

She looked up at him with such devotion. “Oh milord, it has been and always will be my honor to serve the Gil-Gamesh. Please, take care of yourself and your family.”

Stephanie also gave Mrs. Thurgoode a hug. “Thank you, Emily, thank you so very much.”

Emily Thurgoode started to cry, something she rarely did. “Oh milady, no need to thank me. It was a thrill and an absolute pleasure to meet you milady. I just wish we had more time.”

“So do I, Emily ...,” agreed Stephanie. Mrs. Thurgoode gave each of the children a hug as they got ready to leave. Standing by one of the bookcases, Bryan pulled on a volume and the bookcase swung open like a door.

“Follow me and stay close,” he instructed. “These steps can be slippery, so watch yourselves.” He took a small crystal out of his cloak. He held the crystal in his open palm. “*Luminarium!*” he said casting a spell on the crystal. It glowed brightly as it floated off his hand. It started spinning and then split into four separate lights.

As they walked through the secret door, Bryan led them down a spiral staircase with Sarafina bringing up the rear. As they walked, the magical lights spread out between them, following them as they descended downward. The staircase took them further underground, deeper into and under Emmyr.

Stephanie began to wonder if they’d fall out the bottom of the floating island. The farther they walk, the windier it got. Eventually, the wind was gusting, sometimes with such force that it lifted them off their feet. When they finally reached the bottom of the stairs, Stephanie encountered her worst fear.

They entered a large room, over a hundred feet in diameter with a twenty-foot high ceiling. In the center of the room, there was a large hole in the floor. The hole was open to the air below.

Bryan waved his hand and the lights disappeared. He pushed Stephanie and the children back against the wall of the cave.

“What now?” Stephanie screamed at him, her voice muffled by the wind.

“We wait!” Bryan yelled back. “Our ride should be here momentarily.”

As if on cue, three large dragons flew up into the cave through the hole. They spun themselves around and spread out in the tight quarters. Bryan addressed them in that strange tongue. The dragons all nodded in agreement and growled back at the Gil-Gamesh.

“All right, now. Sarafina, you take Rose with you. Ashley rides with Stephanie and Hunter with me.”

Stephanie shook her head at Bryan. “I don’t know how to fly one of these,” she yelled at him.

“Don’t worry ...,” he assured her, “... they’ll take care of all the flying.

Besides, you flew with me before. You already know what it's like."

"You mean hold on tight and kiss my ass good-bye?" Stephanie said sarcastically.

Bryan just laughed at her attempt at humor. "Hunter ... wait here." Bryan walked with Stephanie and Ashley over to one of the dragons and helped them on. Sarafina led Rose over to another dragon as she mounted the winged beast then pulled Rose up behind her. Bryan motioned for Hunter to join him on the last dragon. He mounted it and then pulled his son on with him.

One at a time, the dragons dropped through the hole and into the open sky. They plummeted straight down, heading toward the water below them, before they finally opened their wings and banked close to the water's edge. Once they reached the coastline of Avalon, the land rose up to meet them and the dragons followed the landscape closely.

Bryan watched everyone throughout the flight. Hunter seemed to be handling the ride okay. His hands were so tight around his waist, Bryan couldn't tell one way or the other. A glance over to Stephanie and Ashley told a different story. While Ashley seemed to be enjoying the ride, Stephanie had that look about her ... The one Bryan looked for when he knew he was in trouble. She just glared over at him.

"Yep, that's the look," he thought to himself. He knew she wasn't having a good time with this. Sarafina and Rose were doing fine as Rose was grinning from ear-to-ear, so he wasn't too concerned about them.

Across rolling hills and dense forest, the dragons continued to soar. Within a few minutes, the forest gave way to a large, open meadow. The dragons set down, landing hard in the grassy meadow, scattering a herd of sheep. The young shepherd watching over the flock hid behind a large rock.

The Gil-Gamesh patted the dragon on the side and then lowered Hunter off the winged beast before dismounting himself. He quickly ran over to Stephanie and Ashley, helping them off the dragon.

"That was so much fun," Ashley told her father.

"Speak for yourself," Hunter said, acting as if he had to throw up.

"You could have warned me about that first drop," Stephanie scowled at Bryan.

"If I did, you wouldn't have done it, would you?" Stephanie just frowned at him.

Sarafina and Rose dismounted their dragon with glee. "What a rush!" Rose exclaimed.

"I know," Ashley interjected. "I can't believe I got to ride on a dragon ... It's like Anne McCaffrey and *The Dragonriders of Pern* in real life."

Rose looked at her sister in amazement. "Only you can compare a wonderful ride like that to something in a book," she commented. "You are such a nerd."

