

# The Nesslands 4 – The Realm of Asaph

## Prologue



They're coming, Fimbriald! Out to sea! Look!

The man waved his arms. He gestured to his tall, swarthy companion, who set into a run through the lush grass. Several men looked up, set aside the metal trunks and followed.

'We won't make it, Aganon,' moaned Fimbriald. 'They've already landed!'

High screams came from the village on the shore, the village with palisades still under construction. It was only the dense mesh arching over the houses and shielding the village from the threat of the feared Laniidae that was finished. The mesh consisted of thousands of trees from the Laniu Forest, and the metal flashed sharply in the last rays of the dying sun. Further away, the shadows of the Laniu Forest stretched across the grass.

Fimbriald struggled to pick up the pace. Behind them, the shadows of the trees approached like long, sharp teeth, threatening to rip the fertile soil open and overtake the men in the fields.

It was the soil and the nutritious grass which made the people of Endlet defy the danger and settle so close to the Forest and the Striga Peninsula. However, the growing

danger from the south east and from the mighty Three Peaks to the north meant that the village had to be secured against attack using the trees of the cursed forest.

Terrified, they stared ahead as they ran. The coast was dark with anchored ships, from which broad, cloaked shapes sprang ashore and ran towards the village.

'The guards didn't see them in time!' shouted one of the men. 'They must have sailed under water!' Fimbriald Dolomedes screamed, when he saw the massacre at the town gate. Many of the men from the village had taken up positions in front of it, but the Radix warriors were superior.

'The back gate, Aganon!' he called. 'We have to try to get in that way instead!' Aganon picked up the pace, but had difficulty keeping up with the younger wizard.

'Can't you do something?' shouted Dolomedes.

Aganon's answer drowned in the roars of the charging Radix warriors. Dolomedes cast a quick glance over his shoulder to check whether his teacher was still with him. Aganon raised a hand, his lips shaping a chanted incantation. A shimmering field spread out from the older man's outstretched hand and arched over his head towards the village. Like a thin, creeping veil it moved through the air.

Dolomedes reached the palisade and turned towards the back gate. From the other side of the village they could hear the Radix breaching the front gate. The noise of combat grew inside the village. There were screams behind the palisade.

Quickly he and the other men approached the back gate, where a yet unfinished part of the palisade let them enter. He hesitated instead of following the men, turned and saw his teacher collapse in the grass with a roar. Darkness had fallen over the fields and the sea. The shimmering veil was gone, and the roar of the older man was stifled by the enormous

shape which struck him from the sky – a creature so hideous that Dolomedes gasped for breath.

‘Asaph,’ he whispered, terrified, and stood as if paralysed, unable to help his teacher. ‘What have you done?’

He gripped the collar of a man who was on his way past him. Those Dolomedes had followed from the fields had disappeared into the village.

‘Asaph has made new creatures!’ he roared, shaking the man and pointing to the ballista warrior which had raised itself into the air above its victim on black, leathery wings. The creature screeched triumphantly.

‘We have to barricade this gap ... and the gate!’ he continued. ‘If those creatures get under the mesh, we’re done for! People have to go to their cellars and into the tunnels!’

The man stared at him as if he were insane. ‘But they’re already in the village!’ he screamed. ‘At the front gate! They ha...’ An arrow pierced his neck and grazed Dolomedes’ hand. He let go of the corpse, and whirled to get a better picture of the situation.

Everything was chaos, but there were not yet any Radix warriors in this part of town. Behind him, several people began barricading the gap in the palisade.

‘Marai,’ he gasped. ‘Oh, Marai ...’

He set into a run, continued down a narrow street and on through smelly alleys. At last he reached a small ochre-yellow hovel squeezed in between two slightly larger huts, one of them a smoky tavern.

He pulled at the door and banged on it with the flat of his hand, but it was locked.

‘Marai!’ he roared. He clenched his fist and banged with all his might. ‘Marai! My love! Open up! It’s me!’

