

Chapter Seven

Detours

Elyana dearly wanted to remain at rest in the feather bed, but she forced herself into motion as she heard a rooster crow. Every day, every hour, was counting against Stelan. She wasn't entirely convinced that the cleric and his acolytes had the skill and stamina to keep Stelan going, and there was the added wrinkle that broth and water would have to be spooned carefully into his mouth to keep up his energy. He would be growing slowly weaker.

At dawn, the others found her already awake with Vallyn and helping to supervise the packing of supplies. The bard explained that he didn't want to subject them to any more of Elyana's cooking, so he was bringing plenty of food he himself could prepare.

A half-hour after breakfast they were on the road. Vallyn guided them northeast, where, he assured them, they'd be less likely to meet with a patrol than they were on a straight east jaunt, where lazier smugglers and refugees were apt to cross.

Kellius had a violet petunia in his cap, and reported that he had rarely seen one of such a bright color. Vallyn then set to asking the mage questions about flowers and

gardens, and the young wizard expounded upon them for almost an hour, demonstrating more expertise than Elyana had expected. Drelm, of course, remained quiet. If anything, though, Renar looked more suspicious than the half-orc, and Elyana could get nothing out of him. Finally, Vallyn announced to them all that they'd crossed over from the plains of Taldor to Galt.

"How do you know?" the young man asked.

"See that mountain to the north?"

Renar followed the bard's pointing finger to a snow-topped peak thrusting toward the clouds.

"I mark it."

"That's Mount Rein. Our angle's passed far enough that we're over now, you can be sure. Not that a Galtan patrol wouldn't chase you past the border if they didn't like your look, mind you. Or send something worse after—eh, Elyana?"

"True."

"Why are the Galtans so . . . mad?" Renar asked.

Vallyn answered before Elyana. "They're not mad, boy. They're angry."

"Well, they seem mad. First they kill their rightful rulers. Then they rise up every few years and guillotine whoever they put in place the last time."

"They're impatient, is what they are," Vallyn said. "They won't give anyone a chance to set the place in order. The old ones, the nobles, a lot of them had it coming. In my opinion," Vallyn added.

This was news to Elyana, and the bard must have sensed her surprise, for he hurried to explain.

"The Galtans went way too far," Vallyn said. "I'm not excusing what they did. I'm just saying that their government wasn't exactly looking out for anyone's interests but its own."

"It's not a good place," Elyana said to Renar. "There are spies everywhere. We must tread lightly even in the wilderness."

Renar fell silent for only a moment. "What are we really going to do about Arcil?"

If this was what had truly been troubling him, he would find no comfort from Elyana now. This was neither the time nor the place for that particular discussion. "Nothing I'd discuss without wards against scrying in place," Elyana replied.

"He didn't used to know that kind of thing," Vallyn said.

"He didn't used to be able to crush a man with shadows, either. From a distance."

Vallyn whistled. He rode in silence for a long moment, then said: "I always told you he was going to go bad."

So he had. And still Elyana sometimes wondered if there was something she might have said or done differently to help Arcil find the right direction. She didn't mean to mislead Vallyn or Renar, but she had no intention of admitting to them—or to Arcil, should he be listening—that she had no idea how to stop her old friend. She was still hoping she'd find something within the tower to aid her.

That night they set up camp in the Galtan wilderness and lit no fire, subsisting only on cold rations. Elyana arranged to take the middle watch, and lay down to rest. Sleep came quickly to her.

"Elyana."

She opened her eyes to find Kellius looking down at her. While his expression was calm, the wizard's face was strained. The stars shone in a clear sky. It was deep into the night.

Kellius pretended calm. “There’s something out there. Something large. I saw it flying—”

“Wake Drelm first. Hurry.”

“It’s circled twice,” Kellius said as he moved off.

Large and winged. Elyana ran over the possibilities as she slipped feet into boots and buckled into her leather cuirass. She climbed up to search the sky.

Dragons, wyverns, and giant birds could all be found near the Five Kings mountain range. Galt’s constant chaos meant patrols and huntsman were not as plentiful as they once had been, and all manner of wild beasts had multiplied in the wilderness.