One of the dragons spoke to Bryan in that strange tongue again. Bryan answered and waved them off as the dragons departed. The children waved as well, saying good-bye.

As the family gathered together, Bryan noticed the young shepherd boy still hiding behind the rocks. "It's all right boy, come out from behind there."

The boy peeked out shyly. Seeing it was the Gil-Gamesh, he stepped toward them. He was dressed in modest clothing and carried a shepherd's crook. His curly red hair and freckled face revealed his youth.

"You know who I am?" Bryan asked.

The boy chuckled. "Of course I do, sir. You're the Gil-Gamesh."

"What's your name?"

"Tim, sir. Timothy Baker."

Bryan walked over and knelt in front of Tim. "I need you to do something for me, Tim," he said confidentially. "If anyone happens to ask, you didn't see me today—not me or anyone else."

Bryan reached into his cloak and pulled out a gold talon which he handed it to Tim. "Can you do that for me?"

Tim took the coin in his hand. That's a lot of money, especially for a poor farmer. "Blimey, a gold talon. I understand, milord. I won't say a word."

Bryan stood up and patted the boy on the head. He started walking across the field with his family and Sarafina close behind. Tim felt like the luckiest boy in all of Avalon. Not only did he get to meet the Gil-Gamesh, but he also got a gold talon for not meeting him.

The Gil-Gamesh marched his family across the countryside toward New Camelot. He took them on back roads and trails, avoiding the main thoroughfares so as not to attract unnecessary attention.

They found themselves stopping at least once an hour to rest. Stephanie and the children were definitely not used to hiking like this. Bryan tried to accommodate them as best he could without losing too much time.

As they walked along, Stephanie couldn't help but enjoy the pristine countryside of Avalon—the rolling green hills, the dense forests, the lush farmlands. It all seemed so serene, tranquil and peaceful.

"It's hard to believe that there are parts of this island that are dark and menacing," she said.

"I know ...," he agreed, "... but believe me; you don't want to see those parts of Avalon."

"Why not?" she asked.

"It's like nothing you could ever imagine. Your worst nightmares come to life," Bryan explained. "I have seen things that would give Stephen King nightmares."

Before she could continue, they heard sounds of a fight ahead. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know.” Bryan drew his swords. “You and the children stay here. Sarafina, stay with them.”

He ran ahead while Sarafina drew her sword and moved up next to Stephanie. Suddenly, the sound got louder, indicating to Stephanie that Bryan had joined the battle. Stephanie started to move forward, but Sarafina stopped her, blocking her with her sword. “The Gil-Gamesh said to stay here.”

“Sarafina, I will not stay back while my husband is fighting for his life,” Stephanie scolded. “He may need our help. Now please, let’s go.”

Sarafina heard the truth in her words and lowered her sword. “All right, mother, but stay behind me.”

They moved ahead together with Sarafina in the lead. As they approached, Stephanie and the children saw what all the commotion was about as a large centaur—half-man, half-horse—was protecting a young female centaur as several men who used whips, swords and spears against him. The whips were wrapped around the arms and legs of the centaur, holding him in place, while they grabbed for the female as she cringed in fear.

The Gil-Gamesh was in the heart of the battle. He slashed at the whips to free the centaur. The bandits came at him, thrusting with spears. He blocked the blows, knocking one spear to the ground and then pummeling the rogue in the face with the hilt of his sword.

In one swift move, he put his foot under the spear and kicked it toward the centaur. He grabbed the spear and fought back against the brigands. Suddenly, from behind, another man charged at the Gil-Gamesh with a sword in hand.

“Behind you,” Sarafina yelled.

The Gil-Gamesh stepped out of the way, dodging his charge, spun to block him with *Dusk* while slashing at his sword arm with *Twilight*, cutting off his hand. The bandit fell to the ground, grabbing at his stump and screaming in pain. The others saw this and backed away from the fight. They picked up their wounded and ran away.

Bryan sheathed his swords and walked over to the centaur. “Are either of you hurt?” he asked.

“No, we are unharmed, thanks to you,” he replied, lowering the spear. The male centaur stood over ten feet tall, bare chested with dark brown hair. The young female centaur was a child, only five feet tall, with long blond hair. Her upper torso was clothed in a simple white blouse.

The male centaur extended his hand to Bryan. “I am Cyron of the Northern Tribes of Kéntauros and this is my daughter, Nysia.” Bryan took his hand with a warrior’s clutch. “Thank you for your assistance, Gil-

Gamesh,” he added. “I do not know what those animals would have done with my daughter.”

Stephanie, the children, and Sarafina approach them from behind.

