

PROTECTOR OF THE GROVE

The Jharro Grove Saga: Book Two



TREVOR H. COOLEY

The Jharro Grove Saga: Part Two
Protector of the Grove
A Bowl of Souls Novel
By Trevor H. Cooley

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The Bowl of Souls Series:

The Moonrat Saga

Book One: EYE of the MOONRAT

Book 1.5: HILT'S PRIDE

Book Two: MESSENGER of the DARK PROPHET

Book Three: HUNT of the BANDHAM

Book Four: THE WAR of STARDEON

Book Five: MOTHER of the MOONRAT

The Jharro Grove Saga

Book One: TARAHO WOODBLADE

Book Two: PROTECTOR of the GROVE

Book Three: (Upcoming 2014)

Dedication

To my son, Steel. When I told him I was going to dedicate this book to him, he didn't understand. He asked me why I would do so when he had done nothing to help in the book's writing. It can be hard to explain to a pre-teen boy why you love him. Why he means so much to you when he is the second of your four kids.

At the end of the conversation he told me I should dedicate it to myself because I was the one who wrote it. As he walked away, I smiled. That was so Steel.

He was once diagnosed as autistic. Though I'm not sure you can put that label on him. He has had some tough developmental years, but most kids do. He's smart. He's blunt. He can be really funny. He's just . . . Steel. And I love him for it.

Author's Note

The writing of this particular book has been a crazy ride. We moved to our new home in Tennessee just after the release of *Tarah Woodblade*. There was a lot to get used to out on our little farm. We went the first three months without internet, had tree-downing storms, and lost an animal to fly-strike (Don't google it. Nasty stuff.)

Protector of the Grove is a story I have been excited to tell for some time. I have been hinting about Jhonate's family and culture since book one and the moment when Justan finally met her father was one I had given a lot of thought to.

I hope you enjoy it. Please spread the word about the series. Life as an independent author is wonderful, but also stressful when it comes time to pay the bills. Join us on my Facebook Page and Twitter feed as well as my website, <http://trevorhcooley.com/>. I post constantly and try to respond to every comment. Thank you so much,

Trevor H. Cooley

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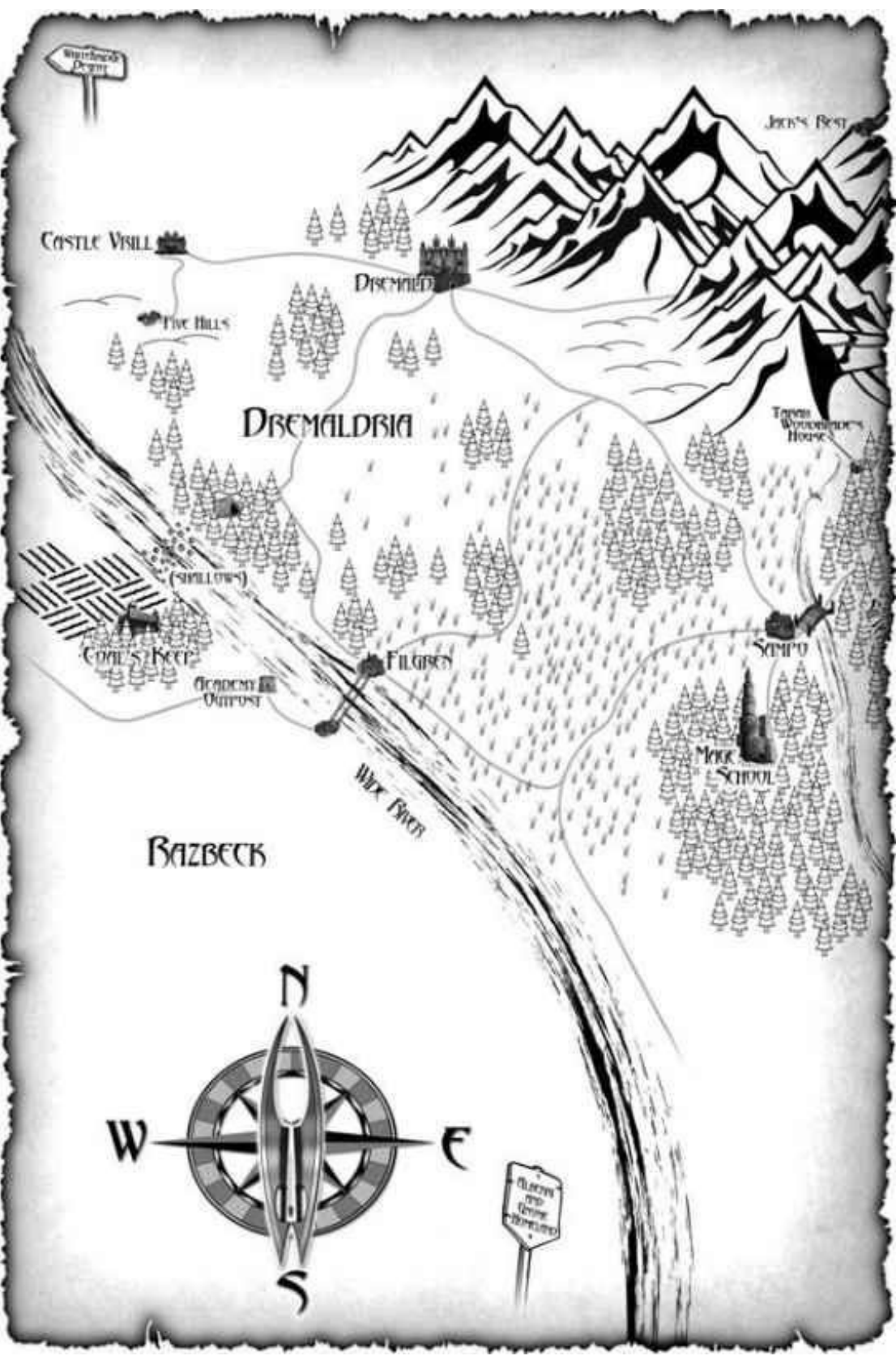
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Chapter One