And there was always the chance that Arcil had sent something against them, calling it down from the peaks or even the Plane of Shadow.

She saw that the land was dark but for a distant light from the Galtan city of Woodsedge, miles to the south. Their camp sat under a scrubby stand of trees, which might explain why whatever it was had not dropped straight in.

The black wall of the Five Kings loomed on the western horizon. Elyana glanced briefly toward it, then looked skyward once more. It was then that she saw the draconic shape blotting out a swath of stars.

The reptile was long and large, with a serpentine neck thrust low. It glided on huge, batlike wings, its tail hanging stiff. Elyana saw that it had no arms and knew then that it was no true dragon, but a wyvern. She’d faced one once before, a creature half this size, and that had been no easy day. Its poisoned sting had put two men in the ground. Wyverns were powerful, relentless, and hungry.

This one swung toward her and lowered its wings for a dive.

“Wyvern!” she screamed in warning, then launched two arrows. Even as the first was still arcing into the air she was running forward. She threw herself into the tall grass and landed with a *whuff* that knocked the air out of her.

The first arrow slammed home just left of the wyvern’s breastbone, provoking a growl that was cut off as the second caught it high along its wing. Its hooked claws grabbed at the dashing humanoid, but Elyana was too swift.

The wyvern landed with an earth-shaking thump. Its snaky neck swung left and right as it considered its targets, its roar a piercing shriek so loud that Elyana felt a sympathetic vibration deep in her chest. She heard Renar call out to her in worry, but stayed low as the wyvern searched the air with its long snout, snuffling.

Drelm praised one gift from his cursed heritage, and that was the ability to see not only in dim light, but in the deepest black. The humans might see the wyvern as a dark, threatening shape with a long neck, but he saw the glint of its eyes, the muscles along its chest as it thundered toward him. He heaved his throwing axe and ran to meet the beast. But the wyvern had hunched as it built speed for a charge, and the weapon soared over its shoulder.

The winged lizard lowered its head, its mouth widening in a display of daggerlike fangs. Drelm knew a burning thrill of action in his veins, a searing strength that left little room for anything but rage and power. He met the wyvern’s strike with a sideways slash of his greataxe. The blow ripped into the side of the monster’s head, tearing through scales in a spray of blood. The wyvern’s teeth clamped down, narrowly missing Drelm’s chest.

Drelm dodged left, his hands barely retaining hold of the axe as he leapt away. There was a blanket of darkness as the wing fell over him, and then the beast's tail lashed down. He caught sight of the long, long spike and rolled, but the thing slammed into his arm, penetrating armor, flesh, and bone. He roared not at the pain, but in anger, and climbed to his feet.

The wyvern somehow managed a swift stop. It spun, horned head twisting toward him. Drelm readied his axe, wondering why his right hand shook so.

A lightning blast underlit the beast's scaly maw, casting its brow ridge in shadow. The thing convulsed, then threw back its head in a deep-throated roar.

So close was the wyvern's head to Drelm when the wizard's lightning struck that he saw the beast's pupils shrink. Drelm raised his axe, snarling, then realized he was strangely dizzy. Dimly, he perceived that Renar was running into the fray. He heard the pluck of a lute, of all things, and Vallyn shouting for Renar to get back. Drelm agreed, and tried to tell the boy to stay clear, but couldn't quite find the strength.

Then a screen of shifting motes of light fell between him and the wyvern. Drelm did not understand where it had come from, but it was very beautiful, and he wanted to do nothing more than study the slowly changing colors, except that he was already feeling rather sleepy. He sat down, conscious that his arm ached and that he wasn't thinking clearly. For whatever reason, it all seemed unimportant.

Renar was two-thirds of the way to the monstrous, roaring beast when Vallyn told him to get back. But Renar wasn't about to retreat and be accused of cowardice. It didn't matter that he could practically

feel his heart in his mouth, or that his pulse beat in his temples like a drum. He pledged to himself that he would not hang back while his friends struggled. His father would not have done so.

