

Chapter 8

Trouble on the Road

At dawn, Elesar was ready to travel and was waiting in front of the castle for Caitlin and Quickfoot. While Caitlin was happily skipping steps, happy the adventure was continuing, Quickfoot was stumbling sleepily, groaning and grumbling. Last night's music had calmed him so completely he had never wanted to wake up.

When he saw Elesar next to three saddled pegasi, he thought he was still dreaming.

"Wha' the hell? Yer thinkin' of flyin'?' Oh, no no no no no," he took a step back, "Not fer me. I'd drop dead from frigh' 'fore we'd get there."

"Do not fear, my friend! On a pegasus' back, you are safer than on any horse!" Elesar encouraged him. Elesar exuded some sort of positive energy, either it was the middle of the night or early in the morning, Quickfoot noticed. He was obviously a tough spirit to break. Nevertheless, his positive attitude did not lend him any confidence about the safety of the pegasus.

"No one's safe on a horse, never mind a pegasus! It's not fer me. What're ya doin'?"

"Actually, I think it is best we go alone, and you keep to the ground if you think it safer," Elesar told him and tightened the saddle, "If you want, you can stay in Valinndor. No one will hold it against you."

Quickfoot had grumbled and protested, but he hadn't intended to back out. He wouldn't miss this for the world. He was eternally grateful to Elesar for granting him his freedom. To refuse him and stay in the Elven city would be an insult and beneath his dignity. And Quickfoot did not want that at all.

"Come on, Quick! It will be fun," Caitlin encouraged him, patted her pegasus on the snout and in one light jump got on the saddle.

"Fer ye maybe!" Quickfoot said to his chin so he wouldn't be heard and got on reluctantly.

Not reacting to Quickfoot's complaints, Elesar was saying goodbye to Kalisa who had come to see him off. She was worried, though she didn't let it show.

"Keep an eye out for Lauren," Elesar asked her needlessly. However much they fought, either would give her life for the other.

"You haven't told her you are leaving, have you?"

"No. If I had, she would have wanted to come with us, and that would be an extra strain on me. Just consider these two. If Lauren were with them? We have to travel swiftly and as safely as possible. I cannot keep an eye out for all of them," though he thought Lauren was experienced enough to care for herself in the wild, he did not want to risk it. Not now.

"It's better this way," Kalisa confirmed, knowing how much he needed to hear that from her.

"I know she will be angry..."Elesar sighed. Every time he left Valinndor, he had taken her with him.

"She will understand."

"She will want to go after us. Do not let her. It is a dangerous road."

"Don't worry. May the Goddess keep you safe on your path," Kalisa said, hugged him and kissed him on the lips.

Elesar mounted his pegasus and checked one more time if they were carrying everything they needed.

"Are you ready?" He said to Quickfoot and Caitlin.

"We are!" Caitlin said excitedly and firmly took her reins.

"I aiiiiiiiiiiiiin't!" Quickfoot yelled, but the pegasi were already in flight. It was a view which had always delighted Kalisa and she watched them until they disappeared in the nearest cloud.

At that moment Lauren exited the castle. She was carrying her things, ready for the journey. Seeing her sister, she asked in surprise:

"What are you doing here so early? Should you not be sleeping? Where is Elesar?"

Kalisa approached her and hugged her. Though she had become used to Kalisa hugging everyone who came close enough for it, Lauren felt this one boded no good.

"Lauren, come here for a while. Elesar took Caitlin and Quickfoot to Adazar. They have just flown off."

Lauren freed herself from Kalisa's hug and looked at her sharply:

"What?! Kalisa, don't make things up! It is not amusing at all."

Kalisa's expression was serious, which disturbed Lauren even more.

"You're telling the truth! Why would they leave without me? I don't understand?!"

"Elesar believes it is too dangerous for you to go with them."

"Dangerous? Nonsense!" Lauren raised her voice, "I've been his companion ever since I can remember! We've overcome every obstacle together."

"I know, Lauren. But Caitlin is not experienced enough and Quickfoot not at all. Worrying about your safety as well would have been too much for him. He believes it is safer this way," he sister tried to calm her unsuccessfully.

"That is exactly why I should have gone as well!" Lauren said angrily and made for the stables.

"Where are you going? Lauren?! Stop!" Kalisa yelled. Everything that Elesar had said was happening.

