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Janet P. Reedman

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SORCERESS OF THE SLUMS

by Janet P. Reedman

Night descended over the slums of the city of Alikh. A crescent moon slashed the tile rooves of the shanties that huddled like frightened children around the bastion of the Priests' Temple. Rats chattered in the gutters, bloated with rotten fruit gleaned from the day's market. Smoke coiled over the streets—a grey shroud that hid the beggars and cutpurses of Alikh.

The smoke-shroud also hid Lynd Raelin as she scuttled between the rowhouses, woolen cloak pulled tight about her shoulders, hood up to cover her face. She peered furtively this way and that, scanning for the city.

She smiled grimly to herself as she passed through one of the four gateways leading into the Gorbans. Now she need not fear the guards so much. Although Alikh was one great teeming slum, save for the Temple, the ancient streets of Eastside were considered the most dangerous and undesirable of all—not worth the expenditure of armed patrols. Murder and mayhem were the course of *every* night in the Gorbans.

Lynd opened her clenched fist and glanced at the parchment in her palm. A sketchy map directed her through the Gorbans to the house of Angkor the Tinker.

Moving swiftly, she strode down a narrow sidestreet, her worn leather boots squelching in the slime that oozed between the cobblestones. Her eyes scanned the buildings ahead, nodding in approval as she spied the lantern swinging gently from the gable of the last house in the row. That was the signal that she was still to be welcomed at Angkor's house.

Approaching the door, she grasped the iron knocker and banged. Moments later, a scruffy woman answered, and guided her inside. "So ye received my summons," she croaked. Her breath reeked of rum. "You've come to heal young Tali."

Lynd nodded. "How is she?"

"Like to die," the woman snapped. "Unless you can help. Though I don't have much faith in *your* kind! All the magics in the world didn't help when the Priests took over..."

Lynd fixed her with a sharp look, then turned to the staircase on her right and proceeded up the landing where a bedroom door gaped open.

Inside, a man squatted beside a pallet. A little girl lay on the bed of straw, the dim light of a taper reflecting off her waxen features. "You're Lynd the healer?" the man asked curiously, as she entered the room.

"I am," she said, removing her shawl. The dress beneath was a rag.

He eyed her with suspicion. "You're not what I expected. Thought you'd be older...one of those from before

the Massacre. I've heard so much about the work you do in the Gorbans."

Lynd ignored him and knelt beside the pallet. "What's wrong with the child?"

"Lung-rot," replied the man, Angkor. "I can't have her dying, y'understand. She works...well for me."

"Works?" Lynd's steely gaze impaled him. "What do you mean by 'works'?"

"Not what you think!" He shook his head in violent denial. "I ain't the kind to sell a child! No. I'm an honest tinker, I am! But Tali begs for me when trade's been slow. She's comely and folks give plenty."

Lynd stared at Tali's pinched face, unnaturally aged in the candlelight. Poor creature, she thought, sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't be kinder to let you die. But perhaps, one day, you'll find the strength to escape.

Angkor was shuffling his feet impatiently. "Are ye just goin' ta stare all night?"

She tossed her chestnut locks back from her face. "Go, and I'll do what I must. But remember, old man, you're getting this service for free."

Angkor sidled out of the chamber, leaving Lynd with Tali. Lynd stood up and cast back the shutters on the window. Moonlight flooded the floor, streaming into the face of the sick child. Lynd closed her eyes, and began to chant the words her mother taught her in their house in Newtown, so long ago it seemed a dream. They had been hiding under the stairs as the Priests' soldiers sacked and looted, reducing all the merchants, tradesmen, and magic-workers of Alikh into paupers overnight. "Never forget your heritage," Merissa Raelin whispered into Lynd's hair as she held her in the dark after imparting the secret words of the mages. "No matter what happens you'll always have the gift of the mage. Use your powers to help those in need, and perhaps, in a happier time, the oppressed shall rise and fight the Priests."

Lynd sighed. Two days later, the Priests had taken her mother, and she had never seen her again. Merchants and workers were taxed beyond endurance or had their goods confiscated, but mages were put to death. The Priests claimed their powers contradicted the teachings of Lutherum, a mighty God whose worship had supplanted that of the Blessed Lady and Her Son, under which Alikh had thrived for many a year.

