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A STORM-MAIDENS CREED

By

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“Where are we headed, Commander?” the Pendarvian lieutenant asked as she walked beside her commanding officer.

“Winterbrook,” Commander Jellan replied as she unfolded a small map of Elvendar she kept tucked inside her gray leather tunic. “It’s about half a day’s ride from here. We are to pick up a Valdarian Ranger there by the name of Filstan.”

“Why do we need a Valdarian? Of all the allies, we have in this growing war, why must they burden us with one of our most hated enemies?” the Lieutenant said, an interesting mixture of hate and disgust etched across her pretty face.

“If the day comes that I get to write the orders, I’ll be the first to let you know,” Jellan replied.

“Until then, I follow the orders I am given, just like you, Lieutenant Melyran. Return to your troop.”

“Yes, Sir,” the tall Storm-Maiden replied with a brief salute and a quick about face.

Jellan watched the tall young officer walk away in her skin-tight gray leather uniform. Each of the one hundred twenty members of her command was dressed identically. Their long hair braided into a single plait that hung to the middle of their backs. Across their tight-fitting leather tunics, two crisscrossed straps held the back scabbards for the signature weapons of a Pendarvian Storm-Maiden, the Shilee. Each Maiden carried two of these weapons in her back harness, along with six more attached to her saddle scabbards; arranged three to a side. The four-foot-long palm sized wooden handled weapon ended in a foot-long double-edged blade. A Shilee had the distinct advantage of being able to serve as both a sword and a spear. Jellan reached down and tightened the laces on her knee-high gray boots. She quickly flashed two hand signals to her three waiting lieutenants who relayed the signals to those in their respective commands. Without a single spoken order, her company set ready for her instructions.

Trained from the age of six, a Pendarvian Storm-Maiden was a member of the finest light cavalry in the world. At the Academy, prospective Storm-Maidens were schooled in not only equestrian excellence and weapons, but they were completely versed in all academic pursuits, as well as Maiden hand talk. Each Maiden could brief every member of her command on the specifics of a mission with just the fingers on her hands; a most useful tool when close to one’s enemies. By the time a Storm-Maiden graduated in her eighteenth year, she was the best Pendar could produce.

“Maidens to horse,” Jellan commanded sharply. As one, a hundred and twenty women vaulted into the saddle at the same instant and sat ready. She could have given the command with just her hands; but even after ten years, the polished precision of her company mounting their sleek steeds, all in unison and at her command, always made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “Officers forward,” Jellan

commanded just as she leaped into the saddle aboard her dappled gray mare, Breeze. When all three lieutenants sat before her, she began, “We will be joined on this mission by a Valdarian Ranger, a Captain Filstan, by name. I know this will not be easy for any of us, but this Valdarian is to be treated with the utmost respect befitting of his rank. This Ranger will provide the details of and accompany us on our next mission against the Priory. As we travel, brief your commands and keep them informed. Regardless of any personal hatred towards the people of Valdaria, they are now our allies in this war. I will be intolerant of any breach of etiquette.”

Jellan let out a big sigh as her lieutenants returned to their troops. “To hell with their feelings; what about my own feelings?” she mumbled to herself. For over twenty years she had schooled with only one purpose in mind: the never-ending war with Valdaria. Their two countries had been in hostile conflict with one another for over a thousand years. How many of her friends and fellow Storm-Maidens had been killed in this never-ending fight? Now in addition to her other worries, she would be taxed with the additional burden of keeping one of her most hated enemies alive. She quickly flashed a series of hand signals, and her impressive column began to move towards their rendezvous with this mystery Ranger Captain.

Winterbrook was only a ride of about five leagues from their camp site, but it gave Jellan an ample amount of time to think clearly about the coming mission. What did she know about Valdarian Rangers? Probably more than they knew about themselves, she mused. Like all other officers in the Valdarian Legion, they entered Tiburn Military Academy when they were twelve years old. There they were schooled in academics as well as horsemanship and weapons. In their fifth year, they were tested for their empathic strength. Out of every class only a dozen met the physical, academic, and empathic criteria of their Rangers. But, the one thing that made a Valdarian Ranger different, the one thing that sat them apart from every other warrior on Rythmar was their Weyr-Drake.

After graduating from Tiburn in his sixth year, a Ranger bonded with a Weyr-Drake, a small dragon actually, six feet in height with a ten-foot wingspan. Warder and Ward spent the next two years in training as the young Weyr-Drake grew to maturity and refined its ability to communicate empathically over distances as much as ten leagues. In all her years as a Storm-Maiden, Jellan had never met one of the famous Rangers, widely accepted to be the finest individual warriors on all Rythmar. She had to admit that she was interested in seeing one of the small dragons. They were reputed to have savage teeth and claws, and to be extremely intelligent while fiercely loyal. Fighting as a team with their Weyr-Drake, a Valdarian Ranger was the most dangerous of adversaries.

Jellan knew little of their upcoming mission except that she and her Maidens would be tasked with disrupting the long supply lines the invading army of the Priory of Karshee used to keep themselves fed and resupplied. A slow-moving supply column was the ideal target for a Storm-Maiden attack, especially here in the flat open countryside of Elvendar with its large interspersed stands of deciduous hardwoods.

Filstan sat quietly with his back to the wall in the smoke-filled common room of the only inn still serving hot food in Winterbrook. The pretty serving maid smiled at him as she walked past. Another button on her tight-fitting blouse had found its way loose. “She is going to be naked if these Pendarvians don’t get here on time,” Filstan chuckled to himself. Just how did he get in this mess anyway?

Of all the things, he had been asked to do as a Ranger, this absolutely qualified as the strangest. A mission with his most hated enemy and their most lethal regiment, The Storm-Maidens of Pendar. Filstan just shook his head. He had seen them in combat once, and he knew that those who said no man alive could match them on the back of a horse were not exaggerating. Now Pendar and Valdaria found

themselves on the same side for the first time in about a dozen centuries. Their conflict had gone on so long, that few if any remembered exactly when it started. “Well, at least it took a global war to bring us together with our nearest neighbor,” Filstan laughed to himself.

A troop of riders is just now entering the town.

Filstan looked down at the map of Elvendar he had spread before him. He traced a line between Winterbrook and approximately where he anticipated intersecting with the enemy supply column. Two days travel at least, even if they pushed. “That will be the Storm-Maidens,” he spoke empathically with his Weyr-Drake, Rial. As he refolded his map, the front door of the common room opened, and a tall woman entered wearing the distinctive gray leather uniform of the Pendarvian Cavalry. Filstan stood and after tucking the folded map back inside his brown leather tunic, placed a few coins on the table. When he looked up, he was eye to eye with his most hated and ancient enemy. He stood frozen in place as a myriad of conflicting thoughts cascaded through his head; and just caught himself as his right hand began to involuntarily reach for his back sword.

