

## CHAPTER TWO

It was all a misunderstanding. Baylon was the first one to admit that maybe he'd had a bit too much to drink, and the nighttime back streets of Crast weren't exactly well-lit. Even when sober and in broad daylight, one brown horse looked much like any other to him. So it was an honest mistake. He had tried to explain as much, yet this large man with a mustache full of scrambled eggs or whatever it was, was yelling at him, calling him a horse thief and even worse things.

“Look,” Baylon said, “why would I want to steal your horse? I already have one. It's right there.” He whistled. “Hey, Danger! Hey! It's me!”

Danger didn't as much as turn an ear in Baylon's direction.

*Well thanks a lot, you worthless old fleabag.*

“Yeah, he seems really attached to you,” one of the man's friends commented with a grin. Scrambled Eggs himself, though, was still livid with rage.

“Get outta here you little maggot, or I swear I'll gut you! I don't ever wanna see you again!”

“Trust me,” Baylon said, “that sentiment is entirely mutual. But I'm not leaving without my horse. I'm going to take him, and then I'm going to leave.”

*The Limping Badger* was a seedy tavern even by Crast standards—

the town itself was a cesspool, its best inns and alehouses dingy and full of vermin—and Baylon had long felt that coming here was a mistake. There was plenty of work for someone who could sing and weave a tale, for sure, but the patrons knew only the crudest of songs and earning his coin this way Baylon felt like a whore. This was his third night at the Badger and he had decided that there would not be a fourth. Taking advantage of the custom that allowed bards and storytellers to drink on the house, he had downed enough wine to make the Badger’s smelly clientèle bearable, and then bade his leave after his second performance.

Coming outside, looking for Danger, he had apparently picked the wrong horse and now an oaf of a man and his two friends, all dressed in leather shirts and looking like some merchant’s hired muscle, were having an issue with this most basic of mistakes.

*Just my luck*, Baylon thought.

“Step back from that horse, you!” The big man was reaching for the heavy sword in his belt and Baylon realized that this was going to get worse before it got any better.

“My good man, that’s *my* horse. Not yours—mine. You don’t get to tell me what I can or can’t do with my horse, thank you very much.”

Baylon quickly assessed his options and his chances. Broad-chested with large arms and a sizable gut, the man was probably strong but slow. Also, Scrambled Eggs looked like he carried a sword to appear intimidating rather than someone who was actually skilled at using it.

Something about the way he so pointedly gripped its hilt without making any actual attempt to draw it made Baylon almost certain of this. Someone who trusted in his abilities with a weapon needn't stoop to such theatrics. Still, even an unskilled fighter could land a lucky blow, and if he was the size of Scrambled Eggs that lucky blow could easily lop a limb off.

Baylon was no warrior but he'd been in enough scraps in his day to know a thing or two. He didn't look like it—short, lightly built, with fair hair and a handsome, boyish face—and he had learned how to use this to his advantage. Maybe he wasn't one to charge headfirst into the fray, but if he had no choice he could fight like a cornered tomcat. But right now Baylon's head was swimming from the wine he had consumed and the man had a sword and two friends, almost as large as him. They didn't appear to be armed with more than their fists, but that was bad enough.

Still, Scrambled Eggs was the only one who looked like he really wanted to fight. That was something at least. If Baylon could avoid getting hacked in two long enough to give the two companions a few good scrapes, they might lose heart and back out. Yes, that was the best plan. Fighting not to win, but to even out the odds until he could focus on the main antagonist alone. Hopefully even Scrambled Eggs was smart enough to realize that appearances could be deceiving and once Baylon proved not to be easy prey, he'd think again.

The strategy wasn't optimal, but the only other option was running

away and leaving his horse behind, which was out of the question. Danger may be a mean-tempered old nag, but he was the only horse Baylon had and he wasn't going to just abandon him.

