

Dragonlance

Lost Histories Vol 4

Land of the minotaurs

by Richard A Knaak

people's trust. He grew very popular very quickly."

"I'm beginning to smell a deal between interested parties," Ganth grumbled.

Kaz agreed. "Looks like either the circle offered Jopfer as a replacement or the high priest preferred him as a way of keeping the sons of Sargas from falling further from grace in the eyes of the people." He shook his head. "Nothing sounds quite right. We must be missing something. Even if the clerics had lost their standing, why accept a minion of the circle as their master?"

"Jopfer's no minion of the circle," Kaz's sister offered. "In fact, they seem afraid of him now. He took to the role of high priest as if born to it. He's not only brought the state priesthood to the forefront again, but eclipsed his predecessor."

"Things make even less sense, then."

They were interrupted by the sounds of armed warriors behind them. Some of the group who had accompanied Fliara at the circus waited just beyond the chamber. One of them stepped forward and curtly pointed.

"I think, my children, that we're being asked to leave this place."

The warrior in the lead responded, "The patriarch has found a house where you'll be safe until tonight. He feels you should go there as soon as possible. We've been sent to escort you."

"What then?" asked Hecar.

"I'm going after Delbin. He freed us in the circus. It's because of me he's here in the first place, and I owe it to the kender to get him out."

"Get him out of where? Who's got him? The guard?"

"No, I'd say the high priest." When he saw Fliara start, Kaz reassured her, "You owe no obligation to us. I'd even make Father stay behind if I thought I could convince him to do so."

She gave him a look that was reminiscent of one Kaz himself had been known to give people in certain situations. "And you think I could do any less?"

Ganth sighed. "What sort of children did I raise?"

"The high priest," Hecar mumbled. "We'll be assaulting the temple itself..."

"Probably. I can't think of anywhere else they would keep him. There are supposed to be cells below the main building."

"The temple..." Helati's brother grunted. "All right, then. How do you expect to gain entrance to that place? We can't just walk in, can we?"

Kaz lowered his voice, making certain that the warriors impatiently waiting by the door could not hear him. "No but there is someone else who can."

"And who's this? A cleric?"

Kaz turned away from him without answering, and said to the guards, "We expect our weapons back before we go."

Honor's Face and the other weapons were brought forth. The leader said, "We'll give them back to you at the safe house."

"That'll do." Kaz looked at the others. Hecar was still waiting for an answer. Kaz smiled grimly. "You haven't figured out who has the key to the temple? I'll give you a guess. He's not a cleric."

"Lad, you're not talking about—"

Kaz nodded to them. "Yes, Captain Scurn. He is no doubt looking for us even now. I think we should help him find us."

Chapter 12

A Traitor in the Midst

Helati looked the children over one more time before settling down. She could not sleep, not just yet, so she spent the time in quiet contemplation of what she and Kaz had expected to do with their lives over the next few years. They wished for more children and had intended to expand their dwelling accordingly. However, the growth of the settlement was going to force them to rearrange some of their plans. Like it or not, Kaz was going to have clan responsibilities.

Helati was not so put out by that. If anyone deserved such an honor, it was her mate. Had he not fought well in the war, faced mages and monsters, and earned the praise of other races, the last the hardest thing for any minotaur to attain? Clan Kaziganthi had a good ring to it, though it would no doubt be shortened to Kaz, as her mate expected.

Her reverie was disrupted by a slight sound, a movement outside. It might have been only an animal, but Helati doubted that. Like Kaz, she had come to sense the difference between various intruders. This seemed more the two-footed kind.

Easing the dagger from her belt sheath, Helati pinpointed the location. Even in her home she always wore a blade, a notion Kaz had introduced to her, for which she was glad. Her other weapons were nearby, but the sound was close to where the children slept. The dagger would be better.

The sound was repeated. A footfall, all right. She poised herself, ready to strike.

"Mistress Helati?" whispered a female voice.

Many of the minotaurs had started calling her by a number of titles such as "lady," "matriarch," and "mistress." Like Kaz, she preferred simply being called by her name, but the others would not hear of it.

"Come in slowly," she called, "with both hands visible."

The other obeyed. A moment later, a female called Keeli entered. Helati recalled her as the mate of Zurgas. The pair had been busy since their recent arrival, already having located a place to build their dwelling. "Forgive me for disturbing you at this time, but I wanted not to be noticed."

Helati lowered the dagger, but did not put it away. "And why is that, Keeli?"

The other female looked around, making certain they were alone. "I had something to tell you, but I was afraid others might be around, others who might be the wrong ones."

"Including your mate?"

"Zurgas knows, but since this is my knowledge, he agreed that it was up to me to tell you. He waits back at our campsite."

Helati did not know whether she was supposed to feel more secure knowing that or not. She was not certain she could trust the newcomer. "Perhaps if you explained what knowledge it is you have..."

Keeli cleared her throat. Her gaze fixed on Helati's suspicious eyes. "I am of the clan of Sumarr. It's not a large clan, but it has links to others. Through those links, I gained a position working as a low-level subordinate for a member of the Supreme Circle. At the time, I was proud of the honor. My work involved seeing to it that his dictates were followed by the State Guard. That was how I met my mate. He occupied a similar position for another member of the circle. We had cause to meet

often, though we kept our interest in one another quiet for some time."

"Understandable." Members of the circle were terribly rivalrous and, as such, leery of interaction between their subordinates. "What does this have to do with me?"

Keeli looked down. "I am sorry. Let me move on. Months later, Zurgas and I came to the understanding that we could not love one another and still work for our masters. For our own good, we resigned to seek our futures elsewhere, perhaps in sailing. If either of us remained as a servant to a circle member, the other might be suspected of betraying secrets. You understand what I mean?"

"I do. Go on."

"It was but a short time before I was to leave. I was doing what I could to make certain my master would have no reason to fault my work since I hoped he would still give me a recommendation. I worked late hours that day, trying to organize everything. That was when he came."

Helati said nothing, relieved that the other female had at last gotten to the point. The younger minotaur had begun to remind her, with her long-windedness, of a certain kender named Delbin.

"He was a representative of the high priest. He seemed annoyed to find me there, but dismissed me a moment later as not being worth his interest. I recalled seeing him once or twice before, but only glances. He wore a robe that marked him as a cleric of some ranking. Since it was not entirely uncommon for the high priest and the circle to communicate, I thought nothing of it, but now that I've seen him again, I thought you ought to know."

It took several seconds for the statement to register. Kaz's mate chose her words with care. "Let me see if I understand what you're trying to say. You are talking about a high-ranking cleric who visited the sanctum of your master, one of the Supreme Circle, and then you claim to have seen him again... Do you mean here?"

"Yes! His appearance has changed, but I remember him. I've always been good at recalling faces."

A cleric among the settlers? High-ranking clerics especially did not simply give up their positions and walk away. She could think of only one reason why a cleric would be among her people: to spy for the priesthood.

"You say he's changed his appearance?"

"Aye, Mistress Helati. The hair is shorter and his face did not wear such a beaten, gladiator look to it. Both horns were intact, too—"

Helati stopped her there. She could not believe what she was hearing. "One of the horns is damaged?"

"Broken off. I was afraid to say anything at first, for he stood next to you when we arrived."

Brogan.

"The one who greeted you when you first met me?" she asked Keeli, hoping somehow the other would deny it. "Brogan?"

"That was him. I swear by the sword of Kiri-Jolith."

Brogan a spy? How long had he been among them? He was one of their most trusted. Helati could not believe what she was hearing, and yet... there had been times when both she and Kaz had wondered if they were being monitored from Nethosak. The powers were suspicious of anything that threatened their supremacy.

She could not condemn him without hearing his side. It could be that Keeli's memory for faces was not so perfect. It could also be that Keeli herself was the spy. Helati tried not to let paranoia guide her emotions.

"Come with me." Sheathing the dagger, Helati returned to the children. With great care, she

gathered them up, still slumbering, then turned to Keeli and commanded, "Walk before me. I'll direct you where to go once we're outside."

The younger female did not understand, but obeyed. They abandoned Helati's dwelling, at which point she ordered Keeli to turn right. The dwelling they soon reached belonged to another mated pair raising a child of their own. The mother was a friend of Helati's, named Ayasha. Ayasha could be trusted. She and Helati had been friends once, long ago in the homeland. It had been one of Helati's greatest pleasures to greet Ayasha when she and her family had arrived in the settlement.

She left the twins with Ayasha, her explanation a simple one, then briefly returned to her own dwelling. Moments later, sword dangling at her side, she journeyed to the home of Brogan. Keeli followed her halfway there, but Helati decided it was best if she went the rest of the distance alone. If, for some reason, the accusations were not true... or even if they were... she did not want Brogan knowing who had informed on him.

Keeli protested. "You should not be alone with him."

Helati touched the hilt of her sword. "Don't worry about me. You return to your mate until I call for you."

Still protesting, the younger female departed. Helati did not mention that she hoped Brogan was innocent. In any case, it would be easier to talk to him alone.

The light from a small, crude fireplace burned in Brogan's modest dwelling. He lived alone, far from most of the others. Helati glanced about, studying the lay of the land. Neither she nor Kaz were overly familiar with the one-horned minotaur's home, for Brogan generally visited them.

Brogan a spy? The distance of his home from the main settlement and his constant interest in what Kaz was doing spoke against him, but could easily be excused for other, more mundane reasons. Helati felt rather foolish about accusing him, but could certainly not ignore Keeli's words.

She remembered that Brogan had tried to form an armed force to accompany Kaz to Nethosak. Had that also been a ploy of some sort?

Enough paranoia! she scolded herself. Time to be a warrior.

It was tempting to peer through a window, but Helati boldly knocked on the dwelling's crude wooden door.

"Who's there? Who is it?"

"It's me, Brogan. Helati."

"Helati?" After some noise, the door swung open. The one-horned minotaur blinked, then smiled. "Some news of Kaz, I hope?"

"Possibly." She had not given any thought to what to say to him. Accuse him outright? "May I come in?"

"Of course! Enter!"

As she walked through the doorway, Helati noticed the mark of Kaz on the dwelling. Her insides twisted. If Brogan was innocent, what she had to say would greatly insult his honor. Yet if he was guilty, the mark of Kaz was of great insult to her and her family, a mockery of the friendship they had extended to Brogan.

There were few furnishings in the minotaur's home: a table, two stools, and a box in which personal effects no doubt were stored. Brogan apparently slept on a bedroll to one side of the single room. The fireplace was very small, almost as if an afterthought. A few items were scattered about, but overall the place seemed orderly. A battle-axe hung on a wall near the bedroll. The table was situated so that if Brogan sat down, he could reach the handle with little effort.

In fact, Brogan led her to the table and offered her a seat. Helati shook her head. "I won't be staying long. Just a few minutes at best."

He frowned. "Is something wrong? Have you heard some bad news?"

"I'm not certain." She did not know how to proceed. Had Kaz been here, Helati suspected he simply would have pushed ahead. She must do the same.

"I'm worried that Kaz might be in danger, that he might also have been captured and imprisoned along with my brother."

"Well, as you indicated not long ago, Kaz hasn't been gone all that long. He might even be on his way back by now."

"Maybe. What makes me fear that Kaz is a prisoner are some rumors." She hesitated for effect. "I've heard there might be spies among us, Brogan."

"Spies?" He sounded genuinely concerned. "Here? Who?"

"There may be more than one, but I've heard that there's at least one who might be acting as a servant of the high priest himself." She watched him for some sign of guilt. So far, he seemed perfectly at ease.

"The high priest, eh?" He rubbed his muzzle and turned toward the fire, staring into it. The battle-axe was only a step away, but Brogan made no move toward it. "I don't like the sound of it. The high priest, he's a deadly sort. Not a gladiator. More like a serpent. That's what he always reminded me of."

"Then you've seen him... often?"

"Now and then." The male squatted by the fire and, seizing a loose stick, prodded the fire into greater life. "From a distance."

"Do you have any idea who might be the spy, Brogan?"

The question startled him more than it should have. Helati saw that. Her hand shifted slowly, almost casually, to the hilt of her sword.

"I used to be one," he replied, still stirring the fire.

The outright admission was so unexpected that Helati froze where she stood, not quite certain how to continue. Her grip tightened on the sword. "You're the spy, then?"

He looked up at her. "No, I said I used to be one. When I first came here, I was a spy for the high priest. I sent messages through various means back to Nethosak. The past four months, though, I've been sending misleading messages."

"Why would you do that? More to the point, why should I believe you?"

Brogan finished tending the fire and rose. "When I came here, I was a fairly high-ranking cleric. That's why they trusted me to send them accurate intelligence about this settlement and its growth. His Holiness does not like this place. Everyone and everything here defies his preaching. I was ordered to assess the situation and report on it. I did so for the first several months."

"What changed your mind?" Helati found herself wanting to believe that Brogan was a friend, not an enemy. But he might simply be an excellent liar.

The one-horned minotaur looked her in the eye. "Kaz. You. The lives I saw around me. There's more life, more satisfaction here than in all the homeland. Oh, everyone works frantically to fulfill our 'destiny,' but we are losing our individuality. We are becoming the servants of the dream, not the masters we were supposed to be." Brogan shook his head. "Honor has become like a sword without a warrior to wield it. We're heading in the same direction as the ancient ogres. Even if we do conquer the world, we will eventually fall. Without honor, without vitality and respect for ourselves,

we're lost."

Helati's grip on the hilt loosened. Brogan sounded honest, but could she believe him? "Pretty words. I'd like to believe that being here has somehow converted you, but I've got no proof, Brogan. Can you tell me anything that'll make me more willing to accept your words?"

"No. Nothing. My words are all I've got. I saw in Kaz the embodiment of what we should be. I decided to follow his example. To be a true minotaur warrior, I could do no less."

More words, but still no proof. She had to make a decision. "Brogan, what you've said sounds good, but I can't accept words alone. I think you should come with me. I think some of the others need to hear what you've said."

"I understand that, but could I ask you a question?"

"Ask."

"Who told you about me?"

"I just found out, that's all."

"It was the two newcomers, wasn't it? They're the only source of recent news. I wondered about them. I thought the female looked familiar—" His eyes brightened. "She worked for the priesthood... no... the circle!" He grinned. "Of course, that amounts to the same thing these days. At least three members of the circle are under the thumb of Jopfer, especially his old mentor! Hah! To think that old war dog thought he was being handed the state priesthood when they offered to make his aide high priest in return for concessions! He thought Jopfer would stay his servant, but it's turned around on him!"

Helati was able to follow only some of what he said, but it was enough to make her hair stand straight. A servant of the circle was high priest? Jopfer? That name sounded familiar. She was almost certain he was an old friend of her brother.

"Well, we can discuss that later," Brogan concluded. He looked around. "The fire will burn down without any trouble, and I've nothing else to take care of. I suppose we can leave immediately, then. I won't bother with taking my axe, of course."

"All right, you walk in front of me." He shifted around. "You should unsheathe your sword, just in case. I would."

Granting his point, Helati pulled her sword free and pointed it at his back. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"Village center." The center was not far from her own dwelling, and it was where most of the minotaurs gathered to talk.

"Good. I'd prefer somewhere more crowded for the time being."

She did not ask what he meant by that. As they started out the door, however, Helati suddenly recalled something. If Brogan was a cleric, then by rights he had abilities that could make her sword useless. She had seen clerics, not only those of Sargas, who could stop a foe in their tracks with but a glance. It was like magic, and yet not. So far, though, Brogan had made no false moves. They stepped out into the darkness, the one-horned male scanning the area as he walked. Outside, he seemed a little on edge. That, in turn, made Helati more attentive. Did Brogan have allies? She hadn't considered that possibility.

Brogan took a few more steps, then paused. Helati readied herself, expecting him to turn and attack suddenly, but the other minotaur simply coughed and then continued ahead.

Helati took a step after him.

Suddenly the cleric turned and roared, "Get down!"

For some reason, Helati obeyed. As she did, a whistling sound caught her attention. She looked up from where she had dropped and saw Brogan, an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. He grunted, dropping to his knees.

A second arrow struck the earth just beyond her head. Then, figures, shadows with raised weapons, began to emerge from the foliage. She counted two, then a third.

"Helati!" hissed Brogan. "If you've got a dagger, I could use it, please!"

She would have been glad to oblige him, but the first of the three was almost upon her. Helati barely had time to rise before an axe blade swung past her face. Backing away, she slashed with her own weapon, but her attacker moved aside.

The second attacker raced past her. Brogan was the intended target. Helati reached for the blade on her belt, but found herself too harried to toss it to her companion. The third figure had joined the fray, and both it and the second attacked at once. She was driven back, effectively separated from Brogan.

Darkness had prevented her from immediately identifying her assailants, only that one was male and the other female. It was not until the female missed with her sword and uttered a curse that Helati recognized her.

It was Keeli. The other minotaurs Helati could not identify.

Why were they trying to kill Brogan? Did they know of his defection? It was the only reason that made sense.

"Surrender and we'll take you to your mate!" offered Keeli in a snide tone.

"I don't think so. I... just... don't trust you for some reason, Keeli."

The other female laughed, then lunged. Helati dodged, but was thrown into the path of the minotaur wielding an axe, which was probably what Keeli had planned. The axe came down, barely missing her foot. She swung her sword and, more out of luck than skill, grazed the axe-wielder's arm. He quickly pulled back.

"I thought you were supposed to be good," Keeli said mockingly. "They said that Kaz himself trained you. Maybe he's not as good as they say. Maybe he won't last that long in the circus."

She was trying to goad Helati. The thought that Kaz might be facing death in the circus threatened to wreck her concentration.

What was happening to Brogan, she could not say. Neither he nor the third attacker were within sight.

Now the axe-wielder returned to the fray, but his swing was a little off. The second swing was not as shaky, but he left a bigger opening. Leaping away from Keeli, Helati thrust at the male's upper leg, near the muscle.

The blade cut deeply. The assassin did not scream, but fell to one knee. His axe he kept gripped in one hand, but he was badly wounded. Helati backed away, focusing on Keeli.

Blade clashed against blade. Keeli was good, but her moves were traditional, the type taught for generation after generation by instructors. Against most opponents, she would have been almost unbeatable, but Kaz, though more proficient with an axe, knew sword tricks that were outside all the usual rules.

Helati let herself be pushed back. She sensed Keeli's growing confidence that Kaz's mate was about to fall. Twice the assassin struck, and each time Helati yielded a little more.

When next her opponent attacked, Helati brought her blade under and around. Keeli tried to counter, but Helati instantly withdrew her sword, causing the former to overreach herself. Kaz's

mate immediately lunged, making utmost use of the opening. She hoped only to wound Keeli, but the younger female twisted wildly in an attempt to sidestep the blade.

Her maneuver had just the opposite effect. Keeli's sword missed Helati's hand by a scant half inch. The force with which Keeli swung her blade brought her forward more than she had anticipated. The tip of Helati's sword sank deep into the other minotaur's chest.

Gasping, Keeli slumped forward. Helati barely had time to pull her sword free before her adversary fell to the ground. Keeli's life had already seeped away.

Helati did not waste time dwelling on her triumph. She eyed the wounded male, but he was clearly no threat. Turning her gaze to the side, she searched for Brogan.

She spotted him standing over Zurgas, the latter crumpled to the ground. The cleric was breathing heavily, holding his wounded shoulder. Helati took a closer look at the dead minotaur. The shaft of an arrow rose from Zurgas's throat. Somehow, Brogan had turned the arrow into a makeshift dagger. It was a reminder of just how skilled he was.

A scuffling sound reminded her of the third assassin. He was trying to drag himself into a position where he could either throw or swing his axe.

"I suggest you drop that before I kill you," she informed him.

"Kill me, then," he grunted in a familiar voice.

"No, she won't kill you. Not yet." Brogan walked up to the pair, gripping the wound in his shoulder. "Not until I've finished with you."

The assassin cringed. Helati had to keep herself from shaking.

"Keep away from me! I have the high priest's favor! You've betrayed your master!"

"The high priest isn't here," Brogan pointed out. "And if you doubt that I still have the power granted by Sargas, then I can think of a dozen fascinating ways in which to resolve those doubts."

The prisoner lowered the axe. He glanced from Brogan to Helati. "I yield to you! Not to him! I give my bond to you! I swear!"

"And how can she tell if you're a warrior of your word? You hunt us from the darkness, giving no warning, no challenge. That is not the way of honor, is it?"

All Brogan did was talk, yet each fierce word seemed to pierce the prisoner like the tip of a blade.

"I swear!"

Looking at Helati again, Brogan asked, "Do you accept his bond?"

She did by nodding. Brogan nodded back, then asked, "Will you allow me to question this one in your name?"

"I gave her my bond. I did not give it to you!"

"But I may act for her, if she desires."

Twisting around, the prisoner pleaded, "Mistress Helati! I've lived here for more than six months, acting as agent of the high priest, especially when he became suspicious of this one's information. I am Yestral."

Yestral. The name was familiar. "I know you. You helped build the storage house."

"Aye. My orders were to watch and report all. Then, when Keeli and her mate arrived, she informed me that the high priest wanted Brogan eliminated for his betrayal. Since your mate was known to be riding toward Nethosak, where it was assumed he would be captured or killed, she also commanded your execution. Keeli said she'd bring the pair of you together. Zurgas and I were to follow and await our chance. She would join us if able. I obeyed, but it wasn't to my liking."

"How many others?" asked Brogan. "How many other agents does His Holiness have here?"

"None! I swear!" Yestral's fear of the one-horned minotaur was palpable. "Mistress Helati! I'm your prisoner, not his!"

"All right, but you'll answer all questions when I ask them. Is that understood?"

"I swear by the horns of Sargas."

They were interrupted by the arrival of three other minotaurs. Helati tensed, then saw they were ones she was certain she could trust.

"You see?" said the foremost, a dark-furred, bulky male with wide eyes who acted as smith for the settlement. "I told you I heard weapon play."

The other two nodded. One of them looked at Helati. "Are you all right, Mistress?"

"I am, but Brogan is wounded."

He waved off assistance. "It'll heal right enough. Someone should take care of this one, though, Mistress Helati. We also need to dispose of these two carrion."

"Agreed." She pointed at one of the newcomers. "You. Get some help to drag these two back to the main part of the settlement. I want this one bound and locked up in the storage house."

They moved to obey. Brogan joined Helati.

"What of me?"

"I'll take a chance on you, but you have to tell me what you did that made him fear you so."

He smiled ruefully. "I've got something of a reputation. Much of it is exaggerated, but... some of it isn't." His tone darkened. "I don't make excuses for that. I'll tell you anything you want to know about my past, but I ask that you leave that for tomorrow. I think I'm going to collapse soon if I don't tend to this shoulder."

Helati had almost forgotten about his wound. "Let me help you."

"I can minister to it myself. You have enough to concern yourself with. Get some sleep, Mistress." He nodded farewell, then walked toward his dwelling.

"One more question," she suddenly called.

"What?"

"You seemed to know that something was going to happen. How did you?"

He looked somewhat guilty. "It seemed like the sort of ambush I might've planned once."

She made no attempt to stop him when he turned away. Perhaps there was reason to be suspicious of him, but Helati doubted that Brogan was lying.

What about Kaz? Yestral's words haunted her. Kaz had ridden into a trap, after all. They knew he would ride to Nethosak and try to rescue her brother. What had happened to him?

I have to go rescue him, Helati thought. I have to go after him before it's too late... but what about the children?

Brogan had offered to organize an armed force. She knew that if she asked for aid, he and most of the others would offer themselves, but to take so many into what certainly had to be the maw of danger...

I have to go alone. There's no way around it. Ayasha will have to tend the children. She loves them as if they were her own.

She shivered, thinking about that. It was fortunate that her friend cared for the twins so much. It was

all too likely that if Helati did not return from Nethosak, Ayasha might find herself acting as mother to the young pair for the rest of her life.

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Delbin looked around the chamber. The chains holding him against the wall had so far defied his supreme lock-picking skills, which really impressed him. That left him with only sleep or staring at the wall, but he was too curious to sleep. Why did a minotaur cleric desire his presence? Maybe he had never seen a kender before and was just curious. More likely, the bad minotaurs wanted to use him against Kaz. Delbin hoped someone would come by soon before things got too boring. So far, the only visitor to his chamber had been a guard who had inspected his head for injuries.

