

The screeching had them hunker down, weapons at the ready.

El looked at the other team on each side. He'd kept them closer this time. Since they were only dealing with machines, he didn't have to worry about snipers and ambushes, so he'd set them to be able to cover each other.

Stevenson smiled, holding something resembling a gun in his hand. It was an assemblage of pipes, wires, duct tape and switches. It was Crazy tech; he knew that. It wouldn't make any sense, but he still couldn't stop himself from trying to work out how it worked each time he looked at it.

Professor Milton's contraption was easier to work out. The armature went over his hand, arms, anchored over his shoulders, and around his chest. It enhanced his strength. The professor had picked up a piece of rubble that had to weight over a thousand kilos as if it had been hollow. Something about the whole thing bothered El, but at least he knew what to expect from it.

Jennifer's contraption made even less sense to El than Stevenson's 'gun' It was built over her right forearm and hand, fine pipes and wires bending this way and that. She held it as if it could fire something, but there was no opening at the end.

"Any thought on what's causing that noise?" he asked.

"It's mechanical," Milton replied.

"It's electronic," Jennifer countered. "You can clearly hear the frequency modulation in the sound."

"Electronic is mechanical," Milton snapped. "Just because you're in charge of the research doesn't mean you know anything about—"

"Quiet." Vee's command was in a normal tone, but they obeyed it. The bull started at them for a moment in surprise, then looked at El, who shrugged. This was the first time any of them obeyed without protest. Maybe they finally understood the severity of the situation?

"Whatever it is, it's getting closer," Leech said.

El put his radio to his mouth and whispered. "Does anyone have a visual?" Negatives came back. "Everyone, proceed forward carefully, and be mindful of your ammo. What you're carrying is all you have."

He nodded to Vee, and the bull stepped forward, rifle at the ready. They traveled a hundred meters, and then the windows of the building to their left exploded out.

"Cover!" El followed his own instruction as things leaped out of the windows at them. Gunfire erupted from the other teams.

One of the things landed before him and he had a sense of a four-legged animal made of scrap metal. He fired at its head.

The thing staggered to the side, then fell down. It still moved, but it couldn't seem to get its leg under itself.

"Headshots incapacitate them!"

"See! I told you it made sense to shoot their heads!" Stevenson yelled.

More fell out of the windows. There had to be hundreds of the things, and they all looked to be built the same.

“We’re going to be overwhelmed,” Leech warned.

“Like hell we are.” Jennifer stood in front of a dozen of the machines and pointed her arm contraptions at them. For a moment nothing happened, then LRK was sent to the ground, hand over his ears as the most painful sound he’d ever heard drilled into his head. His hands didn’t seem to offer any protection. The sound went through them, into his skull. He felt like his brain was going to come pouring out of his ears.

He screamed. He couldn’t hear it, but he had to be screaming. It was just too painful.

“Hey, lynx!” someone yelled.

“El blinked.

“He’s coming around.”

El blinked, then wiped the tears out of his eyes. Stevenson crouched before him.

Someone else was speaking, the tone that of a sergeant giving a reprimand. “That was completely irresponsible of you. Didn’t you think about propagation?”

“Oh shove off, Milton,” a woman replied. “I took down two dozen of them in under one minute. I’ll like to see you do that in that thing you’re wearing. So what if there was collateral damage? We’re at war, right?”

“So what? You took down our command structure. What are we supposed to do without them?”

“We keep taking those things down. What else is there to do?”

“Are there any more?” El croaked. His throat hurt.

“They’ve retreated,” Stevenson answered.

“Why?” El tried to stand, but his sense of balance was shot.

“My guess is that they have enough processing power to work out that needs a new strategy and they’re off working on that.”

A new shadow appeared over him. “Give me your hand,” Vee said. The bull had dried blood at the base of his ears, nose and eyes. “What was that?” He pulled the lynx to his feet.

“High powered ultrasound frequency,” Jennifer replied. “It shook them apart.” She indicated the scrap metal littering the ground before them.

“It almost shook us apart, too.”

She shrugged. “It’s not my fault if there’s a design flaw in your model. Your designers should have—”

“Shut up.” El keeping Vee from hitting her. “We don’t have time for infighting, Vee.”

The bull lowered his arm, still glaring at her.

“Vee, are you okay?”

The bull shook his head. “That thing hurt. It caused us internal damage, but that’s nothing compared to the pain. One of these days, I need to see if I can control pain receptors like I do everything else.”

“Okay, I need you to go see if anyone else had been affected. We can’t afford to be out of commission.” He looked at the humans as the bull left. “You three need to come up with something that will protect us from that. They’re massing again,” he pointed in the distance, “and you’re going to need us to help you fight them.”

“Where are they coming from?” Leech was walking toward them, not too steady on his feet. He too had blood near his ears, nose and eyes.

“From a manufacturing system.” Stevenson pointed to a building where they could see those machines from out of the windows. “In there.”

El looked at it and sighed. “Then we need to get in there.”

“He’s wrong,” Milton said. “They’re clearly self-replicating. There’s no central machine involved.”

“No, Stevenson’s right,” Jennifer said. “The uniformity of design can only come when a central system does the fabrication.”

The old man rolled his eyes. “Of course you’re taking his side. You sleep with him.”

“What?” Stevenson and Jennifer said at the same time.

“He’s a guy,” Jennifer added in disgust.