Scrambled Eggs finally drew his sword, its notched and rusty blade confirming Baylon's suspicions. The weapon was mostly for show. A crowd had gathered around the scene, some whispering and others taking bets, Baylon noticed.

An iron rake with a thick wooden shaft leaned against the railing outside the *Badger*, probably used for keeping the tavern entrance free from the filthy straw that got dragged out into the street under countless boots. Baylon grabbed it with a silent curse, steeling himself. His intoxication provided him with some much needed courage and, paradoxically, made him think clearer as his mind wasn't preoccupied with being mortally afraid.

"Enough of this!" a gruff voice commanded. "What's going on here?"

Three town guards had appeared, alerted to the commotion by the big man's shouting or by some worried passer-by. Baylon let out a sigh of relief. Maybe this wasn't going to be a disaster of an evening after all.

Crast's guards were just as corrupt as the rest of the town's officials, known for happily turning a blind eye to almost anything at the exchange of a few coins. But they did not tolerate fighting in the streets. The town needed its inns and its merchants, and people lying dead in

the gutter was bad for business. Clad in leather armor and wielding short swords and heavy clubs, the guards were usually war veterans or sell-swords drafted into service of Crast, and not to be trifled with.

“This one here’s a stinkin’ horse thief, that’s what’s going on!” Scrambled Eggs pointed a stubby finger at Baylon. “He was gonna steal my horse, he was!”

“I wasn’t,” Baylon sighed. “It’s dark, I’m drunk, and I thought his horse was mine. That’s all. Mine is over there.”

"Can you prove that the horse is yours?"

“Horse is yours,” Baylon giggled, “good one. I’m a bard you know, I know these things. Maybe you should become one, too.”

The guardsman glared at him.

“Sorry. Yes, yes I can prove it. I am Baylon Silverhawk. My name is engraved on the underside of the saddle, along with the same emblem that’s on my dagger hilt. Just so you don’t get the wrong idea, sir, I’m not going to touch the dagger. It’s on my belt, feel free to have a look.”

“Garin, check the saddle,” the guard said to one of his companions as he plucked the dagger from its sheath. “The emblem is a fancy-looking circle with some kind of chicken inside it.”

“*Chicken?*” Baylon gasped. “It’s a hawk!”

Garin unbuckled the cinch strap and let the saddle slide down on the ground. “It checks out, sir,” he nodded after having inspected the underside. “The name’s there, and the emblem.”

“That don’t prove nothin’,” Scrambled Eggs snarled, “he might’ve stolen the horse *and* the dagger!”

“It’s good enough for me,” said the guard. “Man made a mistake, I suggest you get over it.”

“Get over it? I swear to you I’m gonna—“

“You,” the guard barked at Scrambled Eggs, “sheathe your weapon, calm down and go inside for your drinks, or you’ll be fighting me instead of this boy! And you”—he jabbed his finger into Baylon’s chest—“you go straight home and sleep it off. If I see you out on the streets again tonight, I’ll throw you in a cell.”

“Yes, milord, sir. Will do.” Baylon saluted, almost knocking himself unconscious with the rake he was still holding. He returned it to where he’d found it with a sheepish grin and went to put Danger’s saddle back on. The guards stayed long enough to make sure that Scrambled Eggs and his cronies weren’t coming back out, and then departed. With that the crowd dispersed and Baylon began the ride home, swaying in the saddle.

Home was a small room atop a bakery on Chandler Street, six by nine feet and containing little more than a shuttered window, a chamber pot, a straw mattress and a chest for keeping his belongings. Baylon paid one silver a week for it, which was maybe a tad expensive but it was cleaner than most inns in Crast and he didn’t have to share the room with anyone else. He stumbled in through the door, took his boots off with some effort, and leaned his leather-cased harp against

the wall. After having emptied his bursting bladder in the pot he fell onto the mattress, asleep before his head touched the folded-up blanket he used for a pillow.

