

Heirs
of
Anarwyn



Prequel

THE RUIN
OF GOLDBRETH

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ALYS SHIVERED AT the eerie cry that drifted in through her open window. Her room was so high in the tower that only on clear days like this one could the noises of the street far below ascend to her sanctuary. A cool breeze whispered in, stirring the tendrils of long brown hair that framed her face as she turned to face the window. That wind carried something dark and unnatural on its breath. Something that sent a coil of dread around her heart.

“No.” Alys shook herself and shoved the gloomy thoughts aside. She was just suffering from the nervous jitters of her wedding day. The cry had probably come from some far-off hawk hunting on the mountainside. Whirling away from the window, Alys stepped into her white silk hose before tugging on the dainty slippers with the tiny silver-white pearls tied in a neat cluster.

After adjusting the lace, she rose to examine her hair in the looking glass. Her mother had gone for the circlet of fine silver that would hold her golden silk wedding veil in place. Alys’s bushy brown hair had been tamed with braids encircling her head just above the ears and finishing in a rose-shaped bun at the back. Her light blue gown fit her upper body snugly and cut an elegant V down to her waist where it flowed in stylish folds to her ankles.

Galad would be pleased with the dress. He often mentioned how much he admired her taste. He was a knight in the king’s service and a commander in the army. Though he belonged to a family whose

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fortunes had declined in recent years, she had convinced her father to let her follow her heart. Her father was a wealthy scholar much revered among the Tathanar for the subtlety of his mind. Even the king employed him as an advisor, which is why her family occupied this high tower so near the royal palace.

Alys whirled around in a girlish display of excitement and then slid her silver bracelet onto her slender white arm. The bracelet held a green malachite stone shaped like a wolf's head in the middle. A sparkling ruby was set on one side of the wolf's head and a creamy blue-lace agate on the other.

These were the stones of power that she used to channel the energy of the Anarwyn. The practice of wielding the sacred power was called Lithomancy because the power could only be channeled through one of a dozen stones. Alys examined the bracelet with some pride. Few of the descendants of Ilsie could use all the gemstones, and she was thought quite accomplished to have mastered three of them. It was true none of her stones were real weapons, but malachite, called the Protection Stone, could be used to create a defensive shield. The beautiful blue agate was a potent Healing Stone and the ruby, or Strength Stone, could be used to protect her from physical harm.

A nervous flutter rippled through her stomach, and she faced the door, giving it a scowl. What was taking her mother so long? The bells would soon chime, and she would need the circlet before they could descend to the Crystal Vault, the most sacred place in the city of Goldereth, where the wedding would take place. The Crystal Vault served as the ceremonial center of the city where all high celebrations of the Anarwyn occurred and where those of pure descent could be married. The honor of having her marriage sealed in the Crystal Vault would long be remembered as evidence of her lineage and social status.

Alys stepped toward the door intent on finding her mother when a strangled cry burst through her window, followed by another and then another. That was no hawk. She spun to face the tall, rectangular opening through which the bright spring sunlight spilled onto the hardwood floor of her room and a fresh pine-scented breeze wafted in. The wavering wail of some beast carried on that wind. Alys shuddered, and her chest tightened. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

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What could make such a noise?

She raced to the window to peer out over the city of Goldereth. The city sprawled over the southeastern spur of the mountains that surrounded the great valley of the Braganeth. It had been established by the descendants of the Anar after the defeat of the Bragamahr in the wars of the Second Age.

Goldereth was the greatest of the cities of the Tathanar, built of white marble with dozens of round towers and high walls. Three other cities, Mendefra, Reshad, and Numaria guarded the other entrances to the valley. For thirteen hundred years, the Tathanar secured the passes to the valley, keeping the evil of the Bragamahr contained. Though separated from their brethren, the Anar of the Haradd Mountains far to the east, they had built great libraries, schools, and mausoleums to the heroes of old. It was an elegant city of beauty and learning governed by a king who was descended from the great Ilsie, herself, the first to harness the power of the Anarwyn.

Today, that beauty was marred by the horrible creeping terror that encircled Alys's throat. In the streets far below, black creatures leaped about and sprang from building to building. Screams echoed off the stone walls. What was happening?

A sudden movement on the red-tiled roof of a building below caught her attention. Some great black beast with long arms and short hind legs vaulted from the roof to crash through the window of a neighboring building. A scream shivered on the air until it was cut off abruptly, and a body flew from the window.

Alys couldn't peel her gaze away from the slight figure as it fell, silent as a bird, the garments trailing behind like some grotesque, swooping falcon. Just before it struck the cobblestones, Alys yanked her gaze away, but the hollow crunch of its landing reached her ears. The bile rose in her throat.

"By the crystal waters," she gasped, "what is happening?"

A thump sounded against her door, and she spun, expecting to see her mother enter. When the door didn't open, she raced a few steps toward it but slid to a stop when a bright-red liquid slipped under the door and spread in a pool.

"Blood!" she breathed in horror. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her mouth went dry.

The door shivered under another blow, and Alys leaped back.

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Screams of terror and pain echoed in the hallway beyond her door. Alys stood frozen to the spot until a ghastly stench wafted into her room. With it came a creeping terror that gripped her throat in a vice. She tried to swallow. Something was out there. Something that knew she was there and had come for her.

Willing herself to remain calm, she focused on the agate in her bracelet, reaching out to it with her mind. She struggled to relax. Her training came to her aid, and she was able to slow her breathing and focus.

Closing her eyes, she extended the healing power of the stone through the door in search of the danger that lay beyond. An opal would have worked better, but she had never been able to master that gem. Still, she perceived the dying agony of the person lying against her door, and then a terrible evil fixated upon her. Instinctively, she recoiled at the same instant the beast crashed into the door again. The door bowed inward and cracked but did not break.

In desperation, Alys cast about, searching for some way of escape. But her room was near the top of the high east tower in her family's living quarters, and there was only one way from the room. The door shuddered under another massive blow, and a wide splinter of wood fell away.

"Alys!"

The familiar voice was so filled with terror and pain that tears sprang to her eyes. "Galad?" she whispered. But he was still far away, and the evil was just outside her door. She peeked through the crack to see a red-pupiled eye peering in at her. Her heart skipped a beat as the palpable terror constricted her throat.

"Sweet Anarwyn, what do I do?" she mumbled.

A long, black claw slipped in through the crack and tore a great chunk of wood from the door. Through the gaping hole, she could see the flat snout and salivating jaws yawning wide, the black lips peeled back in what might have been a grin.

"Alys?" Galad yelled again. This time he was much closer.

The monster whirled at the sound of Galad's voice, and Alys's blood ran cold. "No," she gasped. "Not Galad."

Freed from the paralyzing terror, Alys mentally connected the malachite and the ruby in her bracelet to form a dyad of power. The green malachite provided protection against magical attack, while

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the ruby could defend against physical injury. Together they magnified each other and produced a powerful shield against injury and evil. When the dyad snapped into place, she sent a surge of power through the door. The swirling green and red light bowled the beast aside, but it came up snarling.