“Captain Filstan?” the striking woman asked with a very pleasant voice, her blue eyes flashing brightly.

“Yes,” he replied. “And you would be Commander Jellan?”

“I am Jellan,” the tall woman said and extended her hand towards the Valdarian.

As Filstan accepted her firm grip, his eyes went to the two-wooden handled Shilee she wore in a back harness and then back to her blue eyes. “Commander, Valdarian military customs call for me to address a ranking officer as ‘Sir’ regardless of gender.”

“Pendarvan protocol is the same, Captain.”

“Very well then, Sir,” he said once again taking his map from its pocket in his tunic and laying it on the table. “Here is Winterbrook, and here is where we need to be two days from now,” Filstan said tracing the route with his index finger.

Jellan took a quick glance at the map and then back to the handsome brown-haired man who stood before her. As his brown eyes looked back at her, she glanced down at the map once again. “We have two days of hard riding before us,” she said glancing at the back sword he carried over his broad shoulders and his long ear length brown hair. As the Valdarian Ranger folded his map once again, she took another appraising glance. Slightly taller than she herself, narrow waist but powerfully built, Captain Filstan was in a word, beautiful. This mission just became much more complex, she thought. She shook her head slightly and then asked, “Do you have anything to pack?”

“No, I am ready when you are, Sir. My horse is right outside.”

She had noticed the tall roan with the unstrung bow tied with loops on the saddle and a quiver of arrows over the pommel when she entered the inn. “Where is your Weyr-Drake?”

“Oh, she is riding the morning thermals somewhere above us. She alerted me when your troop entered the town.”

Once outside the inn it was not difficult to find the Storm-Maidens. Lined up three abreast right down the middle of the street, each Maiden stood relaxed by her mount. The arrival had created quite a stir among the locals as the neighborhood citizens gawked at the all female cavalry in their tight-fitting leathers. From his perspective Filstan could only see them from the shoulders up as they stood on the far side of their horses, but it seemed as if each of them was intense, focused, and hard. Commander Jellan had secured her dappled gray mare beside his roan and with a practiced ease and grace; she nimbly swung into the saddle. Filstan flipped the quiver over his head and felt it come to rest beside his back

sword and was certain one hundred and twenty pairs of enemy eyes followed him as he vaulted up on his large mount.

“Maidens to horse,” Jellan commanded and years later Filstan would swear when telling of this tale that every pair of tight leathers hit the saddle at exactly the same instant. He followed Jellan’s lead up to the front of the column and as his horse walked, he noticed the interest the Storm-Maidens had created among all the locals, especially the young women and girls. They seemed to take pride and intense satisfaction from the hundred plus stoic women warriors who stood in perfect formation awaiting their next command.

Filstan fell in beside the Commander and watched with interest as she held her hands over her head with her wrists crossed. “Be prepared to move when I drop my arms,” Jellan said to him with a smile, “and try to keep up.” Just as she indicated, when Jellan dropped her arms, the entire column began moving at once with no accordion effect. “Where do you suggest we camp for tonight, Captain?”

“I recommend Winterbrook Lake,” Filstan replied. “We should make it there just before night fall.”

Jellan rode beside him but did not seem interested in conversing. However, his Weyr-Drake, Rial, was overflowing with questions.

This is as close as I have ever been to a Storm-Maiden company. From here it appears that they all have their hair braided in the same fashion. Their horses are magnificent.

Filstan finally had to send the inquisitive Weyr-Drake ahead to scout for the lake, although he knew exactly where it was having just been there with Rial a little over a week ago.

With the Weyr-Drakes help, he led them unerringly to the lake and settled on an open knoll with large trees as their campsite. After picketing the horse and seeing to its needs, he joined Commander Jellan around a large central fire and encampment that was just beginning to take shape. “Captain; I

would like to introduce you to my officers,” Jellan said, but before introductions could be made, they were interrupted by the whistling of wings as the silver Weyr-Drake banked into the opening and landed with two graceful back wings.

Filstan walked over to her and began scratching her around her ears and eye ridges. Rial replied by butting him in the chest with her head and began purring loudly. The sudden arrival grabbed everyone’s attention and soon a small crowd had gathered around both. “Her name is Rial,” Filstan said, “and she likes to be scratched right here, that is if you’re not afraid.”

Jellan boldly stepped forward and placed one hand on the sleek creature’s neck and head. “She is so soft,” the Commander said with a grin, “and Storm-Maidens fear nothing from Valdaria,” the smile vanishing from her face. Rial leaned into the Pendarvian and butted her in the chest with the flat of her head as her purring went up an octave. Soon the small dragon attracted a dozen admirers as everyone wanted to take a turn petting the exotic creature. Motioning to several of the women with one hand, Jellan said, “As I was saying, Captain, I would like to introduce you to my officers. Lieutenants Melyran, Rapyden, and Glenn, this is Captain Filstan.”

Filstan shook hands with each of the young officers who appeared to be considerably more reserved around him than around his Ward. “Commander, do we have your permission to use the lake?” Melyran the senior lieutenant asked.

“Is there any problem with the Maidens going swimming?” Jellan asked.

“You will never hear me complain,” Filstan replied with a smile. “I guess as a Valdarian officer and a gentleman I need to turn my back if there are going to be a hundred and twenty naked women running around, but you will have to take my Weyr-Drake. She loves the water.”

Filstan took a seat on a flat rock with his back to the lake, but the sounds of laughing and splashing coming from the water sounded inviting. Interspersed with all the frivolity he could hear the high-pitched barks from Rial.

“No swim to knock the dust off a long ride for you, Commander?” Filstan asked slightly disappointed that Jellan had not joined the others.

“Not right now,” she replied with the flash of a smile. “Perhaps I’ll take one later.”

As the evening meal was prepared, everywhere Maidens sat around a dozen fires combing and drying their long hair. Once dry, it was once again braided by a comrade back into the single long tress each of them wore. Now that everyone was dressed again, Filstan took a long appreciative look at this force of women. They had every color of hair imaginable and were both tall and short. The only thing they had in common, besides the way they wore their hair, was they were lean. There was not an extra pound on any of them. The rigors of a life as a Storm-Maiden left one looking almost hungry.

With little fanfare the next morning, the company was once again moving briskly through the southern reaches of Elvendar. Filstan did notice that the commander had gone for a swim and washed her hair while he had been asleep. He was distracted by the fresh smell of the scented soap and herbal mixture she had used on her hair as they shared a cup of tea around the mornings fire. They traveled hard that day and only stopped at dusk by a small flowing stream. This time, Rial was the only one who decided to get wet. While Filstan was treated cordially and most respectfully by everyone, he was a definite outsider. His Weyr-Drake provided the only bridge between these two old adversaries. As he looked around the camp, he felt uncomfortable that almost every Maiden was staring at him. “You will have to excuse them, Captain,” Jellan said. “They don’t get to be around many men.”

