



B E Y O N D T H E
H I G H R O A D

Troy Denning



Prologue



One man could not kill so many. It was not possible.

The murderer's trail led down to a gnarled fir tree, where an entire company of Purple Dragons lay strewn across the landscape as still as stones. There were more than twenty of them, sprawled alongside their dead horses in every manner of impossible contortion. Arms and legs hooked away at unexpected angles, torsos lay doubled back against the spine, heads rested on shoulders staring in the wrong direction. Many had died with their shields still hanging from their saddles. A few had fallen even before they could draw their weapons.

Emperel Ruousk unsheathed his sword and eased his horse down the hill, keeping one eye on the surrounding terrain as he read his quarry's trail. There remained just one set of tracks, each print spaced nearly two yards apart. After a hundred miles, the murderer was still running—an

Troy Denning

incredible feat for any man, let alone one who had been roaring drunk when he fled.

The trail of the Purple Dragons paralleled the killer's at the regulation distance of one lance-length. The hoof prints ran in strict double file, with no stray marks to suggest the presence of outriders or point scouts. The commander had taken no precautions against ambush, no doubt thinking it a simple matter to capture a drunken killer. Emperel would not make the same mistake.

As he neared the site of the massacre, a murder of crows rose from among the bodies and took wing, scolding him raucously. He watched them go, then stopped to make certain the killer was not lying in ambush among the corpses. The area reeked of rotting flesh. Clouds of black flies hovered over the dead bodies, filling the air with an insane drone. The soldiers' breastplates were cratered and torn and streaked with sun-dried gore. Their basinetts were either staved-in or split open. Some helmets were missing, along with the heads inside. Many shields had been smeared with the vilest sort of offal, completely obscuring the royal crest of the purple dragon, and several men had died with their own eyeballs in their mouths. One had been strangled with his own entrails.

Emperel began to feel nauseated. He had seen dozens of slaughters in the Stonelands, but never anything so sick and angry. He rode over to a headless corpse and dismounted, then kneeled to examine the stump of the neck. The wound was ragged and irregular and full of gristle strings, just like the stump of the tavern keeper's neck in Halfhap. According to witnesses, the murderer had simply grabbed the poor fellow beneath the jaw and torn off his head.

Emperel stood and circled through the dead bodies, taking care to keep his horse between himself and the gnarled fir at the heart of the massacre. With a twisted

Beyond the High Road

trunk large enough to hide ten murderers, the tree was a particularly huge and warped specimen of an otherwise regal species. Its bark was scaly and black, stained with runnels of crimson sap. Its needles were a sickly shade of yellow. The tangled boughs spiraled up to a cork-screwed crown nearly two hundred feet in the air, then withered off into a clawlike clump of barren sticks.

On the far side of the tree, Emperel discovered a large burrow leading down beneath the trunk. The soil heaped around the opening was lumpy and dark, with lengths of broken root jutting out at haphazard angles. A string of ancient glyphs spiraled up the trunk above the tunnel opening, the letters as sinuous as serpents. He did not recognize the language, but the shape of the characters struck him as both elegant and vaguely menacing.

Emperel studied the burrow for several minutes, then approached and tethered his horse to the tree. The hole itself was oval in shape and barely broad enough for a man to enter on his belly. There were several boot prints in the dirt outside, but the walls and floor of the tunnel had been dragged smooth by a passing body. Emperel lay down beside the entrance and peered into the darkness. The interior was as black as night. He could hear a muffled sound that might have been a man's snoring, and the musty air carried an undertone of rancid sweat.

Emperel scanned the massacre once again. Seeing nothing but flies and corpses, he withdrew a black weathercloak from his saddlebags and slipped it over his armor, closing the throat clasp to ready the cape's protective enchantments. As a confidential agent of King Azoun IV, he had access to all of the standard magic in the Royal Armory, and today he was glad for it. He clamped a pair of steel bracers on his wrists, slipped an amethyst ring onto his finger, traded his steel sword for a magic dagger, then dropped to his belly in front of the dank hole. The

Troy Denning

snoring became an erratic rumble, and the smell of sour sweat grew rife.

