

Chapter One

The Last Feast

For a moment, everyone fell quiet at once, and Kagur heard the wind howling outside the Blacklions' meeting tent, a long, peak-roofed shelter pieced together from the tanned hides of mammoths, giant sloths, and other enormous beasts. Then the wood burning in one of the fire pits *cracked*. Yellow flame leaped, sparks flew upward, and as if that had broken a spell, the whole tribe resumed its clamor.

Annik struck up a fresh tune on a harp shaped from caribou antler and strung with reindeer gut.

Grinning like one of the snow foxes that had given its fur to make his tunic, Roga told a joke. Kagur couldn't catch it all, but like most of Roga's pun-laden humor, it must have been awful. It elicited groans and prompted Taresk to peg a well-gnawed elk bone across the trestle table at him.

Zonug held up his silver-chased drinking horn, and eight-year-old Dron came scurrying. When the boy failed to fill the vessel all the way to the brim, Zonug made a show of peering inside it, mock scowled, and

bellowed, “By Gorum’s blood-red eyes! Who’s pouring here, Ganef of the Fivespears?”

That sally *did* make people laugh. The chieftain of the Fivespears tribe was much disliked for his stingy, conniving ways.

In fact, Kagur reflected, Ganef was the antithesis of all that a proper Kellid chieftain should be—which was to say, the antithesis of her father. Sitting straight and tall, the gray eyes of a Blacklion keen and his mane of hair raven-dark despite his advancing years, Jorn turned and told Eovath to tap another cask of Tian brandy.

Even more than their generous, valorous leader, or the preserved skull of the gigantic man-eating cave lion their first chieftain had slain generations before, Eovath was the emblem of Blacklion pride, for only the bravest tribes captured and adopted frost giants. Twice as tall as a man but with a build so thick and muscular he nonetheless looked squat, Eovath had long, straw-colored hair, eyes to match, and skin the blue of the sky at dusk. To Kagur, his features looked less brutish and more intelligent than those of other frost giants, and she sometimes wondered if the love and care of humans had so improved him that the benefit even showed in his face.

For much of his life, Eovath had sat by Jorn at the head of the table. He needed to be where the ceiling was highest to keep his head from bumping against it. Still, when he rose in response to his foster father’s command, it did anyway, even though he didn’t straighten up all the way. Moving with care so as not to jostle anyone or anything, he picked up the brandy cask. His prodigious strength and enormous hands managed it easily.

Kagur considered staying and sharing the brandy. After all, the liquor and wine that came over the Crown of the World were rare treats. If the tribe hadn't fared exceptionally well hunting this past season, amassing fine wolf and bear pelts and caribou hides in abundance, her father couldn't have afforded to trade for it. It would certainly warm the blood on a frigid winter night.

But she didn't actually need drink to warm her, or the flames in the fire pits, either. Stroking her thigh beneath the table, Dolok's hand was more than sufficient.

She liked Dolok. He had a quick, crooked smile, and was nimble and clever enough to make her work at sword practice. He obviously saw something to like in her as well, and they'd grown amorous in recent weeks, kissing and fondling until she made him stop.

She'd already decided that tonight would be the night they wouldn't stop. Once the feast was in full swing and everyone was tipsy, they'd slip away unnoticed.

She'd just as soon avoid the bawdy jokes of the rest of the tribe, good-natured though they would be. And as for her father, well, it was one of the great mysteries of life how he knew perfectly well that she was a grown woman—indeed, one of his ablest warriors and hunters—yet could only see her as a fragile little girl whenever lovemaking was in the offing.

She nodded toward the nearest exit. Dolok grinned in response. They rose and made their way toward the end of the tent.

As Dolok untied the rawhide knots that secured the flap, Kagur glanced around to see if their departure really was going unremarked. Pouring brandy into the leather wineskins in the hands of Dron and the other child servers, Eovath looked back at her.

She might have expected a smirk, a wink, or even a reflection of their father's characteristic frown of disapproval. Instead, he looked . . . relieved? About what?

Dolok pulled back the flap, and a blast of cold wind and swirling snowflakes blew the question out of her mind. She hastily followed him out into the night.

The snowdrifts were halfway to her knees and crunched as she waded through them. Clouds covered the moon and stars, and the other tents were merely shadows in the dark. So were the mammoths standing shaggy and stolid, impervious to the worst the blizzard could do.

Kagur took Dolok's hand and drew him into a supply tent. "Whew!" he said, smiling. "It's not much warmer in here!"

