

Deleted Scenes from *The Ashen Swarm*

These are major scenes from the book *The Ashen Swarm*. These are the parts of any significant length that were cut. There were, of course, numerous smaller pieces changed or taken out.

SPOILER ALERT!

These scenes can contain significant plot points. Please do NOT read them unless you have already read the book!

Scene #1: Reiyalindi talks to Eiyara

Originally Reiyalindis was going to talk to Eiyara about how she discovered Caelden was supposed to be her future husband. In the final version she has a similar talk with Safaya, but it does not go so far as to specifically say they will be married.

“Eiyara,” said Reiyalindis, “I need to talk to you.”

“Oh?” Eiyara said. “What is it, dear?”

“Well, it’s about something kind of...strange. And scary.”

“Scary?” she asked curiously.

“Yes. I can’t really talk to Mother or Father, because they’d worry too much, I think. It’s...um...about Caelden.”

“Yes? What about him?”

Reiyalindis sat down, trying to decide how to say it. “Back when he hadn’t joined us yet,” she said, “I was given the feeling that he was meant to be my protector. But now I think I might have been wrong.”

Startled, Eiyara said, “Wrong? You mean he might still be dangerous to us?”

“Oh, no—no, not that. I guess that didn’t come out right. He *is* my protector, that’s true, and he’d never hurt any of us now. What I meant was...um...I don’t think that’s *all* he’s supposed to be—not to me. He’s also supposed to be...well...*more*.”

Eiyara’s eyes narrowed. “More?” she asked suspiciously. “Like what, exactly?”

Reiyalindis hesitated for a very long moment, her mouth trying to form words but her voice not emerging. Finally, tears beginning to shine in her eyes, she burst out, “Oh, Eiyara, I don’t *want* to marry him! I don’t even *like* him! What am I going to *do*? He’s so dark, so cold and empty, so...so...”

As Reiyalindis was trying to sort through all the negative words she could think of to describe Caelden, Eiyara was trying to recover from her shock. Finally she blurted, “He’s meant to be your *husband*?”

“Yes!” Reiyalindis wailed miserably. “I don’t understand, Eiyara. How could *he* be the one? I wanted to be swept off my feet by a handsome and romantic...well, I guess he’s handsome, but he’s definitely not romantic...” She trailed off, staring into space, and then said, “He *is* very handsome, isn’t he?” Then she shook her head violently. “No, this can’t be right!”

Eiyara was inclined to agree. “You’re still a little young for that, don’t you think, dear?” she said.

“Well, yes, but I wasn’t planning to drag him off by his hair *tonight* or anything. It won’t happen for a while yet. But... *Caelden*? Caelden Wulfe? I don’t even know who he is! *He* doesn’t even know who he is!”

That brought Eiyara up short, and she watched Reiyalindis thoughtfully for a moment. “No,” she said quietly. “He doesn’t, does he? None of us do.”

Reiyalindis also paused, and after a moment she looked up at Eiyara. “No,” she said. “Do you think maybe...”

“It’s possible that the real Caelden is a completely different person than the one we know.”

“But will he ever be that person again?”

“Your curse was broken, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but...I still don’t remember anything before the curse. That was all taken away, and will never come back. And the curse didn’t change me—Caelden’s could have changed him drastically, and some things can never be undone. Look at the things he’s done, Eiyara. Even now, though he fights for the just cause, he still kills without conscience, without feeling. Can that *ever* change? Even if the spell is broken, what if he never remembers who he used to be?”

“We’re just going to have to take that as it comes, dear,” Eiyara said quietly. “But don’t worry; your visions have never let you down. They led Vaelon and me to each other, and it was the best thing that ever happened to us.”

Reiyalindis, though she did not say it out loud, did not take any comfort in that; in fact, the irony of it only made her feel worse. “Yeah,” she said a little numbly. “Maybe you’re right.”

Scene #2: Kiran survives

I had intended for Kiran to die from the start, but at one point I played around with the idea of having her actually survive. I actually rewrote a large portion of the book with this in mind, but ultimately decided to keep it the way I had originally planned.

When Baden regained consciousness, dawn’s light was just beginning to seep through the high windows of the huge building. He blinked, staring up at the ceiling, not sure where he was or what he was doing there.

Then he remembered. The spirits—the cold, the wind, the pain...But he was alive. Why was he alive?

The next thing he became aware of was that there were other people with him. Vaelon was sitting next to him, and on his other side Safaya was also looking down at him.

“Baden?” the Halfbreed said quietly. “Can you hear me?”

“Uh...yeah, yeah,” said Baden, trying to make his sluggish brain move faster. “What...what happened?”

“You were attacked by demonic wraiths,” Vaelon said. “We managed to find you before...well, I’m not sure whether it’s too late or not.”

Baden blinked, not sure what Vaelon meant. “Too late?” He raised his hands to his face, rubbing at it to wake himself up.

Almost immediately he felt the unfamiliar touch of something hard on his face, and he raised his hands up, staring at them. There was a ring on his right forefinger—but he didn’t wear any rings.

With a sudden lurch he realized that he was wearing Kiran's Spirit Ring.

"Kiran!" he blurted, sitting bolt upright. The suddenness of the motion made his head spin, and he almost fell back down before Vaelon and Safaya caught him, gently lowering him back to the ground.

"Just hold still a minute, Baden," said Vaelon.

"Where's Kiran?" Baden demanded, his speech slurring a little as his head continued to spin.

Safaya and Vaelon looked at each other, and then Safaya let out a long sigh.

"Baden...she...well, she's not doing so good."

Baden, despite his sickeningly dizzy state, tried to sit up again. "Where is she?"

"Take it easy, Baden," Vaelon said. He and Safaya grasped his arms, holding him steady.

Baden looked around, but everything was still spinning so badly he couldn't make anything out. He closed his eyes, trying to bring his mind under control. After a few moments the spinning stopped, and he opened his eyes again.

Kiran was lying on her back near him, her eyes closed and her face deathly pale. Reiyalindis was sitting next to her, holding her hand, her eyes red and tired.

"No," Baden breathed. "Kiran, no!" He looked down at the ring, and said, "She took it off—she gave it to me! The spirits...Is she alive?"

"Yes and no," said Shedo, who was sitting cross-legged nearby. Ciroy and Tarron were also there, and Wulfe was standing apart from the others, his back to them.

