

Chapter 4

Unsettling News

“Escaped?! What do you mean escaped?! How is this possible?!” Christian shouted at his meeting with the Chieftains.

“We don’t know, my lord,” one of the chieftains said quietly, evading his gaze.

“Then find me someone who knows!” Christian was still yelling, though he rarely did, “And someone explain to me how Kodran managed to escape the most well-guarded dungeon in Everdark! How could this have happened?! I want answers! At once!” he hit the table with his fist so hard that his wine goblet spilled all over the oak surface.

“My lord!” a voice at the entrance of the hall was heard. A chieftain appeared at the door with a guard, “This guard was there when it happened. He used the divine travel scroll to come here to tell you what happened personally.”

“Speak, soldier!” the king ordered.

The soldier stared at Christian fearlessly. However angry or bad-tempered, Christian was always willing to hear someone out. Everyone had the chance to tell their own truth and that was one of the reasons his subjects respected him more than they feared him. The soldier bowed and said:

“We were guarding in shifts as ordered,” he began, “When it was my turn, it seemed that all was well as usual. It was quiet and calm. And then in one moment, I thought I heard and unusual whining and squeaking. I can’t recall ever hearing such a noise. It came from the ground and before I knew it, the ground began to move. The guardsman next to me vanished! After that, there was an unusual bang. I looked through the window on the door and on the floor next to Kodran I saw a large hole. From it emerged monsters I have never seen before,” the guard paused to take a breath, “My lord, what awful creatures! No bigger than a dwarf, but fatter, with thin, but strong limbs that ended in claws to dig with. But that wasn’t the worst. If you had seen their faces! They had no eyes, but moved about as if they did. Terrible. They

made squeaking noises, like night creatures do. They cut Kodran's chains with their teeth and he disappeared with them into the ground. There was nothing I could have done. Even had I opened the door to Kodran's cell, there was nothing I could do."

"Gnolids!" someone's voice sounded from the back. The chieftains looked about themselves in puzzlement. No one knew where that voice had come from. It was from the back of the hall, an unlit part of it. It was Elesar. Drawn to the sound of Christian's yelling, he had entered the hall unseen.

"Who said that?" Christian looked into the dark and when Elesar stepped out he sighed in relief, "Elesar! We did not hear you when you came in. Come!" he called him.

As he approached the table, the blue eyes of the Half-Elf shone with an unusual blue glow. His steps made no sound. He was draped in a cape. The wide hood fell over his face and almost completely covered him.

"You know something of these creatures?" Christian asked him. There was silence in the hall. Most of the gathered had an unpleasant memory connected to these dark beings.

Elesar stood wordlessly. He threw off his hood and with a look towards Christian indicated he should end the meeting. The king did so at once. He knew what Elesar had to say were not good news, nor for everyone's ears. When they stood alone, Christian asked him:

"What are Gnolids, my friend? And why do you think the others should not know about it?"

"I do not trust these people, Christian. I have a feeling one of them is a spy," Elesar said carefully.

"A spy?! Who? And whose?" Christian was worried.

"That is not important now. We shall discuss this later. The Gnolids are more important. I fear they are the Overlord's doing," by saying that name, it was as if Elesar had roused evil magic. A cold wind entered the hall. The fire in the candles and torches flickered.

"You're scaring me, my friend. The Overlord? I've heard of him, but I thought he could harm no one anymore. It is said he disappeared from the face of the earth centuries ago. At a time when Men had just arrived on Sillwith," Christian said.

"Tales were told that the Overlord found sanctuary deep beneath the earth and became the ruler of the Underworld. Long has he rested beneath our feet, slowly gathering an army of demons and who knows what manner of creatures from the Underworld. Now his subjects have freed Kodran, who will certainly gather the Orcs again. Though Kodran's thirst for revenge is great, it is nothing compared to the Overlord's. The destruction of Men and other creatures in Sillwith has become the only purpose of his existence," Elesar said quietly, as though afraid someone was listening in.

