

## Deleted Scenes from *Reiyalindis*

These are major scenes from the book *Reiyalindis* as they appeared in the original version I submitted to the publishers. I was just thinking to myself one day, “Self, if movies can put deleted scenes on the DVD, why not do the same thing with books?”

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: Reiyalindis’ Kidnapping**

*This scene is the original version of Reiyalindis’ kidnapping in Valsana. It details Koän’s rescue of Reiyalindis, and also provided a first meeting of Lanedra Gawourab, who appears in The Ashen Swarm. It was cut due to the publisher’s request in an attempt to get the novel under 100,000 words.*

Deciding the window was worth the risk, Barc whirled and leaped through it. He felt a sickening lurch in his stomach as he fell, but fortunately for him his fall was broken by the tall shrubs growing around the house. Pain shot through his body as he felt his arm snap, and blood was running into his eyes from cuts made by the broken glass, but despite all that he scrambled from the shrubs with surprising speed.

But Baden had anticipated such an attempt, and was keeping an eye on the front windows while Ciroy was watching those in the back. Even as Barc pulled free of the shrubs, a crossbow bolt passed completely through his head.

“Whoops,” said Baden.

“What?” asked Reiyalindis.

“Uh...well, I meant to hit his leg. He was moving too much for an accurate shot.”

“What did you hit?”

“Well...let’s just say he won’t be holding anyone hostage again.”

She gasped. “You killed him?”

“Well, it’s not like he didn’t have it coming,” Baden said defensively. “Besides, it’s not *my* fault he slipped like that right after I pulled the trigger! These bolts move fast, but that’s quite a distance, you know.” He looked down at the street below. Some of the people there were running in panic, while others were crowding closer to the mansion’s fence, trying to get a look at the body. “Morons,” he muttered.

Reiyalindis stood up. “Let’s go. I want to make sure Koän’s all right.”

They met Vaelon in front of the house. “I thought you wanted to question him,” he said, indicating the dead man on the lawn.

Baden scowled. “Yeah, well...I’ll just question the one who was posing as the butler. You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“No, he’s tied up in the front room. And Ciroy and Safaya left a few of theirs alive, too.”

“I take it Koän didn’t?”

Vaelon shrugged. “He hasn’t said. He’s still searching the upper floors, just in case.”  
“Good.”

In the front room they met Raeif, who was grinning broadly. “Baden, old friend, when I heard you were coming here I knew I was either as good as free or as good as dead. I knew you wouldn’t buy that butler story for a moment.”

Baden shrugged. “Evidently they didn’t know me very well. So what were they after, anyway?”

Raeif made a face. “They wanted that accursed erythin poison—but they didn’t want it for themselves.”

Baden nodded absently. “They’re working for someone else.”

“Yes. I don’t know who; they only referred to him as ‘the boss.’”

“Well, let’s talk to your new butler about that.” Baden looked past Raeif, where the terrified captive was tied to a chair.

Raeif nodded. “His name’s Luso.”

Moving into the room, Baden pulled up another chair facing Luso. About that time Safaya appeared, and stood near Vaelon and Reiyalindis.

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” Luso blurted. “He’ll kill me if I talk!”

Baden smiled easily. “Who will?”

“Don’t try to trick me!”

“I’m not trying to trick you. I’m just going to give you fair warning that *not* talking could be far worse than dying.”

“Don’t bother with threats, either! I know you honest types—you wouldn’t really torture anyone.”

Baden sat back, staring at him. After a moment, he said, “You’re right, I wouldn’t—but unfortunately for you, I can’t say the same for Koän. Vaelon, would you mind getting him for me?”

Vaelon nodded. “My pleasure.” He disappeared up the stairs.

“Koän is a Dark Elf,” said Baden with a nasty grin. “Kind of a grumpy one, too. He’s the one who killed all ten men on the second floor.”

Luso’s eyes bulged a little at that, but he still remained silent.

Presently Vaelon returned with Koän. “Come with me, dear,” Safaya said quietly to Reiyalindis, leading her farther back into the house.

“Koän,” said Baden, “I need this fellow to tell me who he’s working for—but he’s being stubborn. Would you mind loosening his tongue?”

Koän slowly approached the sweating Human, fixing him with a hard, unblinking stare. Luso fidgeted a little, watching the Dark Elf apprehensively. Koän drew a long dagger and grabbed Luso by the hair, bending his head back painfully. Then he placed the tip of the dagger against the hollow of his throat and began slowly pressing it downward.

“I assure you, friend,” Baden said in a cold voice, “Koän would be only too happy to kill you, and we left a couple of your buddies alive for questioning in case you proved too stubborn. We have absolutely no need to keep you alive. Think about that—but not too long.”

By then the dagger was drawing blood, and Luso cried, “All right, all right! I’ll tell you!”

Koän eased up the pressure and lifted the man's head a little, but did not release him. "Good," said Baden. "Who are you working for?"

"Barc is my boss," said Luso.

"Barc is dead," said Raeif. "We want to know who *his* boss is."

"Look, I...I don't know!"

"Yes you do," said Baden. "I know you know *something*."

"I don't, I swear!"

Koän jerked his head back again and began pressing harder.

"All right!" he screamed. "All right! We were hired by a man—I don't know his name, we...we just called him Boss, that's all I know!"

Baden leaned closer. "That's *all* you know?"

"It is, I swear! I never even saw the man—none of us did. He only dealt with us through an agent—an Elf who called himself Torick, but I don't think that's his real name."

"Describe him."

"He was tall—six feet, I'd guess. Kind of thin, middle-aged...He was cold as ice, too; I'd bet money he's some kind of assassin or something." He licked his lips nervously.

"Look...don't turn me over to the law, okay? If I end up in jail, I'm a dead man."

"Well, you should have chosen a better profession," said Baden.

"Speaking of the law," said Raeif, looking out the front window, "here come some city peacekeepers."

Baden nodded, rising from his chair. "Well, Luso, your new landlords are here."

It took a while to explain to the peacekeepers what had happened, but eventually they left, taking the captured robbers with them and loading the dead into a large oxcart to be disposed of. Both Raeif and Baden had well-known reputations, and their words were enough to satisfy the lawmen.

Once that was done, they all gathered in Raeif's front room. "What a day!" Raeif exclaimed. "Good thing for me you happened along, Baden. But this is a strange company you're with! What's going on?"

"Well," Baden said, "we're on a sort of...errand. Not something we want to get spread around, you know, just in case."

Raeif nodded. "Of course."

"Actually, we stopped by here because I need a bit of that erythin."

"Really! That's a popular item today! What do you need that stuff for? More experiments, I assume?"

Baden nodded. "Yes."

"Still trying to find out why it only kills Elves, eh?"

"Yes, and I think I might be on to something."

"Well, I'll grab a bottle from the vault for you—but be sure you don't let anyone know about it. The character who hired those Human robbers might come after *you*."

"The thought has crossed my mind. But what are you going to do? He's likely to try again, you know."

"Yes, I know, believe me. But what can I do, short of hiring a whole platoon of guards?"

"That may not be a bad idea."

Raeif sighed. "The miser in me cringes at the thought, but you may be right."

“Oh, and I also need a little arsenic.”

“Arsenic?” Raeif looked curious, but he didn’t pry. “Certainly. I’ll go fetch them both for you.”

As the day wore on into evening, Raeif fed them a sumptuous dinner, which was followed by an equally sumptuous dessert. Reiyalindis, who had never seen so much food in one place in her life, was overwhelmed by the relatively huge variety, and though she tried to taste a little of everything she didn’t manage to try even half the dishes offered to her before she was too full to continue. The food made her drowsy, and so after dinner she asked if she could go to sleep. Raeif sent a servant girl to show her to a room where she could stay. Ciroy and Safaya also decided to retire for the night, and went along with Reiyalindis and Koän.