Emperel inhaled one last breath of fresh air, then crawled into the darkness, moving slowly and silently. The hole was musty, cramped, and lined with broken root stubs as thick as his wrist. Though there was little room to fight—or retreat—Emperel gave no thought to trying to outwait his quarry. Before beheading the tavern keeper, the murderer had been boasting about how he would ruin King Azoun, and such traitors received no respite from Emperel Ruousk. They received only justice, as quick and sure as an Agent of the Realm possessed of all the magic and might implied by that title could deal it out.

A few feet into the tunnel, the darkness grew so thick Emperel could no longer see the dagger in front of his nose. He paused and whispered, “King’s sight.”

The amethyst on his ring twinkled faintly, then Emperel began to perceive the passage walls in hues of blue and crimson. The warmth of his body made his flesh glow red, while the dagger in his hand shone silver with magic. A dozen feet ahead, the tunnel opened into a small, oblong chamber surrounded by dangling amber strands—the tips of shallow roots. Strangely, there was no sign of a taproot, an absence that did much to explain the fir’s twisted form.

As Emperel neared the entrance to the little chamber, he saw the murderer lying on his back, glowing crimson against the violet pallor of a stone floor. If not for the crust of gore covering him from head to foot, Emperel would have sworn it was the wrong man. The man’s eyes were closed in blissful sleep, his lips bowed in an angelic smile and his arms folded peacefully across his chest. He looked too emaciated to have slaughtered a whole company of dragooneers. His arms were as slender as spears, his shoulders gaunt and knobby, his cheeks hollow, his eyes sunken.

Beyond the High Road

Suddenly, Emperel understood everything—where the man had found the strength to run so far, how he had slain an entire company of dragooneers, why he had defiled their bodies so wickedly. Sweat began to pour down Emperel's brow, and he considered returning to Halfhap for help—but what good would that do? The vampire had already shown that he could destroy superior numbers, and Emperel had the advantage now.

He continued forward to the end of the tunnel, the smell of his own perspiration overpowering the fetor of the musty lair. Though his stomach was queasy with fear, he reminded himself that safety was just a gesture away. All he need do was slip a hand into his weathercloak's escape pocket, and he would be standing beside his horse, outside in the brilliant sunlight where no vampire could follow. He crawled silently into the chamber and pulled his legs in after him.

As Emperel stood, something soft and wispy crackled in his ears. His heart skipped a beat, and he found himself biting his tongue, not quite sure whether he had let out a cry. He glanced down and found the murderer as motionless as before, hands folded across his haggard chest, mouth upturned in that angelic smile. Trying not to think of what dreams could make a vampire happy, Emperel raised a hand and felt a curtain of gossamer filament clinging to his face. It was stiff and sticky, like the web of a black widow spider.

Emperel experienced the sudden sensation of hundreds of little legs crawling down his tunic. Hoping the feeling was all in his mind, he stooped to get his head out of the web, then removed a gauntlet from his belt and slipped the steel glove onto his right hand. When presented palm outward, the glove became the holy symbol of his god, Torm the True, and it would keep any vampire at bay. Next, he drew his hand axe from its belt loop and,

Troy Denning

using the enchanted dagger, began to whittle the wooden butt into a sharp stake.

Though it seemed to Emperel that the sound of his breathing filled the chamber with a bellowslike rasp, the vampire continued to sleep. The silver-glowing dagger peeled the axe's seasoned handle away in shavings as thick as coins, and it was not long before Emperel had sharpened it to a point. He sheathed his dagger again, then kneeled beside the vampire and raised the stake. His arm was trembling.

"Torm, guide my hand," he whispered.

A bead of sweat dropped from his brow and landed on the vampire's shoulder. The monster's eyelids snapped open, its angry eyes shining white in Emperel's enchanted vision.

Emperel brought the stake down, ramming it deep into the vampire's ribcage. Blood, icy cold and as black as ink, seeped up around the shaft. An ear-piercing shriek filled the chamber, then something caught Emperel in the breastplate and sent him tumbling across the stone floor.

He passed through a curtain of gossamer filament and crashed into a dirt wall, his head spinning and chest aching. When he looked down, his mouth went dry. There was a fist-shaped depression in the center of his breastplate, and he had not even seen the murderer's hand move.