Milton looked at her. “You don’t like guys?” He looked like the idea made no sense to him. “Then that’s why you won’t sleep with me.”

“Are you crazy? You’re a creep, that why I keep turning you down.”

“But you’re turning Stevenson down because he’s a guy.”

“Unlike you, he hasn’t tried getting in my bed.”

They both turned to the other human who had watched the exchange, puzzled.

“What are you talking about, exactly?”

“Sex,” Milton answered.

The word seemed to puzzle Stevenson for a moment. “You mean, a guy and a girl, in the same bed, humping together?”

“Yes,” the older man replied, annoyed.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s fun.” The tone said that should be the most evident thing ever.

Stevenson looked dubious. “Making this was fun.” He indicated the ‘gun’ he was holding. “Making theses was fun, too.” He was holding two small things in his other hand. He looked at them as if only now realizing he was holding them. “They’re for you.” He handed them to El. “How is rubbing yourself against woman anything resembling fun?”

Milton’s mouth hung open. He closed it, then seemed to have trouble speaking. “You’re a virgin?”

Even Jennifer looked surprised.

Stevenson looked from one to the other. “Wasn’t I clear?”

Milton looked at Jennifer, grinning. “Well, now you know why he hasn’t tried getting in your bed. You should show him what he’s missing.”

The woman rounded on the older man, but before she could let out what looked to be a biting reply, El stop her.

“That’s enough.” He should have stopped this sooner, but he’d been taken in by the discussion. He didn’t understand how Stevenson could be a virgin, but he was a Crazy, so he didn’t expect to understand much about him.

“What are these?” He indicated the two buds in his hand.

“Sound mufflers. It should block all sounds, including Jennifer’s cannon.”

El studied them. They didn’t look like much, oval with a bump on one end.

“That side goes toward the outside so you can take them out.”

El put them in his ears, and the world became silent. It reminded him of the time

Ellie had died. There had been a moment, just before he realized what had happened when he'd been surrounded by silence. He'd thought that silence absolute, but now he knew what that really was.

Milton was screaming at Stevenson, and El couldn't hear any of it. "How does it work?" His voice sounded strange to him, hollow.

Stevenson answered, but El didn't hear him. He took the buds out and sound came rushing in. Milton was walking away, annoyed, only to be stopped by Leech.

"It's a contained vacuum. Sound can't travel around a vacuum, so it creates a bubble around you that's going to keep Jennifer from shaking you apart."

That didn't sound right. He didn't know much about physics past what was needed for firing rifles, guns and how it applied to his power, but he'd watched television. Something about Stevenson's explanation didn't work.

"How long until you have enough for everyone?" he couldn't care if it did or didn't make sense. It was Crazy tech. The only important thing is that it worked.

"That's going to take a while. I had what I needed for these in my pockets, but it isn't exactly common stuff. I don't know how much of it is lying around."

El looked in the distance. There was a sea of metal reflecting the sunlight, and machines were still pouring from the windows.

"Try to get me at least five. I'll take more, but get me that and we'll move."

Him, Leech, Vee and three soldiers, them plus the three Crazies would have to be enough to find and destroy whatever was making those things.

The ruin of this temple had yet to be cleared. The roads around it were, but in the months since it had happened, little of the rubble had been moved. Carts lined the road, but people were moving smaller stones, those one person could carry.

Most of the building fell in on itself, following the lines of the cut stones, shattering when they hit the ground, not as part of bringing the temple down. The back wall fell outward and as one tall sheet, crushing houses, shops and people. The cost to life was extensive.

"Shame what happened here." The man, a canine, his natural coloring hidden by the stone dust, leaned against the tavern's wall, drinking out of a tankard. He looked at LRK, exhaustion in his eyes. "They say it did this."

"It?"

"The demon," the man spat. "That thing who's jealous of the Celeste."

"Did it leave a message?" LRK asked.

"It did," the dog answered. He motioned to a section of the wall still standing. "The Celeste corrupts. Like anyone's going to believe a demon."

"How man dead?"

"Six of the Keepers were crushed to death. Two so injured they had to be taken to the healers."

"And among the citizens, at the back?"

The man shrugged. "Who's to know? There's always too many packed in those houses. Plenty were hurt and didn't make it to any of the healers."

"Didn't anyone do a count of the dead as they removed them?"

The man shook his head. "Can't remove what we can't reach. And it's all poor folks, so I'm sure Lord Denrick will get to them when the rest of the city is fixed again."

Had it been carelessness, or was it that whoever had done this hadn't cared? Not cared that innocent were hurt. That some Keepers might walk away, or be carried.

"You seemed mighty interested in this," the man said, suddenly suspicious.

"There's rings to be made killing it."

The man eyed the sword at LRK's hip. "You can't kill a demon. Only the Keepers can."

"The one who did this can be stopped. I won't let it kill innocent indiscriminately. Those surviving Keepers, where can I find them? Where would they reside with the temple destroyed?"

The man shrugged. "Still at the healers I figure."

"It's been months, why are they still there?"

"We don't have any healing wizards. The high and mighty Lord Denrick don't like them. Story's that a second cousin of his was one, a wizard, not a healer, and almost killed him with a contraption. When he became king, he chased them out of the city, won't let any of them back."

"Where can I find the healers, then?"

The dog motioned to their left. "Expect the Keepers went to the market's healers. They're the most expensive."

