

The Legends of Kinragon

Darkwoven. Deathrider of the Scorkaden.

Lightwoven. Singer of the Seas.

Bloodwoven. Black Dragon Empress.

By

Victoria Kerrigan

Presenting

The opening chapter of

Darkwoven.
Deathrider of the Scorkaden.

Enslaved to Freedom

*Many things in time do rise and fall,
But the sands of Nerad change not at all,
Wind wears down stone as time does pass,
Temples once tall crumble to ruins at last,
And ever the right of death comes to the heart,
A sting to those carrying the Scorkadin mark.*

Hymns of the Scorkaden

“Is she a virgin?”

“Sad I am to say it, but no.” The slavemaster shook his head. “I purchased ‘er from the Nefsha, some time since, and they leave no stock unbroken, see.”

Kinfyre knew they discussed her. The buyer had affected disinterest as he passed, but his avid gaze prickled her flesh to wary alertness.

“Indeed.” The buyer’s eyebrows rose and he glanced over his shoulder to where Kinfyre hung, fettered last in the line of women slaves. “Two hundred gilds then and I’ll take her off your hands. Slave like that; she would be hard to sell in these times with the Shamalyan offloading their stock.”

“Huh.” Salant’s tiny black eyes narrowed. “Can’t see me letting ‘er go for less than four ‘undred. Or I lose money on ‘er and we can’t have that, see.”

“Three and not a gild more. There are other Slavers roaming the rim. Talk to your wife, I’ll wait your answer.” The buyer strolled down the line of chained girls, examining teeth and weighing breasts and buttocks with a casual hand.

Kinfyre met her cage mate’s concerned gaze. Jiaah alone knew of Kinfyre’s plan, should she ever be unfettered. *Jiaah knows this is the moment.* Someone hissed with pain and Kinfyre glanced at the other girls. The buyer had professed no interest in the boys or men available for purchase and so only the women’s string had been unloaded to stand for sale. There’d been more additions than usual that week, and

some of the new girls struggled with the selling pose, whimpering in agony. The high strung chain hoisted them upward until only the balls of their feet touched the ground. Though it offered a secondary advantage of preventing girls from striking buyers, Salant used it to thrust forward young, firm breasts and make their legs appear longer.

Kinfyre's height and long lean legs gave her an advantage over the smaller girls; she could stand, sparing her the aching calves the other slaves suffered. Several girls wept in hopeless anguish over their fate, their crying soft in the still desert air. But there would be no weeping for her. Kinfyre's tears had dried up years ago, long before she'd left girlhood behind... when she'd woken far from hearth, home and family to find herself under the cruel shadowed silks of a Nefsha tent.

The buyer reached the end of the line and stood before Kinfyre. He fingered the laces on her bodice, tracing a path down under her short skirt to caress her thigh. His gaze crawled over her body as if he already held her leash around his fist. Slipping his hand inside her tunic to weigh a breast with one careless hand, his narrowed brown eyes stared into hers, a half smile curving his lips.

Did he want her to resist? She knew he had the right to test the goods, no matter how much she hated the feel of his hands upon her skin. Kinfyre bared her teeth, hissing her hatred at him. If he'd only stood a little further back she could have placed a well-aimed boot between his eyes. Wait...wait, the moment will come.

"Let's sell 'er to 'im. The offer's good. We can make three 'undred gilds out of 'er, and best we'll get from the Shamalyan is two 'undred." The slavemaster crouched near the sullen fire, beside his sour wife, Ampa.

"She's more to the Shamalyan type than our other stock." The slavemistress stared over the slaves, her gaze threatening them to silence as effectively as the lash.

“They’d pay more than the usual to get their ‘ands on ‘er. They like the long-legged fair ones, they do, you know that as well as me.”

Kinfyre stilled. *Shamalyan...* Were Ampa and Salant planning on selling her back to her own people? Fear and excitement cramped her stomach. Would the Shamalyan release one of their own, one freeborn to their blood? She remembered nothing of them, knew nothing of their customs or ways. Would she be pitied for her past, hated... reviled?

“But Ampa, then we’ve got to get ‘er all the way to the Shamalyan lands.” Salant grimaced, shaking his head. “Some as saying there’s unrest there, so they say. Some as even been whispering they’re selling their stock, you ‘eard ‘im say so yourself. Those Shamalyan still buying are the ones who travel a fair bit, so they do. Remember we have to feed ‘er and keep ‘er ribs covered till we find them. Balance that against the gilds in our hands...” He paused, wiggling his fingers at his wife as though he could already feel the gold on his palm, “with the gain from selling ‘er we’ll manage to keep our other stock in finer form and get more for them.”

“Well, do as you want, you always do. I’m just saying, I am, that she’s got the odd looks the Shamalyan like so much. She’s different from the rest... the others are...” Ampa ran her eyes down the column of girls, “-like foals from the same stallion... dark hair, dark eyes, plump, nice curves.’ She cast a sharp glance at her husband. “Some of the younger ones are probably your get, by the look of them. Have you been riding the breeders again? You know I’ve been trying to keep the bloodstock pure.”

Kinfyre repressed a shudder. Her time in Salant and Ampa’s slave cages had taught her too much of what happened to those who fell prey to the slavemaster’s lecherous glance. She was fortunate she hadn’t been his type. Girls came back from

his bed changed. Not physically injured - Salant was too smart to damage the goods permanently - but there were other, more subtle forms of torment and Salant employed many of them. His cruel torture broke something in the girls nothing could repair. She felt his foul gaze slide over her flesh and lifted her head to meet his eyes.

“Nothing wrong with testing the breeders now and then my love, keeps them fertile, it does, in their off season, and gives us more stock.” Salant watched Kinfyre over his wife’s shoulder. He ran his tongue over his thick lips and winked at her.