When Baylon woke the next day—a couple of hours before noon, judging from the bright sunlight falling in through the open shutters—he spent a long while just lying there on his mattress, trying to keep his head from splitting apart and looking at a pair of sandals that sat on the floor in front of the chest. At first he wondered whether he had accidentally taken someone else’s shoes on his way home last night, just like he had almost taken the wrong horse. But no, no one in their right mind took their shoes off in a filthy place like the *Badger*. Besides, his boots were right there by the door where he’d left them. It was all very strange. Baylon could not remember ever owning a pair of sandals. Maybe when he was a boy, but these were grown-up sandals. Thick soles, finely braided leather straps.

As his hungover brain slowly made sense of what he was seeing, Baylon realized the sandals weren’t empty. A pair of slender feet were in them and above the ankles hung the hem of a forest-green robe.

“You are awake. Good. We need to speak.”

Baylon sat up straight and regretted it immediately. Claspings his throbbing head he fell back on the mattress with a groan, eyes closed

tight against the piercing sunlight.

“Are you unwell?” It was a female voice. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Water,” he croaked. “Water would be nice.”

Baylon heard the sloshing of water close to him. He was handed what felt like a metal flask and emptied it in one long draft.

“What ails you, my friend?”

“I think I had a little too much wine last night.”

“That was foolish of you.”

“Story of my life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” Baylon squinted at his guest. Pale as a moonbeam, with jet-black hair and strangely golden eyes, the woman sat on top of the chest with a delicately carved quarterstaff balancing across her knees. The green robe was plain. At a glance she appeared Baylon’s age—late twenties—but something about her eyes hinted at her being much older than she seemed. Her frame was small but she didn’t look fragile. She was slim and lithe like a young tree.

“How did you get in here?” Baylon asked.

“I used the door. It was not locked.”

“That doesn’t mean you can just walk in!”

“You should have locked it, then.”

“Yes, but—“ A noise from the window made Baylon turn his head. “By the seven lords of hell! What is that?” He scrambled backwards



on the mattress.

The woman smiled. “That is Zathir. He is my friend and companion. Do not worry, he means you no harm.”

Perched on the windowsill was a large white owl. Its green, narrow-slitted eyes regarded Baylon with cool disinterest. It ruffled its feathers again—the noise that had alerted the bard to its presence—and promptly closed its emerald eyes, as if going back to sleep.

Baylon looked from the owl to the woman, first once, then again. “You’re an elf!” he exclaimed as the realization dawned on him.

The woman frowned. “*Elf*,” she said, as if quoting a passage from memory, “*a creature from human legend that lives in forests. See also grinks, fairies, nettlefolk.*” She snorted. “I am a Janessi, but that word means nothing to you, I suppose.”

“Apologies. Of course I know of the Janessi. I’m a bard, you know. It’s just that... well, elf is what humans call you. I meant no offense. If Janessi is what you prefer...”

“How about Jenandra?”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never heard that word.”

“That is my name. And you?”

“And me?”

“What is your name?”

“Oh. Baylon, my name is Baylon.”

“Tell me, Baylon, have you ever been to Arynbridge?”

“Once or twice. Small mining town up north, right? Lots of trees

and mosquitoes?”

“Possibly. I have never been there, which is why I need you. I am looking for a guide.”

“Really?” Baylon scratched his head. “Why me? There are people in Crast who’d be much better suited for such a task. Rangers, trappers.”

“You seem less like a diseased madman than most people I have met here.”

“Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome.” Jendandra, it seemed, was totally impervious to jokes and sarcasm. Maybe it was a cultural thing. “Also,” she added, “you do not wish to stay here. Which makes me think that I will need to pay you less to guide me than someone who does not actually want to leave.”

Baylon spent a moment wrapping his head around this statement. She had only the subtlest of accents but spoke in an oddly measured manner, pronouncing every syllable so clearly and precisely that he found himself listening more to the individual words than their overall meaning.