Baden looked sharply at the Dark Elf. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean," said Shedo, "that she's alive, but she's suffered a lot of damage. She's in a very deep unconsciousness right now, and I'm not sure she'll ever wake up."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and Baden stared at Kiran's motionless form in horror. "No," he whispered. He reach out a trembling hand, touching the girl's face.

"We were forced into this city intentionally," said Vaelon. "Those creatures were never meant to kill us—they were just part of the trap."

"But Lhotian didn't know about Vaelon's effect on demons," said Reiyalindis. "He thought we'd all die."

"How do we help her?" Baden demanded intently. "How do we bring her back?"

Shedo shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. The demon wraiths had a catastrophic effect on her mind. Her magic tried to shield her, but it was only partially successful. It's keeping her body alive, locked in some sort of stasis, but her mind...I don't know if it could ever be brought back."

"There has to be a way!" Baden cried.

"There is," Reiyalindis said firmly. "We just have to find it. And we will, Baden. We will. But for now we need to get out of here."

Baden nodded numbly, still staring at Kiran. "Yeah," he mumbled.

They left the city, but stopped a small distance away to rest. Baden stayed close to Kiran, fingering the blue Spirit Stone on his finger and staring at it.

"She gave it to me," he said quietly. "She put it on my finger after I was unconscious—after I couldn't refuse it. I can't believe she did that."

"You'd be dead if she hadn't," said Vaelon. "She saved your life."

"I know. But now she's just a step away from death, and we don't even know if there's a way to bring her back."

Ciroy put his hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he said. “If anyone can find a way, it’s Reiyalindis.”

Baden sighed. “I never pictured myself falling in love, you know? I never really thought about it much—but I find myself wondering if she and I... well, I don’t know. Maybe nothing would have ever happened between us. Maybe I’m just crazy.”

Ciroy shrugged. “Maybe. But maybe not.”

That night, as they sat around a small fire, there was very little conversation. Baden stared mutely at the fire, and no one else seemed to feel like talking. Even Wulfe looked more grim than usual, sitting barely inside the firelight and staring fixedly at the ground.

Finally, though, Reiyalindis spoke quietly. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Stirring a little, Baden looked at her, but didn’t say anything. After a moment she went on. “This just isn’t right. Kiran shouldn’t have been hurt like this. I don’t understand.”

“Are you saying that you had a vision about this?” asked Ciroy.

“No,” she said. “But now I can’t shake the feeling that it wasn’t supposed to have happened. Something went wrong—very wrong.”

“She shouldn’t have saved me,” said Baden.

“No,” Reiyalindis said, “it’s nothing like that. We should never have even been in that situation—we should never have had to go into that city, those creatures shouldn’t have been there. This whole thing feels wrong. It shouldn’t have happened this way.”

“Well,” said Vaelon, “it’s done. There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“I know,” she said, “but the entire mission has been thrown out of balance.” She stared down at the ground, and then closed her eyes.

For a long time everyone was quiet, but then Reiyalindis’ eyes opened again, and she looked up at Vaelon. “We have to change our plan.”

He nodded. “What do you think we should do?”

“We need Eiyara. She’s powerful enough that she might be able to help Kiran.”

Baden frowned. “Are you saying we’re going to go through the portal to Ji-Ge-Lon and walk all the way to get Eiyara? Do you realize how long that will take? Kiran may not last that long!”

“I know, but it’s the only way. We’ve got to find her.”

“You’re sure?” Tarron asked.

Reiyalindis sighed. “Sometimes I wish people would stop asking me that.”

Scene #3: Xar-Axad are made of gunpowder

Baden was going to discover the different ingredients of the Xar-Axed, which would lead him to the invention of gunpowder. That idea didn’t last long, though.

“Xar-Axad are the Tan-Sho-Ko words for ‘fire’ and ‘thunder,’ obviously referring to how they explode when touched with fire,” said Baden. “I want to see if I can find out what they’re made of.”

Baden spent all night studying the dust of the Xar-Axad, while everyone else slept. He carefully sifted through the dust, meticulously separating like particles into different little piles.

By the time morning came, he thought he had found the answer. As the others began stirring, he said, "I think I have it."

Everyone looked at him, and he pointed down at the little piles he'd made. "Sulphur," he said, "saltpeeter, and charcoal. As near as I can tell. Put the three together, add a little fire, and boom. But the Xar-Axad seemed to have more of a thick clay consistency while alive, not turning to this dust until dead. Whatever magic holds them together like that probably also facilitates the explosion, because something tells me this stuff wouldn't explode so spectacularly if we set it on fire as it is here."

"Why not?" asked Safaya.

Scene #4: Kamas assassinated

I toyed with the idea of having Commander Kamas assassinated. It didn't end up really fitting with the rest of the story, though, and just bogged it down.

Things were not going well, Commander Kamas thought as he looked out a window at Ji-Ge-Lon from his temporary headquarters in Li-Kratta. The invaders had pushed his armies back across the river. Om-Iganore had already been entirely overrun, and it didn't look like it would be long until the same happened to the other two cities.

Their best defense at the moment was the river itself, as the gehlem seemed to be afraid to enter the water, and the other creatures did not want to advance without them. They were trying to build rafts, but materials were scarce and the Elven sorcerers destroyed those they managed to build in short order.

Kamas, though, knew that the river would grant them only a short reprieve. The Gu-Shon seemed to be waiting for something, and Kamas was sure that once it arrived the river would fall quickly.

He was currently trying to coordinate a retreat toward Shikuragari. It would be nearly impossible to move his men to the Sanretsu city without massive casualties if the Gu-Shon got across the river. Staying put, though, would be suicidal; the Tan-Sho-Ko cities were not nearly as well-fortified as Shikuragari, and would not last long under an assault.

The single Dark Elven teleporter at his disposal had already been killed, leaving Kamas with only the two High Elves. Not nearly enough to evacuate all of his troops quickly enough.

"Let's get the common soldiers moving," he said. "We'll hold the river with just a few sorcerers to buy the rest of the men some time. It's going to require some sacrifices—those left behind will be on their own, and the odds they'll survive aren't very good."

Both of the High Elven teleporters were with him, and one said, "We'll stay, sir. We can escape quickly."