The servant girl was young, probably sixteen or seventeen, and she led them to the second floor. “You can stay here,” she said to Ciroy and Safaya, indicating the first door at the top of the stairs.

“Great,” said Ciroy. “Thanks.” He and Safaya went into the room.

“And you can stay here, sir,” said the girl, indicating the door across the hall from the first as she looked at Koän.

“Oh—he won’t need a room,” said Reiyalindis. “He never sleeps inside buildings.”

The servant hesitated, her brows knitting together as she thought. “Um...then—pardon me for asking, miss—why did he come with us?”

“He always stands guard outside my room,” Reiyalindis explained. “He’s very protective.”

The girl blinked, as if confused, but then said, “Well, all right. You can stay in it, then, miss.”

“Thank you very much.” Reiyalindis went inside, and a moment later reappeared with a chair, which Koän took. “Good night, then.” She closed the door, and Koän placed the chair in front of it and sat down, drawing his long sword and laying it across his knees.

The servant girl stared at him for a moment, and then turned and walked back down the stairs.

Rather than returning to her duties, the servant girl went quickly to the rear door of the mansion, slipping outside when she was sure no one was watching. She walked quickly across the lawn to Raeif’s flower garden. A masked and shadowed figure was waiting there, and as she came closer a voice said, “Well, Iltha?”

Nervous, the girl halted a few feet from the figure. “The little girl is in the second bedroom on the second floor—that one there.” She pointed at Reiyalindis’ window. “It’s no good, though. That Dark Elf is guarding her door.”

The figure was silent for a moment, and then said, “But he’s not in the room?”

“No, he’s sitting in a chair right outside the door.”

After a moment of thought, the figure spoke again. “Fine. I’ll use the window. In exactly two hours I want you to go up there and distract the Dark Elf—just talk to him, and keep talking as long as you can. I only need you to make enough noise that he won’t hear anything going on inside that room. Got it?”

Shifting uncomfortably, the girl said, “Look, I was just supposed to tell you which room she was in and leave the back door unlocked for you. I don’t want to talk to that Dark Elf. He scares me.”

“Do it, and I’ll double your reward.” He held out a bulging purse, tossing it up and catching it a couple of times to let her hear the jingle of the gold inside.

The girl hesitated, but then, her greed winning out, she took the purse. “All right. Two hours.”

“Give me a signal from the back door before you go to talk to him.”

“All right.”

Two hours later Iltha nervously climbed the stairs to the second floor. Koän was still there, still alert, and she approached him, her heart beating wildly. “Um... excuse me,” she said.

Koän stared at her, but said nothing.

Feeling more nervous than ever at the Dark Elf’s silence, she nearly turned and ran. Only the knowledge that she had already taken the stranger’s money—and would be in big trouble if she failed—kept her going. “Pardon me, sir, but I was wondering if I could ask you something.”

Still Koän said nothing.

Rushing on, Iltha said, “Well, you see, it’s just that I’ve never met a Dark Elf, you know, and... and... I was wondering if I could talk to you for a while. I mean... I’ve heard a lot of stories, you know, but I don’t know if I believe most of them. Um... do you have any magic? I’ve heard that Dark Elves have a lot of strange magic.”

Despite Koän’s continued silence, Iltha kept talking, going into a long, rambling monologue about all the things she’d heard about Dark Elves and claiming to not really believe a lot of the nastier things, even though privately she did. Koän just stared at her, expressionless, as if simply waiting for her to give up and leave.

In the midst of her stream of chatter Baden appeared on the stairs, though she didn’t notice him behind her. He approached quietly, listening, one eyebrow raised in uncertain curiosity. Just behind her he paused, a frown appearing on his face, and suddenly he reached out and grabbed the girl by the arm.

Iltha let out a startled little cry and jumped so badly she nearly fell. Baden looked sharply at Koän. “Check on Reiyalindis! Hurry!”

Koän’s face turned murderously dark, and he swiftly rose from the chair and whirled, knocking it aside as he opened the door and rushed inside. But he was already too late—the little girl was gone, her window standing wide open to the dark night.

Baden shook his head as he peered at the tracks in the soft dirt underneath Reiyalindis’ window. “These tracks are useless. He seems to be about a hundred and seventy pounds, probably tall, but that could be any one of hundreds of men in this city.” He turned to Iltha, who Ciroy was holding by the arm. “Iltha, I swear to you, if you’re holding *any* information back from me...”

“I’m not, I promise,” the terrified girl sobbed, tears streaming from her eyes. “I never saw him. He always stayed in the shadows.”

“How long have you been working for him?”

“Since last week. I was just supposed to leave the doors unlocked and signal the mercenaries when everyone in the house was close together so they could be sure no one got away. He promised me no one would get hurt, I swear!”

“And you kept working for him after what those mercenaries did?” Baden demanded.

“I had to!” she sobbed.

Raeif, nearby, shook his head in sad disbelief. “Iltha, how *could* you do such a thing? I’ve paid you well, never mistreated you—no amount of money is worth such a betrayal! That poor innocent little girl!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Iltha wailed. “He promised she wouldn’t be hurt!”

“Did he?” Vaelon demanded coldly. “That’s not what *this* says!” He held up a note that had been found in Reiyalindis’ room. He had only read it once, but the words had been so burned into his mind that he knew them by heart—*Put all of your erythin in a box and leave it outside your back gate before sunrise. If you cooperate, we’ll let the girl go once we have the poison. If you refuse, or attempt to interfere in any way, she dies.*

He was too angry to really be surprised at how angry he was; the thought of Reiyalindis being kidnapped and held captive made his blood boil. Baden was also beside himself, though he was trying to keep a cool head, and Safaya was practically frantic with worry. It was hard to tell what Ciroy was thinking; he kept a calm front, but occasional twitching in his jaw, and the tightness of his grip on Iltha’s arm, betrayed his anxiousness.

Koän was gone; as soon as he had discovered Reiyalindis missing he had disappeared into the night, and they could only assume that he was trying to hunt down the kidnapper. Trying to follow him would have been futile, so instead Baden was searching for any useful clues while the others stood around grinding their teeth in helplessness.

Iltha broke down into great racking sobs, and Baden shook his head in disgust and turned back to his searching. “Go lock her up somewhere until we decide what to do with her.”

As Ciroy and Raeif took Iltha away, Baden carefully examined the area again. A rope had been left hanging from Reiyalindis’ window, which the kidnapper had used to bring her down. As far as Baden could tell, he had climbed up to the window on his own, and after binding Reiyalindis he had secured the rope and slid down it while carrying the girl. He had been alone; no other strange tracks were to be seen.

“Bring a couple of lamps over here again,” he said, heading to where Iltha had met the man in the garden.

Baden searched that area again, but as before could find nothing useful. Something nagged at him, though; there was something there, something he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Here comes Koän!” Safaya exclaimed, just as the Dark Elf appeared from the shadows near the edge of the garden.

Koän’s face was like stone, but Vaelon could clearly see the fury smoldering in his white eyes. “Did you find any sign of her?” asked Baden. Koän just shook his head.

“What do we do now?” asked Safaya.

Baden turned back toward the house. “Let’s go back inside. I want to search her room again.”

Inside they joined Ciroy and Raeif, and they all went back up to the second floor. Baden went into the room, while the rest stayed out in the hallway so as not to get in his way. He pulled the rope up and dropped it in a heap on the floor, and then he sat cross-legged near it, just staring at it. After a moment he pulled a strange round piece of glass from his pocket and peered through it at the rope, picking up the end and examining it inch by inch.

For a full five minutes they all simply watched him. Vaelon could nearly sense the Elf's mind whirling with thought, his eyes examining every last inch of the rope for anything he could possibly use. The silence was so profound that they all jumped when Baden growled, "There's *something* about this rope—this whole scene—that's just out of my grasp! I can almost *taste* it!"