She peeked through the splintered hole in the door as Galad roared a challenge and attacked, his sword glinting in the morning light. Dressed in his smart wedding clothes, he looked comical swinging a blade. His sword rang with the impact, and bits of the black armor that covered the beast's body shattered and fell away with a clatter to the stone floor. But the beast barely noticed the blow that would have cut a man in two.

Alys struggled to place a shield around Galad, but the door interfered with the power. She couldn't get it to hold and remain stable. The beast lunged at Galad, who jumped to the side and swung the blade in a backhand strike meant to disembowel the beast. The sword rang as if the monster's hide was made of stone. The beast whirled and came again, stretching out its long arms, the wicked claws reaching for Galad. A terrible, grinding screech came from it the way a rattlesnake might shake its rattle in anticipation of a strike.

Paralyzed by uncertainty, her hand at her throat, Alys mumbled a silent prayer to the Anarwyn. Galad dodged and wove, hacking at the monster, but he might as well have been a gnat. A claw snagged the flesh on Galad's face, and his blood sprayed. He ducked as the beast flew past him and slammed into the stone railing that surrounded the landing outside her door.

The beast whirled, but Galad took a running leap and launched himself through the air feet first. His feet caught the beast in the chest, and it lurched backward, bent over the stone railing, its arms flailing before it fell. A screech echoed in the tower and the clatter of the falling beast reverberated off the stone.

Galad jumped to his feet, blood streaming down his face and neck to soak the light blue wedding tunic he wore.

"Alys?" he shouted as he banged on the door.

Alys jerked it open, and he stumbled in, grabbing her up in a desperate embrace.

"Thank the Anarwyn, you're safe," he said.

Alys squeezed him back, fighting the trembling that coursed

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through her body. The joy at seeing him alive froze in Alys's chest as her gaze settled on the little figure beside the pool of blood at her door. "Gwyn?" She choked on the name, and Galad set her down and grabbed her hand to restrain her as the sob burst from her throat.

"Oh, Gwyn."

Her little sister lay with one hand outstretched, clutching the silver circlet, her eyes wide in astonishment. Gwyn's delicate throat had been slashed, and her beautiful blue gown soaked with blood.

Alys yanked her hand from Galad's grasp and fell to her knees beside Gwyn, not caring that she knelt in her sister's blood. She seized Gwyn's pale face between her hands and bent to kiss her brow. Tears streamed from her eyes, and sobs racked her body. This must be some terrible nightmare, come to haunt her wedding day.

"Come," Galad said. His voice was soft, but his hands were strong and urgent. "Alys, we must leave here."

"I won't leave her to those beasts," Alys sobbed.

Then she remembered her parents and jumped to her feet. "Mamma?"

Galad grabbed her from behind and held her close. "They're already dead," he whispered in her ear. "I just found your mother in her apartments. Your father and my parents were slaughtered in the Crystal Vault." He choked and coughed. "Goldereth is fallen. We must flee."

"But—"

"Alys, please." Galad pleaded with her.

She cast one last glance at Gwyn's little body and grasped his hand. It was warm and calloused and reassuring.

Galad dragged her behind him while they fled through their apartments into the winding staircase. As they descended, the sounds of battle and death grew louder, piercing Alys's ears with the terrible shrieks of the beasts and the cries of the dying. Bodies lay strewn upon the stairs, their blood cascading over the steps in a slender, grizzly waterfall. Her slippered feet made no noise but also gave little traction. She slipped in the pools of blood and had to fight to keep from vomiting.

Pausing at the doorway, Galad surveyed the street before leading Alys across the courtyard where overturned wagons and stalls

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sprawled as silent as the bodies of the men and women who had so recently attended them. Thick, black smoke boiled through the streets, coating everything in fine black ash. Here and there, bunches of soldiers formed tight squares to resist the circling beasts. It was a scene to freeze the blood in one's veins. As a scholar and healer, she had never encountered death like this. The macabre spectacle surging around her was brutal and beastly—murder without feeling or remorse. Killing simply for the pleasure of killing.

As they passed the entrance to the Crystal Vault, Alys pulled up short to stare in horror. Her father stretched out on his back on the steps, the body of one of the beasts sprawled across his legs, a black liquid seeping from its smoking corpse. Two more slumped in smoldering heaps beside him. She stepped toward him, but Galad yanked her back.

“There’s no time to mourn,” he said.

Her father had been a powerful practitioner of the Anarwyn. Now, his body was covered in the black liquid that was eating away at his flesh. The sight was too horrible to be endured, and yet she couldn’t drag her gaze away.

“Father,” she choked on the word as tears splashed down her cheeks. In moments, a beautiful spring day filled with hope and the anticipation of the coming joy of her wedding lay in ruins. Her family, ripped from her by savage beasts who would kill her with as little concern as she might give a dead fly on her windowsill.

An explosion shook the courtyard, and Alys glanced up to see other heirs of the Anarwyn wielding their stones of power. Some hurtled flames and others loosed bolts of lightning at the dark figures swarming through the city like a plague of locusts. A few cast up glimmering shields in an attempt to protect themselves from the beasts’ raking claws.

“Galad!” A man’s voice rang over the chaos of battle. Galad’s hand squeezed Alys’s tight before releasing it. He pushed her behind him as he spun to face the voice.

A man with flowing dark hair stepped from behind a pile of rubble. Around his body shimmered a glistening golden shield. Alys gasped. This was no working of the Anarwyn. No stone of power could create a golden shield. It had the evil, tarnished feeling of the Bragamahr.

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As part of their training in the Anarwyn, every descendant of Ilsië with the capacity to wield the stones of power had been exposed to the evil lurking in the valley of the Braganeth. They were taught to fear and to resist the influence of that power. And here was a Tathanar of high standing and noble birth weaving a shield of the forbidden magic.

Galad must have felt it as well because he said. “What have you done, Sameel?”

“I’m cleansing this city and returning it to the lord of this land.”

“*You* let these beasts in?” Galad raised his sword.

Alys’s stomach clenched, and she reached out to the stones in her bracelet. If Sameel attacked with his twisted magic, Galad would have little defense. He could attune the blue lapis lazuli, which enhanced his natural fighting ability, but he was otherwise defenseless against any magic. Though he came from a long line of descendants who had extensive experience with the Anarwyn, he was not as receptive as Alys and controlled no stones of power.

Sameel leered at them. “Not as important as you once thought, are you?” Then he laughed. “And you think you can harm me with your little sword? The next king’s champion they called you. Well, let’s put that title to the test.”

“Get ready to run,” Galad said under his breath.

Searing white light crackled on Sameel’s hand, and Alys instinctively cast up a green shield from the malachite in her bracelet just as a bolt of lightning shot toward them. The lightning slammed into the shield with such force that she stumbled backward, but her shield absorbed the attack and held.

“Hiding behind the skirts of a girl, are you?” Sameel sneered.

Alys grabbed Galad’s arm. “Let’s go,” she whispered. “I can’t fight him. I can only hold him.”

Galad ground his teeth. “I will find you, Sameel, and make you pay for what you have done.”

Sameel laughed, and Galad spun, grabbed Alys’s hand, and fled. The wedding slippers gave her feet little protection from the bits of broken stone and burning wood that littered the streets. Alys stubbed her toe on a chunk of marble and hissed out a curse as Galad yanked her relentlessly behind him. She didn’t dare let go of his hand for fear that she would lose him in the chaos.