As far as winters in Dremaldria go, this was a mild one. The rubble that remained of the city Reneul and the Battle Academy was covered in a thin blanket of snow and ice. The area was a hive of activity despite the chill. Laborers in winter clothes climbed over the site, clearing rubble and rebuilding important areas.

The workers were a mix of war refugees and tradesmen from all around Dremaldria. The mood of these people was high. The academy paid well and the rebuild was moving along far quicker than anyone had hoped. With help from Mage School wizards and the dwarves from Wobble, the structure of the new academy buildings grew at a rapid rate.

Justan ran around one completed structure at the edge of Reneul's ruins. The long rectangular building would eventually be a town government office. For now it was just in his way as he hurried to catch up to his future wife.

"Jhonate, wait!" Justan shouted as she came into view. Jhonate wasn't wearing her usual heavy armor, but was instead dressed for the cold, with a stiff coat over a thick woolen sweater and padded leather pants. Her breath frosted in the air and her cheeks were flushed pink. With the determined way she was walking, Justan was surprised she didn't slip. It took him several long strides to catch her. "Where are you going?"

Jhonate didn't answer right away and he fell in at her side, noticing how tightly she gripped her staff. Justan could feel the slow burn of her anger through the Jharro ring she had given him. The gift was a precious one, for it allowed them to communicate privately over short distances. Unfortunately it also meant she could listen in on his thoughts, something that had led to many uncomfortable conversations.

Jhonate's strides were leading them through what used to be Reneul, heading down one of the roadways that had been cleared of rubble. He was pretty sure that she was heading towards the main camp, but Justan didn't push her, content for the moment to walk along beside her. A smile touched his lips.

She was as fierce as ever, their betrothal hadn't changed that. Her jaw was set in determination, her lips pressed into a thin line. A smile broadened Justan's face. Ah, but she was beautiful. Her green eyes were striking even when they were burning holes into the world around her.

Those eyes darted at him to show that she was not in the mood to be admired. "I must speak with my brothers," she said.

"Why didn't you just tell Sir Hilt and my father that?" Justan asked.

"Must I tell them every thing I am thinking?" she replied.

"Well, no. But you did turn and leave while Hilt was mid-sentence."

"I was done speaking with him on the subject," Jhonate said, but slowed down, her glare turning to a frown. "Do you think I was rude?"

"Incredibly," Justan said, though his smile didn't fade. Jhonate was straight forward and honest in her conversations, a trait which often led to rudeness, but those that knew her were used to it. In fact, Justan found it endearing when it wasn't complicating things. "He did come all the way here from Malaroo to speak to you, after all."

"Hilt came to undermine me and deliver an ultimatum," she clarified, picking her pace back up.

Less than a half hour earlier, Justan's father had shown up with Sir Hilt at his side to announce that the Roo-Tan people were forming an alliance with the academy. As part of the agreement, Jhonate's contract was being severed. Her father had commanded that she was to come home with

Justan in tow.

—“He was your father’s messenger, yes. But you know that he didn’t have to come.” Justan replied. Sir Hilt was friends with Xedrion bin Leeths, but he didn’t work for him. “The only reason Hilt would come back so quickly, leaving Beth and their baby at home, is because of the affection he feels for us both.”

They quieted for a moment as they strode past a large group of workers. The men were laboring to clear the center of Reneul where the large arena had once stood. Justan had tested to join the academy in that very arena. Little but the foundation remained now. Justan felt a shiver as he was reminded of the sheer power of the explosion that had destroyed the academy. He had been working clearing the rubble for four months and still it affected him.