"No," said Kamas. "As tempting as that sounds, I can't risk it. You're the only teleporters we've got."

"You're calling for a suicide mission?" asked another sorcerer with a frown.

Kamas sighed. "I don't like it any more than you, Colonel, but I don't see an alternative. The enemy is overwhelming us more quickly than I had ever anticipated. We've got to pull back to Shikuragari, but that will take days. *Somebody* has to stay behind and make sure the Gu-Shon don't follow."

He knew, of course, what the High Elven colonel was thinking—that Kamas was willing to let other men die, but not himself. Kamas, though, was a smart enough leader to know when *not* to be mindlessly brave. Remaining behind himself would be a tactical blunder; his greatest strength was not his battle abilities, but in his mind.

Ignoring the unspoken criticism, he said, “Let’s get moving, gentlemen. I need a few volunteers.”

Just then, however, the door opened to admit Sergeant Berlic, who was escorting a heavily-breathing Halfbreed. The Halfbreed was a wolf, from the look of him, and he had obviously been running hard. “Commander, this runner brings a report from Gaeotici,” Berlic said.

Kamas already knew what the Halfbreed was going to say, and he felt his heart sink. With a grim nod he said, “Go on.”

“The city is under attack, sir,” the Halfbreed said quickly. “There’s a portal in the Great Shield due west of the city, and the enemy is coming through in force.”

“Another portal,” Kamas muttered. “I was afraid of something like that.”

“What can we do?” asked one of the sorcerers. “The forces at Gaeotici will never be able to withstand an assault like these creatures are capable of!”

Kamas stared at the ground for a few moments, and then shook his head. “I’ll not leave them undefended. I want both teleporters to take as many sorcerers as they can down there to help immediately.”

“Both?” one of the teleporters asked, surprised. “But, sir, what about your plan to evacuate the troops here?”

“Now,” Kamas said firmly. “This whole battle here will mean nothing if an enemy army is allowed to advance from the south. We’ve got to secure that portal at any cost.”

The teleporters hesitated a moment longer, but then nodded. “Right away, sir,” one said.

Within a few moments the two teleporters were gone, taking with them the other sorcerers in the room. Kamas turned toward Sergeant Berlic, opening his mouth to say something, but even as he did he saw Berlic’s eyes widen with sudden alarm, and from the Human’s thoughts he knew something had appeared out of thin air behind him.

He whirled, but it was already too late. A long spike fixed to the back of his attacker’s hand sank into his chest, and Kamas instinctively knew he had only a few moments before he was dead.

In those few moments he looked into the creature’s eyes, and to his surprise he discovered he could read the thoughts behind them. What he saw there struck icy fear into his soul, and even as he fell to the floor he gasped, “No—the seeress!”

His vision was rapidly fading. He saw Berlic leaping over him, attacking the creature savagely. Then another creature was there, swinging at Berlic, but the Halfbreed runner barreled into it, knocking it aside.

A few other soldiers rushed into the fray, but Kamas didn’t see the outcome. All went black, and the last thing he was able to whisper before dying was, “Reiyalindis...don’t...don’t...”

Scene #5: Weilaroca

After deciding not to have Kamas assassinated after all, I settled on using a vision of it as a way for Lhotian to trick Reiyalindis. There were also going to be more types of

Gu-Shon, one of which was the Weilaroca. In this version Baden was kidnapped instead of Eiyara.

Reiyalindis and her friends stayed at Gaeotici for several more days before a detachment from Commander Kamas arrived. It consisted of two High Elven teleporters, each transporting several other sorcerers with them. Reiyalindis and her companions were with Ticerres in the mess hall when the sorcerers arrived to report to the general.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” Ticerres said as the sorcerers entered, his usual slight tone of mocking in his voice.

“General,” the ranking High Elven sorcerer replied coolly, saluting. “We just came from the battle site near the portal. It doesn’t look like we’re needed here after all.”

A smirk crossed Ticerres’ face. “No. As you can see, we have the situation under control. Whatever plan Lhotian had here, it has been foiled.”

The moment Ticerres was finished speaking, Reiyalindis’ vision went totally black. Immediately afterward, though, it returned—only she wasn’t in Gaeotici anymore. She was in a dimly-lit chamber, and with her in the room was Lhotian, a Darantriv, and several hideous Gu-Shon she had never seen the like of before.

“If I may say so, my Lord,” the Darantriv was saying, “don’t you think we should send more force to attack Gaeotici? Their army may be small, but still, those Dark Elven sorcerers are a force to be reckoned with.”

“That army isn’t there to attack,” Lhotian replied. “It’s there to *be* attacked.”

The Darantriv blinked. “My Lord?”

“The commander of the Rimurean armies will be with the troops at Ji-Ge-Lon. He is a threat, and I have foreseen a way to be rid of him. When the Dark Elves discover the army coming through near Gaeotici, they will send a runner to the commander. When he hears the news he will immediately send eight High Elven sorcerers to help. That will leave him vulnerable—and that’s where our Weilaroca friends come in.”

Turning to the creatures, Lhotian said, “The Dark Elf is your primary target. Two of you will survive the attack, so once he’s dead head for Ruling City and dispose of their new queen as well.”

The three Weilarocas merely glowered at him in response. They were even taller than Lhotian, and, like all Gu-Shon, were gray. They were humanoid, heavily muscled, and had a foot-long black claw sprouting from the back of each hand that curved to extend forward.

“Go, now,” said Lhotian. “Wait at Li-Kratta. A Halfbreed runner will bring the Dark Elf a message, and he will send the sorcerers afterward—strike immediately after they leave. Do not reveal yourselves before then, or the sorcerers will destroy you.”

With a growl of grudging obedience, the creatures dissolved into three clouds of red vapor and disappeared.

Reiyalindis’ vision blacked out again, and when it returned she found herself kneeling on the ground, gasping and trembling. Safaya was beside her, holding her by the shoulders.

“What is it?” the fox-Halfbreed was asking. “Baby, what is it? Are you all right? Did you see something?”

Reiyalindis nodded, feeling tears coming to her eyes. “It’s Kamas,” she blurted. “General Kamas—this whole attack was about him!”

His brow darkening, one of the sorcerers stepped toward her. “What do you mean?” he demanded.

“This was all just a diversion!” she cried. “Lhotian was after Kamas—he had assassins waiting to kill him after you left!”