His head still throbbed, but not nearly as much as earlier. At least now Delbin could see clearly, not that there was much to see in the room. It was nicer than he would have expected from a prison cell. The place was clean and orderly. There was even a bed to one side, though he certainly had no way to reach it at the moment. A table and two chairs stood not far from the bed, also out of his reach. The room was dim at the moment because the only light source came from a pair of torches in the hall beyond his cell door. But Delbin's night vision remained exceptional.

With nothing else to do, he occupied his thoughts with the memories of the dream he had experienced just before blacking out. The man in gray again. The kender wondered why he had dreamt of the strange figure yet another time. True, the dream had been interesting, even entertaining at times, but why the gray man? Why had he not dreamt of being rescued by Kaz instead?

It did not matter. What mattered was that the gray man had reassured him, saying there was still hope. Hope for what, Delbin could not say. What the gray man had said after that was a hazy memory, but the kender had no difficulty keeping his spirits up. Already he began wondering if, by using the pick he had secreted in his hand, he might be able to unlock the fascinating mechanism that kept the manacles sealed....

A murmur from the hall distracted him. It was not one of the guards, but rather what sounded like a child shuffling down the outside corridor.

A moment later, a bedraggled-looking head popped up at the door. Actually, it looked more like the upper half of a face that belonged to a gully dwarf. He had seen a few of them running around, cleaning refuse off the streets, but this was the first one he had seen up close.

"Hello, my name's Delbin. What's yours?"

The gully dwarf blinked, then replied, "Galump. Galump is Galump's name. Delbin's a kender."

"Yes, I am. What're you doing down here? Are you a prisoner, too? Did you escape? They certainly have good chains here, so if you know how to unlock them, I'd sure like to know."

It took the raggedy figure some time to digest this before finally answering, "Galump's no prisoner. Galump does what minotaurs say he do."

Delbin recalled the collars he had seen the gully dwarves wearing. He did not think it was nice that the minotaurs made the poor creatures do such tasks and wear such nasty collars.

The gully dwarf suddenly dropped out of sight. Delbin recalled almost too late the short attention spans of these lowly creatures. "Wait, Galump!"

Galump popped back up into sight. He had to hang on to the door to be able to peer inside. "What Delbin want?"

"Can you help me get out of here?"

This seemed to sadden the gully dwarf. "Galump can't do that, no, he can't. If he could, he would help nice human girl, nice girl who mean bull who hits Galump keeps in cell."

Another prisoner? "If you help me, maybe I can help her. We could all escape together."

Even though all Delbin could see of Galump was the top half of his head, the gully dwarf's fearful reaction was evident. "No! Galump could not do! Disobey the high one and he'll eat us like he eats the others!"

"Eats the others?" People thought it was difficult to keep track of what Render said, but Delbin thought Galump's kind was the most baffling race. "What do you mean? You don't mean he actually *eats* them, because that's highly unlikely. What you probably mean is that he punishes them badly, but don't worry, because if we get the girl—a human girl?—out, then we can go to my friend Kaz and he'll protect us—"

"No!" The gully dwarf dropped out of sight, his disappearance followed a moment later by the sound of light, receding footfalls.

He sure is afraid of the high priest, Delbin thought. He really believes the high priest minotaur will eat him, but minotaurs don't eat other races, as far as I know, even though they're descended from ogres and long, long ago, like my friend Kaz told me, ogres sometimes...

A human girl?

"Now what would a minotaur want with a human girl?" Delbin whispered to the emptiness. "Maybe she's a slave like poor Galump. Maybe she's a princess the high priest is holding hostage." Delbin cared very little for this high priest. He was not a nice minotaur, not if he was making gully dwarves and little human girls into slaves.

"Well, I'll just have to save her, and Galump... and all the other gully dwarves and prisoners the high priest has and deliver them to Kaz. He'll know what to do. He will."

With renewed gusto he went to work on the lock. Normally kender enjoyed the challenge of a good lock, but this time Delbin was impatient. He had to get going. He had to rescue this princess. She was probably a shy, helpless young lass who had never been outside in the real world, not like him. Maybe she would reward Kaz and him for rescuing her by showing them her kingdom.

Orderly footfalls in the corridor caused him to quickly hide the pick. The newcomers drew nearer and nearer until they finally paused before his cell. He made out two guards and one figure clad in the robes of the priesthood.

One of the guards opened the door. Both entered, to be followed by the most sinister minotaur Delbin had ever seen. The kender actually felt a twinge of fear, something rarely experienced by any of his kind.

"I am Jopfer, High Priest of the Temple of Sargas, the Soul of the State. I would like to speak to you about your friend Kaziganthi." He leaned forward and stared into the kender's eyes. "And you will answer me as I desire. Do you understand?"

The fear grew stronger... and the simple fact that it did frightened the kender more than the fear itself.

Chapter 13

The Red Dragon

Scurn was in a foul mood. Not only had he been humiliated in the circus again, but he was now out

of favor with both the high priest and the Supreme Circle. His only hope was to recapture Kaz and his companions before someone else did, not an easy task, since there were search parties all over Nethosak. Of course, some of the parties had spent more time sparring with each other than searching, which was some consolation. The servants of the Supreme Circle had little love for the servants of the state priesthood, and vice versa. Neither cared for the members of the guard. Members of the guard, in turn, thought little of either group.

Scurm drank from his tankard, finding only the dregs of his ale remaining. Yet another thing to curse about. Still, it was probably good fortune that he had finished his drink. He was due back at guard quarters. Scurm had, through his rank, pulled the authority for yet another search party. This time, he swore, he would find Kaz and see to it that his rival was dragged before Jopfer himself.

As Scurm rose, he mulled over his latest humiliation. Truth to tell, he secretly admired Kaz's combat skills. Kaz had defeated him fairly, but leaving Scurm alive but unconscious was an insult. Kaz should have killed him, as such a combat demanded. By leaving the guard captain alive and relatively unharmed, he had belittled Scurm's skill.

You should have killed me, Kaz, he thought. An honorable death was preferable to a bloodless defeat. Scurm felt diminished in the eyes of his warriors. Only Kaz's capture or death would appease the disfigured captain.

Scurm exited the tavern, his mind on where to search next. He wanted to check back with his old clan. Orilg was hiding something. Even Dastrun, who was supposed to be a supporter of the emperor, had said nothing of value when questioned. Yet Scurm was certain the clan had harbored the fugitives for a short time. He had a witness who claimed to have observed members of Orilg behaving suspiciously outside the circus at the time of Kaz's disappearance.

I should go back and shake old Dastrun by the collar until he talks! He knows. He does.

The main quarters of the guard lay just ahead. Because of its importance, the headquarters was not all that far from the emperor and the circus. Scurm picked up his pace, growing more eager to renew the hunt. He recalled now that Ganth had many former comrades among the mariners. There were more than a few who might be willing to give him and his son shelter. He also needed to consider the sector where untried or failed minotaurs made their humble homes. One of these multiple dwellings could easily serve to hide Kaz, Ganth, and Hecar. That sector was overdue for a scouring anyway.

"Captain Scurm?" called a female voice.

He paused and turned. A female warrior several years younger than him ran up, breathing heavily. He did not recognize her, but pinned on her chest was the badge of the guard, a circle within which was depicted a watchful eye superimposed over an axe. "I'm Captain Scurm. What is it you want?"

She gave him a salute, then, gasping, said, "I was sent to find you. The sergeant on duty said you were at the Baleful Basilisk, but I couldn't find you there. So I decided to check this area."

"You must've just missed me. Now spit it out. What's got you running?"

"Captain, there is news that the fugitives have been spotted in the wharf district! Your second took the search party out, but I was left behind to inform you! If we hurry, we can meet them by the warship *Sea Lancer*."

"The *Sea Lancer*?" Scurm did not know that particular vessel. "Is Kaz there?"

"So the rumor goes. The captain is an old member of his father's crew."

"So I was right!" The captain seized her by the shoulders. "Quickly! How long ago? They aren't simply going to board the ship, are they?"

"No, Captain. Right now they're waiting for you. If I don't show up with you soon, though..."

"Then let's get going!" Scurm rushed past her in the direction of the docks.

She fell into step beside him, now silent. That suited Scurm, who was busy thinking. Kaz was familiar with the area, which meant the guard had to be doubly careful. Fortunately, Scurm himself was familiar with the docks, having worked there for quite some time.

The female hurried ahead of him, saying, "We should turn down this way. The other path is blocked by construction work."

"Construction work?" Scurm could not recall any work, and he had been down that street the previous day. "What work?"

"They've decided to expand the woodworks again. It started only this afternoon, but they're going to be working through the night, Captain."

"Hmmp." On the whole, the news was not that surprising. The woodworks were vital not only for shipbuilding, but in other areas of construction as well. They had been enlarged once before, but with activity at its highest since the peak of the war, Scurm could see why the circle would demand improvement.

He turned down the path, again pulling ahead of her in his impatience. The street here was much more narrow, almost an alley, but it did lead in the direction of the docks. Scurm paid his dark surroundings little heed. He saw the like often enough in his duties.

The shadowy form of a tall minotaur materialized before him, almost as if by magic. In one hand he wielded a sword that was pointed at Scurm. The newcomer's intention was clear even if his features were not.

"Stand where you are," the figure said in a gravelly voice.

"You're a fool—" Scurm began, but then a second figure wielding an axe appeared, settling into a fighting stance. Even without being able to see their features, Scurm knew who at least one of this pair had to be.

"Kaz—" he began, reaching for his weapon, but choking on his next words... this time because a sword point prodded his back.

"No sounds, no moves," his own companion said in his ear.

"Very well done, Lass," said a new voice. "Smooth as a morning breeze, you were."

"Thank you, Father."

Father? Scurm wanted to turn around and look at the female, but sensed that her warning was a serious one. It was one thing to die in combat, but another to die uselessly in a dark alley. He would wait. Kaz and the others wanted him for some reason, and he suspected it had to do with that blasted kender that had been captured at the circus.

The scarred warrior relaxed more. The opportunity for triumph still remained. Somehow he would turn this latest humiliation into victory.

* * * * *

Kaz eyed Scurm carefully, noting that his adversary was calmer than he would have expected. That bothered him somewhat, but he could not let it overwhelm his thoughts. The plan had to proceed at the prearranged pace if it was to succeed. They had to strike when the temple was at its most subdued.

There were those who would have called his plan insane, and Kaz was one of them. Still, if minotaur tendencies ran true, invading the citadel of Sargas might prove far easier than anyone could imagine. The minotaur clerics thought that no one would ever be so mad as to enter their domain without permission. That was the sort of attitude Kaz had made use of many times in the

past against opponents who, while skilled, had grown too careless with their power.

"Greetings, Scurm."

The disfigured minotaur snorted, but said nothing. He was taking Fliara's sword very seriously, a wise thing to do. At a nod from Kaz, she removed Scurm's weapons, including the small dagger that most minotaurs wore on their kilts.

"Now then, Scurm, let's talk. I'm glad to see you're the creature of habit I remember, but we did have to wait a while longer than I wanted. Still the same taverns and inns. Still the same impetuous behavior." Scurm glared. Kaz lowered his voice. "You're an excellent warrior, Scurm. Never doubt that I respect your abilities and even, at times, your sense of honor and dedication. I never chose to make an enemy out of you."

"You—" the captain started, before Fliara reminded him of the blade in his back.

"Best to get on with it, Lad," recommended Ganth. "You'll never change his mind. Dedicated he is, to the point of obsession. He'll not see anything but the side he's already chosen, and that's that."

Kaz knew that was true. He said, "I'll offer you the chance to gain your life and freedom, Scurm. I want something from you, and in return I'll let you go. You'll be free to hunt me down again and challenge me to proper combat. That's what you really want, isn't it? The circus doesn't count. The situation there was awkward at best. You want me in formal combat, warrior against warrior, just as you did when you tracked me down three years ago."

Scurm saw that it was true. He might want Kaz captured, tossed into the arena, and killed there, but deep down, the captain's greatest pleasure would be to defeat Kaz in hand-to-hand combat once and for all. Of course, that did not mean that Scurm would work to see that dream come true. First and foremost, he wanted Kaz... period.

"What do you want from me?" Scurm finally asked. "It must be something important. It can't really be that kender, can it?"

Fliara did not remind him of her presence again. Scurm could be ignorant, but he was not stupid. However, Kaz also knew that by allowing his rival to think that he, Scurm, controlled some bit of the situation, the scarred minotaur was more likely to go along with their demands. Kaz was familiar with the way minotaurs such as Scurm thought. The captain would be working on the assumption that he would betray his captors at some point. He would, if things went as planned, agree to help them.

"You're our guide," Ganth informed the prisoner. "We are all going to see His Holiness."

"You expect me to take you into the temple?" Scurm started to laugh, then remembered Fliara's sword. "You might as well surrender to me now. At least you'll have a chance of dying honorably in the circus."

"Nobody needs to die, Scurm, not if we do this the way I ask. That includes you."

"So you say, but I'm more likely to get run through from behind when you don't need me anymore, aren't I?"

Kaz stepped closer, matching gazes with the other. "I don't want that to happen. Do you?"

Scurm was the first to look away. "No, like you, I want to see the axe coming!"

"Your choice, Scurm. Your life and freedom. All you have to do is lead us inside and past the acolytes. What we do after that is up to us."

The captain straightened. "All right. Not that I've got much choice. You'll be walking to your deaths, though. The high priest is not as kind as I'd be."

"Aye," Ganth interjected, "you're kindness incarnate. Now turn around."

Scurm obeyed. Ganth reached into a pouch and from it removed badges identical to the ones Fliara and Scurm already wore. Despite himself, the prisoner could not help but grunt in surprise.

"Amazing how these things can be found lying around," Ganth commented. Members of the guard faced serious reprimand for lost badges, so they generally took care of them.

"Where did you get those?"

"No time for questions now," Kaz reminded him. Even he did not know where Ganth had found the old badges. The mariner had asked his son not to ask, and Kaz respected that wish.

"Are we leaving now?" asked Hecar.

"Yes, we're ready to leave." Kaz faced his companions. "We need to be in and out of there. You all know your tasks. Anyone who doesn't want to commit suicide with me can leave now."

"You gave that speech before, Brother," Fliara piped up. "None of us paid it any mind then, and none of us does now." She tapped Scurm on the back. "Except maybe this one here."

"Let's get going, Son," Ganth commented. "I've got a pair of new grandchildren I'm looking forward to meeting."

"Let's move, then."

The party started toward the temple. Scurm walked in front, with Ganth on one side and Fliara on the other. Kaz followed, with Hecar close behind. Everyone now had their weapons drawn except for Kaz, who had a role to play, and, of course, Scurm.

Nethosak never truly slept, especially these days, but few minotaurs roamed the streets at this hour. A few passed by the group, but other than a furtive glance, most looked quickly away. It was not healthy to bring oneself to the attention of the guard.

They neared the temple much too soon. Torches lit the entrance, and two sentries clad in the colors of the priesthood stood at attention. Kaz glanced at the windows of the edifice and saw that most of them were dark. By now, the high priest would have retired, along with most of his staff. There would be some guards on duty, and a few acolytes.

"You don't think this'll work, do you?" Scurm whispered.

"It'll work, or the last thing you'll feel is this blade running through your stomach," Fliara commented matter-of-factly.

"Amusing," replied Scurm. "But not as amusing as this little plan of yours."

They marched up with Scurm looking as if he were in full command of the situation. The guards looked poised to block their path, but Scurm showed his badge of rank and informed them, "I've got a prisoner that the high priest wants to question." He indicated Kaz. "A companion of the chief fugitive being hunted tonight. Let us pass."

The pair looked at one another, then the larger of the two nodded, at which point they stepped aside.

Expression set, Scurm led the group past. The doorway opened from within. Another pair of guards waited, but they were the only ones Kaz could see.

An acolyte met them when the doors were closed behind them. He looked slightly irritated, as if they had just disturbed him from his catnap. It was interesting, Kaz noted, but the higher the rank of a cleric in the temple of Sargas, the less devout they seemed to be. Oh, they performed all the same ceremonies, but their smug attitudes made them almost interchangeable with the staffs of the eight members of the Supreme Circle.

"What is it you want, Captain? His Holiness has retired for the evening."

"I've got a prisoner he'll want to see first thing in the morning," Scurm replied without prompting.

"A companion of the chief fugitive, Kaz. He knows the kender, too."

The acolyte nodded approval, looking past Scurm. His mouth twisted in distaste. "Such betrayal to the cause is ever shameful. You are sure he is one of the traitors?"

"He's traveled with Kaziganthi for years. Knows him better than anyone. As I said, he is also acquainted with the kender."

"A kender. Can you believe it? A minotaur who travels with a kender. This Kaziganthi has fallen low."

"Captain," Hecar interjected. "Maybe we should get this honorless one in a cell before he slips free again." That there were cells in the temple was common knowledge. In the course of their duties, the clerics of Sargas were forced, so the high priests always insisted, to treat heretics as criminals. No emperor, however popular, had ever had the courage to question the existence of this private dungeon.

"A cell?" blurted the robed minotaur. "He should be thrown into the arena! Take him there."

Fliara casually tapped her sword against Scurm's side. He quickly spoke up. "I'd rather he were kept here, Brother. And the high priest would surely agree. He is too valuable to waste in the arena—not yet at least."

The acolyte weighed this seriously. "I am not accustomed to making such decisions. That was the duty of Brother Merriq."

"Then get him."

"Brother Merriq," the other said frostily, "is no more. He perished bravely, capturing... capturing the other prisoner. A fire of some sort, I understand."

Kaz could barely refrain from smiling. So Delbin had not been captured without a good fight. Kaz had no pity for Merriq. He had been the epitome of what was wrong with the minotaur homeland.

The robed figure was taking much too long to consider the matter. Hecar spoke again. "Captain, can't we just put the prisoner in the cell ourselves and take responsibility?"

Scurm frowned, but Hecar's words made the acolyte brighten. "Of course, if you want to take responsibility for the prisoner, you may go ahead. I cannot say how His Holiness will react, but as long as it is your responsibility..."

Even Scurm seemed disgusted with the robed minotaur's attitude. The acolyte was one of those middle-level subordinates who would do anything as long as it didn't threaten his own well-being. It was the type who never rose very high in the ranks, but seemed to last forever.

"We'll take responsibility for any taint he leaves in the holy temple," the scarred minotaur answered somewhat sarcastically. "Just tell us where the cells are and we'll take him there. You won't have to worry about a thing."

"I'll have to have someone lead you there."

The robed figure stepped away quickly before anyone could suggest that he himself lead the party to the cells. Scurm glanced at Kaz, who kept his expression neutral.

A couple of minutes later, the acolyte returned with what was obviously a novice. The novice, a shorter, muscular minotaur, seemed caught between fear and anger, most of it aimed at his superior.

"This one will take you to the cells. Be about your business, then depart this building. Make certain the prisoner is completely secure before you leave, or it'll be your heads. In the morning, someone will alert His Holiness."

He turned away again before there could be any objection. The novice watched him depart, then looked at the others with a scowl on his face. "Come this way. Walk quietly, for the high priest rests now."

"Will we be passing near his chambers?" Scurm asked on his own. Fliara shifted ever so slightly toward him.

"No, his private rooms are beyond the great audience chamber. The cells are below."

Kaz was relieved to hear that. The farther they were from Jopfer's rooms, the better.

The novice led them down one corridor after another, gradually descending into the bowels of the temple. All along their journey, the eyes of Sargas watched them.

Here was a relief of Sargas saving the first minotaurs. Over there was a tapestry showing him building the border mountains. One image showed Sargas raising ships from the sea. Artisans had worked diligently to create the illusion that Sargas watched the viewer even as he performed his miracles.

They descended deeper. Kaz counted the levels in his head, estimating distance and time. He hoped the cells would not be much farther. One fortunate thing was that they had passed only a few sentries and never more than a pair at one station.

"This level is where the traitor should go," the novice finally said, just when *Kaz* was beginning to think they were never going to reach the bottom. "We'll take him down—"

The entire party paused as four sentries blocked their path. Unlike the previous ones they had passed, these sentries were alert and bristling.

"No one comes down this way," commanded a dark minotaur who was the apparent leader. "By orders of the high priest."

"We have a prisoner—" the novice began.

"No one."

"The high priest'll want this one in a special place," Scurm interrupted. Fliara's weapon had suddenly found itself nudging his back. "He's a companion of the renegade we've been searching for."

"We've got our orders."

Scurm tried again. "He's also a friend of the kender you have prisoner. The high priest will be glad to have him nearby. He'll be able to make use of him. Leverage and that sort of thing."

For the first time, the sentries seemed uncertain. The leader looked at his companions, then at Kaz. "I don't know..."

Ganth glanced at his son. Kaz nodded slightly. Choosing a moment when the guards' attention was elsewhere, he stepped past Ganth and Scurm, in front of the guard leader and one of the other sentries. Raising his hands, he brought forth Honor's Face.

Startled, the guards looked up at the magical axe as if it were Sargas himself. Kaz quickly lowered the axe shaft with both hands and struck wide, hitting them both. The flat side of the axe head caught the second sentry squarely, knocking him completely over. The leader stumbled back, stunned but able to keep his footing.

Ganth reached out and shoved the novice's head back against the wall. The novice struck the wall hard and, with a grunt of astonishment, slid to the floor.

"Don't try anything!" Fliara commanded Scurm, who had started to reach for a weapon dropped by the guard leader.

Ganth seized the guard leader and threw him against the wall, just as he had done to the novice. Hecar and Kaz moved forward. The remaining pair of guards, suddenly outnumbered, backed away. They did not get far before Kaz and Helati's brother caught up to them.

Kaz made the most of his axe in the narrow passage, swinging it diagonally. This action forced one guard back, while leaving Kaz wide open to an attack from the other. Hecar filled the gap, however,

countering the other minotaur's attempted thrust and bringing his blade up underneath, stabbing the guard in the stomach.

The death of Hecar's foe drained the fight from the remaining temple guard. He dropped his blade and fell to one knee, hands over his head. "I yield myself."

Hecar came up and took charge. Their foes had been too stunned to give an alarm. To Ganth, Kaz said, "We need to bind him and put them in another cell. The dead one, too."

"What about him?" Kaz's father asked, indicating Scurm.

"We still need him. Just make certain he knows what'll happen if he opens his mouth at the wrong time."

"I think Fliara's taught him about that already."

They gathered up the guards and located the nearest cell. From the pouches on their belts the party removed rope and cloth. Within a few minutes, the guards were secure. The only traces that remained in the hallway were some bloodstains, which they could do nothing to hide. "I have the keys," Hecar said, holding them up and dangling them. "Now we just need to find him. Surprised he hasn't picked the locks himself and met us already." Kaz brought the head of his axe to bear on the one guard still conscious. "I'm going to remove the cloth around your muzzle, and you're going to answer the question I'm about to ask. You get one chance, or you join your dead friend. Understand?"

The guard nodded.

"Good. Now where's the kender?"

The guard answered, "Third corridor, second cell, but you'll regret—"

Replacing the cloth over the prisoner's protests, Kaz joined the others. "Let's go."

With Fliara keeping an eye on a suspiciously docile Scurm, the group hurried in that direction. The halls were darker here, only an occasional torch illuminating the area. As they passed each cell, Kaz peered inside. He had had a notion to free the other prisoners, but not one cell was occupied.

"Jopfer must want a lot of privacy for the kender," Ganth remarked. "There should be at least a few poor heretics being retrained down here."

Kaz was the first to reach the third corridor. He peered inside, seeing little more than darkness. These cells were far larger. The torchlight barely illuminated part of a chair and possibly a small table.

He tugged on the door. It opened.

Delbin had escaped... but where was he now?

"Kaz! Look what I just found!" Hecar came toward him with a squirming bundle. It was a gully dwarf. "This is the same one I think helped capture me. He did something to my harness!" The minotaur raised the sorry figure up so he could look it in the face. The legs of the gully dwarf... a male, Kaz thought... kept spinning, though his feet were high off the floor. "Well, now we can talk about the lesson I'm going to teach you—"

"Hecar—"

"No hurt Galump!" the gully dwarf pleaded. "Galump is Delbin's friend! Good friend!"

"What's that?" Kaz moved forward, seizing Hecar's arm. He had his companion lower the creature called Galump to the ground. The creature tried to dash away, but Hecar maintained his grip. "Stop that!" Kaz commanded. In a softer tone, he asked, "You're a friend of Delbin's?"

"Yes! Galump is Delbin's friend! Yes!"

"Do you know where he is? It's important."

The gully dwarf hesitated, then murmured, "High one will eat us if I say... He shouldn't have gone after her." The gully dwarf leaned forward and hesitantly asked, "You Kaz?"