Kinfyre stared through him. No need to give Salant the satisfaction of knowing she listened or cared about the bargaining over her. *But given the chance, I’ll kill you Slavemaster... your time is coming.*

She’d listened to bargaining before, but not often over herself. It sickened her knowing she could be bought and sold; like water or wine, with no choice over who to, or when. *I may be a slave, but no one owns my soul. If I ever find freedom, I swear I will fight for the freedom of every slave. No one should endure this life.*

“Well come on, what will it be?” The buyer folded his arms. He glanced behind them to the sand dunes, his body tense. “Will you accept my offer or not? I don’t have all day to listen to you to prattling on. Night will fall soon and I want to be far away by then.”

He seemed nervous about the desert, Kinfyre thought, though what he watched for she couldn’t imagine. She remembered its vast empty distances from her youth; nothing existed out there except sky, sand, searing heat and bitter cold.

Violet shadows danced across the dunes as the sun sank low in the sky. A cool breeze washed over the camp, the first sign of the cold night to come. It smelt fresh. After years cramped amongst unwashed slaves Kinfyre inhaled deeply. Was it the scent of freedom?

“Right then. We’ll take your offer.” Salant nodded. “Four ‘undred gilds, and not a penny less. She’s a prize this one, make no mistake. Look at that eye colour. Like a blue-green sea. I’ve not seen another like it, and neither will you.” Salant walked toward her, pinching the bottoms of girls he passed to make them raise higher on their toes. Stopping before Kinfyre, he gestured to the buyer. “What about ‘er ‘air?” He lifted the pale strands in his hand, turning them so they gleamed in the light of the dying sun. “Pretty stuff. Not your usual colour either. Like gold and silver it is.”

The buyer sighed. “She’s more bone and muscle than soft welcoming curves at the moment; though I grant her looks have potential. Three hundred was my offer and not a gild more. If you want the deal strike her chains and do it now, I’ve no more time to waste.”

Salant measured the buyer, his pig-like eyes narrowed in thought.

Kinfyre held her breath. If he sold her now, she’d have a chance to kill him when he unshackled her – the long wait for the precious opportunity would be over. *But if he refuses the offer, he might sell me to the Shamalyan and I will meet my people at last...if they accept me, that is.* Turmoil and indecision twisted her stomach until she took a deep breath, calming her agitation. She needed to focus on this moment, prepare for the possibility he might strike her chains.

Salant shrugged and picked up a small chisel. “A special deal for you then, but in return I’d be pleased for you to pass on my particulars to those looking to buy good stock.” He waved at the train of cages behind them, the harnessed draybeasts standing quiet in what little shade the sparse stand of trees provided. “We’re going around the outer rim of the desert and we’ll be stopping at the usual watering holes for trade. Be happy to bargain with you again, we will.” Directing a quelling glance at his wife he struck Kinfyre’s wrist shackles free of the master chain.

She dropped to her knees. Despite the fact she expected the brief moment of freedom, a sickening rush of nausea swept over Kinfyre and she hung her head, inhaling deeply. She relished the sting of blood as it flowed back into limbs cramped from being posed too long. Adrenalin followed quickly.

Before she could stand Salant picked up the fetter and ran it free of her collar, replacing it with a shorter chain. He hauled her close. "None of your fighter tricks mind," he said, his tone low and vicious. "At least not till I have the gold in my hands." He hauled her toward the buyer, half dragging her across the sand on her knees.

Kinfyre grunted, the collar strangling around the words she longed to speak.

"Careful with the merchandise. She's mine now and I expect you to treat her as such," the buyer growled, reaching for the chain as Salant neared.

Salant held it just out of reach. "Not until I have the gilds."

Fury darkening his eyes, the buyer lifted a sack and slammed it into Salant's outstretched hands.

Salant tossed it to his wife, his greedy eyes still fastened on the buyer as though he expected treachery. Behind them Ampa counted, the quick clinking chiming a contrast to Kinfyre's harsh breaths.

The Slavemaster toyed with Kinfyre's leash, tightening and releasing the chain collar around her neck while he waited for his wife to finish.

Ampa scooped the gilds up, tucking it back into the sack before casting her husband a sharp nod.

Salant handed Kinfyre's leash over to the buyer and turned his back on them both. Releasing the master fetter, he whistled for the slaves to get back in the cages.

The buyer tightened his fingers around the chain, looking at Kinfyre with an unreadable expression.

Kinfyre ripped her leash out of her new owner's hands. Grasping the chain she lashed the end across his face.

Blood spurted. He reeled sideways and fell to the ground.

Turning and lifting her leg, Kinfyre kicked it into Salant's back, driving him face first on to the sand. Bending she searched in her boot for the sharpened bone she'd hidden there, carved to a fine point. It slid into her palm, heavy and thirsty for blood.

Ampa screamed.

Slaves panicked, chains jerking and grinding against each other as they tried to run in different directions.

Kinfyre walked toward Salant, savouring the moment.

He rolled over, his eyes bulging with fear as she towered over him.

"This is for you, for thinking you own any of us." Leaping upward, she fell to her knees on his chest, feeling breath gasp out of him and the sickening sound of ribs cracking underneath her. Kinfyre readied the bone stake to plunge into his chest when she felt a hand grab her hair and wrench her backward.

The buyer hauled her off Salant. "I don't care if you kill him, but hit me? That I won't permit." He drove his fist into her with such force he knocked her sideways into the sand.

Kinfyre looked up at him through eyes blurry with pain, feeling the hot warmth of blood trickle from her nose and lip.

The buyer towered over her, still holding thick strands of her pale hair in his fist, and her scalp ached where they'd ripped free. He reached down, his fist raised.