“Not at all Cyron, I glad I could help,” Bryan said. “This is the first I’ve heard of humans hunting centaurs.”

“It just started recently, especially for our young females. It seems there are some who would like the opportunity to ... well, shall we say take advantage of a young centaur. They are paying 500 gold talons for our young females.”

“How horrible,” Stephanie exclaimed. Bryan turned to see her and the others standing there.

“Cyron, may I introduce my wife, Lady Stephanie MoonDrake, and my children. Stephanie, this is Cyron and his daughter Nysia.”

Cyron and Nysia both bowed their heads to Stephanie who nodded politely in return. “I can’t believe someone would want to harm an innocent child in such a way,” Stephanie said.

“Unfortunately, there are pedophiles even here in Avalon,” Bryan added.

“Cyron, I will look into this after I return from New Camelot,” Bryan assured him. “You have my word.” He offered his hand again to Cyron.

“I thank you, Gil-Gamesh. That means a great deal to me and my people.”

“Where are you and your family going Gil-Gamesh?” Nysia asked, her voice gentle and sweet.

“Nysia!” Cyron scolded her. “You are being rude to the Gil-Gamesh. We do not need to know these things.”

“It’s all right, Cyron.” Bryan confided. “We are heading for Alfheimer to see Lord Baldric before moving on to New Camelot.”

Cyron looked confused at Bryan. “Why aren’t you on the Vanir Road? That will take you to Alfheimer much faster than these back roads.”

“Yes, well, I am trying to avoid the main roads.”

Cyron understood what the Gil-Gamesh was saying. “Perhaps then, I can repay you for saving me and my daughter.”

No sooner said, Bryan and his family were riding through the countryside on the backs of centaurs. They rode like stallions on the wind, quickly taking them through the woods, nimbly moving around the thick brush and jumping over fallen trees. These creatures knew these woods intimately and were able to maneuver through them with ease.

They reached the edge of Alfheimer before dark. As the others were helped down, Bryan thanked Cyron again for his help, taking his hand in friendship. “Cyron, I cannot thank you enough for this. You have saved me and my family a lot of walking today,” Bryan exclaimed gratefully.

“You need not thank me Gil-Gamesh, it is an honor to serve the

champion of Avalon.”

Stephanie walked over and extended her hand to Cyron. “Thank you Cyron ... Many blessings to you and your family.” Bryan was surprised to hear Stephanie says this. It was a formal salutation here on Avalon. She was becoming more acclimated to life here.

Cyron took her hand and bowed, placing his forehead on her hand as a sign of respect. “Many blessings on you and your family, kind lady. Good journey to you all.”

Cyron motioned to the other centaurs and they rode away. The children waved goodbye as they headed off into the forest. Stephanie noticed the look of surprise on Bryan’s face.

“What?” she asked. “I was paying attention to Ocwyn’s lessons.”

“So it would seem,” Bryan replied. “It’s just surprising, that’s all. You made quite an impression.” They started walking into the woods toward Alfheimer.

“Father, where are we?” Hunter asked. “I thought the centaurs were going to take us to the Elves?”

“No one can enter Alfheimer without permission of the Elves. First we have to find ...” A sword came out from behind a tree suddenly and rested on the Gil-Gamesh’s throat. He immediately drew *Twilight* and brought it up across the throat of his attacker.

“... An Elf to escort us in.”

Stephanie and the children stepped back behind Bryan while Sarafina quickly drew her own sword and moved up next to the Gil-Gamesh. Their attacker was an Elf, a handsome man with long brown hair. His pointed ears stuck out through his hair. He’s wearing shining chain mail with green and brown coverings. His sword was long and thin that burned with a soft blue flame. The edge looked sharp, even in the dimming sunlight.

“Who comes seeking the Elves of Alfheimer?” he asked Bryan. “I see an old man who walks about like a stampede of wild boars.”

“I may be loud, but I caught your sickly-sweet scent a mile away. Not even horse manure can cover up that stench.”

The Elf smiled and lowered his sword, as did Bryan. The two clutch forearms, a welcome akin to the respect of warriors, one to another.

“It has been a long time Gil-Gamesh,” he said.

“Too long Eonis, much too long,” Bryan agreed.

“So tell me, why does the Gil-Gamesh skulk through the woods like a thief in the night?”

Eonis looked past Bryan and saw Stephanie and the children for the first time. “Ah, I see,” he said. Eonis sheathed his sword before walking over to Stephanie. He placed his hand over his heart and bowed. “Milady, it will be my honor to be your escort to Alfheimer.”

Stephanie, like the children, was in awe of the Elf. She stuttered as she

tried to find the right words. “Thank ... thank you,” she managed to get out.