"I know what to do about that," she said.

They clung together and kissed for a while. His mouth tasted of the bison he'd eaten and the ale he'd drunk.

She started unlacing and unbuckling his clothing of fur, hide, and leather, and he did the same for her. When their garments were open, and they could touch in ways they hadn't before, they lay down together.

At that point, he took the lead, kissing and caressing. Content for the moment to be passive, she closed her eyes and enjoyed it.

Someone screamed.

"What was that?" Kagur gasped.

Dolok lifted his head. "What?"

"Someone cried out."

He grinned. "That was you, honeycomb."

"Someone *else* cried out."

"Then it was the wind. It's howling like a pack of wolves."

He was right. Perhaps her imagination was playing tricks on her. Surely no enemy would come raiding on a night like this, and if one did, the mammoths would trumpet a warning.

She smiled. "The wind. Yes. Sorry." She settled back, inviting him to resume his attentions. But as soon as he obliged, she heard another shriek.

When she tensed, Dolok frowned. "What now?" he asked.

"You must have heard it that time."

"No."

"Then my ears are sharper than yours. Get up!"

"Curse it, Kagur!" But he did as instructed.

When they mostly had their garments refastened against the cold, she hurried back out into the night, and he followed. On first inspection, the meeting tent looked no different than before.

"See?" Dolok said. "Everything's fine."

"Maybe." But she led him onward anyway.

Another scream shrilled, louder and unmistakable now that they were closer.

"Lord in Iron!" Dolok said.

Floundering in the snow, they ran to the tent flap. Kagur tugged the edge back, and they peered through the crack.

Every human in the tent was down, either slumped across one of the tables or sprawled on the ground. Some moaned or stirred, barely, like swatted flies still clinging to a trace of life. Some were utterly still, and a number of the latter group lay hacked and dismembered in pools of blood.

Grinning, his yellow eyes shining like molten gold in his blue face, Eovath was doing the chopping with a huge axe the Blacklions had taken as a trophy on the same day they'd seized the giant himself. Gore dripped from the weapon's edge and stained his arms all the way to the elbows.

This is a dream, Kagur thought. He *couldn't* do this. He's my brother.

Then Eovath turned toward Annik, who lay on her side with her fingers still tangled in her harp strings, and raised the axe. Kagur's incredulity shattered. This horrible thing *was* happening, and if she didn't intervene immediately, Eovath would murder Annik and then move on to another victim, and another after that, until no human in the tent was left alive.

But what could Kagur do? Kellids were a warrior race, and none more than the Blacklion tribe, but even so, neither she nor Dolok had carried weapons to the feast.

The only option was to *talk* to Eovath. Talk, stall him, and hope that, as she'd always believed, he loved his foster sister.

"Arm yourself," she whispered to Dolok. "Take him from behind." She gave him a shove to start him moving.

Then she yanked the gap between the flap and the rest of the tent wider and squirmed through. "Wait!" she shouted.

Eovath pivoted and looked her over. Then he sighed and lowered the axe slightly. "When you left without drinking the poison, I thought you were out of it," he rumbled in a voice deeper than any human's. "I thought the Rough Beast had granted me a favor."

“The Rough Beast?” That made no sense, either. The Blacklions had raised Eovath to revere Gorum and, to a lesser extent, Desna, the same as they did. Only the worst and maddest people worshiped Rovagug, god of annihilation and wrath—a being so mighty and infinitely malevolent that, at the dawn of time, both good and evil deities had combined forces to imprison him, lest he destroy the world. Even that hadn’t rendered him entirely powerless, and from time to time he still created earthquakes and terrible beasts to ravage the lands of men.

The frost giant nodded. “He talks to me. In my dreams, mostly, but sometimes I hear him even when I’m awake.”

“How could that be?” Kagur asked. Blood dripped from the edge of a table. Across the tent, someone retched. “You’re not a shaman.”

“No,” Eovath said, “but I will be. It’s part of his plan for me.”

“Listen,” Kagur said. “You’re confused, and it’s making you do bad things. You’re killing your own tribe. Your family.”

Eovath spat. “My family died a long time ago.”

It took her a moment to guess what he meant. “The other giants? Your blood kin?”

“Who else? You’ve heard the story often enough. How your father and the rest of the Blacklions slaughtered my tribe and carried me off into slavery.”

“You’re not a sla—”

“Don’t lie to me!”

She took a breath. “All right. It’s true, that’s what they call it. But Father raised you like his own son.”

“To make me forget my real father and turn me into a traitor to my own kind.”