When the lovely rainbow screen dropped all about the wyvern, the creature's head swiveled his direction and Renar halted, thinking the thing had seen him. Then he noticed its eyes tracking after an especially pretty shimmer of blue drifting to the right. Renar had seen sorcery before, but never anything like this. Kellius had talent.

Renar steeled himself and advanced to swing at the beast's swaying neck. It was a glancing blow, but he'd connected. Somehow that granted him greater courage, and his second strike bit through the blue-black scales. The impact of it raced up through his arms, and he knew a savage exultation as blood spurted forth in dark rain.

He heard Elyana cry a warning. "Renar! Jump back!"

He was accustomed to obeying Elyana instantly—there was no room for hesitation when training horses. He did as bade, and the swinging tail and its bloody spike missed him by a handspan.

As the wyvern's head rose, Renar saw two arrows blossom along its neck like gruesome spines.

"Run, boy!" he heard Vallyn shout, and he leapt back, watching that tail and the head that was suddenly no longer fascinated by the shining lights. A clawed wing swung down as he backpedaled, and then a blazing ball of fire struck that same wing, filling the air with the sound of sizzling and the smell of burned meat.

The wyvern roared again, and at close range, Renar's ears rang at the sound. Smoke rose up from the flapping wing as the creature beat it rapidly to put out the flame.

Elyana raced up on its blind side, the long slim blade glittering in both hands. Renar saw the creature's nostrils flare open. Its head turned.

The elf's blow sliced deeply into the beast's neck a foot back from its head. Renar shouted warning as the tail swung up and then down at her, but Elyana threw up her sword. The tail spike clanged against it, and Elyana staggered, then dropped to her knee.

"Back!" she called to Renar in a strained voice. He'd assumed her first neck blow would kill the thing, but the wyvern beat the grass with its wings. Dirt, dry leaves, and grit blew out, stinging the boy's eyes.

Elyana stumbled backward, panting, and Renar went with her. The wyvern beat its wings once, twice, gave a little hop as though it meant to take flight, and then crashed into the earth.

Its wings fluttered, feebly, and its legs clawed at the grasses. Even after it stopped moving it moaned for several long minutes, in such a pitiful way that Renar actually felt a little sorry for it.

"Is it dead?" Kellius asked, trotting up. A ball of light floated just back of his left shoulder, and black smoke trailed up from the ends of the fingers on his right hand.

"Mostly," Elyana told him. "Stay back." She moved off into the dark. Renar followed.

Elyana found Drelm lying still in the grass, his breathing swift and shallow. As if that weren't a clear enough indicator of what had happened, the plate armor about his right arm was bashed in around a slim hole that leaked blood across the plate, the chain sleeve beneath it, and the tabard that covered both.

Poison. She had no cure for poison.

“Get Vallyn,” she told Renar without turning. The young man dashed away as she bent down, centering her focus. There was a slim chance that the bard had learned greater healing magic in the intervening years. Certainly Arcil had improved—perhaps Vallyn had as well.

Elyana centered her focus with a deep breath. She lowered both hands to the wound and extended her spirit.

The injury was deep and painful, plunging through nearly the whole of the musculature, right down to the bone. The half-orc’s arm was more than twice as thick as hers. She wondered if the spike would have passed all the way through hers.

She sealed the upper layers of his flesh first, so that the blood ceased its egress from the body, and then set to work lacing the muscles together. She was not as practiced nor as polished with more challenging wounds, but she knew that the injury was most of the way knitted. The real problem was the weakness caused by the poison. It marched slow and steady through his bloodstream like a procession of mourners halfway up the cliff to where they would enter the body.

“Looks like we’d best start digging,” she heard Vallyn say beside her, and she snapped out of her trance.

The bard’s lute was slung once more on his back. His nightshirt was rumpled, his hair mussed, and Elyana was surprised by how much older he seemed.

“He’s poisoned,” Elyana said quickly to him. “Are your healing magics—”

“I don’t know poisons, Elyana.” The bard cursed and passed a hand through his hair. “I never thought I’d be burying an orc,” he finished, sounding bemused.

“We’re not burying him,” Elyana said, rising. She did not remind him, again, that Drelm was a half-orc. She

considered the horizon, and the distant point of light that was Woodsedge.