Lynd forced the memories away. A fearful past must not be her focus, if she hoped to save Tali. Raising her arms to the moon, she embraced its light and continued to chant. She started to sway, moving sylph-like around Tali's pallet. Leaning over the child, she placed her hands upon her brow. Sweat beads broke and ran between her fingers like jewels.

Concentrating, she entered Tali's mind, probing gently. She felt heat, and immediately saw dark visions: drunkards brawling, lechers with groping hands, beggars on a corner in a freezing wind..."It's all right, Tali," Lynd soothed. "Cast those thoughts away--until you have the strength to bear them."

She renewed her concentration, forcing pleasant visions of a banquet, heaped high with food, and a warm fire on the hearth, into the girl's mind. There were silk dresses, and dolls with glass eyes and plaits of human hair. Lynd smiled, as Tali stirred under her hands. She seemed less troubled, her face less pinched.

Slowly, Lynd bent over her till their mouths nearly touched. She delved deep into Tali, touching the root of the sickness. *I command you to leave this child*, she addressed the ebon spectre that hovered above Tali's lungs, and she began to draw up the darkness, as the moon draws the tides.

Seconds later an acrid taste filled her mouth. Gagging, she spat. Green venom smeared the warped floorboards.

On her pallet Tali began to sob, her fever apparently broken. Drained, Lynd stretched out on the floor next to her. She had succeeded. The infection was gone. Now she could return home...

She was startled by the sound of the downstairs door banging open. Angkor's woman screamed, and Angkor himself yelped in protest. Alarmed, Lynd dragged herself to her feet. Who could cause such a commotion?

She leaned against the door and listened, but even as she pressed her ear to the thin wood, the door burst inward and she was flung onto the floor. To her horror, she stared up into the face of a Priest.

"Take her!" he ordered the black-clad men at his back.

Lynd struggled up, reaching for a dagger concealed beneath her robes. One of the men kicked it from her hand, while the other grabbed her from behind and looped an arm around her throat. She was dragged over backwards, still struggling weakly, fear taking her voice away as a rag soaked in a violet-colored fluid descended over her nose and mouth. She tried to claw it away, but even as she flailed her arms, the world spun into a roaring void of utter blackness.

Lynd awoke to the sound of water tinkling into a bowl. Opening her eyes, she gazed blearily at the night sky. She took a deep breath. She was somewhere in a garden. And the only ones in Alikh who owned gardens were the Priests...

Breathing heavily, she sat upright and stared about her. Green lawns lit by lanterns on trellises stretched up to an adobe house with windows of bubbled glass. The smell of eucalyptus trees and magnolia blossoms hung heavy in the air. Shakily, Lynd clambered to her feet. She didn't know where she was, but she knew she had to find an escape--at once. The whole place reeked of the Priests of Lutherum.

"Don't run!" a low whisper made her whirl. She gasped loudly as a Priest swirled toward her, a nebula of white in the eerie lantern-light.

Lynd affected a fierce stance, trying to assess the strength of the man before her. "Let me free," she growled, "or I swear I'll make you wish you had never come near me!"

The man halted, and tossed back his cowl. Lynd gazed into a pleasant, broad face, with side brown eyes and a generous mouth. Black hair cropped in a straight line gleamed just below his ears. "Although I am a Priest, you need not fear me," he said mildly. "I am Brother Holt. I only wish to talk to you."

"So it was you who abducted me?" She eyed him with cold suspicion.

He nodded. "I did not believe you would come peacefully. Now--will you take some green tea with me? It will help the headache you must surely have after inhaling the drug."

He turned around and walked over the lawns, without waiting for Lynd. The young woman stared in puzzlement, then hurried after him. He seemed harmless enough. Obviously, her death was not foremost in his mind.

She followed him to a stone patio outside the door of his cottage. A fountain flowed in the middle of the patio--the source of the running water she had heard earlier. A round marble table and cushioned chairs stood to one side, shaded by shrubs in glazed pots.