The door opened, and a young, dark-haired woman threw herself around his neck and quickly pulled him inside.

'Maker be praised, Fimbriald! What's happening?' She let go of him.

'Radix,' he answered and quickly bolted the door. He began pushing a tall cupboard towards it. 'Who else?' he mumbled to himself and cast a short glance through the street-side window. Dismayed, Marai put a hand to her mouth.

'We have to go to the tunnels,' he said. 'They are our only hope. And then we have to pray they don't find us there.'

He turned to the three terrified girls huddling against the farthest wall of the room.

'We're going out through the stables, girls,' he said. 'Can you do it?' The girls gave a stiff nod. He ran to them and hugged them.

'Promise me that you'll hurry as fast as you can. Mother and I will make sure that...'

Something heavy crashed against the door from the street and made the cupboard tilt threateningly. Dolomedes fell silent, gripped his wife's hand and took a shielding position in front of his daughters. He half turned to them. There was a loud roar, and another crash against the door. Something large and black swept back and forth in front of the window and darkened the room in intervals.

'Fimbriald,' whispered Marai, her face white with fear. 'It's not Radix warriors. It's something else.' They backed further away from the door. Dolomedes did not answer, but he recognised the silhouette in the street. The creature's leathery membranes stretched between its hands and feet and made the dust whirl up fiercely around it. Sparks and fragments from the house on the opposite side of the street, which had been set on fire, slammed against the window. The pane shattered, and smoke gusted into the room. The cupboard toppled and met the floor with a crash. The creature's wing-like arm shoved through the door and struck down Dolomedes. He heard a thud, as his head hit the floor; heard his wife and

daughters scream. He saw a beam in the ceiling snap and fall towards him. Then all became black.



It was the smell that brought him back. The smell of Radix; A pungent, earthy and thick stench. A warrior was leaning over him; the sallow face with the curved canines inches from his own. The warrior sniffed, straightened up and looked around. The room swam before Dolomedes' eyes. Blood ran into his eyes and painted everything around him red. The sound of crackling flames reached him from the street. The door had been torn off its hinges, and most of the wall around the door had been smashed. The jagged hole was like a frame around a burning picture; a chaotic scenery ... a portal to an engulfing nightmare. But his worst nightmare was not outside. It was right here. In this room.

He saw Marai first. Her leg pinned by a beam which also lay across one of his own legs. His leg was not broken, he noted, surprisingly clear-headed. He craned his neck as far as he could, and kept his eyes on the Radix warrior which was on its way towards three lifeless shapes on the floor at the far wall. He screamed. His throat became hoarse as the scream stretched into a shrill screech. He met his wife's blurry eyes, woken by his cry of terror. More Radix entered the house.

There came a groan from one of his daughters. As the only one of his children, she had survived the roof's collapse. He tried to gesture for her to be silent – to lie down. Pretend to be dead. But she was already sitting up, dazed and sore from the blow which had opened a deep gash in her forehead and let the blood blur her eyes. He screamed again, when he saw the Radix warrior wrench her to her feet. The other warriors gathered around her.

'Marai,' he whispered and reached a trembling hand towards his wife. She tried to catch sight of her daughter. The white of her eyes flashed at him.

'Oh, Maker have mercy ...' she whispered.

'Marai,' repeated Dolomedes and took her hand. 'Look at me.' Marai kept staring at the broad backs of the Radix warriors.

They turned, exchanged some incomprehensible words and then began to leave with the young girl in tow. She did not say a word.

A roar rolled up though Dolomedes' throat, but died before it was released. He tried to grab the warriors as they passed. Two of them halted and looked down at what they probably thought of as dying victims. The fire from the house opposite filled the street with smoke. The heat was indescribable.

Dolomedes held his daughter's gaze for as long as he could, before the warriors led her into the fog of smoke. Without a sound, she let them take her.