“This is the third time he has come on my father’s request to fetch me,” she replied finally. “He has reasons beyond simple affection to come all this way.”

“Maybe,” Justan said, though he didn’t know what Hilt’s other reasons could be. “Listen, I know you are upset, Jhonate, but to tell you the truth, I’m relieved. Finally we can go to your father and get this over with.”

“Get this over with?” she asked, dumbfounded. This time she stopped completely and planted her staff into the ground before turning to face him, her hands on her hips. Several workers stopped their work to observe the conversation.

“Yes,” Justan replied, not backing down despite the intensity in her eyes. “We have been betrothed for over half a year now and I’m tired of the threat of your father looming over us. Now we can face him and get on with our lives.”

“Do you think I am foolish, Edge?” Jhonate asked, her eyes narrowed at him. She usually called him Justan when they were alone, but she found it disrespectful to call him anything other than her title when in public.

“No,” Justan said slowly, realizing that he was treading a thin line.

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you consider me a coward?”

Justan winced. “Of course not. Why would you-?”

“I am well aware of how much time has gone by,” Jhonate said. “And I am also fully aware that I could have cut my contract short at any time just by asking. Each delay I have made has been deliberate.”

“Okay,” Justan said, confused at where she was going with this. As far as he had known, her contract was the only thing keeping them from traveling to Malaroo. He had assumed that her reason for staying out the year at the academy and fulfilling her contract was out of a sense of honor.

“No!” Jhonate said and Justan was reminded that her close proximity to him allowed her to sense his thoughts through the ring. “My original purpose for coming here was brought to a honorable conclusion months ago.”

“Then why have we been waiting?” Justan wondered. Everyone seemed so fearful of her father’s wrath.

She turned and strode forward again. *I have not delayed out of a fear of my father!*

Justan scratched his head and followed. Why hadn’t she talked to him about this earlier? Why couldn’t she just come out and declare her reasons instead of keeping them bottled up for so long?

“There is still just so much that needs to be done,” she said.

Justan still had no idea what she was talking about, but he let it go for now. If they were traveling all the way to Malaroo, there would be plenty of time for talk along the road.

Where are you going? Gwyrtha asked through the bond. The rogue horse sounded confused. Justan sensed that she was still back at the work site where he had left her and there was a bit of commotion. He sensed laughter around her as well as frantic cries.

Gwyrtha, why is someone beating you about the head? he asked.

~~*This old elf is tired of riding.*~~ Gwyrtha replied with a very un-horselike chuckle.

Justan rolled his eyes. *Then let him down, for goodness' sake!* When he had last seen her, Yntri had been clinging to her mane for dear life as she galloped past. Justan felt guilty for letting her continue her little joke. The elf truly was ancient; little more than wrinkles and bones. Surely such a rough ride wasn't good for him.

He is stronger than he looks, Gwyrtha replied, but she slowed down enough that Yntri was able to leap down. She sent Justan an image of the elf tumbling quickly to his feet and shaking his fist at her, all the while berating her in his language of clicks and whistles. Gwyrtha chuckled again. *This elf really likes me.*

Justan sighed. She had changed a lot over the last few months, her mind sharpening quickly. If, by learning to transform her own body, she had somehow overcome some great hurdle in her development. *Be nice. I'll get back to you later.*

She sent him an irritated grunt. *I'll see if Hilt wants to ride then.*

Justan turned his attention back to Jhonate. He had fallen a few steps behind her and hurried to catch up. "You have to admit that this alliance between the Roo-Tan and the academy is a good thing."

"Perhaps." Jhonate's brow furrowed. "I would never have believed father would agree to such a thing. At least not so quickly. My contract with the academy was a starting point, but I had imagined that, even with steady negotiations, our children would be fully grown before my people consented to an alliance with outsiders."

Justan stumbled. "Uh, how many children did you expect we would have?" She didn't answer the question.

They were quickly approaching the main camp. It sat at the base of what used to be the academy's main gate and consisted of a long cluster of winterized tents and hastily constructed buildings. Smoke rose into the air from hundreds of cook fires and burning piles of scrap.

The partially-built walls of the academy rose high above the camp. Stoneworkers set large blocks of stone hewn from nearby quarries into place while wizards roned the completed sections with earth and fire magic. The dwarves and wizards had approved the plans together and everyone was confident that the new academy would be far superior to the old one.

Soon they were at the barracks; a long hall erected by the wizards when they had first arrived at the site. The building was two stories tall, its walls made from stone pulled up from the ground directly beneath it. The different coloration of the various layers of strata in the walls made it stand out from the buildings built by regular means.