Safaya blinked. "Uh...Baden, it wouldn't be the smell, would it?"

Baden looked sharply up at her. "Smell!" he exclaimed. "That's it! It's too faint for me, but your Halfbreed characteristics must sharpen your sense of smell! What is it, Safaya? Can you identify it?"

She walked into the room and knelt near the rope, sniffing at it. "I feel like an animal when I do this," she muttered.

"Never mind that now—can you tell what it is?"

"Well, there's a lot of smells—but the strongest one is...I could be wrong, I mean, my sense of smell isn't as good as a real fox's..."

"Just tell me!"

"Chrysanthemums."

Baden stared into space for a moment, and then said, "Was the scent just on the rope?"

"No, I smelled it in the garden, too. I thought there were some growing there."

"No!" RaEIF exclaimed excitedly. "I don't have any chrysanthemums—hardly anyone around here does! But I know someone who's obsessed with them—he grows them everywhere, all over his house, on his grounds, everywhere!"

"Who?" Vaelon asked.

"Earl Gawourab, a nobleman who lives here in the city."

Baden rose quickly. "Vaelon, give me that note."

Vaelon handed it to him. "Surely there are other people with chrysanthemums in the city, though."

"Yes," said Baden, "but who would have so many that the smell would get on everything? Safaya, does this note smell of them, too?"

"Yes," she said.

Baden nodded. "It's obvious from the gold Iltha got that whoever is behind this isn't poor." He stared down at the note he was holding. "This note was prepared in advance, before the kidnapper ever came here to get Reiyalindis. Look how neat the writing is—*too* neat, as though the writer was intentionally disguising his handwriting. Certainly too neat to have been scratched out by a kidnapper lurking in the dark just before he struck. I suspect that they had someone watching the house, and when we came along and foiled their plan they immediately concocted a new one." Looking around the room again, he thoughtfully tapped his chin. "You know...I could be wrong about this, but I'd be willing to bet the kidnapper is left-handed, and he's not the one who wrote the note."

RaEIF gasped. "Baden! Gawourab's personal bodyguard is left-handed—and he's tall and thin, too!"

"Wait!" said Ciroy. "How could you possibly know he's left-handed?"

Baden shrugged. "More a hunch than anything solid. It's just the way things are laid out—how the knot was tied in the rope, how the note was pinned to the curtain...just the feel of the whole arrangement. I don't know. I could be wrong."

"But I'll bet you aren't," said Safaya.

“I need to talk to Iltha again.”

Raeif led them to where he had left Iltha, which was the same room the servants had been held captive in before. She was sitting in a corner with her head in her hands when they entered, and she slowly lifted her eyes to them. “What are you going to do with me?” she asked dully.

Baden ignored the question. “Iltha, I need you to tell me something. I want you to think back to when you were talking with this man out in the garden—when he offered you the second bag of gold. Tell me *exactly* what he did.”

She looked confused, but said, “He just held out the bag and I took it—well, he tossed it into the air a few inches and caught it again. A couple of times. But that was it.”

Baden nodded, smiling a little smugly. “Perfect. Now, Iltha, think very hard—which hand was he holding the purse in?”

She blinked. “Well...his left.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I...I’m pretty sure. I remember noticing that he was left-handed.”

“Good.” He stood up, and without another word they left the room, locking it again behind them.

“Raeif,” said Baden as they headed for the study, “can you think of *any* reason Gawourab would be so desperate to get his hands on erythin?”

Raeif pondered, and then said, “Well, he doesn’t strike me as an honest man, but I really never thought he’d ever *murder* anyone. And why so particular about erythin? Arsenic kills, too, and it’s a lot easier to get your hands on.”

“There’s *got* to be a reason he’d want a poison that kills Elves but nothing else!”

Raeif and Baden sat down at the study table, thinking hard. But Safaya was not in the mood for thought. “We’ve got to do something *now!*” she exclaimed. “We don’t have time to sit around!”

“Safaya, we can’t do anything until we’re sure it was him,” said Baden.

“How sure are you it’s him?”

Baden shrugged. “Pretty sure—almost certain, but without proof...”

“I trust your judgement, Baden. If you suspect it’s him, it’s him.”

Baden sighed. “All right. Let’s come up with a plan.”

“I already have a plan,” said a voice that none of them had ever heard before.

All of them stared at Koän, so surprised that they were momentarily speechless. Koän leaned over the table, staring hard at Raeif. “Tell me where to find this man.”

Raeif hesitated, and Baden, finding his voice, said, “Uh...look, Koän, we can’t just run in and kill him, you know.”

Koän ignored Baden, continuing to stare at Raeif. The pudgy merchant fidgeted a bit, and then said, “He has a big mansion near the center of the city. Just follow the street out front deeper into the city, and when you reach the grand square look for the mansion with two giant lion statues on either side of the main gate. It’s on the south side of the square.”

Koän nodded, straightening. “Stay here. All of you.” With that he turned and started to leave.

“Koän, wait!” Safaya exclaimed. “It would be better if we all helped! What if you fail?”

He paused, but did not turn around. “I won’t,” he said. Then he was out the door and gone.

They all stared after him, and after a long moment Raeif said, “So...he *can* talk. I thought he was a mute.”

“What is he *doing*?” Ciroy muttered. “He shouldn’t do this alone!”

Baden hesitated, and then said, “Actually, it may be best this way. We’d probably just get in his way and foul things up.”

“I’m not going to just sit here while Reiyalindis is in danger!” Safaya said hotly.

“Neither am I,” said Baden. “What we’re going to do is come up with another plan in case Koän doesn’t succeed. Now let’s get to work.”

Koän studied the mansion from the shadows. It was enormous, easily three times the size of Raeif’s. Apparently Gawourab was nervous tonight; there were guards at every gate, every door, and various locations around the grounds.

Aware that his white hair was too easily visible, Koän retreated down the street to where he had seen a clothing shop. Quietly picking the lock and entering, he found a strip of black cloth and tied it around his face, leaving only his eyes uncovered. Then he found a light black cloak with a cowl, and he donned it and left the shop, locking it again behind him.

He returned to the mansion by another street, one that ran along the other side of the property, and he crept across the broad back lawn and gardens, easily avoiding a patrol of guards as he went.

The scent of chrysanthemums was strong in the air.

The back door was guarded by four men, but he did not intend to go in by the door. The stone of the wall was too smooth to climb, but there was a tall oak tree whose branches very nearly overhung a balcony on the third floor.

He paused in the darkness under the tree, watching the patrols as they passed back and forth. He soon learned their rhythm, and when the largest window of time presented itself he climbed quietly into the tree. The branches did not quite reach the balcony, so he inched as close to it as he could and waited, simply watching. The room behind the broad balcony window was dark; it was covered by light curtains, but he could tell there was no light inside.

When there was time between the patrols again, he leaped toward the balcony, landing lightly on the railing. Without a pause he ducked into the corner of the balcony, waiting tensely for any sign that he had been spotted. None came.

The balcony door presented a challenge—it was locked from the inside by a latch that crossed the double-doors. He had no way of knowing if there was someone inside that room, but he had no choice but to risk it. Drawing his dagger, he carefully dug around one of the window panes, hoping he would be able to pry it loose.

Suddenly, though, his sharp ears heard a creak from inside the room, and he realized that someone had just gotten out of a bed—he had been heard.

He acted quickly, slipping over the railing and hanging there, drawing his feet up under the balcony so as not to leave them hanging down, where guards below might spot them. He waited, staying just high enough to watch the window, and soon the curtains parted. He could not see who was inside, but only a moment later the double-doors opened and a young girl, probably not much older than Reiyalindis, came out onto the balcony.