The minotaur blinked. "I am. How did—"

"Delbin's friend." Galump attempted to think. It was manifestly a strain. "Delbin's friend. Delbin wanted to help Galump. Galump help Delbin." He broke into a childlike smile. "I show you."

The gully dwarf twisted out of Hecar's grip and started down the hallway. After a moment's hesitation, the minotaurs followed.

Galump hurried deeper into the temple. Kaz was amazed and horrified at how many cells there actually were beneath the temple. Finally, Galump pointed at a cell door midway down a corridor. Kaz hurried past him and peered through the grill into the darkened cell. He could neither see nor hear anything within.

Then a chain rattled slightly. Kaz heard a short gasp that did not sound like the kender. In fact, it sounded like a female, but not really like a minotaur.

"Delbin!" He called, trying to keep his voice quiet enough so that it would not echo. "Delbin! It's Kaz!"

The chain rattled more. He heard someone rise.

"Delbin!"

"Kaz?" came the kender's hopeful voice. "Kaz!"

The chain dropped to the floor with a loud clash. Delbin burst out of the darkness from one side of the cell... followed, to Kaz's astonishment, by a human female in her early or mid-teens. The girl paused only when the chains she wore yanked her back.

Kaz snarled, studying the length of chain. More and more, he desired the high priest's neck between his hands. What right did Jopfer think he had to do this to a harmless, innocent child? She could not be any real threat to a minotaur. There was no honor in the cleric's actions, only evil.

He turned away from the door. "Where are those keys?"

Hecar raised the ring of keys, but Delbin was already at the door. Before any of the minotaurs could say anything, there was a click. A moment later, the kender pushed the door open. "The manacles are really hard, Kaz, but the doors are simple. I locked it when I heard someone coming, just in case."

"Amazing," grumbled Ganth. "Minotaur locks are some of the best in the world, and this little one flicks them open without a care."

They followed Delbin inside. The kender took the girl by the hand. She was staring at the minotaurs in open fear. "Don't worry. We're all going to rescue you."

"Who is she, Delbin?" Kaz studied the girl. She looked as if she had some elven blood, but was otherwise unassuming.

"She's—" The kender frowned. "She says she doesn't have a name, Kaz."

"Is that true, girl?"

"I don't think I've ever had a name."

"Why didn't your parents give you one?"

She looked down. "I don't remember them."

"She said she's been on her own as long as she can remember, but she doesn't seem to remember

very far back, maybe a couple of years, I think—"

"Shouldn't we be leaving soon, Lad?" interrupted Ganth.

"We have to take her with us, Kaz!"

"A human girl?" Hecar shook his head. "She'll stick out worse than a kender!"

"Nevertheless, we will take her." He looked at the girl. For some reason, she reminded him of someone. "Don't worry—girl—you'll go with us. I wouldn't leave anyone here to wait for the high priest."

"I don't like him. He kept saying I'd be here for centuries."

"Jopfer's truly mad," Hecar retorted. "Becoming high priest has made him crazy."

"Can you get the manacles open, Delbin?" Kaz did not want to have to use the axe. Striking the chains would make more noise than they could afford. It was a wonder no one had heard them so far.

"I think so." The kender was already at work. "I think I almost have this one figured out." To the human he said, "Don't you worry! We'll get you out, and then you can come with us back to Kaz's homeland then we can come up with a name for you—"

"I think I've decided on one," she abruptly announced with much seriousness. "I think I found one I like."

"That's all very nice—" but Kaz got no farther.

"I want to be called Tiberia, or even just Ty." The girl smiled prettily at Kaz. "Delbin mentioned a dragon in a story he told me while he was trying to free me. About a dragon called Tiberion. I like that name."

"Tiberia it is then," snorted Ganth. "We can admire the choice later. If you can't get those manacles open in the next few seconds, Delbin, then we'd better—"

Scurm swung his elbow back, catching a momentarily distracted Fliara in the stomach. She bent over, the air pushed out of her, allowing the scarred minotaur to seize her by the arm and shove her. Fliara collided with Hecar.

The action caught the others off guard. Scurm turned and raced through the open doorway.

"Somebody stop him!" Ganth called, already chasing the scarred minotaur.

"Delbin!" Kaz called over his shoulder as he started after them. "Get that bracelet open and get her out of here without us if you have to! We'll meet where we stayed before this whole mess began, but don't wait long! Get her out of Nethosak!"

"But, Kaz! I haven't told you the biggest thing! You should hear what she's able to do!"

"Later, Delbin! Free her!"

The kender was already back at work on the chain as Kaz and the others rushed out after Scurm. Kaz trusted the kender's skills, at least where sneaking around was concerned. If anyone could get Tiberia out unnoticed, Delbin could.

Scurm and Ganth were out of sight as he turned the corridor, not a good sign. If Scurm made it up to the next level, he would be able to warn some of the temple guards.

Then he heard the sounds of a struggle. Kaz twisted around the corner and discovered Scurm and Ganth fighting hand-to-hand, the older minotaur's sword on the floor between them. It was a credit to the undiminished skills of Kaz's father that he had caught the escaping captain before Scurm could climb the steps.

Scurm saw Kaz coming. A dark glint appeared in the disfigured warrior's eyes. Scurm opened his

mouth and shouted loudly, making as much noise as he could. The cry echoed throughout the hall and, no doubt, the floor above.

Ganth finally freed a hand and punched his adversary in the jaw. Scurm stumbled back, falling over the steps. The older warrior reached down to retrieve his sword.

"What's going on down here?" called a voice. Less than a breath later, three temple guards appeared on the steps, weapons drawn.

"He's a traitor!" Ganth quickly replied. "He tried to kill the high priest's prisoner!"

The guards looked at Scurm with surprise, then started down.

"You fools!" Scurm snarled in turn. "That's the fugitive, Kaz, back there! He forced me at sword point to bring them here! I was the one who just shouted!"

The foremost guard looked the trio over. "I think you'd all better come with us. We'll let one of the clerics hear this mess. Now turn your weapons over."

Scurm revealed that he had no weapon. Ganth glanced at his son, then turned the blade so that the hilt pointed at the guards. One of the other warriors reached for it.

The blade slipped from the mariner's hand. As the guard reached to retrieve it, Ganth seized his wrist and pulled him forward hard, knocking the shocked minotaur into Scurm. Both fell roughly to the floor.

As if by magic, Fliara and Hecar appeared behind Kaz. The three wasted no time before charging the remaining sentries. Ganth backed away, seizing his lost sword before rejoining his son and daughter.

Hecar struck the guard who had fallen, knocking him senseless. This gave Scurm the opportunity to grab the unconscious warrior's blade and bring it up against Helati's brother. The attack was weak, but it prevented Hecar from joining Kaz and the others.

For the first time, Kaz saw his youngest sibling in action. Fliara was swift, her smaller stature working for her in ways he would not have expected. Twice she got under the guard of an attacker, bleeding him. Fliara was versatile, using both orthodox and unorthodox moves to confuse her adversary.

Kaz's own opponent was no match and was quickly backed up, leaving Fliara's male alone. He tried to slash at her, but she shifted under him, running her blade into his chest. As he collapsed, Fliara joined her brother in pinioning the sole remaining guard.

All of a sudden, more guards appeared at the top of the steps. This time, there were at least seven. Kaz and his sister found themselves abruptly losing the ground they had gained. Soon they were pushed back near Hecar and Scurm, who were still battling.

"We're trapped down here!" Fliara informed Kaz needlessly. "There's nowhere but the cells behind us!"

Three more guards joined the squad. Although not all of the temple sentries could do battle, the small band was being continually pushed back down the steps. Ganth ran one through, but two more appeared. Kaz and his group retreated. Hecar was forced to abandon his duel with Scurm, lest he be isolated.

"The one with the axe!" the scarred warrior shouted. "The high priest will want him alive if possible, but kill the others!"

As Kaz backed even farther, he bumped into a small form. At first he thought it was Galump, but then he saw it was Delbin.

"Kaz! There's no other way out! I looked all around, but I couldn't find a path anywhere—"

Kaz deflected a sword thrust. "Where's Ty?"

"She's here, Kaz! Listen, she thinks she can get us out of here!"

"Don't talk nonsense! Get back!"

"But listen, Kaz! She can do magic! She can!"

He had no time for the kender's babble. "Well, then let her do it! Get us out of here! Take us anywhere!" Kaz succeeded in knocking away one minotaur's sword, but that minotaur immediately retreated, and one of his comrades renewed the press. Kaz cried, "Ty, if you can do it, get us out of here!"

"I don't know, Kaz! Delbin took off the chains, which the high priest said held back my power, but I've never tried it with so many people. Usually it's just myself!"

He had no idea what the young human was talking about. She talked like a kender. Perhaps there was some truth to the story. Perhaps Ty was a mage. If she was, then she was their only chance to escape. It certainly would not hurt for her to try.

"You have to do it, Ty!" Delbin insisted. "Just concentrate hard on getting us someplace else! You should be able to do it! I'll bet you've got a lot of power!"

A pair of guards prevented him from saying more. Kaz fought off their attack and prayed to Paladine that Delbin wasn't crazy this time.

"There's more of them coming!" Ganth cried. "We'll have to break—"

The corridor vanished... to be replaced by a huge, familiar room dimly lit by a few well-placed torches.

"—away and..." the old mariner's voice faded as he and the others realized the change in surroundings.

"What happened just now?" Fliara demanded. "Where are we?"

Kaz quickly surveyed the group. They were all there, his father, sister, Hecar, Delbin, and the human girl. Ty was pale and shivering, but seemed all right, especially considering the fact that she had just done what Kaz had assumed was impossible... transported them all from one location to another.

"That was fun, Ty! How did you get all of us here? I didn't think you could do that!"

"Where are we?" repeated Fliara. "This looks like it's still part of the temple!"

"It is," Kaz responded. "It's the audience chamber of the high priest, a place we should definitely not be." He started toward the doors. "Come on!"

They had gone only a few steps when every unlit torch in the chamber burst into bright flames.

"Interesting," came the voice of Jopfer. "I found you just in time, didn't I, Young One? Your great powers begin to manifest themselves."

The band turned to see the high priest standing at the top of the dais, arms folded. A satisfied expression covered the tall figure's features.

"At last, this will come to an end."

"Jopfer!" shouted Hecar. "What's got into you? What's happened to you?" Helati's brother started forward, angry at his old friend. "You were never one with much love for the temple. You hated all they stood for, but now you've become the worst of them!"

"The truth would surprise you," the cleric returned, his tone one of mockery. It was almost as if he enjoyed some jest the others knew nothing about.

"Upon reflection, it would do to take a glance at the face of honor," someone said in Kaz's ear.

He looked around before realizing that the voice had sounded like the infernal figure in gray again. It was bad enough that they stood before Jopfer, but did the gray man have to haunt him just now? Still, Kaz turned slightly away from the others and held the mirrorlike finish of his battle-axe so he could see... or not see... the form of the high priest. The others he knew he could trust.

Kaz stared into the axe face, certain that he would see nothing but an empty dais.

What he saw, however briefly it appeared, nearly made him drop the axe. Honor's Face had revealed the truth about Jopfer, but Kaz had difficulty believing it.

Kaz wasted no more time. He had briefly contemplated using the high priest as a hostage, but now, with practiced aim and no warning whatsoever, he threw Honor's Face at the cleric.

The high priest glanced at the whirling weapon, then caught it by the handle when it was mere inches from his chest.

"Dwarven make," he hissed, as if the mere thought of the race disgusted him. His nostrils flared. "And elven taint. A foul but fascinating combination. I shall study it in more detail later."

To Kaz's horror, Honor's Face vanished. He tried to will it back, but the axe would not return.

"Your will is nothing compared to mine," the figure on the dais hissed. "All your wills combined are nothing to me. I am power itself. I am greater than all the race combined!"

"You're mad, Jopfer!" Hecar called. He took a step nearer to the platform. "And you might've been lucky with that axe, but you're still only one minotaur!"

"Aye, let's see how your tricks work against all of us," Ganth added.

The other three minotaurs started forward. Kaz gazed at them in dismay. They truly did not know the extent of the horror.

"Get back, all of you!" Kaz cried. "He's not what he appears!"

That made them pause. Even the high priest seemed momentarily startled.

"Mage or cleric, Lad," Ganth said, resuming his advance. "It's all the same to me."

"But he's neither! He's not even a minotaur!"

The last word was punctuated by mocking laughter that echoed so loudly in the chamber that every member of Kaz's band had to cover his or her ears. The robed figure continued to laugh for several seconds, sounding more bestial by the moment.

"Clever little warrior!" he cried, his toothy smile unnerving Kaz, who knew the truth. "Clever little minotaur! I will have to wring the secret of your cleverness from you just before I end your short, useless existence! You've guessed! You know me as I truly am, do you not?"

"I know you..."

"What're you talking about, Kaz?" asked Hecar. "What're you saying about Jopfer?"

"He's neither Jopfer nor even a minotaur! The high priest is a dragon!"

They looked at the cleric as if expecting him to refute the incredible claim, for dragons had disappeared at the end of the war. Not a single dragon, good or evil, had been seen since, as far as most knew.

Jopfer said nothing. He merely nodded, acknowledging Kaz's warning... then began to swell in size. His snout twisted; his teeth grew longer and sharper. The fur covering him became scales as red as fire. The robe fell away, revealing expanding wings and a long whip of a tail that had not been there a breath before.

His hands became claws with long talons, and his arms twisted. He was already ten times his original size.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Where the minotaur had stood there now squatted a red dragon of immense proportions. Kaz noted how the huge chamber allowed the creature free movement and wondered if perhaps—and the thought was a chilling one—if perhaps the place had been built with him in mind.

"I am Infernus!" roared the dragon, looking down at them as if they were insects. "I have worked centuries to make you all what you are! I have guided you in guise after guise!" He raised his head high. "I am your true god... and you have been very, very naughty children indeed!"

They backed away suddenly as a fear washed over them. It was no normal fear, not even what one might expect to feel when confronted by such a leviathan. Kaz recognized it as dragonfear, a magic of the creatures he had not felt since the war.

The dragon, Infernus, lowered his head. "And as naughty children, it's time you were punished."

Chapter 14

The Emperor

"You shouldn't even be here!" insisted Kaz, fighting the dragonfear. "The dragons have all left Krynn! Since the end of the war!"

"The gods commanded that we depart, yes," agreed the red leviathan. "They compelled us! We served them well... on both sides... and for our reward we were to be cast out of this world! Yet I resisted! I fought against the pull! One by one, my brethren flew off into the air, unable to command their own wills, but still I managed to resist!"

The red dragon clambered down from the dais, eyes darting from one minotaur to the next. Each time his gaze returned to Ty. Kaz noted that and began to wonder.

"My anger was my strength. I had served my lady well, working over the centuries to achieve her goal, and now I was supposed to abandon my work for her, all that I had strived for! It had become more mine than hers, and I was simply to leave it behind because of her failure! I, Infernus!"

Where were the clerics and the guards? Kaz had expected others to barge in by this point. Did they not hear the bellowing? He could not believe the minotaurs who worked in the temple knew the secret of their high priest. Perhaps a few high-ranking ones did, but even that was doubtful.

Again Kaz tried to will his axe to his hands. This time, he felt a slight tug, as if Honor's Face sought to return but was prevented. Yet it gave him a little hope. The dragon's will was not invincible. Kaz might be able to get the axe back if he could distract the dragon enough.

Providing he got the chance.

Infernus seemed glad to have an audience, albeit a captive one, for which to boast of his exploits. They were probably the first outsiders to know the truth... no doubt because the dragon intended to kill them all.

"You are my children, more than you are the offspring of either Sargas or his mistress, dark Takhisis! I have made you into the terrors that you are, guided you over generations for her, obeyed foolish edicts, and given you over to other masters so that you would be honed by the harshness of

your lives. All so that you would become stronger, more defiant soldiers! Now, I can lead you to fulfill your glory, and mine! I will rule, and your kind will act as my talons, reaching out farther and farther until we have all of Krynn under control! You shall bow to no one, no god or goddess, but me!"

Infernus looked up to the ceiling. If Kaz had understood the dragon correctly, then the history of the minotaur race was a mockery—centuries of endless manipulation by forces without and within—the dragon the greatest manipulator of all. Every high priest for countless generations may have been this dragon in minotaur form.

The shiver that ran down his spine was not influenced by the dragonfear, but rather the realization of what had happened to all those minotaurs, many of them no doubt good, honest clerics. What had Jopfer thought when the offer was presented? Had he thought that here was a way for someone to correct the ills of the priesthood? Had he believed that he could work with his former masters and make the temple of Sargas an ally of the circle?

When had he finally discovered the truth? Just before Infernus stole his form and destroyed him?

The baleful gaze of the huge red creature suddenly focused on Kaz. "A shame you had to be so defiant, Kaziganthi de-Orilg. You and I share a kindred spirit, but that is why you could not obey me. You were useful for a time, though, spreading the glory of minotaur skills beyond the homeland. For a time I let those tales spread among your own kind, knowing such feats as were rumored could only encourage others to strive harder." He dipped his massive head in what Kaz supposed was a bow. "I am glad I decided to let you live after you departed the circus. It would have been a pity to rid myself of both you and your brother at the same time. Until you began to settle down and draw others from the homeland, you were more aid than hindrance to my plans. Had you accepted my offer, you would have redeemed yourself and become my greatest general. I hoped you would. Truly I had hoped so. You are what I have been striving to create, Kaziganthi. You are the minotaur warrior that knows no defeat, knows no challenge that cannot be overcome!" Infernus cocked his head. "You still have one last chance."

"You must be mad!" Kaz began, enraged. "After what you've done to me and mine you still have the arrogance to offer—"

"You!" The voice was Ganth's, as Kaz had never heard this father. The mariner, sword raised, stared wide-eyed at the leviathan. Despite his dragonfear, the older minotaur began edging forward. "You had Raud killed! And you had *Gladiator* sent out on that doomed mission, didn't you? I remember the high priest sanctioning it! By the Just One's beard, I remember the temple practically insisting we be sent out into those dark waters immediately... without a cleric aboard, which was standard practice back then! You knew we'd run into those ships, those marauders, and that storm as well, didn't you? You expected us all to perish, didn't you?"

Eyeing Ganth, the dragon coldly replied, "It was my duty to cull the weak, the unstable, and the unpredictable from the ranks. The race had to be tempered constantly if it was to be of use to my mistress." Infernus scowled, but not at them. "And what was done?" the dragon raged. "They were wasted, used as fodder by those who could not appreciate my efforts! I strained to create for her a perfect race through which she and her consort could take Ansalon. Then her insipid little mortal minions wasted so much effort! All the centuries of work, the strengthening through adversity and winnowing..."

"You killed Kyri, you slimy serpent..." Ganth growled. "You killed my crew. You killed hundreds... thousands... You killed my son——"

Kaz moved too late to stop his father. The older minotaur bounded forward, rage overwhelming reason. He raised his sword high, calling out an old minotaur war cry.

Raising one limb, Infernus reached forward and batted Ganth away.

"Father!" Kaz and Fliara both cried. Ganth literally flew over their heads, his weapon clattering to

the floor. The companions, save for Ty, forgot the dragon as Ganth crashed into the floor several yards away, his body sprawled.

Even before Kaz reached him, he knew that his father was dead.

He looked down at the lifeless body. From the marks on him, it was possible Ganth had died before he landed. A single blow from a dragon could easily kill most mortals.

In that moment, the accursed voice of the gray man murmured in his head, "I'm sorry, Kaz. I had no control."

"Get out of my head!" he muttered, turning on the dragon. Infernus was personally responsible for the deaths of his parents and his brother. He was, as Ganth had pointed out, responsible for the deaths of thousands, all in the name of some foul plan to create a perfect race of warriors to serve a sinister goddess. Kaz faced the murderous beast, again seeking to will Honor's Face to him. Briefly, he almost thought he would succeed, but the dragon's will was still too strong, even though Kaz was fueled by intense grief and anger.

As he abandoned his effort, he became aware of a lone figure standing before the fearsome behemoth.

Ty.

"I won't let you hurt them anymore!" the girl called.

"Ty! Get away from him!" Kaz yelled.

"You are young. I will forgive your foolishness," Inferitus told the human. "But do not test my goodwill!"

"You killed Kaz's father!" shouted Ty, ignoring the dragon's words.

A fireball large enough to consume a minotaur burst from the human female's hands. It flew at Infernus, striking him in the chest. The dragon grunted, batting away the flames.

"Consider yourself fortunate that the balance must be maintained, young one. Now behave yourself."

A transparent shell of bright red fell over the girl. It sank down, first enveloping, then passing through its victim. The last traces disappeared into the floor, but the aftereffects were evident. Ty slumped to the floor, overcome with dizziness.

"This has gone on far too long," declared Hecar. "We have to take him or die trying. What other choice have we? Are you with me?"

"The girl must be freed," came the voice of the gray ; man again. "There must be balance in all things for you to succeed. Balance leads to balance."

"I said get out of my head!" Kaz growled. "Take your advice and stuff it back into whatever dream you come from!"

Fliara touched his arm. "Kaz! What ails you? Who're you talking to?"

He had no time to answer, for Infernus refocused his attention. "You were not supposed to die in the circus, Kaziganthi, but your father would have, as an object lesson to you. That is rectified. Now, however, I see that I might as well have let you perish. You will never bow. Never. It would be efficient to simply eliminate you and your small band once and for all, but there would be little satisfaction in removing you in such a... draconian... fashion. Your deaths must be elaborate to excite the masses, something even more extravagant than the ritual executions I'd earlier planned. I shall have to think about it."

They started forward, but it was already too late. Emerald shells similar to the red one that had enveloped Ty covered each of them. Kaz felt his body stiffen, his mind grow distant. The shell

passed through him and, by the time it sank into the floor, he could not move at all, save to breathe. Out of the corner of his eye, Kaz could see Hecar's hand, as pale and still as his own.

"Why are you doing this?" came Ty's voice. "Let them go and I'll do everything you say! I won't resist anymore!"

Infernus seemed impressed. "You need to be as helpless as the rest. I thought I took your true origin into account. You are stronger than you appear. Young One! Good! That means you will live a long, long life for me! Many, many centuries!"

"What do you mean?"

"You still do not understand?" The great red chuckled. "Ah, the naivete of youth! Do you not understand why you are so important to me? Do you not realize what happened?" Infernus leaned his head back. "All the dragons were called away. I knew I would be compelled to follow, but I resisted. You see, my young one and my statuesque friends, there is a balance that must be maintained at all times. For me to remain on Krynn past the calling, there must have been one of my opposite number also on the world! One of the dragons of foul Paladine, you see. Yet, for this one not to obey meant that there must be unusual circumstances. I searched Krynn, sought out the magic forces. Where was there another of my kind, and how had he or she also escaped the call?"

He leaned forward again, smiling. A new wave of dragonfear washed over the helpless group, though none could do anything about it. Infernus chuckled again.

"My agents discovered the fragments of a shell. A single egg had been left behind and had hatched." As he spoke, Infernus began to shrink back to his minotaur form. It was a slow process, a small degree with each breath.

Utilizing his magic, the dragon explained, he had taken the fragments of the shell and used them to seek the hiding place of the hatchling. As long as the other dragon existed, Infernus could remain on Krynn. However, if something happened to either one, the other would likely be forced out of the world.

"Then I found the young one. Or rather, my spell found a creature that appeared to be the hatchling." He grinned. "It found you... Ty. What an amusing name."

"I'm no dragon. If I was, you'd be sorry!"

Infernus found this amusing. Infernus seemed to find everything amusing. "I thought the same, but I observed you. I sensed. I thought. Then I saw that it was true. You are a dragon, Young One. You must be one of the accursed silvers, who shape themselves with more ease than most of us. A newborn especially, with no one to mind it, can shift without intending to. It can take on a form based on the inner knowledge our kind possesses, or from things it happens to see. A young dragon might take the form of humans, who might have been the first intelligent beings it remembered seeing."

"I am human!"

"It can only have been about eight years since the call, yet you are taller than you should be, older in appearance, too, when you wear that form. That fooled me for a time, but then, young dragons grow fast at first. Deny it all you like, but do you not feel your blood calling? Do you not dream of flying through the sky, soaring at undreamt of heights? We all dream of that from birth on. It is a part of our heritage, dark or light, hatchling."

"No..." but Ty's voice evinced uncertainty.