"He's not dead already, is he?" Renar asked, dismayed. "Isn't there something we can do? And what do you mean we aren't going to bury him? He deserves a proper burial—"

Vallyn talked over Renar, paying him no heed. "That's a Galtan city, Elyana. Even if they didn't want to shoot you and me on sight, there's no way any healer would help Drelm. He looks too much like an orc."

"We can get him to a temple of Abadar."

"He'll be dead before we can make it," Vallyn countered.

"Not if we take a shadow ride," Elyana answered.

Vallyn winced. "A plague on shadows. You'd be mad to try."

She stared at him, hard, and he looked down.

"When I last saw you," she said, still staring at him, "you were working on spells that altered your appearance. Do you know them still?"

Vallyn nodded, reluctantly at first, then added a pleased little shrug. "I've gotten pretty good at it, if truth be told."

"Can you alter someone else?"

Kellius and Renar looked back and forth between them, wondering at the length of time it took Vallyn to reply.

"I can," he said. "But I can't alter us all. Only one."

"One will have to do."

"But there's three of us needing disguise."

"Two." Elyana produced an amulet from her pouch. "I have a little help from Arcil." So saying, she lifted the necklace and clasped it around her neck. Instantly Kellius beheld the face of the thin-nosed, arrogantly handsome man who'd confronted them in the ruins.

"Arcil!" Vallyn cried.

"He left this on the body of his apprentice," she said, astonished that her own voice had now taken on the haughty, male precision of her former friend. "Listen to me!" she said. Despite everything, amusement rang in her voice. "He's very good."

"He's very *bad*," Vallyn countered.

"Is this wyvern his work?" Kellius asked.

"Probably," Vallyn said. "It'd be like him. If he were listening and thought we had him pegged to attack after we found the crown, he might've sent the thing just to show us up."

"Wyverns are common in the mountains," Elyana noted.

"I know we've little time," Kellius said quickly, "but I have one more question. It's clear the Galtans want you two dead. Arcil rode with you. Won't they recognize his face?"

"Arcil was always good with concealment magic," Vallyn said. "I don't think any Galtan that lived ever saw his real face."

Elyana faced the bard. "Set a spell on Drelm so we can be on our way."

Vallyn shook his head. "I'm still wanted there, remember?"

"When's the last time you were on a wanted poster, Vallyn? Do you look the same?"

Vallyn's hesitation seemed to indicate more surely than anything else that her point struck home. But he nodded. "They know me even better than you, Elyana."

"Very well." She undid the necklace and passed it over her head, changing in an instant back to her true form and voice. "You wear it. I shall wear a hood. Place your spell on Drelm."

Vallyn considered her, then let the amulet sink into his palm, the chain dangling between his fingers. “He’s probably not going to live,” Vallyn cautioned. “This is—”

“The sooner we get moving,” Elyana said coolly, “the better his chances. Cast your spell.”

Vallyn thrust the necklace into an upper pocket on his shirt. He unslung his lute and stepped over to the prone captain.

In moments the bard was plucking at strings, singing a simple little melody, his voice rich and thoughtful. Drelm’s features wavered and blurred, and Elyana suddenly found herself regarding a pale fighting man with dark hair. He did not look so much a different man as he did an image of what Drelm would have been if the orc blood were somehow stripped away. Fangs vanished, the brow ridge faded, the ears shrank down. He was still thick and muscular, but even in rest was somehow more peaceful.

“There he is,” Vallyn said, a touch of pride in his voice. “It’ll hold for a few hours. After that—they’ll have a half-orc on their hands.”

“He might be dead before then,” Elyana told him.

They worked quickly to saddle the horses and gather their gear. Even so, it was not swiftly enough, and Elyana twice checked Drelm’s pulse, so concerned was she that they were wasting time.

She herself held Drelm, knowing that she could trust Persaily to carry the extra weight and travel the strange terrain. She hoped she could likewise trust the mare to carry them through the Plane of Shadow. To the others she gave the lead lines of one pack animal each, hoping they were skilled enough to manage their beasts and lead another, then set her mind upon the ring and called forth the shadows.