This could be his only chance, and he knew it. There was no way to get back onto the balcony silently, so instead he did it quickly. The girl heard him and turned toward him, but before she could utter a peep he had his arms around her, his hand firmly clamped over her mouth, and he lifted her easily and carried her into the dark bedroom.

She was too terrified to struggle. “I will not hurt you,” Koän whispered into her ear. “Do you understand?”

The girl nodded a little bit, though her eyes were still wide with fright.

“I am going to let go of your mouth. If you make any noise, I will have to knock you out. It won’t feel very good when you wake up. Do you understand?”

Again she nodded.

“Good. I need some information. Do you know Gawourab? Answer me very quietly.” He let his hand up a little bit, just enough for her to talk.

“He...he’s my father,” she whispered.

“Who is Torick?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Do you know if a little girl was brought here earlier this evening?”

“A...girl? What...what do you mean?”

“Do you know why there are so many guards about tonight?”

“N...no. I asked...Father said he was just...feeling jittery. He...he does that a lot.”

“Your father’s bodyguard—what is his name?”

She looked confused now, as well as terrified. “You mean Roagin?”

“Where can I find him?”

“I don’t know, really, I don’t. Please, if it’s money you want...”

“I am not here for money,” hissed Koän. “Roagin has taken someone from me, and I am here to get her back.”

With a sharp breath she said, “You mean...the girl you asked about? But...why would Roagin...”

“Because your father told him to,” Koän said. “Where would they keep a prisoner here?”

“My father wouldn’t...” The girl paused, and then moaned, “Oh, no...this isn’t about that merchant, is it?”

Koän felt a little relief. He was definitely at the right place. “What about him?”

“Well...I heard Father talking about it a few days ago...he just said that some merchant had something he wanted...he told Roagin to get it, and he didn’t care how. I thought...I thought he was just mad. He has a temper sometimes. But I never thought they’d...”

“Well, they did,” Koän interrupted. “Where would they be keeping her?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t!” she said. “Maybe in the cellar? There are a lot of storage rooms and things there...I don’t know.”

“What does Roagin look like?”

“He’s...he’s tall, and has blond hair—there’s a big burn scar on his neck.”

“And your father?”

“He’s shorter, and bald, kind of chubby...Please, don’t hurt him, I know he’s not the most honest person, but he’s my father...”

Koän said nothing, but pushed her toward the closet. He felt her tense a little, and in a quavering voice she said, “Please, sir...please don’t hurt me, I...”

She got no further. Taking a long sash from a hook on the door, Koän tied it over her mouth. Using other sashes, belts, and clothing, he trussed her up securely. Then, to make sure she would not be able to make noise by thrashing around, he tied her down onto her bed. When he was satisfied she would not be able to alert anyone, he left her there and went to her door, quietly opening it a crack.

The hallway outside was dimly lit by only a couple of lamps. There was a key in her door, so he took it and left the room, locking the door behind him and then slipping the key into his pocket.

The third floor halls were deserted, but the second floor was being patrolled by more guards, and was well lit. Koän waited in some shadows at the top of the stairs, watching the patrol go by. There were two men, and they were simply walking up and down the broad hallway, talking quietly to each other as they went. Koän waited until they passed the stairs and then crept down, keeping alert for other people.

There was another stairway directly behind his that led to the first floor, but to his frustration he saw that a guard was stationed at the top. Moving quickly, he was upon the guard in an instant, knocking him senseless with the pommel of his dagger. There was a room nearby with its door standing open, so he dragged the unconscious guard into that room, which, thankfully, was empty.

He knew, though, that the other two guards would probably notice that their comrade was missing, so he waited for their return. Sure enough, they saw that the other guard was absent, and as they stood there looking at where their companion should have been Koän snuck up behind them and knocked their heads together.

Tying and gagging all three guards, Koän stuffed them in a closet and then descended to the first floor.

There things got complicated. There were several patrols in the hallways, and, just to be safe, Koän decided he was going to have to take them all out. One by one he incapacitated, bound, and hid the patrols, until a total of twelve guards were lying unconscious in various closets and empty rooms throughout the first floor.

After a little searching Koän found Gawourab's study, and after silently subduing two guards at the door he listened intently at the keyhole.

"Do you really think this will work?" a voice was saying. "What if the poison isn't there?"

"It'll be there," replied another voice. "They couldn't possibly know it was me who took the girl; they can't try to rescue her if they don't know where she is."

"But supposing they don't give us the poison anyway?"

"Then we cut the girl's throat and get the poison some other way."

"Ugh, is that really necessary? She's a High Elf, you know!"

"They bleed and die just like we do."

"I know, but... a High Elf, man, a High Elf!"

"All the better to prove we mean business! If we don't show them we're serious this time, they won't cooperate next time, either."

"Well... I suppose you're right. Blast, this is turning out to be a lot more complicated than I'd thought it would be. Curse that infernal vault of his!"

"We've got his friend Solignis to thank for that, and for the failure of those pathetic Human robbers. I might kill him just to lighten my mood when this is finished."

"Are you sure the girl can't escape?"

“Of course not. She’s tied up in an ironbound barrel with a latch on the lid, for crying out loud.”

“Still...you never know with High Elves.”

“If she had any magic she’d have used it before now. Besides, there are six guards in that room with her, just in case.”

“I’ll be glad when this whole business is over.”

Koän, satisfied that the two men were alone in the room, knocked on the door. The talking inside ceased, and then Gawourab called, “Yes?” Koän just waited, and soon Gawourab said, “Go see what’s going on, Roagin.”

Koän tensed, and the moment the door began to open he slammed into it as hard as he could, sending Roagin reeling across the room. Koän was inside in a flash, his dagger already flying across the room, and it plunged into Roagin’s throat even as the kidnapper stumbled into a chair.

Before Gawourab could so much as squawk Koän had him by the throat, one of his short swords out and pressed against the earl’s stomach. “Be too loud, and you die,” Koän growled. “Where is she?”

Terrified out of his wits, Gawourab began blubbering incoherently, until Koän jerked him away from the wall and then slammed him into it again. “Where is she?” he repeated, raising the blade of his sword to rest against Gawourab’s throat just under where he was holding him.

“In the wine cellar!” Gawourab cried.

“Take me there—and don’t try to be smart.” Koän jerked the earl around, holding the man by the collar and pressing the point of his sword into his captive’s back hard enough to draw a little blood.

The whimpering nobleman led him to the back of the house and down a dark set of stone stairs, finally emerging in a wine cellar. Six guards were there, and all of them drew their weapons as the two men entered the room. “Drop them!” Koän grated.

“Do as he says!” cried Gawourab.

The guards hesitated, but then let their weapons fall to the floor. Koän looked around the room, soon spotting the barrel that Reiyalindis must be in. There was a row of such barrels, all of them big enough to hold a man, so Koän jerked his head toward them. “All of you get in those barrels. Move it!”

The guards reluctantly obeyed, and Koän forced Gawourab to latch each of the lids. Then he threw the trembling nobleman to the floor and went to Reiyalindis’ barrel, quickly opening it.

Reiyalindis, bound, gagged, and blindfolded, was lying in the barrel, her blindfold wet with tears. Koän lifted her out and removed her bonds, and she hugged him tightly with a sob of relief. “Oh, Koän, you found me! I was so frightened!” Koän stroked her hair reassuringly, and after a moment she looked up at him. “I knew you’d come,” she said. “I didn’t know how you would ever find me, but I knew you would.”

He just smiled briefly.

Again taking Gawourab by the collar, Koän forced him back up to the main floor, with Reiyalindis coming right behind them. Koän gagged Gawourab and tied his hands together, and then took him to a room on the side of the house. He managed to sneak the earl through a window and past the guards on the grounds, and soon the three of them were gone.

