening to the valley and plains.”

“Except . . .” Mogweed seemed to shrink in on himself.

“What is it, man?”

“He says that it . . . smells wrong.”

Elena moved closer to them, a seed of worry growing in her eyes. “What does that mean?”

Er’ril rubbed at a throb that had developed in his temple during the hard climb here. “Yes, what does that mean?” he repeated sourly.

Mogweed studied the flowers crushed under his boots. “It’s not clear. Something . . . something . . .” Mogweed shook his head.

Tol’chuk shifted his large bulk and cleared his throat. “The wolf speaks in pictures,” he attempted to explain further. “The si’luran half of my blood caught some of Fardale’s images, too: *A wolf with raised hackles. An empty path that smells of rotten carrion.*”

“What do you think that means?” Elena asked in a tiny voice.

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“He warns that the way may be open, but something struck his wolf senses as false. So he warns caution.”

In the resulting silence, Fardale trotted over from the creek to sit at Elena’s side, nudging her hand with his wet nose. She absently scratched him behind his ear as he squatted on his haunches.

So much for not treating Fardale like a dog, Er’ril thought, but he kept his silence. The intimacy shared between the wolf and the girl seemed to calm the growing unease in her expression, and the youngster needed as much resolve as she could muster for the long journey ahead.

“So we go,” Er’ril said. “But we keep our eyes and ears alert.”

AS THE OTHERS busied themselves with final preparations, Mogweed hung around the far side of the wagon. He had his own preparations. He spotted the bent-backed crone among the small crowd of Kral’s people that had gathered to wave them all off. Nodding his head at the old woman, he slipped into the shade of the wagon. He shuffled three coppers in his palm, then returned one to his pocket. Two should be enough.

He listened as the others of his party called orders to one another. All busy. Good. Soon, he heard the wheezing breath of the ancient mountain woman as she hobbled toward the lee of the wagon. He bit at his lower lip, hating his dependence on anyone else. But the task he had requested of the old crone was one he could not accomplish alone. He juggled the coins, clinking them together. Luckily, shiny coppers bought other hands to do the work his own could not.

The old gray-haired woman, leaning on a crooked branch of polished hickory, lurched into the shade beside Mogweed. She must have once stood taller than Mogweed, but time had bent her back so cruelly that now she had to roll her eyes up to stare Mogweed full in the face. With eyes the color of black granite, she studied Mogweed silently. As sorely as the passage of countless winters had ravaged her body, he sensed a core of ice in her as hard as the eternal snow atop the windswept peaks.

Suddenly he regretted his choice of accomplices in this task.

Glancing away from her flinty eyes, he cleared his dry throat. “Were you . . . able to get what I asked of you?”

She stared, still silent for several heartbeats, then slowly nodded and reached into the folds of her battered fox-fur cloak. “We mountain folk are traders, ain’t we?” she replied with a throaty cackle. She pulled out a small satchel made from cured goatskin and began to hold it out to him. But when he reached for it, the old woman pulled it back. “Whatcha want with this stuff anyways?” she asked.

He was prepared for this question. “A keepsake,” he said as guilelessly as he could manage.

The crone’s eyes narrowed with his words. “You’re a sly one,” she hissed. “Perhaps too sly for your own good.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

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She spat at his boots. “You stink of lies.”

Mogweed backed a step. Would the woman expose him? He found his left palm slipping toward the hilt of the dagger at his waist.

“But your fate is not mine to judge, and a deal is a deal,” she said and tossed him the stuffed satchel. “The Rock will weigh your worth and carve your path.”

Caught off guard, Mogweed struggled to catch the little bag, fumbling it in his fingers until he pinned it to his chest. Unable to find his tongue, he slipped his other hand, which still palmed two coppers, back into his pocket and retrieved the third coin. He sensed he had better be more generous with his payment to this old crone. Offering all the coppers in his open palm, he finally muttered, “For your troubles.”

The old crone suddenly lashed out with her hickory staff and struck his hand, scattering the trio of coins into the mud. “Only silver will cleanse your lies from my ears.”