LRK handed a copper ring to the man. "Much obliged for the information." He stopped by the section of wall still standing. As the dog said, the words 'the Celeste Corrupts' were there, marked in something that could be blood, or the kind of berry made ink LRK used. Too much time passed to tell, but this was an outside wall, and only the bottom of the letters had dust on them, dust raised by the people walking by.

This had been written after the temple fell, after the dust settled. Had it even been done by the person responsible? Could be children, thinking it a funny joke to pull. LRK moved on, asking direction to the healers until he came to a large building on the side of a market square teeming with stalls.

Inside he stayed in the entryway until one of the person tending the sick past it, in the larger room with beds along each walls, noticed him. She was a goose, matronly in her gray robe. They were all in gray, some stained at the hem, and all women.

"What are you in need of?" she asked, looking him over. He saw surprise to realized she was looking for injuries and not evaluating how wealthy he was.

"I'm looking for the Keepers who were injured when the temple fell. I was told they were brought here."

"They were. They are still healing. Their injuries were severe."

"Crushed by stone, or did they have other injuries?"

"Crushed. Why would they have other injuries?"

"They saw a demon did this. The demon who destroyed other temples. The Keepers there died at its hand, before the temple was destroyed."

"It didn't do that here."

LRK nodded. So the person had either not been confident they would kill the Keepers, or didn't know, or care, LRK did it first.

"I'd like to speak with them. I'm hunting it and they might be able to give me information about it."

"I'm sorry, but they need to rest."

LRK considered walking past her. It wasn't like she could stop him, but not until he had exhausted other avenues. "Got ask them if they'll speak with me." He smiled. "Tell them Rak of Soulsburg, Demon Hunter wants their help."

Antoinette would be here eventually, maybe she was only days behind him, if not hours. He'd hurried, but she was a Keeper, she could request horses. Let her know he'd been here. Maybe she'd understand he didn't approve of this, she already realized it wasn't him. Or maybe she wouldn't. She'd still get his message.

The matron returned and led him past the bed to stairs, then to the second floor, where doors lined the hall, instead of beds. "They are weak, and in need of rest. Please be quick." She opened the door. He closed it before she could follow.

The room was simple, but clean the two beds on each side of the shuttered window so they could get fresh air. At least they knew to keep the room aired and clean.

On one bed was a human girl, barely a woman. An acolyte. On the other was a Furrian, a hyena whose limbs didn't look right under the sheet. Next to each bed was a small table with parchment, ink, and a quill. On the top page something he couldn't make out was written either a language he hadn't learned yet, or something specific to the healers.

"Did He send you?" she asked. LRK heard the reverence in the pronoun. She sounded older.

He shook his head. Three pages under the top one they were free of writing. He smiled again and took the stopper off the inkpot.

"Then who?" she asked.

He finished writing before answering. "Money." Everyone understood the drive for rings. "And it needs to be stopped."

"It's a demon," the hyena rasped. "You can't kill it."

"Everything can be killed." He checked the ink was dry and ripped the message out of the page, then crumbled the rest in his pocket. He didn't the healers to notice things too quickly. "What can you tell me about that night?"

"I woke up to the shaking and hid in the corner of my room. The Celeste protected me."

"I heard a scream," the hyena rasped.

"While the temple fell? Someone in pain? Anger?"

"Before. It was high, almost a keen, but he didn't have any sorrow in it. I was searching for it when the walls shook. I ran for the door, but stones fell on him as I stepped outside."

"The Celeste saved you." The girl said in awe.

"He could have done so in such a way I didn't get crushed," the man replied bitterly.

"The Celeste tests our faith," she replied.

The hyena sighed.

"Was it only the wall that shook, or also the ground?" he asked before the girl could reply.

The man shrugged.

"Did the sound come from inside, or outside the temple?"

"The keen was stronger toward the east wall, but it was night, there was no one inside."

"Like it came from the wall itself, like it was the thing keening?"

The man frowned. "Possibly. There was another sound over it. Something I could barely hear, that hurt to listen to, like mortal ears weren't meant for the sound."

Most Furrians could hear a broader range of sounds than humans. If the person took down the temple using sonic powers instead of control over stone, he could have heard that and the grinding of the stones against each other as they slowly shifted. Back during the wars, Rod had done something like that, but on a building of glass and metal. He'd explained about frequencies, and how the right one would make anything tear itself apart. To prove it, he'd then shaken a tank to pieces.

LRK rolled the message tightly and placed it in her hand. "Hold on to this tightly. Don't let go of it no matter what. I need Antoinette to get it when she comes here." She looked about to asked, but he patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Just hold it and she'll know what it means."

She shrugged and nodded.

"You're going to kill it?"

"Yes," LRK answered since it was expected. He'd see who, and why, they were doing it, before making the decision.

"May the Celeste go with you," The hyena whispered.

"Probably not," LRK whispered to himself before leaving the room.

The matron glared at him. "Did you get what you were after?"

He smiled. "I did."

"Then you can see yourself out. I need to make sure you haven't made their conditions worse."

"I haven't." Not yet. He went outside and felt for the two Keeper's body. Once he had them he raised their temperature. Not enough to set them aflame, just to get their brains boiling.

A cry of alarm came from the room and he felt others join the matron. Felt the water they carried, the cloths and their attempt to

cool them down. They worked in vain. The two Keepers trashed, then became still.