Jhonate spoke to a guard and was directed to the room on the second floor where their new guests were housed. They headed up right away, but Jhonate stopped Justan just outside the wooden door at the top of the stairs.

"Before we enter there are things we should discuss," Jhonate said, her eyes focused.

"Okay," Justan replied.

She pointed a finger at his chest as she spoke. "I have things to say to my brothers and you are not to interfere. I wish I could ask you not speak to them at all, but unfortunately my brothers are likely to ask you questions."

Justan smiled and shook his head. "You're that worried about what I might say?"

"My people can be . . . prickly. It will be all too easy for you to say something that could offend them or bring down my father's ire."

"Jhonate, I have spent enough time around you to learn how to deal with someone 'prickly,'" Justan said.

"That may be true, but I am easy to talk to in comparison," Jhonate replied and Justan frowned.

at the implications. She added, "My siblings do not like the way my father dotes on me. They have often enjoyed finding ways to make him angry with me in the past."

"Very well," Justan said. "Then why don't you just use the ring?"

"The ring?"

"Yes. If they ask me a question, simply tell me what to say to them," he explained. "That way I won't offend."

Her eyebrows rose and she gave him an approving nod. "I had not thought of that. It is a good idea, Justan."

"Thanks," he said. She still had much to learn about the way their connection could be used.

Jhonate opened the door and they stepped in to a wide open room. The first half of the floor was taken up by rows of bunks and small chests where the academy soldiers could store their goods. Most of the soldiers were out working but there were multiple guard shifts during the day and several men were sitting at their bunks in various stages of undress. A few smiled as Jhonate brazenly strode through, but the ones that recognized her scrambled to cover themselves. Some of them saluted Justan. He smiled and nodded in return.

At the end of the main room was a short hall leading to the officer's quarters. The rooms were small and consisted of little more than what the rest of the soldiers were given, but at least there was a bit of privacy. Jhonate's brothers were being housed in the back, for the time being, in rooms that were held for visitors. These were more spacious, but just as starkly furnished.

Jhonate moved to the last door on the right and knocked. It opened a moment later and a tall man answered the door. He looked slightly older than her, but Justan could tell right away that he was one of Jhonate's brothers. He had the same long black hair and his braids were interwoven with green ribbons, though they were pulled back from the side of his face in a different style than Jhonate's. He wore an academy-standard winter coat but looked uncomfortable in it. The laces in the front were tied unevenly.

His chiseled face formed a frown. "There you are, sister lost."

"Fullbrother Jhexin," she said, returning his look. "Are you the best father would send?"

She strode past him into the room. Three other men were inside sitting on cots, each of them wearing similar clothing as the first.

Jhonate raised an eyebrow. "Qurl and Xendrol. I thought this was a joke before, but now I see that father is serious about this."

One of the brothers uncurled, coming quickly to his feet. He looked to be older than Jhonate and wore black ribbons in his braids. He darted forward, his hand lashing out to deliver a ringing slap across her face. Jhonate didn't bother to block. Her head was rocked back, but she did not stagger.

"You bring us dishonor!" he declared.

The blow caught Justan by surprise. His hands balled into fists and he took a step forward, his arm swinging.

Stop! Jhonate demanded through the ring, halting Justan's fist inches from her brother's face. *deserved the blow.*

She stepped in front of Justan and met her brother's angry gaze. "Are you one of those staying behind, Xendrol?"

He glared and shoved past her towards the door. Justan stood in his way, his bulky form crowding the door. Xendrol snarled and his hand moved to the wooden hilt of a Jharro sword belted to his waist. "Move, 'dry foot'!"

Justan, several inches taller than the man, refused to back down. He ached to strike at the Xendrol. Brother or not, how dare he slap Jhonate?

Let him go, Jhonate sent to Justan and she said to her brother, "This school will be good for

man like you.”

~~Reluctantly, Justan stepped aside. Xendrol brushed past him and stormed down the hallway muttering something about ‘father’s pet’.~~

“Who else did father bargain away?” Jhonate asked, looking at the others. “Sir Hilt says that two of my brothers are remaining behind to join the academy. Surely not you, Qurl. Father would not send away both his fourth and fifth born sons. Or have you fallen from his favor?”

“Your tongue is sharp as ever, Jhonate,” the man replied. Qurl looked to be the oldest of the brothers and had the bulkiest build, stretching the seams of his winter coat. Red ribbons were woven into his braids. “Father sent me here to make sure you don’t find a way to slither out of this.” He glanced at Justan. “Is this your betrothed?”

Jhonate turned to look at Justan and he saw the red welt that was already forming on her cheek. “Yes. This is Sir Edge, named at the Bowl of Souls. He is a great warrior and bonding wizard.”

