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Everbeing Passages

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Everbeing Passages

Jan Moss

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CHAPTER 1: TO AID A STRANGER

Thin columns of black smoke rose above the houses in the village. The rampage against its people was over, but the heartache and grieving were just beginning. Brave men prepared to leave the village and track down their attackers. All the villagers helped them with what food and provisions they could spare. The village had little material wealth from the start, but they had watched helplessly, as it was carried away on the backs of the horses of the marauders. The men who sought to follow them, did not care to retrieve the property stolen, they meant to seek justice for the precious lives that had been lost in defense of the village.

While most of the men of the village were away in a neighboring town, selling their harvest, the attackers came. They stole what they could, and wrought terrible hurt on the villagers for having so little for them to take. The men of the village had returned to find the ruin and carnage. All of the men, who would take to hunting the attackers, had lost family members and friends to the brutality. All had a singular determination to track down and punish the marauders.

Those who had attacked the village moved swiftly across the land, for though they were heavy with the spoils of their attacks, they merely stole the horses and wagons they needed to carry it for them. The men of Gubbal Village crossed the land on foot. They followed the trail of destruction the marauders left behind them, and found none who would join their campaign of justice. They traveled far from their village. They went far into the north, into territories they had only heard tales about. Their determination was steadfast, and though the road was frightening and treacherous, they found beauty in these lands they had never seen. They found happiness in their companionship, and in this togetherness, they found resolve to see their quest through to the end.

While traveling through territory called Villain's Valley, they found distraction from their quest. The territory was known far and wide for the viciousness of it, word had even reached the extreme southern territory from which they had come. They traveled the land with great caution and some fear. They were on the trail of those who

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had laid hurt to their village though, and kept their vigilance on the trek.

This early morning, weeks into their journey, the camp was being disassembled with the ease of many practices. Sons of the men who would serve as warriors for the village did most of the work, whilst the warriors gave direction and saw to it all was put right.

Graythorn, the leader of the band, looked about the camp with the business of the day to come in his mind. He wanted his men to move swiftly through this treacherous country, and looked forward to putting it behind them. He was a man in deep hurt, for he had lost both his wife and two daughters to the attackers. His only purpose for moving ahead in this world was to seek revenge for the terrible loss done to him. He led the men with great courage, and with the care, only a man who knew all too well their sorrow, could. He stood tall and proudly in the camp, always leading by example. His blonde hair gleamed in the early morning sunlight, his battle armament already worn upon him, made him appear more rugged and stronger than any of the other men. His face was careworn yet quite handsome even after all his hard years as a farmer, and raising two daughters who had been coming of age. He stood out amongst the men, as a leader should. His blue eyes sparkled in the light, as he watched his men prepare to face the next challenge.

Zekial, Graythorn's younger brother, approached him with purpose. Zekial shared his brother's handsome features, blonde hair, light eyes, and noble carriage, but he did not have the great ability of leadership in him. His intensity came from his great caring for others, and led him to the role of healer. Though he could best his brother in competition of sword or bow, he had never been the strategist his brother was. He neared his brother quickly, and spoke with him in low tones.

"Zakiah has word from his post," Zekial breathed quietly.

"What is it?" Graythorn nodded, hand to beard, already in his thinking pose.

"It would be best you come and see for yourself," Zekial sighed.

Without further word, the two brothers, often in need of very little communication between them, started walking past the edge of

the camp. They came out to a ridge, and crouched behind a large boulder, with Zakiah. The young man, nearly out of his teen-aged years, was Zekial's son, and with the familiarity of family, he skipped greeting to his leader, and began his report.

"I have been watching the fire we saw last night," he shifted his position slightly, so he could point to his subject. The hearty lad, bigger than his father, but with the same blonde hair and light eyes had been assigned to watch the stranger, partly because of his keen eyesight, and partly because he never wanted to be left out of anything. "It belongs to just one person, which is why we could detect so little movement around it last night." He scanned the area and pointed, "She is right down there."

Graythorn followed his nephew's finger, and saw perhaps fifty feet from the fire, a solitary, hooded figure, coming over a rise carrying wood toward it. He squinted in the early morning sun, then looked over to his nephew, "What do you mean, 'she'?" He looked back to the cloaked figure. "A woman, traveling alone in this valley? Impossible!"

"I have been watching long enough, Uncle," Zakiah nodded, "To know that is a woman, and she is most definitely alone."

Graythorn continued to stare at the figure. At the distance, there was no way for him to determine, by looking at her, that she was indeed a woman. He assessed the situation quickly in his mind, and decided this lone traveler most likely proved no threat to him or his men. "If she be woman," Graythorn refused to concede, "And she travels alone, she is either fool or witch, and either way, we need give her a wide berth." He started to push back from the boulder, eager to dismiss it, but Zakiah wanted him to know the whole of it.

"We need not concern ourselves with her, Graythorn;" he mumbled cautiously, "That other band of men watching her seems to be prepping to jump her."

Graythorn lowered himself back into position behind the rock. Zekial pointed to a man watching the figure from behind some trees to the left of their position. The woman's camp was situated on open ground, not quite as high as Graythorn's camp, and from where he knelt, he could survey a large part of the valley. Zakiah pointed

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further back in the woods to movement that could barely be seen through the trees.

Graythorn needed a full assessment of this new threat, “How many are there?”

“They have been moving around quite a bit this morning,” Zakiah acknowledged, “I make them to be at least seven.” He motioned toward the woods where the men were hidden, then back to the woman. “They have been watching her all morning, but show no sign of wanting to move around her. They seem to be sizing up the situation for an attack. The woman, or witch, whatever she may be, seems to be just waiting for it.”

Graythorn thought a moment, hand to beard, “Well, while they are distracted with each other,” he sighed, “We should have time to break camp and put distance between us.” He once again started to push away from the rock.

“Brother,” Zekial breathed heavily, “That woman is in imminent danger! Would you have us simply walk away?”

“The danger,” Graythorn spoke in matter of fact manner, “Is of her own making. She travels alone in such territory, and foolishly makes camp in the open. She is nearly inviting the disaster about to befall her.”

“Whether she is fool or witch or frightened traveler,” Zekial dared speak a little louder, “She is about to meet with an overwhelming force. How can you dismiss it so quickly?”

Graythorn shot his brother a harsh glance, “It is none of our affair. We have our own business here. I see no need to risk hurt to any of our men on the account of these strangers.” He pushed away from the boulder, crouched for a few steps away, then stood, and headed back toward the camp.

Zekial rushed back and grabbed his arm, “Look with they eyes of a warrior,” he motioned back toward the clearing. “She camps in open ground, and seems to wait for the attack. Any assault those men would make would have to come over open ground, giving her advantage of sight of them. She appears to have chosen this battle come forth to her, and takes what little recourse she can, against the overwhelming odds.”