He listened to their cries, their praying and felt a nasty satisfaction. His message to Antoinette reflected it. 'Your Keepers might have escaped him, but none of them will escape me.'

The matron would remember him, when Antoinette asked about the lynx, she might even remember the name he gave. He'd been tempted of telling her he'd take care of him for her, but why make her life easier. Let her continue to worry there were two of them.

Let her continue to be afraid.

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Finding a love Furrian in a world of them wasn't easy, even when he had an idea what he could do, since no Furrian advertised his ability. He searched for months, trying to determine where he would have gone from Sunkberry. The possibilities were too large, even ignoring the towns without temples, which this person was. No Keepers in them died, other than by his hand.

When he heard about the destruction of a temple in the city of Almunim, he had a chance, but even before he headed there, he knew he'd be too late. The news took weeks to reach and took him more to reach the city. The one thing that might be a clue was that Almunim was more west than south.

It could be a coincidence, but if someone was heading west, as he should be, and wanted to avoid Tall Arches, where the destruction of the temple would shout his presence, this would be the best route. He stayed in the city only to confirm this was the same person, the same sloppy work and disregard for innocent death and the same message. No Keepers survived this time, so he took the road heading west out of the city.

It had been months between the destruction in Sunkberry and Almunim, but they were only weeks apart. That spoke of some care not to get caught, any city with a temple would be on high alert for months after news reached them.

Some of that would be planning. The work was sloppy, but no one saw or heard anything. That mean they were careful. Knew where they could act without being noticed. But that didn't take months. Even if they had to be close to bring the temple down, there were enough places to hide that within a few days, they could do it.

The one thing he was confident of, was that they would only stay around after the destruction long enough to leave the message. They couldn't stay while the city was on alert, any stranger would be interrogated, held for the Keepers to question. Any hint of involvement would lead to more questions, possible burning.

The city of Firebright was coming into few when he overheard the merchants talking about the destruction of the temple. It had happened during the night. And the city was closed because of it. The guards preventing anyone from exiting. They'd barely made it out by sun up before the gates were shut.

Cursing LRK ran. He didn't bother with the city, he went around it, to reach the more or less westerly road. This had happened faster

than he'd expected. They were growing confident. But he was right on their trail. Hours behind, a dozen, at most.

He was panting by the time he reached that road, no caring about he looks he got from the people waiting for the gate to reopen. His quarry would have to rest after bringing down the temple. Even as powerful as he was LRK needed to catch his breath. His quarry was nowhere near as powerful as he was.

Would have stopped among these people? He wouldn't be the only one covered in dust. Anyone not wanting to be stuck in the city would have rushed out, most of those would have been close to the temple. These gates had also closed at dawn.

Asking he confirmed the exodus, and learned that guards had followed them, questioning those they caught and bringing some back inside. Still many were searching the woods.

LRK felt for them, found them, but no one else.

His quarry wouldn't stay by the city. The risk someone had seen them was too high. All that was needed was on detail, like fur pattern, and they'd be caught. He walked away from the city, was stopped by a guard, and told them the truth, that he was on his way west and had walked around the city since it was closed, and they let him go.

He kept his senses wide, and the further away from the city he got, the fewer people he felt in the forest the road cut in two.

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He found the group two days later, deep in the forest. They were far enough it was possible they hadn't been on the road at any times, but had only gone to check to confirm they were hunters or bandits.

Fourteen of them, bandits, by their clothing and lack of hides or drying meat. LRK had turned to head back to the road when the laughter made him stop. There was something nasty in it, and as he considered killing them just for the crimes, they had probably committed the laughing man stopped and spoke.

"Did you see the look in that Keeper's eyes? I swear, he thought I was the Celeste himself, come done to save him. Right until I plunged my sword through his heart."

The laughter started up. His the loudest. He was human, one of six, and the largest. LRK would have through he was in charge, except for the way no one sat close to him, and even those laughing cast worried glances at him. The woman, a zebra holding a baby, moved further away from him.

LRK watched them. Listened to them speak. They talked about the temple, about how well it went. The youngest, a fox, bounced in place, exclaiming how fun it had been.

A human knelt by a wooden crate behind a tent. LRK couldn't make out what he took out, but the way the man cradled the device, the patched clothing and the wild black hair, made LRK shudder and the word 'wizard' sounded in his head.

A group.

He hadn't considered that. He'd expected to find a lone Furrian. Someone driven mad with grief. Lashing out. But for a group to function took even more planning than LRK had considered.

It could also explain why this time they'd acted faster. Maybe they'd gathered new people, send them ahead to scout. And a group would be less worried about guards. The fact they were a group would make guards overlook them. Everyone knew demons worked alone.

This group of people were destroying temples. Why? And why was there someone barely old enough to be a teen, and a mother with her baby? The questions didn't change what he had to do. He was here to stop them.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, walking out of the trees.

They reacted faster than he'd expected, but before he was done asking the bruiser who'd been laughing was up, sword in hand. An eagle had two knives out, a marmot was looking at him. What stuck LRK more than that was the lack of panic. The woman and baby were backing away the furthest, but she wasn't scared. Except for those three, there were all moving away from the fire, but in an orderly way.

The human with the wild hair appeared between tents, gauntlets on his hands, big things with wires and rods poking out. Some seem to be glowing. The realization he'd been right about him being a wizard was such he barely noticed the marmot raising her hands.