He heard his wife scream. The two warriors muttered, kicked a bit at the beam, gripped it and began to haul it off her. Then a barking order came from outside. The two warriors let go of the beam and left the house.

'Fimbriald ...' Marai gripped his hand. 'Are they alive? Do you see them?'

Dolomedes swallowed. 'I see them, Marai. I ... I see them both.' He placed his hand on hers and moved it onto his chest. She felt his heart beat strong against her hand.

'But the beams ... they hit ...' He fell silent and closed his eyes. 'Only Sarra survived.' He opened his eyes and met his wife's gaze. The greyish blue eyes were dark with grief. A veil of emptiness slipped over them in that second.

Dolomedes shook her. 'We must save her, Marai. I have to do something! Can you move?'

Marai trembled. 'I can't get my legs free,' she whispered hoarsely. 'I ...' Tears filled her eyes.

Dolomedes sighed. The tears were a good sign. He could still get through to her, but he knew it was only a matter of time. He knew how sensitive his wife's mind was. His own was stronger. He could not let the grief overwhelm him ... not yet. Sarra was still alive. There was still hope. He had to do something.

He lifted his free leg, placed his foot against the beam and tried to push it away. 'Help me,' he asked.

'Can you grip it with your hands?' Sobbing, she nodded.

Exhausted and dripping with sweat in the heat of the fire, they succeeded in getting him free. He got up, winced and then with great difficulty pulled the beam away from his wife.

He gently helped her to the other end of the room. She sat down, leaned against the wall and moaned with pain. The blood painted her dress red. Then he took the cloth from the table and tenderly covered his two younger daughters.

It was only then they realised that it was quiet outside. There were no screams any longer; only the snapping and crackle of flames could be heard. The house opposite had burnt to the ground and all that was left were the smoking, charred remains of the foundations. The fire had spread to the streets behind the burnt house, and the wind had carried it away from them.

'If only the fire had taken us all,' came Marai's voice from behind him. 'Taken all five of us before they came ...' Her voice was toneless. The tears had stopped.

Dolomedes stepped over the fallen beam and into the hole where the door had been. He leaned against the wall to keep himself from falling and stared after the Laniidae birds, disappearing towards the Laniu Forest. Outlines of the new, terrifying creatures could still be seen to the south out to sea.

He turned to her. His tall, broad shape was a silhouette in the hole of the ruined wall. The pale light of the moon washed over the village, only stemmed by the golden, orange light from the still burning houses.

He opened his strong, clenched fists and looked at her with sad eyes.

'It wasn't warriors with knowledge of magic, Marai. They were here for the exercise. For the hunt. And to collect women. Since they didn't take the bodies ... and us ... it seems that was all it was: Fun ... a bit like Asaph used to when he was young.' He fell silent. Then he went to her and knelt in front of her. 'We have no choice, if we want to save Sarra. I have to find Mengiel. He must help me summon his demon. Maybe it can strengthen Sarra's blood the day she ... she gives birth to the child that we know she will bear.'

Marai stared at him and her chin and lips began to quiver.

'I need more time. You understand?' he continued. 'Time to develop the budding magical powers I have, so that I can save her from Aisgard.' Marai opened her mouth to say something.

'I'm not strong enough yet. I have to gain magical strength from somewhere I would not otherwise have considered ... Aganon is dead. I have to go to Meng...'

'No! Not that!' Marai stared at him with wild eyes. 'Not him, Fimbriald! You know he is the cause of the madness spreading through the village! His warped magic is sick! Him ... and his amulet ... his demon! Mengiel cannot heal us like he says he can. He is a disaster to all of us.' She buried her face in her hands and began to sob. 'Oh, we should have left this place long ago. Right when he came to town ... Why didn't...'