"If all this is true, and if he has really freed Kodran, then we have a big problem," Christian said worriedly and sat at the table. He nervously scratched at his thick beard, "I

feared a day would come when Kodran would free himself, but I never expected we would have another enemy more powerful than him."

"You are correct. This is as grave as you think it is. Kodran has been free for several days now. Now he and the Overlord have an advantage. We must act swiftly. You have not been to war in a long time. Is your army ready?" Elesar asked.

"Don't worry. Knight games, horse races and tournaments keep them prepared. Though I had hoped to never go to war again, I have always known the possibility exists. There is too much evil in this world for us to trust in faith of a lasting peace. This is why I formed new units in my army," Christian stood up and gestured to Elesar to follow. From the hall window, there was a view of a wide area where various ranks of Christian's army were performing drills.

"My army is filled with brave and skilled warriors!" Christian said proudly. Then he gestured towards the hill behind the practice area where there were many unusually large nests.

"Griffons?!" Elesar said in surprise, "Very good. They are magnificent and very loyal animals. Your army is mighty, but the enemy isn't helpless either," he warned Christian, "The Overlord freed Kodran, which means they created an alliance. I believe they wish to rule all of Sillwith, and that would first mean conquering the larger kingdoms like Kiroshan, As'silaria, Black Rock, Valinndor, Kaamon-Raht and Adazar. No kingdom can defend itself alone, but united we have a greater chance."

"I agree. Kiroshan is ready. As'silaria has ever been our ally and there is no reason it will not be now. Black Rock is a kingdom on the rise, but their army is organized excellently. I will send messengers there. We cannot count on Imani. It is a merchant's land without an army. I am concerned only about Kaamon-Raht. It is nearest to Everdark and I fear it will be the first to fall. Unfortunately, their army is not very strong. Only Adazar remains," Christian added.

"Leave the mages to me. I am heading there with Caitlin as it is. I believe Zeron already knows the situation."

"Wait a moment, Elesar," Christian took him by the upper arm, "Surely you don't mean to continue with your plan to take Caitlin to Adazar? Especially now that we have found out Kodran is free! Not to mention the Overlord! No. I forbid it. She is safer here," he was determined.

"Christian..." Elesar laid a hand on his shoulder, "How many years have we known one another? You know I would never lead you into danger. Just as I wouldn't lead your kin. But believe me when I say that it is safer for Caitlin to go now to Adazar. The power of the mages will protect her. Though your court is very safe, I fear of spies."

Christian knew Elesar was right. But he could not help himself when it was about Caitlin. He loved her immensely. He wished to protect her from everything. But reason was still stronger than his heart.

"Very well," he barely managed to say, "She will go with you. She is safer that way."

"Thank you, my friend. It is for her own good. I will look after her as though she were my own."

"Of that, I have no doubt," Christian answered.

"We must leave at once," Elesar said, heading for the doors, "It is a difficult journey for horses, so we will stop by Valinndor for pegasi. We will fly with them most of the way and stop by Gateway."

"Gateway?" Christian said worriedly, "That is almost like going to Everdark itself! The enemy is far too near. There is no army on that road to protect you, nor a city to hide it. If you decide on that path, you mustn't stop till the very entrance to Gateway. Only then can you count on protection."

"I know, Christian. You worry about the neighbouring kingdoms and your army. When we arrive at Valinndor, await my letter for the next part of the plan."

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After spending the morning with Elesar, Caitlin decided to go visit Bravecat again. She carefully entered the stable and even more carefully approached the great feline. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully, so she sat beside him on a bale of hay. She was still filled with awe towards him. She timidly stroked her hand down his back. Bravecat opened his eyes, though he had sensed her presence the moment she had entered. He smelled fear, but did not know the reason for it.

"Is it true you can speak or was Lauren teasing me?" she asked, "If it is, why won't you speak to people?"

"I don't trust them," Bravecat spoke, much to her surprise. Frightened, she withdrew her arm.

"You can talk!" she said in wonder.

"It's not news," the cat retorted in a deep voice. He was fluently speaking her language. "I speak to those I trust."