"I'm going after them!" Lauren threw back, not turning around.

"You cannot! They have left by pegasi. Besides which, Elesar said you will be of more use here."

"Quiet, sister! I'm going after them and you cannot stop me," Lauren said brusquely.

"That is enough!" Usually calm and always cheerful, Kalisa blazed. Her younger sister had crossed a line. She shouted loudly: "Melron!"

At that, the Night Elf, always in the vicinity of the castle, shortly found himself by their side.

"Speak, lady Kalisa."

"Escort Lauren to her chambers and do not let her out of your sight. Look after her with your life. Post a guard in front of her door if you believe it necessary," Kalisa said, determined. Even while angry, her face remained gentle and smooth. But her eyes were piercing, revealing she was deadly serious.

"Lady Kalisa, are you certain?" Melron said, surprised. He had never needed to incarcerate an Elf before. The Elves didn't even have dungeons. The only prisons were on the other side of the stream, in the merchant's quarter. People often broke the rules of Valinndor

and were locked up for a few days until they calmed and repented. It had never before happened that an Elf needed to be imprisoned.

"I am! At this moment Lauren presents a danger to herself and others. I order you to lock her in her chambers."

"You haven't the right!" Lauren shouted. She threw her things to the floor in protest and stepped up to her sister. She was shorter than her. Wood Elves were usually shorter than Night ones.

"I don't? Who is in charge when Elesar is gone?" Kalisa asked her.

"Melron!" Lauren said in satisfaction, thinking she had outwitted her sister.

"I am sorry, my lady, but it is not I who am in command, but your sister Fiona," Melron said.

"But she's not here!" Lauren wasn't giving up. She defiantly crossed her arms and lifted her head.

"True, but in that case, lady Kalisa takes command," Melron answered her. He did not like quarrels, especially not between noble Elves and those he held dear.

"How do I not know about this?!" Lauren had been outsmarted. Kalisa did not reply.

"Take her away, Melron!" she ordered strictly.

"I will never forgive you for this! I hate you!" Lauren shouted while Melron took her to her chambers against her will and his. But Kalisa's word was final.

"Oh, forgive me, my sister, but it is for your own good," Kalisa said in a quieter voice. Dark times were ahead of them and who knew who else she would have to hurt so greater evil did not occur. The time was approaching when she would have to choose between her head or her heart.

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The fear that had overtaken Quickfoot still haunted him. He had a firm hold of the pegasus' neck with both hands, which was making the animal lose altitude.

"Quickfoot! You will choke the pegasus," Elesar shouted to him. He lowered himself to Quickfoot's height and showed him how to hold the reins.

"Quick, I know you're scared, but this is truly fun!" Caitlin shouted above them, unable to resist guiding the pegasus into a few neck breaking jumps.

"Easy fer ya to say! I'm a Reptilian! We belong under water, not inna clouds!"

"Do not worry, we will be landing soon. The pegasi need a rest," Elesar shouted.

"I can't wai' fer solid ground!"

Elesar whistled, causing the pegasi to barrel down to the ground. Quickfoot screamed in fear. They righted only a few meters from the ground and then lightly, like fallen leaves, landed. The Reptilian jumped and started kissing the ground, but a sharp pain in his stomach made him curl over. He rolled on the ground, letting out such shrieks Caitlin had never heard before. The sudden change in pressure and high speeds were too much for his stomach.

"Poor Quickfoot," she said, worried, "Is it really that hard for him?"

"Do not forget he is a reptile. I believe he is currently throwing up his breakfast," Elesar joked.

The Kiroshan princess elegantly dismounted her pegasus and petted it in satisfaction. She would remember this experience for a long time. In short amount of time, they had travelled a distance that would have taken days by horses.

"Where are we?" she asked Elesar. They were standing on a hill surrounded by forest as far as the eye could see. Tall trees and thick boughs looked identical to her. But not to the Half-Elf.

"We are on the border of Valinndor's forests. We will fly once more to Gateway and then we will continue on foot. Pegasi are strong animals, but they cannot endure such a long voyage. They require more rest than horses."

"Of course, because of the flying," Caitlin concluded, "Which means we have a long road ahead of us. Here's Quick. It seems he has recovered from the flight."