Bryan chuckled. “Stephanie, this is Eonis, a dear friend of mine. Eonis, this is ...” Eonis interrupted the Gil-Gamesh

“No need for introductions, Gil-Gamesh. I would recognize Lady MoonDrake and your children anywhere.”

Stephanie gawked at Bryan in disbelief. “What in God’s name have you been telling these people about me? It seems everyone here knows me intimately.”

Eonis laughed while Bryan was left speechless. “I assure you, milady, it was nothing but praise and adulation,” he told her. “Now please, follow me and I will guide you all to the Shining City of Alfheimer.”

Eonis led the family through the woods. As they travelled deeper into the forest, they began to see and hear things. Lights, like fireflies, danced around them in the trees while tiny faces and little voices hid in the brush and tree trunks.

“Do not worry ...,” Eonis told them, “... these faerie folks are just curious about you. They mean you no harm.”

“But I thought Elves were faeries.” Ashley asked.

“We are in a way. Pixies, sprites and faeries ... We are all born of the same ilk as beings of magic; we are a part of nature, bound to protect all living things and preserve the balance. We light Elves are larger, more human-like than our faerie cousins, though we are all immortal.”

“Immortal?” Rose repeated. “How old are you Eonis?”

“Rose,” Bryan interjected. “That’s not polite to ask.”

“It is all right, Gil-Gamesh,” Eonis said, pausing to answer her question. “Young miss, I do not count the days of my life, rather the experiences I lived. One of my earliest memories is that of watching the druids build Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain.”

Ashley thought about that for a moment. “That was over 5,000 years ago.”

Eonis just smiled and continued walking. The girls just stared at each other in awe. “He looks good for his age,” Rose exclaimed.

Night fell as they finally cleared the dense woods and walked onto a hilltop overlooking a large valley between two mountains. A giant waterfall, over a mile high, cascaded down between the mountains, feeding the river which ran through the heart of the valley. Rising on both sides of the mountain was a city, carved out of the very stone itself. The ornate and intricate structures reflected the beauty and passion of the Elves, along with every building, statue and column that adorned this lovely city.

In the twilight sky, the city glowed, but not from fire light or candlelight. The magical glow of Alfheimer came from the Elves themselves. Each

street and building were aglow with a brilliance that left everyone in awe.

“Never in my wildest dreams could I ever imagine such a place,” Stephanie proclaimed.

Bryan leaned in and whispered, “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Eonis led them down to the gates of Alfheimer. Two giant statues of Bryr and Beggula, servants to the God of the Elves, stood over a hundred feet tall above the gates, as if protecting the city and its inhabitants. Once inside the city, the Elves watched them with curiosity, bowing in respect for the Gil-Gameash and his family.

The Elves were a beautiful people—light-skinned with flowing hair and pointed ears. They were dressed in the finest silks of billowing robes and elegant dresses adorned with delicate jewelry of gold, silver and mithril with precious gems.

They soon reached the Hall of Freyr, so-named for the God of the Elves. Inside the grand hall, the Elves were scattered about, discussing everything from human politics—a topic they love to analyze—to magical incantations and spells. Large mosaics adorned the walls, displaying the many accomplishments of the Elven race—a history for the ages filled every square foot.

Eonis led them up the grand staircase; it was a massive, solid marble structure, stretching the width of the hall and leading to the upper chamber. “It’s like climbing the steps of a Mayan temple,” Ashley declared, huffing and puffing out of breath.

As they approached the summit, they saw two figures waiting for them—a man and a woman, dressed in gold and silver robes respectively, standing side-by-side. They wore small but very ornate crowns of forged mithril with set gems of amethyst and sapphires. They both had the beautiful features of Elves—the man with long black hair and the woman, long blonde hair.

Eonis reached the top step, bowed and then stepped aside. Bryan took Stephanie by the hand and helped her to the top. He bowed, and without hesitation, Stephanie curtsied. The man reached out his hand to the Gil-Gameash, who took it in friendship.

“*Salüs dai Tulafáir*, Lord Baldrid, thank you for seeing us,” he said.

“*Salüs dai Atrémar*, Bryan MoonDrake, Gil-Gameash of Avalon. You are always welcome in Alfheimer. Our home is yours,” Baldrid said before he turned and looked at Stephanie, extending his hand to her.

“Lady Stephanie MoonDrake, it is a great pleasure to finally meet you,” he welcomed her. Stephanie took his hand and curtsied again.

“Thank you, milord,” she stammered, her voice cracking as it was apparent her nerves were getting to her.

“There is no need to be nervous dear lady. It is not every day you meet the King of the Elves,” Baldrid chuckled at his bold attempt at humor.