Brother Holt sat down and rang a bell attached to the branches of one of the plants. Several servants emerged from the house, bringing a great pitcher of tea and two beakers of sky-blue porcelain. Lynd started as she recognized the dour men as those who had taken her in Angkor's house. So, they were not soldiers at all?

Picking up her steaming beaker, she eyed Holt from beneath lowered lashes. What was his game, she wondered.

Holt sipped his tea, then rolled and lit a fire-stick--a vice normally forbidden to the priests of Lutherum. Sticking the stick between his lips, he blew out a cloud of smoke, then leaned back in his chair. His deepset eyes traveled slowly over Lynd.

"You don't recognize me, do you, Lynd Raelin?" he asked after a while.

She shook her head. "We'd hardly be expected to meet socially!"

He chuckled. "Lynd, before I became...Brother Holt...my name was Tarn-Weth Bligh. My family lived beside yours, and we played together--until the Time of Reckoning."

"You mean the Time of the Massacre."

He looked contrite. "Yes, it was that. But you can't blame me, Lynd, just because I wear Priest's garb! I was only a child."

"But you *joined* them! And they killed your parents, too!"

A strange expression flitted over his features. "I never saw the bodies, and didn't learn the truth until after I'd been in the Sect for years. They'd convinced me by then...that it was necessary to kill the mages, that all free

folk had fallen under their spells, and that the only chance for release, and salvation, was to rid the world of them." He sighed. "But all their teachings blew away like dust a few weeks ago. And that's when I knew I had to find you, Lynd."

"How did you know I was alive?" she asked in a whisper.

"The registers didn't record your death. I assumed you'd been taken in by someone.... And I'd heard tales of a steel-eyed wench who used 'foul ministrations of magic' to heal the sick."

Lynd shook her head; the lantern light bounced off blond strands in her dark riot of curls. "Childhood playmate or not, you're still one of *them*. I don't know what you could desire from me—except my death."

Tarn-Weth puffed on his fire-stick. "You have me wrong! I need you, Lynd Raelin, more than you can imagine. The Priests have a captive in the Temple."

"A captive? Who?" Lynd leaned forward in interest.

Tarn-Weth took a deep breath. "The Royal Highness Lysan Elveron from Murl Keep."

Lynd reacted with surprise. "Lysan Elveron! The warrior-princess!"

Tarn-Weth nodded emphatically. "The same. She came here on a mission from her sire, King Arvon. She tried to convince the High Priest Shamash that he was wrong to persecute those deemed 'impure' in the book of Lutherum—and he had her imprisoned!"

Lynd leaped from her seat. "You're lying! Lady Lysan wouldn't have let herself be taken so easily. She trained on Ini Skaa, the Isle of Heroes, and it's rumoured she's one of the best swordswomen that ever drew blade!"

"She is at that," agreed Tarn-Weth. "She killed a dozen guards before she went down—hamstrung by a traitor's blow."

"Hamstrung!" Lynd was aghast. She remembered hearing of Lysan's exploits over the years; the Princess had seemed almost invincible. Lynd had always looked up to her as a worthy figurehead, someone whose strength could be admired...

"And that's why I need you. You're proficient in the healing arts. You must heal Lysan so that she can escape—before Shamash offers her up to Lutherum."

"Surely he wouldn't dare kill her?" breathed Lynd. "The Lords of the Nine Keeps would never tolerate such an act—already the High Priestess of Murl has set Alikh under interdict."

"Shamash is a fanatic," said Tarn-Weth. "Fanaticism mixed with greed always goes far."

Lynd was silent a moment. "One thing I still don't understand. What made *you* turn traitor and decide to rescue her?"

A blush crept up into the roots of his shiny black hair. "I was appointed her guard. We spoke long into the night. She made me see the truth—and my memories of the glad days before Lutherum flooded back. I owe her everything,

Lynd..."

The slender woman smiled slightly. "You're infatuated with her, aren't you, Tarn-Weth?"

He nodded shyly, then drew again on his fire-stick. Grey ash tumbled into the folds of his pristine robe. "Will you assist me?"