"Yes. You cannot deny it."

Kaz struggled to move, but the dragon's spell held him fast. A multitude of thoughts swirled within him. Ty was a dragon? As insane as that sounded, it made some sense. The girl's fantastic if erratic ability with magic was impossible for one so young and untrained... if she was human.

Infernus spoke of balance, just as the voice of the gray man had. What was the connection there? He was certain the figure in gray had some past significance. Something Huma of the Lance had once spoken about, but the memory was still hazy.

His thoughts scattered as Infernus, much smaller now, suddenly shifted form. The wings shriveled, drawing within his back. His savage maw reshaped into the more familiar muzzle of a minotaur.

The dragon's tail was the last item to vanish. Before them all stood the false Jopfer, his robes floating and wrapping around him.

"You and I will have a lot of time to talk about these things, Ty. You shall realize your destiny under my tutelage. As for these four..." The high priest returned to the desk, pulling a cord.

A moment or two passed, then the doors opened and two acolytes hurried inside. They froze at the sight of the figures standing before them.

"Summon the guards," commanded Infernus in his role of Jopfer. One of the acolytes did. When the guards arrived, the high priest ordered, "Remove these to cells on different levels from the one set aside for the girl. Be especially thorough when binding the kender. I want them all here for their ritual combats. Their deaths will mark the commencing of the day of destiny for the glorious minotaur race... and myself."

They were suddenly able to move again, though temple guards surrounded them. One of the sentries prodded Ganth's body. Kaz snarled and tried to push him away, but the other soldiers held him back.

"Remove that unsightly object and return it to the clan of Orilg. Inform their patriarch that the emperor and I will want to see him in a few days to explain his involvement in these activities. He will receive a summoning when I desire his presence."

"Yes, Holiness."

To Kaz's horror, his father's body was unceremoniously dragged away. Slowly it dawned on Kaz that none of the other minotaurs had evidently heard anything that had gone on in the chamber, including the high priest's revelations.

"You fools!" he dared shout. "You don't even know what happened here! You don't even know the truth about your high priest!"

They were all looking at him. He was about to say more when his eyes met those of Infernus. There was a knowing look in them, a gleam that invited Kaz to say whatever he wanted. The robed figure would not stop him from speaking the truth.

Kaz shut his mouth. The high priest had good reason for not caring whether Kaz informed the others about his true identity. If he had not seen the dragon for himself, he would not have believed his story either. Everyone knew the dragons were gone, and what minotaur would believe that every high priest for centuries past had been the selfsame dragon in disguise? That was the beauty of the red dragon's plot. The truth was too outrageous.

The edges of the robed figure's mouth crept upward. "Take all of them away except the human."

The guards had just begun leading them away from the chamber when several more arrived, their leader none other than a severely shocked Scurm. He looked at Kaz and the other captives, then at the high priest.

"Holiness—" he started.

"Captain Scurm. I find these intruders in the temple and I find you also here. Is there a connection?"

Before the scarred minotaur could defend himself, one of the guards said, "Holiness, we saw him lead this group into the temple, claiming this warrior was a prisoner you would desire to question and the others a unit of the State Guard."

"Holiness, I can explain! I led them here, then alerted the guards to their trick!"

Infernus smiled, rubbing his jaw. "Then you are deserving of a special reward, something of your heart's desire, I think."

Scurm gave Kaz a triumphant smile, then dipped his head in gratitude to the robed figure.

"I'm going to grant you a personal combat against four of the present grand champions from the surrounding arenas. It will be one of the highlights of the circus in the coming days. I'm sorry that it cannot be Kaziganthi de-Oril'g himself, but this should more than satisfy you, wouldn't you say? If you kill them, you will be returned to the guard with full honors and a ranking high enough to earn you a post of commanding officer. If you die, then..." Infernus shrugged. The scarred minotaur was a veteran of the circus, but he was no match for four grand champions.

Scurm's strained voice expressed his realization that he had just been more or less sentenced to death. "But... but, Holiness..."

"Guards, escort Captain Scurm along with the others. See to it that he has the proper accommodations. It will give him time to consider his choice of actions when confronted by enemies of the state."

"Holiness, I am a captain of the State Guard—"

"Which follows the dictates of the emperor, the circle, and, of course, the temple." Infernus waved a languid hand. "You are all dismissed. Prepare yourselves for the circus. There will be no interruption of the combats this time."

With a protesting Scurm in tow, the guards prodded Kaz and his companions out of the audience chamber. Kaz caught one last glimpse of Infernus descending the dais and walking toward a hapless Ty. Then the doors closed.

Kaz tried once more to summon Honor's Face, thinking that they might as well make a last stand here as in the circus, but his thoughts were too confused. He had failed them, Ganth most of all.

And Ty, a dragon? It did not sound so surprising, not after all Kaz had been through during the war. Huma's silver dragon had also been a beautiful human maiden. Kaz had also seen one or two other dragons take human forms.

Hecar walked up next to him. "Kaz, I grieve with you. I swear that each blow I strike in the arena will be in your father's honor. They'll see a battle like they've never seen."

"Be quiet!" snapped a guard.

They completed the journey in silence, even Scurm, who was still obviously befuddled by his downfall. Kaz almost felt sorry for him.

The guards separated the prisoners, putting each into a different cell. They were careful to search the kender beforehand, removing several items, including a tinder box belonging to one of the guards.

Kaz and Scurm were the last two to be incarcerated.

"Inside," one of the guards commanded Kaz. When he obeyed too slowly, both guards prodded him. Once inside the cell, which was lit only by a torch that one of the temple warriors held, Kaz was quickly chained to the far wall.

The lead guard looked over the chains to be sure they would hold, then said to the prisoner, with a grin, "You won't be going anywhere this time. I'll promise you that."

He received no response from Kaz, which made him scowl. A moment later, the guards exited, taking Scurm with them.

Darkness enveloped Kaz, the only illumination coming from a small, barred window in the door.

His eyes adjusted slowly. What's the point? he asked himself discouragingly. Infernus had everything under control. The minotaur race was his tool, to direct as he pleased. No one would believe that the high priest was anything but one of their own. Few would Likely cross the high priest, even if they knew his origins.

What a jest it was, the history of the noble minotaur race. All they had achieved, all the adversity they had suffered, was for the sake of a dark goddess and her servants. Warriors had lived and died for generation after generation in the mistaken belief that they fought for the future of their own kind.

Warriors like Ganth.

Kaz closed his eyes and tried not to think. He forced himself to ignore the streaks of moisture gliding down his face and waited for the oblivion of exhaustion to overcome him.

What he got instead, after some hours of fairly fruitless waiting, was a visit from the gray man.

* * * * *

Polik did not like being dragged from his bed before sunrise. Polik, in fact, did not like being dragged from his bed several hours after sunrise, but Jopfer had requested his presence and the emperor feared the high priest sufficiently to obey.

The acolytes spirited him to the temple with their usual efficiency. It did not do for others to see the emperor rushing to an audience; that was bad for the image Polik had worked hard to perfect. That was why he had lasted in the role for as long as he had. Both the warlords and the high priest had found him well-suited. Polik believed he would go down in the annals of minotaur history as the emperor who had led his people to their destiny, and all he had to do in return was follow the words of those like Jopfer.

"This way," indicated one of his guides as they entered a hidden doorway of the temple. "His Holiness is impatient."

One thing that did annoy him was that few of the high priest's people bothered to address him as emperor. He would bring it up with Jopfer, delicately reminding the high priest that appearances were important at all times.

What did that emaciated fiend want at this time of night? Had they finally located the damnable Kaz? The shame of that travesty in the circus still angered the emperor. How had Kaz been allowed to wear that medallion? Where had it come from? As far as he knew, his rival of old had thrown the thing to the ground after the death of his brother... Raum or something like that. It unnerved him to think that Kaz had kept it all these years. Had he always planned to come back to challenge Polik?

Kaz was not that big a fool, but...

Before he realized it, he was in one of the smaller rooms behind the great audience chamber of the high priest. These were Jopfer's private rooms, the place where the pair generally met.

The high priest himself was seated in a chair behind a wooden desk that was a perfect copy of the stone seat atop the dais. Jopfer seemed lost in thought. The acolyte in the lead respectfully cleared his throat.

"You are here," Jopfer said complacently. "I expected you sooner. We have an important matter to discuss."

"I came as soon as I could." The emperor made no move to sit. He never sat down, no matter how much he ached, unless the high priest indicated it was all right to do so.

Jopfer gave no such indication. He dismissed the acolytes, then, when they were gone, he said, "Kaziganthi de-Orilg and his associates are in the custody of the temple."

Polik brightened up. "You have them all?"

"All. The old one, Ganthirogani of the same clan, died during the capture. His body will be returned to the clan, which will have some explanations to make."

The minotaur did not envy Dastrun, but was glad it was the Orilg patriarch and not him who faced the high priest's displeasure. "Good news, indeed. My thanks for alerting me to this."

"You should not have been so careless in the circus, Polik, altering my orders. If not for the fact that someone had already confused the commands and placed Kaziganthi in a certain deadly situation, I would be especially angry. He was to have fought a single ogre, a certain triumph for him. Then, with his confidence swollen, he would have seen his father killed by the gladiators. It would have shattered his spirit, I think, made him malleable." Jopfer idly scratched his chin. "Merriq has paid for not being able to properly transmit commands."

So, despite Polik's transgression at the circus, the high priest was willing to forgive and forget. Polik was not quite certain he understood, but he was willing to accept his good fortune. "Then if that is all—"

"There is more."

"More?"

"Certain plans have come to the fore. A missing component of my—of our—success is now within my hands. I think it is ready to use. I do not see why we need delay any longer. The fleet is ready, and our warriors chafe at the bit, desiring blood and glory. It is time we gave them free rein."

Polik almost sat down in astonishment. "The campaign is to begin? The Supreme Circle—"

"Will sanction everything, some of them because they are as bloodthirsty as their warriors and the others because they would look like cowards to the rest." Jopfer's eyes seemed to blaze with anticipation. "For the announcement, we must plan a special day in the circus, a showing of our might to the general population. The event will highlight the deaths of the rebellious minotaurs, your ultimate combat victory, ensuring your place at the head of our people, and the announcement of the impending campaign."

The campaign. Polik could scarcely believe what he had heard. The campaign was to begin at last. "Where do we attack?"

Leaning back, the high priest replied, "I've chosen the humans to the west of us. It will be a two-pronged attack, with the fleet sailing north and coming around to their shores up there. They will transport an army with them, of course. Meanwhile, the rest of our forces will come through the mountains and crush their eastern border."

"Such a two-pronged attack could work against us as well as for us," Polik dared to point out. "They're only humans, I grant you, but there is always the unexpected."

"The plan will succeed. I will give you details concerning it on the morrow. Rest easy, Emperor. We have tremendous power behind us, a force as great as any army. On the day of the attack, you will know the details. I can say nothing more for now, but it will be a sign to our people that their patience has been rewarded. It will be a sign that this is the beginning of our conquest of Krynn!"

"At last..." Polik rubbed his huge hands together in anticipation, then recalled something said earlier. "Did you say my 'combat victory'? In the circus?"

"You are overdue for a victory. Emperor. This incident with the heretics has further emphasized the need to renew the people's faith in you. A successful duel prior to the announcement will nudge them in the correct direction."

"Against Kaz?"

"The thought had occurred to me," replied the high priest. "He has become uncontrollable, no longer a trustworthy addition to our commanders. He will have to die, but I fear that for us to ensure

success in such a duel as you suggest, we would have to drug him beyond what is feasible. This combat must look true to all. No, his fate will be different. For you, I can find a more suitable opponent. There are two or three candidates among the grand champions, one especially who considers himself a far better choice for emperor than you, Polik. As a matter of fact, he was encouraged to make a formal declaration... or rather, he will be. See to it that he gets his reply in time for the event."

"Of course, Holiness." Another victory under his belt. No one would be able to deny his destiny, save for Jopfer, of course. However, Polik saw no reason why he could not find a way to remove the one obstacle to his complete authority, sooner or later. It would not be too troublesome to eliminate Jopfer.

"You may return to your bed." The high priest turned away, his thoughts already elsewhere. The acolytes came up behind Polik.

The day of destiny was to begin. The emperor could scarcely believe his luck. He had begun to wonder if the day would ever come. Jopfer was correct; it would be good to prove his right to rule just before the announcement. An imperial combat was definitely called for.

As the acolytes led the emperor out of the temple, his thoughts turned again to how simple it would be to remove the one minotaur he feared... once the campaign was well underway, of course. There were those among the circle who would welcome Jopfer's demise. From among them he would be able to find a capable assassin. Then, it would simply be a matter of timing. For all his power, there were limits to the high priest's control. It would not be hard to kill him.

After all, under the cloak of authority, Jopfer was just a minotaur like the rest of them.

Chapter 15

The Gray Man

Ayasha did not like the reason Helati gave her for needing her to watch the children, but she understood. Helati did not want to spend time arguing. It was terrible enough pulling herself away from the infants. She felt like a negligent mother, but hoped that, if something happened to her, they would grow up understanding why. She had to try to bring their father back.

This was her quest. The other minotaurs could fend for themselves.

No one was in sight as, before dawn, she stepped out to saddle her mount. In a few minutes, she would be on her way, with no one but Ayasha and her mate knowing her secret. She had given Ayasha permission to let others know once she was far away.

"You can't be serious about riding there alone, can you?"

Helati whirled about to find Brogan, his shoulder bandaged, standing a few yards behind her. He had moved so silently that neither she nor her mount had taken any notice of him. "What're you doing here, Brogan? And why isn't your wound healed? You are a cleric."

"My faith in Sargas has been... weak... of late. This is the best I could do. That's not important, though." He shrugged, changing the subject. "It's strange. I had a dream a short bit ago, about a human. I've rarely seen humans, save in war, and certainly not one all dressed in gray... from top to bottom. It was a short, strange dream. He told me he could not stay long, but he wanted me to wake up and find you. The children needed you more since Kaz was gone. That was what he said. Then, I

woke up."

His words were disconcerting, especially about this human in gray. "Just your own fears, Brogan. There's nothing to the dream."

"But you're leaving," he pointed out. "And dream or not, I think you need to stay here."

"You were the one who wanted to gather an armed force and storm Nethosak... or was that a ploy at the time to get most of us back in the grip of the emperor?"

His expression made her instantly regret the rash comment. "It was meant honestly. I've thought things over, Helati. Kaz was correct about a large force being more hindrance than help. That is even more true now. If we rode in to save Kaz, we'd be riding right into the high priest's hands. The high priest is the one to watch, not old Polik."

"I can't just sit and wait. Kaz may need help."

"He may be dead already," Brogan returned bluntly. "I'm sorry to say that, but it could be true. Riding to Nethosak would then accomplish nothing except that you would share the same fate. Would Kaz want you to abandon the children?"

"That's not fair! You know I'm not simply abandoning them!"

The one-horned minotaur dipped his head apologetically. "I said that badly, but you know what I mean. The children should be your primary concern now."

"And what about Kaz?"

"He may return with your brother and the kender, all of them none the worse for their experiences. He may be a prisoner of the high priest. He may be dead. The point is, you must stay here and wait."

"Who can I ask to go in my place? This concerns my mate and my brother. Should I be any less than Tremoc? He journeyed over Ansalon time and time again, tracking down the murderer of his own mate."

"Tremoc was Tremoc, and although his legend has much merit, it shouldn't be the basis for this decision. Besides, you don't have to go to Nethosak yourself. There is another way to find out what's going on. Mistress Helati."

"What do you mean?" She eyed the other minotaur. "What other method could there possibly be?"

Brogan looked away. He seemed ashamed. "I have... a swifter way to contact Nethosak, swifter even than if we had messenger birds to use. Something I brought with me as an emergency measure."

Her eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"A small medallion. I purchased it from a black-robed mage during the war, when I often needed to go places where I could not use my own powers without being noticed by a cleric of Paladine. It can contact anyone in Nethosak, but only for a short time. It turned out I never used it. I brought it with me, though. It should still work."

"Can I use it?"

"It's attuned to me, but... perhaps I'd rather not explain a lot about it... It's not something I'm proud of now." He spread his hands. "You must believe me, Helati! I would not lie to you about this. I never thought to use it since I planned to abandon my former allegiances, but now the opportunity and the need demand it."

Helati thought over his words carefully, then nodded. "All right, but let us both try it together."

Brogan agreed. They returned to his dwelling, where he moved aside a small chest.

"I was looking at it when you came. You see, I was already contemplating contacting someone I know back there." The one-horned minotaur pulled out a small silver medallion with a blue crystal in the middle. There were markings on it, but Helati could not make them out. Brogan held the item cupped in one hand.

"How does it work? I've never seen anything like it before."

"It's simple. I merely have to put my thumb on the crystal and my index finger directly opposite it on the other side of the medallion. Then I think of the location or person and close my eyes." He gave Helati a grim smile. "It cost me quite a lot, but I felt a need for it at the time."

Indeed, there was much about his murky past that needed to be explained, but that was not important to her now. Helati moved nearer so that she could read the detail on the artifact. Her mind was racing. "Who did you plan to speak with earlier?"

"I think there might be a few friends of mine who would still give me aid. I will try for them now."

"No, let me try. I have a better idea."

He looked at her, uncertain. Then, shrugging, Brogan handed her the artifact. "As I said, originally it was attuned to me."

"I have to try." Thumb and index finger in place, Helati concentrated. She tried for Kaz, but for some reason, the great clan house of Orilg invaded her thoughts instead.

"—to me—" began a voice.

She was so startled, she broke contact.

"What is it?"

"You have no need to fear that it won't work for me, Brogan." Without waiting for his reply, Helati tried again.

"—agreed to by him! There will be no further word on the subject!"

Dastrun. She would know his voice anywhere. The spell was working.

All at once, the voices were accompanied by an image. It was the chamber where Dastrun and the other elders held court, and they seemed to be arguing about something amongst themselves.

"He knew the danger!" insisted Dastrun. "He made a pact! We abided by that, not even telling the guard where he had gone! That is the end of it!"

"They are scheduled to die in the arena during some contrived ceremony," pointed out an elder female. "They are to die for no good reason, Dastrun!"

"It has been decreed—"

"Decrees! We're talking about honor and justice, Patriarch!" called another voice.

"The high priest has declared them heretics and traitors," argued another, "especially Kaz!"

Kaz. They were talking about Kaz. She had thought so. Then the patriarch spoke again. "He made his agreement. We will abide by it. The clan can gain nothing by dragging itself down with Kaz and the others. They will die in the circus, and that will be the end of it. Kaz is dead from this moment on. I have made my—"

"No!" Everyone in the chamber looked up, seeking the source of the voice. Only after the echo had died away did Helati realize that she had spoken.

"What in the name of Sargas?" muttered Dastrun.

Recovering, she spoke again. "No, Dastrun, that won't do."

"Who is that? Where are you?"

"I'm Helati. Kaz's partner and mate."

Many of the elders whispered to one another. The patriarch looked disconcerted. "Where are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding, Patriarch. I've been given a device that I used to find out what is happening to Kaz. Well, I've found out what I wanted to know, and I do not like it."

"Now, Helati—"

She braced herself. Orilg was going to listen to her, Dastrun or no Dastrun. She had some things to say about loyalty and honor. She was going to make them listen— and act.

Kaz had better not die, Helati thought. If Kaz died, she would make the clan pay dearly for its failure. There was a side to Helati she had never let her mate see... but Dastrun and the other elders were about to be reminded of why she had been nicknamed "The Terror" as a young warrior.

Thinking of two infants waiting for their father to return, she started talking.

* * * * *

The tap-tap-tap of the staff against the stone floor was the first thing that alerted Kaz to the presence of another in the cell. He opened his eyes slowly, wondering why he had not heard the door being unlocked or even being swung open. When his gaze focused on a pair of gray boots half-obscured by a robe of the same color, he tried to jerk himself to his feet. Unfortunately for Kaz, the chains did not allow him to move so freely. The only thing he succeeded in doing was nearly losing his balance and crashing back against the wall.

The human in gray watched him in silence. He looked exactly as he had appeared in the dream, save that he was a little taller than Kaz recalled. The robed figure was, in fact, nearly as tall as the minotaur. It also occurred to Kaz that he could see the gray man clearly even though the torchlight from the hallway was still the only illumination available.

"Another dream?" Kaz asked.

"It is hard to tell sometimes, isn't it?" The gray man smiled in sympathy. "Sometimes I find myself wondering whether I am awake or sleeping when I do this. This time, though, I would venture to say that it is the former. Yes, the former, not a dream."

"If you've something to say, you'd better say it before the guards come to drag you away."

The gray man glanced over his shoulders. "Oh, they can't hear me, Kaz."

"Why am I not surprised? All right, then, what do you want this time?"

A sigh escaped the robed human. He leaned on his staff. There was sorrow, great sorrow in his eyes. "I grieve for your loss, Kaz. I tried to predict what would happen, but I could only guess in the end. If I could truly see the future, it would be a terrible danger to Krynn, for I'd be tempted to alter one thing after another despite the agreement I made. That would only make matters worse, not better."

Kaz snorted. "I've no idea what you're talking about, mage. You are a mage, aren't you? Or are you a cleric of Gilean?"

The questions seemed to amuse the gray figure. "You might say I'm the foremost mage in the world and perhaps, in my own way, an unofficial cleric of the God of Neutrality. I am certain my appearance makes you think the latter, though the color gray is more the mark of my agreement with the gods Solinari, Lunitari, and Nuitari. It is the way they assure that I will not forget my place, or my vow." He shook his head bemusedly. "And they say the gods have no sense of humor. They have one. We just do not think their jests very funny."

"You still haven't told me who you are or why you're here." Kaz was growing tired of the gray figure's vague and confusing comments. "Why've you been haunting us? What's all this talk of

balance?"

The staff went tap-tap-tap again. "So many questions, and so little I can answer. Your friend Huma was not half as questioning."

The minotaur's eyes narrowed. "That's where I know you from. I remember now! Huma said he met you before discovering the dragonlances!"

"There was a world out of balance then. The dragonlances were needed to restore balance, and the knight Huma became the catalyst. He was the most worthy one we could find within the time still left to us, and he proved to be better than anyone could have hoped. There are similarities between the two of you, you know. That was why I decided to keep an eye on you. I knew that even with the war over, there was still a danger, an imbalance. It is a gift, or perhaps a curse, given to me. I can know what the threat is, but am limited as to what I can do."

"You knew the truth about our high priest?"

"I discovered it. You have no idea what the presence of the two dragons means to Krynn, Kaz. The dragons, good and evil, were supposed to depart as part of the peace created among the gods. It was a pact of the highest magnitude. Yet, because one egg, the egg of a silver dragon, was lost, the entire pact could unravel. The egg meant a dragon stayed behind. In an attempt to effect some sort of balance, the world allowed for another dragon, one of evil nature, also to remain on Krynn. Unfortunately, it was the red called Infernus, one of the deadliest of the Dark Queen's servants. You, already tied to this history, became our one hope."

"What do you mean, 'already tied to this history'?" Kaz shifted uneasily. For some reason, he felt the gray man spoke the truth.

The staff tapped against the floor again. "There was a mage who held a wounded dragon prisoner. He used threats to her eggs to force her to do his will..."

Kaz's head sank. "I remember. The dragons should've been gone. It was just after the war. She and her mate had not left because they wanted to get their eggs back, the ones Brenn the Black Robe had stolen." He raised his head again and glared at the robed figure. "But Brenn fell victim to his own magic and, although the dragon perished, I brought her eggs to a place where her mate took them from me. They should be safe now, wherever they are!"

"The male silver was also wounded. You recall that. Because of his wounds, Kaz, one slipped from him. It slipped when it began to hatch, although he could not have known that. He circled, but could not find it and assumed it had broken. That was not the case, however. Dragon young are hardier than other newborns. Dragon eggs are very sturdy, and the fall only cracked the egg and stunned the hatchling. When it finally woke and freed itself, it did not know where or what it was."

"Ty... ?" Fate was laughing at Kaz again. That was the name of the young female's father—the male silver.

The gray man nodded. "The first intelligent creatures she saw, only days later, were humans, families moving on to new homes. Wanting to join, she reshaped herself without thinking. Although she was never with anyone long, the shape became so much safer to use that she soon forgot her birth form."

"All right!" snarled Kaz, growing weary of all of this. "So I'm tied to her past. That's all. You didn't have to involve me in all of this! I'm not responsible for what happened later."