Emperel spun to his knees—he was too dizzy to stand—and struggled to gulp some air into his lungs. A few paces away, the vampire lay on its side, writhing in pain and slowly pulling the stake from its chest. Emperel's jaw fell. He had slain more than a dozen vampires, and not one had done such a thing. Had he missed the heart?

The vampire's white eyes swung toward the wall. Emperel raised a finger, pointed at its gaunt hands, and shouted, "King's bolts!"

Beyond the High Road

Emperel's bracers grew as hot as embers and sent four golden bolts streaking across the crypt. The magic struck the vampire's hands with a brilliant golden flash, then sank into its flesh and spread up its arms in a pale saffron glow.

The vampire jerked the stake from its heart, then struggled to its feet and turned toward Emperel. Gouts of dark blood pumped from the hole in its chest, but it did not seem to care. It merely hefted the axe and stumbled forward.

Emperel jumped to his feet and stepped to meet the monster, drawing his magic dagger and boldly thrusting the palm of his steel gauntlet into its face.

"Back," he commanded, "in the name of Torm!"

The vampire slapped the offending arm down so forcefully that the steel gauntlet flew from Emperel's hand. "Do I *look* undead to you?"

Emperel's mouth went dry, and he brought his magic dagger up, driving the silver-shining blade into the thing's stomach and up toward the heart. The vampire—or whatever it was—closed its eyes and nearly collapsed, then reached down and clamped Emperel's hand.

"How . . . treacherous," it hissed.

Emperel tried to twist the blade, but found the thing's grasp too powerful to fight. Struggling against a rising tide of panic, he pulled away, then slammed an elbow into the side of its head.

The blow did not even rock the monster.

"By the Loyal Fury!" Emperel gasped. "What manner of devil are you?"

"The worst kind . . . an angry one."

The killer slammed Emperel into the wall, unleashing a cascade of pebbles and loose dirt, then pulled the dagger free. The silvery glow had all but faded from the enchanted blade, and as Emperel watched, the weapon grew cold and

Troy Denning

utterly black. The murderer tossed it aside and staggered forward, dark blood now pouring from two wounds.

Unable to believe what he was seeing, Emperel raised his ring finger and said, “King’s light!”

The amethyst setting burst into light, filling the chamber with a blue-white glow. Caught by surprise, the murderer closed its eyes and turned away, momentarily blinded. Emperel, who had known what to expect, leaped forward, drawing his sword and slamming a foot into the back of his foe’s knee. The murderer hit the floor rolling, tangling legs with Emperel and sweeping him off his feet.

Emperel landed hard, his head slamming against the stone floor. His vision narrowed and his ears began to ring, then his foe was on him, tearing at his throat and denting his helmet. He raised his arm to ward off the blows, and the murderer caught hold of his hand. His ring finger gave a sickening crack, then a terrible pain shot up his arm. Emperel cried out and brought his sword hand up, slamming the pommel into his attacker’s head.

The killer went sprawling, ripping the weathercloak off Emperel’s shoulders and pulling the magic ring off his finger—no, not *off*.

In the murderer’s hand was something thin and bloody, with the white nub of a knucklebone protruding from the red stump. Emperel’s ring was still attached, illuminating the killer’s head in brilliant blue-white. Its face was mantislike and skeletal, with ovoid eyes as red as embers and an impossibly slender chin. Even in the light, the creature’s complexion remained shadowy and dark—but not so dark Emperel failed to recognize something familiar in its arrow-shaped nose and upturned lip. He brought his sword around, placing the tip between himself and the man-thing.

“Do I . . . I know you!”

Beyond the High Road

The murderer's eyes narrowed to red slits and it hissed, "Not for long."

Emperel heaved his aching body to its feet and advanced a single step, bringing his sword to a high guard. The killer smirked and retreated the same distance, closing one fist around the stolen ring. A sigh of satisfaction slipped from its lips, and the amethyst's light began to flow into its hand, filling the tiny chamber with eerie fingers of light.