Lynd brushed her hair out of her eyes and slopped back the remainder of her green tea. "I will," she replied softly.

Lynd stood within the confines of the Temple, trying not to stare. Her borrowed Priest's robe billowed around her like a tent, half-tripping her as she shuffled through the Great Hall beside Tarn-Weth. "Don't attract attention to yourself," he whispered to her, as they approached a dias. "Shamash himself is seated up there, and if he finds out you're an impostor both our lives are forfeit."

Lynd crossed her arms protectively across her chest and continued to shuffle across the mosaic floor. Peering cautiously from her hood, she caught a glimpse of High Priest Shamash—the man who had brought the Book of Lutherum to Alikh, and ordered the downfall of all disbelievers.

Shamash was a corpulent man, with a domed, hairless head covered in spiraled tattoos. Opulent robes the color of the peacocks that strutted behind his chair draped his limbs. On either side of him his concubines strutted in flimsy gowns, giggling and feeding each other grapes.

Lynd felt a stab of anger at the sight of him, then forced the feeling back. Emotion must not ruin her chance at saving Lysan.

As they passed the throne, Shamash leaned forward with a lazy yawn. "Greetings, Brother Holt. How fares our prisoner?"

"She is in great pain, your Holiness," Tarn-Weth muttered in a low voice, "yet she still defies Lutherum."

Shamash's eyebrows rose into the crinkles massed on his forehead. "She still does not fear death? She has not yet begged for mercy?"

"No, your Holiness," replied Tarn-Weth.

"Then you have not done your duty and put the fear of Lutherum into her!" Shamash roared, pounding his meaty fist on the arm of his throne. "I dismiss you from your guard duties! Let the honour of converting the heathen whore fall to...say...the brother next to you! What is your name, man?" He pointed to the hooded Lynd.

"I...I am Brother Pertroc, your Holiness," Lynd quavered, trying to force her voice down to a man's timbre.

"Very well, then, Brother. Go to the infidel's chambers and begin your duties. Lysan must be converted before she dies—it is the will of Lutherum. Use any means you possess to break her spirit!" The fat man's eyes gleamed in their fleshy sockets. "I...ah, the great Lutherum...will not be defied by any mere female!"

Lynd bowed awkwardly, then let herself be dragged toward the exit by Tarn-Weth. "Better than I'd hoped," he told her, when they were out of range of hearing. "Now you will have direct access to Lysan!"

He led her down umpteen corridors into an area where the walls were carved from black jet. There, guarded by a soldier, stood an iron door. "That's where Shamash keeps her," whispered Tarn-Weth, as the two glided forward over beslimed flagstones.

"Who goes?" Eyes slitted, the guard leveled a pike in the newcomers' direction.

Tarn-Weth glared haughtily at him. "I am Brother Holt, you blind idiot! I have come to show in Brother Pertroc—he is to take my place as the convertor of the Infidel."

The guard grunted ill-naturedly, and lowered his pike. Taking a key from his belt, he unlocked the door. Thrusting it open, he nodded toward the darkened interior. "Enter," he growled. "But be careful."

Tarn-Weth drew Lynd aside for a moment. "Go on," he whispered. "Heal Lysan and try to devise a way to free her from the cell. If you succeed we'll hide somewhere in the city. I wish we could head straight for the gates, but by the time we arrived, the alarm would be up. Best we lie low for a few days." He scratched his head. "I don't know where..."

"Don't worry." A sparkle lit Lynd's clear grey eyes. "I know of a place Shamash and his men have never touched. All the mages who survived the massacre hide there; some even make it their home!"

Tarn-Weth gripped her shoulder warmly. "You're brilliant, Lynd!"

The guardsman cleared his throat. "Come on, Brother," he snapped. "That's enough talk! I don't like havin' this door open—she's a tough trollop, that Lysan, and I don't want her tryin' to escape."

Lynd moved back from Tarn-Weth. He gave her a reassuring nod, and then she stepped into Princess Lysan's cell.

The room was dark and musty, the walls stained with damp. Yet, Lynd reflected, at least there was some light and air. If Shamash had willed, he could have thrown Lysan into the oubliette, the bottle-dungeon, where she would not have even been able to sit down.