The Reptilian approached them, wiping his mouth with his hand. He didn't want to dirty the new uniform he had received from the elves. He liked the green colour that matched the brown pantaloons.

"This isn't fer me! I'm a reptile, not a bird!"

"Not to worry, we continue on foot from Gateway," Elesar smiled.

"Yer righ'! Can I have a bit of a kip?"

"Of course. I will light a fire," Elesar said and went to find dry wood.

Quickfoot leaned against a rock, held his stomach with both hands and said: "I've had enough o' quick rides ta last me a lifetime. I don't think I'll survive."

"I thought it was exciting," Caitlin said, "Wind in my hair, a magnificent view, the excitement..."

"Not me! And did yer see the boss? Like a rock he was! Didn' even blink while we descended."

"How would you know when you kept your eyes closed the entire time?" Caitlin smiled.

"Ah, righ'. Yer righ'. Anythin' ta eat?" Quickfoot asked, ignoring the pain in his stomach.

"Not to worry, Quickfoot. You will like Elven cuisine," Elesar said, taking out food from a bag.

The meal obviously agreed with Quickfoot. He lay down on the grass and contentedly smiled to himself, his hands behind his head.

"Tha' hit the spot! Yer know what I'd like now? Ta jump in that Sacred lake. Why'd we even leave there?"

"You could have stayed, as Elesar already told you. Besides, you chose to travel with us," Caitlin reminded him.

"That's righ'! Ol' fool, me!" Quickfoot joked, "Still, I prefer yer company."

"Thank you, Quick! It is nice of you to say so," Elesar thanked him.

"Hey! Ya called me Quick! I knew we would get along righ' good!" Quickfoot said proudly.

"You are a wonderful person!" Elesar smiled.

"Give it a while an' I'll start believin' it. How much longer ta the mages then?"

"We will arrive at Gateway by noon with a little more flying," at the mention of flying, Quickfoot's stomach growled. Not again, he thought, "After that we shall continue on foot. It will take us a few weeks to the foot of Enolar where the path to the Adazar plateau is."

"We're gonna climb as well? Come on! Firs' flyin' now climbin'! Why can't we swim or crawl or somethin'?" Quickfoot lamented.

"After we return from Adazar, you can swim in the St. Itar Lake to your heart's content! And now onwards!" Elesar commanded in a mild voice.

Caitlin and Quickfoot obediently mounted their pegasi. They took to the air again and it seemed that Quickfoot had grown used to flying. He was much calmer than the first time.

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They landed not far from fort Gateway, the border dividing northern Sillwith from the rest. The forest was placed at the only pass through the Enolar Mountains. The reason for building it came from a time long past, when Men were but newcomers to Sillwith. Even then, they fought with barbarians and Orcs and in their long battles had managed to drive them north. Apart from the fort, even the gates of Gateway were built from Enolar stone. The massive doors were opened by special mechanisms on wooden wheels that had to be moved by up to ten Men. Though they rarely did. For few people travelled north. No one wanted to enter the land of barbarians and orcs and who knows what wild beasts other than brave adventurers and those seeking fame. On the other side of the fortress, barbarians tried to breach its defences countless times. But all of their attempts to shatter the strong walls broke against them like waves on a rock. To this day, the fort firmly stood in its place.

Stepping towards the fortress, the company heard horns sounding in the keep. A moment later, from a small door hidden from view from the road, a guard in silver armour exited. He was armoured from head to toes. In his hand was a great battle axe.

"Who heads to Gateway?!" the guard shouted.

"Elesar, lord of Valinndor, in the company of his friends," Elesar retorted. He was calmly standing, waiting for the guard to take the next move.

"Greeting, lord of Valinndor! We've been expecting you!" the unfriendly expression on the guard's face disappeared and a smile took its place. He bowed and shouted up to the keep.

"Open the gates! Let them pass!"

The heavy stone gates creaked and began to slowly open. Quickfoot could hear the sounds of turning wooden wheels. He'd never seen a door this big before. The walls of Valinndor had seemed twice as small.

"Greetings, soldier. What is your name?" Elesar asked after they approached the guard.

"Artas, my lord. A guard in the service of his majesty Christian, the ruler of Kiroshan," the guard answered.

"You are far from home."

"Indeed, my lord," Artas turned to Caitlin and bowed deeply, "Princess Caitlin, welcome to Gateway. Your presence here is an honour."