“Half of them look like they don’t agree with the truce between our nations and want to kill me in my sleep.”

“They probably do, but the other half thinks you are gallant and handsome and are scheming about how to get in your sleeping furs. Either way, you might think about setting that big lizard of yours on guard tonight,” she finished saying with a grin on her pretty face.

“I suppose Rial should only stop the ones who are wearing clothes then?”

Jellan just shook her head with a smirk but did not rise to the bait.

Mid morning of their third day together, Filstan held up his hand and asked Jellan to stop the column’s progress. He quickly dismounted and spent the next ten minutes examining an interesting set of tracks he noticed from the saddle. When he returned to the Storm-Maiden Commander, he gave his report. “Many sets of wagon tracks moving in both directions, but not north and south as you would have surmised. These tracks are moving in an east and west direction.”

“What do you make of that?” Jellan asked looking confused.

“It supports a theory I have had for some time now, Commander... If you were going to invade the northern continent, the last thing you would want was a supply chain that stretched for a thousand leagues.”

“They have established caches of food and supplies here in the north.”

“Exactly,” Filstan replied. “The Priory has been preparing for this invasion for decades. They have had more than adequate time to establish their food reserves here in the north. From what we have been able to piece together, the invasion is a three-pronged attack. The eastern most force is ten leagues from our current position west of here. I’m thinking that if we can destroy this reserve, it will force them to haul their supplies from the south over much greater distances, or even better, make them give up the eastern leg of their operation.”

As Filstan mounted his horse again, Jellan asked, “How do we pinpoint this supply depot, Captain?”

“That is the easy part. Rial can follow these wagon tracks from the air. They will lead her directly to their supplies. The bad news is it is highly likely that it will be heavily guarded. We might need to come up with a plan to get some of the Maidens inside their defenses.”

“That means we need to have a close look at this place first.”

“We also need to find a good ambush point,” Filstan replied as they turned their horses to the east. He briefly looked skyward for a minute as he spoke empathically to his Weyr-Drake.

“Isn’t there a chance she will be spotted?”

“If they were looking for her, perhaps, but we have no indication they even know we are here, so I would say at least right now the chances are pretty slim.”

They rode east for two hours easily following the spoor from the passing of several wagon trains. The terrain here was different from the plains of Elvendar. Now their pathway was completely surrounded by mature forests with only the occasional open park or meadow. “Rial has found the supply point,” Filstan quietly announced as they entered one of the larger meadows they passed through during this day. “It is about three leagues from here in a box canyon. She thinks the canyon ends in a cavern; it is hard to see from the air.”

“That would make perfect sense,” Jellan said. “They could store everything under ground. By the way, this meadow has ambush written all over it.”

“I’ll leave those details to the Storm-Maidens. I need to have a much closer look at this canyon and potential cave system.”

“Hold up a minute, Captain. I need to have a few words with my lieutenants.” Jellan rode slightly to the right and spoke with her officers for several minutes before returning to his side. “Everything is taken care of here; I’m ready.”

“Ready, for what?” Filstan asked.

“I’m going with you, of course.”

Filstan started to protest but thought better of it from the set of the Commander’s jaw and the intense look in her eyes. “As you please, Commander,” Filstan replied and turned his horse towards the east. The well used road they followed traversed through more mature hardwood forests. The darkness created by the huge canopies of the large trees allowed for little understory growth. “Not much to hide behind in here,” Filstan said looking around at the beautiful forest.

“That is why the meadow is our perfect ambush point with its natural defiles on either side... By the way, aren’t you concerned that we’ll blunder into a patrol of guards or something?”

“Rial is in the thermals above us. She can see everything for miles that crosses this road. So far it has only been two deer.”

“I don’t see her,” Jellan said looking up and turning her head in every direction.

“She is in the sun, just in case one of the Priory’s guards is looking for a scout... I think we have reached the point we need to leave the road. We can come in above them if we get off on the left.”

Filstan took the lead as they rode easily through the mature forest. After a quarter mile, their track began to climb gently. After another half mile, they reached a level bench in the mountains with a medium sized creek flowing freely on one side. “Not far now,” Filstan said. “We’ll leave the horses here.”

Filstan strung his bow and checked that the arrows in his quiver were not hindered in any way. With a quick glance at Jellan, he started on an uphill trek to the north, the Commander following a few steps behind. It was obvious their path was taking them to the crest of a rise, but both were not fully prepared for what they saw as they crawled the last few yards on their stomachs. Below them was the box canyon, as Rial had reported, but many of the surrounding trees had been removed to build a stockade that closed the open end.

The enclosing fence stretched at least four hundred yards across and stood fifteen feet in height. In almost the exact center a large gate had been placed with two swinging doors, each mounted on three huge metal hinges. The open expanse between the man-made gate and the rear of the canyon stretched for almost a half mile and never narrowed as it butted against the end of the valley and the beginning of a good-sized mountain. At the slight apex of the gorge a large opening could be seen that was indeed a cavern.

The open expanse of the canyon's floor was taken up by a large corral for teams of horses on the far side and parking for several dozen unused wagons on the near side. "Looks like most of the wagons and teams are on a delivery right now," Filstan said.

Jellan lay only a hands distance from him and the fragrance of her hair was bothering his concentration. Filstan focused his attention on the activities below him. "Ruks" he said sharply, pointing towards the wooden platform constructed where the open cavern met the floor of the canyon. The two creatures picked up opposite ends of a crate and disappeared into the bowels of the cavern.

Not much was known about these creatures except they first appeared on Rythmar well over ten thousand years ago. They were a creation of the Dark Lord Karshee and had figured prominently in the First Great War over a hundred centuries before. Since their defeat in that conflict, they were rarely seen on the northern continent except in the deep confines of the Benden Mire, a large savannah that composed the disputed border between the country of Roldum in the west and Pendar and Valdaria in the east.

At approximately five feet tall, with heavy arms and legs, and with a mouth full of pointed gapped teeth, a Ruk appeared to be slightly bent at the waist with arms much too long for its squat body. A large head and pointed ears protruded through leather armor and breeks. Occasionally Ruks carried

short powerful longbows, but their normal weapons were a cudgel or tulwar. A Ruk was immensely strong but seemed to have very limited reasoning abilities.

“What is the latest estimate of the size of the invading army?” Jellan asked rolling over slightly so that her lips were right next to Filstan’s ear.

“About a half million,” Filstan replied feeling uncomfortable facing the commander’s smile so directly and closely. “And, about ninety nine percent of them will look just like those two.”

“Are you and Rial as skilled at killing them as you are at killing Pendarvians?”

Filstan took two deep breaths before replying. Then his raptor like eyes locked in on her, making her feel warm and uncomfortable. “Commander, I don’t like being here with you or any Pendarvian for that matter. But I have put my personal feelings aside for the good of our mission. That is to destroy this supply depot with a minimum of loss of life by us and our allies, and that includes Pendarvians... And to answer your question, we are pretty damn good at killing both.”