"No, you are not. You were chosen, by me. The Dark Queen will use this situation. Everything for which you fought side-by-side with Huma of the Lance will be lost. We will return to endless war, with the outcome this time questionable." The gray man sighed again. "Ansalon has not recovered sufficiently from the last war to suffer such another. I chose you because I believed you would understand that. I chose you because I believed you were the best hope there was of returning Ansalon... and your own people... to its proper path."

"My father is dead... and I never wanted to be a hero."

Tap-tap-tap. "Kaziganthi de-Orilg, if I could, I would take your place, but I swore a vow to all three gods of magic, who, having removed themselves from the affairs of the others, have a vested interest of their own in maintaining the balance of the world... regardless of what their mages do. My power does not wane no matter which moon is dominant, but in return I must use care and I must always strive to help Ansalon, all of Krynn, remain in balance. I must guide others, and am never allowed to be the one who acts. Always it must be another."

Kaz was not certain that he agreed with, or even understood, everything the gray man said, but, in truth, he agreed that Ansalon could not endure a return to war. "Have you come to offer me a chance, then? Are you going to set me free and give me the means of facing Infernus?"

"Do you wish it?"

"Given a choice... yes."

"I have spoken to the young dragon. She will abide for now, but only because she is lost in her own mind. If you desire to help, to restore the balance, Kaz, there is one thing you must do, whether you perish or not. You must awaken the dragon within her."

Kaz grunted. "I thought Infernus was trying to do that already."

The gray man shook his head. "No, he seeks only to release the form and power of the young one to do his bidding. He seeks to twist the silver into his servant. If you hope for victory, you must awaken the true dragon. You must stir Tiberia to be what a silver dragon is meant to be. Only then can you possibly defeat the creature Infernus."

"I won't be able to do anything as long as I'm like this," Kaz retorted, indicating his chains with a rattle. "Are you planning on releasing me?"

His ethereal companion looked away in what might have been outright embarrassment. "You will know what the time comes." The staff tapped against the floor again. "The guard is stirring."

The minotaur glanced at the door, hearing, in the distance, the movements of the sentry. He turned his gaze back to the gray man, but the human was no longer there.

"Typical mage," he snarled under his breath. "More damned trouble than help!" Still, his mood had lifted, his determination returned. He had battled ogres, mages, and even living statues, defeating all of them. He might fall to Infernus, but he was not going to go complacently to his death.

It would have eased his mind if he had been able to retrieve Honor's Face, but surely any strong minotaur axe could cut through the scaly hide of a dragon, couldn't it? There was one way to find out.

Something blotted out the light. The shadowed head of the guard covered most of the barred window as he glanced inside at the prisoner.

"Something the matter?" Kaz asked.

The sentry peered inside, then snorted. After one more quick glance, he shook his head and departed without a word.

Alone again, Kaz considered the gray man. From what little he now recalled of Huma's encounters with the figure, the gray man never said more than he needed to say. He did not promise that Kaz would succeed; nor did he promise that the minotaur would live, even if he somehow did garner victory. Huma had died even though he defeated the Dark Queen; the same might happen to Kaz. It was not a comforting thought, but it did not dissuade him. If he had one last opportunity even to slow down the dragon's machinations, then he would gladly take it. He wished the others were not involved. They might all perish. Even if the gray man mourned them also, he would immediately start searching for someone else to restore the balance. In some ways, his methods seemed almost as

heartless as those of the dragon. Yet it was the gods who forced the mage to act as he did, the gods who interfered whenever they felt like it.

That was not quite the truth, and Kaz knew it. Paladine was not like that, and Kaz supposed that even the hands of the most powerful gods were tied at times.

"Paladine," he whispered. "Kiri-Jolith... and you, too, Habbakuk." The three gods made up the pantheon honored by the three orders belonging to the Knights of Solamnia. Kaz respected these three the most for their sense of justice and honor. Especially now, it made more sense to honor the Solamnic gods rather than Sargas, who seemed to demand so much and give pitifully little. "Do you think you could make an exception and interfere just one time? For me?"

He received no answer, of course.

* * * * *

Infernus looked out over his city, his kingdom. His eyes allowed him to see everything in exceptional detail despite the darkness. He could make out the tall walls surrounding the northern reaches of Nethosak. Nethosak had become a marvel that any race could admire, and the damage done by the war was but a memory. He had molded the minotaurs well in that respect; they worked like bees in a hive, constantly building and rebuilding for the good of the race.

There were exceptions, however. The greatest of these would perish, though, and his taint would fade before the year was out. The new campaign, the red dragon's campaign, would demand the minotaurs' full attention.

The minotaurs were his by right. Infernus knew that. It was he who had worked so long to make them what they were now. When he had come, at his mistress's bidding, Nethosak had been a young city only a fraction of its present size. The temple of Sargas had been less of a power then, as had been the governing body of the race. Already a competitive people by nature, Infernus simply played on that aspect of the minotaur personality and busied himself creating what would become the Great Circus and the games.

With his ability to shift form, he had easily infiltrated their kind. A green dragon, often used for plans involving subtle cunning, might also have succeeded in influencing the minotaurs, but greens, Infernus thought with a snort of derision, were poor military beasts. They were good for little plots behind the scenes, but they failed to comprehend the intricacies involved in creating an armed force or fighting a strategic, large-scale battle.

He had thought first of assuming the role of emperor, but the temple and the role of high priest offered a more secluded, secret hierarchy. It provided him with the privacy he needed, plus its influence could be even greater than that of the other arms of the government, if played correctly.

So much work, Infernus thought with pride, returning to his chambers. Under the guise of the high priest Presir, whom he had, of course, been forced to eliminate, Infernus had caused the first temple to be built. Its grand scale had appealed to the populace, and he had known that, when completed, it would continue to impress future generations as well. The audience chamber and his own personal rooms he designed so that he would be able, at times, to return to his true shape. Infernus had directed the artisans to carve the dragon relief that now stood over the massive doorway to the audience chamber.

He had actually enjoyed revealing himself to the small, pathetic group that had attempted to rescue the hatchling. Only the minotaur supposedly chosen to be the next high priest ever saw his true form, and that just before the dragon dispatched the unfortunate and took on his corporeal shape. In some ways, it was a pity these heretics had to die. It would have been a pleasant respite for Infernus to, on occasion, speak to someone who knew the truth.

Of course, there was the hatchling. Given time, she would understand better than anyone else.

"You would be more comfortable if you would just give in to your destiny, Young One," Infernus

informed the tiny figure standing in the middle of the chamber. "I could ease the restraints a little bit, then."

"I won't help you!" Ty was surrounded by a field of crimson that pulsed with each breath the young woman took. The strain of standing through the night was obvious in her tense expression, but she had not sat down since Infernus had moved her here from the great audience chamber.

"Your will is a credit to your heritage. A human, even a minotaur, would not be so strong. They are all weak, the little races. It is we, the dragons, who should have rightly come to rule Krynn." The high priest indicated the city outside. "We are everything they are not. Look at what little they have done during their existence. They spend so much time quarreling with one another that they fail to achieve much else. They need the guidance of an older, wiser race to show them how the world was meant to be. They need us, Young One. That is why you should be willing to help me. It is for their own good."

"You're lying! Kaz and Delbin would never want me to help you!"

There was a fleet waiting to depart in a matter of a few days and a vast army poised to march around and through the mountains to the west. They were awaiting his command. He did not have the time to spend trying to convince this confused young silver dragon of what was the right thing to do. Infernus decided that once the minotaur Kaz was dead, he would resort to harsher methods of persuasion. She would change her mind when the minotaur's body was brought to her. The hatchling's defiance, too, was a credit to her race, but enough was enough. Infernus had a world to conquer.

"You are weak, Young One, not so much in power but in mind. I see I shall have to do what I can to educate you, to teach you. You will come to appreciate my efforts, believe me." Infernus steepled his hands. Centuries of role-playing had ingrained certain human habits in the dragon's mind and body. He talked to Ty as he would one of his faithful acolytes. "This is for the good of all. You will agree in the end, even if your friend Kaz understands too late. It is better that his life ends before the great campaign begins. He would not cooperate, and his continued presence would only confuse otherwise loyal soldiers."

Yes, Infernus thought. The death of... Tiberia's... champion and the threat to her tiny kender friend would be enough to break the young one's will. It was a pity he could not take the girl to the circus to watch the minotaur's death, but it was too soon to risk bringing the youngster out in the open. Still, the same spell that had allowed Infernus to first discover his counterpart could be used again. The female could watch the events unfolding in the circus from here, in the temple, alone and helpless.

His captive continued to stand, as if by this mere act of defiance she could hurt Infernus. Infernus shook his head. "You weaken only yourself with this act, Young One. The minotaur will still die, and you will eventually collapse. Why not conserve your strength? Perhaps, if you get some rest, you will see things as they truly are meant to be."

To his surprise and mild pleasure, Ty did just that. She sat down resignedly and, with a sigh, rubbed her eyes.

Then she did something that confused even the red dragon. Ty looked up and stared, her expression a questioning one. It was almost as if she were asking if she had made the correct decision by at last sitting down. But Ty was not staring at her. She was staring over the high priest's shoulder.

Infernus turned quickly, wondering if the minotaur Kaz had somehow magically escaped again, but there was no sign of any other figure. Uneasy for some reason he could not fathom, the dragon crossed the chamber and peered around, seeking any shadowy area that might hide a watcher as small as the kender. Still there was nothing to see.

He turned back to Ty, but the young one had already closed her eyes, exhaustion having swiftly taken over. Finally Infernus dismissed the matter and departed the chamber. He still had a war to

finish planning... once he made the final preparations for the minotaur's death spectacle.

Chapter 16

Clan Loyalty

The announcement that Emperor Polik was to answer a challenge in the circus was not the most important reason for the vast crowd that squeezed into the huge arena that day. Polik had been winning his challenges for so long that most assumed he would win again. There were, of course, many who would have preferred to see him lose, especially a few select members of the Supreme Circle who cared neither for him nor for the influence of the high priest. Be that as it may, most of the crowd, both those able to gain entrance and those forced to wait outside and simply listen, had come for different reasons.

The short but unforgettable appearance by Kaz, a supreme champion still recalled by many—whose fame had reached a new zenith since his escape—had galvanized many minotaurs. There was something of a mystique about the infamous champion who had shunned his race at the height of his success. When it was announced that he had been recaptured and would appear in the circus again, anticipation had begun to build. Many in the audience actually sympathized with Kaz, realizing that it took bravery to step away after reaching such a plateau.

Aside from Kaz, there was another reason why the minotaurs flocked to the circus in even greater numbers than usual. That reason was the rumored announcement. No one knew just what that announcement was supposed to concern, but it was to take place immediately after the emperor's expected victory, and the majority opinion was that the day of destiny had finally arrived. Everyone knew that the fleet was ready to set sail. The armies had been training near the mountains and were, by this point, ready for battle. The work still continued on ships and weaponry, but the might of the minotaurs was ready to be let loose. So the general populace was ready to believe.

Some wondered if the race had sufficiently recovered from its years of war and bondage, but they kept their thoughts to themselves. The emperor, with the high priest's blessing, insisted that the minotaur race was ready. The Supreme Circle, while a little less enthusiastic, affirmed its confidence in the people.

At the moment, the elite legions were marching in hill dress uniform around the floor of the circus. Armor gleamed in the sun as hundreds of minotaurs marched in perfect unison. Each unit carried high its standard, emblems depicting creatures of strength. There were those of the Bear Legion, the Lion, the Hawk, and, favored of the temple, the Dragon. The order of appearance was based on the battle records of each of these units, with Dragon inevitably first, but all were considered stalwarts of the cause. Horns blared as each unit passed the boxes where the rulership of the twin kingdoms sat. Cheers went up from the different sections when individual commanders paraded past. It was a glorious day for ceremony.

Polik contemplated all this as he prepared for the imperial combat. Everything was going as Jopfer had said it would. Oh, to be sure, there were those in the audience who resented his reign and protested the efforts he and the high priest had put into the new campaign, but their only choice was to join the war or be dishonored in the eyes of their fellows. The high priest had been exceptionally successful in his determination to undermine all resistance. Minotaurs were encouraged by the temple to inform on naysayers. The number of spies employed by the temple and the circle—not to mention his own private corps—had quadrupled in the past few months.

One of his aides entered the chamber. "Emperor, a cleric seeks permission for a private audience with you."

It was about time, the graying minotaur thought. The combat was only minutes away. He had begun to wonder "Send him in." To his servants, he said, "You are all dismissed. Do not return until you are summoned."

They knew the routine almost as well as he did. Polik did not care what they thought. Their livelihoods depended on his whims.

A robed figure, who might or might not have been the same cleric who had come the last time Polik had fought, entered the room moments later. They all looked the same to Polik—tall, narrow fellows with little humor. The cleric gave the emperor a cursory bow, then remained silent until the aide had departed.

"Well? Is it done?"

"Your challenger has received the blessing of the temple, as is proscribed by law. He has drunk the ritual goblet of wine and even now awaits the summons to the field."

That was it, then. The cleric had given the fool the carefully drugged wine. The temple was adept at creating mixtures that did their work and later left no trace. In fact, someone drinking the same wine only half an hour later would feel no effects. His challenger would not even be affected until about the time he stood on the ten-foot-high, ten-yard-wide wooden platform and it began to rotate under the power of a dozen or so minotaur warriors. It was then that disorientation would strike him.

That was all the advantage Polik needed. Sometimes he felt he could have defeated a challenger undrugged. The clerics, however, had the process down to perfection and did not like any tampering. Jopfer was very much like his two predecessors, so much so that Polik, who also had collaborated with these two, sometimes felt as if he were dealing with the same cleric who had first crowned him emperor.

"And Kaz?" he finally asked. "What about Kaz?"

"At this time, he and his companions are being rounded up for their journey to the circus."

"They should've been dealt with before my combat. My combat should be the culmination of events."

The cleric's expression did not change. "His Holiness has decided they should be used as examples after the grand crusade is announced. Their deaths will be used to remind other heretics what it means to defy the destiny of our race."

Polik scratched his jaw. "Suppose so. Would've done it different, myself." He shrugged. "That's it, then. Time for the duel."

"Sargas be with you, Emperor Polik."

"Yes, yes..." The emperor turned away, seeking his helmet. As ruler of the empire, he was allowed to wear the ceremonial helmet in the hand-to-hand combat. "You're dismissed."

The robed figure gave Polik a brief look of contempt, but the emperor's back was to him. With a final, even more cursory bow, he departed. Almost immediately, the servants and the aide returned. "Are we ready to begin, Emperor?"

"Just help me find my helmet. I know it was here a moment ago."

Sighing silently, the aide forced back the thoughts that sprang to mind—thoughts that, were they known, could have got him tossed into the arena alongside the rebel Kaz—and started to search for his master's missing helm.

* * * * *

Infernus sat in the booth set aside for him and his aides, four lesser clerics flanking him. He was clad in the most elegant robes of the high priest, gold trim and diamond sparkles making him glitter in the sunlight. It was all the dragon could do to suppress his eagerness and satisfaction, but he had to maintain the mask of quiet confidence, especially now.

Back in the temple, the hatchling, Tiberia, would be watching all of this. Infernus had decided it would be good for the young one's education to see just how well her captor's plans were progressing. The spell would give Ty a view of what went on in the arena based on the red dragon's own perspective. The young one would see everything, including the death of her would-be champion, through Infernus's eyes. It was a clever spell.

The day of destiny is upon us, Infernus thought, allowing himself a satisfied smile that brought shivers to the one cleric who happened to glance his way. My day...

* * * * *

They're coming, Kaz thought, fidgeting. They're coming, and the cursed gray human still hasn't given me any kind of sign! The day before had passed without any clue as to what Kaz was supposed to do to free himself and the others. He had expected some clue from the mage before this moment; after all, the human had more or less promised. From what little he could recall of Huma's experiences with the gray man, nothing indicated that the figure was a liar or a trickster. Still, he was beginning to wonder.

Ty, Hecar, Delbin, Fliara... their lives all depended on Kaz. He could not let them down, even if it turned out that the gray mage had let Kaz down. When the guards came for him, he would find some way to win.

Paladine watch over me... and Helati and the children, just in case.

"It's time."

The voice startled him, especially when Kaz realized whose voice it was.

"It's about time you got here, mage."

"It is all a matter of balance, Kaz," responded the gray figure standing near the minotaur. "I can act only when it is time. Too much interference, and things might be tilted even further out of balance. We would not want that, trust me."

Kaz shifted. "Someday, I hope to have a conversation with you that makes some sense. Meanwhile..." He shook the chains that held him. "Are you going to free me now?"

"This is the time for everything to come together, Kaz. This is when the potential to rebalance the scales is at its zenith."

With the last word, the minotaur's chains—empty, but still locked—suddenly clattered against the wall. Kaz looked at his free hands, then at the manacles. There were some advantages to being a mage.

"What happens now?" he asked as he tested his arms and legs.

"The path is open to you." The door swung open just enough to allow Kaz out. "The rest is up to you."

"What about the others? I can't just leave them."

"I will watch over them as best I can. The kender knows what I plan and will do his part. If it encourages you further, I will tell you that a certain stubborn catalyst has made her mind known in Nethosak despite my intentions. As is sometimes the way, this catalyst's presence has given me a new and unexpected path to use, a path that your friends must take rather than aid you." When Kaz still hesitated, the gray man added, "Trust me. This will not work if they are with you, Kaz. You know that."

He did, but it was difficult to admit it, even to himself. Alone, Kaz could slip through the halls to where Ty was being kept. With the others, he ran the greater risk of discovery.

Thinking of Ty, he started, "The female. Where—?"

"Look in the lair of the dragon," the mage returned. For the first time, a hint of impatience appeared on the gray human's face. "The guards have been delayed, Kaz, but not for long."

The minotaur started for the door, pausing just before stepping through. He turned one last time to the gray figure. "I don't suppose you have a weapon?"

In response, the mage suddenly tossed his staff toward Kaz. The warrior reached out and caught it in midair. Despite its thinness, it felt like a strong, sturdy piece of wood. It would have to do. "My thanks... Hecar and the others... you'll..."

"It is the least I can do for you, Kaz."

"Thank you."

As he hurried out the door, he thought he heard the gray man add, "Huma would have been proud of you, minotaur."

* * * * *

As the minotaur disappeared down the hall, the gray man walked calmly over to the empty chains and stood in front of them, his back to the wall. The manacles materialized about his wrists and ankles, securing him. The mage nodded, then smiled. In his place there suddenly stood a minotaur, a minotaur who looked exactly like Kaz.

He waited for the guards to come.

* * * * *

With the events of the arena captivating nearly all of Nethosak, even the temple was nearly bare of occupants. Kaz did not encounter a sentry until almost the ground level. The sentry, not expecting an assault from below, had grown lax. When Kaz discovered him, he was leaning against the wall, staring up at the ceiling.

A blow with the staff to the stomach, followed by a solid punch in the jaw, was enough to deal quickly with the guard. Kaz dragged him into an empty cell and laid him to the side so he would not be visible. As he finished, however, the minotaur heard the sounds of an armed escort.

Keeping clear of the open door, Kaz waited until the sounds continued past him. It was the escort for him and his comrades. He prayed to Paladine that the gray man would indeed watch over his friends. He also hoped the mage had done something to prevent them from noticing his disappearance. Kaz needed some time to reach his goal.

In the lair of the dragon. That could be only the high priest's personal chambers. Ty must still be there. It made sense, since, if the female had been escorted back to her own cell, she would have had to pass Kaz's. That had not happened.

There were no apparent guards when he entered the ground level. That was not too surprising. The vast majority would be attending the circus, the better to emphasize the glory of the sons of Sargas. Kaz had some inkling of how Infernus's mind worked. The dragon was one for showmanship and flash. He reveled in power and wanted others to recognize the supremacy of that power. Now that tendency was working for Kaz.

He had made it halfway from the stairs to the high priest's chambers when he nearly ran headlong into Infernus's chief acolyte. The other minotaur was so stunned, he did not react until Kaz was already upon him. The staff caught the acolyte under the chin. Kaz dodged a reckless swing, then lowered the staff on his adversary's head.

The blow should have only stunned the robed figure, but to Kaz's surprise, his opponent slumped to the floor. Kaz glanced at the staff, recalling that it belonged to a mage, then shrugged. A meditation chamber provided him with an adequate place to hide the body. Kaz hesitated once he had the cleric in there, pondering the voluminous robes and the high hood.

A few moments later, clad in the same robe and with the hood pulled up over his head, he continued on his way. There was no method by which he could hide the staff, so he kept it out and used it as a walking stick, pretending some leg injury.

Two clerics, obviously on their way to the circus, gave him perfunctory acknowledgments, then hurried on. A temple guard straightened as he walked past.

His good fortune faded as he reached the doors to the audience chamber. Two guards stood on duty, guards who stared intensely at him as he walked up to the doors.

"I'm on official business for the high priest. Let me pass."

They did not move. The one on the right announced, "We've orders not to admit anyone. That comes from His Holiness himself."

"My orders are new. His Holiness left important papers behind that I'm to retrieve. Do you want to face his displeasure after I tell him you wouldn't let me pass?"

The words were enough to cause the two sentries discomfort, but still they stood their ground. The same guard spoke again. "The orders were very clear. No one is to enter, save the high priest himself."

"Commendable," replied Kaz with a nod. He stepped closer to the two. Both sentries shifted stance ever so slightly, showing their weapons, in this case a pair of sturdy battle-axes. "But I think I have a way of resolving this problem."

He brought the staff up sideways and charged both guards. One raised his axe and managed to deflect his end of the staff, but the other was slower. The staff caught him in the throat, and he went down, coughing and struggling to breathe.

The other sentry fought back, pushing against Kaz's staff. Kaz slipped to the side and used his momentum to strike the gasping minotaur with the hard end of his weapon. Again, the blow, which should have only stunned the guard, sent him slumping to the floor.

The remaining guard was still off balance. He stumbled forward, and Kaz caught him on the back of the neck, just below the head. The second guard joined the first on the floor.

The battle had not gone unnoticed, however. From across the temple, several guards and clerics came running. Kaz cursed, pulling a door open. He slipped through even as the first of the guards threw a lance at him. The weapon bounced harmlessly off the door.

The doors were designed to be barred from the inside, something Kaz found very useful. Kaz had the entrance barred in seconds. That would certainly hold off the guards for a time. Now he had to find Ty.

The audience chamber was dark, but it was not difficult to locate the rooms in back. Kaz found the doors, but could not open them. They were either locked or possibly ensorcelled. He glanced at the doors, then at the staff the mage had given him. It was not Honor's Face, but he was certain it was imbued with magic.

Raising the staff, he aimed for the center of the door. Behind him he could hear the barred doors to the audience chamber rattle as the guards threw their weight against them, so he rammed the staff against the door. It shattered, sending splinters flying everywhere. Kaz had to fall back immediately lest he be injured by the debris.

No magic had kept the door sealed, only a simple lock.

Clearing the remnants with the aid of the staff, Kaz entered.

Tiberia sat in the midst of a chamber that seemed almost as huge as the one from which he had just departed. A pulsating shell of crimson light covered the small figure. Prior to the minotaur's appearance, Ty had evidently been staring at a greenish globe that floated at the young prisoner's eye level. Even from where he stood, Kaz could see faint images skimming along the globe's surface. It was just like the red dragon to make his captive watch the deaths of Kaz and the others.

Ty rose to her feet at the sight of the minotaur. Her eyes were tired. A smile broke across her features. "Kaz!"

"I've come to free you, Ty."

"I know. The gray man said to wait for you."

"Nice of him to do that." He wondered if the mage had, said anything else, such as how to break the spell that surrounded Ty.

The staff had worked before. Perhaps it would work again.

"Ty, curl yourself up into as small a ball as you can."

The female did as Kaz requested.

"Ready yourself!"

Kaz brought one tip of the staff down on the crimson field.

The force unleashed by the dragon's spell when the staff hit burned the magic artifact to ash and threw the minotaur across the chamber.

* * * * *

The guards chosen to escort Hecar and the others gathered the party together. Scurn was among the prisoners. The guards placed Hecar next to an oddly contemplative Kaz, who obeyed their captors' orders without protest. He did not have an opportunity to do more than glance at Helati's mate, but when he did, Kaz smiled back at him. It was almost as if Kaz knew some jest, which he had not shared with the others.

What can he be thinking about? Hecar wondered. Does he have a plan of escape?