Mogweed rubbed his injured hand, then quickly fished the rare silver from among his small cache of coins. He cautiously passed her the payment, eyeing her staff warily.

The coin disappeared among the folds of her cloak. With a grunt of effort, she turned from him, but not before sharing a final warning. “Beware what you buy with lies, sly fox. You might discover the prize is not worth the price.” With that, she slipped from shadows into sunlight and vanished beyond the corner of the wagon.

*Not worth the price?* Mogweed fingered open the goatskin satchel and stared at its contents. A smile without humor etched his face. This prize could very well prove to be worth *any* price.

Tucked within the shadowed interior lay several of the sheared locks of Elena’s auburn hair.

Proof of a wit’ch.

UNDER THE SHADOWED tangle of oak branches, a hush had fallen over the copse. Not a bird sang, not an insect whirred. Vira’ni listened for any sound. Naked, her skin the color of the softest moonlight, clothed only in the folds of her long black hair, she knelt by the rotted stump of a pine, its sides charred by old fires. She held her breath. Even a single noise could disrupt the spell.

Her children, though, had done their job well. Nothing still lived within a quarter league of the glade. From here, she could see the ground littered with the small bodies of the dead woodland creatures—tufted squirrels, birds of every feather, even a red doe lay sprawled at the edge of the copse, its neck contorted from the poisons. Satisfied, she bowed her head in preparation.

Before her, atop the worm-eaten wood of the stump, rested a palm-size bowl of carved ebon’stone. Its basin glowed blacker than the richest obsidian, while jagged veins of silver quartz

etched its dark surface like forked lightning at midnight. She allowed a finger to trace its edge.

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Here lay wealth—and within its basin lay power.

Using a bone dagger, she sliced her thumb and dripped the blood into the basin. Fat droplets rolled like quicksilver to the bottom of the bowl, then quickly vanished—the stone was always thirsty.

Reciting the words taught her, Vira'ni's tongue grew colder with each utterance. Without halting for that meant death, she forced her tongue to keep moving. Thankfully it was a short litany. Tears squeezing between her clenched lids, she spat the last word through her blue, frozen lips.

Finally done, she sat back upon her heels and raised her injured thumb to her mouth, licking gently at the cut. The blood was like fire in her frozen mouth.

Now, though, came the hardest part of the spell—waiting.

As she sucked at her wounded finger, her children must have sensed her distress and approached tentatively. Vira'ni allowed them to climb up her legs and nest where they had been birthed. An especially concerned child even crawled up her belly to gently rub its furred legs against her nipple. She ignored the young one, dismissing its impetuosity.

In her mind, she went over the ritual. Had she made a mistake? Perhaps more blood—

Black flames suddenly erupted from the ebon stone bowl, flickering like a hundred serpents' tongues above the basin.

“Darkfire,” she whispered, naming the flames with lips still blue from the cold. But these flames offered no warmth. Instead the small glade grew colder for their presence. Where normal fire shed light into darkness, this flame drank the late-afternoon sunlight that dappled through the branches overhead. The wood grew gloomy as a fog of cold darkness flowed out from the flame.

The child at her breast, frightened by the darkfire's blaze, bit her teat, but Vira'ni dismissed the pain. Poison or not, the spider's bite was but a small nuisance compared to the menace that lurked within the black flame.

She bowed her head to the stump. “Master, your servant awaits.”

The flames swelled. Darkness swallowed the bowl and the stump. A faint scream echoed up from the flames. Even this whisper of pain brought a shiver to her skin. Vira'ni recognized the music of Blackhall's dungeons. Her own voice had once joined the same chorus as she writhed among the tortured. And so she would have remained if the Black Heart had not found her pleasing to his eyes, choosing her as a vessel for his power and impregnating her with the Horde.

Vira'ni's hand raised to where the Dark Lord himself had touched her that final night. A single white lock now nestled within her black hair, like an albino snake among black roots. As she fingered the single snowy tress, images flashed across her eyes—yellowed fangs, ripping claws, the beat of bony wings. Her fingers fell away from her hair.

Some memories were best left untouched.



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