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Alys maintained the shield as they ducked into a long passageway and down a steep staircase to the lower marketplace of the city. One of the monsters saw them and loped toward them only to be distracted by a running woman. He leaped after her and left them to scamper through the streets in search of some refuge from the destruction.

In the wide square of the marketplace, the king stood with his head bare, his nobles gathered around him. The king and a few other Heirs of Anarwyn flung their magic at the pack of beasts that surrounded them, blasting them aside or roasting them with yellow flame. But for every beast they killed, two more took its place. The king's guard retreated as their numbers diminished.

Galad cursed and ducked behind an overturned wagon, pulling Alys behind him. A bloody hand protruded from beneath it, and Alys shied away from it.

"I have to help him," Galad said.

"You can't," Alys insisted. "There are too many."

A tortured expression twisted Galad's face. "I have to do *something*. He is my liege lord. I have sworn an oath."

Galad was a man of honor, which was one reason she loved him so much. She knew he would never forgive himself if he abandoned his king in his time of need.

"I'll help," she said and let the green shield glow more brightly. She formed a bubble of energy around Galad and one around herself. Then she rose, thrusting her hand toward the writhing mass of monsters and the king's embattled defenders.

"Go," she said and concentrated, slowing her heartbeat and her breathing, centering, feeling the deep strands of magic infusing this land, reaching for the power of the Anarwyn. She created the dyad of ruby and malachite again to enhance the shield, wishing for the first time in her life that she had developed the ability to wield the Fire Stone or the Lightning Stone. As it was, she had no weapons. All she could do was try to protect him as best she could.

Galad jumped up with his sword held in both hands and sprinted toward the beasts. The green shield Alys cast encircled him and another surrounded her. She had never cast multiple shields before, and she struggled to manage them. The beasts lunged at Galad but bounced off the shield. Galad's sword rose and fell, and the beasts

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fell away before the ferocity of his onslaught even though his sword had little effect against their armor.

Alys extended the energy of the Anarwyn to create a third bubble of crackling power around the king, his guards, and the last two remaining heirs of Anarwyn. They glanced around in stunned surprise as the monsters crashed into the green barrier, shrieking in frustration. Then, realizing that they were protected from attack, their efforts became less chaotic and more intentional. Great columns of fire and flashes of lightning cut into the ranks of the beast.

Their black scaly bodies flew into the air, broken and smoking or were consumed in the flames. Some rose again, screaming in defiance, and came on only to be blasted away. The circle of safety widened around the king as the beasts fell back, and Galad came on, hacking his way toward the king.

Sweat coursed down Alys's face to soak her gown as she concentrated with all her might. Her arms trembled and sweat dripped from her chin. Never before had she used so much power nor maintained it for so long. But she was no warrior and had no training in fighting. This was all she could do for the men and the city she loved.

A tremor swept through the ground, and a laugh rang over the tumult of the snarling beasts and the cries of the injured. Alys glanced up to see Sameel standing on the battlements above, his robes fluttering in the morning breeze. The golden glow of his shield encircled him. The beasts took no notice of him but scampered past him as if he was one of them.

A pulse of energy slammed into the wagon behind which Alys stood, sending it tumbling toward her. She lost her focus as it crashed into her shield and she stumbled backward. The shield wavered and she dove to the side, but the wagon burst through the weakened shield to clip her on the back, sending her sprawling to the cobblestones. Her concentration collapsed, and her shields fell.

Desperately, she struggled to regain control. Before she could manage it, an explosion shook the courtyard. A wave of dust and debris washed over her, bringing with it the reek of charred flesh and hot metal. It smelled like a blacksmith's forge and a charnel house.

She crawled to her feet, choking on the vomit that rose in her throat to see the king, his guards, and the heirs of Anarwyn prostrate on the stones, scattered in a wide circle like sticks blown before

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the wind. Many of the beasts lay with them. Sameel's laugh echoed over that moment of terrible silence. Then, the remaining beasts shrieked as one and launched themselves upon their victims, rending and tearing in their blood frenzy.

"Galad," Alys sobbed. Where was he? She couldn't accept that he was dead, that she had failed.

A man rose to his knees amid the scattered corpses and a gasped escaped Alys's lips. He was alive. Before she could so much as whisper his name, a beast launched itself toward him, its vicious red eyes flashing, and its fangs bared as it extended its claws toward Galad. Alys snapped a shield into place around Galad as he crawled to his feet. The shield cut the beast in two with a spray of black liquid. The claws tore Galad's tunic, leaving long bleeding gashes in his chest, but he was somehow untouched by the beast's blood.

"Run!" Alys shouted, feeling her shield waver as her panic threatened to destroy her concentration.

Galad stood as one paralyzed until another beast crashed into his shield causing the power to crackle and shimmer. Galad dashed to the king's side and knelt beside him. Alys bit her lip and fought down the panic that would break her concentration.

"Run," she whispered.

Galad rose with the king's sword in his hand and surveyed the crowd of mutilated men before he spun and raced back toward her.

Tears glistened on his cheek as he reached her. "Are you okay?" he panted.

She nodded, despite the throbbing pain in her back, unable to speak as she joined her shield with his to form a single, more manageable barrier.

"Sweet waters of Ilsie," Galad cursed, "they're all dead."

"I'm sorry," Alys said. "I did what I could."

Galad glared. "This is not your fault."

He grabbed her hand and dragged her away from the horrible scene. A pulse of energy slammed into Alys's shields as they spun, bowling them over. She kept the shield in place, and they picked themselves up, scrambling into a narrow alleyway. They raced through the devastation, dodging the monsters who tried to claw their way through Alys's shield, leaping over the bodies sprawled in the streets, and avoiding the belching flames that devoured the city.

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Alys's feet were bruised and her breathing ragged, by the time Galad swept them into a small guardhouse by the eastern gate. He shouldered the door closed and bolted it. Alys let the shield fall and watched with wide eyes as she struggled to catch her breath and to control the trembling that coursed through her.

She was weary in body, heart, and soul. One word kept repeating itself like an echo in her brain. "Gone. Gone. Gone." It was all gone. Everyone and everything she had ever loved except for Galad. Alys clenched her jaw. She would defend him to her last breath. No matter what happened to her, he must survive.

"Are you all right?" Galad asked.

She nodded. He gave her one searching look before he strapped the king's sword beside his own, snatched up two rucksacks from a pile, and led Alys through the barracks, past the garderobe to a tiny door no more than three feet high.

Something smashed into the door behind them, and Alys gave a little cry before she clamped a hand over her mouth. Galad shoved the door open. "Go," he said and helped her duck in before following. He closed and barred the door, shutting out all light.

Alys fumbled for his hand in the darkness, and he grabbed it.

"I've got you," he said. "Watch your step. But we must hurry. That door won't hold them."

Together, they set out into the moist darkness of the tunnel. The air had a musty, stale flavor to it. She reached out to feel for the wall. It was wet and slimy like the skin of a fish. She yanked her hand away in disgust and concentrated on keeping her feet in the darkness.

For what seemed like hours, they descended one step at a time until Alys's legs ached from the exertion, but Galad refused to pause for a rest. The sounds of destruction above them grew muffled before disappearing altogether.