Then the sound wave hit him hard enough he flew back and hit a tree, the force of it holding him in place. His ears ringing he tried to push forward, but the wave increased.

Well, that had been easier than he'd expected. He now knew who had brought down the temples and confirmed sonic powers were used. The presence of the wizard worried him, but he'd deal with that once he'd had his talk with the marmot. Get her to leave this to him, whatever her grievances with the Celeste were. Of course, to have that talk, he couldn't be stuck to this tree, with the head-splitting sound louder than he could scream.

He smiled, sounds he could deal with.

He created a line of vacuum between him and the marmot. Vacuum wasn't easy to maintain, but he'd done it often enough it wasn't paralyzing anymore. He dropped to the ground and stood. Now she was panicking.

The wizard slammed his gauntleted fists in the ground and the earth rolled toward LRK. He moved slowly, but the dip was visible. They were going to use earth against him? Who did they think he was?

Right, they didn't know him.

For effect he slammed a foot down and the earth smoothed over, except for where the wizard's gauntlets touched the ground, the earth climbed up them and solidified. The wizard tried to pull his hands out and panicked as he couldn't.

A human exited one of the tents, yelling something LRK couldn't hear. The marmot replied something, her face a snarl, and the wizard's face filled with fear as he spoke. The young man spoke louder by his expression. And the marmot threw her hands in the air.

"Fine," She said, her voice coming from far, around the edges of his wall of the vacuum, "but don't come bitching to me when he kills everyone." She headed in the closest tent.

LRK let the air flow and the thunderclap startled them.

"Everyone stand down," the young man said. He looked at LRK. "We don't mean you any harm."

The bruiser ran at LRK with a yell, sword high. LRK stopped the flow of air in his throat and two steps later the man stumbled.

"Finn," the young man said, exasperated, "I wish you'd pay attention sometimes."

The man, Finn was on his knees, grabbing his throat.

"Please don't kill him."

LRK had been wrong, the marmot wasn't in charge, this young man was. Another surprise. He allowed enough air for the bruiser to breathe, but not so much he'd consider causing problems.

"Can you let Bertrand go?" he indicated the wizard.

LRK eyed the terrified man. "I so much as feel the earth tremble and I'm going to bury you so deep they're going to forget you ever existed, do you understand?"

The wizard nodded eagerly and as soon as LRK released him he was up, gauntlets cradled to his chest, speaking to them softly. LRK rolled his eyes, then looked at the young man in charge.

He was looking back at him, eyes wide with a level of amazement LRK didn't think was warranted.

"It's you."

"Me who?" LRK asked cautiously. He couldn't know he was who they were copying.

"You're the one who saved me, I recognize your voice."

LRK shook his head. He didn't even try to figure out who he was. He didn't recognize him, so if it was something he'd done, it hadn't been recent. And trying to figure out what he might have looked like younger wasn't going to happen.

"I was a kid, the Keeper was a woman, she'd accused me of being a demon because I wouldn't let her abuse me. Just before they put me to the fire a storm came and you free me."

The man's story had a sense of familiarity to it, but only in that Keepers using their position to abuse children happened far too often.

"Look, kid—"

"My name is Kamdy."

LRK rolled his eyes. "Really?" He couldn't believe someone was trying to steal her name. If she ever found out this boy was in for a world of pain.

"It isn't the name my mother gave me. You told me to take another one, so I took this one."

"You do know Kamdy is a woman, right? And a Furrian. She's a tigress."

"Kamdy was a hero. I heard the legends. She protected the defenseless. She stopped armies with a glare."

LRK chuckled. What had she done to deserve that story? "A glare?"

"Yes," the would-be Kamdy said, getting angry. "One angry look was all it took, and you'd be frozen in place."

Well, he wouldn't be able to move if she didn't want him to, he did have that right. But frozen? Angry looks? What had she been up to since the last time he saw her?

It had been a few decades before he left Vee's army. She'd sought him out, without Vee present, he still considered her a deserter and the previous time they're encountered each other the fight had been epic, and only the fact they'd agreed not to use their powers kept that town intact.

LRK and CM had talked for hours, about their travels, the things they'd done, the people they'd met, but brother's and sisters they hadn't seen in centuries. It had been a bittersweet meeting, and now he wondered what she was doing.

He looked at the young man, and CM would be pissed at him for doing so, but as he'd just said, those were legends. "Look, Kamdy—" he couldn't help the smile— "those are just stories. There never was some tigress who went around saving people. That isn't what people do. Those who try end up dead. So take your friends and go back where you came from."

"No." The anger in the man's voice surprised LRK. "There are people who save others."

LRK sighed. "No, there aren't."

"Yes," he growled, "I'm looking at one of them."

"Kid, that is so not what I'm doing."

"Maybe you don't want to see it that way, but you saved me. I'm going to do the same to the people out there."

LRK looked up at the darkening sky. "No, you won't. All you'll—"

"Yes, I will."

"No!" The fire died to ambers, casting everyone in shadows. "This isn't a game. You won't end up with stories told about how brave you were. No one's going to sing your praises."

"We're not playing games, we're saving people."

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're stubborn." LRK ignored the stares, his curse had been in English. "Didn't you hear what I said, all you're going to do it get yourselves killed?"