'Marai! Stop it! We have lived here happily for many years.' Dolomedes gripped her shoulders. 'But the times have changed since that wizard arrived. I admit ... We should

have left. But I had a responsibility towards the people in this village. Without Aganon and me even more people would be insane because of Mengiel's lack of power as a healer. And more would have passed on the sickness to their children. What could we have done differently? He is the brother of the village chief. I did not have the power to topple him ...'

Marai gripped his wrist. 'I beg you, Fimbriald. You don't know the demon's price.'

He gently broke free of her grip and stood up. 'I have to do it. It is the only chance we have of getting Sarra back. I'm not at all strong enough yet ... I need more time.' He hesitated for a moment.

'Forgive me,' he whispered, turned on his heel and ran into the street.

On his way through the village, he saw people coming out of hiding, which confirmed his theory that the attack had been for fun and not necessarily driven by the Radix' need for more food. Endlet was increasingly afflicted by inbreeding and the so-called healer's lack of skill. So not many young women in Endlet were particularly attractive to the Radix. Dolomedes swallowed the lump which threatened to hinder his breathing. His daughters had been an exception ... And the warriors had not been slow to take advantage, when they found out that Sarra was still alive.

He picked up speed as he passed one of the potters. The body of the potter's wife hung out of a large hole in the wall.

Survivors were rummaging around in the street, smeared with blood and moaning with their hands round their heads. Some knelt beside collapsed bodies in the street. It was strangely quiet in the village. As if an oppressive, pent-up cacophony of screams was slowly gathering into one united cry.

Dolomedes reached the wizard's large, richly-decorated house and stepped inside.

The old man lay stretched out on the floor with splayed arms and legs. He stared into the ceiling with empty eyes. A long, blood-smearred knife had slipped onto the floor from his hand. His furniture was scattered around him. Much of it torn apart.

Dolomedes repressed an oath.

The wizard's useless helper was nowhere to be seen, or ... something caught his eye from the neighbouring room to which the door was ajar. A pair of boot-clad feet dangled in the air over head height. Although he knew the sight that was waiting for him in the chamber, he went to the door anyway. Just in case.

He nudged the door, which swung open with a creak.

The apprentice was hanging from a rope in the ceiling. His mouth and eyes were wide open and his tongue blue and much too big. Behind him hung the wizard's wife.

Dolomedes quickly turned away and stared desperately at the dead wizard. What should he do now? He studied the body which was covered with dark scraps that looked like leather. He bent down, picked up one of the scraps and held it up in the moonlight. Thin veins made a tangled pattern just under the surface of the leather. The skin was still warm and still felt alive. It twitched and contracted, and Dolomedes threw it away. The wizard had not gone down without a fight. He had fought against one of these new creatures that Asaph had created.

Dolomedes studied Mengiel's expressionless face. The hands were strangely rigid, almost like claws compared to the rest of the body, which was completely limp.

He noticed something around the throat. It glinted faintly from under the cloak. He knelt beside the body and let the

leather cord slide between his fingers until the wizard's feared amulet was in his hand.

He hesitated, lifted his eyes and met the gaze of his reflection in a large, shiny copper plate which hung on the wall in front of him. He was a man in his prime. Strong, broad-shouldered and with his dark hair and beard cut short and lightly oiled. He knew that what he was about to do would change his life forever. He would never be the same person after this.

He squeezed the amulet.

Then he pulled. The cord broke, and he quickly stood up and left the house at a run.



'Mengiel is dead,' he panted and slumped down beside Marai. She stared, terrified, at the amulet and pulled away slightly.

'What if you can't control the demon, like he could?' she whispered breathlessly and stared at him.

'What then?'

He opened his hand and stared at the dark, ominous amulet. 'I've seen him summon it,' he said hoarsely. 'I think I know how to do it.'

She looked away and began rocking back and forth with her arms wrapped around herself.

'I need more time,' he repeated. He put a hand on her cheek and tried to meet her eyes, which shone as if with approaching madness. 'Don't you understand? If ...' His eyes darkened. 'If a Radix warrior impregnates Sarra, then ... she'll only live until the child is born. She'll die giving birth. Or shortly afterwards. You know that.'

