

Chapter Twenty-Two

As it turned out, nothing about this new rift was so simple after all.

The closer Axion assured them they were getting, the deeper Chris's sense of uneasiness. But not until their horses rounded a bend in the road and startled a small herd of shaggy zajele into scrambling up the black rocky hillside did he realize where he was.

"No way."

Riding just behind him, his dad urged his borrowed horse into a trot. "What is it?"

Worick had showed up at the palace this morning just as Chris, Allara, and a Guardsmen squad were boarding the skycar that would take them the six hours to Virere Ford. One look at the sword on Chris's hip and the Glock strapped across his chest, and Worick had paled beneath his swarthy tan. Grimly, he'd refused to be left behind.

Now, he frowned. "What's wrong?"

Chris shook his head. "I've come through this rift before."

On his other side, Allara reined in a prancing Rihawn, and looked at him questioningly. "You had bones here?"

"No, I followed a friend from my world. His shadow lives here."

Riding at the head of the column with a sullen Quinnon, Axion stiffened. He cocked his head, listening. "There is a gathering."

"Cherazii?" Allara asked.

"I think not."

Chris strained his ears, but caught only the wind whistling amidst the crags. It took a full quarter of a mile more before he heard it too: an ominous murmur.

The road took another curve around the hillside. To the left, farther down the slope, the rift's metallic opacity glinted amongst the black boulders. As before, it hovered several feet above the ground. But now, it was three times larger.

A hundred yard distant, where a few farmsteads came together to create a commune, two dozen villagers crowded the road. Mattocks and shepherd's crooks over their shoulders, they shouted at the Yellow Guard platoon herding a line of chained outlanders through their midst.

"Return them home!" a villager shouted.

"Tisn't right for them to be here at all, I tell you!"

"Lord Virere may tax the food from our mouths, and that's one thing. But forcing us to provide for outlanders who should not even be here?"

A man's deep voice boomed above them all: "I'll be no man's jailer, I won't."

Chris flinched.

The voice was Mike's. Or, rather, Rordin Soller's.

"I will not," Rordin continued. "No matter what Virere says. Tax us how he may."

Chris's gut tightened. At least, Allara was getting a show made to order. She looked straight ahead, her face tight. "Quinnon."

With a nod, he moved the column forward at a canter.

As they reached the rear of the quickstepping prisoners, two Yellow Guardsmen reined up to salute Quinnon. Then, recognizing Allara, they dismounted to bow.

“Let’s see your commander,” Quinnon said.

The senior Guardsmen, a sergeant looked Quinnon over with an almost insubordinate smirk on his scarred face. “Aye, Captain.” He vaulted into his saddle and galloped up the line of prisoners, which was being hurried toward the next curve around the hill.