Jellan immediately regretted her comment and could tell by the set of his jaw and the furrow in his brow that her jab had struck a nerve. “You have faced Ruks before then?” she asked after waiting a few moments.

“Yes, they are not too dangerous unless they have a very distinct numerical advantage. They have little skill with tulwar or cudgel, and they rely more on overpowering someone with their strength or their strength of numbers. Without the men leading them, they are not inclined to make valued decisions. Our tactics against them are to eliminate the men commanding them first if at all possible. Oh, and they are deathly afraid of water.”

Filstan went back to watching and examining the guards manning the stockade and its large double swinging gate. He could feel Jellan’s warm breath on the side of his face but tried to continue

concentrating on the canyon below them. “The barracks for the guards must be inside the cavern,” Filstan said more to refocus his concentration than for conversation.

“I would like to know more about what is inside that cave,” Jellan said rolling over slightly to peer down into the gorge again. “This canyon and layout are not made for a Storm-Maiden attack. We will lose a lot of Maidens attacking this place.”

“After dark, Rial can make a run past the opening. That will at least give me a glimpse of what is inside waiting on us.” Filstan glanced over his shoulder as Rial lit behind them and crawled up on his left side.

“How long have the two of you been together?”

“Eight years this fall.”

“Is it true that the Weyr-Drake chooses its Warder?”

“Yes, the twelve Rangers from your class at the academy assemble at the old volcano in Landar for the yearly Weyr hatch. The warm sands from the old volcano help the eggs mature. Most of the hatchlings choose not to impress a Warder, but twelve of them do choose to bond with a human. Rial hopped right up to me and butted me in the knee with her head and told me that she was hungry.”

“And they always bond cross sex?”

“Yes again,” Filstan said looking into the deep blue eyes of this Pendarvian woman.

“What happens if one of you is killed?”

“If a Warder is killed, his Weyr-Drake will commit suicide in the old volcano at Landar. If the Weyr-Drake is killed, usually the Ranger will take his own life. There have been occasions when the Warder lived on, but he is only a shell of his normal self.”

Refocusing his attention on the open expanse of the canyon below him and particularly on the wooden gate, Filstan continued, “I count only four gate guards.”

“It looks like we can get to that last row of wagons pretty easily.”

“That’s what is bothering me. It’s too easy.” Filstan kept scanning the open area of the canyon for patrolling teams of guards. “They are inviting someone to drop off the side of this cliff, right into the canyon; exactly what you and I are going to do in a few minutes.... Well, neither Rial nor I can see any guards, and I don’t have any choice. I have to get a look inside that cave.”

“Then I am coming with you.”

“No, you’re not... Sir,” he added as an afterthought remembering who the ranking officer was here. “Commander, my brown leathers and even your grays will confuse anyone after dark, but I can tell that you are a woman from several hundred yards; and so, can they.”

“They are bound to have women in their army.”

“But what if they don’t have any in this remote assignment,” Filstan countered, “and, I am certain they don’t have any that look like you in those tight leathers. We cannot take the chance, and you know it.”

“Well, I’m going as far as I can with you without compromising our mission and that is final, Captain... And thanks for the compliment.”

“Are all Pendarvian women this stubborn?”

“Just about all of them, I would say.”

“It must be a wonderful place to live then. Come on, Commander, I have some rope and equipment in my saddle panniers that we are going to require.”

While Filstan retrieved the items he needed, Rial landed at their temporary camp, and he explained their mission to her. He also dispatched the Weyr-Drake with a written message to deliver to Lieutenant Melyran from Commander Jellan. By the time it was dusk dark, they had descended the sheer face of the lower rim of the canyon to a position just outside the cleared line of trees.

Jellan watched with admiration as Filstan slipped from wagon to wagon, inching his way closer to the last row and the mouth of the cavern. With one fluid motion and no warning, Filstan grabbed an arrow from his quiver, fitted the knock snugly to his bow string, and brought the bow to full draw pointing directly at her. The fletching almost brushed her hair as it passed by her head. Filstan rushed towards her, shoving her to the ground between the rows of wagons. His bow landed on top of her as he smoothly drew his backsword in one fluid motion. His blade was just a blur in his two-handed grip as he quietly dispatched first one and then one more Ruk that had snuck up behind them. Rial crashed into the last of the creatures, seizing it by the neck. With a violent shake of her head, both Ranger and Storm-Maiden could hear the Ruk's neck break.

“That was close,” Jellan said regaining her feet. “How did you know they were there?”

“I didn't. Rial just returned from the meadow and saw them. They must have been stationed in a defile or pit beside the cliff to guard against someone scaling the sheer wall from above.” After a quick thanks and scratch on her head, the Weyr-Drake was gone again. “She is making sure there are not any more of them now... Come on, Commander; help me pull them under this wagon.”

Jellan pulled Filstan's arrow from the left eye of one of the dead Ruks. “I thought for an instant this was intended for me.... I guess for most of my twenty-eight years, I have been programmed to hate Valdarians.... I apologize for doubting you, Filstan, and for my behavior. You saved my life.”

“Apology accepted, Commander,” Filstan said as he received his arrow and returned it to his back quiver after flicking the blood from the broad head. “Rial says there are no more Ruks hidden on this side waiting to jump us.”

Filstan used the rows of unused wagons as a landmark and counted twenty-four of them between their climbing rope and the open area before the cavern. Commander Jellan knelt beside him as they watched the entrance for any signs of movement. When viewed from the side, the slight glow emitted

from several lanterns gave the opening an eerie luminescence. Occasionally, they could see shadows moving across the ceiling of the cave as men or Ruks moved around inside. When everything had been still for an hour, Filstan sent Rial the empathic message to begin her run. Starting high on the canyon's rim, the Weyr-Drake set her wings, so she could glide for the entire pass. Filstan just picked her up as her glide path carried her past the open mouth of the cave's entrance.

"The opening is clear," he whispered to Commander Jellan. "I'll be right back."

As he stood, she grabbed the top of his shoulder. "Filstan, you are not what I expected as an enemy. Like the Storm-Maidens you are a warrior, and you accept that every sunrise you see might just be your last. Risking your life for the benefit of others just comes with the job, even when it is your most hated adversary... Listen, what you are about to do is extremely dangerous and you have already saved my life once... I think under different circumstances you and I could be good friends; and, I would miss you if you went off and got yourself killed... Oh, I'm rambling and not doing a good job of this."

Jellan looked away for a second then locked her eyes on his. "Before a Storm-Maiden goes into battle, she asks for *Amyda*, *Bransida*, *Acroveli*, for herself and for those who risk their lives beside her." Starting with her palm towards him with her fingers spread, she next clinched them into a fist, and then brought her fist to her heart. "Courage, strength, and honor, the very foundations of a Storm-Maiden's life and the creed that she lives by," she said... "And, this is just from me." With no further explanation, she kissed him on the lips.