As she glanced around the dungeon, a rustle came from the direction of a pallet in one corner. Seconds later, a wild head of tawny hair raised itself from a blanket, and a gaunt face with a dusting of freckles turned toward Lynd. Thin, determined lips jerked up at one corner in a mocking smile. "Oh, so I have a new priest, do I?" muttered the Princess Lysan. "Come, tell me more of Lutherum and his lovely exploits—how in his loving kindness, he ordered all unwilling 'heathens' murdered, be they men, women or children. Oh yes, tell me more good priest...I long to hear. The tales only heighten my resolve never to bow to your will."

For a moment, Lynd could only stare. She had expected a demi-goddess—but this thin, wiry woman could have been any tavern wench in Alikh. Yet there was a defiant light in her eyes, and the tattoo of her noble House shone in red upon her brow.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" asked Lysan, rolling onto her back. "Begin the tales! I must hear what a wicked sinner I am! Gah, you are slow-witted, aren't you? If you're going to stand there all night, you may as well get me some rum to drink..." She gestured to an earthenware crock on the rickety table at the center of the room. "My wounded leg burns like the flames of the Underworld you Priests always yammer about!"

Lynd took a strike forward and tossed back her hood. The faint light emanating from a grille on the wall cast weird shadows over her features.

Lysan gasped. "You're not one of the Priests!"

"No, your Highness." Lynd dropped to her knees beside the older woman. "I am here to rescue you."

"To rescue... But how? I...I cannot walk, girl. My leg was slashed!"

Lynd grinned. "Your Highness, I possess the art of healing. If I had the light of Mother Moon upon me, I probably could do a better job—but I can at least get you walking."

Lysan grasped the other woman's hands. "Praise the Lady and her Son, you've come," she breathed. "I *knew* that somewhere in Alikh, there were the faithful..."

Lynd nodded. "Most stay hidden in crypts beneath the city. I come above to help the weak and sick, for that was my mother's wish ere she died. I will heal you and then take you to the mage's abode."

"My thanks," said Lysan, gratitude obvious in her eyes, and then she swept aside the blanket that had covered her, revealing her slashed and mangled leg. She nodded towards it, with a grim smile. "Do what you must, little sorceress," she whispered. "Let me walk again."

An hour later a drained Lynd leaned over the grimy table. Lysan drowsed on her pallet, her exposed leg black and blue, but otherwise whole. Lynd swallowed deeply, then took a swig from the rum-jug that stood before her. Tonight she had worked with all her skills, concentrating until the pain in her head had almost made her scream...but her efforts had been a success. Now, all she had to do was get Lysan out of the temple to safety.

Dragging herself from the chair, she approached the bed and shook Lysan's arm. "My lady," she said, "I know you're tired, but we can't risk the guards coming in here and finding you healed. We must go."

Lysan rose groggily, rubbing her sword-scarred arms. "How can we go when there are guards posted outside? If I had my sword, we'd have a chance, but they took her from me..."

Lynd drew up her hood as an impish look crossed her face. "I'll tell them you converted," she giggled, "and that I'm taking you to Shamash to beg for forgiveness."

Lysan suppressed a chuckle. "Smart thinking, Lynd Raelin. May *they* be stupid enough to believe!"

Taking Lysan by the elbow, Lynd led her to the door and tapped. Seconds later the guard opened it. He glowered

suspiciously at Lysan, who stood with head bowed, looking contrite. "Where are you takin' the prisoner?" he growled.

Lynd puffed herself up, careful not to reveal her face. "The infidel has seen the error of her ways," she intoned. "She goes to His Holiness, the Lord Shamash, to beg for mercy. Now stand out of my way!"

The guard stepped aside, with obvious reluctance. "Shout, if she causes any trouble," he said. "She's a tough bitch, that one."

Slowly, Lynd and Lysan headed down the corridor, the Princess playing the part of a penitent with aplomb. Ahead, Lynd spied a flutter of white robes in a side passage and sighed with relief. Tarn-Weth was near at hand. He'd know the way out.