The sorcerer whirled toward the teleporters. “We have to go back!”

“No!” Reiyalindis cried, coming back to her feet. “It’s too late—it happened right after you left him. But the assassins are after Eiyara now!”

“Eiyara!” Vaelon exclaimed.

“Go to her, Vaelon—hurry!”

Vaelon already had a grip on the teleporter, and they vanished, and only a moment later a few of the sorcerers raced away with the second teleporter as well.

Ciroy stared at his daughter. “Kamas...he’s dead?” he asked.

In reply Reiyalindis burst into tears and buried her face against Safaya’s neck.

Baden looked infuriated. “Stupid!” he growled. “I can’t believe I didn’t see through this! I *knew* this attack didn’t feel right!”

One of the remaining High Elven sorcerers looked northward. “We’ve lost a good leader,” he said grimly. “We’d better not loose the queen as well.”

Reiyalindis pulled back from Safaya, taking control of herself. “She should have guards, right?”

“Yes,” the sorcerer said. “Hopefully they have not been lured away as well.”

Ticeres stroked at his chin. Rather than looking sad or angry, Reiyalindis thought she detected a hint of amusement on his face. “Lhotian is quite the trickster,” he murmured. “Well, I have things to attend to.”

As the Dark Elven general walked away, Ciroy glared after him. “I’m starting to wonder if that jerk works for Lhotian. He looked like the cat that got the cream right there, didn’t he?”

“He had no love for Commander Kamas,” said the High Elven sorcerer. “They had quite a falling out at Ji-Ge-Lon earlier. Ticeres nearly convinced half the Dark Elven command to abandon Kamas.”

Safaya frowned. “Maybe he *does* work for Lhotian.”

“No,” Reiyalindis said quietly. “He hated Kamas, and he hates Common and High Elves, but he’s not in league with Lhotian.” Turning away, she said, “I’d like to go lie down for a while, if you don’t mind. I’m very tired.”

“Sure, sweetie,” said Safaya, taking her hand. “I’ll go with you.”

Going to their room, Reiyalindis sat on her bed, sighing wearily. “This is all going wrong, Mother,” she said quietly. “I can’t believe I fell for Lhotian’s trick.”

“You can’t see everything, dear,” Safaya said gently.

“I know,” she said. “But that doesn’t make it easier. I wonder why Lhotian went after Kamas, though? Why not concentrate on us?”

“We’re not Lhotian’s only problem,” said Safaya. She sat on the bed, putting her arm around Reiyalindis. “He’s trying to fight a war up at Ji-Ge-Lon at the same time, and Kamas was a great leader. And a mind-reader, too, don’t forget.”

Reiyalindis curled up on the bed, resting her head in Safaya’s lap. Nothing more was said, and she closed her eyes, trying to rest. Safaya gently stroked her hair, managing to soothe her enough that she started to drop off to sleep.

The next thing she knew, her head was being abruptly dropped onto the bed as Safaya sprang to her feet. Reiyalindis, dazed by her sudden awakening, blinked in confusion. “What...” she started to say.

“Stay in here!” Safaya commanded, heading for the door.

Before she reached it something red and terrifying materialized in the middle of the room, and Reiyalindis cried out in horror—it was a Weilaroca.

Safaya immediately attacked, but the beast was quicker than she was, sidestepping and slashing savagely at her with the long claw on its hand. Safaya was thrown against the wall, her arm and part of her chest torn and bleeding, and she collapsed to the floor.

The Weilaroca turned to Reiyalindis, and the young seeress pressed back against the wall. She’d been wrong—so very wrong. Lhotian had *known* she’d see that vision, and he’d duped her into sending away Vaelon and most of the High Elven sorcerers in a moment of panic. She’d fallen for it, and now she was going to die.

The Weilaroca lunged, and Reiyalindis didn’t even have a chance to dodge. The creature’s long spike jammed into her chest, pain flared briefly, and then her sight was replaced with nothingness.

Almost immediately afterward, however, her eyes snapped open again, and she found herself lying on her bed, her head still in Safaya’s lap.

It only took her a moment to realize that she’d just had a vision of her own death, but even as she reached that realization there was a cry of alarm from outside the room, and Safaya jumped up, heading for the door.

Reiyalindis’ heart froze. Now? Already? It *couldn’t* be this soon! It was already too late to stop it!

“Mother!” she cried, sitting up.

“Stay in here!” Safaya said.

And then the Weilaroca was there. Before Reiyalindis could even scream her mother was flying into the wall, falling to the floor, and the creature was advancing.

She had never felt so helpless, so terrified. She had seen her own death, and her visions had never been wrong.

But then something totally unexpected happened. Shedo was there, appearing out of nowhere behind the Weilaroca, his dagger already seeking its target. The Weilaroca screamed in pain and shock, throwing its arms up and turning on its attacker. Shedo struck again, and the Gu-Shon beast fell, gurgling out its last breath on the floor.

Reiyalindis, breathing heavily, stared incredulously at the Dark Elf. “Shedo?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“You okay?” he asked, kneeling to check Safaya.

“Shedo—how...how...”

She got no further, for then Ciroy burst into the room. “Safaya!” he exclaimed, going quickly to his wife. Captain Kritgar followed him in.

Shaking herself from her shock, Reiyalindis also knelt beside Safaya. The fox-Halfbreed was badly dazed and bleeding heavily, and they tried to stop the blood flow. “I’ll get a healer,” said Shedo. “Stay with them, Kritgar, in case of another attack.”

Safaya regained her senses soon after Shedo left. Reiyalindis held onto her hand, and the fox-Halfbreed said, “Is everyone okay?”

Ciroy looked like he was about to say something, but then Tarron entered the room, his face smeared with blood. “It’s dead,” he said. Spotting the Weilaroca on the floor, he said, “Another one? What *are* those things?”

“They’re the creatures Lhotian sent to kill Kamas,” said Reiyalindis, feeling so foolish she wanted to cry. “He never sent them after Eiyara—he only pretended to. I was his real target.”

Tarron stared at her for a moment, his eyes grim. “You weren’t the only one.”

Feeling a pit open up in her stomach, Reiyalindis said, “What do you mean? Who?”

“Baden,” said Tarron. “There was an Usgaijan. It took him.”

“Took?” she demanded, coming to her feet. “Not killed?”