"Does that mean you trust me? Why?" Caitlin asked in excitement.

"I feel I can trust you," Bravecat lifted his head and stared deep into her eyes. Caitlin had never seen such cat eyes up close. They were beautiful.

"I'm glad you think so," she admitted. She felt honoured that Bravecat trusted her, even though he did not know her. Animals could surely feel such things better than people, she thought. "Are there others like you?" she asked him.

"Of course there are. I have not seen one like me in years, but they live near the troll's habitat."

"Elesar spoke to me of that place. The home of the trolls. I would like to travel there to see it."

"It is not an impossible wish."

"I know! Considering we will be travelling together to Adazar, maybe we will come across trolls as well. That would be wonderful!" her conversation with Bravecat still felt like a dream.

"It would. Does that mean you are going to see the mages?" Bravecat asked.

"Elesar is taking me to archmage Zeron. He is going to teach me how to use my powers. I recently found out I had inherited them from my father." Caitlin lowered her head. She was still affected by the fact her father had lied to her all these years.

"He killed a mage a hundred years ago," Bravecat purposely changed the subject.

"How do you know?" Caitlin asked, surprised.

"I was there. I took part in the Great Battle. While searching for food, I saw the Orc army and knew that something bad would happen. I followed them all the way to the Almok valley. There, they were fighting with Men and Elves. I wasn't going to participate at first, but then I saw Kodran. He was fighting Elesar and I knew Elesar would need my help," he looked radiant telling the tale, "I jumped Kodran and dealt him a mighty blow. The fact he only has one eye is my doing. I saved Elesar and he is forever grateful," he bragged, not noticing when Lauren had entered the stable.

She stood at the entrance and called out:

"So that's how it is! You've decided to talk to her!"

"Hello, Lauren," Caitlin greeted her politely.

"Hello," she answered quickly, "Bravecat has been telling you his warrior stories? And did he tell you how he was exiled from Valinndor and its surroundings and he would stay exiled had not Elesar protect him?"

"I was just getting to that part," Bravecat informed her.

"Yes, I'm certain you were. But enough talk, we have to get ready. Something has happened that no one expected. Kodran is free."

"What?!" Bravecat stood up, "I had feared it would come to this. But I never expected it to happen so soon."

"Neither did Elesar. We have to leave immediately. Noon has long since passed and Elesar wishes to leave the Kiroshan border by nightfall," Lauren said.

"Very well. I'll go pack my things," Caitlin said in excitement. The adventure had only just reached her and it was already growing into something so much more.

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Christian and Elesar were already standing by the castle gates waiting for the women. Caitlin had wanted to take almost everything she owned with her, but with Lauren's advice and firm guidance, she only took what was necessary.

"I have readied the best horse in the kingdom for Caitlin. He can keep up with your unicorns," Christian said, looking towards a servant who was leading a bridled horse with a beautiful black mane.

"It will not be necessary, my friend. She will ride something faster than Kiroshan horses and unicorns combined," Elesar said and gestured towards the stables. At his whistle, Bravecat reached them in a few bounds.

"Bravecat?" Christian wondered, "He can be ridden?"

"You are safer on Bravecat's back than on any horse."

"I'm not so sure of that," Christian replied doubtfully. But the look sent his way by the cat convinced him.

Caitlin and Lauren finally arrived, ready to leave. When Caitlin realized she would be riding Bravecat, she did not even bother to hide her excitement. She went to her father and hugged him tightly.

"Thank you, father."

Christian returned the embrace, kissed her forehead and spoke to Elesar:

"Take care of her, my friend."

"You need not worry. You know I will!" Elesar said and mounted his unicorn. Lauren did the same. Bravecat lowered his front legs so Caitlin could get on his back more easily. The soft and thick fur was more comfortable than any saddle.

"Good luck!" Christian called, fighting his feelings. His little princess was leaving him.

Before he left the castle courtyard, Elesar turned and shouted: "Until next time!"

"Until next time," Christian quietly repeated, wondering when that would be.

End of Chapter 04