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OUTSIDE, THE MOON shone on desert sands, and a chill wind scoured buildings constructed of massive stone blocks. One of these was a giant square structure, the two exposed stories of which gave no hint of the five floors underneath. Deep inside, on its lowest level, Shehkmi al Nasir worked feverishly. The Stygian mage had not tasted fresh air in a week, had not slept or eaten in days.

Nor would he. Too much was happening, too many events that would upend his world were in the offing. He scryed for signs and portents and found more than he could begin to interpret. In a distant desert landscape, torrential rains fell, creating rivers where none had existed before. On a glacier-covered mountaintop, shore birds were seen building a nest. Blood ran like tears from the eyes of a dozen marble statues in an abandoned jungle city. In faraway Khitai, a child was heard crying inside a temple where no children had ever been allowed. And more, and more, and more.

Shehkmi al Nasir tugged at his long, black beard and wondered what it all meant. A connection had to exist

between these disparate events, a thread of some kind that could be traced. But he couldn't find its end. All he knew so far was that something was going to happen. Something big. Lives would be lost, others irredeemably changed. Powerful magics would be loosed upon the world.

Any time these kinds of things were in the offing, a powerful sorcerer like Shehkmi al Nasir stood to benefit. He just had to be aware, alert for the opportunities when they arose.

He would be.

He didn't know what form these events would take. But they were coming soon, and he was determined that they would not pass him by. The wisdom to be gained by exploiting them was too great.

Wisdom, and power. And if there was anything that Shehkmi al Nasir craved . . .

KRAL WAS RUNNING for his life when he first saw the girl.

According to the Bear Clan elders, death waited across the Black River. Kral had long made a habit of listening carefully to his elders, then doing what he wanted to anyway.

And it was a good thing he did.

Going too near the fort, which the settlers called Koronaka, could indeed be dangerous. But if he hadn't ignored all the warnings, he would never have spotted the girl with hair of a golden sheen rivaling the late-afternoon sun, with skin as clean and white as the clouds. She was like no one he'd ever seen outside of a dream. So different from the Pictish girls he knew, with their dark hair, arms and legs knotted with muscle, tattooed, painted, or both, and wearing pelts of rabbit or beaver or wolf instead of whatever divine beast had provided its skins for her garb.

He was curious about the fort, though, and the people

who lived there. One afternoon that curiosity got the best of him, and he went to see the fort for himself. Before the truce between them and his Bear Clan, Pict warriors had raided it often, returning, if they returned at all, with souvenirs: weapons, heads, new scars they wore as badges of honor. He had been too young to accompany them.

But since the time of the truce, his people mostly stayed on their side of the Black River and the Aquilonians on theirs. They still told stories of clifflike log walls atop which soldiers marched, wearing so much metal and leather on their bodies it was a wonder they could stand at all. And everyone, the stories claimed, lived together within those walls. Soldiers, farmers, women, children; more people, all told, than in the entire Bear Clan. There seemed to be a limitless supply of them, so many that people wondered if Aquilonia herself were deserted, because all her people were here on the border trying to remake the forests to their own desires. It wasn't that he didn't trust the stories, but Kral needed to see all this with his own eyes.

The Bear Clan lived on a plateau. Not only were the huts of his people reasonably spaced, but where the hillsides sloped away, one could see forest spreading out below for hundreds of miles in every direction. Living within giant walls, packed in like tadpoles in a hand-sized pond, seemed so confining, he was surprised the Aquilonians could even breathe. They were not like Picts, he decided, to whom confinement was worse than death.

So Kral moved silently, stealthily through the forest until he was within sight of the incredible structure. He whistled softly, in spite of himself. It was just as they had said. The fort's people had cut down the tallest trees around to make walls in which to imprison themselves. The fort was bigger than he'd expected; during the time he spent walking around it, examining its features and regarding such of its inhabitants as he could see from outside, the sun moved several notches across the sky.

Even so, it was still just midafternoon when he had seen all there was to see. Walls of enormous timbers, gates guarded from above by bowmen standing on towers. More towers at each corner, also occupied by guards who, while alert, had no idea they were being observed. Other soldiers, who seemed to be a dozen or more feet tall, but who he guessed were standing or walking on some sort of platform built just below the top of the walls. Smoke drifted up from dozens of unseen fires, gathering in a haze that lay over the fort like a blanket, scenting the air with its acrid tang.

Beyond the walls themselves, crops grew in cultivated fields, where even more trees had been felled. The forests were sacred to the Picts, life-sustaining. Kral felt a deep anger growing at people who would so recklessly cut down trees in order to build their odd structures and grow their crops. Men and women worked these fields, accompanied by guards who had grown careless during the years of truce. Didn't they know the forest would provide for them if they only knew how to use it?

Kral believed that if he wanted, he could have taken a head or two from here. But not only would that violate the truce to which his clan's elders had agreed, he had not painted himself for battle or ever killed anyone except in the heat of war.

His curiosity wasn't satisfied. If anything, it was piqued, and he desperately wanted to see what the world inside those great walls was like. Not today, though. He needed to get back across the river, and still try to do some hunting before dark. Reluctantly, he turned away from the fort and started home.