“Not that we know. We were near the front doors when one of these things appeared.” He indicated the Weilaroca. “While I was fighting it an Usgaijan smashed open the doors, and it grabbed Baden and then took off.”

Reiyalindis sank back to her knees, overwhelmed with anguish. “No,” she moaned. “No, this is all my fault! How could I have been so *stupid*?!”

“Honey, it wasn’t your fault,” Ciroy said firmly.

“Yes it was! I fell for his trick like a complete idiot, and now Kamas is dead, Mother is hurt, and Baden is in the clutches of an Usgaijan!” Tears started streaming from her eyes, and she cried, “I can’t do this anymore. I’m no match for Lhotian!”

Ciroy took her in his arms, and she held him tightly, sobbing. Safaya, again taking her hand, squeezed it consolingly.

Presently Shedo returned with a Dark Elven healer, and as he began seeing to Safaya, Reiyalindis tried to pull herself together. “Was anyone else hurt?” she asked.

Tarron shook his head. “No, no really. The Usgaijan and those other two creatures were all that attacked.”

“Where’s Caelden?”

Tarron shook his head. “He was with me, actually, but he didn’t fight. He just froze, like he was paralyzed—like he didn’t know what to do. Not surprising, really, all things considered.”

“No,” she said quietly. “I’d better talk to him. Shedo, would you come with me? I need to have a word with you.”

“Sure,” said the Dark Elf, his tone suggesting that he knew what she wanted to talk to him about.

“I should come with you,” said Kritgar.

Reiyalindis nodded. “Thank you, Captain.”

After leaving the room, Reiyalindis, speaking quietly so Kritgar would not hear, said, “Shedo, I had a vision of what happened in that room just before it occurred.”

“Really,” he said blandly.

“I saw myself die.”

“Is that so.”

“But I didn’t.”

Glancing at her, Shedo said, “You don’t say.”

Looking at him intently, she said, “You can’t be seen in visions. I don’t know how, but your magic shields you from seers. Anything a seer sees is the way it would be without you. Am I right?”

Shedo gave a slight shrug. “Apparently.”

“Kamas knew that, didn’t he?”

“That’s why he sent me. He knew Lhotian was a seer from Baden’s memories about his talk with Ko-Tun.”

“Well...I’m grateful to you. Who knows how many times you’ve thwarted Lhotian already? I’d be dead if not for you. Thank you.”

He nodded. “You’re welcome. It’s best that no one else knows, though.”

“Yes, you’re probably right. The more people who know, the more chance there is of Lhotian finding out.” Then, an awful thought dawning on her, she said, “Oh, no. Baden knows. Of course he knows.”

“He does?”

“Baden has probably known that for a long time now. Believe me.”

Shedo frowned. “Hopefully Lhotian won’t be able to pry it out of him.”

Reiyalindis took a deep breath. “Why would he want Baden, though? What if he knows there’s something Baden could tell him? What if...oh, I don’t even want to imagine what could happen!”

Shedo looked at her for a moment, and then turned his eyes back to the floor in front of him. “You’d better be prepared for the worst.”

Reiyalindis briefly closed her eyes. “Oh, Baden,” she whispered.

Before long they met Caelden and Lanedra coming the other direction. When he saw her, Caelden looked relieved. “Reiyalindis, you’re all right,” he said.

“Yes, thanks to Shedo,” said Reiyalindis.

Caelden’s face took on a shamed look. “Reiyalindis, I’m sorry. When the creatures attacked, I...I just stood there. I could have helped—I should have, but...”

Reiyalindis took his hand. “I know, Caelden,” she said. “I don’t blame you. I would never have expected you to fight so soon after your spell was broken.”

He looked at her for a moment, and then looked down at the ground. “Baden—you heard about him?”

“Yes,” she said sadly.

“I could have helped him. I might have been able to save him. But I didn’t—I just stood there and watched the Usgaijan take him.”

“Caelden...”

“No,” he said, looking back up. There was a strange look in his eyes—almost a kind of fire. “There’s no excuse, Reiyalindis. But it won’t happen again. I’m still your guardian, and I promise I’ll do my best.”

She was a little surprised at the conviction in his voice—surprised, and grateful. She squeezed his hand a little. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I know it’s a lot to ask of you. I know it isn’t fair. I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to.”

“I know,” he said.

“Ticeris is coming,” Shedo murmured.

They all looked down the hallway to see Ticeris approaching, followed by several other soldiers. “Kritgar!” he barked, seeing the captain. “What the blazes is going on here?”

“A few of Lhotian’s creatures attacked, sir,” Kritgar said, saluting. “We killed two, but one escaped and took the Common Elf Baden with it.”

Ticeris looked murderously angry. “How did they get here?”

“I don’t know, sir. Perhaps they snuck through the portal and hid before we took it.”

“It’s possible,” said Ticerés, “but I don’t want to assume anything. We’d better check on the portal in case something happened there. Where’s the teleporter?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Kritgar replied.

“Sir,” an officer behind the general offered, “the teleporter is currently at the portal. He has orders to report every hour—he should be here within another fifteen minutes.”

“Good,” said Ticerés. “I want his report brought directly to me when he arrives.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ticerés, issuing more orders to the men with him, walked quickly away. Reiyalindis, watching him go, said, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Reiyalindis’ fears turned out to be well-founded. The teleporter never returned, and when General Ticerés sent men to the portal to investigate, it was to find all of the men there dead and the portal deactivated. The teleporter was found among the dead.

Gathered with Ticerés and some of his top officers, Reiyalindis and her friends heard the news at the same time as the general. Ticerés was beyond furious, and he demanded, “What about the men on the other side of the portal?”

“As far as we know,” replied the man who brought the report, “they’re dead, too. It seems that Lhotian must have had a hidden force in that fortress, and they attacked and pushed through.”

“But the teleporter should have come back to report the moment he saw something amiss!” Ticerés growled. “Why did he stay?”

Caelden stood. “If I may,” he said, “I know a bit about Lhotian’s tactics.”

Ticerés frowned a little, but nodded for Caelden to go on.

“The teleporter was probably his first target,” said Caelden. “I suspect a Weilaroca killed him before the actual attack came. I also suspect the portal was changed to lead to a different destination. The men you had in that fortress are, I hope, still alive—Lhotian’s creatures were probably in a different location.”