“Now-” Jiaah’s scream caught the buyer’s attention and he paused, looking up.

Kinfyre turned her head. Her heart lifted.

Jiaah fought against the chains, urging the other slaves to haul at them with her. They’d almost freed the master fetter from the last hooks. Soon they would all be free.

Ampa’s lash cracked. Studded with hooked barbs, it could shred through muscle, slicing rebellion out of an unwilling slave. It curled around Jiaah’s ribs, blood spurting over the white sands as the barbs shredded and tore across her golden flesh. A second time Ampa lashed her, ripping great gashes across Jiaah’s torso.

Jiaah did not scream her agony but fell silent in the traces, her head dropping to her chest in defeat as she hung from her wrists, dark hair shrouding her face.

“Jiaah-” Kinfyre kicked upwards with both legs, leaping to her feet. She swung both fists into the buyer’s stomach. Air hissed out of him and he doubled over. Kinfyre slammed her knee upward, hearing bone crunch as it smashed into his chin, lifting him to full height. She made her second strike into his exposed groin and the buyer’s eyes rolled backwards.

He groaned, clutching his manhood as he collapsed back into the sand.

Turning, Kinfyre searched for her bone knife. It lay beside Salant who tried to scuttle backwards in the sand from her, gasping for breath.

He stretched his fingers out, reaching for his whip.

Measuring the distance between them she leapt toward the slavemaster. Coming down in a roll she bounded up in an instant, the knife safe in her palm. She continued the movement into a kick that slammed into Salant’s ribs, thrusting him away from the lash.

Salant shrieked an agonised scream, his eyes rolling backwards.

The buyer staggered up, unsheathing his own knife. “You bitch.”

“Hold!” The voice thundered from behind them.

Kinfyre whirled, balancing her weight on the balls of her feet as she gauged this new threat. For a moment she nearly dropped her knife, astonished at the sight before her.

A man sat astride a massive creature. Swaying over the sands, it crouched, poised to spring.

Kinfyre had to call on every ounce of strength to stand tall. Never had she seen such a beast. Deep black eyes, like polished mirrors, appeared large in the wedge shaped head. Two great ruffs fanned behind the head, the rider sitting in an ornate saddle strapped between them, his gaze curious as it rested on Kinfyre. The beast’s huge tail curved over its back, ending above its rider’s head. Menacing claws, rimmed with serrated edges, clicked open. Large armoured leathery plates rippled down its back and guarded each of its six legs. Scaled leathery skin, the colour of sand, covered the rest of its body.

Kinfyre couldn’t decide whether the creature appeared more insect or lizard, but either way it looked like it could cut her in half with one slice of its massive claws.

“What happens here?” the rider’s quiet air of authority reduced even the screeching Ampa to silence.

The slavemistress rose to her feet, gathering her composure. “Our slave here,” Ampa gestured to Kinfyre, “is trying to kill her slavemaster, my husband.”

“She’s my slave now,” the buyer corrected, but Kinfyre noticed he too, had taken a step backward, meek in the presence of the strange creature and its rider.

“And you? What have you to say?” The rider stared at Kinfyre, something akin to respect in his expression.

“You ask a slave to speak?” Ampa burst out, “what manner of man are you?”

“I am a rider of a Scorkadan, and one of the Scorkaden folk,” the rider answered, raising an eyebrow in Ampa’s direction. “I do what I will. As for your claim to ownership of this woman, I believe no person should own another. We Riders have no respect for slavers, so I suggest you mind your words, old woman. You,” he directed his piercing eyes to Kinfyre. “It is clear to me you are a fighter. My people respect those who can use a blade, and you have a rare gift such as I have not seen before. How did you come to be a slave?”

Silence followed his words.

Kinfyre raised herself to her tallest, lifting her chin. “I am Kinfyre. I am free born, lost to slavery through no fault of my parents. No one has the right to sell me, least of all this man,” she nudged Salant’s body with her toe, “who deserves death for all he has done. I’ve long planned to avenge the cruelty he has dealt to those in his care.”

The rider cocked his head. “Well then Kinfyre, free born and who stands free, kill him.”

Ampa moaned and then swayed, falling to her knees.

Kinfyre didn’t need to be told twice. She knelt and thrust the bone knife deep into Salant’s chest, taking a deep pleasure in the spurt of his blood over her hand. The slavemaster’s body jerked once, twice, then lay still. Kinfyre stared down at his slackening face for a moment. After all his torturous ways, his unmitigated cruelty, he died too fast. But still, it felt good. She wiped her hands on his tunic, smearing his crimson blood across the rich cloth.

Kinfyre lifted her head, not bothering to hide her grim satisfaction as she met the rider's eyes.

"Neatly done," he inclined his head to her, his expression reserved. "You found his heart easily, and I'm guessing it was a small target. Had it been me I would have made him suffer a little. But no matter, there are as many who will laud your quick mercy." He glanced around the campsite, his gaze full of pity. "Would that I could free you all," he said, in a voice lifted to carry to the other slaves. "But we are reluctant to interfere in the laws of those not our own. Already I have done more than I ought."

A series of staccato clicks came from the beast and the rider looked startled, his eyebrows rising as he glanced down at his mount. His gaze settled back on Kinfyre, and she wondered about the intense curiosity she saw in his eyes. He paused for a long moment as if weighing his next words.

"Kinfyre of the free born, since you are already unfettered and thus bound by no laws, what do you think about joining the Scorkaden?" He extended a hand and his mount crouched low to the sand, almost as though it waited for her.

Kinfyre looked deep into the rider's eyes, torn by indecision. This fearsome creature appeared as though it had been torn from the very depths of her worst nightmares. Perhaps he just wanted to feed her to the beast. Yet... what waited for her here but certain death? She'd expected to die trying to kill Salant, and if not then, afterward at Ampa's revengeful hand. Kinfyre had not planned to live; had not cared if she didn't.