“Well, I suppose,” he said, finally. He wondered how she could know that he was thinking of leaving, but decided it didn’t matter. Maybe she had seen his half-hearted performance at the *Badger* last night and deducted that there was a man who wasn’t enjoying his stay here. “Now, you mentioned paying me...”

“I will give you one gold piece now and an additional two when we

reach Arynsbridge. I will also pay for whatever provisions you might need for the journey.”

Baylon raised an eyebrow. That was not a bad deal at all. Arynsbridge lay almost ten leagues to the north, but an Imperial road ran most of that distance and while partially dissolved into wilderness, it was a relatively straightforward route. Not necessarily safe, of course, but straightforward.

“Let me make one thing perfectly clear,” Baylon said. “I’m a bard, not a fighter. If you’re looking for someone to protect you I’m not your man. If we run into trouble I’ll be too busy protecting myself to fend for you as well.”

Jenandra made a wry grin and rapped her fingertips on the quarter-staff. “You need not concern yourself with that, my dear Baylon. As a matter of fact I was fully expecting having to protect *you*, should the need arise. I need a guide, not a bodyguard.”

Baylon shrugged. “All right, then. When do we leave?”

“How about now?”

“Now? As in right now?”

“Unless you have any pressing matters to attend to first, yes.”

“Well, I’m terribly hungover and I could use something to eat. Does that count?”

“No. You can eat on the way.”

Baylon cursed. “I thought so. Well, let’s be off then.”

He gathered his belongings, which didn’t take long as they consisted

of little more than a knapsack, a pair of saddlebags, his harp and the short spear he carried on the road for fending off brigands or wild animals. With that they went down the stairs and into the small yard behind the house where the stable was. Baylon led Danger out while Jenandra watched.

“Where’s your horse?” Baylon asked as he was saddling Danger, habitually dodging the old stallion’s attempts to bite him. “Stop that,” he mumbled.

“I do not have one.”

Baylon looked up at Jenandra. “Really? And you were planning on traveling ten leagues just how... ?”

“I will run.”

“In sandals?”

“No, of course not, are you daft? Once we are away from this filthy place I will take them off and run barefoot, like the Weaver intended us.”

Baylon raised his eyebrows but refrained from commenting. *She’s paying you good money, he told himself, and it’s her feet. Let her do whatever she wants.*

After having stocked up at a merchant’s and filled their flasks and waterskins from a well, they exited the town through the north gate. Baylon looked back once at Crast’s ramshackle walls and the buildings leaning drunkenly against one another, a miasma of greasy smoke hanging over the rooftops. In the distance the harbor could be

glimpsed, masts pointing towards the sky like reeds at a riverbank, and beyond those the sparkling Sea of Whispers. Baylon's hangover was slowly subsiding, as was the stink of Crast, and he was glad to be rid of them both. He made a made a mock salute and turned his back, urging Danger onwards. True to her word, Jenandra stopped to remove her sandals once they were clear of the town's filth, and seemingly relieved she fell into step with the horse and its rider. Her long, black braid bounced against her back.

"So, why are you going to Arynsbridge?" Baylon asked when they were on their way.

"I am looking for someone. A woman."

"Right. And she lives in Arynsbridge?"

"No. But she is going there, and I need to find her."

"Why?"

Jenandra gave him a cool, sidelong glance. "I like you, Baylon the Bard. But I am paying you to be my guide, not for asking questions about matters that do not concern you. Feel free to say whatever you want, but do not for one moment mistake my politeness for familiarity, or expect that you have a right to know more than you have been told."

Baylon nodded. "Fair enough. Just making conversation."

They traveled for a while without speaking, Danger at a light trot and Jenandra keeping pace without as much as breaking a sweat, and Baylon's doubts about the woman's ability to keep up soon fell to

shame. Baylon, however, wasn't one for long silences and before half an hour had passed he was bored.

“Are you like a priest, or a wizard?” The bard glanced at her. “I mean, a wizard... ess?”