Emperel felt a chill between his shoulder blades. The murderer was absorbing the ring's magic—just as it had absorbed the magic bolts from his bracers and drained the magic from his dagger. The chamber began to dim rapidly. Realizing he would soon be trapped in total darkness without his weathercloak or any other means of escape, Emperel glanced at the exit passage. The murderer stepped over to block the tunnel mouth.

Perfect. Emperel sprang forward to attack, allowing himself a confident smile as the last light faded from the ring. His sword had no magic at all, and when the blade hit home, the murderer groaned and fell into the darkness. Emperel spun on his heel, bringing his sword down in a vicious backhand slash. Sparks flew as his blade clanged off the stone floor. He pivoted away, blindly weaving his weapon in a defensive pattern. A gentle thud sounded beside him, so soft he barely heard it over the whisper of his flying blade. He spun toward the noise, bringing his sword around in a hissing arc. The blade bit into the corner of the tunnel entrance, sending a spray of dirt and pebbles clattering down onto the stone floor.

A low moan sounded deep within the tunnel, followed by the scrape of leather on dirt. Emperel flung himself into the passage, blindly whipping his sword to and fro. He struck nothing but dirt and roots.

A moment later, his horse screamed, and the murderer was gone.

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hey sat swaying in unison, the four of them quietly watching each other as Princess Tanalasta's small carriage bounced across the High Heath toward Worg Pass. The shades were drawn tight against blowing dust, and the interior of the coach was dim, dry, and warm.

The Warden of the Eastern Marches sat at an angle across from Tanalasta, square and upright in his polished field armor, his steely eyes focused curiously on the wiry priest at her side. The priest, Harvestmaster Owden Foley of Monastery Huthduth, rested well back in the shadows, his slender head turned slightly to smirk at a portly mage whose moon-spangled silks touted him as one of Cormyr's more powerful war wizards. The mage, Merula the Marvelous, perched at the edge of his seat, bejeweled hands folded atop the silver pommel of his walking cane. He was staring at Tanalasta with a bushy-browed glare that could

Beyond the High Road

only be described as rather too intense. Tanalasta sat studying the Warden of the Eastern Marches, a gangly, horse-faced man who was still somehow handsome in his scarlet cape and purple sash of office. She was thinking that a princess could marry worse than Dauneth Marliir.

Tanalasta did not love Dauneth, of course, but she liked him, and princesses could rarely marry for love. Even if he was five years her junior, Dauneth was loyal, brave, and good-looking enough for a noble, and that should have been enough. A year ago it would have been, but now she needed more. With her thirty-sixth year approaching and all of Cormyr waiting for her to produce an heir, suddenly she had to have bells and butterflies. Suddenly, she had to be in love.

It was enough to make her want to abdicate.

Seeming to feel the pressure of her gaze, Dauneth looked away from Owden. "My apologies, Princess. These mountain roads are difficult to keep in good repair."

"A little bumping and jarring won't hurt me, Dauneth." Tanalasta narrowed her eyes ever so slightly, a face-hardening device she had spent many hours practicing in the reflection of a forest pond. "I'm hardly the porcelain doll you knew a year ago."

Dauneth's face reddened. "Of course not. I didn't mean—"

"You should have seen me at Huthduth," the princess continued, her voice now light and cheerful. "Clearing stones out of fields, leading plow oxen, harvesting squash, picking raspberries, hunting wild mushrooms . . ."

Tanalasta paused, thinking it better not to add "swimming naked in mountain lakes."

Merula the Marvelous raised an eyebrow, and she felt a sudden swell of anger. Could the wizard be reading her thoughts?

"You were hunting wild mushrooms, milady?" asked Dauneth. "In the forest?"

Troy Denning

“Of course.” Tanalasta returned her gaze to Dauneth, still struggling to decide how she would deal with the wizard’s intrusion. “Where else does one hunt for mushrooms?”

“You really shouldn’t have,” Dauneth said. “The mountains around Huthduth are orc country. If a foraging mob had come across you. . . .”

“I wasn’t aware that protecting me was your purview, Dauneth. Has the king told you something he has yet to share with me?”

Dauneth’s eyes betrayed his surprise at the woman returning from Huthduth. “No, of course not. The king would hardly confide in me before his own daughter, but I do have a . . . a reason to be concerned with your safety.”