"For luck," he said, returning the soft, unexpected kiss.

"For later," she replied with a coy smile on her normally serious face. "Just get yourself back to me alive. I don't want to have to explain this to that big lizard of yours."

Filstan rechecked his bow but placed it over his shoulder instead of carrying it in his hands. He shook his head to clear the thoughts that were clouding his mind about the very attractive Commander Jellan. He looked back at her pretty face once just to nod and smile, and then straightened up and walked purposefully towards the closest set of steps that would give him access to the large wooden loading platform.

No one challenged him as he reached the broad staircase and walked resolutely to the top of the raised area. At a first glimpse inside the opening, he knew it was massive. He quickly glanced all around him looking for guards; after seeing no one, he entered the cavern itself.

His first impression was one of looking inside an empty eggshell with the narrow end removed. The natural opening had been hollowed out and excavated years in the past. The cuts on the living rock had already weathered and were no longer shiny in appearance. Four sconces over his head held smokeless lanterns that provided the ambient light. In the very center of the cave, most of the space was consumed by large stacks of grain and mealy products stored in coarse bags. These piles of bags reached the thirty-foot ceiling of the excavated cavern. A long central corridor separated the huge space into roughly equal sides. He walked to his right to examine a large wooden door set against an excavated tunnel entrance. The door was unlocked and slightly ajar, and he could hear men's voices coming from beyond the opening and the sounds of plates, cups, and eating utensils being used against wooden tables. Probably the quarters and dining facilities for the staff, Filstan surmised. Beside the door he found a rack of oil lanterns and strikers. He chose one with a full load of oil and slipped one of the strikers in the pocket of his tunic.

Filstan hurried over to the large door filling a similar excavated corridor on the left. Here he found a bar filled semi circular window in a huge door. The entrance was barred from the outside by a

large wooden brace fitting snugly between two heavy metal brackets. They lock their Ruks up at night, he assumed.

Now very curious, he returned to the opening and turned left down the large aisle that ran straight just as far as he could see between two enormous banks of grain and other products. A light shone from the far end of the stacks of grain, and Filstan set his sights on reaching this landmark. When he arrived, he discovered that instead of being the end of the underground warehouse, it was only a metal station that reached from floor to ceiling and held four lanterns. He took this opportunity to turn down one of the corridors perpendicular to the main path and discovered wooden racks constructed to aid in the piling and stacking of the grain products. These racks also reached from floor to ceiling.

When he returned to the main corridor, he again turned to proceed deeper into the huge facility. He counted his progress by the vertical lighting stations. When he reached twenty, he stopped. This place was absolutely enormous. Glancing up at the almost smokeless lantern, he could clearly see by the vapor discharge that the cavern was being vented to the rear.

“Showtime,” he said to himself and started towards the entrance. He became aware of his boot heels landing on the stone and knew that he subconsciously had begun to speed up. Pausing at the last light station before the entrance, he made himself stop and take a few deep breaths. It was then that he heard the voices. Filstan quickly turned left and walked far enough to get into a shadow cast by the light station.

“I’m telling you there is dry rot in some of the mealy bags down at station one hundred and sixty,” a voice said.

“Faison, you wouldn’t know dry rot if it bit you in your arse. And, you have not been that far back in the cavern in ten years.”

“Just because you cannot get those worthless Ruks of yours to work faster, don’t start accusing me of not minding my store,” the voice of Faison came back.

“They only gave me forty, and most of those are old and past their prime. The Emperor expects the impossible.”

“It will be both of our heads if we don’t turn that caravan around tomorrow afternoon when they arrive. It isn’t the way it was when he was back on the southern continent. He is here with the main army. If you don’t want to become meat rations for those animals of yours, you had better start getting more out of them.”

The two men carried a lantern each and seemed intent on getting to the back reaches of the huge cavern. When Filstan could not hear their conversation anymore, he left his hiding place and once again started towards the main entrance. Just as he reached the final row of bags before the main cavern opening, he heard the scrape as the large door to the men’s quarters opened. He quickly ducked back the way he had come and waited in the shadows. A lone man appeared backlit by the large lanterns over the inside of the main entrance. He held a lantern in one hand and a striker in the other.

“He’ll see me if I make a run for it,” Filstan quickly thought to himself. As rapidly as he could, he took his bow off his shoulder and wedged it in an empty space between two stacks of grain. He swiftly followed it with his quiver of arrows. Last, he picked up a sack of meal and threw it over his shoulder. With one deep breath, he started towards the approaching man.

As soon as the man saw him, he became suspicious. “What are you doing here?”

“Faison asked me to bring this bag up front so that he could examine it for dry rot in the light of day,” Filstan speedily improvised.

“Are you one of the new drivers? I don’t think I have ever seen you before. What is your name? I will have to verify this with Faison when I see him next.”

Those were the man's last words as Filstan brought his belt knife up under the cover of the mealy bag and sunk it directly into the man's heart. As the small man fell, he grabbed him by the back of his uniform collar and pulled him out of line of sight and into the shadows from anyone passing by at the entrance. Just as rapidly as he could, Filstan returned the mealy bag to its rightful place and retrieved his bow and quiver of arrows. For the first time, he noticed a piece of leather wired to the bag and removed it with his belt knife. He stood for moments in disbelief staring at the tag before shoving it in his pocket and resuming his mission.

From the large pocket on the thigh of his breeks he removed a coil of fine waxed cord. After counting ten marks, he cut the cord and slightly frayed both ends. From the borrowed lantern, he poured a large quantity of the oil on the lowest pile of mealy bags. After securing one end of the slow-match fuse in the bag, he hit his striker. The free end of the fuse caught on the first strike. As quickly as possible, Filstan repeated this process three more times in widely separate locations on either side of the central aisle. Everywhere he stopped, he gathered more leather tags.

With a large heave, he pulled the dead man to his feet and threw him over his left shoulder. Without pausing to consider the risks, he walked to the end of the platform and down the stairs to the dirt floor of the canyon. Filstan did not see anyone around and did not hesitate any longer. He walked straight to the first line of wagons and then down them to the end of that row.

"Where have you been, and who is your friend?" Jellan almost yelled at him from the shadows.

"Open the gate on this wagon please, Commander. I need to store my friend in here." When she lowered the gate, Filstan tossed the dead man from his shoulder into the empty bed of the wagon. "It is a good thing he was small," Filstan said breathing hard from the exertion.

"He isn't as big as I am."

“Well, your butt is a lot nicer than his, and I’ve patted his about as long as I care to. Come on, Commander, we need to get out of here.”

They walked without speaking until they reached the twenty fourth row of wagons. “Here we go, Commander. Do you want me to go first?”

“I’ll go first. You are tired and if you get in trouble, I can pull you up.”

