

The big bay careened down the road, its hooves pounded the soft dirt, sending clods flying. Crouched over his mount's sweating neck, the man dug his heels into the barrel sides of the horse, let the reins out through his gloved hands, and gave the horse its head.

Inspector Stefan Bane was the bait, riding for his life, as he led Lord Blackmoor's bravos on a wild chase down the Avea road. Almost to the bridge over the stream at the village of Chester, it was time to signal Rolf and his men. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved the communications mirror.

He pressed the release, flipped open the black case with one hand, and brought it to his face. "Bane to Creel. They're right behind me! Meet me with your men on the bridge. Rolf?" Rolf's face failed to appear in the mirror. Stefan swore, snapped it shut, and flipped it open again.

"Rolf, damn it, where are you?" If he got out of this alive, Stefan was going to thrash Inspector Rolf Creel.

Still no answer.

He tried to make the connection again as his horse came around a bend. Three men on horseback blocked the road, wands held ready. As Stefan leaned back and jerked hard on the reins the mirror case slipped from his fingers. The horse skidded to a stop, front legs straight, its sweat flecked haunches almost sitting on the ground, and its eyes rolling white with fear.

"Hell's Demons!" The first blast missed him. Stefan tried to aim his wand but the bay danced in circles. Good thing, it made him a damned hard target. Blasts shot past his

head. He fired and missed. Jerking the reins, he tried to get control of the horse to turn it around and make a retreat, but the terrified animal fought him.

The three riders chasing him came around the sharp bend and stood in the stirrups, pulling hard on the reins of their mounts as they slid to a stop.

Cut off, Stefan turned in the saddle and fired. A man dropped, landing face down into the dirt.

A blast from behind streaked past Stefan's head. Wheeling his horse around to face his attacker, Stefan fired again. The man yelped in pain, dropped his wand, and clutched his arm.

A gap opened and Stefan kicked his heels into the bay's sides. The horse leapt towards the narrow space as the road burst into blue light. Caught in the crossfire of bolts, the air sizzled around him, the heavy smell of ozone burned his nostrils. How he wasn't struck was a miracle. Perhaps, the One God watched over him, after all.

A blue bolt missed his knee and seared into his horse's chest. The bay screamed and reared. His wand flew from his hand, arced through the air, and disappeared into the woods below the road. As he felt the horse collapse, Stefan dove from the saddle. He hit the soft dirt in a roll, and felt the heavy thud as the horse collapsed onto its side. Stefan's ears rang with the animal's screams.

Struggling to get to his feet, he faced his attackers. Without his wand to help him teleport or defend himself, he was at their mercy, what little they would show him. At last, by the One God's pity, the poor horse lay still and silent.

One of the mounted men urged his horse closer, eliminating any room for Stefan to maneuver.

“Hold your fire. He’s got nowhere to go.” The riders closed ranks around Stefan to hold him in check, wands leveled at his head. He spun around to keep them in front of him, but their tight circle had him surrounded. Although, two of the men didn’t hold wands, it didn’t make them any less menacing.

They meant to capture him and he couldn’t let that happen. Desperate, his eyes searched for some way out. The woods behind him were his only chance.

Maneuvering closer to the road’s edge, Stefan positioned himself. “I suppose this won’t be a fair fight, will it?” Stefan searched their ranks for the man who’d spoken.

“Now, now, Inspector Bane, you know that’s not possible. Our orders are to bring you in alive, but, no one said anything about unhurt.” The man leaned forward in the saddle and pointed his wand at Stefan. “You’ve been a pain in Lord Blackmoor’s side for a long time. Perhaps it’s time for you to feel the prick of the thorn?”

“I didn’t think your orders called for torture. Blackmoor usually prefers to do that himself.” Stefan had no intention of being captured or to practice his new skills of mental control while under Lord Blackmoor’s care.

“They don’t. But I’m taking some initiative.” He grinned. Looking to one of the men, he jerked his head towards Stefan. “He’s all yours, Sims.”

The man began to dismount as an expectant hush fell over the others.

Stefan took a step back. The ground beneath his boot disappeared. Feeling a sickening lurch, he dropped backwards over the side of the road, tumbled down the steep embankment, and crashed through the underbrush. Brambles tore at Stefan’s clothes as he tried to protect his face with his arms. Landing with a hard thud, he lay on his belly tangled in the debris at the bottom of the gully.

Raking air into his lungs, Stefan got to his knees, then brushed the dirt and leaves from his face and clothes. A quick inventory of his body told him there were only a few scratches, and no broken bones. He stood and looked around in frantic hopes of finding his wand.