"Tell me what happened," Alys said.

"I don't know," Galad replied. "I was just coming to the Crystal Vault to make sure the meal was set, and the candles were lit when the screaming began. The beasts came from everywhere, swarming and killing. I saw your father fall beneath them. My parents were torn from my side and flung from the walls." He paused, and his voice grew thick and gruff. "I couldn't save them." He coughed. "So, I ran for you. Then I found your mother dead in her sitting room, and I

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called for you. When I saw Gwyn lying dead outside your door, I thought I'd lost you, too."

"Sameel wasn't using the power of the Anarwyn," Alys said, trying to keep the fresh surge of tears in at the thought of her murdered family.

"I know. I felt it."

"Then, we have failed," Alys said. "The Bragamahr is unleashed again."

"It appears so."

"How did he do it?" Alys asked. "No one has possessed the power of the Bragamahr in thirteen hundred years."

"You mean no one that we know of," Galad corrected. "There have always been those who would sell their souls for the smallest bit of power."

"What are those beasts? Did Sameel create them?"

They reached a landing where a pale light framed a doorway. Galad dropped the rucksacks and fumbled around. Alys couldn't see what he did, but she heard the distinct metallic snap of steel on flint. The sparks flashed, blinding her. The steel struck again, and a spark caught. Galad coaxed a little flame to life and a torch crackled and sputtered, belching a thick black smoke that spoiled what fresh air was coming in around the door. Galad dropped the torch into a bracket on the wall. The light revealed a narrow passage with a line of weapons stacked against one wall and a doorway at the other end.

Galad took a deep breath and passed his hand over his sweating hair. "We can rest here for a moment."

Alys collapsed gratefully onto a step. Her back ached where the wagon struck her.

"Did Sameel create those beasts?" Alys insisted.

"I don't know, Alys," Galad said. "I don't see how he could do such a thing, but it doesn't matter. He has betrayed Goldereth and his king." Galad's voice caught, and Alys lay a comforting hand on his arm.

"We couldn't have done anything else," she choked on her own words and coughed.

"Goldereth is gone," Galad said. "Everything is gone."

They sat in silence for a time until Alys remembered the gashes on Galad's chest and face. The blood had soaked his blue tunic.

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“You’re injured,” she said. “Let me tend to it.”

“Okay.”

Alys reached out to the lace agate in her bracelet. It was a Healing Stone—a particularly potent one. She laid her hands on his arm and closed her eyes to help her concentrate and center. She sensed his pain and gasped at the intensity of it. How had he kept running with injuries like this?

The energy flowed through her hands into his body, searching out the damage, stopping the bleeding, and knitting together the torn flesh. The wounds were deep, and the effort, after the battle in the market square, drained her. But she managed to seal the wounds and send the warm healing power of the Anarwyn through Galad’s body. Then she quickly tended to her own minor injuries.

When she finished, she opened her eyes to find Galad gazing into her face.

“Do you know you become even more beautiful when the Anarwyn is flowing through you?”

Alys shook her head, reaching a hand up self-consciously to touch her hair. She glanced at her tattered and bloody gown. “I look like a ball of yarn a cat got hold of and batted through a muddy street.”

Galad smiled and touched her cheek to wipe some of the filth away. “You’ve never been more beautiful.”

Alys sniffed. “Is that supposed to be a compliment? I hope I look better when I’ve bathed, and I’m not wearing bloody rags.”

“You know what I meant,” Galad said. “Stop trying to act offended.”

“A girl doesn’t want to hear that she looks better covered in grime and ragged clothing than she does after she’s spent hours cleaning herself up.”

“All right,” Galad raised his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry. You looked beautiful when I found you this morning, but now you look awful. Is that better?”

Alys slapped his shoulder playfully. “Stop it.”

He grinned at her, and she smiled back, but the smile wouldn’t linger on her face. She couldn’t forget the horror of seeing Gwyn dead at her very door and her father slaughtered by the beasts. She hadn’t even been able to see her mother before they fled. Her whole

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world had just been destroyed in a matter of half an hour.

“Where will we go?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Will anywhere be safe from these monsters? My sword barely scratches them, and neither of us can wield the Fire Stone or the Lightning Stone.”

“If we can reach the Brunen,” Alys said, “maybe we can find a craft to carry us south. Isn’t there a settlement at the head of the bay?”

Galad handed her one of the rucksacks. “These are patrol sacks with enough food for three days. We’ll have to fill the waterskins at the creek. Two days should get us to the Brunen, but after that...” His voice trailed off.

“There are villages along the Brunen,” Alys said, “surely they will help us.”

Galad raised his gaze to meet hers. “If they haven’t already been overrun.”

She pinched her lips tight at the wrenching despair that twisted her gut. Would anyone be able to survive? “Do you think the beasts have taken Mendefra, Reshad, and Numaria?”

“Probably, and if Sameel had anything to do with it, you can bet they’ve also attacked the Anar at Donmor.”

“Then, there is no hope,” Alys sniffled.

Galad gripped her hand in his. “We will go on without hope if we must,” he said and rose.

He selected a spear from the rack with a foot-long steel blade and slipped into a mail shirt, which he buckled around his waist with a leather belt. He chose a smaller mail shirt and gestured for her to rise. “It will be heavy, but it will give us some protection from those claws.”

Alys had never worn mail. Her family were scholars and merchants, not warriors. The shirt weighed heavily on her shoulders until Galad found a belt and secured it around her waist. The weight of the shirt settled onto her hips, and she shrugged to adjust it.

“It isn’t that bad,” she said. “I always thought the mail would be so heavy it would buckle my knees.”

“You’ll notice it when we start walking again,” Galad said. “But I’d rather know we had something to protect us.” He backed up to examine her. “Now, you look like Ilsie herself.”

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“Uh-huh.” Alys slipped on the knapsack and faced the door. “Do you think it’s safe out there?”

“We can’t stay here forever.” Galad picked up the two swords and paused. “I don’t know if I have the right to wield the king’s sword. But his is made of better steel than mine.”

“He would expect you to use it,” Alys said.

Galad agreed and rested his own sword with its badly chipped blade beside the door before buckling the king’s sword at his waist. Then he slipped the thick wooden bar from before the door and eased it ajar to peek out. Golden sunlight burst in, followed by a cool breeze laced with the acrid reek of burning. “I don’t see anything.” He dragged the door open and stepped through. Alys followed.

A wide plateau spread out before them, sloping down away from the wall of rock behind them. Bees buzzed merrily amid the purple and yellow alpine flowers. The blue vault of the sky stretched overhead, and the breeze felt cool and refreshing against her sweaty skin. She peered up at the walls of Goldereth high above. They had descended well below the walls and stood at the base of the rocky escarpment.

Black columns of smoke roiled above the towers. Faint screams reached their ears, causing Alys to shiver. Then, she noted the dark shapes flying through the air and thought for a moment that they were carrion birds or that the beasts had sprouted wings.

“Don’t look,” Galad said and tried to draw her away, but she resisted until she realized the dark shapes were falling bodies.

“They’re jumping,” she whispered in horror. “They’re jumping to escape the beasts.”