“Makes sense to me,” Filstan said. “Besides, if I go first, I cannot admire your butt as we climb.”

Jellan just smiled and grabbed the knotted rope to begin their arduous ascent out of the canyon. Lean and sleek and only round in the few places women were supposed to be round, Jellan climbed like a fox squirrel going up its favorite white oak tree. “A friendly hand up from an ancient enemy,” she said extending her hand to an obviously exhausted Filstan when he reached the top.

Filstan gladly accepted her help and was so winded that he could only nod his thanks as they crested the sheer rock wall where he had secured their climbing rope. “Sit,” Jellan said, “at least until you get your strength back.” Filstan didn’t have to be asked twice and sat down beside the Pendarvian Commander as she began unknitting and coiling the rope for him.

“You’ve obviously climbed before,” Filstan said between long deep breaths.

“Yes, rock climbing is a hobby of mine. I have not had much time to enjoy it since this war with the southern continent started, but I climbed a great deal while stationed at the Academy.”

“Well, it looks like it made you firm in all the right places.”

“I thought you were just interested in my butt.”

Filstan just smiled at the jab. “Tell me, Jellan, just what makes a beautiful woman like you want to become a Storm-Maiden?”

“Oh, I suppose the thrill of a lifetime spent on the knife edge of peril is appealing to most. Others just want to be a part of something special. Personally, I wanted to be somewhere that I could make a difference by being a leader of the best our society can produce.”

“Tell me more about the training you receive.”

“Well, we enter the Academy when we are six years old and begin learning how to ride a horse in the manner befitting a Storm-Maiden. The training is both grueling and arduous. Over sixty percent drop out before they are fifteen. When we graduate at eighteen, we are assigned to a Storm-Maiden regiment or we are sent to another year of officer training. One of the interesting facts that most non Pendarvians are unaware of is that after our initial eight-year enlistment, only ten percent remain in the service. The others go on to find husbands, raise their families, and live normal otherwise productive lives in our society. Filstan, when I was three years old, I saw a Storm-Maiden Company for the first time. The precision, the gleaming tack, the magnificent steeds they rode, I knew right then and there this was the career path for me.”

Filstan kept glancing back at the entrance to the cavern. Suddenly, the glow emanating from the opening increased exponentially. “How did you set the fire and still get out of there alive?” Jellan asked.

Filstan pulled the remaining cord from his pocket. “Slow-match cord, it’s a technique they teach us at Tiburn. Each of these marks is two minutes burning time... I thought it might save a few lives if it worked, but if I briefed you beforehand, you would have insisted on going with me.”

“Saving Storm-Maiden lives again, Captain? Your most hated and ancient enemy. It could have gotten you killed. What would your instructors at Tiburn say?”

“They would say the mission isn’t finished. We need to take the returning wagon train, burn all the wagons here in the canyon, and take the horses back to Winterbrook.”

As Jellan started to rise, Filstan grabbed her arm lightly. “Why did you insist on coming with me to the canyon? You could have sent Melyran or one of the other officers.”

The pretty, blond Pendarvian looked away for a second before locking eyes with the Ranger. “I’m not exactly sure.”

“Yes, you are... You’re lonely, and when you are around just me you can be yourself. No longer the commander with ice water running in her veins that must be perfect all the time. It must be difficult being an officer commanding so many women. You want to be their friend, but you cannot... I have to admit that I admire you and your lieutenants. As we were taught at the Academy, it is always lonely at the top.”

Jellan looked at him with a knowing smile across her face. “It’s ironic, Filstan, but as an outsider and a former enemy I can speak with you about this subject but not with the members of my company. I am so lucky to have a hundred and twenty wonderful women in my command, yet I cannot be friends with any of them. It is very painful sometimes. They can relax and frolic in the lake with your Weyr-Drake, but I have to remain aloof and always be the serious commander.”

“When your Storm-Maidens look at you, they see someone in which they have absolute confidence. Let me tell you a quick story from my days at the Academy in Tiburn. All first years are required to know the Table of Organization and Equipment, beginning with the cadet officers who command the regiment. My roommate and I studied the required information and knew it cold. We get to the mess hall for a midday meal and before we can eat, the senior mess officer asks me who the regimental commander is. I froze, my mind went completely blank. I told him I had forgotten, and he said something that has stayed with me every second of my life since that day. He said, ‘Filstan, as someone who aspires to be an officer one day, you do not have the luxury of not knowing the answer. Every member of your command is looking at you to make the right decision and save their lives. Your

platoon is about to be overrun by a company of Storm-Maidens. Are you going to tell your men, that you knew what to do once, but you have forgotten in the heat of the moment? I promise you the Storm-Maiden commander who is about to kill you and all the members of your command, knows exactly what to do. Being an officer means one thing, poise under pressure. Now, who is the regimental commander?' My mind suddenly cleared, and I knew the answer and I have never forgotten that lesson and the responsibility that goes with being an officer."

"Thank you for sharing that with me," Jellan said, her blue eyes locking in on his. "I apologize for saying those ugly things earlier; but I am not going to apologize for kissing you; I was just afraid I might never see you again."

"I don't want you to apologize; just tell me that it will not be the last time."

"Well, to set the record straight, I am not some tavern wench with moon calf eyes that you can charm her blouse off with just that pretty smile of yours. You know, Filstan, I had some time to think things over while you were exploring that huge cavern. You are a remarkable person. I cannot imagine how I would react if I was thrown in with a hundred and twenty men, who by nationality were my mortal enemies." She paused and took his right hand in both of hers. Tenderly, she kissed the top of his hand before continuing. "I would give a month's pay right now to be back at that beautiful lake with just you and Rial. By the way, I'm feeling the urge to kiss you again."

Filstan pulled Jellan to her feet and wrapped her in his strong arms. She threw her arms around his neck and as their lips met, she melted into his firm body. They stayed that way until both of them were breathless.

When they broke apart, Filstan said, "Commander, right now we need to place this improbable relationship on hold, because we have another problem." He pulled the half dozen leather strips from his pockets and held them out for Jellan to see in the moon light. "These are called milling tickets. While I

went away to fight for the honor and glory of Valdaria; my older brother stayed home to manage the family milling business. Every sack of milled grain or flour on the northern continent must have one of these strips of leather attached to it before it can be sold. It is one of the few things even our two countries agree on.”

“I am familiar with the ‘Grain Treaty’,” Jellan said, “so, what is the problem?”

“The stores we destroyed in the cavern were not brought in from the southern continent by the Priory, they were purchased here in the north from Elvendar, Baldor, Pendar, and Valdaria,” Filstan said as he spread the tickets out for her to see. “The letters and numbers on these tags tell anyone where the grain was milled and even the month and year it was prepared.”

“They have agents operating here in the north,” Jellan said, suddenly understanding where Filstan was going with this line of thought and all business again.