"She is *my* slave. If you want her, pay for her!" The buyer lifted his knife and threw it haft first at the rider. It flashed through the air, turning end over end.

Kinfyre gasped, ducking as the knife skimmed past her head.

The rider raised a hand in a careless motion. The knife thunked into his gloved palm. “Unless you can stop me, stranger, Kinfyre is free to join us.”

“Us?” the buyer gestured around, his tone scornful. “As far as I can tell you’re alone.”

“Even if I were alone, you could not stop us.” The rider issued a low whistle and the ground trembled as two more of the massive creatures appeared from behind the dunes. One beast had hide with colour striations like golden stone, the other shades of pale brown. A rider sat on each creature, both men wearing armour dyed to match their mounts. They wore strange helmets, fanned wide at the back in imitation of the beasts, with visors that hid all but their eyes. “Well Kinfyre, what choose you?” the first rider asked once more.

Kinfyre glanced at the other slaves. Jiaah still hung silent, her skin bloodied and torn from the lash, her face curtained by her black hair. In this moment pregnant with freedom, Kinfyre knew she should obey the first law of slavery – if you have a chance to escape, go and do not look back. But she’d shared a cage too long with Jiaah to leave her still shackled. At that moment Jiaah lifted her head. Her eyes met Kinfyre’s through her strands of black hair, widening as they lit upon the Scorkaden.

Ampa snarled and the lash cracked around Jiaah’s ribs once more.

Jiaah jerked, grunting in pain. Her eyes closed and then opened again.

For one brief moment Kinfyre saw her dark golden eyes staring past Kinfyre. She thought she saw Jiaah’s lips forming a word before she fell unconscious into her fetters once more – had she told Kinfyre to go? Kinfyre took a deep breath. She’d no weapon and no means to fight Ampa’s lash and the buyer. It would be the Scorkaden or slavery, she realised. She started toward the Scorkadan creature at a run. *I’ll come back for you, Jiaah*, she vowed.

Reaching the creature's side, Kinfyre stretched her hand up and found herself hoisted smoothly into the saddle behind the Scorkadan rider. To her surprise the creature's hide felt softer under her hands than she expected; it seemed to be covered in fine hairs, giving it the colour of shifting sand.

The buyer raised both hands, shaking his head. "Take her and go then, I've no quarrel with the Scorkaden."

"Yes you do," the rider murmured. "For you raised a weapon to me and the penalty for that is death. Not the quick merciful death a warrior deserves but..." Hefting the knife in his hand the rider ran the blade over the tip of his mount's tail as it curved above him. Flipping it between his fingers, he threw it back at the buyer. It sliced past the man's upper arm, leaving a welling line of blood. "A touch of poison to remind you of us in the coming days."

"Now we go." The rider turned his head to look over his shoulder at her, his face creasing for the first time into a deep grin. Reaching up, he unhooked the chain collar around her neck and tossed it into the sand. "I am Dukkar, Kinfyre freeborn. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Dukkar – but I have a friend..."

Dukkar's amber gaze was warm with sympathy. "I can take no one else, much as I myself would choose to. I have already done too much this day, even if it seems not enough. Now, shall we go?"

"Yes." Kinfyre wrapped her arms around Dukkar's waist as the Scorkadan began to move. The creature tucked its front two claws up as it crawled, each of its legs reaching smoothly over the sand, the long body undulating behind with an almost serpentine movement. It felt odd but not uncomfortable. Kinfyre looked back over the campsite.

Ampa had turned her back on them, herding the girls back into line. She ignored the dead body of her husband, instead haggling with the buyer. “You can have this one instead,” she said, indicating the still unconscious Jiaah.

“But she’s damaged goods.” The buyer’s protest came faint over the sands.

“I’m thinking you like the ones with fight in them... like to keep them in line, eh? Well, you can see she’s got plenty of that.” Ampa folded her arms. “I’ll offer you no other but this one... it was you who lost the first slave we sold you, not us. You’re lucky I’m offering another at all.”

Well, Jiaah may yet have a chance at freedom... easier to escape a single owner than a trader. Sadness and regret gripped Kinfyre as she stared at the slaves. Several of the women gazed after her, mingled expressions of envy, hope and fear on their faces. She could imagine how they felt. “I will return, and when I do, I will free every one of you – and every other slave I can find,” she whispered, swallowing unexpected tears as the campsite disappeared behind a dune. She opened her mouth to call a last farewell to Jiaah, but a shadow winging above them choked the words in her throat.

Instinctively she ducked, feeling the strange mount beneath her crouch low, almost burrowing into the sand to escape the strange shrill cries overhead. What could it be? *That’s no bird...*

Dukkar seemed to complete Kinfyre’s thought. “A dragon-glamour,” he inhaled sharply, his whisper reverential as he gazed upward at the tiny speck.

The speck folded its wings and dived again. A rush of salt air washed over them as it passed. It matched the colour of a flame’s heart, golden yellow in colour. Soft cries issued from it, joyous trills of pleasure as the beast dived again, pulling out at the last possible moment to soar upward and away.

“I didn’t know dragons still existed,” Kinfyre watched with an ache of regret as the creature dwindled into the distance, merging with the setting sun.

Dukkar sucked in a breath, hissed it out through gritted teeth. “They don’t. That is a glamour set to charm the hearts from men. I think it no coincidence that I see one on the day I find you, Kinfyre.” He turned to look at her, his eyes narrowed. “It wings toward the Shadlak lands.”

She shook her head, confused. “What do you mean? What are the Shadlak lands and what have they to do with me?”