“There’s nothing we can do.” Galad tugged at her arm more insistently. “We have to get away from here.”

Alys bowed her head and followed as fresh tears spilled from her eyes. How had the world descended into such depravity and butchery? Why would anyone want this? She let Galad lead the way as they strode out into the warm light of a bright spring day away from the cliff face and the towering battlements of Goldereth—away from the death and the slaughter.

She fixed her gaze on Galad’s back, not wanting to see any more death and destruction. He clutched the spear in one hand and rested the other on the pommel of the king’s sword that swung at his

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hip. The knapsack bounced on his back. What would she have done without him? He was so resourceful and so determined.

Ghastly images of the destruction of Goldereth played through Alys's mind as they wound their way down the narrow trail, passing through bright meadows and stands of tall pine. Her legs burned as the trail wriggled its way ever downward. The weight of the mail shirt began to tell, but she stubbornly plodded on, lost in gloomy thoughts and desperate forebodings. They might have escaped Goldereth but had simply postponed their death by a few hours or a few days. Should they have remained and died with the others?

They passed a flock of sheep grazing alone on a green hillside, apparently unconcerned by the destruction going on above them. Where was their shepherd? Several huts and cottages littered the trail and grew more frequent as they descended hour after hour. The sun swung through the sky, slipping past midday, and sinking toward the peaks of the mountains to the west.

Eventually, they reached the denser forests and ambled through a land of dappled light, songbirds, and sweet pine. The quiet beauty of the land was almost obscene after the horror Alys had witnessed in Goldereth. At any other time, it would have brightened her spirits, and she would have danced about picking mountain bluebells and yellow daisies to plait in her hair.

The path led them through the woods to a wide plateau where cattle grazed, and the spring wheat was casting up pointed shoots in a soft carpet of green. Stone fences encompassed the fields and surrounded the thatched huts that lined a wide, deep creek flowing out of the hills.

“Where are the people?” Alys asked.

Galad seized her elbow and guided her back under the concealing shadow of the trees. “Good question. Let’s keep out of sight.”

They left the trail and cut through the forest toward the gurgling creek, all the while a trembling terror clutched at her throat. The beasts were about. She could feel them. Galad came up short and thrust a hand out to stop her, but Alys could see the body of the woman half-in, half-out of the creek.

She lay on her stomach with her face in the water, bobbing with the current. Alys stepped toward her, but Galad seized her arm in a vice-like grip and raised a finger to his lips. He released her and

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crouched, grasping the spear with two hands as he crept down the bank to where the roots of a great tree gripped the land like a claw. The creek had nibbled away the soil on one side, hollowing out an empty space between the roots.

Something shifted in the hollow, and Alys's breath caught in her throat. She reached for the power of the malachite, just in case, and waited, trying to control the trembling in her limbs. Galad paused with his spear at the ready. Then he glanced back over his shoulder at Alys and knelt in the mud. He said something, and a little hand reached through the tangle of roots and gripped three of his fingers.

Alys scrambled to his side, slipping in the mud, and wishing she had something other than ruined slippers on her feet. A little brown head appeared, and soon a child was peering up at Alys with wide dark eyes and a mud-stained face.

A gasp escaped Alys's lips, and she scooped the little girl up into her arms. "It's okay," she whispered. "It's okay."

The child couldn't be more than three years old. She wrapped her little arms around Alys's neck and clung to her. Alys's gaze met Galad's. "We need to keep moving," he said.

Alys glanced at the woman's body and adjusted so the child couldn't see it. "Mamma," the girl said.

"Shh," Alys soothed. "Mamma's gone. You have to come with us now."

"The child is injured," Galad said.

"We have to get her away from here," Alys said and waded through the creek and scrambled up to the high ground on the other side. She found a soft bed of pine needles and set the child down. One long cut crossed the child's back where the flesh had been torn in a ragged, seeping wound.

Alys took a deep breath and centered, reaching for the power of the Healing Stone. The girl whimpered and struggled, but Alys held her as she let the power infuse the child's body, sweeping away the weariness and hurt and knitting the flesh back together. The child relaxed, and Alys released her hold as the wound closed.

Galad knelt beside her. "We should keep going to the river. If the beasts are already here, this village won't be safe."

Alys picked up the little girl. "What's your name?" she asked. But the child only peered at her with big, dark eyes. Alys settled the child

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onto her hip and followed Galad as he wound his way through the trees and undergrowth following the creek ever downhill.

The sun had set, and the shadows deepened by the time they reached the rolling foothills that stretched for miles before meeting the wide, flat valley through which the Brunen River flowed. A haze of smoke had settled into the trees, carrying with it the scent of roasting meat. The creek widened and passed from the forest to the cultivated fields. Galad paused there and studied the area. Huts burned like torches of light in the gathering darkness, the yellow flames dancing and gyrating. Clouds of smoke boiled out to settle heavily over the land, sinking into the hollows and clinging to the very air.

“They’ve been here, too,” Alys whispered in growing despair. Fear made her feel weepy, but she held in the tears and set the child down.

“The river is still some miles yet,” Galad said. “We’ll rest here.”

He picked up the child and strode down the creek away from the flames. By the time night had overtaken them, Galad had found a sizeable, well-built farmhouse of sturdy logs. No one was there, though the corpses of several cows lay sprawled in a pen with their bodies ripped apart as if the beasts were playing with them.

The farmhouse was in disarray, indicating that someone had left in a hurry. The table was overturned, and food and clothes were scattered over the floor. Alys and Galad slipped off their knapsacks and found wheat cakes and smoked meat in a box on the north side of the cabin, which they ate cold and washed down with clear creek water from their waterskins.

Alys washed the child’s face and arms with water in an earthenware basin while Galad rummaged around in the trunks in an adjoining room. He returned with an arm full of clothes and unbuckled his belt.

“We’ll need tougher clothing if we’re going to travel in the wilderness,” he said. He lay the sword on a little table.

“How do I get this thing off?” Alys said as she unfastened the belt that held the weight of the mail shirt.

“You have to stand on your head,” Galad said.

He demonstrated by bending over and letting his arms out so the mail shirt slipped over his head. He let it fall to the floor and

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grinned at her.

“Easy,” he said. He flung his blue tunic from him and slipped into a coarse linen shirt. He was well-muscled, and Alys couldn’t help but imagine what this night might have been like had their wedding taken place.

“Come help me,” Alys said. She bent over until her head touched the ground and wiggled and squirmed while Galad peeled the mail shirt off.

“Yeow, my hair.” She grabbed at the chain mail, trying to ease it over her head, but it took a considerable quantity of hair with it.

She straightened and scowled at Galad. “You could have warned me that thing was going to try to scalp me.”

He laughed. “Would it have mattered? You still had to take it off.”

“There *has* to be an easier way to get that off.”

“Nope. Not really.” Galad handed her a linen tunic and a pair of trousers with some old worn boots. “It’s the best I could find.” He glanced at the ragged fragments of her slippers. Most of the seed pearls had fallen off long ago. “They’ll protect your feet better than your wedding slippers.”

Alys swallowed and glanced at Galad’s cast-off tunic and her ruined gown and slippers. Today was supposed to be a day of joy and celebration. Tears burned in her eyes.