At Raeif's mansion the others had another plan in place. Raeif and Baden had prepared a harmless mixture that looked like erythin, and they were ready to place it outside the house. Most likely their enemies were watching the house, so they did not dare try to get into positions to follow whoever took the poison; Baden was planning to watch from a concealed spot on the roof with his telescope when the time came.

Now they were simply waiting. They were gathered in Raeif's study, all but Safaya sitting around the table. The Halfbreed could not sit still, but was pacing worriedly up and down the room. Silence had settled, unbroken for the past half hour or more.

Then, suddenly, the study door opened, and a short, bald Elf stumbled into the room, followed immediately by Koän. And then, to a chorus of relieved cries from everyone else in the room, Reiyalindis also entered.

### **Scene #2: Discovery of Ghost People attack aftermath**

*This scene occurs just after leaving Valsana. It was cut due to the publisher's request to make the novel shorter.*

Three hours later, Vaelon spotted something in the distance. Frowning, he shaded his eyes and peered at it, and then he said, "Hold up a moment."

The others saw what he was looking at—something was in the road ahead, or several things. "Now what do you suppose..." Ciroy muttered.

"Let's go find out," said Baden.

As they started moving again, though, Koän pulled Reiyalindis to a stop. "What is it, Koän?" she asked.

Koän just shook his head, motioning for her to stay there. Sensing something amiss, Vaelon said, "I think he may be right. Reiyalindis, you stay here for a moment. Safaya, would you stay with her?"

Safaya, looking worried, took Reiyalindis' hand. "Sure."

The four men moved forward. Soon it became obvious why Koän hadn't wanted Reiyalindis to go any closer—the objects on the road were dead bodies. There were seven on the road, plus three more in a line leading away from it. "Dang," Ciroy muttered. "They really got slashed. This is ugly."

"There are valuables lying in plain sight," said Baden. "This wasn't the work of robbers."

Vaelon shook his head. "It was the Ghost People. They must have appeared right on top of these poor souls; most of them didn't even have a chance to run."

"These bodies aren't that old. The attack must have happened earlier this morning—probably about when we were leaving the city."

"Thank goodness they didn't appear *in* the city. That's always bad."

Looking around the bodies off the side of the road, Ciroy said, "It was the Ghost People, all right—look how the tracks just appear and disappear out of nowhere. They weren't here long, looks like."

Vaelon looked around at the dead. "It was long enough. Let's get these people out of the road."

Attacks such as this, where there were no survivors to tell the tale, had become increasingly common, and the customary thing to do when finding victims of the Ghost

People was to lay them out near where the attack took place. There was not much else to do; they could not be buried, or their friends and relations might never find out what happened to them. Local and military peacekeeping troops patrolled the roads regularly, so the bodies would soon be found and taken to the nearest city. There they were kept in morgues as long as possible in the hope that someone might be able to identify them; if none did quickly enough, sketches and descriptions were made of them and the bodies were buried.

Once the bodies were arranged on the roadside, they continued on their way. Reiyalindis kept her eyes closed as she passed the grisly scene, holding tightly to Safaya's hand.

There was little conversation for the remainder of the day's journey. Their morbid discovery was a fresh reminder to all of them how dangerous just being outside could be; the Ghost People could appear anywhere, anytime. Vaelon found himself hoping to reach the Gray Forest soon, where—if Baden was right, which he always seemed to be—the shade from the trees would offer them protection from attack.

### **Scene #3: Original first contact with Ghost People**

*Originally the company's first contact with the Ghost People occurred when they were stopping in a Halfbreed village to visit Safaya's parents on their way through the Gray Forest. It was cut—you guessed it—due to the publisher's request to make the novel shorter.*

For two days they traveled through the forest before reaching the village where Safaya had been born and raised. Most Halfbreeds lived in such villages scattered about the southern part of the Gray Forest; as a race they were not inclined toward cities, their largest settlement being about the same size as Cim's Hill. There was a remarkable variety in the appearances of the Halfbreeds there; from what Vaelon could see as they entered, no two were even remotely alike. All sorts of animals could be seen in their traits; cats, dogs, cows, pigs, beavers, rabbits, deer, and others he could not even put a name to. They were engaged in perfectly mundane tasks, though, not unlike any normal Elven village one might wander through.

Their party earned a few curious stares as they passed through, but few suspicious ones, for Ciroy and Safaya were well known to all the people there. Safaya led them through the village to a modest little house, and as they approached it a huge bear of a man appeared in the doorway.

'Bear' was not a figurative term, either, for that was the animal Safaya's father took after. He was a good seven feet tall, and his skin was covered with fur. His head looked Human, save for the furry bear's ears, and his fingers were tipped with short, blunt claws that looked only partially formed. "Safaya!" he boomed, coming toward them.

Safaya ran to him. "Papa, it's good to see you!" she cried, hugging him. "How are you?"

"Oh, same as always," he said. "Hungry. Ciroy, my lad, you're looking ugly as ever." Ciroy smiled. "If I look ugly to you, that's good news."

"Who are your friends?" he asked, glancing at the rest of them.

"Where's Mama?" asked Safaya. "I'd rather not have to introduce everyone twice."

He shrugged his massive shoulders. “Out visiting, which means she could be a while.”

“Well, since she’s not here,” said Safaya, “this is Vaelon Sahani, Baden Solignis, Reiyalindis Amarainein, and Koän.”

Extending his hand to Vaelon, he said, “Gordaw Elithinæn.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” said Vaelon.

The bear-Halfbreed waved them toward the house. “Well, come on in. We weren’t expecting company, especially not so much, but come in anyway. Safaya, if you want you can go find your mother; she’s probably at the old hag’s place.”

“Father,” she said reprovingly, “be nice.”

“I’ll be nice once that harridan is good and buried,” he replied. “Ornery old battle-ax, anyway.”

Safaya shook her head with a laugh. “You’ll never change, Papa. I’ll be back.”

Safaya headed down the street while the rest of them entered the house. It was a small but comfortable place, and Ciroy immediately settled himself in a rocking chair near the empty fireplace. “So,” he said, “how’s life?”

Gordaw shrugged. “Can’t complain. Pesky critters keep tearing up the farmers’ crops lately, but the fishing’s been real good. Killed anyone lately?”

“Not for a while, no,” replied Ciroy. “Beat up a few, though.”

“Robbers?”

“Yeah. And a kidnapper. I only got to hit him once, though.”

“Kidnapper, huh?” Gordaw spat into the fireplace. “Dirty business, then?”

“You could say that. We got it cleaned up, though.”

“Good to hear.” He glanced at the others. “So what brings such a strange bunch out here? This is probably the first time in forever a High Elf has set foot in our little village.”

“Just a bit of a job,” Ciroy replied. “Kind of hush-hush; you know how it is.”

“Oh, yeah; sure. Well, I’m glad you stopped by, anyway. It’s been a while.”

They chatted for a little while longer, and then the door opened to admit Safaya and another Halfbreed woman. Safaya’s mother was nearly pure Human; her only visible animal characteristic was her huge round eyes that were reminiscent of an owl’s. She had long dark hair, in sharp contrast to Safaya’s pure white hair, and although she was not a petite woman she looked small indeed next to her husband. “Everyone,” said Gordaw, “this is my wife, Rulinne.”

“How do you do?” said Rulinne with a nod of her head. She spotted Reiyalindis and, looking surprised, said, “My, what a darling little girl! I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a High Elf around here. You are a High Elf, aren’t you, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am, I am,” said Reiyalindis.

“Well, goodness, what brings you all here?”

“One of Ciroy and Safaya’s jobs,” said Gordaw. “You know—one of the secretive kinds.”

“Oh.” She nodded.

“You don’t seem to be very uncomfortable around us,” Reiyalindis said. “The first time I saw a Halfbreed he crossed to the other side of the road to avoid coming near us.”

Gordaw chuckled. “We’ve kind of been cured of being suspicious of other races. Safaya’s fault, really, bringing a Human home and all.”