Qurl stood, giving Justan an appraising look. He was just as tall as Justan and carried a Jharro staff slightly smaller than Jhonate’s in his right hand. “I have heard that you have a Jharro bow, Sir Edge.”

“I do,” Justan replied.

“May I see it?” Qurl asked.

“It is in my quarters,” Justan said, knowing instantly that he had already made the kind of mistake Jhonate had warned him about.

“Do you often let the tree’s gift gather dust?” Qurl replied, his voice tinged with contempt.

Justan saw Jhonate’s jaw clench. He realized that he had never seen her without her staff at his side. Justan kept his voice level. “I usually keep it with me, but I was clearing rubble when we heard of your arrival. I haven’t had time to retrieve it.”

“You leave your bow behind when you labor and yet you carry your swords?” Qurl snorted and gave Jhonate a wry look. “How low. Are you always so lax when teaching your pupils?”

Jhonate winced. *He is right. I am sorry, Justan. I should have prepared you better before coming in here.*

What should I say? he asked, wanting to make things better.

Nothing, she replied.

“You are being harsh, brother,” said the youngest of the brothers in the room. He was lounging on his cot, his winter coat unlaced down the front revealing a simple deerskin shirt underneath. His hair was more dark brown than black and he wore ribbons the same shade of green as Jhonate’s. “The trees do not require this.”

“This is true,” Jhonate said. “Father may require that the Leeths Clan keep our weapons at one side, but Sir Edge is not of our family.”

“It is about respect!” Qurl said through gritted teeth. He shot a promising glance at the youngest brother.

Justan wanted to say something but kept his jaw shut. Instead he folded his arms, making sure the rune on the back of his right hand was clearly visible, and gave Qurl a level gaze.

“He is my betrothed,” Jhonate said. “I would not be with him if he did not respect his gift.”

Qurl snorted. “Perhaps. We have a long road ahead of us in which to determine the manner of your betrothed. Come, Jhexin. Let us see what these ‘dry foot’ warriors have to eat at this time of day.”

Jhexin nodded and the two Jharro wielders moved past Justan into the hallway.

“Wait, Qurl,” Jhonate said. “I have questions for you!”

“Ask the yearling,” the other brother said with a dismissive wave and they continued down the hall.

“Yearling?” Justan wondered.

—“They are remarking on my youth, dry foot,” said the youngest brother, still laying back on the cot.

“Dry foot?” Justan said, confused.

“It is a derogatory term,” Jhonate said, frowning. “My people come from the marshes and most outsiders that come there fear to get their feet wet.”

She nudged her brother’s leg with her staff. “Sit up, Pelgroth, and show my betrothed more respect than the others!”

Pelgroth sighed and swung his feet over the edge of the cot. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Sorry, fullsister. And I apologize, Sir Edge. If Jhonate likes you, your feet must be at least partially damp.”

“And do I not warrant an embrace, fullbrother?” Jhonate said, raising an eyebrow.

A cautious smile appeared on her younger brother’s face. “Well, I suppose the others are gone. He stood and wrapped his arms around her. “I missed you, Jhonate.”

“And I you, Pelgroth,” she said with a smile, returning his embrace. She placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back at arms-length. “You have grown much since I last saw you.”

“That happens when one is gone for over three years,” he said reproachfully. “With you gone the clan’s clod-head ratio has been out of control.”

Jhonate’s smile faded a bit. “My one regret has been leaving you and Trincy behind.”

He shrugged. “We were quite angry with you about it at first, but that was just because we wished we could do the same.”

Justan found himself smiling. He liked this brother. “So you’re the other one staying behind here at the academy then?”

“I am,” he said, turning an appraising gaze on Justan. “And I am glad of it, too. Anything to get out from under father’s thumb.”

“Pelgroth!” Jhonate said reproachfully. “Do not disrespect father.”

“Come on,” he said. “It is not about respect. It is about freedom. You of all people should know that.” Jhonate pursed her lips, but didn’t disagree with him. Pelgroth spoke to Justan. “So, Sir Edge. You are the one who won my sister’s heart. How did you do that when she does not have one?”

Justan chuckled. “We both know that isn’t true.”

Pelgroth raised his hands and tucked them behind his head. “I think I like you, Sir Edge. To be bad. I think father plans on killing you.”

Justan’s smile faltered. Jhonate grabbed Pelgroth’s arm and sat, pulling him down to sit on the cot next to her. “You must tell me what has been going on since I left.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“You mean over the last three years?” Pelgroth looked incredulous. “Do you know nothing?”

“Very little, fullbrother,” she replied. “Sir Hilt told me a few things but I did not ask for more.”

“What does it mean when you call him fullbrother?” Justan asked.

“We share the same mother as well as father,” Jhonate replied.

Pelgroth wrinkled his nose. “Have you told him nothing of our people?”