“Some things are best not spoken of here. The wind might carry our words to those hidden in the dark and brooding corners of the world, listening for tidings of such things. All things will reveal themselves in the proper time,” Dukkar whispered, turning to watch the sky where the dragon-glamour had disappeared.

The Kyscarab Denburran

*Over windswept sands flows a mournful song,
Carrying prayers and dreams it soars along,
Through Claws the Bitterwind flutes its call,
Searching for ways to break Ardestyn's thrall,
Over age-worn cliffs drifts the sorrowful tune,
Rising in cadence with a dark bejewelled moon,
Enthralling worshippers with a tragic refrain,
Until Clawsong followers understand their pain.*

Scorkaden hymns.

An eerie melody haunted the night air, the fluting sound of breath across hollowed bone. A chill quivered up Kinfyre's spine, prickling the hair on the back of her neck. Their Scorkadan mount slowed. Beside them Kinfyre could see the large dark outlines of their Scorkadan companions, their pace also easing. Stars twinkled overhead, for night had fallen with the swiftness of a blade, and the wind bit into Kinfyre's flesh with sharp, icy teeth.

The strange song rippled over her nerves once more. A subtle glow softened the darkness ahead and Kinfyre craned her neck to discover the source. She could see a scattering of rocks protruded from the sand, ribs jutting out of the earth's carcass. An oval of light indicated shelter within a lean-to on one side. On the highest rock stood a tall horn, glittering in the light it garnered from the stars. Strands of shimmering silver tethered it to stone. The thin fluting tones of eerie song came again, and Kinfyre realised it came from the horn, if horn it was.

A soft velvet voice spoke out of the shadowed folds of dune. "The warriors of the Kyscarab pass into the Wyvden desert late this dark eve."

One of the other riders spoke, his voice deep and grave. "We have been riding the borderlands on patrol, Clawsinger Alsum."

The woman's upturned face gleamed pale under her hooded cloak. "What reports from the Outer rim?" she asked.

"Nothing of interest stirs in those sands of yet." The rider replied. "What have you heard?"

She sighed and lifted a graceful, slender hand. "The Bitterwind sings many tidings through the Claw this night; some good, many of them not." She raised inquiring eyebrows to Dukkar. "Some songs have told tales of those Mystic's riddles that so fascinate you."

In front of Kinfyre the rider stirred. "Fancies, nothing more."

Her gaze narrowed. "So then you won't care if I don't tell them to you?" She gave a short humourless laugh, taking long, gliding strides across the sand. "I shall nonetheless, for they amuse me as well. They talk of Fire, and who may be born of..." She stilled, seeing Kinfyre for the first time. Her tone grew guarded. "You bring new blood into our lands."

Kinfyre balled her fists on her knees, taking a calming breath. Would the rejection of her slave past begin now, so soon?

"Worthy blood, Mistress Alsum," Dukkar assured her. "A fighter." His voice sounded confident but he shifted in the saddle as if made uneasy by the question.

Kinfyre released a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. *Perhaps not food for the beast, then.*

Their Scorkadan sidled as the woman neared. She stared up at Kinfyre for a long moment, her face smooth and expressionless. Only her eyes betrayed her emotion, and they glittered dark and knowing in her pale face. "You are well come to our lands," she said after a long moment before turning away, her long skirts sweeping across the sand as she walked back to the lean-to.

“Clawsinger Alsum?” Dukkar called after her.

She turned back. “Be you gone, warriors. I have other songs to send this fair night.” The oval of light outlined her for one brief moment before she disappeared.

Kinfyre looked between the riders, wondering what they thought of the woman’s strange behaviour. They sat in silence, the same way they’d passed most of the journey. A long glance seemed to pass between them. She thought they must often ride together, for most of the time the three riders used little more than hand signals to communicate. This time was no different. Kinfyre wished she could see their faces. During the ride their visors had remained lowered, thin gauze nets dropped over the eye slits. Dukkar had donned his helmet as they reached the deeper sands of the desert, and she’d understood why as soon as the winds started to blow. Her face felt raw and when she’d reached up tiny pinpricks of blood etched strange wind-blown designs across her fingertips. After that she’d spent most of the ride with her head tucked low behind Dukkar’s shoulders for protection.

“Do you think she suspects?” One of the other riders said.

“I don’t know. We shall see what happens when we reach the Burrowed City, I suppose, and hope she sends no songs to fall there before us,” Dukkar replied, clicking to his mount. The Scorkadan crawled across the sand before breaking into a run.

The Burrowed City? Kinfyre glanced back, looking past the two beasts following them to the strange singing horn and the lady who lived beneath it. She’d returned to the doorway to watch them leave, her face in shadow. Something about her chilled Kinfyre’s flesh. She wanted to ask Dukkar what had happened; what the exchange meant, but the wind swallowed her words as they raced forward into darkness.

“Do you want a drink, Kinfyre?”

Dukkar’s question jolted her out of a restless slumber. Pulling herself upright, Kinfyre realised she’d been leaning against the rider’s back. The smooth motion of their strange mount must have lulled her to sleep. “Yes, I thank you.” She accepted the flask, taking a long swallow of the cool water. A faint blush over the horizon heralded the rise of dawn. They’d stopped at a cliff, the two other riders ranged along the edge beside them. Below them more desert stretched into the seemingly endless distance, a velvet mantle of shadow unfolding shades of gold and pink as the soft light crept across the sand. The men watched the still dunes, waiting.

“No trace to be seen.” One of the men spoke into the quiet.

“As expected.” Dukkar replied. “It is one of their rare strengths, I admit. We face a worthy adversary.”

Kinfyre slid a glance at the men. Who would be foolish enough to name the Scorkaden and their beasts enemy?