Above him, a man broke through the brush. Sims slammed into him and knocked Stefan's breath from his chest. He rolled with the blow and came up on his feet, gasping for air. Sims' large hands reached out as Stefan backpedaled away.

Circling in the small gully, they took each other's measure.

Sims held no wand.

"So, is this my fair fight?" Raising his fists, Stefan prepared to defend himself. It was a method rarely used, but one he'd practiced sparring with Rolf.

"Nope. Not fair."

Sims' eyes were uncanny and his speech strange. A cold dread passed over Stefan, like a blast of winter wind. Something about this man was very wrong.

Lunging, Sims took hold of Stefan's jacket and tried to get a lock on his head. Stefan twisted to the side, his scrambling feet caught between his attacker's. Together, they fell into the small rivulet dampening the gully. Cold water seeped into the back of Stefan's clothes as the man's weight pressed him into the oozing mud. Like a vision, he spotted his wand only a few feet away. Stefan promised the One God a candle and a coin if he could just get to it but he was pinned beneath the man. As Sims raised his arm, Stefan caught the glint of light off cold steel.

What the hell?

Pain ripped through his leg, forcing a roar from him.

Staring at the knife embedded in his thigh, his mind reeled. The man was a lunatic. Sims struggled to his feet just as Stefan's fist connected with his jaw, rocking his head back. He fell off, freeing Stefan. Scrambling backwards, his hand searched the damp leaf litter behind him for his dropped wand. Sims rose to a crouch, eyes filled with hatred as a smug grin spread across his thin lips. He pulled another knife from his boot.

Stefan's eyes locked on the long steel blade as the man waved it back and forth in a threat.

“Cut? Hurt? Get more before I'm done.”

If it weren't happening to him, Stefan would never have believed the man had used a knife on him. Blood weapons had long since been abandoned. Working through the damp leaves and mud, Stefan's fingers touched polished wood and he raked it into his hand. Gripping his wand so hard it was a wonder it didn't snap in two, he spun it in his fingers, pointed the business end forward and brought it to bear.

“Hold.”

Doubt flickered in the man's narrowed eyes, then they hardened and he lunged. Stefan poured his power into the wand and fired. Sims convulsed. His body fell and the knife, still clutched in his fist, stabbed into the dirt between Stefan's boots.

Perhaps if he'd had more time to think, or felt less as if his life hung on his actions, he would not have killed the man. No time for regrets now. The others gathered on the road above him. They'd come for him in a moment, and wounded, he'd be outnumbered and overpowered. His mind screamed at him to get the hell out of there, but taking a deep breath, he silenced his fear.

He rolled the body away from him with his foot, but it stopped. Even in death, Sims still grasped the knife. Stefan kicked the hand free of it and with a grunt of effort and disgust he pulled the blade from the ground and flung it far into the woods. Lying in the muck, his eyes strained upward for a glimpse of his attackers as he tried to control his ragged breath.

How the hell did they know who I am?

He hadn't thought they'd seen through his disguise. The shabby farmer's clothes he wore, a three-day stubble on his chin and his long hair pulled back into a tail under the wide-brimmed hat had even fooled the innkeeper who knew him well. When he'd left the tavern, his pockets full of gambling winnings, he was sure the three men who'd followed him meant merely to beat and rob a poor farmer of his gold.

That assumption vanished when he'd turned the bend and met the others. He groaned. Rolf would never let him live this down.

The remaining men stood at the edge of the embankment and scanned the bushes below for their lost companion. Stefan held his wand ready, his other hand clamped around the knife protruding from his leg to staunch the bleeding. The leaves beneath him grew sticky with his blood and its cloying smell added to the fetid air of the narrow gully.

This was not going well, to say the least. In order to save something from this disaster, he needed one of them alive for questioning. Taking a risk, if he just kept the urge to teleport out of there in check and held his position they'd be on him soon enough and he'd get his chance. He watched the ridge above him as their voices floated down.

“Sims?” someone called out. “Did you get him with your blade?”

“He got Sims.” There was a reverence in the man's voice that made Stefan smile.

“It was a mistake to send a man down there that can’t use a wand.”

“Come along, you sots. Get down there and get him.”

“His Lordship’ll be right pissed if we don’t return with the good inspector.”

“Can’t we just kill him and tell Blackmoor we had no choice?”

Come on, you bastards, Stefan thought.

No one moved. Time stretched.

“Hell’s Demons, get out of my way, Barker, I’ll get him.” One of the toughs started to make his way down the slope.