“It’s nearly lunchtime,” said Rulinne. “Let me fix you all something to eat.”

“Oh, we don’t want to impose,” said Vaelon. “We can’t stay very long, anyway.”

“Nonsense; travelers always need food. I’ll just whip up some sandwiches; I baked some bread just this morning.”

There was no stopping her, so they stayed long enough to eat lunch. Once the meal was over, though, Ciroy stood. “Well, we’d best be on our way. Hopefully we’ll see you again soon.”

“Good luck to you on whatever it is you’re up to,” said Gordaw as he followed them out the door.

“Thanks,” said Ciroy. Safaya hugged her parents, and then they walked out into the street to head out of town. A few Halfbreeds were on the street, but other than that the village seemed quiet.

They appeared with such startling suddenness that Vaelon barely had time to realize what was happening before he saw an ugly sword heading straight for his head. Pure reflexes kicked in, and he whirled aside, his sword flashing from its sheath and shearing the Ghost Man in front of him completely in half.

Instantly the street became a battlefield. Safaya, acting quickly, grabbed Reiyalindis and threw the little girl into the protective shadow of the house, narrowly avoiding the swing of a Ghost Man’s axe. Koän immediately slammed into the Ghost People nearest him, a sword in each hand, and within seconds three of them were down. Ciroy didn’t quite have time to draw his sword, so he simply sidestepped a blow directed at him and then knocked his attacker flat on his back with a vicious punch.

Baden was also a little slow drawing his sword, and he fell back as two Ghost People charged him. But Vaelon intercepted them and killed both within a split second before running back to face the others. He was amazed at the deadly efficiency of the sword Baden had given him; it sliced through armor and bone with ease, despite its being light as a feather. Battle instinct took over, and he whirled and dodged among the Ghost People, leaving a trail of bodies behind him.

“Leave some of them alive!” he faintly heard Baden shouting behind him. But he was not about to risk trying to capture any of them while there were people about getting killed. Some of the Halfbreeds on the street were already down, and Vaelon ran toward them, cutting apart the Ghost People who were attacking them. He was surprised at how naturally his swordsmanship came back to him, despite how long it had been since he’d been in a fight.

Fortunately for them there were not many of the Ghost People, and soon they were all dead—all but three, who were being held tightly by Ciroy, Baden, and Gordaw. Vaelon ran to help some of the wounded, while Koän took over holding the struggling Ghost Man that Baden had captured. Baden quickly dropped his pack and rifled through it, producing the two bottles of poison. “Quickly, we may not have much time,” he said, handing one bottle to Safaya. “This is the arsenic. Hurry, and be careful with it!”

Safaya quickly took the bottle to the Ghost Man her father was holding and, with her father’s help, forced the poisonous solution down the Ghost Man’s throat. At the same time, Baden forced the second Ghost Man to drink the erythin. “Ciroy, drag that one into the shadow of the house, I want to see what happens!” he said.

Ciroy obeyed, and Baden tried to watch all three Ghost People at the same time. The one who drank the arsenic was dead within a few moments, but the one who drank the

erythin showed no signs of being affected; whatever they were, they did not share the Elven susceptibility to that poison.

When Ciroy dragged his Ghost Man into the shadow of the house, a most peculiar thing happened—nothing. The Ghost Man became visibly angry, but nothing that Baden had been expecting; he didn't vanish, didn't die, didn't do anything but struggle harder. Baden stared, nonplussed, and finally said, "Keep him there for a while, and we'll see what happens."

Vaelon was crouching near a badly wounded Halfbreed boy. He was bleeding profusely from an ugly slice that cut down almost the whole length of the front of his torso. "Bring me a blanket, hurry!" he shouted back toward Rulinne. The Halfbreed woman ran into the house.

Reiyalindis, her face shocked and horrified, slowly approached him. He was trying to hold the ugly wound closed with his hands, and did not notice her until she was right beside him. "Oh—Reiyalindis, please don't watch this," he told her. "Go back into the house. Go." He turned back to the boy, still trying to close up the wound despite knowing it was hopeless.

He did everything he could. The boy had already lost too much blood, and he died even before Rulinne had time to return with the blanket. Vaelon let out a long sigh, shaking his head. "Blast." He noticed Reiyalindis still standing there, frozen in mute horror as she stared at the boy's body, and he moved to block her view. She gasped when he did, jolted out of her shock.

He couldn't touch her, because his hands were covered with blood, but he spoke as gently as he could. "Reiyalindis," he said, "please go back into the house."

She stared at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Is...is he dead?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Yes. He was losing blood too fast; we couldn't do anything for him. Go, please."

Rulinne arrived with the blanket then, and, seeing what had happened, gently took the little High Elven girl's hand and led her back to the house. Reiyalindis began crying on the way, and Rulinne put a comforting arm around her shoulders as they entered the house.

"Cursed villains!" Gordaw growled. "That's Lian Bayol's son. I sure hope *I'm* not the one who has to tell him, poor devil!"

"Was anyone else killed?" asked Vaelon, wearily rising to his feet and looking around.

"Three others, I think," Gordaw replied. He looked down the street, to where Safaya was looking after some wounded people. "A few injured, too. Lucky you folks were here—bugger, I've never *seen* such fighting! But what's with the ones we took prisoner?" He glanced at Baden, who was trying in vain to get a Ghost Man to talk. At that very moment the Ghost Man, along with the one Ciroy was still holding, vanished, along with all traces of the dead ones. Baden let out a frustrated growl.

"I'll explain later," Vaelon said. Walking past the big Halfbreed, he went into the house. Rulinne and Reiyalindis were on a bench in the front room, the Halfbreed woman holding the little Elf closely as she cried. Vaelon quietly found the kitchen and washed his hands, and then returned to the front room. "Can I have a moment, please?" he said to Rulinne.

She nodded and rose, and Reiyalindis straightened, wiping at her eyes. Rulinne went outside, and Vaelon sat next to Reiyalindis. “I’m sorry, Vaelon,” she said. “It was just...so horrible!”

Vaelon shook his head. “You have nothing to be sorry about.” He hesitated a moment, and then said, “Had you ever seen anyone die before?”

She shook her head. “No...I’ve seen Koän fight Ghost People before, but...but I never actually watched one die...and this—well... Vaelon, he was just a boy. Not much older than me.” Looking up at him, she asked, “Vaelon, do you think that I’m...weak?”

“Weak?” he asked. “Heavens, no. It’s not weakness, Reiyalindis. You just saw someone die a terrible death.”

“I know, but...but I just stood there. I couldn’t even move. You were trying to save his life—I mean, trying to hold that awful mess closed with your bare hands...I wanted to throw up just seeing it!”

Vaelon let out a long sigh. “The first time I saw someone get killed,” he said, “I did throw up. And it wasn’t as bad as this, just a sword through the heart. Honestly, I’m surprised at how well you’re handling it. There was nothing you could have done to save him, anyway.”

She shook her head sadly. “At least you tried. I didn’t.”

Vaelon noticed that her trembling was getting worse, and her reddened eyes were again leaking tears. Slowly, a little awkwardly, he put his arm around her and drew her close, and she gratefully laid her head against his chest and burst into fresh tears. “Don’t you feel bad about it,” he said quietly. “No one is expecting you to be perfect, Reiyalindis. No one should ever have to see something like that.”

Within a few minutes Safaya, Ciroy, Baden, and Koän also entered the house. A crowd had gathered at the scene of the fight, and Safaya’s parents stayed there to make sure the dead and wounded were properly seen to. Reiyalindis stopped crying, but she still held onto Vaelon, even when Koän sat down near her.

“Well,” Baden said after a moment, “there goes the direct sunlight theory.”

“Well, at least we know that erythin doesn’t kill them, but arsenic does,” said Ciroy. “Though I’m not sure what good that knowledge does.”