Marai hid her face in her hands and began to sob.

He lowered his voice and put his arms around her. 'I have to prevent it. I need more time than a pregnancy can give me ... much more time. Maybe ... maybe if she survives the

birth, they'll let her live ... maybe ... because then she could be ... used ... again.' Tears blurred his eyes. He hugged Marai tightly.

'That hope is so fragile,' she whispered against his breast. 'I don't think I can keep it alive.'

Dolomedes slowly held her out at arm's length and looked into her eyes. 'It is fragile,' he said quietly.

'But we have to try.'

It was right before dawn, as Dolomedes knelt in the ruined doorway. He turned his gaze to the sky, then lowered it again and let it rest on the deep shadows that had swallowed every corner of the wrecked street. Now he might succeed in drawing forth the powers that could help him. He looked left and right.

The narrow, crooked street was deserted. A few rats ran out of a house further down the street, but other than that there was no movement to be found anywhere. It was as if the village were frozen.

He lent forwards and drew with a finger in the mud of the street. His finger left the shape he had seen Mengiel use. A simple circle in which he wrote the demon's name: Vaal.

He clutched the amulet and hesitantly mumbled the words bound to the summoning. He could hear his wife breathe behind him in shallow gasps and he felt her eyes burn his back.

The darkness in the street's shadows began to lighten and gather in a common rhythm until they followed his heartbeat. Something was moving independently of the shadows' pulse. An almost imperceptible movement. It tore free and whirled into the street, where it was lit by the waning moonlight. Every corner was empty; empty of the shadow which had gathered before him. Instead they were bathed in an unnatural, shimmering light, as if the moonlight had taken the shadows' place.

Dolomedes fell silent and stared at the tall mass of black, impenetrable shadow which towered above him in the street.

'You are not Mengiel ... son of the People of Light,' said a voice from the darkness. 'Speak ... What do you want from me?'

Dolomedes felt the hairs on his neck stand on end. The demon's voice was low. However, it still felt like it was forcing its way through his flesh and bones like a dull sword.

'I am Fimbriald Dolomedes,' he began. 'I've summoned you because I need your help. Mengiel is dead ... killed by the Radix. They have also killed my two youngest daughters and captured the eldest. I beg you to help me cast a spell that will protect her ... a spell that will strengthen her blood. So that I might be able to save her from Aisgard. I need time to develop the budding magical powers I possess.' He looked imploringly at the black shape of the shadow demon. 'I could revenge Mengiel's death for you ...'

A scornful hiss came from the darkness.

'Revenge Mengiel?' spat the demon. 'Why? Do you really believe me stupid enough to fall for your sycophancy? You don't care about Mengiel. In truth, he disgusted you. So why should I help you, when you're already lying? You're only interested in saving your daughter.'

The voice echoed and faded, and for a while Dolomedes feared that the demon had slipped away. He felt panic rising. This demon was his only hope. He had to be more careful.

The tall column of thick, black shadow was still before him, so he grasped at the straw that was left.

'It's true,' he said quietly and bowed his head. He lifted his eyes and stared into the darkness.

'What's true?' said the demon's voice. Low and unmistakably triumphant.

'Mengiel disgusted me, and the only thing I want is to save my daughter.' Dolomedes lent forwards and folded his hands in his lap. 'I beg you, great Vaal. I'll do anything...'

'Anything?' sounded the smiling voice of the demon. 'Oh, but yes ... you will. You can be sure of that ...'

Dolomedes quickly looked over his shoulder and saw that Marai had crawled up close behind him. It made him twitch when he noticed her so close. She shivered and began rocking back and forth again. He reached out behind him and squeezed her hand. He looked back at the demon.

'You will have to sacrifice blood to me,' continued the demon. 'In large quantities.' It hesitated.

