

They spiralled down to the battlefield. Marrec's gut tensed. This was a big incursion. Must be around a hundred horrors. The Marshalls and Chevaliers had agreed that he and Calli would continue to follow Lady Hallard who would attack from the opposite direction of the Marshalls, then both groups would work inward.

Marrec opened himself completely to Calli. Fear lurked in the back of her mind, under control. Good. Ready?

She sucked in a deep breath, nodded. Ayes.

He was pleased she used Lladranan.

Just do as we have practiced and you will be fine.

They flew to attach themselves to the front of Lady Hallard's wing, just behind her.

Marrec nodded to her new Chief of Chevaliers**.

"Dive!" commanded Hallard.

Shield! ordered Marrec.

Calli heard it in her mind, snapped a forcefield bubble around Marrec, exhaled a little prayer that the action had been instinctive reaction to the demand she'd heard again and again in the last couple of weeks. She puffed out her breath and drew in another deep one as the ground – and the monsters, this time no illusion – got nearer and nearer. Splotches of color separated into different beasts – black renders, yellow slayers, gray soul suckers. Bigger than she'd expected. Huge.

On the ground, they screamed in rage and vicious delight at the thought of killing, maiming, tearing into human and volaran flesh. Tasty meat.

Waves of their brutal glee smacked her, rocked her back in the saddle. Thunder whinnied in fear. She couldn't have that – have Thunder fear, let herself fear. Only concentration on the event mattered.

Marrec and the other Swords dove, weapons out, at the monsters. On the other side of the mass of horrors, she saw the Marshall Swords, including Alexa, do the same. Battle cries ripped from their voices. Shields, like herself, thank God, flew over the battlefield.

Icy panic slopped in her stomach, but she didn't allow it to overwhelm her. Stay cool. Stay calm.

But she wished this was thirteen second event. No chance of that.

Until two small dreeths appeared and breathed fire. Took out a line of Chevaliers. Zoomed toward her.

Then others were around her, Bastien, Thealia's Shield, leading her to safety and warriors attacked.

The link with Calli was incredible. Knowing that he was completely Shielded, that he didn't need to defend himself at all, her Powerful Shield would keep all attackers from him, left him free to fight as he never had before. Now and then he and Dark Lance felt a nudge from Calli and Thunder, urging a move in a different direction, and he followed. All his focus was on keeping Gray calm and killing the horrors, swinging sword, using shield in up-close fights.

Near the end, he had the luxury of going afoot. When he met Alexa on the ground across the dismembered heap of a slayer and two soul suckers, they exchanged fierce grins. Though the invasion had been larger than usual, he'd killed more monsters than usual, the time had passed more quickly. He shook his head, noticing the huge quiet of the absence of fighting – no

horrors screaming rage and hatred, no

And a monotonous whimpering in his mind. Calli. He took off his helmet, letting the air dry his wet scalp, and looked toward her. She and Thunder circled the battlefield. Though their flight was like a dance, Marrec knew shudders rippled her body, nausea filled her.

Alexa followed his gaze, frowned as if she sensed Calli's horror** and sickness herself. "Been there, done that," Alexa said. Then Thuder banked, one wing nearly touching the ground, his close foot kicking out to finish a rising slayer. "Sorta," said Alexa. She turned back to Marrec, brows still lowered. Taking a cleaning rag from her pouch, she slid it over her blade, eyes meeting his. "This is Calli's first fight. That means she'll have to be blooded." Alexa's lips thinned. "She won't like that." Alexa's lips tightened, then she continued. "Were you at mine— Oh, yes, you were. Do the same."

Do the same? Then he recalled that as her pairling and an experienced Chevalier, it was up to him to blood Calli – annoint her with the blood of her enemy. For the first time in his life he thought about it – thought it was a barbaric custom. He sent his mind back to the first time he'd seen Alexa fight, trying to recall. What had Bastien done? He couldn't envision it. Then realized Bastien hadn't been there. Luthan had been the person who'd blooded Alexa, and Marrec let out a breath as he remembered.

Then Calli was there, above him, Gray coming in for a short landing, along with Dark Lance. They were awfully close, so he stood still. As soon as Gray stood and folded his wings, Marrec reached for Calli, drawing her off the volaran to lean against him. Her face was pale and wet from tears. Her body trembled. He wrapped his arms around her and felt her soaring relief that he was there, that she was not alone, and that touched him so his throat closed.

"The new Exotique Chevalier will now be blooded!" Bastien announced, coming toward them, sympathy in his gaze. He was right. Get it over with fast.

"Trust me," Marrec whispered to Calli.

She blinked and looked up at him. "I do."

He set her to one side, scanned the beast bodies around them. What had Luthan used? He couldn't remember. Render would be best, no chance of poison from a render, unlike soul sucker or slayer which carried foul blood in their veins.

Alexa was there, standing on Calli's other side, so close as to be brushing her skin. "Brace yourself," Alexa said. A circle of Chevaliers, then Marshalls, formed around them.

"Blooded." Calli licked her lips, staring down at the heap of dead horrors. "Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Probably, but Marrec will do it."

Calli relaxed a little. Her gaze met his. "It will be all right then."

A sweep of emotion flooded Marrec. Caring. He'd never cared for another person so much as he did Calli. He jerked a nod, stripped off the fighting gauntlet on his left hand, touched the bloody wound in a render's back. Dark red-black blood coated his finger. He noticed his hand shook a little. That wouldn't do. He sent Power to steady his nerves. With the most delicate of touches, he dabbed Calli's cheek. She stood rock still.

A chorus of cheers roared around them.

Calli's lips turned up. "Guess I'm a real Chevalier, huh?"

Swordmarshall Thealia's husband and Shield walked up, a short man who usually wore a

smile. Today his expression was serious. "I kept an eye on you during the battle," he said. "You did very well as a Shield. Never doubt yourself."

Clearing her throat, Calli ducked, then said. "Thank you."

Alexa grinned, clapped Calli on her shoulder. "You passed the test, Calli." Then Alexa's brows dipped. "Tho, no, you won the final championship."

"Guess so," Calli said. "Does that mean I get a gold buckle?"

"That means we have made our first payment on our land," Marrec said. "We're done here." And how glad he was that he wasn't counting his kill, scavanging for pelts to sell. He glanced to the mountains to the north, then the south. "They came directly north of our property. Again. I hope this doesn't continue to be a pattern."

"They might have moved their staging camp," Alexa said. "We should contact the Circlets and find out as soon as we return to the Castle." She held out her hand to her Shield, Bastien. "Let's go back."

Marrec slid his arm around Calli's waist. "We'll do better. We'll go home. Check on the house and land."

Anticipation and pleasure flowed from her to him.

"Good idea," Alexa said, waved.

Calli stepped away from him. Despite the time and place, Marrec wanted to keep holding her. But if they were lucky, the house would be clean and hold a bed, at least. The notion cheered him. Calli smiled. "You lead, cowboy."