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“Argue but a few more moments,” Zakiah whispered loudly over his shoulder, “And it will be too late for any decision to be made. They are moving forward toward her.”

Graythorn strode back toward the boulder, and glanced at the scene playing out before him. The men from the camp in the woods, were spread out, and moving toward the tree line. The woman moved slowly about her camp, as if oblivious to the movement. In that instant, he realized, if he found himself in a similar situation as the woman, he would do the same thing.

“Come along Zakiah,” Graythorn barked, “We will need every sword for this!”

He trotted back to the camp; Zakiah and Zekial close on his heels. He stopped short of the fire, “Leave the packing to the boys, men,” he shouted, “Pick up your arms. We have an errand to run!”

He watched as his men dropped what they were packing and rushed to their swords, knives, axes and bows. “There is ambush coming to a lone traveler in the clearing below our camp,” he gave his men the assessment, “And we shall do our best to thwart it.” He watched the men for sign of reaction, “Quickly brothers, or we will have rushed to bury a corpse!” He noted the reaction of the boys who had been helping to pack up the camp. “Break camp with all haste,” he motioned toward them. He pointed to his younger nephew, Tanbo, “Go and watch us from the ledge, we will motion to you when it is safe to join us.” Tanbo started to run out toward the ledge when Graythorn yelled out, “On course of no signal, get them out of here as quickly as you can.”

The solitary figure placed another log on the fire. The cloak she wore over her head and shoulders was pulled closely to cover most of her face. She placed the log on the fire, as her bright green eyes scanned the horizon. She listened in earnest for sound that might give proof of the imminent attack. Her heart raced with the dread in it. Her arms and legs were taut as iron, and the hair tingled at the back of her neck. She eyed the ridge above her position, and then scanned the

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woods to her right. She struggled to keep her movements about the camp slow and casual. She took a few steps back from the smoke of the fire, and drew large inhale. She searched her mind for the recognition of the smell of a man's sweat as he draws near battle.

A bird flew low along the tree line. The woman seemed to take little notice of its flight, yet she positioned herself to face the woods. She heard a muffled sneeze in the bushes, and noticeably stiffened. The men charged out from their positions, taking long strides over the open ground. The woman pushed back her cloak with both hands. She drew a bow from beneath it, and reached for an arrow from the quiver strapped around her. She dropped a man with the first flight from her bow, and quickly readied another. She dropped two more men before the rest could cover the distance of open ground to reach her camp, swords drawn.

The woman dropped her bow, and pulled a gleaming sword from its scabbard. She backed herself into position by the fire, and took hit on her sword from the first man to reach her. She lunged forward toward the man, and with a knife she drew from her belt, slit open his belly to allow innards to fall to the ground. The man clutched at his stomach and let out an agonizing wail. Eight men had started the charge from the woods, and in the matter of merest seconds, half were already out of the fight.

Keeping her back to the fire, she awaited the next two men, running abreast to reach her. As they entered the boundary of the camp, she heard a whizzing sound in the air, and the larger of the two men, halted, eyes wide, gaping at an arrow that caught him in the chest. With no time to assess or even process what was happening, the woman raised her sword in defense of the other man barreling down upon her. She met his sword with a slight pressure, then quickly stepped aside, and shoved him into the fire. His startle led to his demise, as she moved toward him with tremendous speed, and ran her sword through him. She heard the abrupt clanking of steel behind her, and turned to witness, the men who had been on the ridge above her camp, engaged with the enemy who had just begun their attack of her.

Confusion ripped through her mind, as she placed her foot on the back of the man she had run through, and started heaving her sword

out from him. Graythorn and his men made quick work of the remaining attackers. The woman gave her sword a final tug, and as Graythorn and his men began to approach her, she held it up, bloody entrails washed down it toward her grip. She held the sword in defensive posture, her eyes still glazed with the frenzy of the battle. She made it clear; she meant harm to anyone who came near her.

Graythorn fixed his eyes on her, he held his arm up to his men, "Stay back, lads," he shouted. He began to lower his sword slowly keeping his gaze into the woman's eyes, "We meant only assistance to you!" He took a small step closer to judge her reaction. Her grip of her sword tightened. "We mean you no harm," he uttered softly. "We saw the disadvantage coming toward you, and came to help."

The woman's eyes, still wide with purpose, held her sword at the ready. Graythorn had witnessed her skill with the blade and bow as he had rushed across the field with his men. Though her eyes seemed wild, he felt her mind must be fit, to gain such prowess. "I am Graythorn of Gubbal Village," he used the most pleasant tone his voice would allow. "These men and I come from the Princefort Territory. We are tracking men who attacked our village while we were away on business. We mean no harm to anyone but them." He kept his gaze fixed on her eyes, and tried to smile in reassurance to her.

His friendly eyes, calm demeanor, and soothing voice brought down the guard of the woman. She began to lower her sword, and reasonable thought returned to her brain. Her eyes softened, and as she opened her mouth to speak, the man at her feet, whose entrails she had exposed, reached out, grabbed her wrist, and thrust his sword upward toward her back. Her quick reflexes caught the blade on her scapula, but it caused a horrific wound, which bled furiously from the onset. She stepped back, raised her sword above her head with both hands, and dealt a crushing blow to the man's skull, while at the same instant; Zakiah's bow landed an arrow in the man's chest.

Wildness and pain returned to the woman's eyes as she held up her sword once more. Graythorn stared in stunned silence. Zekial trotted up to his side. He looked at the woman's wound, and then into

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her eyes, "I am a healer," he shouted hoarsely, "Permit me to aid you!"

"We are here to assist," Graythorn tried to make her understand once more.

The woman felt herself leaving her senses, and knew she would not be able to stop herself from swooning. She lowered her sword into the fire. A sweet stench and smoke rose from it, as the blood and flesh of those she had struck seared in the heat. She left it in the flame long enough to glow a bright orange. She held it in her right hand, while she tore at the clothing on her right shoulder with the left; she exposed the wound as best she could, then took the sword in her left hand, and tried to seal the wound on her shoulder with the blazing heat of the sword. She made little more than a wince at the pain of it, keeping her eyes fixed on Graythorn.

Her knees came weak from the pain, and she only reached a small portion of the gash. Zekial dared take several steps forward, "Permit me to aid you, before you succumb!" he shouted feverishly.

The woman let loose her glare at Graythorn, and eyed Zekial. She knew her moments of consciousness were nearing end. She saw the desperate kindness in his face. Unable to form speech in her state, she dropped to her knees before Zekial, and offered him her sword. He stepped forward cautiously, Graythorn slowly moving up behind him, sword at the ready. Zekial gently lifted the sword from the woman's bloody palms, and then quickly presented it to his brother. Graythorn held the sword at mid length, still feeling the heat within it through his gloves. He was flushed with a wave of sudden concern, "Permit my healer to aid you, that this day not be lost to those brutes."