Galad gathered her into his arms and kissed her. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “When I think of what today might have meant...” he trailed off.

They stood awkwardly until Alys grabbed up the clothes he brought her, blinking back the tears. “I’ll just change in there,” she said and strode to the other room.

The linen scratched against her skin, but she was grateful for some clean clothes and clothing that was better suited to the hard life she would lead from now on. They couldn’t return to Goldereth, and they might have to spend weeks or months in the wilderness before they found safety. She undid her ragged bun and braids and picked up a comb from a little table to run through her hair. Then she drew her hair back and tied it with a flaxen string. It wasn’t much, but at least she wouldn’t have her hair poking out in every direction.

When she came back to the main room, she found Galad with

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the little girl on his knee. He had discovered a toy somewhere in the house and was playing with the child. He glanced up when she entered. The smile on his face faded to a sad frown. Alys settled onto the floor beside him and rested her head on his lap.

“I’m so tired,” she said.

Galad patted her head. “You can sleep in the other room if you want.”

“No,” Alys said with more energy than she intended. “I don’t want to be alone.”

So, Galad handed her the child while he arranged a bed for them of woolen blankets he drew from the trunk. They curled up beside one another—Alys, with the child in her arms, and she in Galad’s—and fell asleep.

Alys awoke with a start to find Galad bending over her. “We should get going,” he said.

Long rays of sunlight cut through the gaps in the shutters. Particles of dust danced around in the beams of early light. Alys extracted herself from the clutching arms of the little girl, whose dainty face was pink and full of life.

“She’s such a pretty thing,” Alys said.

Galad nodded his agreement.

“We have to call her something.”

“She won’t speak.”

“I’m going to call her Gwyn,” Alys said.

Galad studied her. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Alys said. She could not recover her family, but she could keep their memory alive. And what better way to do it than in the life of an innocent child?

“We shouldn’t linger here overlong,” Galad said.

They ate a quick breakfast, shrugged on their mail shirts, and Alys hefted the child onto her hip again before they set off into the smoky haze of a cool spring morning. Alys glanced to the western horizon where the mountains stretched their bald heads above the crowning wreath of green pines. A halo of smoke encircled them, stretching out in a long, dark column, as it settled toward the plains.

“Do you think anyone is alive up there?” Alys asked, thinking of all her childhood friends and their families in Goldereth.

“I hope so,” Galad said.

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Alys turned away and plodded after him down the narrow lane that cut between the green fields where a few cattle and sheep still grazed, oblivious to the fact that the humans who cared for them had been driven from the land or slaughtered. They worked their way over the rolling hills avoiding the high ground where they might be seen by the beasts. Alys trudged along, growing ever more weary under the weight of the armor and the child on her hip. But she refused to complain. When so many had lost so much, she could endure a little fatigue.

“I wouldn’t mind a horse about now,” Alys said.

“If we find one, I’ll let you ride it like a queen.”

Alys ignored his teasing. She wiggled her toes in her boots, trying to relieve the pinching. But she didn’t say anything. Galad had more important things to worry about than her sore toes.

The weary miles passed beneath their plodding feet. At each village, they found signs of the beasts’ passing. They had swept over the land like a whirlwind. The bodies of animals and humans alike littered the landscape, providing a feast for the carrion fowl and the flies, whose buzzing whine seemed to haunt every bend in the road. They encountered no other living soul. The population had either fled or been brutalized by the beasts.

“How could there be so many of these monsters?” Alys asked.

“Sameel, and whoever else helped him, must have been planning this for years,” Galad said. “They just swarmed out of the sewers and came in through the gates as the guards opened them for the day.”

“The sewers?”

“I saw some of them come up that way.”

Alys considered everything she had learned about Goldereth. The city had been built, like the others, so that it blocked a pass through the mountains. The object had been to control access to the valley of the Braganeth, where the Bragamahr dwelled, and so ensure that no one could ever enter there again and acquire the terrible power of the Bragamahr. This had been a volcanic land, and sometimes tremors still swept through the mountains.

“Tubes,” she said in sudden understanding.

“What?”

“You remember those lava tubes they used to talk about that led

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into the mountains?”

“They were all blocked.”

“That’s the only way they could have come in. Someone unblocked one of those tubes.”

“Sameel was in a position to do it,” Galad said. “He sat on the council and studied at the School of the Anarwyn.”

He glanced at her and paused. “Hand me the child,” he said. “You’re going to wear yourself out.”

Alys gratefully exchanged the child for the spear, and Galad set the girl on his shoulders and kept walking.

She tried to adjust the uncomfortable mail shirt that bit into her neck. The day was warm, and the mail only made it hotter.

“How far to the river?” she asked.

Galad glanced at her with a wry smile. “You’re not going to start complaining, are you?”

“I’m not complaining. It’s a fair question.”

“We should reach it by nightfall, I think.”

Alys sighed. “How are we going to cross?”

“Well, if we don’t find any boats floating around, we’ll have to head east. There’s a ford a few miles up the river.”

Sunset found them in the marshy lowlands around the river. This region was wild and untamed, with only a narrow track where the wagons from the docks carried their goods to and from Goldereth. Wanting to avoid the possibility of stumbling unexpectedly onto any beasts that might be haunting the town, Galad made Alys wait with the child concealed in a patch of tall rushes while he scouted the area.

Alys fidgeted and tried to occupy herself by feeding the child and combing through the girl’s wild brown hair. The child never spoke a word. She just watched Alys with interest and played with the little toy Galad had found for her. This child must have seen the beast kill her mother. The thought made Alys sick. Why would Sameel do this? What could he hope to gain by destroying the Tathanar, his own people?

A rustle sounded in the rushes, and Alys stiffened. She reached for the energy in the malachite when the tip of Galad’s spear pushed through the grass, and he emerged. His legs were caked in mud, and he wore a frown on his face.

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“They’ve been here too,” he said. “It looks like the villagers fled in the boats. I found a couple of dead monsters lying in the reeds.

Alys’s throat tightened. “Are you sure they’re dead?”

“I couldn’t see a mark on them, but they were dead. Maybe they drown.”

“Well, that’s something to remember,” Alys said. “Did you find any boats?”

“None that are usable. We’ll have to seek the ford.” He glanced at the child. “Has she said anything yet?”

“No.”

“Well,” Galad said, “we’re not going to get much farther tonight. I found a little cottage upriver a bit where we can spend the night.”

Alys hefted the girl into her arms. “I feel like I could sleep for a year.”

“I couldn’t wait that long for you to wake up,” Galad teased.

They set off through the reeds until they came to a path that led to the main road. Galad followed this for about a mile, then veered off into a thicket of trees that lined the river. Near the shore, a little cottage rested on a stone foundation. A long garden stretched behind it, and a corral slouched to one side. An old, rotted dock pushed out into the swirling waters of the river. The mosquitos were thick here, and despite the quiet beauty of the river, Alys was happy to duck inside and close out the obnoxious, biting insects.