Tanalasta said nothing, allowing Dauneth a chance to make himself sound less presumptuous by adding some comment about a noble’s duty to safeguard a member of the royal family. When the Warden remained silent, she realized matters were worse than she had expected. With King Azoun turning sixty-three in two days and Tanalasta on the far side of thirty-five and still unmarried, people were starting to wonder if she would ever produce an heir. Certain individuals had even taken it on themselves to hurry things along—most notably the Royal Magician and State Pain-in-the-Princess’s Arse, Vangerdahast. The crafty old wizard had no doubt arranged to celebrate the king’s birthday at House Marliir for the purpose of advancing Dauneth’s courtship.

That would have been fine with Tanalasta, who knew better than anyone that her time to produce an heir was fast running out. In the past year, the princess had grown more conscious than ever of her duty to Cormyr, and Dauneth had proven himself both a loyal noble and a worthy suitor in the Abraxus Affair fifteen months before. Nothing would have made her happier than to summon the good Warden to the

Beyond the High Road

altar and get started on the unpleasant business of producing an heir, and the princess had made up her mind to do exactly that when she received word of the celebration in Arabel.

Then the vision had come.

Tanalasta quickly chased from her thoughts all memory of the vision itself, instead picturing Merula the Marvelous trussed naked on a spit and roasting over a slow fire. If the wizard was spying on her thoughts, she wanted him to know what awaited if he dared report any particular one to the royal magician. Vangerdahast would hear of her vision soon enough, and Tanalasta needed to be the one to tell him.

Merula merely continued to glower. "Something wrong, milady?"

"I hope not."

Tanalasta drew back a window flap and turned to watch the High Heath glide by. It was a small plain of golden checkerboard fields divided into squares by rough stone walls and dotted with thatch-roofed huts. The simple folk who scratched their living from the place had come out to watch the royal procession trundle past, and it was not until the princess had waved at two dozen vacant-eyed children without receiving a response that she realized something was wrong.

She turned to the Harvestmaster beside her. "Owden, look out here and tell me what you think. Is there something wrong with those barley fields?"

The thin priest leaned in front of her and peered out the window. "There is, Princess. It's too early for such a color. There must be some sort of blight."

Tanalasta frowned. "Across the whole heath?"

"So it appears."

Tanalasta thrust her head out the window. "Stop the carriage!"

Troy Denning

Merula scowled and reached for his own drape to countermand the order, but Tanalasta caught his arm.

“Do you really want to challenge the command of an Obarskyr, wizard?”

The wizard knitted his bushy eyebrows indignantly. “The royal magician’s orders were clear. We are to stop for nothing until we have cleared the mountains.”

“Then proceed on your own, by all means,” Tanalasta retorted. “Vangerdahast does not command me. You may remind him of that, if he is listening.”

The carriage rumbled to a stop, and a footman opened the door. Tanalasta held out her hand to Dauneth.

“Will you join me, Warden?”

Dauneth made no move to accept her hand. “Merula is right, milady. These mountains are no place—”

“No?” Tanalasta shrugged, then reached for the footman’s hand. “If you are frightened. . . .”

“Not at all.” Dauneth was out the door in an instant, jostling the footman aside and offering his hand to Tanalasta. “I was only thinking of your safety.”

“Yes, you did say you have reason to concern yourself with me.”

Tanalasta gave the Warden a vinegary smile, then allowed him to help her out of the coach, prompting a handful of peasants to gasp and bow so low their faces scraped ground. Outside, it was a warm mountain afternoon with a sky the color of sapphires and air as dry as sand, and the princess was disappointed to note they had already crossed most of the heath. The foot of Worg Pass lay only a hundred paces ahead, where the barley fields abruptly gave way to a stand of withering pine trees.

Tanalasta motioned the peasants to their feet, then turned to Harvestmaster Owden, who was climbing out of the carriage behind her. “Do you think your assistants could do anything to save these fields, Harvestmaster?”

Beyond the High Road

Owden glanced toward a large, ox-drawn wagon following a few paces behind the princess's carriage. A dozen monks in green woolen robes sat crammed into the cargo bed among shovels, harrows, and other implements of Chauntea's faith. They were eyeing the blighted fields and muttering quietly among themselves, no doubt as concerned as Tanalasta by what they saw.