Zekial knelt with the woman, and she raised her head to look into his eyes. She then looked up once more to Graythorn standing above them. He saw the pain in her eyes, and the cloudiness that comes with the wound, "Will you permit my healer aid you?"

The woman, beyond her ability of speech, nodded her head once, and then lowered it.

CHAPTER 2: THE ACCOMPLISHED ONE

Graythorn's warrior training, the tales he had heard about the Villain's Valley, and his keen sense of responsibility to his men, kept him alert and wary while in the valley. He would not allow his men to camp on open ground in such a place. It was customary for a healer to have his own fire while tending to a sick or wounded patient, so Graythorn left Zekial at the fire of the stranger, and had his men set up camp close to the tree line. They buried the men who had attacked the stranger, after relieving them of what they had carried with value. His men now had more food and provisions, which were good, but they were making no headway out of the Villain's Valley, while Zekial cared for the stranger. He could not deny his brother protection, but he had great concern about guarding the wild-eyed stranger. He watched the fire where he knew Zekial would work tirelessly to help the woman. He felt a dull ache in his heart for the worry of his brother's safety. He felt the woman, even only partly healed, could be lethal. He watched for sign his brother might allow him to come to the fire, or sign his brother might visit his camp. The wait was anxious and agonizing.

Zekial had closed the wound with much stitching. He had cleaned the wound as best he could, made a large poultice to cover its length, and bandaged it gently. When all was done that he could for the wound, he went about seeing to her comfort, as she would need to lie still and give the poultice time to work, and the stitches time to set. He set a basin of water near her head, and began to clean the grime and blood from her face. He noticed she was a woman of mature years, for there were some small wrinkles around her eyes and her brow. Her long golden hair was mixed with some wiry gray. Her features were delicate, and he could not help thinking she must have been quite lovely when she was younger. He realized he needed to stop his reverie if he was to care for her well. He untied the leather armor she wore on the forearms. He placed the armor near the bowl of water, in thought he would clean it last. He cleaned the back of her strong hands, and her well-muscled forearms of blood and sweat. He

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then turned over her left hand, to clean further, when he jumped at a start with what he saw. There on her left inner forearm, even through the blood and grime, he saw a tattoo. He looked up to her face for a moment; to be sure she still slept. He then wiped away slowly at the dried blood. The marking showed a large capital letter B, surrounded by a shield, and lightning bolts came from above, striking the shield. His jaw dropped in awe, and he looked back to the woman's face respectfully, "I know not why you used sword alone against your attackers," he whispered softly, "But I will serve you as the accomplished one you are."

He went back to his work of cleaning the woman's hands and arms. When he picked up her right arm, he saw scarring near the woman's wrist. His eyes grew wide as he cleaned around it. He stared at the scar, a circle with a star inside of it. In the middle of the star, was carved in her flesh, the letter H. Zekial dropped her hand, and stood quickly. He glanced about the camp, and up into the single tree that stood in the clearing. He stepped away from his patient, his eyes scouring the camp. He saw a gleaming light coming from beneath the dried sticks piled near the fire pit. He took cautious steps toward it, glancing back at the woman often. He stood above the pile of sticks, then slowly crouched, and gingerly reached his hand toward the light. He felt a straight piece of wood, smooth and cool. He stood, clutching the wood, and the sticks fell down around it. In his hand, he held a staff, a small round orb attached to the top of it, glowing brightly. He felt the staff seem to pull his hand toward the woman. He held tightly, and did not allow himself to advance toward her with it. He slowly replaced the staff on the ground near the pile of kindling and wood. The light of the orb instantly faded, as he released it.

He looked back at the woman, lying helplessly on the ground. He took a step toward her, and then looked up toward the area of Graythorn's camp. He looked down at the woman once more, "You are puzzlement, Stranger," he breathed softly, "But I have placed myself in your service." He took a few steps away from her then picked up a torch he had placed near the fire. He set the torch to blaze; he raised it over his head, and waved it slowly back and forth while facing his brother's camp.

Zekial watched as Graythorn and several men strode toward the stranger's camp. He trotted out to meet them, before they came too close. Graythorn smiled broadly, "Is she ready to be moved? We have set a small camp for you in the safety of the woods."

"I need to talk to you a moment," Zekial whispered in a low tone. "Walk with me."

Graythorn stepped closer to the stranger's camp with his brother, "What is it?"

"On removing her armor," Zekial stopped walking, "I found mark upon her."

"What?" Graythorn took one more step, and then turned to his brother.

"On her left arm," Zekial looked down, away from Graythorn's gaze, "I found a Wizard's mark."

"Surely you jest," Graythorn grinned, and started to walk toward the stranger's camp once more.

Zekial quickly stepped in front of him to stop him, "There is more." He met his brother's eyes for a moment, and then looked down again.

"Tell me," Graythorn grew impatient.

"On her right arm, there is a Warlock's scar."

Graythorn looked at his brother angrily, "Surely you misread travel grime and battle scars."

"I wish it were so," Zekial shook his head. "She is trained in the crafts. I found a Wizard's staff hidden in her firewood."

"I will see this proof," Graythorn demanded.

Zekial led his brother to the woman. He turned her arms that his brother might see with his own eyes. He then pointed to the staff placed beside the wood. Graythorn's eyes widened, "What demons have set upon us now?" he exclaimed loudly. He shot his brother an accusing glare, "We must leave this place with all possible haste!"

Zekial held his brother's harsh gaze, "Leave if you must brother," he hissed. "I am one who spoke of assisting her, and I am one who begged her permit me to heal her. I alone will stay."

Graythorn took a step toward his brother, "I do not lay blame on you, brother. I made the decision, but I will leave no one behind with

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a Wizard with witch's training, or a witch with wizard's training, or whatever else she might be."

"I will not leave her to die!" Zekial shouted louder than he planned.

Graythorn looked over at his men they looked back with concern. He looked back once more at the woman who had so suddenly halted their quest. His mind raced with fury, fear, and turmoil. He stepped away from the woman's fire, "Come, Zekial," he moved away, "We must inform the men of what you have discovered."

"I will not leave her," Zekial stood firm.

"I am only asking you come with me to the men," Graythorn soothed, "We must all discuss this at once. Whatever she is, there may be others looking for her, or with her. She is not out here alone for no purpose."

They stepped over to the men waiting in the field, "It would appear lads," Graythorn heaved a sigh, "We have come to the aid of a witch."

"What?" Zakiah exclaimed.

Graythorn stared at Zekial, "Well, Brother," he snorted, "Will you tell them, or shall I?"

Zekial cleared his throat nervously, and then began, "I have seen a Warlock's scar on her right arm. It bears a letter in the center. She also bears a Wizard's mark on her left arm." He shuffled his feet nervously, "There is a Wizard's staff in her camp." He glanced around at the men, "I will have you all know, I asked her permit me to heal her, and I must stand by my oath. Should you decide to make distance between yourselves and her, I will remain."