“Just tell me what has happened,” Jhonate said, refocusing him. “All I know is that father is still Protector of the Grove and that he has refused to take another wife from the Prath Clan.”

“The Prath Clan is pretty soaked about it, too,” Pelgroth said, shaking his head for emphasis. “But they never have liked father anyway and he says he is done taking wives. I, for one, am glad of it. Our clan is enough of a snake pit as it is with seven surly women about. Besides, father has become too fixated on Tayle women. Can you imagine the outcome if he took on another wife from the

Clan?"

—“The Prath might take up weapons against us,” Jhonate said.

Pelgroth laughed. “Sure, they would arrive just in time to find that our other mothers had killed him in his sleep.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” Jhonate said dismissively, but her brow was knit in thought. Justan could sense her mind churning. “I suppose that means no more siblings then.”

“Did Hilt not tell you?” Pelgroth said. “Liz had a daughter about six months ago. Father named her Lizbeth.”

“So you have another sister?” Justan asked. That made twenty six children. When you had that many did another one even matter? Being an only child, he found the concept of having twenty five siblings a difficult one to grasp.

“Possibly two,” Pelgroth replied. He looked Jhonate in the eye. “Our mother is pregnant again.”

“At her age?” Jhonate said, her eyes wide. “Is that safe?”

“The nurses were worried, especially after what she went through with Trincy. The other wives wanted to stop the birth, but Listener Beth said she had a vision that both mother and the baby would live,” Pelgroth said. “The baby will be born some time this spring.”

Jhonate sighed in relief, one hand on her chest.

“Your people seem to have a lot of respect for Beth,” Justan remarked.

“She did save the grove, after all,” Pelgroth said. They gave him surprised glances and his nose wrinkled in confusion. “You are Hilt and Beth’s friends are you not? Did you not know?”

“I saw that she had a Jharro dagger, but I never asked her why,” Justan replied. “What did she do?”

“What did she-? She only fought her way to the top of the highest mountain and brought down a bag of Jharro seeds!” Pelgroth said, his face animated. “You should ask Hilt about it. Both he and Yntri were there when she did it.”

“New seeds . . .” Jhonate raised a hand to her mouth. “Then-.”

“A whole new section of the grove has been planted! Over a hundred saplings have grown and the old trees have wakened with new life! If not for the Roo-Dan, life couldn’t be better!” he said enthusiastically.

“The Roo-Dan?” Justan asked.

“Rag-tag villages to the east of the grove, full of witches and sorcerers,” Jhonate said, pulling down her lip thoughtfully. “A constant annoyance, nothing more.”

“More than an annoyance now,” Pelgroth said. “There are rumors that they have been banding together. Even father is worried. People are going missing.”

Jhonate dropped her lip and looked right at her brother. “Witches’ work?”

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug. “No one knows for sure, but whole villages of our people have disappeared. There is no sign of battle. It is as if they just wandered off.”

“That would take one powerful witch. Even Mellinda couldn’t do that,” Justan said. Bewitching magic could control lesser minds, but for a witch to take over a human mind, the victim would have to be a willing participant.

“Is this why father is making the alliance with the academy?” Jhonate asked.

“I do not know,” Pelgroth said with a shrug. “Father acts as if he is not worried about the Roo-Dan, but he sent Xeldryn and Sen along with two score warriors to investigate.”

“Then he is worried,” Jhonate said. She looked at Justan. “Xeldryn is the first-born son. Father prefers to keep him at his side.”

Justan shook his head. “If he was setting up this alliance to get the academy’s help right away, this is a bad time to do it. There is little we can do. We are stretched far too thin as it is with the

rebuild. Besides, if he was sending for help, father and Hilt said nothing about it.”

—“Then why would he go to such lengths for the alliance?” Jhonate asked. “Why send four of his sons away at a time like this?”

Pelgroth gave her an incredulous look. “Seriously, Jhonate? After all that father has gone through to bring you home, you still don’t believe?”

“What are you saying?” she asked, squinting in confusion.

“It is about you!” Pelgroth shouted. “By the marshes, why else do you think our brothers are so angry? With each successive time you rebuffed his requests to come home, father has gotten more and more angry. You saw what he did to Hilt the last time he came back empty handed.”

Justan swallowed at the thought of the new scar that ran from Hilt’s ear down his neckline. The dread he’d been feeling grow in his stomach at each mention of Xedrion’s fury reached a new depth of intensity. Jhonate was worth any obstacle he would have to overcome, but he was realizing just how much he didn’t know about the situation he was about to walk into.

“I am just one of his daughters and an unimportant one,” Jhonate said, though her voice was uncharacteristically weak and unconvincing. “He has ten now, after all, and I am number six.”