They reached the main level just as several guards and clerics went rushing toward the doorway leading to the high priest's audience chamber. The guard leader called a halt and started toward one of the clerics, but Kaz suddenly broke his silence.

"If you delay, we won't make the circus in time. They, can handle the matter."

If Hecar and the other prisoners thought it odd for Kaz to speak these words, the guards and their commander seemed to find them completely sensible. The leader nodded, and the small band continued on, departing the temple moments later.

"Kaz!" whispered Hecar. "If you've got a plan, you'd—"

"Be silent!" snapped a temple soldier. He swatted Hecar on the shoulder with the flat of his blade. Hecar was tempted to forego the circus and end his life in a valiant but futile struggle with the guard.

"Rest easy, Hecar." Kaz gave him that same peculiar smile again.

"But, Kaz—"

Delbin abruptly giggled. Hecar glanced at him, wondering what even a kender could find so humorous at this moment. Delbin glanced at Hecar, then barely forced back another giggle after looking at Kaz.

"Just a little longer, Delbin. It's almost time for the surprise."

None of the guards seemed to take notice of what Kaz was saying, which further perplexed Hecar. It was as if they knew Kaz was there, but paid no mind to anything he said or did.

There were ten guards besides the leader, which was something of a compliment to the four minotaurs and one kender they guarded. Given weapons and free hands, Hecar was fairly certain he and the others could have fought their way to freedom... at some cost, of course. Still, that was not likely to happen.

The streets were nearly deserted, most of the city's population having gathered in or near the Great Circus. Now and then a minotaur passed within sight of them, but, compared with the normal traffic in the busy city, Nethosak was a ghost land.

Then the attack came. Hecar likely would have chosen the same location, for it was narrower than most of the path, and the street was deserted, with many hiding places for armed warriors.

The band and their captors were suddenly surrounded by roughly a dozen or so minotaurs bearing swords and axes. Some of the newcomers were vaguely familiar to Hecar, but he had no time to consider that, for the guards formed a defensive position, some of them concentrating their weapons on the captives.

"Stand aside," commanded the guard leader. "These warriors are destined to redeem themselves in the Great Circus."

"You mean they're supposed to die there," said one of the strangers, a tall, dark-furred minotaur with a streak of white between his horns that ran all the way to the back of his head. Hecar was certain he knew him, but from where, he could not recall. "For daring to defy the high priest's desires and nothing more. I had another brother who died for reasons something like that. There's no honor in such a death."

"This is treason. You defy the will of your lords."

The leader of the newcomers smiled. It was a smile that Hecar had seen on only one other minotaur. Kaz. "We've got a history of defiance in our clan."

Beside him, Hecar heard Kaz quietly say, "All right, Delbin. It's time."

The temple guards did not seem to hear or notice the kender suddenly touch his manacles, which slipped off a moment later without a sound. Only belatedly did Hecar note the tiny lockpick in Delbin's hands, a lockpick that the kender put to use with astonishing speed on Hecar's own manacles. In the space of seconds, he had the chains off Fliara as well.

It was not until Delbin reached Scurm that one of the guards blinked and noticed what was happening. He turned to stop the kender's efforts, shouting, "The prisoners—!"

His outburst was all that was needed to send the two groups into battle. Three guards turned on the prisoners. Hecar, using his chains like a flail, swung at a soldier. His blow struck the minotaur's sword hand, causing him to drop his weapon. Delbin was instantly there, seizing the sword and handing it to Fliara, who was closest.

The minotaur with the streak in his hair laughed as he fought back both the escort leader and another temple guard. He wielded a sword large even by minotaur standards, a sword that whipped in and out and around with such speed and daring that it confounded the pair who fought him. Neither could get past his blade. The escort leader fell seconds later to a thrust.

Two more guards fell, one of them wounded in the leg, but one of their rescuers also died. Hecar swung the chains at any guard who came within range. One soldier managed to press Fliara back, but Hecar pulled his chains around the attacker's neck and did not loosen his grip until the guard ceased to move.

Someone bumped into Hecar from behind. He turned, expecting another attacker, and found Scurm, one hand still manacled, struggling with a guard who had evidently tried to run Hecar through the back. The guard was strong, but Scurm was stronger. The scarred minotaur pushed his opponent to his knees, then raised his knee into the guard's chin. Scurm's adversary collapsed.

Circumstance makes for strange shield-brothers, Hecar thought as he turned to fight some more. Never thought I'd owe that one my life.

"Give yourselves up!" demanded the leader of the rescuers. "You can't win this battle!"

The remaining soldiers lowered their weapons. Four of their number were dead, including the escort commander, with at least three others injured. Of the rescuers, only one had fallen and another had a wounded arm. All in all, a good battle, at least from Hecar's point of view.

"Toron!" Fliara ran over to the minotaur with the streak in his fur, hugging him. For no reason he could fathom, Hecar felt a twinge of jealousy. He was certainly not attracted to Kaz's sister. Certainly not.

"This is hardly the situation I'd expected you to get into, little sister!" roared the one called Toron. "You were always the strict, rule-abiding one in the family!"

"Toron?" The name was more than familiar, but as with Fliara, many years had passed since Hecar had seen this same minotaur. Toron, like Fliara, had been much younger. Hecar turned to where Kaz had last been standing. "Kaz! Your brother is—"

Kaz, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Hecar quickly scanned the street, fearing that somewhere he would find the fallen body of Helati's mate.

However, it almost immediately became apparent that Kaz was not among the dead and wounded.

Delbin tugged on his hand. Hecar looked down at the kender, who was trying to hold back a giggle. "He fooled you really good, but then he looked exactly like Kaz, which is what he told me he had to do in order to give Kaz the time to get where he had to, and, besides, it would have been harder for Kaz to do certain things if we were still prisoners in the temple—"

"What the blazes are you talking about, Delbin? Are you saying that wasn't Kaz with us?"

"No, it was the gray man from my dreams, and he said Kaz had the best chance to rescue Ty if we were out and safe, and, besides, Helati's been talking to your clan, which is why—"

"Which is why we decided to show the temple it can't push around Orilg, especially my own family." Toron walked up and patted Hecar on the shoulder. "And that includes you, Hecar! I missed the rest of what this little creature said! Where's Kaz?"

Hecar shook his head. "Delbin says he was never here, that some mage was here, disguised as him. That much I think I understand. Kaz went to rescue a... human female"—it would not do to tell Toron the truth just yet— "who is a prisoner of the high priest. The female's important for some reason."

"Then we should go back and help him! The others can handle these prisoners!"

"No!" piped up Delbin. "The mage said we should go to the circus!"

Hecar paused. On the one hand, he wanted to go back and help Kaz, but on the other hand, their interference might make it more difficult for Kaz to slip out with Ty.

"I wish Helati were here," he muttered. Her advice had always been sound.

"She's done enough as it is," replied Toron, "considering all she helped plan!"

"Helati's here? How is that possible? Where is she?"

"Not here, at least not in the flesh, but—"

Fliara joined them, cutting off her brother's explanation. Her expression was one of great concern. "Where's Kaz?"

"Not here," her brother replied, "that's all I understand. He might be back at the temple, if what Hecar here said is true."

"Then we've got trouble."

"Why's that?" asked Hecar.

She looked around, verifying something. "Scurm's missing, too."

* * * * *

As the ceremony announcing the imperial duel began, Infernus felt a tug of warning in his mind. The tug was something he had added to the hatchling's prison spell; it warned him if, say, the young one's power grew sufficient to disrupt or destroy the crimson cage. It also, as a matter of function, warned the dragon if some outside force attempted the same thing.

Infernus did not think the hatchling was sufficiently schooled yet to free herself. That left only outside influence and that, to the disguised leviathan, meant, impossible as it seemed, only one audacious creature.

"Kaz..." he whispered.

One of his subordinates, hearing the high priest mutter, immediately turned to see if his master desired something.

The chair of the high priest was empty.

Chapter 17

The Silver Hatchling

The fall, if not the shock, should have killed Kaz. He knew that very well. He should have struck the wall or the floor with the force necessary to crack his hard head open or snap his neck. It would have been appropriate. It would have been almost exactly like the death of his father.

Yet, while Kaz's head throbbed as if every drum in the homeland were being beaten, he was far from dead. His muscles ached, but that was fine compared with broken bones and a battered body.

"Kaz! Don't die! Don't!"

"I'm—" The minotaur tried to rise too swiftly and encountered throbbing pain. "I'm alive, Ty, but I think I might regret that good fortune for the next several minutes."

"I thought you were going to die! I tried my best to keep you from falling so hard!"

Kaz's head began to clear. Finally he could see well enough to observe that Ty was still a prisoner, but the spell that held her had grown pale now, almost pink, and did not pulsate every time its captive breathed. The girl's words started to make some sense... he thought. "Are you saying... are you saying *you* kept me from breaking my neck?"

"I couldn't let that happen! Not after... not after..." Ty fought back tears. "Not after I couldn't save Ganth!"

"It's all right, Ty." Kaz slowly rose. The throbbing lessened, but his arm, the same one that had been injured in the woods, now hurt intolerably. "You can't be blamed for not saving him. Blame Infernus, if anyone."

"I hate him! I wish I could do something!"

Kaz rubbed his chin, more to take his mind off his pain than because he was thinking. "You might be able to, Ty. You remember the gray man from your dreams? He spoke to me. He told me you have a power within you. All you have to do is remember what it means to be a dragon, a silver dragon."

Ty closed her eyes, visibly concentrating. Precious seconds passed, but there was no sign of success. After a few more seconds, the young woman opened her eyes and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Kaz. I've been trying. I've been trying ever since he put me in here. I tried harder when the man in gray said you'd be coming for me, but I still can't do it! I only remember being human!"

From what Kaz recalled of dragons, they were born with an intelligence that was already exceptional, by minotaur standards. They understood innately how to use their wings and their most basic skills, physical and magical. Magic was so natural to them that they picked up the most simple tricks only days after hatching. They were adaptable when young, growing set in their ways only after reaching adulthood.

"It's in you, Ty. It's the only way you'll be able to defy Infernus. He wants you to be a dragon in form, but not in mind. He wants you to be a frightened child, obedient to him. He also needs you alive, so remember that you have some hold over him."

Ty tried again. For a moment it seemed as if she might succeed, then she fell back, gasping. The female shook her head again, saying nothing.

"Maybe if I can get you out of there first." Kaz searched around for the staff, then, noting a trail of ash, recalled what had happened to it. He wondered if anything had happened to the gray mage at the same time. Magic-users' staffs were supposed to be important to them, often containing spells that the mages spent years creating. Sometimes the staffs were even tied to the lives of their owners. Had he injured the gray man?

That could not concern him now. If he had no wizard's staff, then he needed to find something else magical, something to make headway.

Something magical?

The globe that depicted the events of the circus still floated in the same place it had prior to Kaz's rescue attempt. Its magic came from the same source: Infernus. It was risky, mostly to the minotaur, since Ty's power protected her better, but he could see no other possible tool.

"Ty, I'm going to try something. Do you think you can protect both of us from some magic?" He indicated the globe.

The young captive understood immediately what Kaz intended. "I'll do my best. I think I can, Kaz."

"Good. Now let's hope I can touch this."

"Infernus touched it a lot."

"That's encouraging, at least." Kaz gingerly reached for the globe, hoping the red dragon's ability to grasp it without harm was not due simply to his having created it.

His hands tingled as they closed on the magical sphere. Touching it was like touching something soft and malleable, yet solid. It was slightly warm. Encouraged, he held it tighter, raising it to chest level.

Kaz raised the globe over his head. "Get ready, Ty."

He threw the magical artifact at Ty's prison, at the same time backing away as quickly as he could. Nothing happened, for just before it would have touched the magical cage, the globe suddenly vanished.

"You are a very tenacious pest, minotaur."

Infernus stood near the window. His eyes were a fiery red. The artifact floated above one hand. Without his gaze leaving Kaz, the red dragon dismissed his device.

"Others have said that about me before," Kaz returned, wishing he had Honor's Face in his grip. At least with the magical axe he would have stood a good chance of leaving Infernus with a permanent souvenir of this encounter. "Most of those are dead."

The false minotaur laughed. "Do you seriously think those words unnerve me, Kaziganthi de-Orilg? Do you imagine me shivering in fear at your implied threat? You are no more a threat to me than a bee's sting or a drop of rain. I am Infernus! I am the embodiment of power! I am a dragon!"

"Careful, your loyal followers out there might hear you."

"These rooms are proofed against sounds, minotaur. I have, on occasion, dealt with those who have failed me or attempted to cross my will. The hunters who failed to capture you. A cleric who protested my methods, calling them dishonorable. A fool of a general who thought he could bully a newly ordained high priest into being his servant." The robed figure indicated his domain. "They all challenged me in here in one way or another and paid for their folly... as you shall now."

Infernus pointed at the minotaur.

A wave of molten rock poured over Kaz before he could even move. At first the heat was searing. The rock flowed over him from all sides. Kaz fully expected to die there and then.

He did not. The rock cooled as it touched him, turning so brittle that all he had to do was move to shatter it and free himself.

"Impossible!" roared the red dragon. "Impossible... or your doing!"

His last words were directed at Ty, who stood defiantly even though still a prisoner. The damage the staff had done to her crimson cell had given her some respite. Ty had been able to regain some of her strength.

"I won't let you hurt him!"

"You will not? You who are less of a threat than he is? Little One, if you bore a will as strong as the minotaur's, I might consider your words of some import, but you are nothing. You are an infant not yet familiar with much more than breathing and eating. You know a few basics of magic and think you can stand against me! I am centuries old, far older than most and far more dangerous than any. Do not interfere again, Little One. I need you alive, but not necessarily whole. Simply alive."

Ty glared.

A wind buffeted the disguised dragon, but did little more. Infernus smiled and waved a hand. The wind died away. The dragon glared back at the defiant young female.

The cage began to crackle with renewed energy. Ty's legs buckled, but to her credit, she did not scream.

Angered by the high priest's assault on Ty and knowing it would be his best chance to strike, Kaz leapt for Infernus. Unfortunately, Infernus was far swifter than any minotaur could ever have been. He reacted even as Kaz was in the air, turning his burning eyes on the flying figure. Kaz found himself floating in midair, helpless. The high priest stalked toward him, his expression less and less like that of a minotaur and more and more like what would appear on the reptilian visage of a dragon.

"Enough! It is time we ended this! Emperor Polik is no doubt just beginning his duel, the one that will reaffirm his right to lead the race in the grand campaign. He will win, of course, though the duel is planned to take several minutes simply for the sake of drama. My presence will be required then for the announcement." His mouth stretched in a way that was impossible, showing far too many teeth. "Consider yourself fortunate. That means I shall make your death a quick one. Not a painless one, but a quick one."

Kaz barely bit back a cry as his arms, legs, and head stretched in different directions. His muscles strained, and it felt as if his bones were about to be torn apart. He fought against the strain, but his efforts were for naught. Slowly but surely, he was going to be dismembered, one piece at a time.

"Let him go!" he heard Ty call. "Let him go!"

Infernus only laughed.

"I said let him go!"

A cry coursed through the chamber, but it had not come from Kaz. The minotaur fell without warning to the hard floor, only a last-minute turn preventing him from breaking his arm. As it was, his left leg felt numb.

"You... hurt... me... you... little..." Infernus sprawled against a column, his chest heaving rapidly and his eyes wide in both anger and surprise. There was no physical evidence of what Ty had done to the red dragon, but the robed figure's reaction was enough to indicate that it had been a mighty blow, indeed.

Rising from the floor, Kaz quietly stalked toward Infernus. Every muscle in the minotaur's body cried out in pain.

"I can see... that your education is going... to require some rethinking."

The minotaur was close enough. "Infernus?"

The red dragon turned, still not quite recovered.

Kaz punched him.

He had the satisfaction of watching Infernus fall back, the blow so sudden that the high priest did not possess the wherewithal to brace himself. The robed figure tumbled to the floor, rolling several feet.

If I only had Honor's Face, Kaz wished. I could probably end this now.

It was not until he had completed the thought that he realized the axe was somehow in his hand. The dragon's will had been shattered to the point where his hold over the magical weapon had vanished. Once more Honor's Face obeyed its master's command.

Kaz grinned, starting toward the sprawled figure. Infernus was just rising to his hands and knees as Kaz reached him. The minotaur stopped, raised the axe, and said, "This is for my father and every other minotaur, dragon!"

A blood-red serpent knocked him off his feet. Kaz fell back, still somehow managing to maintain his grip on his weapon, and saw that his first observation had been inaccurate. It was not a serpent that had attacked him, but rather a long, scaly tail.

A dragon's tail.

Infernus was shifting, throwing off the form of a minotaur. The robe tore to shreds, unable to contain the swelling form. Folded wings burst through the back of the garment, then opened and stretched. The last vestiges of the high priest's clothing scattered as the red dragon expanded. He was nearly full-grown before Kaz could even rise.

The draconian visage twisted toward him. "Insufferable creature! Audacious gnat! You dare strike

me! You dare to think you can destroy me!"

"You like to hear yourself talk, don't you?" Kaz challenged, trying to throw the dragon off. "You do a lot of talking, Infernus."

His words further enraged the leviathan, which was what Kaz had hoped for. The more enraged the dragon got, the less thinking Infernus would do. Red dragons, the minotaur recalled from the war, had terrible tempers that often led to their downfall in combat.

"I will crush you!" Infernus raised a massive paw and brought it down.

Kaz jumped aside. It was a clean miss. He adjusted his grip on Honor's Face and waited. If Infernus did that again, Kaz would be ready.

"Your race was nothing until I came along, minotaur!" the immense dragon cried. "Beasts no better than the cows you resemble! I made you into the master race! You yourself are the product of my careful culling of the weak! You should be grateful to me! Without my touch, this race would have died out long ago!" Infernus hissed. "Now all I demand is my due."

"Your due is waiting for you in my hands," Kaz replied calmly, hefting the axe.

Infernus raised a paw and brought it down again. The strike was nearer, but again Kaz managed to leap out of the way. As he moved, he counterattacked, swinging Honor's Face up in a vicious arc. The gleaming head buried itself deep in the dragon's paw.

With a roar of rage, Infernus pulled the injured appendage away, tossing Kaz and the axe aside in the process. Blood splattered both the floor and the minotaur as the red dragon shook his paw. The minotaur scrambled to his feet, retrieving his weapon. Without hesitation he advanced toward the crimson leviathan's other forepaw, axe up and ready to strike.

His monstrous adversary saw him too late. Infernus had time only to register the small figure's new position before Kaz brought the deadly axe down again.

If the first cry had been deafening, the second threatened to make Kaz's head burst. It seemed impossible that those outside could not hear the dragon's roars despite whatever spell or handiwork was designed to block the sound.

"Gnat! I will eat you instead of killing you outright! First a hand, then a foot, using my magic to keep you alive and conscious until I snap your head off your limbless torso! I will wreak such pain on you as you have never imagined!"

"You're talking again," Kaz pointed out. "All you ever seem to do is talk."

"Ha!" The eyes of Infernus gleamed. His mouth opened. A great burst of flame shot toward the minotaur. It was too wide to avoid. Kaz rolled to the floor, praying the flame would go over his head.

Instead, the length of flame turned upward at an impossible angle just before it reached Kaz. Tapestries caught fire, and the ceiling began to smolder.

The dragon turned back to his captive. "You again! You are becoming more trouble than you are worth! I can see that before I can remove the minotaur from my sight, I must first deal with you!"

To the minotaur's horror, Ty and the magical cage started to fade away.

"Kaz!"

"Ty! Fight it, Ty! You're a dragon, same as him! Your powers are every bit as strong! You've seen that! Don't let him send you away, Lass!"

"Ka—" The last faint image of Ty dissipated.

"Now, then!" roared Infernus, swinging his head around so he could again concentrate on the minotaur. "Now, then. This has taken long enough, gnat. Emperor Polik should have begun the duel

by now. I am needed by my people. It is time you died."

"You think so?" Kaz held Honor's Face before him. It had served him well in the past, but he doubted it was strong enough to turn away the dragon's magical might.

Infernus chuckled. "Oh, yes, gnat. I do."

The dragon raised his head. There was no hope that the axe, even with its powers, could stop dragon flame from such a huge and savage creature.

All of a sudden, the floor began to rumble. The red dragon rocked back and forth, stunned by the unexpected quake. He roared his anger, but Infernus could do nothing, his balance already lost. His wings flapped, but in the chamber he did not have the room to rise aloft. In the end he merely tipped over, fortunately not in the direction of Kaz.

The minotaur rolled away from the center of the quake. Kaz had no idea what could be causing the natural occurrence, but thanked Paladine, Kiri-Jolith, Habbakuk, and any other god that might have had a hand in it.

From within the rising, cracking floor came a roar of challenge. Stone fragments flew in every direction as the swelling floor rose higher. Infernus struggled to roll over so he could right himself, but the vibrations shook him loose each time he almost gained a talonhold.

Then the cause of the quake burst through the floor, rising swiftly and pulling itself free. Its silver head gleamed, and wings as smooth as ice stretched for the first time ever. Despite the physical similarities between the two reptilian visages, there was something noble in the face of the second dragon, a sense of honor. That alone was the great contrast between the two behemoths.

The silver dragon looked around, finally locating Kaz, who could only stare in awe. "Kaaazzz! I couldn't let him hurt you!"

"Ty... Tiberia."

"So the hatchling has found herself!" mocked Infernus, righting his massive form. "Not the most opportune time, but I will make do. This means I may start your education even sooner."

"No!" Tiberia whirled about to face her counterpart. "No! You don't care about anyone but yourself! You hurt others and expect everyone to obey you!" The silver dragon raised her head so she could almost look Infernus in the eyes. "I don't have to! I don't have to, and I'm going to make sure no one else will ever have to, either!"

As powerful as the young dragon was, Kaz doubted that Tiberia alone was a match for Infernus. She might have the raw power, but she lacked the red's guile and experience. Infernus would deal with her swiftly unless someone could direct the hatchling, someone with more experience in combat involving dragons. Why always me? Kaz silently grumbled. Why always me?

Infernus leaned back as he spoke, possibly due to his injured forepaws. "You challenge me, do you, Little One? You think you have the might? My kills, especially of your kind, number high. I've not had a good struggle in many years. I won't kill you, of course, since I have need of you, but you will not fly for decades and you will always move with a limp, perhaps because one of your limbs will have been bitten off."

His words were having an effect on the silver dragon, who had never fought before. Kaz saw uncertainty grow in Tiberia's eyes, and the glittering wings began to twitch nervously.

Infernus was not paying any mind to the minotaur, the red considering the other dragon a more serious threat. Kaz waited until the larger creature's head swayed away from him, then ran as fast as he could.

"Give up now, Little One," Infernus was saying. "There is a place for you, too, if only you will see the way. There is—"

It was at that moment that Kaz leapt onto Tiberia's, back. The silver dragon jerked, but, fortunately, did not whip around to remove the sudden weight. What she did do, however, was back away abruptly from Infernus, the spell of fear broken by the minotaur's action.

"Tiberia... Ty... back away farther, but let me get to your neck so I can sit there!"

The dragon obeyed, albeit a bit awkwardly.

"A dragon rider are we?" Infernus unleashed a throaty chuckle. "And where is your dragonlance, minotaur?"

"The axe and my friend will do just as well, Infernus!" Kaz's words were meant more to instill some degree of confidence in his companion than to frighten the red dragon.

As he expected, Infernus did not take his threat seriously. "I will remember your sense of humor after you are gone, gnat!"

A whirlwind filled the chamber, tossing loose rubble directly at Kaz and Tiberia. The dragon managed to bash away the first few large pieces, but several easily flew past her guard. Kaz pulled himself behind Tiberia's head and neck as much as he could, but stone after stone pelted him, marking his arms and legs with small nicks and cuts. Tiberia roared as stones struck her with considerable force.

"Surrender him, hatchling, and I will cease!"

"I won't!" cried the silver dragon in a small voice. "I won't!"

Kaz struggled upward. He needed to be high enough for Tiberia, and only Tiberia, to hear him. "A fireball! If you can make a fireball, aim at his—"

Tiberia unleashed a fireball, a good-sized one, at Infernus's chest. The flames licked at the red dragon for several seconds, but the monstrous creature seemed barely affected by it.

"Fire? You send fire against me? I am a red dragon! Fire is my element more than yours!"

A ring of flame burst to life around the pair, causing the silver dragon to back up. The ring was so tight that Tiberia could move only a few steps. Infernus laughed.