The men were silent for a moment; taking in the information they had been given. Graythorn could not read their expressions, "I have told Zekial we should leave this place, and the woman. Should we break camp now, we might make it out of this valley before nightfall." The men stood in silence still. "It would seem," Graythorn continued, "My brother and I are of differing opinions on this matter. We would discuss this with all of you. I will ask no man to follow the

will of Zekial or myself. You must each give voice to your views on this matter.”

Zakiah, an avid admirer of the magical crafts, quickly joined his father, “I would stand with my father on this matter,” he spoke loudly. “If decision is made to leave the Wizard behind, I will remain here with our healer.”

Graythorn found no surprise in Zakiah’s reaction, “We must all decide together,” he warned, “If we will all stay, or we will all go.”

Canthor, a mountain of a man, quick to laugh and quicker to fight, stepped forward. His daunting size was backed with a deep, hearty voice and a brave demeanor. He stood beside Graythorn, “I would agree with Graythorn. We have a quest to finish, and we can not wait in dangerous territory to protect one who may be dangerous herself.”

“I find concern in this,” Danmeer, the group’s finest bowman spoke up, “If she is trained in the crafts, why did she only draw sword upon her attackers?” He stood still, not making indication he was ready to make a final decision. His dark hair flowed in the wind as he looked over to his only son.

Danbow, Danmeer’s son, nodded in agreement, “If she is truly wizard or witch, she had call to use her ability, yet did not.” He stood close to his father, a near spitting image of him, with long dark hair and deep brown eyes. The two were often mistaken for brothers when met by strangers, to Danmeer’s obvious delight, and to Danbow’s serious sorrow.

Zakiah, intrigued by the whole of it, and exuberant in his youth, saw this as opportunity, “Perhaps we should all see these markings for ourselves.”

Graythorn stared him down, “No one else will near her,” he stated firmly, “Until we have all come to agreement. Zekial and I both are witness to the markings on her flesh, and the staff in her camp. I will not risk her waking to a group the likes of us all staring at her.”

Rosfell, the village’s Ferrier was not so accustomed to voicing his opinion, and shifted nervously. “It seems to me,” he managed to speak softly, “We all would want more information about her, but she is not able to offer other than what is on her flesh.”

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Stymar, the eldest of the group, held his hand to his silver beard in deep thought. He looked at Graythorn, "We came to the aid of that woman," he stated loudly. "We risked hurt to ourselves and halt to our quest on her behalf. She is in our debt. It might do us good to have a wizard in our debt." He took a few steps toward Zekial, "Our healer has been permitted to aid her. She is in debt to him as well. If there is gratitude in her heart when she awakens, we could be well served by it. Should we leave her in a meadow to die, I feel her heart will be hardened toward us, should she awaken. We must consider what we do, quite carefully my friends."

"Stymar is right," Zakiah nearly grinned. "I would carry more concern leaving her, than staying here and at the very least, hearing what she has to say." He positioned himself between his father and Stymar, "We might all remember she surrendered to us. She gave Graythorn her sword. By all rights, she is a captive of ours, and we would be wrong headed to abandon her in her state."

Graythorn took discomfort from Zakiah's statement. He felt himself wishing he had not opened the subject to discussion. He saw the way things were headed, and felt a great worry from it. "We must come to a decision," he uttered soberly. "Be she wizard or witch, threat or prisoner, friend or enemy, we must all be agreed upon what we shall do. I say to you, my worry is others might be hunting for her or with her. Are we all prepared to make defense of her again?"

Danmeer stepped forward, "None of us know what will happen with a wizard in our midst. We have heard Stymar tell a thousand tales of wizards, but none of us has met one in the flesh. I should think if that woman were a wizard who meant us harm, we would already have befallen it. She offered us her sword, and accepted our healer's aid. She does owe us her gratitude, and when we came forward to her aid, we owed her to see it through. I say we stay, and face what may come."

Danbow nodded slowly and sighed, "Stymar has told stories of wizards for as long as I can remember." He looked over at the elder man and smiled, "In every tale, the wizard was a being of nobility and honor. I believe this woman wizard will show us honor for aiding her."

Canthor stood close to Graythorn, and saw the tenseness in the man he would call his leader. He stood firmly beside him, “We might also remember she wears a Warlock’s Scar. A letter in the middle would indicate, from Stymar’s tellings, she is a member of a council. There is more to her than wizard. We all saw how deadly she is with sword in her hand. She may have the nobility of a wizard, or the treacherous ways of a witch, but we know with certainty she can land the sure and deadly blows of a warrior. I would not trust a mark on her skin over that I have witnessed.”

Graythorn was glad to have someone voice an opinion of what sounded like reason to him. He did become a bit concerned that only he and Canthor seemed to view it the same. He eyed Rosfell cautiously, “What say you, Rosfell?”

“She may be only the first we see of witches and wizards on this journey,” Rosfell spoke clearly. “If she be part of a council, I would find great discomfort in meeting another of it, if we left her here to die. We have met many strange folk in these lands, and it seems any decision we make could bring disaster as easily as it could bring reward. We took risk to ourselves to aid her this morning, now we fear risk from the one we aided. It seems to me, the risk has already been taken on by us, and I say we see it through.”

“Rosfell speaks wisely,” Stymar nodded. He gave a harsh look to Graythorn, “This morning you had us take up arms to protect this woman, without discussion. After the battle, you permitted our healer to aid her with her wound. You accepted her sword in surrender to us. In all these actions, Graythorn, you took responsibility for her. She may not have needed our assistance this morning, but in all honesty, our aid was what led to her injury. You would gladly accept responsibility for our safety, but you would leave her to die when you have accepted her sword? You must know in your heart, this decision was made long before you asked any of us.”

Canthor thought a moment, and then took a step back from Graythorn. He conceded what Stymar posed. Graythorn looked around at the men, and saw their accusing stares. He looked over at Zekial, “It is decided then,” he huffed. “We will move her to the camp we prepared in the woods; I will not have my brother sleep on

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open ground in this place.” He looked back to the men, “We will post guard in both camps.” He noticed Zekial about to speak, “I will hear no further discussion. Before we prepare to move her, she should be bound and gagged, as the prisoner she has allowed herself to become.”

Graythorn turned and stormed off in the direction of the injured woman. The men stood still for a moment, glancing back and forth at one another. Graythorn strode over to the woman alone, and knelt beside her. He studied the peaceful look on her sleeping face. He noticed the slight curl in her long blonde hair. He looked at her hands, rough and calloused like a warrior’s, in sharp contrast to her soft hair and quiet repose. He felt a stirring within himself as he noticed the loveliness of her face. “I do not know what you are,” he whispered softly, “But I do see the nobility Styamar and the rest would think I do not. Just know this, if you hear me, whatever responsibility I have to you, I have a thousand-fold more to them.” He heard the men moving toward them, and tore his stare away from her.