"My thanks, guardsman. It is good to see the people of Kiroshan eager and always ready," Caitlin answered politely, the way she had been taught in court.

"The king informed us you were coming. But he didn't say you would be in the company of another person," Artas said and looked suspiciously at Quickfoot.

"He couldn't have know, for he had joined us in Valinndor," Elesar said to avoid unnecessary explanations, "This is Quickfoot, of the Swamp."

A Reptilian, my lord?" Artas wondered. He knew that Men on the borders of the swamp kept Reptilians as their slaves. But he had never heard Elves that had them.

"Yes, Quickfoot, a friend of the royal family," Elesar quickly said and changed the subject, "We are weary from the long road, Artas..."

"Of course, my lord. It is a difficult journey from Kiroshan to here. Even on a pegasus. We have prepared accommodations for you. The room of our former captain is free," Artas offered.

"Former captain?" Caitlin asked.

"Yes. He was killed in the last barbarian attack. These days the attacks have grown more common. I would not recommend this road to Adazar. This fortress is the last place where the laws of the west are enforced."

"What d'ya mean?" Quickfoot asked.

Artas gestured to a sign behind him. In large red letters in the Common tongue of Sillwith read:

<<Stranger! Your laws do not protect you here!>>

"Oh. I get it."

"Thank you for your offer and your warning, Artas, but it is the only way to Adazar. We cannot stay. Time is not on our side," Elesar thanked him.

"I understand, my lord. Good luck to you!" Artas said and when they moved on, ordered the gates closed.

The creaking of the heavy doors disturbed Quickfoot. He didn't like being cut off from the world he knew while entering the unknown.

"I don' like it here! Even me swamp looks prettier than this!"

"Many things in life are neither pleasant nor pretty, Quick. It falls to us to adapt," Elesar told him, keeping an eye on their surroundings. Small houses and a few taverns

sprawled across the cobbled street. The last inns before crossing to the 'wild side'. The atmosphere was gloomy. Only a few men would peek through their windows to see who the new passengers were. Their cold faces didn't seem particularly friendly. There wasn't even the expected racket from the taverns. The dampened candles in the windows were the only sign of life. Who in their right mind would want to live in a place like this, Caitlin thought.

Her opinion was shared by Quickfoot. The hoof beats against the cobble stone road and the torches that barely burned didn't help him calm any. He would look about himself every once in a while like a frightened animal.

They slowly made their way to the other gate when a huge cart passed by them. There was an iron cage on the cart, intended for slaves. Two men bearing strange weapons rode next to it. The weapons were something in between a spear and axe, with a lassoed rope at the end. While one eyed Caitlin inappropriately, the other suspiciously looked at Quickfoot. The princess felt the same unease she had in Imani so she stood closer to Elesar. Quickfoot did the same. Even the pegasi squirmed. Elesar was carefully watching the riders and the cart. Only when they got father away did Quickfoot speak in a quick, trembling voice:

"Slavers!"

"Slavers?!" Caitlin asked him. He had said it so quietly she had barely heard him.

"Yes! They catch Reptilians an' barbarians an' they've caught wanderin' Men and Elves too. They sell 'em ta Men afterwards, mostly ta them who live on tha edge of tha Swamp! They give 'em plenty o' gold fer slaves! They don' care which race ye are. We're all slaves ta tha likes of them! I hate slavers!" Quickfoot said, almost in tears.

"Savages. They believe in gold and nothing else," Elesar said in contempt, subconsciously holding the hilt of his sword, "Do not worry, Quick. Keep close and no harm shall come to you. Remember, do not wander off!"

"Righ'!" Quickfoot said and took Elesar by the arm.

"Not that closely, Quick!" Elesar said.

Twilight descended and with it a thick fog. They could barely see each other, let alone the path before them. Only the sound of the other gates opening signalled their exit from Gateway. They wanted to ride, but flying was out of the question in this fog.

Elesar could not get rid of the feeling they were being watched. The fog didn't retreat and it dulled his senses. But his first instinct did not fail him. It told him something was not right. He had to turn around.

"Caitlin? Caitlin, where are you?!" he called for her, "Quick, where is Caitlin?!" an unpleasant feeling passed through him.