“You are and always have been his favorite, and you know it. Everyone knows it!” Pelgroth said. “Among all of us, besides maybe Xeldryn, he loves you best.”

“I don’t understand,” Justan said to Jhonate. “If he wants you home so badly, why did he send you here in the first place?”

“You have not told him?” Jhonate looked down sheepishly and Pelgroth laughed. “Father did not send her here. She stole off in the night and came on her own.”

Chapter Two

Jhonate ran away? Fist asked in surprise. Though the ogre was over a weeks' travel away lying in his oversized bed at the Mage School, his thoughts were clear in Justan's mind. Their bond had long range when they were both able to fully concentrate on the connection. It also helped that Justan's magic was particularly strong. *That doesn't seem like her.*

No it doesn't. She was offended when her brother put it that way, Justan sent as he lay in his cot in the warehouse at the edge of Reneul's ruins. The building was used mainly to store equipment and provisions, but the council allowed him a little corner to use as his own.

Justan had been offered a bunk in the officer's quarters, but he had refused it. He didn't feel comfortable there. He had never really been a student at the academy, much less an officer. Besides, Jhonate slept there and with the way she tended to listen to his thoughts, what if she listened to his dreams? Justan found the possibility shudder-inducing.

But Jhonate is good at running, Gwyrtha commented from her spot at the side of his cot. There was another benefit to sleeping in this place. The rogue horse could stay by him instead of sleeping in the stables with the horses. The more intelligent she became, the less she liked being housed with the animals.

Not like that, Gwyrtha, Fist said. The ogre could hear her from his side of the connection, though her thoughts were faint.

Ohh. You mean running in fear, Gwyrtha said. *No, Jhonate doesn't run like that.*

Jhonate didn't see it as running away at the time, Justan explained. At least that's what she told herself. *The way she explains it, she was just taking advantage of an opportunity. Sir Hilt had regaled her family with tales of the Battle Academy for years. So when she overheard her father and Sir Hilt talking about the possibility of sending one of his children to the academy, she decided to volunteer.*

She 'volunteered'? Fist said, his amusement rolling through the bond. *By sneaking off into the night and pretending to be an envoy from her father?*

Pretending? Why didn't she ask her father first? Gwyrtha wondered.

She knew he never would have let her go, Justan replied.

Oh. Then she was running, she said matter-of-factly. Justan couldn't refute the rogue horse's logic.

What was so bad there that she wanted to leave? Fist wondered.

I don't know, Justan said. *I've gotten the picture that her father is overbearing but, knowing her, there has to be more to it than that.* He shrugged. *I'm sure I'll find out more as we go.*

When do you leave? Fist asked.

Justan could feel a hint of unease coming from the ogre. *The day after tomorrow. I haven't asked Sir Hilt which route we're taking yet, but I'm assuming we'll stop by the Mage School on the way. That way you can join us.* Fist's anxiety rose and Justan paused. *That is, if you want to come.*

I do! The ogre said. *It's just . . . I have a lot to learn here right now and . . . Mistress Sherl might not let me.*

Justan frowned. *Do you have to refer to her as 'Mistress Sherl'?*

She says I have to, Fist said emphatically. *She may be Darlan to you, but she's Wizardess Sherl to the wizards and she says since the other apprentices have to address their masters properly, I do too.*

Justan's mother had taken Fist on as an apprentice when it was found out that he had elemental magic. Justan understood the logic, but it still felt strange.

Alright, but I think I can convince mother to let you come with me. Justan said and he could sense the ogre's wince. *Wait, you're just making excuses, aren't you? You must be having a good time there.*

I am. See, Mistress Sherl made the other wizards let me bring Squirrel to class. Also . . . I have some good friends here now. We sit at lunch together every day and they even study with me at the library.

That's good, Justan said, trying to sound enthusiastic, though he felt a sense of unease rising within him. *Why did he feel that way? It was good for Fist to have friends. Who are they?*

There's Antyni. Fist pushed an image of the elf girl through to Justan's mind. She looked odd wearing a student robe instead of her normal forest garb. *They made her apprentice real fast. Somehow she remembers a lot of what Qyxal learned while he was here and her elemental magic's real close to his too.*

Justan nodded, remembering Qyxal's funeral and the way the elf's twin sister had linked with him before his spirit had passed on. *That's good for her. I'm glad you two are friends.*

There's also Neau. The ogre sent Justan an image of a portly young man wearing a blue robe with red trim. *And Jezzar.* This one was a thin older man wearing spectacles. His robe was gray. *He's new. He came here to learn how to use his spirit magic. The wizards say he's good at blessing and binding magic.*

That's great for you, Fist, Justan said, pushing his unease away. *You know, you really don't need to feel bad if you don't want to come with me to Malaroo. I understand.*

No! It's not like that, the ogre replied. *I do want to come. I just . . . I'm not sure what to do. If you needed me to fight at your side I wouldn't hesitate.*

I know. And that shouldn't be necessary, Justan said. *I mean, it won't be necessary. No fighting on this trip.*

You don't sound sure, the ogre replied.