Zekial kept vigil over the woman in all earnestness. He took great pains to be certain she was warm and comfortable. He enjoyed the visits Zakiah and Tanbo made to his fire. He knew they were more interested in getting a closer look at the wizard, than learning a thing or two about their father’s healing craft, but he was happy to have them near in any case. He was offended by his brother’s decision to put the woman under guard, and to bind and gag her for fear she may wake and try to place a spell upon him, but he heard the firmness in his brother’s voice when the decision was made.

He noticed Canthor, first to stand guard, fidgeting uncomfortably. He smiled at his big friend, “I have placed an herb under her tongue, which will make her sleep for many hours. If you find yourself needing a moment to take to the bushes, I assure you I will be safe.”

Canthor blushed at realizing Zekial understood his urgent need, “Graythorn wants her guarded.”

“I should think I can serve as her guard, Canthor,” Zekial stood up from his place beside the woman. “Even if she should wake, the gag in her mouth and bonds on her wrists will certainly keep her from making spell or harming me in any way.” He motioned to the woods, “Go and do what you need, then before you come back, take a meal at the main camp, so I may go and take mine when you return.”

Canthor thought a moment, “Perhaps we should ask Graythorn first.”

“My brother would not see you in discomfort, friend,” he smiled broadly. “Whatever Rosfell is cooking at the other camp smells quite good. We need our chance to reach their fire to get our shares. I have finished my tendings to her, and I assure you, I can take up the guard of her.”

Canthor took a whiff of the evening air. He smelled the meal cooking in the other camp. His mouth watered, and then his other need suddenly became more pressing. He nodded to Zekial, and hastily retreated into the woods.

Zekial knelt back down to the woman after he left. He gently lifted her head, and removed the gag from about her mouth. She took a gasp from freedom of it. He watched her cautiously, and noticed her face had become flushed. He put the back of his hand to her cheek and felt warmth from possible fever. He reached for a goatskin canteen and poured some water onto a cloth. He wiped her face gently, and then folded the cloth over to place on her forehead. The concerns of his brother and Canthor would not sway his treatment of the woman.

Graythorn was beside himself with anger when he saw Canthor return to the camp. As he saw the large man fill his plate with Rosfell’s stew, he could not bring himself to chastise the obviously hungry man. He strode off toward his brother’s camp. It was customary to ask permission before entering a healer’s camp, so as not to disturb the healer at work, but Graythorn, feeling the challenge of his leadership, stormed into the camp unannounced. He found Zekial sitting quietly beside the woman, herbs in his outstretched hand being slowly spread over the woman’s body. He felt a twinge of embarrassment at having come into the healer’s camp in such fashion.

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He stood for a moment, waiting for Zekial to acknowledge him. He grew impatient as he watched his brother leave all attention on the woman. He stared down at her, and noticed her face was free of the gag, and her hands free of the bonds. He could hold his tongue no longer, "What are you doing?" he exclaimed loudly. "Have you gone mad? Why is she not bound and gagged?"

"She is taken with fever," Zekial did not look up, "I missed early sign of it for her bondage. I must be able to assess all of her to care for her properly."

"Zekial," Graythorn had trouble controlling his anger, "You would put us all at risk for this woman! Do you not find yourself able to assess the danger?"

"Graythorn," Zekial breathed, "I offered to stay with her alone, and you decided to give everyone chance to voice opinion. Well, my voice will be heard now. I will care for this woman as I see fit. When she is fit, you may deal with her as prisoner as you see fit."

The woman let out soft moan in her discomfort. She shifted her body and seemed to startle with the pain of it. She took several sharp gasps then seemed to settle back into sleep. Graythorn stared at her, and took pity on her situation. He found himself flooded with concern for her. "Zekial," he whispered softly as he knelt at the woman's feet, "Have we suffered all this turmoil, just to watch her die?"

"It is a fever," Zekial tried to sound matter of fact, "It is often normal occurrence after such a wound. I would not begin digging her grave as yet."

"I have never meant her harm," Graythorn confessed. He looked away from her, and into his brother's ever-caring eyes. "This land has proved so strange to us. All the people we have come across have been so harsh. I see this woman, alone in the midst of it, and I am confused by it. Even to look upon her," he allowed his gaze to fall back to her, "To see the softness of her face, and the strength in her hands, gives me pause. I fear for the safety of the men. We have traveled to a place that is beyond our understanding." His eyes looked down to the woman's wrists, "Rosfell is right you know, any decision we make here could as easily lead to tragedy as reward, and we would not know it until it befell us."

“I know not why she would travel alone,” Zekial admitted. “Why she would use a sword when there is magical craft at her dispense puzzles me as well, but all I know in this moment, is she is in need of our assistance. If she did not need us in that battle, she surely needs us now. She made herself prisoner to us out of necessity. You saw her try to sear her wound closed herself. If she had been able to reach it, she would not have needed us. Many things happened this morning to make risk to her life and she saw them all through. I take admiration in her for it.” He gently held his brother’s arm, “I know you took admiration from it too. She gives me hope we may survive this quest.”

“If we need to learn the resilience she shows to survive this place,” Graythorn placed his hand on hers, “Then we would all do well to take inspiration from her.” He grasped her hand in his, “My brother will see you well, Stranger.”

When Graythorn returned to his camp, he was glad to hear Styamar in midst of storytelling. He sat down quietly, so as not to disrupt anyone’s hearing of the tale. Of course, the tale was about a mighty wizard, in fact the mightiest of wizard’s, the great Bayanbar. Graythorn looked around at his men, and the camp boys, all equal in their avid hearing of the tale Styamar told. He was glad they all seemed so relaxed. Perhaps all would be well after all, he thought. Perhaps through all of this, he had over reacted. Though he tried to listen to what was left of the tale, his mind drifted to the stranger, now in great distress due to her fever. He could not help but feel responsible for it. He remembered how the stranger stared into his eyes, and was suddenly caught by one of her attackers by the vicious blow.

Styamar could tell a tale like no other. He chose his words with great caution. He was given to the most dramatic of pauses. He spoke in a deep voice, with such clarity in it; he brought the story to life in his listener’s minds. Though Graythorn barely heard the words Styamar spoke while in his reverie, he found comfort in the sound of the man’s steady voice. Styamar’s words seemed to drift up from the fire, and surround the land.

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“Bayanbar’s staff gleamed in the moonlit night. He would not see ruin come to the king he so cherished in their long friendship. He knew this enemy was too large for the King’s forces, and made all plan to end the battle in haste.”

In the stillness of the night, Zekial could almost make out the words of Stymar’s tale. He might have listened were it not for his deep concern for the stranger. The fever had put her into a near fit of shivering. He quickly added wood to the fire for better light, and warmth.

“Bayanbar jumped upon a large rock, and stood above the field of battle,” Stymar’s story continued. “He looked out at the size of the enemy, and made judgment of the strength he would need.”