"Isn't she righ' behind us? Caitlin! I'll go an' find her!" Quickfoot exclaimed and headed back towards Gateway.

"Quickfoot, stop! We must not get separated!"

"Elesar?" Caitlin appeared in front of him.

"Child, where did you wander off to?" Elesar said worriedly.

"Nowhere. It was the two of you who fell behind. Where is Quickfoot?"

"Looking for you! Quickfoot!" exactly what he had feared was happening. They had split up when they shouldn't have.

"Quick! Come back!" Caitlin started calling for him, but Elesar suddenly bid her to be quiet.

"Silence! I hear hoof beats and a cart."

"Slavers! And Quick is alone out there!" Caitlin said, scared.

From the direction of the hoof beats, a male voice sounded:

"There he is, running away! Get him!"

"Oh no, they've seen him!" Caitlin said tearfully.

Elesar drew his sword and looked into the fog. He strained his eyes, but couldn't make anything out. At first. Suddenly, he saw someone running towards them. Quickfoot! He was running without looking where he was going until he hit Elesar's chest.

"Elesar!" Quickfoot exclaimed in relief, though his fear hadn't left him, "The sla...sla...slavers are after me! Save me!" he begged. His green skin had become grey, almost like the fog. That's why Elesar had barely seen him. The Reptilian had chameleon-like characteristics when in danger.

"Quick! Pull yourself together and stand by me," Elesar tried to remain calm, though his blood was rushing through his veins. He hoped Quickfoot's ability would fool the slavers so they would not see him.

The cart soon appeared in front of them and next to it the two horsemen.

"Greetings, travellers. What brings you to travel in such conditions?" Greeted one of the horsemen. The torch in his hand slightly illuminated his figure. He was wearing a closed helmet from which thunderous grey eyes could be seen. He had a long lance in his other hand.

"Greetings to you as well, gentlemen. We could ask you the same question!" Elesar answered. He was standing with his head held high. He had put Moonsaber away for now, but still had it by the hilt.

"We are in search of a Reptilian, he has wandered here and we wish to...bring him home," the horseman said, to which his company laughed derisively.

"We haven't seen any reptiles!" Caitlin said nervously. She recalled that unpleasant drunkard from the Lost Traveller. The same feeling enveloped her like a cold fist.

"I see you have pegasi. And three of them, though there are two of you. A rarity in these parts. You must be an elf from Valinndor or you have killed the Elves and stolen their transport," the horseman continued.

"We have murdered no one! The pegasi are ours," Elesar answered and grasped the hilt of Moonsaber more tightly.

"Then you must be a rich Elf, milord...what did you say your name was?"

"I haven't," he said coldly.

"And the name of this young lady?" the horseman continued to question. His companion slowly approached Caitlin from the side. Elesar noticed him from the corner of his eye. He didn't take his gaze off of the first one.

"None of your business!" Caitlin said coldly.

"All right. I meant no harm. You just continue on your way," the horseman retorted.

"Thank you. Likewise," Elesar said and waited for the slavers to pass before them. He carefully turned, not moving his hand off of Moonsaber. He took the reins of his pegasus and slowly began moving. Just when he thought they were out of danger, one of the horsemen turned:

"Almost forgot. Watch out for barbarians...What's this?" his gaze fell on Quickfoot, whose skin had almost returned to its natural colour. The unlucky fellow had thought the danger was past, "The Reptilian! It's him! Grab them!" the horseman shouted.

Faster than you could blink, Moonsaber was in Elesar's hand ready for battle. Elesar ordered Quickfoot to guard Caitlin and he lunged at the slavers. He attacked the first one that approached. It was the cart driver. He had a sabre in his hands and he ran towards Elesar. The Half-Elf jumped on him like an animal and hit him in the chest, feet first. The cart driver looked at him in disbelief and fell to the floor, gasping for breath. Elesar threw the spear to Quickfoot and even though the Reptilian was not a warrior, he rushed after Elesar. The indescribable rage he felt towards the slavers gave him strength.

The slavers might have been skilled in catching unlucky Reptilians that feared them, but it turned out they were no match for Quickfoot, let alone Elesar. Quick strokes with Moonsaber took care of their weapons as well as the hands that wielded them. And Quickfoot managed to kill one with his spear. His survival instinct was stronger than his fear.

Soon, only Elesar and Quickfoot were standing.