Stefan raised his wand, held his breath, and waited. A small, lean man with a full black beard burst through the thick underbrush, a wand held in his right hand. The blast from Stefan’s wand hit him in the chest. The man groaned and his eyes rolled back in his head. Collapsing to his knees, he hung there for a moment, and then fell forward, unconscious, sliding head first down the slope towards Stefan.

“Murphy, what happened? Where are you?” The leader’s voice was a hoarse whisper.

“The bastard got him, too, that’s what.”

“Kill him.” Callous laughter sent a chill through Stefan.

“His Lordship said to bring him alive.”

“I don’t give a damn about his lordship. He’s gotten three of us and I’m not going to be the fourth. I say we kill him. Who’s with me?”

The pain in Stefan’s leg throbbed and he knew it wouldn’t be long before he passed out from loss of blood. Time to go. He couldn’t do anything more, except be killed or worse, be captured.

His original plan of ambushing the gang of thieves at Chester was in shambles. Without Rolf and his men, he stood no hope of saving it either. However, there was still information to be learned. Better if he took his prisoner and made a strategic retreat.

He levered himself upright, and dragging his wounded leg, hobbled closer to the fallen man. Kneeling, Stefan reached down and touched his prisoner's outstretched arm. As he clutched his wand, he mustered his strength and teleported as far as he could in his weakened state with his hard won prize.

Stefan opened his eyes and looked around. He was on the bridge at Chester, his hand still on the unconscious man at his side. With a soft groan, he lowered himself to the wooden planks to relieve the strain on his injured leg.

"Hold! What's going on here?" A patroller ran out of the guard shack on the Chester side of the bridge, his wand aimed at Stefan. "Identify yourself!"

"I'm Inspector Bane. I need to get to Avalon. Had some trouble on the road." Stefan pointed with his wand. "This man is under arrest."

The young patroller's searching gaze changed to happy recognition. "Inspector Bane! It is you! I'm Niles Wilson, sir." Then, he froze, eyes wide and mouth open. "Is that a knife, sir?"

"It appears to be," Stefan drawled. Wilson still hadn't moved, his eyes fixed on the hilt of the blade. "Come on, man, secure this fellow and help me to the shack."

With a shake of his head, Wilson summoned a pair of manacles and secured the prisoner's wrists together. He wrapped his arm around Stefan's waist, helped him to stand and together they headed to the shack. As Stefan slumped into a chair, he pulled off

his leather gloves, shoved them in a pocket of his jacket, and ran his shaking hand over his face.

How did Blackmoor's men know about the trap?

He narrowed his slanted eyes to slits and let out his breath. There could be only one simple, yet horrible, explanation.

There was a traitor at Avalon Castle.

Wilson hurried back to the prisoner and, dragging him by the heels, dumped him just outside the small shack. Returning inside, he opened a large communications mirror case attached to the wall and looked into his reflection.

“Patroller Wilson at Chester, to Avalon.”

“Communications Officer Hastings at Avalon.” A woman’s face appeared in the mirror.

“I’ve got Inspector Bane here. He’s wounded and needs help getting back to the castle. And he’s got a prisoner.”

“Wounded?” Her eyes widened, but she recovered quickly. “I’ll send an addler right away.”

Wilson turned to the inspector. “He’ll be here shortly, sir.”

“I heard, Wilson, thank you.” Stefan braced himself and without waiting to see the healer at Avalon he pulled the knife from his leg with a grunt. Blood welled as the bleeding intensified. Retrieving a handkerchief from his pants pocket, he folded it into a pad and pressed it over the wound. He pulled off the leather strip holding his hair, tied it around his thigh, and twisted the knot to cut the flow of blood. He leaned back and rested his head against the wall.

Rolf, when I get hold of you....

* * *

“This way, please, Patroller Tallow.” Gustav, the head addler and steward of Avalon Castle, motioned for Sarah to follow him with a flick of his small, gloved hand. He stood only a little taller than her waist and had a half ring of thick gray-brown hair from one pointed ear to the other. An earth elemental, he must have been incredibly old to show signs of age, since addlers lived for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, he was still youthful in his step despite a slight stoop to his shoulders.

He had been giving her a tour of the public areas of the castle. Now, they stood in the grand foyer in front of the symbol of the Avalon Patrol. A massive mounted black forest bear rose upright on its hind legs, teeth bared and front paws extended, its claws razor sharp. Sarah felt its power and fierceness, and she envied the bear’s great courage. However, she noted with a wry smile, power, ferocity, and courage hadn’t helped this particular bear.