“There’s sandrat sign on the dunes - sunfall side. We could hunt?” one of the men suggested.

“We can wait until we get to the Denburran.” Dukkar answered. “Bistaa?”

“We can wait.”

Kinfyre offered the flask back to Dukkar.

He tucked it into a pouch on his saddle before turning to look at her. “We’ve reached the heartlands of the Scorkaden. I thought you might like to refresh yourself before the descent.”

Which meant he wanted her awake and holding on, Kinfyre guessed. “I don’t see a path.”

“We don’t need one. We’re going down the cliff side.” He watched her eyes.

“You mean we’re riding down that?” She looked at the cliff before them, chilled by the thought. It sheered downward, almost a vertical descent.

“We are.”

Kinfyre knew they wouldn’t respect her for showing fear, and it wouldn’t change their course. She nodded, keeping her expression calm.

“Now, as we descend, we will lie back against X’im. There is an extra strap there with handholds for us both.”

They name these things? Turning, she saw the strap Dukkar referred to, half way up the creature’s back

“You see them? Grip the higher pair, and we’ll go.”

“I see them.” Kinfyre leant back until she lay along X’im’s spine, reaching for the handholds. In front of her Dukkar leant back, gripping the second set closer to her knees, the creature’s ruff between them supporting his back. Then, although she heard no command, X’im began to move. Slowly the creature tilted its tail upward, inching its head forward over the cliff edge until even though they lay along his back, they sat almost upright again. X’im descended the cliff at a slow crawl. Her arms ached with the immense strain, but Kinfyre gripped tighter and gave herself to the moment, trying to enjoy the view of the wide and lonely desert stretching away beneath them. She’d learnt long ago in the slave cages how to distance pain from her body.

Thinking of the cages brought back a rush of memories. She remembered Jossan’s kindness, the first slave to befriend her. She reminded him of his granddaughter, he used to say, and she’d seen the tears in his eyes before he blinked them away. Slaves weren’t allowed tears, nor to remember families to cry them over. As gentle as he’d been, Jossan’s fighting skills had been near legendary amongst the slaves. It had been Jossan who taught Salant’s slaves to fight and he’d taken a special

interest in Kinfyre. Salant may have traded better for Jossan's skills improving the reputation of his slaves in the fighting rings, but he'd never known Jossan's true cause. Jossan drove the slaves to unmatched fighting skills in the hope one day they might have the chance to free themselves – and the skill to take that chance if it came. She smiled, wishing he could have seen her kill Salant. How proud he would have been of her. In Kinfyre at least, his ambitions had been realised. *If it weren't for Jossan teaching me how to fight...I would still be enslaved.*

“Kinfyre?” Dukkar interrupted her thoughts.

“Yes?”

“We will rest at the plateau.”

Kinfyre glanced around, realising they'd nearly reached a wide protuberance half way down the cliff. X'im's tail started to tilt downward as he became horizontal, and she felt the strain on her arms decrease. As they reached the ledge, she sat up, letting the leather handholds fall. Behind her Kinfyre heard an audible clicking as the other Scorkadan joined them, levelling out as they too reached the outcropping.

The other riders cast enquiring glances in her direction, as if measuring how she had coped with the descent.

Show no fear, no pain, no matter what you feel. Never had her own mantra been so appropriate she thought, letting a small smile curve her lips as she copied Dukkar's smooth style of dismounting. It took all her strength to stand tall after the long ride; her legs ached from the unaccustomed activity.

One of them executed a half bow in her direction before he too dismounted, checking his saddle straps. The thicker of the two lifted off his helmet. Blunt faced and scarred, he nodded to Kinfyre as he passed a flask around. Kinfyre took a quick

sip. No water this; it burnt a molten path down her throat, but she felt warmed and stronger for it.

A far off rumble sounded, ominous in the quiet of the dawn. Kinfyre glanced at her companions, sensing their nervousness as their mounts side-stepped uneasily. The rumble turned into a roar, and then the ground shook. Above them the line of the cliff began to move. It trembled against the sky, and then stilled.

“The Gods shiver,” the blunt man said in a tone filled with awe, his gaze sliding to Kinfyre. “Someone has stirred their envy.”

A grinding noise began, loud in the sudden unnatural quiet. Kinfyre glanced upward to see a massive section of the cliff shear away from itself. Down it slid, toward their upturned faces. She could hear nothing but the rushing of her own blood in her ears. Her heartbeat thrummed through her body, loud with fear.

“Go!” Dukkar shouted, first to move. He leapt towards X'im, hauling Kinfyre with him. Smaller pieces of rock and cliff spun away from the main edge, pelting down amongst them. Dukkar settled into the saddle, depositing her behind him. Once more they tilted to begin the descent. Kinfyre grabbed the handholds and tried not to watch the tangled blur of the Scorkadan's undulating legs as they scrambled down the cliff. A cascade of rocks fell around them, some bombarding X'im, one welting Kinfyre's cheekbone. A single rock hit Dukkar on the side of his head. A spray of blood flew over Kinfyre, and she reached forward to grab Dukkar with one hand as he slumped into unconsciousness.

She glanced downward. The desert floor seemed an eternity away – but if she let him go he would plummet to his death. *How long can I hold him like this?* Her muscles, still weak from her tremendous exertion a day earlier, trembled in agony.

Above them the endless grinding and hail of rocks ceased for a moment, then came a massive crash. Kinfyre risked a quick look. The shorn rock face had smashed into the ledge where they'd rested moments before. The remaining shaft wavered on the precipice of another sliding descent.

"Can you hold?" Dukkar roused, his voice breathless with pain.

She could feel the terrible ache in her arms, but she removed herself from it, using breathing to set the greater pain aside from her body until she could feel only a low ebb of agony. *So much better to hurt with honest use than from being cramped in the travelling cages all day*, she told herself. "It's nothing."