Again he spoke so that only the silver could hear. "Listen to everything I say first, Tiberia! I want you to make another fireball! I—"

"It won't hurt him!"

"Don't worry about hurting him that way! Listen! I want a fireball in his eyes! The biggest and strongest fireball you can create! Do it now!"

Kaz held his breath, hoping Tiberia would do as he said. They needed to reverse the course of battle.

He felt the silver leviathan shudder. A sphere of flame larger than the red dragon's head flew unerringly into Infernus's visage. The smile of mockery twisted into astonishment.

"Now, Tiberia! While he can't see! Jump and attack! It's our best hope!"

The massive silver form leapt forward, crossing over the flames without hesitation. The young dragon trusted Kaz that much. Smaller than Infernus, Tiberia was still an enormous projectile. Infernus, still fighting to restore his vision, was unprepared for the force of a half-grown dragon falling upon him. The injured paws scratched at Tiberia, but there was no stopping the silver's descent. The two leviathans crashed together, Kaz desperately hanging on and hoping Tiberia would not be forced onto her back.

"Again, in his eyes!" the minotaur cried.

To her credit, Tiberia managed a third, though smaller, fireball even while tangled up with the red

dragon. Infernus roared as he sought again to protect his eyes.

"Hold him fast!" Kaz leaned to one side and, using his better arm, swung his battle-axe in the direction of the red dragon's neck. Infernus twisted, however, and instead of the neck, the axe bit into his shoulder.

The red roared, throwing Kaz and Tiberia to one side. The silver's great form crashed through the wall dividing the room from the audience chamber. Tiberia's momentum was such that she ended up almost on top of the raised dais Infernus used when acting as high priest.

Kaz was astonished to find himself still holding on to his companion. Tiberia's body had knocked a clean hole. The warrior felt as if he had just survived the hailstorm of all hailstorms unprotected.

"I will chew you slowly, minotaur!" Infernus barged through the hole without pause, causing still more masonry to fly and creating huge cracks that ran up to the ceiling. "I will shred your wings, hatchling!"

Kaz wondered just how much more damage this part of the temple could take before the ceiling caved in. While both Tiberia and Infernus were likely to survive such an incident with little more than a few bruises, Kaz was not so well armored.

The silver dragon stared at her foe. Another fireball formed before Infernus, but this time the red dragon reacted quickly enough to disperse it.

"No more of that trick, hatchling," snarled the crimson terror. "No more tricks at all."

Infernus charged. Tiberia tried to back up, but fell over the desk and the dais. The collision between the dragon and the dais was enough to shake Kaz loose. He fell over the front end of the dais and rolled down the steps just as the two dragons met.

The minotaur took one look at the two gigantic forms descending in his direction and scurried away toward the barred doorway as fast as he could. He had no plans to abandon Tiberia, but he would be little good to his friend if he were crushed.

Under the combined mass of the two dragons, the desk and dais were quickly reduced to rubble. Kaz gave thanks that the red dragon had seen fit to have the audience chamber built so vast; as it was, he was only a few yards away when the dragons' heads finally struck the floor.

The pair fought with tooth and claw now, Infernus trying to tear out Tiberia's throat with his talons, and the younger dragon simply trying to shield herself. There was no good target for Kaz, not yet, but he did have an idea.

"Tiberia! The injuries! Bite them!" Honor's Face always struck deeper than a normal axe and always dealt more damage. Even now, it was clear the red dragon was experiencing spasms of pain.

Tiberia tried to snap at the injured appendages, but her position would not allow her to get close enough. In desperation, she sank talons into one of the red dragon's injuries. Infernus hissed and backed away, the paw now covered in blood.

Using the respite to save herself, Tiberia pulled her silver form toward Kaz and the doorway. Kaz turned and tried to open the doors, but realized almost immediately that there was no way he could do so in time.

Infernus raised a paw and roared, "No! You will remain in here! I command it!"

It took Kaz a moment to understand why Infernus suddenly seemed so anxious. If Tiberia crashed through the doorway, the presence of dragons would be revealed. Infernus clearly did not desire that information known to anyone, not even the clerics.

The crimson behemoth started a spell, but there was not enough time for him to complete it. Kaz threw himself to the side. The doorway and the surrounding walls gave way easily under the weight of the retreating giant. Kaz wondered if the clerics and guards still waited outside. If so, he almost

pitied them.

The moment a gap appeared, the minotaur rose and darted through it. Tiberia was halfway out into the temple's front hall with Infernus following close behind. Whether it was his rage or the thought that the silver dragon had already revealed the truth about what was happening behind the doors, the high priest moved as if he did not care who saw him.

The scene in the hallway was one of chaos. A number of bodies were scattered here and there, victims of the collapsing doors and walls. Infernus had spoken true when he had said that his chambers were proofed against sound. Kaz found he had no sympathy for the servants of the high priest. There were still several alive, but they were doing little at the moment, save gawking at what had burst out of their master's chambers. Some of the more intelligent quickly turned and fled. There were some challenges even too great for minotaurs.

Kaz was caught up in conflicting choices. He wanted to get Tiberia out of here. The silver dragon could not maneuver well, and at close quarters the advantage would continue to belong to her larger, more experienced foe. Yet, fighting Infernus in the sky was not something Kaz wanted Tiberia to face, either.

As he tried to get nearer to the silver, who had by this time made it out into the somewhat cramped hallway, Infernus burst through what was left of the wall. Pieces of marble rained down on those nearby. One cleric died screaming as he was crushed. Kaz dodged the first two pieces that slammed into the floor near him, then tripped over rubble just as he was almost out of range. Twisting helplessly, he fell onto his back. His sudden upward view revealed yet another enormous fragment bearing down on him.

Before he could react, strong hands gripped his shoulders and pulled him up. Honor's Face skittered away. Kaz finally pulled free of his rescuer's grip and glanced over to where he had been lying. The fragment had embedded itself deep into the floor. He would have been crushed. Grateful to his rescuer, Kaz looked next to him and discovered a wide-eyed Scurm.

"You vanished during the rescue, Kaz!" shouted the scarred minotaur, finally looking down at him. "I knew you'd come here! I knew you'd try to rescue the damned human whelp, and I want to help, for what the cleric did to me!"

"Scurm! Never mind that! Just get out of here! Only a fool would stay here!" Which means me, Kaz silently added.

"What's happened here? Where's the female? Why're there dragons, Kaz?"

He saw no use in lying to Scurm. "The girl's the silver one, and your precious high priest is the red! They're both dragons, Scurm! They've always been dragons!"

"Dragons? The high priest is a dragon? What nonsense is this?" Nonetheless, the other minotaur eyed the red differently.

"He's always been a dragon, you fool! Every high priest has been *him* for centuries? He killed them and then made himself look like them! Just listen to him!"

Perhaps Scurm might have disbelieved what, even to Kaz, sounded like nothing more than a fantastic tale, but at that moment Infernus caught sight of them.

"Gnat... and the unfortunate captain as well! How appropriate this is! You will get to die together after all!"

The voice was not exactly Jopfer's, but, from Scurm's horrified expression, he clearly recognized the high priest.

A silver form again blocked the red one's path. "I said leave them alone!" demanded Tiberia. "Kaz is my friend! You can't hurt him!"

"As stubborn as a red you are, hatchling, but more repetitious, it seems." Infernus eyed the younger dragon again. "I see I must still beat that stubbornness out of you. You and your little friend have cost me dearly as it is!"

The two dragons faced off once more, their huge bodies wreaking havoc with the building each time they even moved a few paces. A portion of the ceiling caved in behind Infernus. Most of the remaining clerics and guards had retreated from sight.

"That's... that is the high priest?" whispered Scurm.

"That's a dragon, too, Scurm, one that thinks it should control our lives, our destinies! It thinks it has the right to be our master!"

"Our master?" The other minotaur's expression grew grim. Kaz had touched the one point of agreement among all minotaurs. No one but a minotaur had the right to rule the race. Anyone else, anything else, was an enemy of the people. "He wants to be our master?"

The dragons snapped at one another. "That's right, Scurm. Our master, body, mind, and soul."

"Never... our master... Sargas take me for a fool!"

"Then we have to help the silver dragon! She's our only hope! We have to do what we can!"

Scurm nodded absently, his eyes still fixed on the red form. Kaz wondered if he was thinking of all he had done in an attempt to ingratiate himself to the high priest. "You're right, Kaz. You're right."

To the other minotaur's surprise, Scurm abandoned him, fleeing through the temple entrance and losing himself in the streets beyond. The action was so sudden, it left Kaz stunned. He had not expected much aid from Scurm— what could the other minotaur do against a dragon?—but he had not thought Scurm capable of such outright cowardice, regardless of his flaws or their past enmity.

Scurm's flight did not go unnoticed by Infernus. "So much for your ally, minotaur! A sensible coward, that one!"

"But I'm still here, Infernus."

"As if that makes a difference, gnat!"

With his tail the red dragon battered the wall to his side, sending fragments flying toward both Tiberia and Kaz. Tiberia swatted away what she could and actually used one wing to deflect others from the minotaur.

"Be ready for me, Tiberia!" the minotaur called. Fortunately, the silver understood what he wanted, for Tiberia lowered her back end, making it simpler for Kaz to leap aboard again. Kaz hooked both feet into areas where the scales gave way a little, effectively creating stirrups.

Infernus moved forward only a breath after Kaz had gained his mount. Talon struggled against talon. Then, while the two behemoths battled, Kaz extended his good arm and opened his hand. Once more, Honor's Face returned to him.

The red dragon had attempted no further spells, perhaps preserving his strength for physical combat. It might even have been the result of Infernus having lived so long among the minotaurs. While they did not completely eschew sorcery, they preferred physical strength over the power of magic. A dragon who had worn the guise of a minotaur for centuries may have picked up some of the same tendencies.

Of course, even without magic, Infernus stood a good chance of defeating them.

Tiberia and the red snapped at one another, Infernus ever gaining advantage. Kaz struck whenever he could. Only one of his attacks had any effect on Infernus, a gouge in one paw. Anger fueled the red's attack, though, and almost immediately the ground gained was lost again.

The minotaur felt truly ineffective. With a dragonlance, he might have had a chance to spear

Infernus and end this with his life still intact, but, despite the power of his axe, he lacked the reach to do more than harry his foe. If he hoped to be at all effective, he had to be able to reach Infernus's neck or strike his torso with the hope of piercing deep. Only then could he hope to do grave injury to the beast.

Kaz glanced at his favored weapon, wishing, for once, that it was one of the legendary lances of the war. With the lance, they could win.

Honor's Face shivered in his grip and stretched. The mirror blade sank into the shaft, which grew longer and longer yet felt as if it weighed no more. A swelling near the minotaur's hand became a protective guard. Another outgrowth stretched to the neck and shoulders of Tiberia, gently wrapping around her throat.

In the blink of an eye, before the gaping minotaur's astonished gaze, Honor's Face had become the very thing he needed for victory. Kaz now held a dragonlance, secured for battle.

He had always wondered about the origin of his axe and now he realized that it had always been linked to the lances. The dwarf craftsman who had given it to Sardal Crystalthorn might have been one of the same group who had presented Huma with the first dragonlances.

Kaz shifted the lance. Whatever the reason, he had what they needed. "Tiberia! Back away!"

His companion did. Infernus did not at first realize why Kaz had given the command until his fiery eyes caught sight of the long, majestic weapon trained on him.

"We have a knight among us," he mocked.

"No knight," Kaz returned, fixing the point on the dragon's chest, "but a knight's dragonlance. Forward, Tiberia!"

It was a sign of the young one's faith that she obeyed this latest command without hesitation. Tiberia charged forward. Infernus roared contemptuously, attempting to swat the lance aside, but somehow it shifted, moving away from its original target almost of its own accord. The point dug into the red dragon's wing, tearing through the tough membrane with as much ease as a burning knife in soft snow.

Infernus roared in pain, glancing at the huge tear. The lance bit again while his attention was diverted. Kaz barely had to make sure of his aim. The dragonlance moved like a creature with a mission of its own... which perhaps it was. There had always seemed to be something lifelike about the weapons. Kaz recalled how they rarely seemed to miss their targets, even if inflicting only minor damage.

Twice more the dragonlance nicked an increasingly baffled Infernus. None of the wounds was serious alone, but the total of the dragon's injuries could not help but begin to take a toll, even on such a massive beast as the red.

Infernus backed up, destroying more wall and causing yet another segment of the ceiling to collapse. His eyes fixed on the dire weapon wielded by the minotaur. Kaz could almost sense the magic being deployed.

The dragonlance suddenly glowed. A crimson aura surrounded it, slowly turning it as black as pitch. Kaz felt the dragonlance stiffen, grow cold.

No! Not now! the minotaur desperately thought. We have him! Incredibly, the dragonlance seemed to react. The blackness faded and the weapon grew pleasantly warm. The aura vanished.

"Not possible!" hissed Infernus. "Not possible!"

Perhaps if the red dragon had been at full strength and concentration, he would have succeeded, but now his magic was not strong enough. The lance struck twice again in rapid succession, piercing the same wing again and, on the second attack, nicking the side of the dragon's neck just above the

shoulders.

Infernus pressed himself against what remained of the wall, his breath a little ragged. There was a hint of surprise in the fiery orbs, a hint of surprise and the first glimpses of fear. Nonetheless, he was not beaten. "I have worked hard and planned long! You will not deny me my destiny! You will not deny me my minotaurs!"

Kaz's retort went unspoken, for the floor was suddenly aswarm with other minotaurs. They raced about, some carrying lances, others swords, and one group in particular carrying what looked like long, thick ropes ending in grappling hooks. They quickly cordoned off the dragons, those with grappling hooks beginning to spin them around and around.

Leading the group was Scurm. Each man with him, Kaz realized, was a member of the State Guard, whose headquarters was not far away. Even with news of the coming announcement, the guard did not leave the city unprotected.

Neither dragon paid the minotaurs much notice until the first of the grappling hooks went flying. One caught Infernus on a leg, another on his stomach. A third snagged the dragon on the long, sinewy throat. The lancers moved in, their long weapons balanced against the ground so that if a paw or tail tried to land on them, it would first encounter a very sturdy, pointed lance. They avoided Tiberia entirely, though many eyed her with some wariness.

"What jest is this?" bellowed Infernus, affronted by the audacity of the small creatures. "Cease this!"

He got one of the grappling hooks off, but in that time three others snagged him, two on one of his forelegs and another on his torso.

The scene threw Kaz back a decade. He recalled the same techniques used by the minotaurs and others under rare circumstances when the enemy's dragon allies were caught on the ground. Grappling hooks to catch on to the scaled hide of the dragon, so great a number that even a leviathan would not be able to pull free.

Scurm had evidently remembered the technique.

"Kaz!" called Tiberia. "What do I do?"

It was tempting to retreat and hope that the enterprising Scurm and the guard could pull Infernus down, but Kaz suspected this was one dragon that would not be caught for very long. He doubted that Scurm thought otherwise. The guard captain was doing what he could to give Kaz and Tiberia some advantage.

"Back a step!" he called. "Watch your footing! We charge for the chest. Let the lance do the final work!"

The silver dragon obeyed, carefully avoiding the minotaurs near her feet. Kaz lowered and aimed the dragonlance. One swift thrust and Infernus would be but a bad memory.

As Tiberia steadied herself, Infernus ceased his attempts to pry away the hooks and stared at the younger dragon and his rider. His fiery orbs narrowed, and a knowing look crossed his visage.

All of a sudden, Infernus leapt skyward, his head striking the ceiling hard. The dragon's skull was thick, and the ceiling broke, raining destruction and death down upon the guard. Most of the ropes from the hooks fell loose as the red dragon burst free of the temple, but one minotaur was carried aloft to a point just above the ceiling before he lost his grip and plummeted to his death.

Only when the battered corpse struck the floor did Kaz recognize that it had been Scurm, tenacious to the end. Kaz doubted he would ever fully understand the other minotaur, a warrior who had been rival, foe, and, finally, ally. Honor's Face had once revealed Scurm to have had little honor of his own, but Kaz wondered if, had he taken a second look minutes ago, the reflection would have been strong.

Scurn was only one of many who had died because of Infernus, however, and now the dragon was in the air and flying, revealed to all. There was only one choice left to the minotaur and the silver dragon. They had to follow.

"Stand back!" he commanded the remaining members of the guard. They obeyed without further encouragement. Kaz waited, then leaned close to Tiberia. In a quieter voice he said, "We have to go after him, if you think you can fly."

"I think I can, Kaz. I know I can," Tiberia answered, sounding much older than when the battle had started. A dragon's instincts, perhaps. Kaz held on tight as the silver flexed her wings for the first time... and leapt through the hole in the ceiling.

Somewhere above them, they both knew, Infernus waited.

Chapter 18

Aerial Combat

At Toron's and, surprisingly enough, Delbin's insistence, Hecar and the others headed for the circus instead of returning to the temple. Surrounded by the other minotaurs of the Orilg clan, they looked like simply one more group of interested warriors late for the grand announcement.

"I still don't like it!" Fliara muttered to Hecar. "I don't care what Toron says we should do... and I certainly do not care what that little monster insists, either! We should go back! There's Scurn to consider, if nothing else. That one has hated my brother for years."

"Toron's words aside," Hecar returned, "Delbin was as serious about us not going back as I've ever seen him serious about anything. I know a kender's word generally doesn't count for much, but I know this one enough to understand that his insistence means a great deal. I was also next to Kaz... or what seemed to be Kaz, if I understand Delbin... before the rescue. He was acting strangely. I don't know. I can't say why. But I think we should go to the circus."

"And what can we solve there? We're just a few among many!"

"Is that what you think?" asked Toron, suddenly nearby. Taller than even Kaz, he moved stealthily for a minotaur. He grinned. "Wait until you hear what Helati had planned..." His grin grew wider. "Too bad we might not need it, what with Kaz not coming here after all and the rest of you free. Your sister's quite a speaker, from what I understand, Hecar. She gave Dastrun a good scolding."

"But I thought she wasn't here at all. What do you mean?"

"I'll explain later—" was as far as Toron got when the entire party heard the crash.

The sound reminded Hecar of the war, when siege weapons could level half a city in the name of Takhisis. As part of the advance force, he had watched many a rock crash down on buildings and walls, killing defenders and civilians alike. Hecar had never liked siege warfare; it made no distinctions between worthy opponents and innocent children.

"By the horns of Kiri-Jolith, what is that?" roared Toron, suddenly gazing skyward. "It can't be a—"

But it was. Hecar and the others knew what word Kaz's brother could not bring himself to utter. They knew the word, but could no more speak it than the dark-furred warrior, so stunned were they by the sight.

A dragon. A red dragon soaring high into the sky, burying itself in the clouds above.

They stood there, trying to make sense of it, but just as the first shock finally passed, they heard a smaller but no less significant crash.

This time a smaller, sleeker dragon, gleaming silver, raced skyward. There was something on its back, something that Hecar was fairly certain was a rider.

"Silver and red," he whispered. He could never forget the battles he had watched in the sky during the war. "Deadly foes. They'll fight to the death. The rider..." It seemed a voice spoke in his head. He nodded to himself, not caring whether the others heard or not. "Yes, it is Kaz. It would have to be."

Belatedly he realized that both dragons flew in the general direction of the circus.

* * * * *

Clouds had gathered over some parts of Nethosak, and Kaz knew that among them hid Infernus. Not for a moment did he think the red dragon was hiding in fear. Rather, Infernus was simply using the heavens to his best advantage, counting on Tiberia's inexperience. This was the first time the silver had flown and, although flight was natural to dragons, Tiberia's unsteady journey so far was an indication of just how much practice she needed.

"What do I do, Kaz?" the silver dragon gasped, pushing hard to gain more altitude. She was clearly frightened, but trusted Kaz to guide her along. "I don't see him!"

"He's in the clouds just above that tower." Infernus might be a master of aerial combat, but the minotaur had picked up a few things during his time as a dragon rider. A creature as large as a red dragon could not hide forever. "Go up! Do it now!"

Arcing awkwardly, the silver dragon rose. Kaz gripped Tiberia and the lance tightly, hoping they would break through the clouds without being attacked. Infernus would not flee. He had to defeat the pair if he hoped to salvage his plan. Fortunately for Tiberia, the red suffered the disadvantage of needing the silver alive. That did not mean Infernus had any intention of sparing Kaz. The minotaur was certain that his death was a priority.

They broke through the clouds... and found nothing.

Kaz craned his neck, searching. "Move ahead, but slowly."

"Should I go higher?"

"No, we—" It suddenly occurred to him what Infernus had probably done. "Yes, higher! Higher! Now!"

Startled, the young dragon was slow to react.

Infernus burst from the clouds just below them, colliding into Tiberia's underside. As soon as they touched, the red dragon twisted so that he could sink his claws into his younger counterpart's sides.

Only by sheer luck did Kaz hold on. He cursed himself for being a fool. Infernus had flown back down and come up under them. It was a simple tactic he should have predicted. Evidently he had been away from war much too long.

"I will shake you loose, gnat!" roared Infernus, twisting both dragons around and around. His greater wing-span gave him more control. Tiberia sought to counter his weight, but could not. "I will watch you plummet to your death as Captain Scurm did so nicely!"

It was impossible to get the dragonlance into position. A long tentacle nearly swatted him from his already precarious angle. The minotaur looked around and saw that what had nearly hit him was not a tentacle but rather one of the ropes left over from the guards' attempt to drag Infernus down. At least two of them whipped about as if alive.

Again the rope flew by. Kaz glanced at it, then he pulled himself tighter against Tiberia and shouted,

"The rope! Grab the rope with your mouth and pull back!"

Tiberia did not understand at first. Then, as Infernus increased their spinning, the silver dragon snapped at the tether. She missed, but it hovered within range. Tiberia timed her next attempt better, catching hold of a long length of the rope. Immediately she followed the rest of Kaz's instructions.

The grappling hook was lodged deep in the lower scales of the red's neck. As Tiberia pulled, the hook tore deeper. The sudden pull by the other dragon caused Infernus to lose his momentum and, in part, his grip. He shifted his position to regain his advantage.

Kaz stared at the wings, now closer. He made an estimate of Tiberia's jaws and neck. "The wing! Let the rope loose and bite!"

Below them, the red dragon had obviously decided on the same tactic, but Tiberia was small, and her wings, flapping somewhat erratically, made for a more difficult target than the red dragon's much larger ones. Infernus could not stretch his wings back far enough. The silver stretched as far as she could, opened her maw wide, and bit.

Her foe shuddered and, for a moment, the three simply dropped. Tiberia's jaw remained clamped on the wing.

With a snarl, Infernus brought his lower paws up and, using the incredible strength of his legs, pushed the two leviathans apart. By doing so, he further damaged his wing, for Tiberia did not let go willingly. The red dragon fluttered awkwardly around, trying to compensate for the terrible injury.

Less injured, the silver dragon regained control almost immediately. Kaz shifted. They had to strike now before Infernus was able to adjust. He lowered the dragonlance, aimed, and called out, "Fly at him, Tiberia! Fly at him with every ounce of speed you can muster!"

Her companion nodded, spread her wings to their fullest, and pushed herself toward her foe.

They were too near one another for the silver to pick up much speed, but likewise were they too near for the red to maneuver away in any direction without his younger counterpart compensating.

Kaz gritted his teeth for the collision.

The dragonlance pierced its target in the left side of the chest. Infernus roared in agony and, out of sheer reflex, seized hold of Tiberia. Unable to concentrate fully on flying, the red dragon began to drop... taking his adversaries with him.

Around and around they spun as they dropped through the clouds. Tiberia flapped her wings as hard as she could, trying to slow if not stop their descent. Kaz realized there was no way the silver dragon could support the three of them, and that Infernus had no intention of releasing his grip. The minotaur tried to pry the dragonlance from the red's chest in the hopes that Infernus might then let them loose, but the lance would not pull free. It was as determined to remain impaled in its target as its target was determined to hold on to Tiberia.

We're going to die! Kaz thought as the first tower tops came into sight below them. We're going to die. Damn you, gray man, we're going to die. I hope you and your balance are happy.

"I... won't... let you... get... hurt... Kaz!" bellowed the silver dragon. "I won't!"

In desperation, Tiberia stretched her neck down as far as she could, focusing on her target. A fireball barely half as large as Kaz struck one of the red dragon's injured paws. Under other circumstances, Infernus might have shrugged it off. Wounded as he was, however, the crimson leviathan reacted with a shriek of agony.