Pride in the great stone castle of Avalon was evident in Gustav’s droning lecture. “The Patrol has been housed in the castle for over one hundred and seventy-five years, and I have been steward from the beginning.” As he spoke, his small chest seemed to swell. Full of hot air, she thought. “Of course, you’ll reside on the Patroller’s corridor with the others.” He stood at the bottom of the grand white marble staircase, one small, gnarled hand resting on the intricate black wrought iron banister.

“Of course,” she replied.

His expressive face sneered, as if he didn’t think much of those who held her new rank. Was he this rude to all the new recruits? Perhaps it was just her. On the one hand,

patrollers needed only two years of training at the academy to win a post, beginning their careers with lesser majik skills. On the other hand, she hadn't been to the academy and lacked most of the basic skills of majik to even qualify for her modest rank. With a sigh, she thought, it must be me. Still, she shouldn't allow his disrespectful behavior towards her to continue.

As they climbed the stairs, Sarah's eyes rose to the great stained glass windows dominating the wall at the top of the staircase. The afternoon sun coursed through the window's panels, the colors refracted like crystal shards on the white marble stairs. On the left, the panel told the legend of the great forest bear who led his hunters to the site above the lake where the castle now stood. In the wider center panel, the bear stood in a pose similar to the one downstairs. On the right, the castle was depicted. Its spires hosted colorful banners that streamed in the wind. Sarah felt the pressing weight of history and a ripple of excitement passed through her. At last, she would be a part of this world and contribute something important to it.

On either side of the wide landing the second floor branched off to the east and west wings. Half a dozen suits of armor stood at attention along each of the walls, pikes presented and flying the castle's bear-embroidered pennants. The armor's polished metal gleamed in the lantern light that illuminated all of the hallways of the castle. The knights who once wore them were long gone, in a time before the spread of majik folk, when the castle and its lands were protected by the knights' swordsmanship and their deep faith in the One God.

Faith in the One God remained strong, but blood weapons, swords, knives, quarrels and bows, were relegated to decorations on the castles' walls. Majik had risen in

power to take their place. Although just as lethal as weapons, majik was merely less bloody. A subtle difference not lost on Sarah. Death without the mess. In her experience, death was always messy, for both giver and receiver.

She'd left that life behind when she'd crossed over to this world. Now she was one of the castle's knights and a defender of the One God. She reached out a tentative hand to touch one of the green silk banners.

Gustav waited for her, his arms folded. "Are you coming, or just going to gawk at everything, like a peasant at the district fair?"

She pulled her shoulders back and took her time walking to him, letting the little man know she would not be rushed and he could damn well wait. His deep brown eyes narrowed in understanding and one scraggly eyebrow arced upward. She hoped she'd wrung a little more respect from him; addlers were very aware of their social standings amongst each other and those they served. In this world's social order, Gustav, the highest ranking addler at the castle, still placed lower than a patroller, no matter what.

"Chief Inspector Thatcher said he'd see you before dinner, Patroller Tallow, after you've settled in." Now the tone of his voice was more acceptable.

"Will the other officers be attending dinner?" Sarah worried about meeting the other men and woman she'd work with and whether they'd accept her.

"As many as wish to eat either before or after their duty shifts."

He turned left and led her down the hall. Lamps extending above the doors were engraved with majik runes to ensure they never needed to be refueled. They illuminated each of the six doors both day and night. The polished wood floor of the hall shone.

Exquisite tapestries hung on the walls between the doors, telling of the Great Sundering or depicting forest scenes. If she searched, a bear was often hidden in the landscapes.

“These are the inspectors’ rooms.” Gustav sniffed, tilting his nose upward. Honestly, she thought, the old addler had no need of speech, his range of sniffs and sneers seemed to express all he had to say. It was obvious he held the inspectors in much higher esteem than a mere patroller.

Be fair, she told herself, they deserved respect. One only earned the rank of inspector after serving ten to fifteen years as a patroller, took advanced majik training and passed the tests. With their superior skills and more powerful wands, they alone in the Patrol were trained to kill.

As they passed each room, Gustav called out the inspector’s names in a voice much larger than his small body, “Loch... Bane... O’Reilly... Creel... Tullis.”

Sarah noticed a small brass nameplate placed in the center of each exquisitely carved door, so perhaps locating her door wouldn’t be so hard after all.

Hearing slow uneven steps, she turned. Time slowed. Then stopped.

A tall man, limping hard, made his way down the hall. Dirty, long black hair fell past his shoulders. The rumped and mud-stained condition of his worn clothing and several days’ growth of beard on his face added to his disheveled appearance.

Sarah was sure the bandage on his thigh was stained with blood. His square jaw was set with – what? Pain, perhaps? Or determination?