Kagur felt like she was saying all the wrong things. What did she know about reasoning with lunatics? Where in the name of keen iron was Dolok?

“Eovath,” she said, “brother . . . humans raid giants, but giants raid humans, too. It’s just the way things are.”

“But not the way they have to be.”

She hesitated. “I don’t understand.”

“Down in the depths, a sun shines in the darkness, and a pyramid rises under the sun. That’s where I’ll find what I need to do my work.”

“What does that mean?”

He grinned. “I don’t know. But the Rough Beast will guide me, through the Earthnavel and beyond.”

“Can’t you hear how crazy you sound? But if you want to go on a journey, just do it. You don’t need to kill all the people who love you.”

“Yes, I do. Rovagug wouldn’t help me if I didn’t sacrifice to him, and even if he would, the spirits of my *real* tribe are calling out for vengeance. They won’t be satisfied until every human is driven from the tundra.”

She stared into his yellow eyes. “Even me?”

He winced. “I told you I wanted to spare you. I still do. Just go to one of the other tents and don’t come out till morning.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“I suppose I knew you wouldn’t.” He lifted the axe and advanced on her, stepping over the dead and the helpless, leaving footprints in the pools of blood.

Kagur reached past a corpse with a smashed skull for a wooden platter. The grilled ribs of an aurochs

tumbled off as she grabbed it up and skimmed it at Eovath's head. Not even breaking stride, he knocked it aside with a flick of the axe.

She grabbed a stool and flung that. He chopped and again prevented the blow, but he ended up with the stool stuck on the blade of the axe. With a scowl, he started to shake it loose.

At that instant, when he was at least partly distracted, Kagur grabbed a knife smeared with grease and flecks of bear meat. It wasn't a proper weapon, just the kind of tool every Kellid carried for eating, mending harness, and whittling tent pegs. But it was a length of steel with a point, and she hurled it at Eovath's heart.

It only had a short distance to travel, but even so, he jerked to the side, and the spinning knife only pierced his left biceps. He bellowed, shook the remains of the stool off the axe, and charged.

With the walls of the tent hemming her in, Kagur only had one place to go. She sprang and rolled over the tabletop, upsetting trays and dishes in the process. For an instant, she found herself gazing into the glazed gray eyes of Roga's severed head, and then momentum carried her onward. She tumbled off the other edge of the table into someone's lap—she didn't see whose, or if he was alive or dead. He toppled backward, and they crashed to the ground together.

It knocked the wind out of her, but she didn't dare let it slow her down. She scrambled to her feet just as Eovath grabbed the long, heavy tabletop between them. With a grunt, he flipped it up off the trestles and sent it spinning at her.

She flung herself backward, and the makeshift weapon just missed her. Unfortunately, it couldn't

miss all the incapacitated Blacklions sprawled on the ground. A woman cried out as the weight smashed down on her.

Kagur resisted the urge to look down and find out who it was. She kept her eyes on her foe.

Who, intentionally or not, had just cleared a larger space for the two of them to fight in. With bodies, severed limbs, benches, trays, drinking horns, and chunks of roast meat strewn about, the footing would be treacherous. But that was true of the rest of the tent as well, and maybe with a little more room to maneuver, Kagur could use her speed and agility to at least hold out until Dolok returned.

She glanced at a table next to the open space. She grabbed a long carving knife—it verged on being a proper weapon, even though it seemed like a bad joke compared to Eovath’s axe—for her right hand and somebody else’s eating knife for her left. Then she edged forward.

Her foster brother snorted. “Truly?” he asked.

She didn’t bother to answer with words. She simply rushed in, and the axe whirled to meet her. She ducked the horizontal stroke and kept coming.

The low ceiling was already awkward for Eovath, and getting in close seemed the best way to further turn his size into a handicap. At that distance, big warriors had difficulty hitting smaller ones.

Or at least that was how it was supposed to work. But Eovath was an expert combatant, and after the hundreds of times they’d practiced together, he understood exactly what she was doing and why. He strove to keep his distance and, when she got close anyway, met her with elbow strikes and jabs with the butt of the axe. Meanwhile, his vest of boiled leather

stopped her stabs and slashes from reaching his vitals. As often as not, the attacks failed to penetrate at all.

Eovath chopped at her head. She stepped back out of range, caught her ankle on something, and staggered, struggling not to fall.

The giant charged. The axe flashed at her, she twisted, and the weapon passed so near that it snagged in her mantle and ripped free.