Zekial dashed around the fire, and picked up his bedroll. He would not need it for sleep tonight, so he felt he should place it over the woman to help with her comfort. Her sleep was torturous for the fever. She twisted and moaned, her strong body writhing.

“Bayanbar outstretched his long arms,” Stymar motioned the same, “His sword in one hand, and his staff in the other. His motion caused his tunic to spread open as well. And there, just below his neck, was exposed his Council Membership Brand!”

Zekial spread his blanket over the stranger’s fitful body. As he pulled it up over her chest, she shifted her position suddenly. He pulled back the blanket to reposition it, when he noticed her blouse stretch apart from its gathering tie below her neck. He gasped at what he saw on her skin beneath. A brand was displayed. It depicted lightning bolts flashing down into a great triangular fire.

“His brand showed lightning bolts flashing down into a great triangular fire,” Stymar nearly shouted with excitement from his own tale. “Those closest to him, had only the merest instant to reflect upon their lives, before the wave of his spell sent them into darkness and oblivion! The brand glowed with the light of his superbly honed craft against his skin!”

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Zekial, mouth agape stared at the brand, glowing in the moonlight. Its fiery depiction burned brightly against the woman's pale and fevered skin. He feared touch her further, and crawled backwards away from her, in great haste. The glow of the brand outshone the roaring fire. The moon shone what seemed suddenly brighter. A gust of wind roared through Zekial's tiny camp. His eyes widened as his fire grew, and the glow of the brand and the glow of the fire and the glowing moonlight melded together. The stranger's body was awash in the bright light, and Zekial was certain she was being lifted off the ground, for he saw light under her body as well. The woman took mighty gasps of air. Zekial shaded his eyes from the brightness of the light, but could not avert his gaze from the magic he would witness. The woman's rigid body shook violently in the blinding light, and then went suddenly limp. The light faded in a heartbeat, and she lie motionless beside the quieted fire. A calm cool wind washed through the camp, and brought the night softly back into its stillness. Zekial, nearly paralyzed from his fear, slowly forced himself to crawl back to her side. The flush and glow of sweat was gone from her skin. She lay quietly in the peace of the night, her brow no longer furrowed with the suffering of her discomfort. He watched by the fire, as her chest moved slowly up and down, regular breathing restored. He stared at the brand below her neck. The glowing was still slightly visible, and seemed to pulse a bit brighter with her heartbeat. Zekial felt a weakness overcome him, for the magic he had just witnessed.

Suddenly Zakiah dashed into the camp, "Father," he exclaimed, "I saw a bright light in your camp!"

"All is well," Zekial's voice nearly cracked. "I needed more light from the fire for a moment, to better tend to her fever." He pulled his bedroll up over the woman's brand. "I do believe her fever has broke, and she will rest quietly now." He struggled to keep his voice calm.

"You must be tired, Father," Zakiah seemed to sense his father's needs. "I can stay with her if you would go take a meal at Graythorn's fire. Styamar is in rare storytelling mood tonight his words come to life in our minds."

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Zekial felt himself become very sleepy, "I am not hungry," he sighed, "But I would be grateful to take some rest."

Zakiah nodded, and took a place by the fire near the woman. Zekial felt weariness as he stretched out on the ground close to the stranger. He put his arm under his head, and nearly as quickly as he could shut his eyes, he was asleep.

CHAPTER 3: AM I A PRISONER?

The morning found a crisp chill in the air. The men in Graythorn's camp, slept soundly through the dawn. Truly, all slept quite well for the first time since they had headed out on their quest. As each began to be let loose from slumber's hold, he felt refreshed and renewed. As Graythorn woke, he felt a strength he had not known within himself, for a very long time. He stretched as he stood, and looked out at the rising sun with great comfort in his mind and body. He suddenly thought of the stranger, and it became imperative to him he learn how she had fared the night.

Graythorn quietly made his way through his camp, so as not to disturb his still dozing men. He walked silently along the path that had been worn down between his camp and his brother's. The morning sun's light shown better through the trees, and his brother's camp looked warm and comforting from it. He saw Zakiah, sleeping by the fire, and Zekial sitting by the stranger, sipping tea.

"She is still with us," Graythorn sounded relieved as he fell to one knee beside his brother.

"Yes," Zekial nodded, "Her fever broke at the moon's fullest light."

"It would seem we will lose another day of travel to her mending," Graythorn stated flatly. "Perhaps it would be a good time for a hunt."

Zekial looked at his brother, unable to hide his surprise. Was it only yesterday Graythorn had spoke of leaving the woman to die, so he and his men could make hasty exit from the valley? Now he spoke of a hunt? Zekial had woken that morning with thought that all that had happened the previous day was merely a dream. As he heard his brother's words, he silently wondered if he and the others were somehow put under a spell. He thought of telling his brother about the brand he witnessed on the stranger. The brand that indicated she was a member of the council of her order of wizards. The brand, which had summoned the strength of her fellow members to aid her in her desperate fever the night before, to his terrified witness. Had it all

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truly been a dream? He looked to his brother, prepared to offer what he had seen, but as his words came out he could not speak of it, “Would you have some tea with me?” He motioned to the pot, still slightly bubbling on a flat stone in the embers of his fire.

Zakiah slept long into the morning. The stranger had ceased to move for many hours. Zekial pondered whether to give his brother the latest information about the woman he had noticed. Graythorn deserved to know she was of a wizard’s council, but Zekial was certain now, his brother would allow all the time needed to tend to the woman. Should he inform his brother of his latest discovery, it might sway his mood. He lifted her blouse slightly, to look at the brand once more. He knew he sat by more than just mere wizard. He sat by a being of considerable power, for having the will of a council in her craft. He recovered the brand.

Zekial decided he would go to his brother, and tell him what he knew. He stood up, gave one last glance to his son and the stranger; both sleeping soundly, and headed off toward Graythorn’s camp.

The stranger stirred slowly. She was given memory before she would wake fully. In her mind, she saw the events of the previous day. She remembered watching the two camps of men, from her fire. She remembered sending birds to fly close to their camps, so she could see through the animal’s eyes. She remembered seeing a young man crouched behind a large rock on the ledge above her. She remembered the rough looking man crouched in the trees to her right. She remembered the men preparing to ambush her camp. She remembered her brief battle. She saw the other men from the ledge running toward her position, but this time she saw them from overhead, from a bird’s eye view. She saw them run toward the men who were attacking her. She saw a young man drop one of her would be attackers with his bow, before the man could reach her. She remembered the tall man telling her his men meant her no harm. She remembered the man reaching up for her wrist, and trying to run her through, and she remembered the young man from behind the rock let

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loose an arrow into the man. She remembered the healer, asking her to permit him to aid her. She remembered the searing pain as she tried to cauterize her own wound. She remembered the tall man asking her to let his healer aid her.