His almond-shaped eyes took her in and the tightness around his full lips softened. A rush of unexpected heat burned her cheeks.

“You should have gone straight to the healer, sir.” Gustav’s voice held his concern.

“Aye, I suppose I should’ve.” His deep voice rumbled down the hall towards Sarah.

He stopped at one of the carved doors, hand frozen in mid-air as he reached towards it. With an intensity she’d never experienced, his penetrating gaze went through her eyes straight to her very core. His lips parted as if to speak.

She stopped breathing to wait for his words. They stood alone in the hall, the addler, the tour, her room, all forgotten. There was only this man and her.

Without willing it, her feet brought her to his side. “You’re injured.” She looked up into his hazel eyes.

“Aye.” He pushed open the door and stepped into his room.

Sarah followed him. “Sit on the bed.”

Stefan pulled off his jacket and limped over to his narrow cot. Sitting down, he stretched out his injured leg. He’d never invited any of the male inspectors inside, much less had a woman in his room. His eyebrows rose as Sarah knelt on the floor next to him.

Her slender fingers worked loose the knot in the cord and pulled away the blood-soaked rag. Through the narrow slit in his breeches, he could see the wound still seeped.

“You’ve been stabbed.” She looked up at him.

He bit his tongue before he asked her how she could have eyes the same color as a clear spring sky.

Instead, he swallowed and said, “How did you know?”

“I’ve seen a few.” With a strong jerk, she ripped the fabric open to expose his wound and then rose. “I’ll get this cleaned up. Gustav!”

The old addler, who’d been leaning in the doorway, sprung to attention.

“Aye, miss?”

“Bring the healer to...” She looked back at Stefan.

“Stefan. Stefan Bane. Inspector Stefan Bane. First class.” With a quick glance at the smirk on Gustav’s face, Stefan cleared his throat.

She smiled and his dark, dreary room lit. He’d never seen such a beautiful woman and here she was tending to him, in his room. Perhaps this was a dream, and he lay unconscious at the bottom of the gully.

“Bring the healer to Inspector Bane’s room right away.”

“Aye, miss.” Gustav gave Stefan a final twitch of his lips and teleported out.

She looked around the room, spotted a door, and went into his bathroom. He heard the water run and stop. She returned with a towel draped over her shoulder and a bowl of water. Kneeling next to him, she dipped the end of the towel in the cool water and washed the blood from his leg.

The cool touch of her fingers on his skin sent a jolt of desire through him. Stefan moved his jacket and draped it across his lap to hide his body’s response to her. If she noticed the growing tightness of his breeches, she didn’t give a sign, but continued to wipe the blood away.

He leaned forward as if to watch her work and his nostrils flared as he inhaled. Her long black hair trailed over her shoulders and down her back, scented like a summer

meadow, all sun and flowers and tall grass. It was heady stuff, like nothing he'd ever encountered.

Gustav reappeared in the door and cleared his throat. Stefan straightened, caught in the act. Damn. If he didn't speak with the old gossip, this story would be all over the castle by nightfall.

A short man with a black satchel stood behind Gustav. "Inspector, Gustav tells me you're injured." He waited for Stefan's nod to enter the room and came to look over the woman's shoulder at her handiwork.

"Very good job of cleaning, miss. I'll take over now." He placed his bag on the cot next to Stefan, unsnapped the clasps, and rummaged through it.

Dropping the bloody towel next to the bowl on the floor, she began to rise. Stefan caught her hand as it rested on his knee. His thumb brushed the back of her hand, treasuring the softness of her skin.

"He's all yours, healer." She slid her hand from under his and walked to the door.

He should say something witty before she left, but his mind denied him any words except, "Don't go," and "Stay." Those weren't clever at all.

"Gustav. See me when you've finished." Stefan leaned back against the wall as the healer brought out his wand.

"Aye, sir." Gustav reached up to tug on her sleeve. "This way, patroller."

Without giving Stefan a second look, she left the room.

"Damn." Stefan blew out his breath and thumped his head against the wall several times. He'd forgotten to ask her name and to thank her for her tender ministrations.

The healer looked up from his work. "Sorry, Inspector. Did that hurt?"

“No. I just forgot something.”

She was young and beautiful and he was older and... Stefan rubbed his face with his hand, feeling the coarse grizzle of his beard. His gaze traveled down his long length. Damnation. He looked as if he'd been trampled in the mud and smelled of sweat and blood. Stefan groaned.

“Inspector?”

“Just get on with it.” Leaning back against the wall, Stefan closed his eyes and wished he really was lying face down in that damned gully.