“Well, it shows one thing very clearly,” said Baden. “Their bodies look Human, but they function very differently. He showed none of the usual symptoms of arsenic poisoning. He just...died, much too quietly.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “But the one Ciroy dragged into the shadows—I just don’t get it! If it doesn’t harm them, why do they avoid it so adamantly? And did you notice how angry he got?”

“I was a little preoccupied at the time,” Vaelon said.

“Oh—yeah. Sorry. He really got ticked off. Maybe they just don’t *like* being in shadow.”

“Maybe the sun does provide them some kind of boost, even if it’s not necessary to keep them alive,” Safaya suggested. “If the sun is what gives them life, why would they ever disappear at all?”

Ciroy nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I’ve asked myself that before, as well. Why not just stay as long as the sun is up?”

“Well, if their energy did come from sunlight, shouldn’t it still reach them even if they’re in shadow?” asked Vaelon. “I mean, there’s still light in shadow. Maybe they just prefer direct sunlight.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Baden, getting excited. “Have you ever thought about *why* there’s still light in shadows? If light couldn’t reach places in shadow, why can you still see at all? Simple—because light *travels*, you see? It *bounces* off of other things and into the places with shadow! So there’s still light, just not as much as with direct sunlight. Still, even if that were the case, we should have seen *some* kind of detrimental effect.” His mind was whirling now, his eyes staring intently at the floor and his fingers twitching as if he were silently counting something off on them.

He suddenly jumped up and started pacing. “Of course! Perhaps it’s not *sunlight* that’s giving them power at all—maybe there’s something else, something *in* the sunlight! Something that isn’t always there—something that can pass through things light itself can’t, or simply fills the entire area without having to have a direct path to it!”

“Like what?” asked Safaya.

Baden came to a halt, frowning. “I don’t know,” he said. “But it must be something we can’t see.”

Before any more could be said Gordaw entered the house. “Well, that’s done, then,” he said. “That’s six our village has lost to the Ghost People this year. Two attacks in such a small village within a few months of each other! It’s getting worse. Soon they’ll be showing up every day. Anyway, I suppose you’ll all be on your way again now, eh? Can’t let these attacks scare us into not doing what’s needful, or we’d end up hiding under tables all day.”

“True enough,” sighed Safaya. “See you later, Papa.”

It wasn’t long before the village lay behind them, and they struck off deeper into the forest. Reiyalindis was still visibly shaken, and as the day wore on into evening she remained pale and withdrawn. There was little talk that night.

#### **Scene #4: Meeting Ciroy’s parents**

*This scene takes place after the company finds out about Reiyalindis’ curse and they leave the Queen’s Palace on their way to confront Alhalon. It was cut partly in order to get the book shorter, and partly because I ended up not really liking it.*

As they were heading down a street that would lead them out of the city, Ciroy said, “Hey, anyone mind if we stop in to see my brother? We’ll pass right by his house on the way out.”

“What for?” asked Vaelon.

He shrugged. “No reason in particular; it just seems a shame to be right here and not see him. It’s been a while.”

“I know what you’re really thinking,” Reiyalindis said quietly. “You think this may be the last time you get a chance to see him.”

Ciroy’s mouth tightened a little, and though he didn’t say anything they could all tell that she had been right. Vaelon stepped in, though, and said, “That sounds fine, Ciroy. Let’s go.”

Ciroy’s brother, Faleor Xagalliack, lived in a mansion not far down the street. Though it was not as opulent as many others in the city, it was obvious that his business was prosperous. “What exactly does he do?” asked Baden as they approached the front door.

“Wood,” replied Ciroy. “He owns a logging outfit.”

“Ah. Good market.”

“Evidently,” said Vaelon, his eyes wandering across the house.

Ciroy knocked on the door, and a few moments later the butler opened it. “Well, well, it’s Master Ciroy,” he said. “It’s been a long time. I will inform Master Faleor of your arrival. Do come in; you can wait in the front sitting room.”

“Thanks, Kurs,” said Ciroy. He and the others followed the butler to the sitting room, where they settled down to wait.

It wasn’t long before Faleor came. The family resemblance was obvious, though he was slightly more heavysset than Ciroy and sported a short beard. Far from looking pleased to see his brother, however, he appeared to be distressed. “Ciroy, this really isn’t a good time,” he said as he entered the room, his voice almost a low hiss. “You’d better go, quickly!”

Ciroy stood up, looking puzzled. “What’s up, Fal?”

“Mother and Father are here!”

Ciroy froze, looking profoundly uneasy. “Uh...dang. Do they know I’m here?”

“No, not yet; Kurs was smart enough not to say your name. You’d better go—I’d rather not have a battle here.”

Vaelon, though aware of the situation between Ciroy and his parents, was still shocked. “Is it really *that* bad?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ciroy said. “It’s that bad. Let’s go.”

But just as the others were standing, an older man came into the room behind Faleor. At first he just looked a little curious, but when he caught sight of Ciroy his eyes went flat and angry. “You!” he growled. “What are *you* doing here?”

It was easy to see where Ciroy got his looks, but his personality was another matter entirely. The elder Xagalliack’s face began to grow mottled, as though the very sight of his younger son filled him with rage. Faleor let out a long, resigned sigh, and said, “Everyone, this is my father, Admar Xagalliack.”

Admar glared at Faleor and, pointing accusingly at Ciroy, demanded, “What is *he* doing here?”

“Just visiting, Father,” Faleor replied wearily.

“You!” Admar said again, looking back at Ciroy. “What gives you the gall to come here, boy?”

“He visits sometimes,” Faleor cut in. “You don’t have to treat him like a common thief just for that!”

“You mean to tell me that all this time you’ve been seeing him, after I strictly forbade it?” Admar said, his voice rising to nearly a shout.

“Forbade what?” asked a woman’s voice, and Admar’s wife joined him. She gasped when she saw Ciroy, her face hardening. “Ciroy!” she exclaimed. “What on earth are you doing?”

“What do you think, Lera?” said Admar contemptuously. “Probably taking advantage of Faleor’s good nature and begging for money.”

Lera glared at Ciroy. “Haven’t you caused this family enough trouble already?” she asked scathingly.

“Now hold on!” Ciroy said. “I’ve never begged anyone for anything, and that’s a fact!”

“Honestly, Father,” said Faleor, “he’s not here for money. Just a visit.”

“He *happens* to make a very good living,” Safaya said angrily. Though Ciroy was staying calm, she was bristling.

“Right,” said Admar coolly, looking her up and down. “And just who are *you*? I certainly hope, Ciroy, that you haven’t stooped so low as to keep company with *those* things.”

Ciroy set his jaw. “As a matter of fact, I have.” He put his arm around Safaya’s waist. “This is Safaya—my wife.”

The utter shock that filled his parents’ faces was so extreme as to almost appear comical. “*What?!*” Admar exploded, his face growing beet red. “You...you...you *married* one of those...those...”

“How *could* you?” his mother wailed. “Ciroy, how *could* you do such a thing? Why?”

“Because I love her,” Ciroy said. The emotions behind his forced calmness were betrayed by his voice. “Because she is the most wonderful person in the world, and because I could never bear to live without her. That’s why.”

“*It is not a person!*” his father hissed. “*It is an animal!* I want you and the rest of this riffraff out of here now!”

“No,” Faleor said firmly.

It looked as though Admar’s eyes were on the verge of popping right out of his head. “*What?*” he barked, rounding on his other son.

“I said no,” Faleor repeated. “This is my home, and I will decide who may stay here.”

Before Admar could launch into a tirade, Ciroy held up his hand. “No, Faleor, don’t,” he said. “I’ll go. I don’t want to cause any more trouble.”

“You’re not the one causing it!” Faleor said heatedly. “Father, this nonsense has gone far enough! Just because Ciroy didn’t want to go into business...”