She had nearly reached his hiding spot, when a shout made both women whirl. The guardsman was starting towards them, sword drawn.

"What's the meaning of this?" Lynd's voice emerged shriller than intended. "Why do you draw on me?"

The soldier's face suffused with color. "'Cause you ain't headin' toward the High Priest's chamber--and because the prisoner ain't limpin' any more!"

Lysan clapped a hand to her brow. "What a fool I've been! It feels so good to walk again, I forgot to pretend I was still injured!"

The soldier continued towards them, head down like a charging bull. His progress was rudely halted as Tarn-Weth leaped from the side corridor and slammed a moldy beer-keg over his head. The man collapsed without a sound, and Tarn-Weth turned to the two women. "The way is clear to the outside," he said, gesturing to the corridor. A fresh draft blew down its length. "I shall take you through the gardens, then Lynd will lead on to the secret hiding place she knows of."

Lysan nodded. "What of pursuit?"

Tarn-Weth shook his head. "They don't know you've escaped yet."

The three quickly hurried down the passage, Lysan draped in an extra robe Tarn-Weth had brought. Soon the corridor ended, and the fugitives emerged into the gardens of the temple. Honeysuckle and wisteria climbed on sun-bleached statues of Lutherum, here depicted as a fat, bald man--not unlike Shamash.

Passing wraith-like through the growing twilight, knocking aside the huge moths that battered the lanterns strung from the shrubbery, they eventually reached a wicker gate leading into the city. Tarn-Weth unlocked the chain, and they entered a cobbled lane that led toward Northgate, the Devil's Door and fourth entrance to the Gorbans.

Hugging the buildings, the companions hurried through the shadows. The occasional harlot or drunkard reeled by, but no soldiers were in sight. Before long Northgate became visible, its age-pitted stones glowing eerily in the muted moonlight. Several guards lounged on stools

before it, looking bored. Their main function was to keep the Gorbans' rabble out of the temple's vicinity, rather than to prevent anyone from passing *into* the slum.

As Lynd and the others approached, the guards sprang to attention. "What's going on here, Brothers?" asked one. "Unusual to have three of you straying into the Gorbans."

Tarn-Weth sidled over to him and pressed a coin into the man's palm. "Take this, and keep your silence, good fellow," he said in an oily voice. "My comrades and myself are merely going...to attempt to convert the fallen. In the stews." He nudged the guard in the ribs.

A leer spread across the guard's unshaven face. "I know exactly what ye mean, Brother. Have an...entertaining time. Pass."

The three headed through the gate, Lynd in the forefront. In silence, she guided them down an alley and into the ruins of what had once been a thriving tavern. Charred prongs of wall stuck up into the gloom; the remains of benches and tables lay in sodden piles on the ground. Lynd glanced hastily around, making sure that no one was hiding in the corners, then led the others to a rotted wooden door. Throwing it open, she revealed a pit of blackness that stretched down to an unknown distance. With a nod to Lysan and Tarn-Weth to follow, she swung one leg into the pit.

"Lynd, what are you doing?" Tarn-Weth's eyes were wide. "You could kill yourself!"

She shook her head. "This is the secret passage into the underground vaults of the city. There are rungs set in the stone about three feet down. You can feel the first one with your foot." She continued on down, and with great caution Lysan followed her.

Tarn-Weth was leaning over the hold, expression fearful. "I can't...do it," he whispered. "I detest heights. Besides, maybe I'd best return to the Temple ere I'm missed. I can work to get you out the front gates better if I'm not wanted for treason myself."

Lynd nodded. "Yes, you had better go back. When will we see you again?"

"Soon," he replied. "You can count on it, Lynd." And then his face vanished from the opening above.

Lynd stared at the black bulk of Lysan, clinging to the rungs. "We haven't far to go," she said. "You must be exhausted--magic takes its toll on both the giver and the receiver."

Lysan smiled wanly at her. "I've been bred tough, little sorceress. So lead on, and have no fear for me!"

"Lynd!" The jolly red-haired girl threw her arms about the slender woman as she entered the sepulcher of the Kings. All around, crowned figures of men and women glared with stony eyes--overlooking a sea of makeshift beds and furniture, and a little fire on a hearth of stones.