As he did, he saw a strange motion in one of the tended fields, not far away. Looking more closely, he realized it was a bit of whatever skins these people wore. Sometimes Aquilonian traders brought clothing of their kind, to trade for Pictish metals and furs, but the Picts didn't see the value

in such things and tended to hold out for weapons or other, more useful, items. So Kral had never held such a thing in his hands. It didn't look like the skin of any animal he had ever seen. He stepped closer, picked it up from where it had snagged on a plant's stem. It was light blue, and felt almost impossibly soft. He turned it over in his hands.

Which was when he was finally spotted, by one of the more vigilant tower guards. "Pict!" he heard a man's voice shout. He knew the word—Aquilonian missionaries had taught most Bear Clan children the fundamentals of their language, years before. And when he glanced up at the tower, he saw the man pointing his way.

Tucking the fabric into his girdle and clutching his spear tightly, he tore into the nearest trees, heedless of thorns and branches scratching and clawing at him. His chest and limbs were bare, with only a belted loincloth covering him, and he was accustomed to the minor wounds that accompanied a run through the woods. As the winter came on, he would wear heavier skins and cover his feet, but that was still months away.

Behind him, he heard the unmistakable sounds of pursuit. A grinding noise that must have been the gates being opened, and the shouts and thunder of men on the heels of their prey. He had a good start, but he was on the far side of the fort, and to get back to the Black River he would have to go around it.

First, however, he struck due south, away from the fort and the river. The Aquilonians crashed through the brush and trees behind, always letting Kral know with their sounds how far back they were. He figured they wouldn't have given chase if they hadn't seen him holding that little piece of cloth. For all they knew, he had torn it off one of their women. Still, he didn't think they'd keep it up for long. He was beginning to feel safe when he broke through some low-hanging pines and found himself facing a rocky cliff, two dozen feet high.

Had he been herded this way? he wondered. No matter—there wasn't a Pict alive who couldn't scale it. He jumped up, caught a narrow handhold, started clambering up the sheer wall. His spear was an impediment to the climb, but not something he would toss aside.

It was from there, up on the cliff, glancing toward the Black River, that he thought he saw a girl with impossibly golden hair passing between a couple of faraway trees. He craned his head for a better look.

But in slowing to see her, he had exposed himself to his pursuers, despite the distance he had put between them. An arrow whistled through the air and bounced off the rocks not three feet from him. A second thudded into the exposed root of a tree at the cliff's edge. The archers had the range, and nearly the aim. Hearing a third arrow streaking right toward him, Kral simply let go of the cliff face and fell fifteen feet to the ground. The arrow drove into the dirt, right where he had been clinging.

His fall had cost him valuable time, he knew. Noisy in the brush, the Aquilonians made steady progress just the same. And he still had to go around the cliff's base until he found another way out, rather than expose himself again.

The girl—if she was real, and not a hallucinatory vision of some kind—was between him and the river to the east. So he turned west, away from her and his own village, deeper into Aquilonian territory. He ran along the wall's base, noting that its top gradually lowered, and the ground he ran on rose slightly. Soon enough they would meet, or close to it.

He was right. A short distance ahead, there were only a few feet of elevation difference. Kral leapt that with a deer-like bound and reversed direction, heading east now, toward where the wall was taller. As he gained in elevation, the trees changed. He ran on until he saw one that looked like it would do. A stout trunk, thick, spreading branches above, dense with foliage. Behind, the shouts of his pursuers

had settled into the huffing and puffing of men approaching the limits of how far they could maintain their pace through rugged terrain. Kral wrapped his arms and legs around the trunk of the tree and shot up it, ignoring the scraping of his flesh against its rough bark. By the time the Aquilonians reached the tree, he was safely ensconced in its upper branches, peering down between broad leaves at them.

They continued on, not even looking up. Soon enough, Kral judged, they would give up the chase, realizing they had lost him. In the end, it didn't even take as long as he had expected; some of them had already arrived at that conclusion, and they had barely all passed beneath him when they stopped, conversed, and turned back for the fort.

Kral waited another fifteen minutes, by his reckoning, before dropping down from the tree and going to the top of the cliff. He was willing to risk exposing himself here in order to steal another glimpse of the yellow-haired girl he had seen. Even if he was spotted, he believed the settlers had lost their enthusiasm for the chase. The girl was no longer in sight, but he mentally fixed the location where she had been and scrambled down the cliff.

Soon, threading his way through the closely spaced trees, making no more noise than the faintest whisper of wind, Kral approached what looked like a grassy meadow hemmed in on three sides by a wall of thick firs. Where the firs gave way it was to spreading oaks, extending their long, leafy branches. The girl sat in the center of the meadow, on the trunk of a lightning-felled tree that canted toward the ground. Her passage into the clearing, through the grass that lay underneath the oaks, was as clear as if she had marked it with stones.