"And all the pain you feel shall be as nothing to her," Dukkar whispered, his voice so soft she wondered if she imagined the words. He fell limp again.

They levelled as they reached the desert floor. Once they were upright once more Kinfyre released Dukkar into the safe embrace of the X'im's thick ruffs. They held the Rider upright, though his head still lolled to one side. The Scorkadan did not slow until they had reached a safe distance from the cliff, then another rider lifted his hand and the creatures halted, spinning to stare at the devastation behind them.

The tall rider slid to the ground, making his way to Kinfyre and Dukkar. "You did well," he told her, his tone approving. "My brother has you to thank for his life."

Kinfyre barely managed a brief nod. The exhaustion of holding Dukkar in the saddle had drained her. X'im lowered and Kinfyre slid to the sand. Her legs felt shaky underneath her and she collapsed to her knees. Small black spots danced before her eyes, growing larger with each passing moment, until the darkness enfolded her.

Hands on her shoulders drew Kinfyre back from shadows. Someone lifted her up, tilting a waterskin to her lips. Cool liquid slid down her parched throat and she swallowed gratefully. Kinfyre closed her eyes against the dark shapes still dancing in

her vision and leaned back against the supporting arm, infinite weariness in every bone and muscle. Voices sounded around her, fading in and out.

“-do you still doubt my wisdom, brother?”

Kinfyre thought the first voice was Dukkar’s, stronger now.

“Let us say I will speak nothing to dissuade you the next time one of your foolish ideas is mentioned.... half woven prophecies and riddles from mystics, who imagined a vein of truth might run in them, eh?” Concern shadowed the undertones of the sarcastic comment.

A laugh came from Dukkar in reply, ending on an inward hiss of pain.

“All stitched,” a third voice spoke in a low tone. “There’s naught wrong with the lady a month’s worth of food won’t fix.”

“What of the injury on her cheek, Bistaa?”

“A scrape, no more. It won’t even leave a scar, though I’ve covered it in balm to be sure. She needs a helmet though – the wind shear on her cheeks is bad.”

“Kinfyre?” Dukkar spoke, and she opened her eyes to see him kneeling before her. “I thank you.”

She closed her eyes. “No more than I owed you, Rider.”

“We need to press on. Do you think you can stand to mount? I have food for you to eat as we ride.”

Kinfyre nodded, sheer strength of will driving her to her feet. “Does this mean you’re not going to feed me to the Scorkadan?”

Dukkar snorted as he assisted her to X’im’s saddle with gentle hands. “His diet is sandrats, not thin waifs in need of a decent meal.” She could hear laughter in his voice as he added, “Perhaps when I have fattened you up. Hey X’im?” He slapped his mount as he stepped up into the saddle.

Kinfyre felt Xim rumble underneath her. *Surely the beast doesn't understand our conversation?*

She leant against the Scorkadan's ruff as the ground passed beneath them in blurry swiftness. A lone rock appeared on the horizon, gnarled and twisted by the sand's ravages. It slipped past too, almost between blinks, Kinfyre thought. The endless plain of sand dipped and flowed around them as the Scorkadan travelled across the desert. Glancing back, Kinfyre realised the constant wind had already smeared away what little impression their mounts had made.

A sudden flurry of clicking and murmuring rumbles returned her attention ahead. X'im had raised his claws, and over her head she sensed his tail curving upward. Before them stood a strange stone, at first appearance like any other in the desert, when she looked closer she could see a faint discolouration in the rock forming the blurred outline of a Scorkadan. On the ground beyond she could see a thin crack. Further on it widened into a crevasse, spearing downward into darkness. Slowly the Scorkadan crept closer to the edge, his body beginning to tilt as he nosed downward into the cleft.

Without being told, Kinfyre leant back and grasped the leather handholds, feeling moments later Dukkar settling into place.

"We are almost home," he said, a note of unexpected longing in his voice.

What breath Kinfyre had to reply was stolen by the rapid descent into darkness. Were they going into the very bowels of the earth itself? She repressed a shudder. The black air pressed dry cool fingers against her, almost too close after the wide freedom of the desert.

It seemed they crawled vertically downward for an eternity until the crevasse began to level out. Kinfyre released the handholds again as the Scorkadan reached the

floor. Nothing but shadows surrounded them. In the dim light from the thin line of sky overhead she could make out darker shapes against the wall as the other two Scorkadan crawled after them. Then the Scorkadan crept forward into blackness so absolute it stole her breath.

Kinfyre could feel the walls of the tunnel overhead and all around, pressing in upon her with the weight of rock and sand above. She concentrated on the feel of X'im beneath her legs. Passageways seemed to open out of the tunnel. At times they crept through openings so small she had to press her body along X'im's back to prevent the stone roof from scraping her head. What manner of place was this underground warren? *Show no fear, no matter what you feel*, she told herself, breathing deeply to relax her muscles. An unusual aroma reached her, the scent of spicy wood stronger in senses heightened by the darkness.

A flash of light in her eyes blinded Kinfyre for a moment, and when she opened them she realised they had emerged into a wide pit filled with people – a thriving city. The noise seemed deafening after the silence of the tunnel. Far overhead a glass dome formed the roof. A drift of sand swept across it, momentarily shadowing the floor, then the wind blew it free and sunlight shone down again. Countless holes scarred the walls of the burrow, but as her gaze travelled down from the roof Kinfyre realised they must be living quarters - she could see people in some of them. Scorkaden crawled everywhere – several creeping up and down the walls, delivering folk to their caves. People chatted, arguing over purchases or bartering trade goods. Others balanced urns of water on their heads, while one woman carried a bundle of wood worth at least four slaves.