“*Just because?*” Admar cried. “*Just because?* My only wish was to see my sons grow and prosper and make something of themselves—but no, he wouldn’t have any of *that!* He wanted adventure! He wanted violence! He betrayed our whole family and...and...and he’s wasting his life! Life that *we* gave him, wasted!”

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Reiyalindis was standing in front of Admar. “You should be ashamed of yourself,” she said, her voice quiet and filled with pain, her eyes brimming with tears. “How could you be so cruel to your own son?”

Admar stood stiffly, obviously wanting to make a scathing remark but hesitating to direct it at a High Elf. Finally he muttered, “He’s no son of mine.”

“No,” Reiyalindis said. “He’s not. I can see that. He is a good and brave and kind man, an extraordinary man who has done great things—and you? You are a selfish, twisted, blind old fool!”

Vaelon was profoundly shocked—he had *never* heard Reiyalindis say such things to *anyone!*

Admar’s mouth worked up and down a few times, but before any sounds could come out Reiyalindis went on. “And Safaya—you judge her simply by her appearance. But I tell you that she is a better person than you! She is warm and caring and completely selfless, a truer friend than anyone you could hope to meet!” She was crying now, her little body trembling with emotion. She whirled, running to Ciroy and throwing her arms around him. “Oh, Ciroy, I’m sorry!” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean to—I just couldn’t...I couldn’t stand there and let him say those things!”

“Don’t worry,” he said gently. Looking back up, he said, “Father, I’d like to introduce you to this ‘riffraff,’ as you call them. This is Vaelon Sahani, the most honored man in the Elven military, a man who has won both a Crimson and Golden Star, decorated by the Queen herself. And this is Baden Solignis, a great scientist and the most brilliant mind in the world.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go *that* far,” Baden murmured, but no one heard him.

“Oh, yes, and by the way,” Safaya added, “this bunch of riffraff—along with your worthless son who’s wasting his life—just destroyed Daaku Chikara and put an end to the Ghost People. Just so you know.”

Admar appeared to be at a loss for words, but after a moment his expression darkened again. “Destroyed Daaku Chikara, did you? And the Ghost People? So you’re a liar as well as a mongrel.”

“That’s enough, Father,” Ciroy said. “You can say what you will about me, but don’t drag my friends into this. And she’s not lying.”

He just smirked. “You expect me to believe this? Do you think I’m a fool?”

“Why don’t you ask the Queen?” Vaelon said, his voice hard. “We were just with her. Or do you want to call me a liar, too?”

Admar stared at him for a moment; it was readily apparent that he wanted to call Vaelon just that, but he seemed to be intimidated. He whirled. “Come, Lera. We have better things to do.”

“Um, one moment,” Baden said mildly. “Before you go, you ought to know that you need to see a healer—soon.”

Admar turned back. “What?” he snapped. “Why?”

“Because,” Baden went on, “if you don’t, you’re going to be dead within a week.”

Admar hesitated, blinking. “What? You’re spouting nonsense! I’m healthy as an ox!”

“Uh-huh. Have you been experiencing any strange pains?”

His expression faltering a little, Admar said, “What? Well...just a few morning aches, that’s all.”

“I see. How about your urine? Has it had any unusual coloring lately?”

Admar stared for a moment, and then snarled, “I don’t need advice from some no-account friend of Ciroy’s!” With that he turned and left, and with a last disdainful sniff his wife hurried after him.

Faleor stared at Baden. “Are you...are you sure about this?”

“Believe him,” Ciroy said. “He knew everything about all of us five minutes after we met him.”

“Not *everything*,” Baden disagreed. “At any rate, Faleor, you’d better talk him into seeing a healer or he’s not going to last much longer. The sickness appears to be fairly advanced—and it could be even more serious than it seems at a glance if he’s been hiding his symptoms, which wouldn’t surprise me.”

“I’ll certainly try. Thank you.”

Feeling a little weak, Ciroy exhaled a big breath and plopped back down onto the couch. “Oh, man, *that* didn’t go too well.”

“How can he be so mean to you?” Reiyalindis asked, tears still rolling down her cheeks. “You’re such a wonderful man, and he treats you like vermin.”

“Unfortunately, that’s how he is,” Faleor sighed. “If people don’t fit his strict view of how people should be, he dedicates his life to hating them. Mother’s just as bad, too. That’s probably how they ended up together—no one else could stand them.”

“But both of you are so nice!”

“Well, that extreme of an attitude isn’t likely to catch on with many folks,” he said wryly. “I want to just hit him sometimes, but...well, he’s my father.”

“Yeah,” Ciroy said, rubbing at his face. “Good ol’ Dad. Well, Faleor, it was good to see you, anyway, but we’d better be on our way.”

“Of course, you know you’re welcome any time. But—did you *really* stop the Ghost People?”

Ciroy nodded, smiling a little. “Yes. It’s a long story, though; I’ll tell you about it some other time.”

“Some other time! Surely you’re not in *that* big a hurry! You can’t just walk in here and make an announcement like that and then leave me to wonder about it!”

Faleor managed to prevail upon them to stay long enough to get the meat of the story from them. Finally, though, they were on their way again, soon leaving the city behind them. Ciroy, understandably, looked downcast as he walked, deep in his own thoughts.

A messenger caught up with them as night was beginning to descend. He handed a letter to Ciroy and then, despite the growing darkness, turned back toward the city. Ciroy slowly opened the letter. “It’s from Faleor,” he said.

“What does it say?” asked Safaya.

Ciroy read the letter aloud. “I hesitate to tell you this, but you need to know. I tried with all my might to convince Father to see a healer, but the old fool is determined to ignore the warning. I tried to get Mother to convince him, but she’s just as stubborn; she said that if he says he’s healthy, then he’s healthy.

“I did everything I could, but it was to no avail. He left for home in a rage, and there are no healers out there. I fear, Ciroy, that if your friend is right, your meeting with Father today will be the last you ever see of him. I’m very sorry things had to end like this, but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Ciroy stared at the letter for a long moment, and then looked up at Baden. “How sure are you about...about him?”

Baden hesitated, and then let out a long sigh. “I’m certain of it. I may have been exaggerating a little about him dying within a week, but it certainly won’t take much longer than that, if not even less.”

Ciroy nodded slowly, and then said, “Yeah. I...uh...I’ll be back. Don’t wait up for me.” Still holding the letter, he wandered slowly away from the camp.

Safaya stood to follow him. “He’ll be all right,” she said to the others. “He just needs some time.”

Reiyalindis watched them go, and then quietly said, “He loves his father. Even in spite of how that man has always treated him, he still loves him.”

Baden shook his head. “I’m certainly not that magnanimous. I was half-tempted to just not say anything to the old swine.”

Ciroy and Safaya were gone for well over an hour, and when they came back Reiyalindis was already asleep. “You okay?” Baden asked quietly.

Ciroy nodded as he sat down. “It...ah...wasn’t really the picturesque last memory of my father, you know? But I’ll be fine. I’m just kind of worried about how Mother will take it, but I guess we’ll see.”

“Maybe it’ll knock some sense into her.”

“I doubt that, honestly. More likely she’ll blame me for it.”

“What reason would she have to blame you?”

“What makes you think she’ll need a reason?” He stretched out on the ground, and Safaya snuggled beside him, drawing their blanket up over them both. “Night,” said Ciroy. He didn’t close his eyes, though, but simply stared up at the sky.

When morning came they broke camp quickly and quietly. Ciroy said nothing for a long while, but then, realizing that everyone was being oddly hesitant around him, he said, “All right, look, I know that I’ve had a bit of a shock, but please don’t spend the rest of the hike tiptoeing around me, okay?”

“Right,” said Baden. “Sorry.”

“Okay. Let’s get a move on.”