After noticing her lack of woodcraft, which was always the first thing Kral measured when encountering a new person, the next thing he saw was her hair. He had never seen anyone with hair like hers. His clan worked gold from

time to time, but this girl's hair was as if someone had spun that metal, finer than the most delicate thread, then piled it on her head, sweeping it away from her face and holding it back with a wooden device Kral didn't recognize. When she turned her head the sun caught her hair, bathing her in its glow as if recognizing a kindred soul.

Kral wondered for a moment if she was perhaps a goddess instead of a human being. Her skin was pale and unblemished, her arms and legs smooth and rounded like none he had ever seen. She had the same features as everyone else he had ever known: two eyes, a nose, a mouth, ears on the sides of her head; but they were put together in a fashion the likes of which he had never imagined. Her eyes were the blue of the clearest sky, her lips the richest red, her features precisely formed as if by a craftsman's hand. Underneath a pale, nearly white shift of some remarkably smooth material were the curves and bulges of a youthful body growing into full maturity. Threads of gold, accented by her hair and the late-afternoon sun that slanted through the firs toward her, were woven into the bodice of the tunic, which was cinched by a belt of brown leather from which depended a silly, useless dagger. The shift ended midway down her thighs. Her ankles were encircled by the straps of sandals, and on her wrists were golden bracelets.

When he had absorbed her beauty for a few minutes, it occurred to Kral that the girl was entirely unprepared for survival in the woods. Never mind that she was clearly too far from the fort for safety from his own kind, should one of them other than himself happen upon her. The forest held bears, wolves, and other dangers against which she had no protection except that dagger.

But then again, maybe she was divine. The natural and supernatural worlds mingled easily in Kral's mind and the minds of all the Picts. The rising sun and the twinkling stars gave evidence of the activities of the gods, as did the continued supply of beasts in the forests and fish in the

ivers, despite the best efforts of the Aquilonians to kill them all. There was nothing to say that this girl was not the emissary of a god or even a goddess herself, in which case she would have little need for steel or other protection against man or beast.

In the end, it was her lack of awareness of his own presence that convinced him of her humanity. A goddess would have seen him, sensed him, even though he kept himself hidden. The girl did not. Despite the evidence of his own eyes, he had to believe that she was flesh and blood,

He didn't want to take his eyes off her, but the sun kept sinking. She would be going back to the fort soon. And if he had any hope of bringing down a rabbit or something else for dinner, he had to be on his way. With one last, longing glance at the most splendid female he had ever seen, Kral melted back into the forest and started home.

ALANYA OF TARANTIA, daughter of Invictus, glanced at the position of the sun. She knew that she should return to the protective walls of Koronaka. She loved being out by herself, though—out where her little brother, Donial, couldn't pester her. Away from the fort, where soldiers and settlers alike seemed to think that a girl of passing beauty was like some art object; to be gazed upon and commented on as if she had no feelings of her own. The men of the fort were not the civilized ones of Tarantia, who could see women of far more stunning aspect on any given day, and they seemed to take Alanya's presence in their midst as an invitation to ogle and leer.

And perhaps it was her own overactive imagination, but some of the women of Koronaka seemed to hold Alanya responsible for the effect her appearance had on their men. She went with them when they left the log walls to pick berries, or down to the Black River to launder their garments, but she never felt part of them. There always

seemed to be whispered conversations that excluded her.

So the moments she liked best were those where she was able to steal away by herself. She came often to this meadow, where she could lie in the soft grass or sit on the trunk of the old, downed tree, and daydream. She thought about her girlfriends back in Tarantia, who would even now be preparing for balls or parties to mark the beginning of autumn. Often, she imagined herself back there—back *home*—whenever her father's mission here in the Westermarck was finished. Her time away would give her an aura of the exotic. Boys she had grown up with, who had become men over the intervening span of time, would hardly recognize her because of her own blossoming here in the wilderness. This place was only a temporary stop for her. Tarantia was where she belonged.

Some told her that she shouldn't go off by herself, shouldn't risk being found away from the fort by the savages who had inhabited the woods before civilized man came to settle. Stories were told about attacks by Pictish headhunters in the forests. But the peace between the Picts and the settlers of Koronaka had held for three years, her father said. King Conan himself had sent Invictus here to learn what made this peace so secure, and to travel to other border areas to try to extend it there. Given that, Alanya felt relatively safe in the woods. The stories gave her a little thrill of the forbidden, but nothing else. No savage who hoped to maintain the truce against a vastly superior force would dare lay hands upon the daughter of the king's ambassador.

Today, she watched the birds winging overhead or lighting on the thickly draped green branches to scold and cackle at her. A black squirrel provided entertainment for a time, scampering up and down the trunks as if in search of precious treasure. After a while, she lost herself in memories of home, the trees and grasses of the border region disappearing in favor of the cobbled roads and walled residences of Tarantia. Before she knew it, the sun had sunk low in the

sky. Donial would be beside himself with worry, and if she weren't lucky, he would rouse the concerns of others. She might find herself watched more carefully by those in the employ of her uncle, Lupinius, or others.

So without even a last look around at her favorite meadow, which she knew by heart already, she struck out for home, beneath the spreading oaks, then south and west, into the setting sun.