Where do they find such bounty in the desert? The smell of baking food and hot bread wafted toward them, overlaying the rich spice scent she'd noticed earlier. Kinfyre's mouth watered. She swung a leg over X'im and jumped to the ground.

The cavern fell silent.

Kinfyre felt the weight of a thousand eyes upon her. Abruptly she became aware of her unclean state. She wore the same clothing she had for months, standard issue to Salant and Ampa's slaves. Once creamy undyed hide, the filth of the slave cages soon discoloured it. Little remained but a short skirt snarled with rips and tears and a tunic laced tight.

After a long tension-filled moment, the gazes upon her began to feel ominous. Fear prickled her skin. Realising none of the riders moved to help her; she threaded between X'im's legs and reached up to the weapon sheaths she'd noticed strapped to his belly. Nocking the guard off one she slid out a sword. Tucking into a roll she came up between his claws, keeping the sword low by her side, but ready. Above her she sensed a rumble from the Scorkadan, but the creature didn't move.

To Kinfyre's surprise a rustle of approving whispers echoed around the cavern. A few heads nodded her way, and then people continued on their previous tasks. Keeping one eye on the crowd, she spoke over her shoulder to Dukkar. "What was that all about?"

He gave a short laugh, shaking his head. "We are too many with space too tight within the burrows to swell our ranks with careless additions. Only tested fighters are welcome here now. They're usually men." Dukkar arched an amused eyebrow at her sudden look of comprehension. "I see you understand. We Scorkadan do not measure a fighter's worth by their sex; though it seems the world outside does so, for so few women are trained to fight these days. Your battle readiness showed

them why I chose to bring you here.” He cocked his leg over the saddle and slid down X'im's side, landing lightly on his feet. “Kinfyre? You can keep the sword. Though in future remember X'im usually prefers the courtesy of advance warning before you go underbelly; it's their most vulnerable area.”

“Just tell me what is going on,” she demanded, squaring up to Dukkar. “What is this place? I think I deserve to know where you have brought me.”

Dukkar crossed his arms, leaning against one of X'im's forelegs. “This is *Kyscarab Denburrán*, the Burrowed City of the Scorkaden. I brought you here because I thought you belonged among us. You're a fighter, Kinfyre. Even as underfed and ill-nourished as you are, I can see that. It makes you of a like mind to the Scorkaden Riders. You wanted your freedom again, and I've granted that desire. What you make of it is up to you.”

“Choose life or death, it's all the same to us,” another voice commented.

Kinfyre turned to see one of their companions striding up to them, the man who'd claimed Dukkar as his brother.

“You've met my brother, Yanddus,” Dukkar said, performing the introduction with a flourish of his hand.

Kinfyre looked between the two men. She could see the resemblance well enough. Both men were tall and well muscled with the easy confident stride of fighters, sharing brown hair, strong features and yellow eyes; the colour of ale. There the likeness ended, for where Dukkar's eyes were merry and his face creased with smile lines, Yanddus exuded a cold impatience.

“What do you mean life or death is all the same to you?” Kinfyre asked.

“Life and death are two facets of the same gift. In the Denburrán we live by the sting and die by it.” Yanddus crossed his arms, his face impassive. “You may be so honoured to die under a Scorkaden sting, Lady, should you prove yourself worthy.”

“I’m here as some kind of sacrifice? I thought you said I was free?” Blood rushed to her face, and Kinfyre reached for the sword hilt.

“You’re faster than the desert wind at leaping to conclusions,” Yanddus replied, shaking his head. “I merely said that it would be an honour to die by the sting, not that you would be allowed to. Here, you can choose your own fate.”

“Allowed to?” *By the gods what manner of people were these?* It seemed every time she asked a question the answer made her even more confused.

“Where should we take her now?” Dukkar asked his brother, his brow creased with concern. “We need to talk to her where we won’t be overheard. And she has been seen, so that won’t be easy.”

Kinfyre glanced from one to the other. *What is going on?* There seemed to be more to this than a simple slave rescue. Why would others be interested in what the brothers said to her?

“Let’s take her to the fighting pits - they’ll be too distracted to pay notice to us there.” Yanddus smiled. It made a difference to his face. He looked almost handsome, in a hard, flinty way.

“You’re right, good choice.” Dukkar nodded approval at his brother. Swinging himself on to X’im’s back, he extended a hand down to Kinfyre.

“Trust me.” His expression seemed serious, as though he understood the fear she must be feeling. “You have thus far, and come to little harm.”

My Rider is worthy of trust, Daughter of Flames.

Disbelief stole Kinfyre's breath as she settled into the saddle behind Dukkar. *Could that have been X'im?* The creature could think – speak even? And why did he call her the Daughter of Flames?

It is true the Darkweavers created us from the smaller wonders of the desert, Kinfyre. But time has made us so much more than those simple life forms.

Kinfyre stared sideways at the Scorkadan Yanddus rode. Intelligence gleamed in the creature's dark mirrored eyes. It must have seen the stunned expression on her face for a ripple of amused clicks scattered between the two creatures.

"I am sorry, X'im, I had no idea," she said, shaking her head at her own ignorance.

Dukkar turned to stare at her, his face incredulous. "What did you say?"

"X'im told me he was no simple creature, and I apologised for thinking he was," she replied, puzzled at the various expressions crossing Dukkar's face.

"X'im spoke to you?"

"I believe he did. A voice spoke in my head, telling me his Rider was worthy of trust. Given your words I have to think he meant you." Kinfyre gripped the saddle's edge to prevent herself from reaching for the security of the sword hilt once more.

A grin broke across Dukkar's face. "Mystics indeed," he said, with a bemused shake of his head. "Here I walk in the presence of the riddle's answer and even I fell into doubt for a moment."