Ticerés thought for a moment, and then slowly nodded. “So the Weilaroca quietly kills the teleporter and then switches the portal to a place Lhotian has another army assembled, which charges through and destroys my men while others head straight here to attack the seeress. It makes sense, if indeed that’s what happened. How much do you know about the Weilarocas?”

“Not a whole lot,” Caelden admitted. “They are deadly assassins because of their ability to teleport, though in combat they aren’t so much stronger than other true Gu-Shon. I imagine they are extremely difficult and dangerous for Lhotian to summon; otherwise he would have before now.”

“What about the other creatures we’ve been facing?”

“The greatest portion are gehlem,” said Caelden. “The earth-creatures, as you called them. They are not true Gu-Shon, but are merely created by them, much like the xar-axad.”

“Which are?”

“The name is the Tan-Sho-Ko words for ‘fire’ and ‘thunder.’ They appear to be slow-moving, misshapen men, but explode violently on contact with fire. Lhotian uses mainly them and gehlem, because they are much easier to summon than true Gu-Shon. Most of the true Gu-Shon he has at his disposal currently are the Chandorin, the insectile creatures, and Scarackhel, the dog-creatures.”

“And the large brute that took your friend?”

“An Usgaijan—among the most powerful of the Gu-Shon. More than likely there is only one out right now; Lhotian wouldn’t be able to handle two.”

“You’re sure?”

Caelden hesitated. “Well...not entirely sure. I only know what I’ve heard him say. Whether or not it’s the truth is the question.”

Ticeres pondered for a few moments, and then said, “I’m going to take what men I have left and retake that portal. We need to find out if the men on the other side are still alive.”

Scene #6: Baden’s captivity

A continuing scene of Baden’s capture by Lhotian.

Baden grunted with pain as the Usgaijan dropped him roughly to the floor. They were in the throne room of Lhotian’s fortress in Marchiam, having just come through the portal near Gaetoci. Lhotian, sitting on the throne, looked down at him with narrowed eyes as the scientist stood up.

“Master Solignis, so good of you to join me,” the old Tan-Sho-Ko said.

Baden rolled his eyes. “Spare me the small talk, Lhotian. What do you want?”

A faint hint of a smile crossed Lhotian’s face. “You’re a confident one, I must say. All right, then, I’ll cut to the chase. I need your help.”

Baden raised an eyebrow. “Help? What on earth makes you think I’d ever help *you*?”

“Common sense,” said Lhotian. “According to a vision I had, your friend Reiyalindis is dead by now. Without her you have no hope, and therefore you have nothing to lose by helping me—and everything to gain.”

Baden couldn’t help but smirk. “Not that your visions have been much good lately.”

Lhotian’s face darkened. “I see you are aware that my visions have been somewhat inaccurate of late. How did you find out?”

“Some of your goons told me you’d had a vision they would be victorious—right before they weren’t.”

“And do you know the cause?” Lhotian asked, a steely edge in his voice.

Baden shrugged. “No,” he lied. “You must be slipping in your old age, I guess.”

Lhotian’s gaze turned into a glare. “Your little seeress friend’s power can’t block mine *all* the time,” he growled. “At any rate, that’s not what I want to discuss with you.”

“Okay, so what *do* you want to discuss?”

“A proposition. In exchange for your help, I’ll let you live—and Kiran, too.”

“That’s what bad guys always say,” said Baden. “Don’t you ever read adventure stories? As soon as you get what you want from me, you’ll kill me, and don’t bother denying it.”

Lhotian’s eyes narrowed. “You impertinent little fool! All right, how’s this for a deal? Help me, and I’ll try not to torture you when I kill you.”

“Wow,” said Baden, “that’s comforting. Just for kicks, what exactly is it you want me to do?”

“Nothing much,” Lhotian said with a grim smile. “Just translate a few small books.”

Baden blinked, taken aback by the request. “Books?” he asked suspiciously. “What books?”

“These,” said Lhotian, moving his hand to rest it on top of three books that were on a small pedestal next to the throne.

Baden, curious in spite of himself, said, “Can I see one?”

Lhotian held one of them out to him, and Baden took it, turning to the first page. He scanned it quickly; it was written in Old Elvish.

Something definitely caught his interest in the book, though he didn’t let it show. According to the first page, the book had been written by Lady Charinela Feric Hailstern. “You can’t read Old Elvish, huh?” he said.

“No,” said Lhotian. “I can’t. But you can.” He nodded toward it. “I know you know who wrote that book, and I know you’re dying to read it. One of these others was also written by Lady Hailstern, and the third was written by her husband.”

Baden closed the book. “Why do you need it?”

“If you’re expecting me to divulge my entire plan to you in a moment of triumph, as do the ‘bad guys’ in your little ‘adventure books,’ I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you. You know my terms—accept them, or we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

“There’s no need to be shy, Lhotian,” said Baden. “I could make a few guesses.”

Lhotian’s expression became like stone. “Really.”

“Yes, really,” said Baden. “You already know witchcraft, if I’m not mistaken, and it’s obvious that you also want to learn Dark Elven magic. Apparently there’s part of your scheme that requires more magic than your own can provide. My guess would be that it has something to do with releasing Gu-Shon. At present your ability to summon them is too limited to suit you—either you can’t summon them fast enough, or you can’t control as many at once as you’d like.”

Lhotian slowly leaned back in his throne, his eyes sharp and hard. For a long time he just stared, but finally he broke the silence. “My compliments, Master Solignis,” he said. “I can see you’re not one to be taken lightly.”

“I do my best,” Baden said modestly.

“Unfortunately, you are partially correct.”

“Partially?”

“Summoning the Gu-Shon is only half the story, I’m afraid. I could summon more, but at the rate I’m going, the creatures I summon will manage to break free of my control before I am ready.”

“Ready? For what? Does it really matter *when* you release them? They’ll kill you as soon as they break free!”

“Dying,” said Lhotian, “is exactly my problem—thanks to you and your friends.”

Baden felt his heart skip a beat as he realized what Lhotian’s plan really was. “Bura-Ji-Ge-Lon,” he said. “Of course. That’s what this is all about.”

“Yes,” Lhotian said. “Who do you think showed the Sanretsu how to draw the power of Ji-Ge-Lon back into itself? Had they succeeded I would have regained my former power, and remained immortal—but now that hope is gone forever!”