“Those words are meaningless to me and my people. I am a servant of the Sacred Glade. There is only one Weaver and there is only one Weave, though in the hearts and minds of other races it takes many different shapes.”

Baylon searched his mind for all he knew about the Janessi and their ways. He came up with very little of use. “I see,” he said. “So, a druid, then?”

“You have no idea what I just said, do you?”

“No,” Baylon grinned, “none whatsoever. Still,” he added, “you're an elf. A Janessi, I mean. How come you need me to show you the way through the wilderness? Aren't you supposed to be better than me at something like that?”

Jenandra frowned. “Normally, yes.” She looked around her. At the side of the road a crumbled stone structure stretched for some distance, covered in lichen and entangled in vines and brambles. “But this place... it is different. Humans have inhabited this land for a long time and the Weaver's strands are faded. I could send Zathir to scout the path ahead, I suppose, but that would take a long time. Clever as he may be, he is still a bird and not the best judge of what is a good path for someone who lacks wings. And besides, I need him to keep

his eyes on the road behind us.”

At that time Baylon didn't stop to think what that last comment meant. It would only become clear to him later.

When the sun descended behind a cloud formation to the west, painting the skies a fiery amber and casting long shadows across the yellowing late summer grass, the duo halted. The road was rougher up ahead, Baylon warned, where the ground had sunk over the centuries and the Empire's paving stones had been washed away or buried by floods and torrents, to become overgrown with vegetation. It was not the kind of terrain that you wanted to negotiate in waning daylight, let alone in complete darkness. He suggested that they make camp while there was still enough light to find a good spot. The Janessi woman, who likely had keener eyes than both Baylon and Danger, was at first reluctant but conceded when Baylon reminded her that if he couldn't see where he was going, it would be to her detriment as well.

They set up camp in a hollow among the roots of a giant oak straddling a hill a stone's throw from the road. Zathir flew off into the twilight—to hunt, Jenandra explained. With only a small fire to heat water for tea, they ate some bread and cheese and talked quietly as the stars awoke above them, one by one.

“Is it common for sons of Brennish noblemen to become bards?” Je-

nandra inquired after Baylon had explained his origins. He didn't normally like to talk about it, but she had asked where he was from.

"Hardly." Baylon smiled. "My father wasn't happy about it, and that's putting it mildly. But with three older brothers I had no inheritance to look forward to except for Danger and the clothes on my back. Besides, I was always better at the playing and the singing than..." Baylon paused. Jenandra wasn't listening anymore, her expression distant.

Grasping her quarterstaff the Janessi got to her feet, looking up into the night air. For a brief moment it seemed as if her golden eyes glinted emerald green, though Baylon couldn't be certain. A trick of the flickering firelight, for sure.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't answer immediately. "Probably nothing. But I need to make sure. Stay here."

With that Jenandra was gone and Baylon was alone. Crickets chirped in the darkness and a soft breeze fanned the flames, sending sparks flying up into the oak's branches like fireflies. Baylon drummed his fingers on his knee and waited. A quarter of an hour went by.

With a rustle in the grass, something flitted from one shadow to the next at the edge of the campfire's light. Baylon looked up. The crickets had gone silent.

"Jenandra?" he said. No response. "Uh... Zathir?"



A shape lunged at him out of the darkness and before he could as much as cry out, Baylon found himself pinned to the ground under a body swathed in black. He reached for his dagger but let out a yelp of pain as strong fingers dug into the muscles in his arm, turning his hand limp. A long, curved blade was at his throat, firelight dancing along its edge, and eyes like two coals stared down at him, the only visible features of a face covered in black cloth.

“Make not a sound, worm,” the man said, his accent thick and his voice dripping with malice, “or I’ll cut you open from throat to groin. Nod if you understand me.”

Baylon nodded carefully. The blade was cold against his skin.

“Good boy. Now, I want you to...”

With a shriek and a flash of white, something shot down from the night sky. It was Zathir. The man screamed as razor-sharp talons cut through the hood he was wearing and raked his scalp. He jumped to his feet, slashing at his assailant, but the owl avoided the blade with ease.