Eovath hesitated, as if he imagined he'd actually struck her. Kagur recovered her balance and darted in. She stabbed his hip where the vest didn't cover and lunged on by.

He roared and whirled with blood already welling from the puncture. They glared at one another, circled, and then he let go of the axe with his left hand and gripped it with the right alone.

Evidently, Kagur decided, the knife still jutting from his left forearm was bothering him. At first, he'd scarcely seemed to notice the wound, but now it must be painful enough that he needed to let the damaged limb dangle.

Which meant Kagur should attack his left side. It would be harder for him to swing the axe across his body to hit or block her there. Only a little bit harder, but little advantages were all she had.

Pivoting, fixing her gaze on the crook of his right arm, she raised the carving knife as if for a throw. He sneered but also poised himself to bat the blade out of the air.

Instantly, she charged at his left flank. She'd cut even lower this time, hamstringing him and dump him on the ground, then slash his throat as it came within reach.

She could see the sequence of events so vividly it was like it was already happening. Perhaps that was

why it caught her so completely by surprise when Eovath's left arm, the one she'd thought useless, snapped into motion.

She tried to stop short, but it was too late. Looking like a sliver in his enormous hand, Eovath's dagger drove into her midsection. It didn't exactly hurt, but she felt a kind of shock all through her body, like she was made of shattering ceramic. She stumbled back and fell with the blade still buried inside her.

She struggled to understand what was happening, but it didn't make any sense. She was supposed to outwit and outfight Eovath, and he was supposed to fall down. Everything was the wrong way around.

She looked at the hilt of the dagger and realized she knew it well. Her father had fashioned it himself, carving it to look like a crouching cave lion and staining the pale bone dark. Then he'd presented it to Kagur to give to Eovath as a token indicating that the tribe now trusted him with weapons.

The giant gazed down at her with tears running down his cheeks, washing away the specks of gore that had splashed that high. "I'm sorry," he said.

She could see he meant it, that he truly did love her. Insane though it might be, she felt a surge of love in return. Somehow the emotion managed to well up inside her without in any way diminishing her horror, grief, and rage. She'd never known it was possible to feel so many different things at the same time.

She was still marveling at it when she glimpsed Dolok creeping up behind Eovath. Her lover had armed himself with a longsword and a round shield of wood covered in leather.

The sight of him cut through the daze her injury had engendered. She struggled to control her expression lest it change and so warn Eovath of the peril at his back.

Apparently, she managed it. Her foster brother just kept looking down at her and weeping. She felt a kind of vicious eagerness—another emotion to add to the stew—to see Dolok cut him down.

But the toe of Dolok's boot bumped a wooden cup lying amid the gory litter on the floor. The cup rolled and clicked against a platter.

It was a tiny sound, and Kagur insisted to herself that Eovath wouldn't hear it over the wail of the wind outside the tent. But he plainly did, for he started to pivot.

Dolok charged, and his sword flashed yellow in the firelight. Eovath finished turning just in time to parry the cut with his axe.

The giant struck back, and Dolok blocked with his shield. He had it angled to make the axe glance off, yet even so, Eovath's strength knocked him backward.

Eovath advanced and struck again immediately. Step by step, he pushed his opponent back. The relentless pressure kept Dolok from making many attacks of his own, and when he did, the axe deflected the sword with a clang of steel on steel.

I have to help, Kagur thought. I have to! But when she tried to stand, agony ripped through her middle and paralyzed her.

With his back nearly against the wall of the tent, Dolok finally landed a cut to Eovath's wrist. Then, at last, the frost giant faltered. At once, Dolok bellowed, feinted to the knee, then spun his sword up for a slash to the torso.

Undeceived, Eovath stepped in and brushed aside the true attack. Then, not even bothering to chop with the edge, he simply rammed the top of the axe into Dolok's face. Bone crunched, and the human flew backward into the wall of the tent, bounced back, and collapsed. Blood flowed out around his head.

When Eovath turned back around, his face was once again a mask of malice, without a trace of the love, regret, and perhaps even guilt Kagur had seen there previously. He was ready to finish off the rest of the tribe, and she was helpless to prevent it.

Or nearly helpless. She couldn't save anyone else, but if she played dead, perhaps he wouldn't feel the need to hack her to pieces.

She tried it, and rather to her surprise, it worked. Eovath didn't hurt her any further. But she still had to endure the thuds of the axe striking home, to listen to the occasional truncated cry or whimper without crying out and giving herself away.

She felt like the slaughter would never end. And in fact, she passed out before it did.