

who matched the men in ages. Each of them wore a long mane of wavy hair black as coal, including the two elders, though theirs were streaked heavily of white and gray.

"You are the Circlists?" Orthnarr asked, eying the four with evident curiosity. "Of what lineage are you? You are not Balar, I deem, nor Carath. Are you Helgarin then, or Thirlan?"

In response the Circlists burst into laughter, their amusement turning the Bear-slayer's face grim.

"We are of no race that settled these lands as you are," replied the old woman. "We are of the Old Stock, they who were here before Balar, Carath, Thirlan or Helgarin. We are all who remain now, our ancestors slaughtered in bitter wars centuries ago."

"Tell us, Chieftain Orthnarr, what is it you want from us?" asked the young woman of the group.

"If you know so much, you should know what it is I seek."

"Tell us, nonetheless," said the maiden.

"I wish my warriors to be invincible, that they cannot die in battle. If it were thus we could crush Kalan and his mongrels!"

The four smiled.

"Very well then," the old man now spoke, "if that is what you wish. We ourselves have no favor nor malice to any who now dwell within these shores, and welcome all those who come to us, whomever they be. Just as we aid you in your quest to slay the host of Kalan, we would give aid to them as well, should they seek it."

"What?!" Orthnarr flared, a shocked rage bristling his features. "You aid me, yet would deign do likewise for my enemies? They who would surely destroy you with the rest of us given the chance!?"

Again the four laughed.

"Kalan the Raider and his warriors can do no harm to us, as you cannot," spoke the youth. "We will aid any who come to us, lest they should be unwilling to pay the price for our service."

"Price?" Now the chieftain's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You've said nothing of payment for the deed. What price do you demand?"

"Have no fear, Chieftain Orthnarr," said the young woman, "it will be nothing you do not have to give, and we will come to you when the