"So what?" a jackal said, a sword planted in the ground before her. LRK let the fire grow so he could see them. She was older than Kamdy, but because of what she'd gone through. The scars on her body spoke of pain. "You think some of us aren't dead already? Don't you think that it's worth it to save even just one person? I'd rather die doing that than just wait for them to find me again."

"Dying isn't—"

"Oh get off it," she cut him off. "You think you're the only one who deserves to die? Who deserves to make some great gesture against the Celeste? Yes, I know who you are. Who else would be here right now trying to stop us? Well, I don't know what you did to piss off

the high and mighty, but let me tell you why I was going to be put to put to the fire. I was hired to protect this town, and the Keeper there objected to me loving another woman. That's not in the Celeste's rule, none of the Keepers back home ever had a problem with it, but that didn't matter. That town had become his own little kingdom, and he was going to rule it as he saw fit."

"Finn's brother and sister," Kamdy began then paused when Finn stood, glaring. "They were burned because they loved each other more than siblings should, the Celest—"

"Don't you dare finish that Kam. There was nothing wrong with them. They did nothing wrong." Finn closed his eyes, tears falling. "I told them to be careful. But it didn't help. Our father found out, and he dragged them to the pyre. When I tried to save them, my own mother locked me in the house."

Kamdy indicated the zebra and her baby. "Charlene's husband was accused of being a demon by a rival shopkeeper. By the time I got there the pyre was done burning. But they weren't done talking. She was with him, she might be corrupt. What about her baby? Could the result of such a unit be blessed by the Celeste? I was barely ahead of the mob. Everyone here had a story about how we were betrayed by the Celeste."

"I don't care." LRK kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to see the pain in their eyes. Hearing it in Kamdy's voice, in Finn's, was already making him question his decision, and he couldn't afford doubt. "I don't care what your stories are. You're going to stop this right now."

"Yeah? And why is that?" Finn said, mockery in his voice. He strutted toward LRK. "Id your pain so much greater than ours? I don't care what they took from you, you can—"

"Stop. Talking." LRK fixed his gaze on the man. "And stop thinking too, because the only thing that's going to do is get you killed. You don't know me. You have no idea why I'm doing this. Don't even think of comparing what you went through to me." He looked at Kamdy. "I will not have you ruin this."

It was Finn who spoke, his voice soft. "We're trying to help."

"No. You're lashing out. You're angry and hurt and you want to hurt other people."

"And you don't?" the jackal said coming out of her tent.

He ignored the attack. "You're a bunch of amateurs, you don't even know what you're doing?"

"We're doing the same as you," Kamdy said.

"No, you're not."

Kamdy sighed. "We're destroying the temples, just like you."

"You're killing innocents," LRK growled.

Finn snorted, and LRK was already turning. "There are no inno—" The fist caught him in the face and Finn flew off his feet. On the ground he glared at LRK, spitting blood.

"That is why you're going to stop. There are always innocents. There are always victims. If you don't think that, you're no better

than they are." He looked at Kamdy. "What did the people in those houses do to deserve having a wall of stone crush them?"

Kamdy looked away. "It wasn't supposed to happen like that. Bertrand was supposed to direct the way the wall fell."

"The wall falls," the wizard said. "The stones come down, down, down, go boom boom boom. The Keepers die." He beamed.

"Getting him to follow instructions isn't always easy."

"He's a wizard," LRK said. "They're all crazy. You shouldn't have one among you for something like this."

"Hey," Finn spat. "He suffered just as much as any of us. He lost his entire family to Keepers."

LRK closed his eyes and tried to stay calm. "I, don't, care."

The wizard giggled, but there was an edge to it.

"You don't let innocent die," LRK growled.

"You think it's easy to control how a wall going to fall?" the marmot said. "You think Bertrand can just snap a finger and every stone will jump at his command."

"Jumping!" the wizard said, "what a great idea!" and the man ran behind the tent. No one seemed worried at that, but LRK wondered how safe it was to leave him unsupervised with an idea.

"I don't see what the problem is," the jackal said, "this is war. There are casualties in wars."

"You have no idea what a war is," LRK scoffed, "And I will not allow innocents to die, especially not because of a badly prepared plan. You've shown you can't do this correctly, so just go back where you came from."

"And where's that?" Kamdy said. "You talk like we have something to go back to."

"Then do elsewhere. This isn't your fight."

"Yes, it is."

"No! I won't have a bunch of amateurs getting in my way."

Kamdy shrugged. "It isn't like you can stop us."

"You're wrong there."

The human straightened, but it was Finn who spoke. "You're going to have to kill me."

LRK eyed the bruiser. "Don't tempt me."

"Me too," the jackal said.

LRK glared at her.

"And Me," Kamdy added.

The others didn't seem as confident.

From being a tent the wizard spoke up. "Whatever this is about, count me in."

"I could kill each and every one of you."

"I thought you didn't kill the innocent," the marmot said.

"You are far from innocent. And if you continue, you're just going to end up getting yourselves killed. At least I'll do it cleanly."

"I'd love to see you try," Finn said, and the fighters in the group added their comments. Swords were drawn, knives pulled.

"Train us," Kamdy said.

LRK stared at him. Even the others fell silent. "Excuse me?"

"Whatever an amateur is, you don't like it. So, train us. Teach us how it should be done."

"No," the idea was ridiculous. "I'm not the head of some boot camp for would-be saviors. I don't have the time to waste training anyone. I have a mission, and you aren't part of it."