Her eyes opened quite suddenly as she remembered handing over her sword to the healer. The rest was a haze of motion and sound. She remembered hearing the healer barking orders to others of the men to help him with what he needed. She remembered being carried to a place by her fire. She remembered the healer's constant assurances to her that all would be well. Then darkness had overcome her

She scanned her surroundings. She was in a new camp. There were many trees overhead. She rose to her elbows to have a better look around. She saw the fire pit, her satchel of belongings near her feet, and the young man from behind the rock was sleeping by the fire. She sat up, and pushed the blankets down. As she did so, she noticed her armguards had been removed. She startled at the jolt of it. She ran her hands over the wizard's mark and warlock's scar. It could be a problem if these men knew the truth of her. She heard footsteps approaching.

Zekial had found his brother missing from his camp. He had gone with Danmeer and his son on the hunt he had spoke of earlier. After taking a small breakfast, Zekial decided to return to his camp while waiting for his brother's return. He thought it best he tell Graythorn what he knew first. As he stepped back into his camp, he nearly jumped to see the stranger sitting up on a log near the fire.

"Good morning," he managed after a long moment of staring. "You should be resting."

"I assure you I feel well enough to sit," the stranger stated with authority. "I am in your debt, Healer," she lowered her head in a slight bow to him. She glanced at her satchel warily, "I carry some gold with me. I assure you I can pay you for your service."

Zekial came forward into the camp, "There is no need to discuss such a matter now," he tried to smile. "It is most important that you are feeling so much better." He stepped over close to where she sat, "I

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am Zekial of Gubbal Village in the Princefort Territory, healer to the men on this journey.”

The stranger stood to face him. Zekial was shocked at how quickly and easily she stood. She bowed her head once more, “I am glad to meet you, Zekial,” she said with stiff formality, “I am Emeda.”

Zekial was slightly uncomfortable with her formal tone, and with the fact she simply stated her name, and gave no more information. “I am glad to see you up,” he stated firmly, “I would like to change that poultice if you will permit me.”

Emeda eyed him for a moment; she was puzzled at his reaction. Most, upon hearing her name, acted much differently. She stiffened with some nervousness, and then relented, “It does feel a bit dry, Healer.”

“I must apologize for that,” Zekial nodded. “You fell into fever last night, and I had not time to change it. When the fever broke, and you fell into a still sleep, I had not the heart to move you for risk of waking you.” He knelt down to retrieve his healer’s bag. “If you could sit down on the log once more, I will tend to you right away.”

Emeda sat and eyed the healer as he walked around behind her. He knelt on the ground behind the log. He took a deep breath, and reached out his hands to pull away her blouse. He saw his hands shaking as they neared her, and tried desperately to gain his composure. He had been a healer for many years, but he had never tended to a woman who was a stranger to him, and he had never tended a wizard or witch. He took another deep breath and forced his hands to steady. Emeda, sensing his unease, reached around with her left hand and pulled down the already torn and bloody garment.

“This blouse is a mere rag now, healer,” she sighed. “Tear it more if you need.”

In the bright light of early morning, Zekial saw the musculature of the woman. He could see how she could swing a sword with such ease and command. Her frame was large for a woman, but her flowing clothing with its delicate embroidered detail, did much to hide what brute strength lay underneath. Her skin was pale, but held a

glow within it, and he was shocked to see scars on her back from what seemed must have been terrible wounds.

Zekial gingerly removed the bandage and could not help letting out a slight gasp at what he saw underneath it. The wound was very dry and the skin was set firmly around the stitches. If he had not known he had stitched it only the day before, he would swear it was time the stitches be removed. There was no sign of any need for further tending. He put his hand near it, and felt no warmth. He leaned forward to gain any smell, but there was only the aroma of the herbs he had used for the poultice. Emeda sat still as stone, waiting for remark from him, but none came.

He stood with the old poultice in his hand, it too was dry, and there was very little stain of blood. He stepped over to the fire, and threw the bandage in the heart of the flames. "I would let that air a moment," Zekial pointed to her shoulder, "Whilst I prepare a fresh poultice and bandage." Emeda sat silently, but nodded slightly.

Zekial pulled the items necessary for a new poultice from his bag, "I am compelled to ask you," it seemed easier for him to speak while his hands were busy, "About the last morning."

"Yes, Healer?" Emeda stared at the top of his head as he bent over his work.

"As I tended to you yesterday," Zekial began nervously, "I found need to remove your armguards. I could not help but notice the wizard's mark, and warlock's scar." He looked up for a moment, and found himself feel weak from the stare of her eyes. He looked back down to his work, and steadied himself, "I find it curious you are trained in the crafts, yet you used only your sword against your attackers."

Emeda found slight amusement with the uneasiness of Zekial. This man truly did not know who she was. He must never have left his southern territory she thought. She eyed him coolly, "I assure you, healer," she breathed, "Had you and your brethren arrived an instant later, you would have witnessed the fullness of my ability." Indeed Emeda had thought both camps of men had planned to attack her, and she had planned to use a spell to wipe them all out at once.

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“You were in such grave danger,” Zekial pressed. “Your ability with sword was masterful, but it would seem using the crafts would have been prudent.”

Emeda felt no more amusement the statement insulted her. She found it hard to believe this man might challenge her ability thus. “Healer,” she said through gritted teeth, “A fire spell is best utilized when the entire enemy is close.” She glared at the fire for a mere instant, and a huge ball of flame set loose from it, and singed leaves on the trees above it.

Zakiah woke with a start. He looked around to survey the situation. He saw his father and the stranger on the other side of the fire. Wilted, singed, and still burning leaves were floating down into the fire. “What was that?”

“Zakiah,” Zekial stood, “I am glad you rested well. I would ask you to leave us and return to Graythorn’s camp.”

Zakiah stared at his father for a moment, and then looked at the woman. She seemed quite healthy. He suddenly felt a deep concern for his father’s safety. He failed to move, and Zekial felt the need to urge his son to go. “I have work to do here, Son,” he breathed. “When I am finished, you will be welcome to return.”

Zakiah continued to stare at the woman. She noticed his gaze, and tugged at her torn blouse to cover her exposed shoulder. Zakiah blushed, quickly stood, and rushed out of the camp without another word.

“He is very interested in the magical crafts,” Zekial turned back to Emeda, “I must apologize for his reaction to you. None of us have ever seen a wizard before.”

“He is your son?”

“Yes,” Zekial could not help but to smile, “He is my eldest.”

“If you wanted him to stay,” Emeda’s tone was soft, “To learn of your craft, I would have allowed it.”

“No,” Zekial smiled, “He is not interested in my skills. Had he stayed he would have asked you a tireless amount of questions about yours.” He bent over to pick up the poultice he had prepared. “I would put this on your wound,” he patted the paste of herbs he had placed on a soft cloth, “But I am not certain it needs it.”

“It is already prepared,” Emeda pulled her blouse back down, “And I could do with the soothing of it.”