Then Jenandra was there. She burst out from the shadows, no less fiercely than her winged companion. The Janessi and the black-clad man exchanged blows, impossibly fast, and then it was over as quickly as it had begun. Jenandra’s quarterstaff shot out, the man dodged, but it was just a feint and half a heartbeat later she swung it around and hit him just below the chin. Baylon heard the man’s neck snap like a twig. He was dead before his body slumped to the ground.

“You shouldn’t have killed him,” Baylon said as he rose shakily, fingering the point on his neck where the memory of the dagger’s touch still lingered. “Now we won’t know who sent him, or why.”

“I already know who and why. This man is a member of the Shadow Crescent. Or was.”

Baylon paled. “What?”

“The Shadow Crescent. They are—“

“Lady, who do you take me for? You may have found me in the ass-crack of civilization, but I am, believe it or not, actually a bard and not some common fiddler! I know who the Shadow Crescent are, thank you very much. What I want to know is why he was trying to kill me!”

“He was not. He was after me.”

“Splendid. That makes everything *so* much clearer!”

Jenandra regarded Baylon with a strange look on her face. At first he thought she was taken aback by his angry outburst, but then he realized she was afraid. The Janessi woman, who had been the epitome of self-confidence from the first moment he met her, was actually afraid. She also looked ashamed, Baylon thought.

“Blood of the Gods.” He sat down on the grass, shaking his head.

It was a long while before Jenandra spoke. When she finally broke the silence, her voice was quiet and subdued.

“I owe you an apology, Baylon Silverhawk. I have done you wrong by hiring you and not letting you know the stakes involved. I have

put your life in danger and that was never my intention. It seems I have underestimated my enemies and I never thought..." She trailed off, rubbing her eyes as if overcome with a great weariness or burden. Finally, she sighed. "I am truly sorry for dragging you into this. If you wish to leave, then go now. I would if I were you. I will happily pay you the gold I owe you. I will find my way to Arynsbridge somehow."

"Now wait a moment," Baylon said, "so that's it? You're going to just dismiss me here in the middle of nowhere?"

"It is for the best. Trust me."

"No, no, no. That's not how it's going to happen."

Baylon wasn't happy about almost having his throat slit, but somewhere in this there was a story waiting to be told. He had been a bard for almost ten years and aside from silly love songs composed for pining nobles, he had yet to write his first original piece of any significance. And here he was, hired by a Janessi woman on a mysterious mission, being attacked by a southern league of assassins in the backwaters of a fallen empire. As terrifying as the situation was, he knew he'd regret it for the rest of his life if he just backed out and went back to the *Limping Badger* or whatever dreary place.

Besides, he liked Jenandra. Not as in being attracted to her; she was pretty, for sure, but she was also alien in a way that was vaguely disturbing, and Baylon suspected that she was old enough to be his grandmother. She was a good person, if somewhat distant, and if

there was something Baylon had learned over the years it was that you take care of the good people you meet, because they are few and far between. Gold or no gold, tale or no tale, Baylon didn't just want to leave her here at the mercy of whatever dangers lay ahead. Not that he thought he was much use to her besides being a guide—she could clearly take care of herself—but at least he could try his best to get her where she wanted to go.

“Here's my deal,” Baylon said. “I will uphold my end of the bargain and get you to Arynbridge, and you tell me exactly what's going on.”

Jenandra looked at him, unconvinced. “That is not much of a deal. I could just leave, you know.”

“Feel free!” Baylon leaned back on the grass, bringing out his pipe. “I'd be happy to sit here for a bit, having a smoke. In fact, I have a skin of wine on my saddle and a grilled chicken. So go, by all means. But be careful with that stretch north of here. It's tricky if you don't know the way. But you're not in any hurry, are you?”

Jenandra glared at him, her golden eyes flashing. “Are all humans this annoying?”