They spent a quiet evening until darkness and exhaustion forced them to bed. Alys lay awake, staring up at the rafters long after she could no longer distinguish them from the surrounding darkness. What were they going to do? The land had been depopulated. The bodies and destruction were everywhere. Those that survived had fled or were in hiding. How far had these creatures roamed? Would anywhere be safe for them now? At least she had Galad with her and now the child she called Gwyn. Without them, she might have lain down and died or perhaps leaped from the city walls herself like so many others had done.

Alys didn’t remember falling asleep, and so she was startled when she was jolted to wakefulness by a sudden crashing. A creeping terror gripped her stomach, and she smelled a foul reek. Only one other time had she smelled that odor, back in her room when the monster slammed into her door. She scrambled to a sitting position.

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“Galad,” she whispered and reached out to him.

He was already on his feet with the spear clutched in his hand, a vague shadow in the night. He was facing the door, where a dark shadow blocked the light of the stars.

“Sweet waters of Anarwyn,” he cursed. “They’ve found us.”

Alys grabbed the child, who cried out in surprise. Galad shouted a warning, and something punched into Alys’s head. The blow sent her sprawling on the dirt floor, her ears ringing and her eyes watering. The child’s scream cut off in a terrible gurgling sound, and something thumped to the floor.

Alys scrambled to her hands and knees, gasping for breath against the horrible, crippling terror that froze the blood in her veins. “Gwyn?” she sobbed.

Galad roared a challenge, and his shadow lunged. A scraping sounded, and the beast let out a gut-wrenching shriek that paralyzed Alys. It reverberated in the little hut, driving the breath from her chest.

“Run!” Galad shouted. “To the river. Run!”

The sound of his voice galvanized Alys to action. She reached for the power of the malachite in her bracelet and sent a surge of protection around them. There was no time to form a dyad. The beast screamed, and then Galad had her hand and was dragging her with him.

“The baby,” she gasped.

“Is dead,” Galad said and shouldered through the splintered door, racing across the packed earth toward the rotted dock that loomed out of the darkness.

Something smashed into Alys’s shield. Her foot caught a tree root, and she sprawled to the ground. The blow broke her concentration, and the shield evaporated. The beast leaped at them. Galad knelt, rammed his spear into the ground, and leveled it at the great black shadow flying toward them.

“No,” Alys gasped and tried to get the shield up, but she was too late. The beast collided with the glinting steel blade in a horrible crunching sound. It screamed as the shaft broke and the beast was on top of Galad. Alys sent the shield anyway, and it bowled the monster aside. Galad scrambled to his feet and clutched at her. Something warm and wet splashed onto her face.

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“Run!” Galad said, but the sound gurgled in his throat. “To the water. It won’t come into the water.”

They splashed out into the river, the gravel grinding under their feet until they were waist deep. The icy water flowed around them as they whirled to face the dark shore. A band of stars dangled overhead, casting the landscape in a dim twilight. The black shape sprang into the water, and Galad drew the king’s sword. But he was shaking, trembling all over, and his breath seemed to boil in his throat.

The beast threw back its head and emitted that blood-curdling screech before splashing back to the shore, where it paced back and forth.

Galad slumped into Alys, and she caught him. His weight drove her to her knees so that the water flowed around her shoulders, but she didn’t dare wade any closer to shore.

The starlight glistened in Galad’s eyes, and Alys saw for the first time the terrible gash in his throat where his life’s blood was pumping out into the swirling water. His mail shirt had been torn through like it was nothing more than gauze.

“Sweet Anarwyn, no,” Alys gasped and reached for the power in the bracelet, struggling to still her panic.

She summoned the healing power of the agate and set to work stemming the flow of blood and stitching the flesh back together. But even as she worked, she knew she was too late. He had lost too much blood and was failing. Tears slid down her cheeks. She tried to work faster while clamping a hand over the wound in a vain attempt to staunch the flow of blood.

“Stay with me,” she mumbled. “Don’t leave me.”

Galad raised a hand to her cheek and fixed her with a steady gaze. “I love you,” he whispered. His voice was so weak. He sucked in a shuddering breath and went limp in her arms.

“No,” she choked. “Please, no.”

In desperation, she formed a dyad with the green malachite stone in her bracelet and the lace agate. The malachite was the stone of absorption, and the agate was the stone of healing. Together, they formed a powerful bond she had rarely used. Concentrating with all her might, she infused Galad’s body with the combined and enhanced power of the two stones. As she did so, she felt a tug on her own energy, her own life force, and she realized that there was only

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one way to save him. But if she did, would he simply be killed when he emerged from the water, unarmed, and unprotected?

Against all the training she had ever received, Alys formed a triad by connecting the malachite and the red ruby. Fully expecting the unusual combination to kill her outright, she was surprised when the two dyads held and reinforced each other. The ruby was the Blood Stone that granted the wielder protection from physical harm and metal weapons. Maybe she could turn it to other purposes.

Carefully, but quickly, she healed the wound in Galad's neck and then prepared his body to absorb her life force and with it a measure of invulnerability to the magic of the Bragamahr. Energy flowed from her, tearing at her conscious mind, which rebelled at the act of self-destruction. But she persisted. Her body trembled, and her eyelids grew heavy. She was so sleepy. Galad stirred as the blackness crept in at the edges of her vision.

She lost all sensation save the feel of him in her arms and the greenish glow of his eyes as they opened.

"Live, my love," she whispered and let herself fall into the swirling waters and the enveloping darkness.

"No," Galad screamed in a voice that seemed so far away. "Alys, no. Don't do this."

But Alys had already made the choice and ruthlessly persisted until something gave inside her, and she was floating—floating away into the realms where time and pain meant nothing.



Dawn found Galad still kneeling in the freezing waters of the Brunen, clutching Alys's limp body to his chest, sobbing as he rocked back and forth. Why had she done this? Without her, there was no reason to go on living. No point to all he had done to save her. If only he was as powerful in the Anarwyn as she had been, maybe he could have done something. But he had never had more than a slight sensitivity to the power. He possessed a lapis lazuli stone, which he wore on a ring on his pinky, but all it did was enhance his natural abilities.

True he had used it to good effect to rise in the ranks of the lower nobility, but it couldn't save her. Nothing could save her now.

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Maybe he should just drown himself and end the pain. Maybe he should find the beasts and let them kill him. But what would that do for him or anyone else? A better use of his life would be to rid the world of the beasts that had caused Alys's death. To find Sameel and make him pay for the ruin of Goldereth.

When Galad finally looked up from his grief, he found that the beast was no longer pacing the shore. The door to the hut stood wide, but nothing stirred in the little clearing, and the creeping dread the monster carried with it was no longer there. He retrieved the king's sword from the riverbed and slid it into its sheath. Then, gently, Galad lifted Alys's body into his arms and splashed his way to the bank, where he placed her on a smooth piece of ground beneath a weeping willow tree.

He wiggled out of his torn mail shirt, ignoring the hollow ache in his gut, and spent the next several hours gathering stones from the riverbed until he had a sizeable pile. He removed Alys's bracelet and slipped it into his pocket. Then he scooped out a shallow depression in the hard-packed earth with the broken spear. He settled Alys's body as peacefully as he could and returned to the hut where he retrieved Gwyn's little body. After laying the child in the crook of Alys's arm, he erected a stone monument over them. The labor occupied him for the better part of the day, but doing it allowed him to work through his grief and to find new resolution.