Lysan stared about in wonder. Some of her own ancestors lay here; she recognized the effigies of King Artador, Queen Azenor, a dozen others.

"How are you, Maril?" Lynd asked the red-headed girl.

"Is all well in the Sepulcher?"

"As well as it will ever be, living in a tomb like a pack of maggots," said Maril with a touch of bitterness. "But it's *you* I want to hear of! They said you'd been captured by a Priest. The community's been in mourning!"

"Maril speaks truth." A white-haired matriarch stepped from behind a sarcophagus and strolled toward Lynd and Lysan. As she moved, others came forth from the shadows—men and women, boys and girls, all with pinched, grim faces. "Tell us how you escaped, Lynd!"

"I wasn't truly captured, Old Mother," said Lynd excitedly, grasping the woman's frail shoulders. "Rebellion is fomenting in the citadel. Some of the priests turn against Shamash's teachings, due to his ordered execution of Princess Lysan. The leader of the rebels had me use my magic to heal Lysan's wounds, then assisted us to flee the temple."

The matriarch glanced over at Lysan. "Is it truly you, Royal Highness?"

Lysan nodded in assent. "It is I, Old One."

"Praise the Lady and Her Son that you are safe."

"Thanks to Lynd Raelin." The Princess clasped Lynd's arm. "May your magic ever flourish, little sorceress."

Lynd smiled wistfully. "My powers are minimal—compared to those of my forbears. Much knowledge was lost...in the Massacre."

Lysan touched her forehead. "You've used your arts for healing—and that is noble. But other powers reside in you, also, and one day they, too, may be quickened to life."

At that moment the red-haired girl Maril, who had been standing near the door where she'd greeted the newcomers, gave a cry of alarm. Everyone in the chamber whirled to face her. She was clinging to the crumbling stonework, her lips quivering in fear. "Blessed Lady, Blessed Lady..." she moaned.

"Maril, what ails you?" Lynd approached her, full of concern.

The girl grabbed Lynd's tattered sleeve and pulled her closer. "Listen," she said. "In the corridor. I can hear footsteps...the clash of weapons! Oh Lady, we're all going to die!" She sank to her knees, head bowed in despair.

Lynd listened at the entrance, color draining from her cheeks. Sure enough, she could hear men shouting and swords clashing. Poor Tarn-Weth—the other Priests must have caught him and forced him to divulge what he knew. She hoped he hadn't suffered too horribly at their hands.

At her back Princess Lysan swung round on the cowering, weeping folk. "You're mages, aren't you? Act now and save us!"

"Our powers are minimal," quavered the Matriarch. "We no longer possess the ability to split stone or create phantom armies to help us in need!"

Lysan tossed back her tawny hair in an agitated motion. "Then at least give me a sword, so that I may die fighting!"

The Matriarch stumbled back into the clutter of sarcophagi. Reaching into one broken tomb-chest, she plucked forth a dented iron blade. She handed it hilt-first to Lysan. "Take it, your Highness. It was your ancestor's anyway. May it balance as well in your hands as his!"

By the mouth of the chamber, Lynd pushed Maril aside and stood ready, dagger in hand.

"This is the place!" She heard a man's voice roar from the corridor. "We'll crush out their cursed race forever. Onward Brothers, to the glory of Lutherum!"

The Priests swirled into the sepulcher in a frenzy of white. Lynd lunged from her spot beside the door, taking the first one down. She rolled on the flagstones, struggling with the robed man, trying to maneuver her dagger to strike. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lysan spring



into action, meeting the onrush with her blade. Priests fell before her, grasping vainly at her weapon, which darted like a striking snake.

Lynd continued to struggle, eventually managing to wrap a fold of cloth around her opponent's throat. Dragging it tight until he began to choke, she raised her dagger, hating what she had to do, but seeing no other course. And then she saw the man's face, purple in the folds of his hood.

"Tarn-Weth!" she cried in horror.

He spat weakly at her. "Fool! You fell for the lies I spun you like a gullible child! You did all I wanted and helped lead the Priests to this den of evil!"