The moon was just clearing the canyon rim to their east as they climbed the rest of the way out of the steep ravine. With one last glance, back at the cave entrance, Filstan verified the huge column of smoke spilling from the opening, unable to completely vent to the rear of the huge storage area, and the intense glow from the internal fires. Destruction of everything and everyone inside the cavern was almost a certainty. Rial was waiting for them with the horses when they arrived at their temporary camp. Filstan scratched her ears and eye ridges as she head butted him in the chest. “Time to go to work, Gal. You need to find that wagon train for us, and we need to alert the Storm-Maidens and prepare an ambush... By the time we reach the meadow it will be dawn.”

Four mounted Storm-Maidens intercepted them a few hundred yards before the narrow trail opened to the long field that would be the scene of their attack.

“Rial says they will be here in about three hours,” Filstan said looking at Commander Jellan, “Sir,” he added as an afterthought.

“Captain, you are with these four lovely ladies. Your mission is to keep anyone or anything from escaping in this direction. First platoon moved into position last night to keep any survivors inside the canyon from escaping; second and third platoons will handle the ambush here in the meadow.”

“Remember, we need two of the drivers alive, Sir,” Filstan said as Jellan returned to join her officers in planning the attack.

Filstan looked at each of the four women seated on their sleek mounts in a semi circle before him. They were all about twenty years old and sat their horses with an ease and grace that only came from a lifetime of practice. “Captain, would it be permissible for us to dismount?” the one on his far right with black hair asked.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “I guess we don’t have much to do for the next few hours anyway.” However, each of them remained in her saddle with her eyes riveted on him. It suddenly dawned on him that it would be impolite for one of them to dismount before a senior officer. He quickly threw his right leg over the saddle and dropped lightly to the ground. As soon as his boot touched the hard earth that made up the road, the one who had asked permission flashed a quick series of Maiden hand talk. Whatever she said must have been amusing because they all chuckled under their breath. At another signal from this woman they all dismounted, still with smiles on their pretty faces. Filstan was certain that he was the brunt of some joke or comment but did not want to give them the satisfaction of asking about it.

“What is your name?” he asked the black-haired Maiden instead.

“Corporal Roth, Sir,” the pretty young woman answered.

“You know the capabilities of your Maidens far better than I. How should they be deployed?”

“Two to each side of the road, Sir,” she said. “We have already picked our places and constructed a wall of brush to conceal the horses on either side. The only problem is I must stay by your

side, Commander Jellan's orders. I am to protect you with my life, Sir. She told us what you did last night in the storage depot."

"Then when it is time to spring the ambush, I will place myself in your capable hands, Corporal."

"Very good, Sir," she said with a broad smile. Their brief discourse was interrupted as Rial swooped in to land gracefully in the road between them and the open meadow beyond. Each of the four Maidens was quick to want to touch and pet the sleek silver Weyr-Drake who loved all the attention. The four young women were hesitant to address him directly, but Rial broke some of the ice between the two ancient enemies. In the next hour Filstan learned not only the names of the other Maidens but also the names of their horses and all about them. It was quickly apparent to him that a horse to a Storm-Maiden was not a tool to use but instead a partner she trained with for years. One depended on the other for their lives in combat, not unlike a Weyr-Drake.

Nervously Corporal Roth drew a Shilee from her back scabbard and spun it in her right hand. Then she switched the blade to her left hand. Either she was ambidextrous, or more likely she had drilled with either hand so long that it made no difference. There was little doubt to Filstan that she could fight equally effectively with either hand.

Rial had settled down to sit with all four legs tucked up under her with her light silver wings folded neatly across her back. She purred contentedly as each of the Maidens took turns scratching her ears and eye ridges. The Maidens never addressed each other orally. Any communication between them was always accomplished by Maiden hand talk. It was Corporal Roth's turn to entertain the Weyr-Drake who looked and acted just like a large contented cat with all the new-found attention. "What is this war all about, Captain?" she asked taking a break from the purring Rial.

"This war is pretty easy to understand. We, on the northern continent are free. The Emperor of the southern continent wants to take our freedom and make us subjects of his dark domain. We want to

remain free; it's that simple really. But most conflicts are much more complicated than this one. Now, Pendar and Valdaria have been fighting for so long, they cannot remember what they are fighting for. I just hope when we throw these invaders out of our homelands, we are smart enough not to take up arms against each other again."

"I've heard the war between Pendar and Valdaria began over Roldham," Corporal Roth said.

"The official phrase we learned at Tiburn Academy was a contagion of territorial imperatives."

"What does that mean, Sir?"

"It means that old men in two countries cannot sit down and agree on where a line should be drawn on some map about a large empty savannah that no one cares anything about."

Their conversation was interrupted as a Storm-Maiden rode to the edge of the large meadow and flashed a series of hand signals at the five of them in the road. The Corporal held her right hand extended, palm first, with her fingers open. Each of the other maidens followed her lead. She then clinched her hand into a fist and brought it to her heart. Each of the other maidens did the same. "The wagon train is a half hour away, places everyone, with your permission, Sir," Roth added as an afterthought.

"Courage, strength, and honor," Filstan said nodding to the four women warriors. "Lead on, Corporal Roth, I will follow you anywhere." Filstan grabbed the reins of his horse and looked at Rial. "Time to go to work, girl," he said to her out loud. "Stay near us in case some of them break away and escape in this direction."

With one leap from her powerful hind legs and two beats of her silver wings, Rial was airborne and already over the trees. Filstan followed Corporal Roth to the screen of brush she and the others constructed. It was on a slight rise, perhaps forty yards off the road, and it gave them a great view of the

meadow behind them where the ambush would be sprung. Filstan strung his bow and quickly checked the arrows in his quiver.

Five hundred yards from the meadow, I count forty wagons and twenty outriders.

“Slightly more than a quarter mile away,” Filstan said as he swung into the saddle.

Roth exchanged Maiden hand talk between her teams on either side of the road before she vaulted into the saddle. She lovingly patted the neck of her sleek mare that stamped a foot occasionally in anticipation of the coming action. Filstan stood in his stirrups and could just see the top of the lead wagon as it entered the very far side of the meadow. Just as Rial indicated, mounted men dressed in black uniforms rode on either side of the column. The driver of the lead wagon looked bored and seemed to feel completely unthreatened this close to their home base of supply.

The first wagon rumbled across the uneven road and Filstan stood silently as Corporal Roth raised one hand over her head. From his vantage point he could see the complimentary pair of Maidens across the road and both of them raised a Shilee in their right hands. Roth waited until the lead team of horses was out of the meadow and once again enclosed by the forest before dropping her hand. At her signal both Maidens brought their weapons down sharply, each cutting a rope supporting a large conifer. With a loud crack, the tree fell across the road, blocking the wagon, its team, and all those trapped in the meadow behind.