“I don't know all humans. But I am, whenever someone owes me something.” Baylon smiled.

For a brief moment Baylon thought she was going to break his jaw with the quarterstaff. Then she laughed, a bright, sparkling sound that filled the clearing like birdsong on the first day of spring.

“Very well,” Jenandra said, crouching down. She held out her right arm and Zathir landed in a flurry of white feathers, grasping her forearm with inch-long talons. “I suppose you have a right to know. But time is of the essence and I must be brief. We can not stay here.

“Like I said, there is only one Weaver and only one Weave. But there is also the the Unraveler, it-whose-name-must-not-be-uttered. I, as a servant of the Sacred Glade, am the sworn enemy of the Unraveler’s minions on earth, and it is my duty to prevent its influence from spreading.”

Baylon didn’t know what to say. Jenandra raised an eyebrow at his blank stare and continued:

“There is a site far to the north of here where the Unraveler’s influence is strong. The location of this place has been a long-kept secret of my people. Only the elders of our order knew of it, and there was a map in the deepest vaults of the Glade. The map was drawn with made-up names in the human language, meaning to fool and distract a casual observer.

“Six months ago, the Glade was attacked by servants of the Unraveler. My master was slain along with many of my brothers and sisters and I had to leave them there to die, escaping with the map. I fled north to Dorath, a city with which I am sure you are familiar, and there I hid the map in an old book in an apothecary’s shop. I was followed, of course, but I killed them in a back alley. I thought they lost track of me there. Zathir was wounded and I had to spend days tend-

ing to him and waiting for him to recover. When I returned to the shop, the book and the map was gone.”

“That is some tale,” Baylon said. “How do you know what happened to it?”

“The map has a mark on it,” Jenandra said. “A Weave-sigil that allows someone attuned to it to extrapolate its location.”

Baylon snorted. ”Common tongue, please.”

“I used magic.”

“Magic. Right.” In Baylon’s experience, most people who claimed to know magic were charlatans. Illusionists, swindlers taking advantage of people’s ignorance and superstition. Still, he had seen things that could not be explained with mere sleight of hand. With the Sundering, ages ago, much of the wild, potent magic had disappeared from the world—or at least so the old stories claimed. But Baylon knew that some of it lingered and he saw no reason to question Jenandra’s claim.

“When you find this woman, how do you plan on getting the map from her?” Baylon asked.

“I will ask her for it, of course.”

“And you assume she’ll just give it to you?”

Jenandra looked genuinely puzzled. “Why would she not? She has no use for it.”

Baylon rubbed his eyes. “How much time have you spent outside your Sacred Glade, Jenandra?”

“Oh, several months. Why do you ask?”

“Because the world doesn’t really work like you think it does. This woman, she has no reason to give the map to you. She paid for it, albeit indirectly, and therefore it’s now her property.”

“It is not! It is the property of my order!”

“I doubt she’ll see it that way.”

“All right, then I will buy it from her.”

“Then I hope your purse is bottomless, because if she honestly believes it to be a treasure map, she’s not going to want to part with it for less than a fortune. And the more you offer to pay, the more she’ll think it’s worth and the less she’ll be willing to sell it.”

“That is indeed a conundrum. But I will think of something, I am sure.”

“One more thing,” Baylon said, “This map, this place. What happens if your enemies get there?”

“Honestly, I do not know. As an acolyte I was not entrusted with such knowledge. But they have been looking for it for centuries. Like I said, the Weaver’s strands are faded here, and I believe that is why it has been hidden from their gaze for so long. But now... now that the Empire is gone, things are slowly changing. For good and for ill.”

“So what are we waiting for?” Baylon asked.

Jenandra looked at him, bewildered.

“The moon will be out soon and I think there might be enough light, if Zathir keeps an eye out from above and makes sure we don’t stray

too far from the path. It's a long way to Arynsbridge. Are you coming?"

The Janessi woman's smile was like the sun coming out after a long, rainy day.