No. I'm sure. It's-. It's okay. Justan sighed. *Look, we won't make it down to the Mage School for another week yet. Think about it. Talk to my mother about it. See what she thinks. I'd love to have you with us, but I understand if you can't. Do what's best for you.* Justan paused. This was the most awkward he had ever felt during a conversation with Fist. *So, um, is there anything else interesting going on?*

The new fire wizard on the High Council came today, Fist replied, glad for the change of subject. *He's named.*

Really? Who is it?

The Mage School High Council had lost five of its seven members during the war. A staggering loss, but while the Academy had replaced its fallen council members within days, the wizards were still dragging their feet.

Master Barthas. He came from the Mage School in Alberri. Mistress Sherl knows him. She says his fire magic is just as strong as hers.

Barthas. The name sounded slightly familiar to him, but Justan couldn't recall anything about the man. There were many named wizards he hadn't met. The wizards he'd known were Mage School professors and most wizards didn't stick around the school for long once they'd been named.

Oh! And there's something else. Something big happened, Fist said excitedly.

Something big? Justan's curiosity perked up.

But it's a secret, Fist said mischievously.

Justan chuckled. *So you're going to bring it up and then not tell me?*

I can't. I promised, the ogre replied. *But I can tell you that it's good news.*

A good-news-type secret. You're going to leave it like that?

Yes, Fist said. *You can see when you get here.*

~~—Justan sighed. *All right. Well, good night. I'll contact you again tomorrow and tell you what S Hilt says about our plans.*~~

Good night, Justan. I . . . good night.

With that, their contact ended. The bond between them thinned until all that was left in Justan's mind was a general knowledge of the direction the ogre was in. Justan put his hands behind his head and laid there in the darkness of the warehouse, his mind digesting the conversation he'd just had with Fist.

Of all the people in his life, Justan found Fist the easiest to talk to. Yet this time he hadn't been able to put his thoughts together. Why had he been so unhappy with Fist's good news? They were the things he'd wanted for Fist all along, weren't they?

When he'd first bonded with Fist in Ewzad Vriil's foul dungeon, the large ogre had been almost childlike in the ways of humans. Justan had wanted nothing more than to share everything with him, and it had torn at him whenever Fist had faced adversity because of his race. Now Fist was finally gaining acceptance for who he was. Why had Justan's first reaction to the news been to dislike it? Was it because these new friendships were keeping the ogre away from him?

A pang of guilt struck him. How petty and selfish his emotions had been. To make things worse, he knew that Fist had felt his reaction through the bond. The ogre was probably feeling terrible about wanting to stay at the school. Justan promised himself that he would apologize to Fist the next time they spoke.

He should be with us, Gwyrtha said. The rogue horse was, as usual, listening in.

I would prefer that too, Gwyrtha. But what's important is Fist's happiness. He needs to do what's best for him.

But we are his tribe, Gwyrtha replied in confusion. *He said so.*

And we are, Justan sent. They were more than a tribe. Their bond gave them a closeness that couldn't be found elsewhere in life. *That doesn't change no matter how far apart we might be. But we can't force him to stay by our side.*

The last four months being apart from Fist had been hard. Justan hadn't realized how much he depended on his friend. Despite his relative newness to life among the goodly races, Fist had a surprising amount of insight. Justan knew that when he went to Fist with his problems the ogre would somehow help him find the answer. Now there was only a short amount of time during the day that they could talk and long-distance communication just wasn't the same as speaking in person.

It had gotten even harder two months prior when Deathclaw had left with Hugh the Shadow on a mission for the academy. If Fist was Justan's moral compass, Deathclaw was his best strategic advisor. Justan closed his eyes again and reached into the bond to find that bundle of awareness that was his connection with the raptoid.

Deathclaw was far away, farther than Fist, yet their link was nearly as strong. Justan fed his thoughts through the bond. *Deathclaw. Can you speak with me?*

Justan received a faint acknowledgement, telling him that Deathclaw had heard his request. He waited for the raptoid to be in a situation where they could speak. Hugh the Shadow was head of the assassin's guild at the Battle Academy and he had his men do much of their work during the night. This made finding a good time to communicate a difficult prospect. Sometimes it would take hours before Deathclaw was in a position to reply.

Luckily, this time was an exception. Justan only had to wait for a few minutes before he felt the raptoid reaching towards him through the bond. Justan joined the raptoid's thought with his own and their connection strengthened. The bond opened up until Justan could feel it solidify like a thick cord bridging the hundreds of miles between them.

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