The driver of the wagon seemed too stunned initially to act. With the road blocked, his team of horses stopped of their own accord. He recognized his peril as gray clad Storm-Maidens carrying a weapon in either hand came charging out of the open forest to attack his caravan. Filstan was mesmerized by the attack as the Maidens flew into the stranded wagons. A Shilee spinning in either hand, they guided their horses with just their knees. The lead driver threw his hands in the air in surrender as a Storm-Maiden held a razor sharp Shilee against his exposed neck. Roth and her partner

sprung into action as four of the outriders made it to the safety of the woods on their side. They cut down two on the first pass. As the two remaining men in black thundered past him, Filstan knocked an arrow and loosed it at the lead rider. He fell with a resounding crash. Both Storm-Maidens were in hot pursuit of the lone escapee. Before they closed enough for a killing strike, the man was bowled out of the saddle by a diving Weyr-Drake, her balled talons breaking the man's neck.

Roth and her partner returned to his side and everyone's attention became focused on the battle still ongoing out in the meadow. Some of the wagons must have been ferrying Ruk laborers in their beds as roving teams of Storm-Maidens systematically rode down and destroyed the strange creatures. "Each of you rides like you are a part of the horse," Filstan said in absolute awe of the astounding ability displayed by the Pendarvian women.

"Thank you, Captain," Roth said. "By the way, that was a nice shot with your bow."

Filstan occupied himself by examining the dead soldiers, and he did not notice Commander Jellan as she approached. Roth saluted as Jellan dismounted. "What have you got there, Captain?"

"The four men Roth and her team killed all carry this tattoo. I thought it might be important, so I am making a drawing of it."

"Roth says you are quite a shot with a bow, and that she would go into battle with you and your Weyr-Drake anytime and anyplace."

Filstan nodded to Corporal Roth and then asked, "Any casualties?"

"A few minor cuts, but everyone can still ride and fight. They are being tended to now."

"Take me to your wounded, and I will show you another Ranger trick." He followed the Commander until she stopped at the back of one of the empty flat beds of an uncovered wagon. Three Storm-Maidens sat on the bed and were being administered to by one of their sister Maidens. Filstan

looked up as Rial back winged in to land. “Allow her to lick the wounds before you bind them. Her saliva prevents infection and also speeds the healing.”

Filstan sat on the gate of an empty wagon with a blank piece of parchment and began writing his report. To this he added the leather tags he had collected and his copy of the black tattoo some of the enemy had on their left forearms. “Corporal Roth will deliver the prisoners and both of our reports to our combined headquarters,” Jellan said as she added her folded written pages to the pouch containing Filstan’s documents. “Both of our drivers were very interested in talking. Of course, I might have let it slip that your Weyr-Drake would eat pieces of them if they didn’t... Those are some impressive looking teeth Rial has.”

By the time all the teams had been unhitched, the dead were stacked on several of the empty wagons. Other wagons were overturned to add to the pyre before the whole thing was set on fire. As the flames leaped thirty feet into the air, fifty horses appeared in the open meadow being herded by a platoon of Storm-Maidens returning from the canyon.

When Filstan was able to locate Commander Jellan again, the jovial mood in the large meadow had changed. “There wasn’t much left for them to do in the canyon. Your fire destroyed everything inside the cavern, and only a handful of men escaped the blaze. The Maidens finished off the survivors and burned the wagons, but they had one casualty, Lieutenant Melyran - a crossbow bolt from one of the gate guards... We’ll build a pyre for her, but not in this place. I’ve already given Roth my amended report.” Jellan flashed a series of hand signals and the company and large herd of horses began moving.

They stopped again when the troop left the mature forests and regained the plains of Elvendar. The Lieutenant’s body was laid on a funeral pyre by the members of her command, a Shilee placed in either hand. Filstan stood slightly away from the semi circle of Storm-Maidens with Rial by his side. The only sound he could hear was the gentle wind blowing across the plains.

“Today, we have lost a valued comrade and fellow Storm-Maiden. It is not our Pendarvian way to mourn our dead, for they are now in a better place and she died with a Shilee in her hand. Let us instead give thanks. We have gained a valuable ally from one who was once our most hated and ancient enemy. But for his valiant actions last night, this funeral pyre would be much larger today... Maidens to horse,” Jellan commanded sharply. The company of Storm-Maidens vaulted into the saddle as one. Jellan sat her gray mare stoically beside a sleek brown mare with an empty saddle. She nodded slightly to Filstan who ignited the pitch covered arrow on the string of his bow. His shot was perfect and instantly the dry grass and oil-soaked wood of the pyre was ablaze.

“*Amyda, Bransida, Acroveli*, Lieutenant Melyran... Maidens Shilee,” Jellan commanded and the entire company drew a weapon with their right hand and brought it to their chest in a final salute to their fallen sister. As was the Valdarian custom, Filstan blew three long mournful notes on his saddle horn before drawing his back sword and saluting the fallen Maiden. Understanding the serious ritual of mourning the death of a comrade and friend, Rial bugled a mournful farewell as the flames increased.

With the brief service complete and their comrade laid to rest, the entire mood of the company instantly changed. Wine skins appeared, and it seemed as if every Maiden wanted to shake his hand, introduce herself, and pet Rial again. “You do realize they have adopted you into their exclusive sorority of warriors, don’t you?” Jellan said smiling and shaking her head. “A Valdarian and a Ranger; all I can say is you had better be as good as you look. I expect perfection from those in my command.”

Four days later Filstan awoke suddenly lying on a blanket spread before a good-sized fire by a beautiful crystal-clear lake. He could hear Rial splashing in the water playing some impromptu game or trying to catch one of the elusive trout that lived there. Jellan sat closer to the fire combing and drying her long hair, the hard muscles in her shapely legs and taught stomach very prominent as she leaned towards the fire and stroked her hair across her round firm breasts. Seeing that he was awake, she turned

to face him. “Are you going to sleep all the time? We only have one more day before we have to leave for Winterbrook and rejoin the company.”

“You have your blouse off again dear, and how are the Storm-Maidens going to accept a Valdarian Ranger as their Commander’s lover?”

“I have not worn a blouse or anything else for two days, and they will think that I am very fortunate to have a man who is both handsome and brave. Filstan, you saved many of their lives and they recognize that fact. Courage is one thing they all understand and value above all other human qualities. But that doesn’t mean you get to slack off when you are alone with me.”

As he started to reach for her, a second Weyr-Drake banked in to land beside them. Filstan rose quickly and greeted the darker Weyr-Drake with a loving scratch on his head, before accepting the rolled message he carried in a front claw. As Filstan accepted the letter, the male Weyr-Drake made a dash for the water. “G’sel, a member of our Fair... Well, it looks like we will be spending some more time together, Commander. The drivers you took prisoner were very helpful and gave our intelligence teams some good leads on the Priory’s agents here in the north. I’m to leave with your company on a new mission to round some of these people up and put their network out of business, but not until tomorrow.”