'Blood which contains the strongest essence of love that you can find. From that I will be able to cast a blood spell over your daughter.' The demon paused, and Dolomedes stared despairingly into the engulfing darkness. He had not expected that.

'The blood can be found in the ones closest to you,' said the demon's voice, soft as a breeze. 'It will make your daughter strong ... and her offspring too.'

'Take me, then,' said Dolomedes hoarsely and bowed his head again. 'Take my blood.'

The contours of the demon suddenly became clearer. The upper part of it undulated as if it were shaking its head.

'And who will save your daughter from the Radix, if you sacrifice yourself? Wasn't that your plan? That you should be the saviour?' it asked mockingly. 'Because I will need all the blood there is in a living body. But that price is not enough.'

Dolomedes stared at the demon. 'I don't have anyone else to help me,' he whispered in despair. 'No one I can sacrifice ...'

A hand touched his arm, and he met his wife's gaze. She crept closer and looked at him seriously. She took his hands in hers.

'No,' he whispered. 'There must be another way.'

'There isn't, Fimbriald,' she said softly. 'And you know it. Bring our daughter home. She's all we have left. Let me make that sacrifice. Take care of her for me.'

Dolomedes stared at the demon with wild eyes. 'Was that your price?' he whispered. 'That you'll take my wife from me?'

'Oh, I could have taken her anyway, if I wanted to,' answered the demon. 'Because she is alive. But I cannot take the dead ... You will have to give them to me.' Dolomedes shook his head. 'But ... I don't understand. I...'

'You said you had three daughters ... and two of them were killed.' The demon paused. 'I want them. They are my price.'



The flames from the burning house roared against the sky and made the tears scorch Dolomedes' cheeks. He closed his eyes against the heat; closed them against the sight of the house which a few hours ago had contained everything he held dear.

He threw the torch on the ground and stared towards the east – into the dawn which had swallowed the demon after it had been sated with his wife's blood. He turned and stumbled down the street, trying in vain to repress the image of Marai's pale, lifeless body – an empty husk, stretched out on the floor in front of the bodies of their two youngest daughters ... And the image of the demon, as he took them all.

Trembling, he stroked a hand from his forehead down over his eyes, as if to wipe away the dreadful pictures. But they permeated his brain – merciless and vivid. He would never forget the sight of the black shadow-form of the demon as it leant over Marai, hesitating, as if it wanted to sniff its victim first – and decide where to enter.

It had circled her and enveloped her in misty shadow, which followed it like a shroud. Marai's face had been chalk-white with fear, but she had not said a word. When the demon finally seemed to have decided, she had closed her eyes.

It had not entered her body. Or at least it had not looked like it. There were no fierce roars, no limbs being torn apart. Instead it had silently slipped in under her and lifted her, so that she hung in the air like a broken reed.

The silence of the ritual had been painful and terrifying. He had kept expecting blood to rain down on him. But nothing like that had happened. Marai's blood-spattered skirt had fluttered weakly in the breeze, and her arms had gracefully fallen to her sides, as if she were dancing through a cloud of darkness.

It had taken the demon an alarmingly short time to empty its victim. Streams of red pulsed through the black shadow, and it became more and more red as Marai became paler. In the end the red shadow-form had dissolved into the sunrise. His two dead daughters were gone, and the body of Marai fell towards the ground. Dolomedes had caught the delicate, white bundle.

He swallowed.

His throat was dry and sore from the screams which he had not been able to hold back. He felt a numbness encroach on him, felt it spread throughout his body. Something froze in him, as he moved through the village towards the back gate. Bewildered, moaning people staggered through the streets, some sat in doorways, staring emptily into the rising sun.

Some men called after him, but he did not notice them.

There is nothing more I can do here, he thought. Nothing more I can do for Endlet. All these people are lost ... I am lost ...

He continued through the back gate and cast a glance at the sleeping Laniidae which hovered on the updrafts over Three Peaks. Then he went north.