"And what's that mission?" Charlene asked. She was standing, holding her baby to her breast. "I get that you're destroying temples, killing Keepers, but what's that accomplishing? Other than giving sell-swords employment as bodyguards?"

"I'm killing their faith, killing the Celeste."

"Really?" she said. "And how is that going? You've been at it a while, have you seen any fewer Keeper?"

He waved the comment aside. "In time, once enough of them have died, enough temples are wiped the face of the earth, they're going to realize there's nothing protecting them."

"Do you remember the city of Stalgard?" Kamdy asked.

He ground his teeth as the image of Alaine came to him and he wondered how she was. How many other children did she have. Had her husband kept her safe, as he'd promised to do?

He buried her in the deepest part of his memory. He was done with that part of his life. "It's the first temple I destroyed."

"Have you been back there?"

LRK glared at him as Alaine tried to force her way to the surface.

"I have. Not long before I began assembling this group. It's almost completely rebuilt."

LRK stared at him. He wanted to contradict him, but it was the first temple. They wouldn't have understood what happened. It was only after the fourth or fifth temples that stories of the demon circulated.

"I've sent people to every city that lost a temple to you," Kamdy said, and LRK didn't like the look in the human's eyes. "They're all in the process of being rebuilt. You think you're destroying their faith, but they've turned that around and made it a test. They've rallied the people to them because of the destruction."

It couldn't be true. His plan was sound. Every war had been won when the enemy understood they were outmatched, and the Keepers couldn't stop him. They had to know that.

"You're one person," Kamdy said. "There's one demon out there, testing us, testing our faith that the Celeste will keep us safe. Looked to the faithless city that fell, we will not be one."

LRK staggered. How? How had this happen? One of the Keepers was hunting him, so they knew the damage he could cause. So why weren't they running away? How had he not seen the lack of fear? They were protecting themselves, but none of them were cowering behind their protections. They went about their business, kept going to the temple, stayed strong in their faith.

When he focused on them, Kamdy was no longer in front of him, but in front of Finn and they were glaring at each other. The bruiser had his sword in hand.

"Do you want me to tell you what I think you're doing wrong?" the jackal asked, and he glared at her. She raised her hands. "I'm going to take that as a definite no."

He looked at her, around, even Finn and Kamdy were no longer glaring, but looking at him, expectantly.

"Go ahead," LRK sighed.

"I said it was a war, but I'm wrong. You had it right yourself. This is a vendetta. With we all get here. And it was fine, until you said you were destroying the Celeste. You can't destroy that kind of being with a vendetta. Sure you'll hurt them, one Keeper, one temple at a time, but you're seeing what the result is."

He ground his teeth. He didn't want her to be right. He was older, knew more, had fought thousands of wars. She couldn't know better than he did here.

But he was also old enough to recognize his pride talking. That's he'd invested himself so much into what he was doing that he'd ignored the signs and focused on doing something. It had been more focused, but he was still simply lashing out. Why had he gotten at Antoinette for protecting one of the Keepers otherwise? She was the enemy, he knew she'd do what she had to protect them.

Now that he'd been forced to confront his flawed thinking, he needed to decide. What did he want? Did he want the satisfaction each kill gave him? The sense of accomplishment destroying a temple brought? Of did he want to destroy the religion that abused the innocent?

Was he doing this for himself, of for everyone else.

"I am not a savior," He grumbled. He a soldier. He'd lead, had been decent at it, but he'd been happy to pass the responsibility to someone else.

And where had that gone? Vee turned into someone who would fight anyone for a few rings because he loved killing so much, inflicting violence.

Just like LRK had enjoyed killing the Keepers.

He looked at the people assembled around him. Kids, compared to him, but kids who had suffered, had come together and did the best they could with what they had. They were trying to do what he had convinced himself he was doing.

And they wouldn't stop.

Short of killing them, he couldn't stop them. They'd said it, he saw it in their eyes. Even Charlene, holding her baby would fight to stop this religion.

And he hadn't lied.

All they would accomplish was get an ugly death. If he allowed them to continue, he would be as much responsible for their death as they would be. He'd be no better than some of the commanders he served under, who cared nothing for their units, the Anthros under

their commands.

He let his breath out. There was only one way he could resolve this.

"I want to make something clear. If I do this, I'm not training you. I'm taking over. When I give an order, you obey it. You don't ask why, you do it, and you trust me to have a plan that will save as many of you as possible. Is that clear?"

"Doesn't that imply some of us will die?" Charlene asked, but there was no fear in her voice.

LRK looked at her. "Yes." He looked around, making eye contact with everyone. "Some of you will die." He returned to Charlene. "They want to do to war, soldiers die in war."

"You said them," she said.

"Yes. You aren't joining."

She bristled and stood taller. "I am perfectly capable of helping. It isn't because I have a—"

"Yes, that is exactly why." He fixed his gaze on hers. "Your child lost its father. I will not be responsible for it also losing you."

"And where do you expect me to go? I have no one. Vernon was my world. His family will have nothing to do with me, by now my family will know how he died and they will shun me."

LRK thought it over, and this time when Alaine came to him he smiled. "I know someone who will help you. She'd take you in if she can, if she can't, she'll make arrangements for you to have a place. It's far, so no one will know you."

She looked at the others, silently pleading. He let her. This was the first test of his army. If they couldn't obey this order, what chance had he of getting them to obey the really bad ones? No one said anything.