"The only evil is in the mind of Shamash," she wept, choking back tears. Through her gullibility she had led her folk to doom. "And in the heart of a faithless traitor!" Hands shaking, she brought the knife down. Tarn-Weth jerked and died, a malign sneer marring the face that had seemed so pleasant before.

Lynd struggled to her feet. Glancing around, she noticed Lysan embroiled with the soldiers who had followed the Priests into the Sepulchre. Despite her exhaustion, she fought well—but she was sorely outnumbered.

Noticing Lynd's stare, the Princess called out: "Lynd! I cannot hold much longer! Use your magic—none of the others will!"

Lynd glanced at the rest of the mages, huddled in the stone alcoves of the crypt. "I can't help," she called back. "None of us can! We told you; the powers are lost to us!"

"And I tell you, they're only dormant! I beg you, find the strength and save us all! Seek inside, Lynd. Destroy the foe with your powers!"

Tears welled from Lynd's eyes. "I—I can't. I'm a *healer*, not a killer! A fight using arms is fair—but to use magic?"

"Lynd!" Lysan stared at her in desperation. She threw up an arm to block a descending blow—and staggered weakly, almost falling.

And then the young healer knew there was no course but to act. She couldn't see Lysan and her friends slaughtered. Especially since she had fallen for the ruse that had brought destruction upon them...

Falling to her knees, she began chanting fragments of spells heard from her parents. Darkness engulfed her, and it seemed she walked through a black void with only a gibbous moon above. Even as she watched, the benign moon decayed into a rind that bore a faint resemblance to a death's head. And she knew she looked upon the Goddess as Destroyer. She raised her arms in supplication, and a dark energy coursed through her, flowing down from the ghastly moon. With a laugh she flung up her arms, as the power flared from her fingertips.

Then the Moon was gone. She stood in the Sepulcher again. Yet a change was taking place. Seeping from every sarcophagus, from every urn, a greenish essence wound its way across the flagstones. The smell of death was in the air, as tapers died to darkness with a hiss. The soldiers ceased their assault, staring this way and that in fright.

They began to scream, as the green essence took on the shape of skeletal men and women bearing weapons of ages past. With leering mouths and baleful eyes, the wraiths of the Kings of Alikh descended upon those who had ruined their once-great kingdom.

The soldiers tried to flee, but the dead army was unstoppable. They engulfed the men inside their glowing, spectral bodies, and left them lying like crushed worms, hearts stopped with fear. Then, the wraiths passed up the corridor on a dark wind, borne toward the Temple of the hated Shamash.

The following eve, Alikh lay silent, drowsing under a misty pall. Lynd stood with Lysan, overlooking the great temple. Shadows darkened every window.

"Do you suppose they're all dead?" asked Lysan, leaning on her sword.

Lynd nodded. "The wraiths were angry—their wrath burned in me like fire. But they are back at rest now, and will stay so—unless summoned."

Lysan placed a hand on the other's arm. "I knew you had the strength. I owe you much."

"I didn't do it willingly," Lynd admitted. "Such violent powers I mistrust. I prefer to give life—not take it. Though I will kill when I must—as in Tarn-Weth's case." She bowed her head, still remembering the little boy she had played with as a child.

Lysan drew her cloak around her shoulders. "Within the hour I shall return home," she said, changing the subject. "I will have workers come to rebuild Alikh and make it great once more. A just Overlord will replace the Priests—and the mages will no longer be forced to hide. New schools will be opened to teach them their untapped strengths. Lynd..." She met the younger woman's eyes. "I owe you my very life. I want to reward you. Would you assist in the ruling of Alikh, the teaching of your people? If so, I'll have the position declared yours."

Lynd smiled at the Princess, then slowly shook her head. "No, your Highness," she said softly. "That's not for me—at least not yet. Not until there are no more lepers and beggars and sick souls upon the streets of Alikh. When they are all gone, you can summon me to the palace."

She flashed the startled Lysan one final brief smile, then slipped away into the evening, walking with purpose and determination toward the smoky alleys of the city slums.