Tiberia flapped her wings with all the strength she could muster, at the same time pushing away from her dark counterpart with her legs and tail. Infernus tried to grab hold again, but the other injured forepaw could not maintain its grip.

The red dragon fell below, backside down. Infernus might have righted himself had he had more time, but they were already too close to the ground.

Only then did Kaz see that they were over the circus.

The streets and stands were already filled with running and milling figures, all trying to avoid the massive forms plummeting down at them. Tiberia could regain control before they reached the circus, but Kaz saw that Infernus was going to land half in the field and half on the stands, crushing hundreds.

"Tiberia! Knock him into the field!" The field was large enough to contain four beasts the size of Infernus if only they could shove him to the side.

He could have saved his breath, for the young silver dragon was already swooping down, evidently having come to the same realization as the minotaur. Tiberia strained with her talons, trying to gain some hold on the hapless, writhing red. Infernus no longer seemed aware of what was happening to him. He merely snapped at the smaller dragon and tried to slash one of Tiberia's legs with his own claws.

The silver dragon seized the one limb. Infernus dug into her paw. Tiberia did not cry out. Her wings shifted.

Infernus crashed into the ground, Tiberia landing on him, then rolling away. Kaz was thrown toward the red dragon.

He bounced against Infernus, then slid helplessly down the crimson terror's side. Belatedly Kaz realized that Tiberia had prevented a major disaster. Both dragons had managed to land on the field.

But what had happened to the silver dragon? Kaz stumbled to his feet and looked around, trying to orient himself at the same time. His left leg seemed on the verge of collapse, his wounded arm was half numb, and his ribs hurt, but he refused to allow the pain to overwhelm him as he searched. Kaz could not see the silver dragon's immense form, though.

Then he saw the small, very human shape lying against one wall of the field. So accustomed to the human form, Tiberia had reverted to it upon unconsciousness.

Kaz prayed the young female was only unconscious.

Then movement behind him reminded the minotaur there was another dragon to consider. Infernus had taken the brunt of the fall and was gravely injured, but the red leviathan was remarkably strong... strong enough still to grasp victory from defeat.

There was only Kaz to stop him. Minotaurs filled the stands, but they stood uncertainly, clearly stunned and confused by the spectacle. By the time they chose to act, it might be too late.

Kaz looked around for some sort of weapon, something he could use to finish off the dragon. To his surprise, he found just what he needed not far from him. It was a godsend, especially considering the shape it had worn when last he had seen it.

Honor's Face, no longer a dragonlance, lay not more than a few feet away. It could not have arrived there of its own accord, yet, there it was. Kaz did not question how it came to be there. He seized it with renewed hope, took one last look at the still form of Ty, then charged toward Infernus.

The dragon suddenly succeeded in righting himself, flipping over and nearly crushing Kaz in the process. But Infernus was not yet recovered enough to rise, much less fly. Still, it wouldn't be long, and Kaz had to move swiftly.

He leapt. The dragon saw him, but too late. The minotaur landed on the upper edge of one wing, then scrambled up to the red dragon's shoulder. Savage jaws snapped at him, but Infernus could not twist his neck enough to reach the minotaur. The red dragon tried to shift enough so that he could bring a paw up, but his injuries and twisted position made it difficult.

Kaz reached the neck. Infernus tried to shake him off, but Kaz hooked his feet into the scales and held fast. He gripped his axe.

"Leave me, gnat, or I will crush you! I command it!"

"No more commands, Infernus, not as high priest or dragon! It's time we were allowed to make our own way in the world!"

"Ungrateful fool!" bellowed the injured dragon, sounding much like the high priest. His voice echoed throughout the circus. "I have guided your race to the glory it has attained! I have molded you into the finest warriors! I sent you into slavery time and again, the better to cull the weak and bring to the forefront the stubbornness, the pride, and the strength you now display! All I ask in return is your allegiance! We will rule the world!"

"You mean *you'll* rule the world... we'll just do the dying for you." Kaz raised his battle-axe.

"Your kind was nothing before me and will be nothing without me!" Infernus punctuated the statement by snapping at Kaz. The red dragon was clearly weak, thankfully too weak to cast any spell, it seemed.

"We'll take that chance." Kaz aimed.

Infernus suddenly began to push up. Even as the minotaur brought the axe down with all his might, the red leviathan tried to roll over toward him. Infernus intended to crush Kaz beneath him.

"I am your master!" the red terror roared. "I am your destiny!"

Kaz's footing started to fail, but he did not let up. Honor's Face struck the dragon's neck, sinking deep. Infernus, hissing in agony, pushed harder. Kaz raised the weapon again, knowing he might not complete another swing.

"Paladine, let this blow swing true!" he snarled through clenched teeth. His world was tilting, and only one secured foot prevented him from toppling off the spinning beast.

Once again, Kaz brought the magical axe down.

Once again, the axe changed. It seemed larger, longer, the blades growing as huge as Kaz himself. Yet it was no harder to hold the oversized axe and was no more difficult to guide toward its target. In fact, it was almost as if Honor's Face directed his hand toward the most vital spot on the dragon's neck.

The mirrorlike blade struck deep into Infernus... and continued to bite. Incredibly, the cut spread, penetrating the entire neck. Infernus bellowed, and his whole body shook. Kaz lost his grip on the axe and, finally, his footing. He slid backward and would have fallen headfirst to the ground if not for the grappling hook still caught in the dragon's neck. More out of luck than skill, the minotaur caught hold of the rope. He was flung around, but his drop slowed.

The red's shaking ceased.

Still dangling, Kaz waited. Infernus shuddered again, but the motion ended after only a few seconds. Kaz waited a little longer, then began to climb back.

The first thing he saw was Honor's Face. The axe lay on the upper part of the dragon's shoulder. It was back to normal size. Its mirror finish was as pristine as ever.

The second thing he saw was that Infernus's head and neck had been cleanly severed from the body.

Too exhausted to cheer much about the red leviathan's death, Kaz dragged himself over to the axe and picked it up. His battered reflection stared back at him.

"Wish I'd known before that you could do that," he muttered. "It would've come in handy now and then."

All around him, the air filled with thunder. No, Kaz corrected himself, it was not thunder, but the

stomping of hundreds of minotaur feet.

Applause and cheers added to the stomping. Kaz heard someone call his name, someone whose voice was familiar to him. Others in the audience, either taking their lead from that voice or recognizing him on their own, also called his name. It quickly grew into a chant that he had no doubt could be heard throughout all of Nethosak.

Then the guards arrived. They started toward the area where Kaz and the dragon were, but before they could get very far, minotaurs began to pour from the stands. They came from all sides. Kaz readied the axe, thinking he could take a few of his enemies with him, when he suddenly noticed that the newcomers were not attacking. They were forming a defensive ring around both the massive corpse and the minotaur, weapons displayed against the guard.

Only then did Kaz recognize several of them as members of Clan Orilg.

"Kaz!" called one warrior. He fought his way through the others and clambered up the dragon as if it were something he did every day. The crowd continued to chant and applaud.

"Hecar? How did all this come about?"

"You can thank Helati and Brogan for it." It looked as if more than simply Orilg had come to his aid. It was not possible for the entire clan to be here, since many members lived far from Nethosak, which meant that a number of the minotaurs defending his position had to hail from other clans.

"Helati had a little talk with Dastrun and the clan... I'll tell you later how she did that. Not even certain I understand myself. She found out what you'd been up to and what you'd been fool enough to agree to. Then she heard you were supposed to die in the circus today, so she reminded the clan of what its honor meant. It finally agreed to help." Hecar glanced at the crowd and grinned. He clearly enjoyed the moment. "We were supposed to charge the field when they brought you out... but no one expected this sort of entrance! That's something I'll have to tell you about in detail later." His eyes widened. "Fliara and the others—"

"Are there." Kaz pointed at one of the entrances. Fliara, Delbin... and, if Kaz was not mistaken, his brother Toron, whom he had not seen in longer a time than Fliara. There was no mistaking that streak of hair or that face.

He wondered if Toron knew about their father. "I think they want to make you emperor, Kaz."

"Polik might have something to say about that."

"I doubt it. He was on the platform taking his victory bows when you and the dragons fell." Hecar shook his head in disgust. "And never have I seen a more pathetic combat. Anyone who did not wonder at his challenger's sluggishness already knew that the combat had been rigged. The longer it went—and it seemed even Polik thought it went too long—the more pitiful it became. It was more a slow slaughter than a battle."

Blinking, Kaz looked down the field. Toward the back end of the great beast he made out a portion of the splintered and exceedingly flattened platform used for imperial challenges. There was no sign of a body on what little of the platform could be seen, and he had no desire to go and verify his friend's words. What was left of the late emperor would be something that would appeal to neither his stomach nor his eyes.

"So you see, they have no qualms about making you emperor. After all, how many minotaurs fight and slay a dragon, especially one of such size, and especially one everyone heard claim it was their master and destiny?" The other minotaur snorted. "As if we would ever accept such a beast as our master!"

Kaz scanned the throng. Hecar was probably correct about the crowd wanting to crown him. Even among those of the circle, there was obvious sentiment for Kaz. One or two members scowled or pretended indifference, but with the exception of those few and a handful of clerics, everyone was

saluting the slayer of the dragon.

Dragon? In the aftermath of the red terror's death, Kaz had momentarily forgotten the other dragon, the brave youngster that Kaz considered more responsible for the red's destruction than he.

Abandoning Hecar, he leapt off the massive corpse and went directly toward where he had last seen the young female.

Ty was still there, still unmoving. Kaz broke through the defensive ring and hurried to her side. He knelt down, turning Ty over. The female was breathing. Giving thanks to Paladine, Kaz raised her in his arms. As he did, Ty opened her eyes.

"Kaz?"

"Hush, Ty. It's all right. We beat him. Infernus is dead."

"Did I do good?"

The minotaur snorted. "You did the best anyone could've done under the circumstances. I'm proud of you. Your parents would've been proud of you, too."

Ty smiled, then closed her eyes again.

"The balance is almost restored. You have the gratitude of many, Kaz."

Still carrying the transformed Ty, Kaz turned. The gray man, staff in hand, stood behind him.

"I thought I broke that," the minotaur commented, referring to the staff. "And what's that you're saying about the balance *almost* being restored? Infernus is dead. The danger is past. When the smoke clears, they'll see that this invasion is going to drive us only to ruin."

"The invasion does not matter without Infernus, Kaz. If they launch it, the minotaurs will fail. This is not their time... if such a time is ever to come. I can promise you that." The mage glanced down at his staff. "As for this, it is more durable than it appears."

"What about the balance, then? What do you mean?"

His hooded companion sighed. "The red dragon is dead, but the silver remains. If she remains too long, one of the Dark Lady's draconian creatures will awaken. Although it might be hard to believe, there are worse dragons than Infernus. Should both dragons remain in the world for very long, the compact made at the end of the war will crumble. It has been crumbling these past eight years. I have been busy, very busy, but for a long time even I did not know the truth. Still, Takhisis will be allowed to renew her drive for conquest much too soon if the hatchling is not dealt with immediately."

"I think you told me that before, but what can I do?"

"There are two choices, Kaz." The gray man studied Ty. "I may take her to where she must go. However, I can take her only if she truly wants to leave."

"And the other choice?"

"She must die, minotaur. You will have to kill her, since I am forbidden to do so. She must die or the world returns to imbalance, and thousands of others must die in the ensuing conflicts."

"I won't kill her! You're mad, mage!" Kaz backed away from the gray figure.

"Then she must leave. She must come with me."

"To what? To where? She obviously knows nothing about where you want to take her! She knows only this world." It seemed unfair to the minotaur that Ty had to be taken from everything and everyone she knew because some gods had made a deal. Ty belonged here. Kaz would be more than happy to allow her to stay in the settlement. In the short time since he had met her, she had proven a brave, honorable companion.

"Kaz?"

He looked down to see that Ty had opened her eyes again. By the looks of her, the young woman had heard everything that had been said. "Ty, I—"

"Kaz, I'll go with him."

"Listen! The gods don't have to have their way! They—"

Ty slipped out of his grip. Her stance was unsteady, but she refused help from the minotaur. She gazed at both Kaz and the gray man. "I know I don't have a choice, really, Kaz. I have to leave." Ty steadied herself. "I don't want another war like the one you've talked about, Kaz. It sounds awful. Fighting Infernus showed me how terrible another war would be."

"Do you mean that?" It still seemed unfair to Kaz, but the female sounded determined.

"I do. If I stay much longer, another dragon will awake. I couldn't face that. Too many people would get hurt or die, including maybe you and Delbin."

"The decision is made, then," announced the gray man. His expression softened. "For what it is worth, Tiberia, I regret it must be so. You deserve to live as you desire. I can say only that you shall at least join your sire and your siblings where you are going."

Ty brightened. "I'll see them?"

"I promise." The gray mage smiled. "Then you all shall have a pleasant sleep."

Sleep was one thing Ty definitely needed. The female required time for her injuries to heal. She closed her eyes, then asked, "Is it far? I don't think I can fly far."

"You will not need to fly." Raising his staff, the gray man looked behind him. A hole appeared, a hole that glowed brightly from within. "We will walk. It is not so far that way." He extended his free hand to the transformed dragon. "If you are ready, we should leave very soon."

Ty turned to Kaz. "Could—could you say good-bye to Delbin for me? I wish there were more time, but... I don't want another dragon like Infernus coming."

"I'll say good-bye to Delbin for you."

She leapt forward, wrapping her arms around the minotaur. Kaz froze, then slowly hugged Ty back. "I won't forget you, Kaz! Thank you for everything."

Kaz lifted her chin, meeting Ty's eyes. "You are an honorable warrior, Tiberia, and a good lass, as my father would have said."

Ty lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry about Ganth, Kaz. If it hadn't been for me—"

"Don't think that. Infernus was responsible. Ganth would thank you. You avenged not only him and my mother, but all those minotaurs who died so that Infernus could mold us to his and the Dark Queen's damnable vision."

From behind Ty, the gray man called, "Tiberia. It must be soon. Already there is stirring."

Breaking away, the young human dragon joined the mage. Ty looked back at Kaz and smiled.

"Paladine watch over you, Ty," the minotaur called.

"Thank you again, Kaz... I'll think of you."

"And I you."

"You have my gratitude, too, Kaz," added the gray figure, somewhat sadly. "And my apologies for what I had to do. Know that your father... and mother... watch over you."

"I understand... and thank you, mage."

With that, the pair walked into the hole. As they entered, Ty waved one last time. The hole vanished as she lowered her hand.

It was over, just like that. Kaz felt cheated. The female had hardly time to recover and enjoy some peace with her newfound friends. She had hardly time to see the world. Then again, as a dragon, she might someday see a world that existed long after Kaz was gone.

"Kaz!" There was no mistaking Delbin's voice. "Kaz! Is Ty all right? Where is she? I thought she was over here, but—"

"Take a breath, Delbin," said Hecar.

Kaz turned to face his friends and family. Hecar stood there with Delbin and Kaz's brother and sister. They were not alone, either. There was an entire contingent of minotaurs, not all of them from the clan of Orilg. One group in particular simultaneously interested and worried him. They were members of the Supreme Circle. There also was a handful of clerics.

"I'll tell you about Ty later, Delbin," he said, warily watching the others close in on him. "I promise."

The circle paid little mind to Kaz's friends and relations, barging through the gathering without comment. Kaz looked them over and saw that all eight members were there, their identities marked by the clasps of their cloaks. Three he recognized personally, but the others not at all.

"Hail, Kaziganthi de-Orilg!" called a scarred warrior with gray fur on top and one eye covered with a patch. His name was Athus, and Kaz recalled him from the war. Athus had never struck him as someone who would bow to the high priest's dictates, but it was difficult to say how the old warrior had changed over the years.

"Hail, Athus." Kaz surveyed the gathering. "Come to personally arrest me this time?"

"His Holiness—" began one cleric.

"There is your high priest." Athus pointed at the red dragon's huge form. "We all heard the voice. We all know that voice and that tone even if the form is different. Am I right, Kaziganthi?"

"You are."

"It is a He!" The same cleric pushed forward. "When the high priest comes—"

Kaz snorted. "You should begin thinking more about which of you is going to be the new high priest, rather than wasting time on empty protests. Jopfer, as you knew him anyway, is dead. That leaves a vacancy that must be filled, don't you think?"

The cleric shut up. Kaz watched with amusement as the robed figures began to eye one another. These were some of the red dragon's highest-ranking servants. Any one of them could claim the right of succession. There would be some duels before the week was out, which did not sadden Kaz in the least.

Athus also seemed to enjoy the clerics' sudden realization. He finally shook his head, responding to Kaz's earlier question. "No, Kaziganthi, we've not come to arrest you. Far from it. If anything, I think the majority of us are quite pleased to see you."

That was exactly as he had feared. Kaz remained quiet, waiting.

"Emperor Polik is dead." A trace of a smile again escaped Athus. "Definitely dead. As his challenger died before him, there is a void that must be filled, a void even more important than that which the priesthood faces." The graying minotaur ignored dark looks from more than one cleric. "I think we've all seen and heard enough today to know who exemplifies what we most seek in an emperor. Honor, bravery, determination to face all odds in the course of one's duty, and, of course, the cunning and strength needed to attain victory in combat."

"Listen all around you, Kaziganthi," spoke one of the other members, a shorter, wider minotaur with one crooked horn and, for one of their kind, what would be called a flat snout. "They are still chanting your name. They want you, Kaziganthi! We want you!"

Athus nodded. "We salute you, Emperor Kaziganthi, slayer of dragons and champion of the people!"

The clansmen of Orilg who stood nearby cheered, especially Kaz's siblings. But Hecar seemed less enthusiastic. He was proud of his sister's mate, but he knew Kaz better than the rest. He was probably the only one here who truly knew what Kaz thought of becoming emperor.

Kaz faced the circle and the clerics. He could not deny feeling pride that he had been so chosen. It was the greatest accolade his people could have given him.

"I prefer Kaz as a name," he responded, standing as tall as he could. His body wanted to lie down and sleep for a month, but he did not listen to it, not yet. "And I prefer to decline your offer. I'm not the kind of emperor you want, and I never will be. You'll have to fight that out among yourselves."

As soon as he was finished speaking, Kaz walked past the stunned and gaping minotaur leaders, joined his family and friends, and headed for the circus's nearest exit.

Chapter 19

The Future

Kaz could not help but admire Nethosak as the ship carrying him and the others departed for the south. His people had indeed accomplished much in a few short years, yet if they could forego their historic drive for power and spend more time on improving their lives, he believed they would accomplish much, much more. The minotaur race was indeed destined for glory. However, one did not necessarily need to achieve glory through conquest.

He hoped some of what had said to the Supreme Circle and the rest had sunk in, but only time would tell.

"I can't believe how much you got out of them, considering you threw the throne back in their faces," Hecar remarked, standing next to him. "This ship, calling off the invasion, the funeral pyre for your father... a magnificent, touching sight that was, too."

Kaz nodded. He, Fliara, and Toron's family had represented the children of Ganth and Kyri, the others being far off in other parts of the homeland. They would be notified, however, along with other relations. The pyre had rivaled those of great emperors of the past. Dastrun, much to Kaz's pleasure, had been forced to give a great speech extolling the old mariner's accomplishments. He had done an excellent job of it, too, perhaps hoping he would be able to maintain his position as patriarch even though both of his patrons were now dead.

There had been other pyres, too: one for Scurm, who Kaz made certain was honored for his bravery, and one, not very well attended, for the late emperor. The burning of Infernus's body had taken a great deal more effort, considering both the dragon's size and its natural resistance to fire. A variety of flammable oils had helped that effort.

Kaz turned to his friend. "Should I have accepted?"

"No. I, like the others, was proud that they wanted you, but it's not right for you. You want something different. You don't want to conquer a world. Besides, Helati would have killed both of

us if you had accepted."

Kaz chuckled. "There is that. As for conquest, hopefully the Supreme Circle and the new emperor will think long before they embark on rash adventures. The gray man said that if they continued with the invasion, they would fail."

"I'd like to meet this gray man... and give him a piece of my mind. I still haven't forgiven him for using you, maybe all of us, like that. No, I've changed my mind. I'd rather give him a piece of my fist."

Now that things were calmer and Kaz could think, he felt he understood the mage better. There was always a hint of sorrow in those eyes, sorrow and, most of all, frustration.

Thinking of the mage made him think of Ty. Most of the minotaurs had taken his word that the silver dragon had vanished because her work had been done, but Hecar and the kender had wanted to know a little more, especially Delbin. It had taken some effort to explain to the kender, but when Kaz had finished, Delbin had been so impressed by what had happened, he had immediately sought his notebook... at which point the kender had discovered one or two objects that belonged to Athus, as it turned out.

"Forget the mage," Kaz told his companion. "He did what had to be done." After another pause, he asked, "Do you think they really listened?"

Kaz had been forced to make a speech rejecting the crown for the benefit of the crowd, while trying to keep from offending them. He knew, he told them, that he would not be a good emperor. He had enough trouble leading his own small settlement. He recommended some immediate changes concerning one or two members of the circle, who saved themselves further dishonor by resigning there and then. As for the clerics, they needed to spend some time working themselves back into the good graces of the people.

Toward the end of the speech, after telling everyone what Infernus had done, Kaz reminded the minotaurs of what mattered most. They were their own leaders now, possibly for the first time in their nation's existence. If they made mistakes, they could blame only themselves.

"Remember that life without truth or honor is nothing," he had concluded. "If we are the children of destiny, we must act suitably."

"Are you two going to stand by that rail through the entire trip?" bellowed Toron from behind Hecar and Kaz. Kaz's brother had decided to join the settlement, taking his family—his mate and three small children—with him. They evidently were still below, possibly with Fliara, whose company Hecar seemed to enjoy.

In fact, there were more than a hundred minotaurs aboard the ship, dubbed *Dragonslayer* in Kaz's honor, and even the crew included new additions to the settlement. Several were from his old clan, but many had come from others. There would be more coming as the weeks went on. Kaz might have rejected the role of emperor, but he still had found no way around turning his back on the village that had grown around his dwelling. With a hundred more minotaurs, it would be more like a town from now on.

He hoped he would not be calling it a city before long.

At least there were not any gully dwarves aboard. Clan Orilg and the circle had taken it upon themselves to escort the creatures back to their home, such as it was. Galump had become unelected leader of the newly released slaves, who had nearly forgotten their enslavement already; such was the benefit of a limited memory span.

"We were taking one last look at Nethosak," Hecar finally responded to Toron.

"I can do without the entire homeland! There are better adventures than fighting one worthless war after another. I would rather my children explore when they grow older."

Coming from Toron, who had always played warrior even as a very young child, that was something. Kaz nodded his agreement. "Exploration would be good. There's another continent. Why should Nethosak be the only one sending ships to chart it?"

Hecar looked both of them over. "First you're going to take some time to raise your children, Kaz, or Helati will have both of our hides... and you would do well to do the same with your own mate, Toron. She seems the strong-minded type when it comes to family."

Kaz's brother laughed heartily. "Perhaps I'll go down even now and see if my mate needs me. I'll leave you two alone to admire Nethosak."

As he departed, Hecar mumbled, "It's going to take me a while to get used to him, Kaz."

"Think of him as a younger me."

"I'd rather not. You couldn't ever have been like that."

Kaz laughed. The two of them returned their gazes to the shore. Kaz knew that the bulk of minotaur history to come would always emanate from Mithas and Kothas, especially from Nethosak. Good or ill, though, the future would be determined by the minotaurs themselves. Kaz suspected their basic nature would not change much.

The dream of destiny would, of course, continue without Infernus. Deep inside, Kaz suspected that most of his people needed the dream, if only because they felt too unlike the other races to comfortably live with them.

"We have been enslaved, but have always thrown off our shackles," Kaz found himself whispering. "We have been driven back, but always returned to the fray stronger than before. We have risen to new heights when all other races have fallen into decay. We are the future of Krynn, the masters of the entire world. We are the children of destiny."

Hecar grunted in disgust. "Are we really?"

He shrugged. Nethosak was tiny in the distance now, seemingly inconsequential. Kaz squinted and thought he could still make out what might have been the ruined roof of the temple.

"I don't know," the minotaur murmured more to himself than to his companion. "I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

They watched Nethosak continue to shrink, thinking no more about its future. After all, Kaz and the others, including Helati and the rest of those already at the settlement, had their own to consider... and that was more pressing at the moment.

The End