“My son would gain apprenticeship with a wizard one day,” Zekial tried to sound matter of fact, “I would be proud to help him in any way I could.”

“Careful where your words tread, healer,” Emeda warned him. “Any man, who would seek apprenticeship from a wizard, need apply on his own, lest the wizard would find fault with his devotion.”

Zekial knelt behind the woman and gently placed the poultice on the area of her wound, “Would it be proper for another to seek counsel on his behalf?”

“Counsel is another matter,” Emeda agreed. She made a few adjustments to the bandage Zekial had clumsily placed over the poultice. “While I have enjoyed exchanging pleasantries with you, Healer,” she sighed, “I would care to know when I will meet with your leader.”

Zekial admired her direct manner, but was made a bit tense by it. “I was in his camp just before I returned here to find you awake,” he stood and moved away from her nervously. “He is away on a hunt now, but I will speak to him on your behalf when he returns.”

“Am I correct to assume,” Emeda stood and checked the tightness of her bandage with movement, “He has been made aware of what I am?”

“Yes,” Zekial expected the question, but was not sure how much information to give in return.

“Healer,” Emeda tried to look into his downcast eyes, “I am a stranger to you, and all those in your camp. I would ask you a question, and decision to answer is yours. I would know if I will find welcome in your camp when you deem me healed.”

Zekial looked into her eyes, “I can not say with true certainty. My brother and the other men have questions about you. I am only certain they would want to talk with you and amongst themselves before a decision would be made.”

“Your leader would take the others’ opinion into account?” Emeda seemed surprised.

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“My brother, Graythorn, is our leader,” Zekial nodded, “But he often consults with the rest of the men before he makes decision.”

Emeda was intrigued to meet a man such as Graythorn. “I understand,” she nodded. “I would care to change my blouse before I would meet him,” she motioned to the tears and stains.

“Of course,” Zekial stepped further away from her. “I must ask before I leave you with privacy, is there anything else you need?”

“I would only ask if I may partake in some of your water,” Emeda motioned to the goatskin flask.

“Of course,” Zekial felt foolish for not having offered her water or food. “I could get you something to eat as well.”

“My stomach sets uneasy just now,” Emeda rubbed it gently, “I would be grateful for just some water.”

“Take and use all you need,” Zekial gestured to the flask. “I will return after checking on my brother’s whereabouts. Please take some rest.”

Zekial made a slight bow to her, and then rushed out of the camp. He felt uneasy about leaving her alone, but she did seem to be doing quite well considering her injury from the day before. He assumed the healing he had witnessed the night before had not just been in address of her fever, apparently it had sent great healing to her wound too. As he neared his brother’s camp, he noticed Zakiah watching for him, obviously eager to hear all he could learn about the wizard. Zekial now only had to decide how much he would tell his son.

Emeda quickly changed her blouse, and checked on the rest of her belongings. She saw that everything was still in place in her satchel. She took out a small pouch, and pulled some gold coins out of it. She placed several on Zekial’s bag. She drew a long swig of water from the goatskin, and then filled her own much smaller flask from it. She rolled up Zekial’s blanket, and placed it near his bag, then rolled her own and strapped it to her satchel. She looked around the camp carefully, but there was no sign of her sword or her staff.

Her hurried pace found her a little dizzy, and she sat down on the log to gather her stamina once more.

She heard loud voices coming from the camp down the path. She looked around in the trees and noticed a bird sitting on a branch, quietly grooming its feathers. “Little One,” Emeda said softly, “I would use your eyes and ears for a few moments.”

The bird suddenly looked up from its preening. It made a tiny chirp, then dropped off the branch, and easily flitted through the trees. The bird found a branch on a bush near the edge of Graythorn’s camp. It sat quietly, watching the scene.

Graythorn and the others had returned, and were empty-handed but in seemingly high spirits. “We saw sign of deer, goat, and wild boar,” Graythorn laughed, “But we were only close enough to step in it!”

“We need go back out at dusk,” Danmeer smiled, “It might give Tanbo enough time to clean off his shoes!”

The men all erupted in laughter as they watched Tanbo look up from untying the leather from his shoes. Graythorn’s smile faded when he noticed Zekial in the camp. “What are you doing here? Who is watching the stranger?”

“I have come here on her behalf,” Zekial knew the moment had changed to seriousness. “She would ask meeting with our leader.”

“She is awake?” Graythorn seemed to have mixed feelings about it. His tone was both glad and surprised.

“Yes,” Zekial nodded. “She would know if she will be welcome in our camp, after she is healed.”

“First should be first,” Graythorn’s brow furrowed, “You have obviously spoken with her. She is well enough to converse?”

“She is doing quite well,” Zekial conceded, hoping his brother did not ask more on the subject.

“I would speak with her then,” Graythorn stated loudly.

“Graythorn you should know,” Zekial wanted to buy a little more time, “I put into question her ability, and she made demonstration.” Graythorn gave him a quizzical look, so he continued. “We all wanted to know why she used sword alone against her attackers yesterday. She stated she was prepared to use spell when

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we intervened. In the confusion, she dare not use spell and risk hurt to us. I do feel I insulted her for prying too far, she made a blast of fire to prove her ability.”

Graythorn drew a deep breath before replying, “Had you angered her deeply, Zekial, I think she would not ask welcome in our camp. I will talk with her.”

“Graythorn,” Zekial shook his head, “She did not ask for a welcome, she asked if she would be welcome.”

“And what did you tell her,” Graythorn’s brow furrowed again.

“I told her decision would be made after your return, and after you speak with her.”

Graythorn nodded in agreement, “You should let her know we have returned, and I will meet with her shortly.” He set down his bow, and took the quiver of arrows from his shoulder, “But, brother, do try to refrain from telling her anything else.”

Zekial nodded and headed off to his camp. Graythorn glanced around at the men. “If any man has opinion on what should be done here, I would hear it before I go and meet with this woman.”

“We must be wary,” Canthor spoke up, “She has demonstrated her ability.”

“We should know if she desires to remain with us after she is healed,” Danmeer chimed in softly.

“We have not found reason to trust anyone in this northern territory,” Danbow voiced his caution. “But while our quest is on halt during her recovery, we should learn what we can from her about this territory and its people.”

“Anyone else,” Graythorn eyed Stymar and Rosfell.

“We have risked much on the behalf of this lady wizard,” Stymar sighed. “Our best hope of not offending her further is to offer her welcome. We risked ourselves to aid her; it would be foolish to treat her like an enemy now that we know the truth of her. When we went to her aid, we felt she was merely a stranger about to face insurmountable odds, now that we know she is a wizard, what difference should that make to us?”

Graythorn took heed in Stymar’s wise words. He felt prepared to go and meet the stranger. He looked to Rosfell, who simply nodded in

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agreement with Stymar. "I will meet with her at once." He headed off toward Zekial's camp.

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