"Quickfoot, there is a warrior hidden in you. That spear suits you," Elesar complimented him. He cast his eye over their enemies and convinces they were no longer a threat, sheathed Moonsaber.

"Boss, I haven't the slightest where tha' came from. I never got inta such a fight before," he said excitedly, "What'll we do with this scum?"

"Put them in the cage and free the horses. Let it be a message to other slavers," Elesar decided.

They unharnessed the horses and put the slaves in the cage. They tied the surviving horseman to the cage. He could find his own way home.

Caitlin approached them.

"I have bad tidings. The pegasi escaped! I wasn't able to calm them down."

"The fight scared them off!" Elesar concluded. He whistled to see if they would come back. Nothing.

"An' we chased them horses off!" Quickfoot hit himself on the head, "Load of fools, we are!"

"What will we do now, Elesar?" Caitlin asked and pressed herself against him. She had never felt so insecure as she did in this thick fog.

"We walk," Elesar said reluctantly.

"What?! On foot?! In this pea soup?! Which way?"

"Good question, Quickfoot. In the battle, I lost my bearings," Elesar admitted, though he did not want to. Caitlin and Quickfoot were counting on him and he had lost his bearings. "There are two paths before us, we must choose which to take."

"I say we take tha right," Quickfoot said determinedly.

"I too think that is the correct way," added Caitlin.

"The majority has decided. We go right," Elesar answered. They took a few steps and found the packs dropped by the pegasi. At least they were headed in the right direction, he thought.

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After hours of walking through the thick fog, instinct told Elesar they had chosen the wrong path. The fog was getting thicker and darker; they could barely see each other. They had to keep hold of a rope so they didn't repeat what had previously happened.

"I do not like this. We should have been at the foot of the mountain by now. Or at least on the way to it," Elesar said. He thought they should have returned to the fort for horses, but it was far too late for that. There was no point in crying over spilt milk.

"Now ye say it! Why'd ya even listen ta me?!" Quickfoot lamented. He was a step in front of the others and every few moments he turned to see if they were still behind him. "I canna even see me snout!"

"What shall we do now? We lost the pegasi, we don't know where we are headed and what else?! We will never get back home!" everything seemed black and hopeless to Caitlin.

"Don' cry, little one!" Quickfoot comforted her, "No worries! The boss'll find the right way! Don'cha see we're climin' up? 'Ere, lookit! I'm climbin'! See? I'm climbin'," he explained, but suddenly lost the ground beneath his feet and fell downhill.

"Quick!" Caitlin yelled and grabbed hold of the rope tightly. But Quickfoot's weight dragged her along. Elesar tried to stop them, but he had realized what was happening too late. Caitlin dragged him down as well and they both rolled downhill. They stopped on Quickfoot, who was lying on the ground and moaning:

"Ow, ow, ow! Gerrof! What a tumble! D'ya see tha'? What's I sayin', o' course ya did, yer here too!"

"Where are we?" Caitlin asked, raising and dusting herself off.

"I am not certain, but I see some kind of stone tablet in front of us," Elesar said and moved towards it.

Quickfoot helped Caitlin to her feet. He wanted to go after Elesar, but he fell over something again and fell to the ground. Caitlin smiled at him. For a moment, she had forgotten the worries that plagued her. Quickfoot felt for the object he'd fallen over and lifted it. To his horror, he realized he was holding a human skull. He screamed in fear and Caitlin joined him.

At the same time, Elesar realized that the stone tablet was a gravestone and that they had found themselves in a graveyard.

"I do not like the feel of this place! Let us go!" he concluded, but too late.

Skeleton hands started rising from the ground beneath their feet. They grabbed them firmly by their ankles and downed them. Countless other hands emerged as well and held them to the ground. Caitlin's scream echoed throughout the land. Quickfoot tried to bite through the bony hands, but it was in vain. Elesar was trying to rip himself out of the strong grasps, but stopped when he noticed a haunting spectre in black on a black horse. Red eyes watched him from a helmet opening.

Behind that black spectre, another appeared, casting a large net over the three of them. The hands from the ground loosened and the spectral horsemen pulled the nets.

"By the Goddess, let us go you cursed creatures!" Elesar shouted, but no one heeded his protests. A strong blow from one of the horsemen knocked him unconscious.

End of Chapter 08