Owden motioned his assistants out of the wagon. "It will take a few hours, Princess."

"A few hours!" Merula hoisted his considerable bulk through the carriage door with surprising ease. "We can't have that! The royal magician—"

"—need not know," Tanalasta finished for him. "Unless he is spying upon us even as we speak—in which case you may inform him that the Crown Princess will spend the afternoon walking."

Tanalasta eyed the Purple Dragons guarding her carriage, one company mounted on their snorting chargers ahead of the procession and the other bringing up the rear, lances posted and steel helmets gleaming in the sun. At the end of the official column followed a long line of merchant carts taking advantage of Tanalasta's escorts to ensure a safe passage through the mountains. Sighing at the futility of trying to find a little privacy with her suitor, Tanalasta turned to Dauneth.

"Will you join me, Warden?"

Dauneth nodded somewhat uncomfortably. "Whatever the princess wishes."

Trying not to grind her teeth in frustration, Tanalasta took Dauneth's arm and led him past the long file of riders to the front of the column. Though her shoulders were draped in a silken cape of royal purple, underneath she wore a sensible traveling smock and a pair of well-worn walking boots, and it was not long before they reached the foot of Worg Pass. She sent the company captain ahead

Troy Denning

with two scouts and instructed the rest of the company to follow twenty paces behind, but she could not quite make her getaway before Merula the Marvelous came puffing up from behind.

“I trust . . . the princess will not object to . . . company,” Merula panted.

“Of course not. Why should she?” asked Owden Foley, appearing from the other side of the horse column. The weatherworn priest winked a crinkled eye at the princess, then looped his hand through Merula’s arm. “My friend, what an excellent idea to join them. We could all do with a nice, brisk walk. Nothing like a stroll to get the heart pumping and keep the fields in water, is there?”

Merula scowled and jerked his arm away. “I thought the princess asked you to attend to the peasants’ fields.”

“And so I am,” Owden replied, digging a good-natured elbow into the wizard’s well-padded ribs. “That’s why one has monks, is it not?”

“I wouldn’t know,” grumbled Merula.

Owden merely grinned and continued to prattle on about the wholesome benefits of mountain sunlight and pine-fresh air. Tanalasta smiled and silently thanked the priest for coming to her rescue. With the Harvestmaster expounding about the benefits of mountain life, Merula would find it impossible to eavesdrop on her conversation—or her thoughts.

Tanalasta led the way up the road at a lively gait. The pass climbed steeply along the flank of a lightly forested mountain, and soon enough the sound of Merula’s huffing breath faded from her hearing—though it was replaced by the somewhat lighter panting of the Warden of the Eastern Marches.

“If I may say so, Princess, you have changed much since . . .” Dauneth paused, no doubt as much to summon his tact as to catch his breath, then continued, “Since the last time I saw you.”

Beyond the High Road

Tanalasta eyed him levelly. "It's all right, Dauneth. You can say it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can say, 'since Aunadar Bleth made a fool of you,' " Tanalasta said lightly. She continued up the road. "The whole kingdom knows how he tried to marry me and steal the crown. Really, it's insulting to behave as if I'm the only one unaware of it."

Dauneth's face reddened. "You were under a terrible strain. With your father poisoned and—"

"I was a damned ninny. I nearly lost the kingdom, and it was nobody's fault but my own." Despite the steep climb, Tanalasta betrayed no sign of fatigue as she spoke. A year at Huthduth had conditioned her to harder work than hiking. "At least I learned that much from Vangerdahast. I swear, I don't know why he didn't tell Father to name Alusair crown princess."

Dauneth cocked an eyebrow. "Perhaps because he saw what you would make of the experience." The Warden grew thoughtful, then added, "Or, since we are speaking frankly, maybe it is because he knows your sister. Can you see Alusair as queen? No noble son would be safe. If she wasn't getting them killed in a war, she'd be entrapping them in her boudoir."

Tanalasta let her jaw drop. "Watch your tongue, sir!" Smiling, she cuffed Dauneth lightly on the back. "That's my baby sister you are maligning."