When he finished, he knelt before the monument to the woman he loved. Claspng her bracelet in one hand and the king's sword in the other, he bowed his head and offered a prayer to the Anarwyn.

"Give me the strength, Lady of the Crystal Water, to create a weapon that will allow me to protect your people."

He tried to focus his mind on the bracelet and the stones of power. He had never succeeded in doing this, but he had been trained until he was a young man when it became apparent that he did not possess the necessary talent to command the stones of power. He tried nonetheless and to his surprise, power surged into him from the very earth itself. His hair stood on end, and he gasped at the sudden understanding that infused his mind.

In that moment of refreshing enlightenment, he realized that Alys had transferred more than her life force into him. She had given him her understanding of the Anarwyn, her power to use the stones,

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and some other power he didn't understand.

The stones in her bracelet responded to him, and he infused his sword with the power of the green malachite, the Stone of Absorption so that it would now absorb the power of anyone or anything it killed. With each defeat of the beasts of the Bragamahr, his sword would grow stronger.

When this was done, he bathed the sword in the power of the ruby, the Strength Stone, so that it would protect the bearer of this sword from metal weapons and magical foes. He made the sword invulnerable to time and moisture. It would never break or corrode. It would never fail. Then he used the blue lapis lazuli set in his ring to enhance the power of the sword and the energy of both the ruby and malachite. A musical chord hummed in the air around him and the blade shivered, vibrating in resonance with the musical notes.

Light flooded the little clearing and Galad experienced a profound sense of purpose. He had been spared to accomplish one task and he had been granted this magnificent sword to wield in the service of goodness and peace. This had been the king's sword. He had never touched it let alone wielded it in battle and yet the sword was comfortable in his hand as if they had long been friends. From deep within, an upwelling of emotion brought tears to his eyes, and he understood.

"Alys," he whispered. The sword now contained the essence of the beautiful woman he had loved. She may not have had a warrior's training, but she had a warrior's spirit, and it was now magnified in this sword.

Galad bowed his head in exhaustion, letting his sweat and tears drip to the earth. After a few moments of rest, he held up the sword to examine it. The blade had turned black and glowed a dull red. It caught the light of the setting sun, causing the pattern weld to resemble rivers of blood flowing through the steel. It was the most beautiful weapon he had ever seen.

He rose to his feet, strode to the river, and plunged the blade into the water. It hissed as it entered, and he proclaimed in a loud voice, "I name thee Dorandel because you will endure through all time." Then he drew the sword from the water and raised it toward the waning light of day.

"I will avenge them," he said out loud. "I will avenge them all."

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A rustle in the reeds along the river caught his attention, and he whirled into a fighting stance. A great gray wolf padded from the undergrowth and stopped to study him. This was no ordinary wolf. It was twice the size of the wolves that haunted the mountains, and it had keen, intelligent eyes. It reminded Galad of the great wolves called the Maured of Taniel who had once fought alongside the Tathanar in the battles against the Bragamahr.

The wolf bobbed his head at Galad and turned to walk a few steps before peering back at him over its shoulder.

“You wish me to follow?” Galad asked.

The wolf trotted away.

Galad cast one last glance at his monument to Alys. There was nothing more he could do for her. He retrieved a rucksack before following the wolf into the reeds.

The wolf padded along at a steady pace for more than a mile, keeping to the cover on the edge of fields and clearings until it came to a lofty barn on a stone foundation. Shouts and cries came from within, and the flames of torches danced inside.

Darkness was just settling over the land, but Galad could see the shapes of the beasts lurking about, though this time, he felt no fear. He slipped off the rucksack, letting it fall to the grass, and unbuckled the sheath. A smile creased his face as he slid the sword free and dropped the sheath. Raising the sword in both hands, he glanced at the wolf and nodded his thanks before racing into the paddock before the barn.

The first monster never saw the blade that clove his head in two. Galad danced away from the fountain of blood. His sword smoked and glowed red. He swept it into another beast that lunged at him, severing the monster’s arms before cutting it in two. With each stroke, the blade grew stronger and cut cleaner with less resistance. The great wolf brought down another beast by its throat and shook it until the neck snapped, and it lay quivering on the earth.

With howls of rage, the monsters attacked Galad in a writhing pack of slashing claws and gnashing teeth, but his sword whirled and sliced, killing with every stroke until he was surrounded by a pile of twitching smoking beasts and covered in their hideous black blood. The blood burned away his clothing as if it were acid until he was standing almost naked in the circle of dead monsters. His skin

The Ruin of Goldereth

remained unharmed.

Galad threw back his head and laughed. The sound of it rang over the battlefield. The sword smoked and hissed as the black blood boiled away. Galad could feel the sword's joy at the slaughter. This was a mighty weapon, and he would wield it until he had destroyed the last beast of the Bragamahr.

A door creaked open, and a man stepped out of the barn with a torch in one hand and a sword in the other. The torchlight glinted in the wet blood of the beasts.

"Who are you, friend?" the man called.

Galad strode to him, uncaring that the few remaining scraps of clothing did nothing to conceal his nakedness. "I am Galad of Goldereth," he said. "Have you any spare clothes?"

The man gazed past him to the pile of quivering bodies and then at his ragged clothing. His eyes widened with wonder.

"You may wish to wash, my lord," he said and gestured to the well. "I'll find you some clothes."

Galad nodded his thanks and retreated to the well, where he hauled up buckets of water to wash the blood and sweat from his body. By the time the man returned, Galad was dripping with water and completely naked.

Galad accepted the proffered clothing gratefully and slipped them on. "Thank you," he said. "What's your name?"

"Elis, my lord."

Galad placed a hand on Elis's shoulder. "Do you know the little cottage by the river about a mile from here? The one with the rotting dock?"

"Yes."

"You will find a monument there. In payment for my services, I wish you to protect it and care for it. Will you do that for me?"

Elis blinked in surprise at the odd request. "Of course, my lord."

"Good," Galad said. He strapped on his sword belt and flung the pack over his shoulder. He waved to the wolf who padded over to him. "We're going hunting," he said and jogged into the night.

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ABOUT J.W. ELLIOT

J.W. Elliot is a professional historian, martial artist, canoer, bow builder, knife maker, woodturner, and rock climber. He has a Ph.D. in Latin American and World History. He has lived in Idaho, Oklahoma, Brazil, Arizona, Portugal, and Massachusetts. He writes non-fiction works of history about the Inquisition, Columbus, and pirates. J.W. Elliot loves to travel and challenge himself in the outdoors.

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Writing Awards

Winner of the New England Book Festival 2022 for Science Fiction for *The Covenant Protocol (The Ark Project, Book II)*.

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Award Winning Finalist in the Fiction: Young Adult category of the 2021 **Best Book Awards** sponsored by American Book Fest for *Windemere (Archer of the Heathland, Book V)*.

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Chet Kevitt Award for contributions to Weymouth history for the publication of *The World of Credit in Colonial Massachusetts: James Richards and his Daybook, 1692-1711*. Awarded by the Weymouth Historical Commission, 2018.

Writers of the Future Contest

Honorable Mention for *Recalibration*, 2018.

Honorable Mention for *Ebony and Ice*, 2019.