He suspected none of them had wanted her to take part, but they hadn't had anyone they could send her to.

"Before we continue. I want each of you to tell me you are okay with me being in charge. You need to mean it, because I'm not going to be nice. I'm not a friend, here to help out. I'm here to make soldiers out of you and get you to fight a war with me."

"I'm in," Kamdy said without hesitation.

"Me too," the jackal said.

The marmot shrugged. "I already knew I was going to die doing this. I'm in."

"Yes, yes," came from behind a tent. "I'm in too."

The others each said their were in, in their own way, until only Finn was left. He looked around. "You're all going to just go along with this? He just walked in, we don't even know who he is."

"He's the one who started this."

"According to who? We weren't there when the first temple was destroyed. We haven't seen him do anything like that."

"He killed the Keepers we missed."

"Says who? We can't sit here and wait until one of back from

Sunkberry after checking. For all we know all he's looking to do is start trouble."

LRK liked that unlike the others he wasn't taking this at face value. So long as Finn could keep his mistrust from turning into outright paranoia, it would be a useful mindset to have among people too willing to believe.

"I fought you and won."

"Kam ended the fight," Finn corrected. "And I have no doubt you're powerful. That's not my problem. My problem is you coming here and wanting to replace Kam. He's our leader. I don't care if you don't like how he does things. He's in charge. Not you."

"Finn, I want him to—"

LRK raised a hand and Kamdy stopped talking. He looked at Finn, the bruiser who lost his family. The man desperate to protect the one he'd found. He took a chance. This would either be a good decision, or it would eventually blow up in his face.

"Then leave."

"What?" Finn narrowed his eyes. "You think you can just get rid of me like that?"

"Everyone here has made their decision. I'll even point out they insisted. I wasn't going to do this until—" he looked at the jackal.

"Harleen," she answered.

"Until Harleen pointed out I was screwing up. You're in the minority. I'm not going to force you to follow me, but that means you are leaving everyone behind."

Finn got in LRK's race. "You think I'm going to leave them in your tender mercy?"

"You either do that, or accept to follow my leadership."

"I don't need to follow you anywhere, none of us do!"

"Finn, that's enough!" Kamdy yelled.

"No! You don't just let that—"

"I did! If you aren't happy with my decision, just leave."

"But..." Finn trailed off, the fight leaving him.

"I'm not going to change my mind just because you're yelling. Finn. We need someone who knows what he's doing, and I chose to believe that's him."

"Kam, we were doing fine."

"No, we weren't. We were mostly lucky. You heard him, we were going to get killed."

"Fine," Finn grumbled. He glared at LRK. "I'm going to do what you say, but that doesn't mean I trust you. The moment you try to screw us over, I'm going to kill you."

LRK smiled. "Fair enough. First thing, I need a volunteer to escort Charlene to Stalgard." He smiled at Finn. "Ideally someone who knows I to fight."

"Oh, no, I'm stay right by your side."

"Then don't volunteer."

"What does that mean?" a pigeon, who'd stayed at the outer edge until now.

"Volunteering means you make the choice of doing what's asked, instead of being ordered to do it. If no one volunteers, then I'll have to order one of you to do it." He looked at Finn again.

"I'll do it," Harleen said. "But I'm coming back. I'm not staying there to look after her."

"Then first thing in the morning, get you, Charlene, and her baby ready. I'm going to need paper and ink." He needed to write a letter to Alaine, explaining what he needed, in such a way that she wouldn't worry. He'd have to instruct Charlene and Harleen not to say anything about him. If she worried she'd insist on coming back and trying to talk some sense into him.

"I have that in my tent."

"Alright. Harleen, Before you leave I'll be able to tell you what my plans are so you have an idea where to meet up with us. Now, I have one last thing to say then we're done for tonight. Civilians are off-limits. I don't care what they've done, if they aren't a Keeper or an acolyte, you will not lay a finger on them." He looked at Finn. "If you do, you are going to answer to me."

"I said I'd follow your orders. I won't hurt any of them, but what about guards? They're not going to stand around letting us destroy their temples."

"Defend yourself and incapacitate them. If they push things too far, your life is more important than theirs, but if I find out you've been manipulating the situation so you could kill them, you won't live long enough to regret it."

"Got it, so I can go sleep now?"

"Yes." He caught Kamdy's arm and held him while the others went to their tents. He nodded toward the noise the wizard made, still behind a tent. "We can't keep him around. Wizards are insane. It's just a question of time before he blows himself and us up."

"Bertrand isn't bad. He'd just a little odd."

"What are you doing?" Bertrand came running out from behind the tent toward the young fox who was taking a leak against a tree. "Get away from her. You're making her wet."

The fox sidestepped, and the wizard picked up a rock at the foot of the tree. "There, there. It's okay. I'm going to dry you."

LRK eyed Kamdy.

"I did say he was odd, and yes, he does have a thing for stones."

LRK rubbed his face. The others probably wouldn't let him leave the wizard behind. Well, he'd have to keep an eye on him and deal with the chaos when it erupted.

"You know," Kamdy said, "if this is going to be a war, we're going to need more people."

"Yeah, but we can deal with that later, we already have plenty on our plate."

"Actually, I already know where we can find a lot of people who are going to be happy to follow you."

"Where?" LRK asked cautiously.

"Fort Worth."