"So the crown princess wishes to acknowledge her own weaknesses and remain blind to those of everyone else?" Dauneth shook his head sagely. "This will never do. It runs contrary to the whole spirit of sovereign tradition. Perhaps I should have a talk with old Vangerdahast after all."

"That will hardly be necessary." Tanalasta lowered her voice and leaned closer. "All you need do is mention it in

Troy Denning

front of our companions. I've no doubt Vangey knows everything the moment Merula hears it."

"Really?" Dauneth glanced back at the pudgy wizard, who looked almost as weary of climbing as he did of Owden's nature lecture. "I didn't realize the royal magician was such a voyeur."

"That's just one thing you'd need to accustom yourself to, if . . ."

Tanalasta let the sentence hang, as reluctant to reveal her condition for giving her hand to Dauneth as she was to commit herself to giving it.

The Warden was too good a military man not to press for an advantage when he saw the opportunity. "If what, milady?"

Tanalasta stopped climbing and turned to face Dauneth, bringing the whole procession of guards and merchants to a clamorous halt. Only Merula and Owden continued to climb, the wizard more eager than ever to eavesdrop, and the priest just as determined to fill his ear with valuable nature lore.

Trying to ignore the fact that she was being watched by a thousand eyes, Tanalasta took Dauneth's hand and answered his question. "*If* we are to do what my father and Vangerdahast want us to, but first we must trust each other enough to speak honestly and openly."

Dauneth's face grew serious. "I am sure the princess will find me a very honest fellow."

"Of course. No one can doubt that after the Abraxus Affair, but that's really not what I meant."

Noticing that Merula's huffing was growing audible again, Tanalasta turned up the road and started to climb. They were almost at the summit now. At any moment, she expected to crest Worg Pass and see the bulky towers of High Horn in the distance.

Dauneth clambered to keep up. "So what did you mean, Princess?"

Beyond the High Road

“Tanalasta, please. If you can’t even call me by name—”

“I didn’t want to take liberties.” Dauneth’s voice had grown defensive. “You haven’t invited me to.”

“I am inviting you to now.”

“Very well. Then what did you mean, Tanalasta?”

Tanalasta rolled her eyes, wondering how she could say what she meant without making it seem a command, and without sounding like the same ninny who had nearly let Aunadar Bleth steal a kingdom from beneath her nose. The princess had little doubt that Dauneth, raised in the fine tradition of noble families everywhere, would find her wish to marry for love as laughable as Vangerdahast found it. On the other hand, it was she who wanted to speak honestly and openly, and she could hardly demand such a thing of Dauneth if she was unwilling herself. Tanalasta took a deep breath and began.

“First, Dauneth, there must be trust and respect.”

Dauneth’s lips tightened, and Tanalasta saw that she had gotten off to a bad start.

“Oh no, Dauneth! I have the utmost trust and respect for you. Everybody does.” Tanalasta paused, choosing her next words carefully. “What I mean to say is . . . well, it must be mutual.”

Dauneth frowned. “I do trust you, Prin—er, Tanalasta. Of course I respect you.”

“If that were true, you would not be lying to me now.”

“Milady! I would never lie—”

“Truly?” Tanalasta allowed her voice to grow sharp. “You still respect my judgment after the Abraxus Affair? You would trust the kingdom to the care of someone so easily manipulated?”

Dauneth started to reply automatically, then his eyes lit with sudden comprehension. “I see your point.”

Tanalasta felt a hollow ache in her stomach, which she quickly recognized as the pang of wounded pride—and

Troy Denning

evidence that Dauneth was listening well. She forced a smile, but could not quite bring herself to take Dauneth's arm.

"Now you're being honest. Thank you."

"I wish I could say it was my pleasure, but it really isn't. This is truly what you want from me?"

"It's a start."

"A start." Dauneth sounded somewhat dazed. He plucked at the fabric of her woolen traveling frock. "If I am being honest, would you also like me to tell you that gray really isn't your color?"

Tanalasta swatted his hand away. "I said honest, not brash!" she chuckled. "After all, I am still a princess, and I expect to be courted."