Dolomedes let himself fall back into his human shape. He groaned, placed his hands on the floor and tried to push himself up.

‘Not bad this time, Fimbriald. I think you’re almost ready.’ The bog woman nodded at him approvingly, turned and went to the oven, which she opened. The smell of freshly baked bread spread through the room. He got to his feet with difficulty and went to the table, where he sat down.

‘What about the arachnids, Myrica?’ He panted. ‘Soon there won’t be any left in the marsh for miles around.’ He glanced at the brew, bubbling its way over the edge of the enormous cauldron.

Myrica put the bread on the table and cut it. She spread a thick layer of butter over a steaming slice of bread and handed it to Dolomedes. The melting golden butter glistened.

‘The population will recover,’ she assured him. ‘Although it’ll take a while. But like I said: I think you’re almost ready. You’ve drunk enough of my brew for its magic to flow through your veins for the rest of your life.’ She paused. ‘And you have become strong enough to keep it down,’ she added with a smile. She put down the knife. ‘Give me your hand.’

Dolomedes put down the bread slice, and gave her his hand.

She studied it intently. ‘I suppose you’ve noticed?’ She raised an eyebrow and let go of him. ‘It’s happening quickly now.’

He nodded and grunted a confirmation. He threw a short glance at his hand and its nails which had shrunk. Then he stroked his wide jaw and caught a glimpse of his face reflected in one of Myrica’s copper pans hanging from the ceiling over the stove.

The sight brought him back to Mengiel’s house in the autumn. He stared at the reflection as he tried to get the nausea under control. The memories of what happened in

Endlet always made him unbearably nauseous. Spring was on its way up on the surface. It was long ago – Endlet – and at the same time it felt like it happened yesterday.

His gaunt face was almost unrecognisable; sallow and covered with mousy tufts of beard. His eyes had become small and piercing, and both his eyelashes and eyebrows were falling out.

Myrica studied him for a while.

‘Yes, Fimbriald. Shapeshifting has a price,’ she said quietly. ‘But that was what you asked me to help you become: a magic shapeshifter.’ She sighed, sat down opposite him and took his hand again across the table. ‘The arachnids will always be part of you from now on. Their nature will develop, bring forth the monster in you when you wish it and ... slowly, take over your mind. But it will take a long time. A very long time. Because you are strong, Fimbriald.’ She hesitated. ‘When you leave, you must stay hidden as often as possible. If the Radix get their hands on you, it will have grave consequences. And that’s exactly what ...’ She looked at him earnestly. ‘... I mean, that’s where you’re going. So promise me to be careful.’

‘I know,’ said Dolomedes quietly. ‘And I want to thank you again for taking me in and helping me ... you had no reason to...’

Myrica frowned.

‘We serve the same people,’ she began. ‘Long ago, I chose to go against the nature of my people. I wanted to serve the People of Light, because I think their way of life is the right one for this world.’ She placed a finger on the tabletop. ‘The day will come when the Radix will be conquered and will have to pay the price for their evil deeds.’

He looked at her silently.

‘I took you in, because I always know when I meet someone with a pure soul,’ she protested amiably. ‘It was a good

thing that the witches weren't wrong about you when you unwittingly stumbled onto their Crossroads.' A smile flickered across her flushed face. She shook her head forbearingly. 'It was fortunate that they brought you to me. I've enjoyed your company.' The furrow in her brow deepened. She sighed. 'Why do I get the feeling that you're trying to say goodbye?'

Dolomedes squeezed her hand and looked at her seriously. 'I know you don't think I'm ready yet ... but I must go. An entire winter has passed. Time is running out.'

They let go of each other.

She pulled her bushy eyebrows even closer together and shook her head sadly. 'Is it wise, Fimbriald? A couple of months and you...'

He gripped her hand again with both of his and looked at her earnestly.

'You know that I don't have a couple of months, Myrica.'