“You’re trying to tap into the Gu-Shon magic yourself!” exclaimed Baden. “You know you’ll eventually die now that Bura-Ji-Ge-Lon is destroyed, and the only other immortal race in the world is the Gu-Shon.”

“Exactly,” said Lhotian. “Some Dark Elven sorcerers discovered the means to prolong their lives, but even they could not last forever. And most of those few who

discovered the secret to long life were either too weak or too afraid to use it. Gu-Shon, on the other hand, possesses life that never ends.”

Baden shook his head. “So this is all a mad scramble to regain your immortality.”

“Oh, not *just* that,” said Lhotian. “I’m not going to pretend I’m above a little sweet revenge. I intend to make you and all your friends pay dearly for what you did to Bura-Ji-Ge-Lon. You can’t even begin to imagine the kind of power I was able to wield in the old days, when the mountain was still whole. And now? Now I am left only what little of Ji-Ge-Lon I can draw from the earth, as your feeble High Elves do.”

“And you’re willing to risk releasing Gu-Shon? To free them to ravage the entire world?”

“Not just willing to risk it,” said Alhalon. “I *intend* to release them. Once I become one of them, I will lead them on to wipe out even the memory of every other race that ever existed!”

“Wow,” said Baden. “You’re even more twisted than I thought.” He tossed the book onto the floor. “You can forget about getting any help from me.”

Lhotian’s smile was cold. “We’ll see about that, my friend. You see, I have certain...methods...that are quite handy for ensuring cooperation.”

“Oh, so now it’s the melodramatic threats of torture again, is it?” Baden said.

“No,” Lhotian replied, his eyes gleaming. “I’m going to do to you what I did to your friend Caelden Wulfe. You’ll translate those books for me, all right—whether you even know who you are while doing it or not. And after you’re finished, I think I’ll send you to slit your precious Kiran’s throat, at which point the spell will break. You, my friend, will suffer a fate much more terrible than any torture.”

Baden folded his arms with a smirk. “Eh, no. I don’t think so.”

Looking more and more irritated by the moment, Lhotian said, “And why not?”

“I don’t think you want to cast a spell on me,” said Baden. “I don’t really know why, but if that would work, you wouldn’t have bothered trying to convince me to do it of my own will. You’d have just cast the spell on me as soon as I got here.”

Lhotian’s eyes narrowed angrily. “You’re a very annoying individual.”

“Yes, I know. So why, then? Do you lack the power now? Would the process have a chance of making me forget how to read Old Elvish? Or is it something else?”

“Since you’re so smart,” Lhotian snarled, “I’ll let *you* figure it out. A few days without food or water might convince you to change your mind. Take him away!”

Baden, more because he knew it would aggravate Lhotian than because he really felt like it, chuckled as a pair of Warthon bound his wrists and dragged him out of the room.

Scene #7: Baden’s captivity 2

A continuation of Baden’s capture.

Baden kept a careful watch on his surroundings as he was being led to a cell, mapping the layout of the fortress in his mind. Should an opportunity for escape present itself, he planned to take full advantage of it.

The dungeon was, naturally, underground. While not exactly clean, it was, at least, dry. One of the Warthon unlocked a cell, and Baden got a good look at the key, storing the image carefully in his memory. He had never seen the type of locks used on these

cells, but the key could provide useful information on how it worked in case he wanted to pick it.

Once he was locked in the cell, Baden spent some time examining it very thoroughly. To his disappointment, it was of solid construction, with no weaknesses that he could exploit. It was also completely empty—there was not so much as a mat to lie on, and certainly nothing he could use to break out. The guards had searched him before his imprisonment, as well, and had left him nothing he could use to pick a lock.

For the moment, at least, he was stuck. He sat in the corner of his cell, breathing deeply and closing his eyes so he could think more clearly. He went over the events of his capture in his mind, going over it in slow motion in his head to look for any useful information he may have overlooked.

He already knew a few interesting facts about Lhotian. The old Tan-Sho-Ko was nervous—he was, in fact, growing desperate. His knowledge that his visions were no longer entirely reliable had unsettled him deeply, as had his loss of control over Caelden Wulfe. In a way that was good, for desperate men were more prone to mistakes. On the other hand, it also meant he was more dangerous—he would fight fiercely and recklessly, like a cornered animal.

In addition, Baden had the distinct impression that Lhotian was running out of Gu-Shon. He had probably been assembling his army for some years now, most likely since shortly after the destruction of Bura-Ji-Ge-Lon. He obviously could not summon them very quickly, or he would have thrown a lot more against them already. Most of his forces, Baden guessed, were tied up in the invasion of Rimurea.

That was the part that Baden didn't understand. It didn't seem to him that Lhotian had been entirely prepared for such a move, so why had he made it? Why had he wiped out the Tan-Sho-Ko and assassinated the queen so soon? He could have waited for years and years in Marchiam, building a much more powerful army.

Obviously something had forced Lhotian's hand, and Baden could think of several possibilities offhand. There was a chance Lhotian could not raise more Gu-Shon without losing his grip over them, so his army was already as large as it would ever be. It was also possible that time was weakening his grip on the Gu-Shon, and he had to move faster than he would have liked. Lhotian may also have seen a vision warning him that his plans would soon be discovered. Baden doubted the vision had included Reiyalindis, though, or Lhotian would have had *her* murdered instead of the queen.

Whatever the reason, Baden knew that Lhotian's position was precarious at best. The main danger was not that he would accomplish his designs, but that he would free the Gu-Shon during the attempt, after which they would most likely destroy him—along with everyone else in the world.

The hours passed slowly. Once Baden was certain he's exhausted the possibilities of everything he could remember, he let himself drop off to sleep. It didn't seem to last long, though, for the next thing he knew he awoke to the sound of approaching footsteps.

Several Warthon appeared at his doorway. "Get up, you," one of them said gruffly as he unlocked the door.

"Good day to you, gentlemen," Baden said as he stood.

"Shut up," growled the Warthon.

They chained his hands behind his back and began leading him back toward Lhotian's throne room. "So," Baden said casually, "you fellas know that your master is intent on wiping out everyone in the world, right? Including you?"

"Keep quiet!" the Warthon behind him said.

"Just curious," Baden said mildly.

Lhotian rose from his throne as Baden was led into the room. "Leave us," he said curtly to the Warthon. They nodded, leaving the room and closing the doors.

Lhotian watched Baden silently for a moment, and then said, "I have a proposition for you."

"Oh?" Baden said.

"You're an intelligent man, Master Solignis, not easily coerced. I think I may have underestimated that earlier. You know perfectly well that helping me will gain you nothing in the end."

"That's about the size of it," said Baden.

"You probably know what I'm about to say, don't you?"

"Probably. If I'm not mistaken, this is the part where you offer me immortality and unimaginable power in exchange for joining you."

"Precisely. But before you reject my offer out of hand, consider the ramifications. You are a mortal—you were born a mortal, and you've lived your whole life knowing that someday you would die. Like it or not, you are psychologically prepared for that. I am not. I have lived for longer than you could imagine, and not until recently have I been faced with the prospect of unavoidable death. You can surely understand I will do whatever I have to in order to escape that fate."

"I suppose I can see where you're coming from," Baden said.

"Good. Now, when I offer you immortality, it's easy for you to dismiss the idea, because it's not something you've ever really considered possible. But, as I said, you are an intelligent man. Think about it—can you not imagine eternity? Never having to face the awful uncertainty of death? Isn't that worth giving *anything* for?"

Baden folded his arms. "I can imagine it."

"You are an inventor, Master Solignis. I know a bit about you, yes—that should come as no surprise to you. You are a scientist. Surely you must know that so many of the things you want to do are beyond your reach for the simple reason that you do not have enough time. Consider everything you could accomplish if you had an unlimited time frame!"

"I can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind," Baden admitted. "But there's still the problem of whether or not I can trust you. Suppose I *do* help you? What's to stop you from killing me when you have what you want? How could I be sure you'd ever keep your promises?"

"Because," Lhotian said, "once I get your help, I will have no reason to kill you and every reason to keep you alive forever. Let's not beat around the bush—I am a man of simple taste. All I desire is power. You don't. Power means nothing to you, and therefore you would be no threat to me. What you *would* be is a valuable asset—with your genius we could rebuild the world in any way we saw fit."

"Simply put," said Baden, "you wouldn't kill me because you could use me."

"Precisely. I would give you all the time and resources you desire for your work, and you would give me power. A symbiotic relationship, you could say."

Baden thought that over for a moment. “What about my friends?”

“Again, your limited mortal mind interferes with the big picture,” said Lhotian. “Mortals cling to others in an attempt to give their short existence some semblance of purpose. Once free of the constraints of time, relationships become meaningless. Believe me—in a hundred thousand years, you won’t care that your ‘friends’ ever existed.”

He leaned back. “But I can understand how hard it is for you to really understand that concept, so I’m willing to compromise. I’ll allow you to keep Kiran D’avrian for as long as you want, on the condition that she surrenders her wristband to me.”

“Only Kiran?”

Lhotian chuckled. “I’m not completely unreasonable, but neither am I a fool. I can’t have too many other immortals hanging around, waiting to band together and challenge me. Kiran will have to suffice. You can be with her for as long as your heart desires—though, believe me, within a few millennia you’ll realize how meaningless even *she* is to you.”

Baden didn’t say anything for a long time, thinking. “So,” he said, “I translate the book for you, and you give Kiran and me the Gu-Shon magic that will make us immortal. That’s it?”

“Oh, no,” Lhotian said. “Translating the book is only the beginning. You didn’t think the prize I was offering would come *that* easily, did you? I’m going to be honest with you, Elf, because I know that lying to you is pointless. You will become my unquestioning servant until my plan is complete and my power absolute. Only then will you be free to pursue your own interests. But those few years will seem so very short next to the eternity you will gain from serving me.”

Baden nodded a little. “If I agree to something like that, I want to make sure it’s going to work. So there’s a few things I need to know.”

“Go on.”

“First of all, what makes you think gaining the Gu-Shon magic will get you this power? Why are you so sure the Gu-Shon will submit to you at all?”

“A reasonable question,” said Lhotian. “There is one thing about the Gu-Shon that sets them apart from any other race—they never question their leaders, and they never try to usurp their power. I’m fully confident I will be able to show to them that I am a more capable leader than their current rulers, and once I do they will accept my authority without reservation.”

Baden wasn’t convinced of that, but he nodded anyway. “The other thing I’d like to know is why you attacked Rimurea. It seems like a rash move to me.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, it just doesn’t make sense. If your goal is to gain Gu-Shon magic to release them from their prison, why attract attention like that? Having to fight a war like that can only be hindering your progress—not to mention all the trouble my friends and I have caused you. There’s no logic in attacking Rimurea.”

“Indeed not,” said Lhotian. “That whole invasion, in fact, has been nothing but a confounded nuisance. Unfortunately, however, it could not be avoided, thanks to the idiots at Ji-Ge-Lon. After our war they isolated themselves at that mountain, spending all of their time chipping out that ridiculous mausoleum of theirs. I foresaw, however, that Ri-Ghy, always the loyal lapdog of Vol-Gebba, would soon sense the return of the Gu-Shon. Naturally I couldn’t have them snooping around.”

“So you sent Wulfe to kill them all.”

“Yes. It didn’t quite go as planned, though—one of them managed to escape, but I did not discover that until too late; I saw in vision that he would succeed in alerting the Rimureans. The truly annoying thing was that I was not shown *who* he would alert, so I couldn’t simply send a Weilaroca to eliminate them.”

“So you had to strike the Rimureans where it would cause the most commotion,” said Baden. “You killed the queen.”

“Precisely. That war is really no more than a delaying action, you understand. If that was all I had to deal with, things would be going much better—but that seeress friend of yours is proving to be a real nuisance. There is one thing I don’t understand yet, though—why did *you* come here with those Dark Elves? Did the seeress send you?”

“No,” Baden said. “Actually, Ko-Tun did. I’m the one he came to after he escaped your massacre.”

“Ah,” said Lhotian. “Pity I hadn’t known that earlier—I would have been able to avert this whole mess by simply having you killed.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“I’m sure. Any more questions, Master Solignis?”

“No, not right now,” said Baden. “I’ll need to think about your proposal.”

“Of course,” Lhotian said. “Think all you want. I’m confident you’ll see the wisdom in it eventually.”