

*Blind
Contract*

*A story of
Altiva*

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This is an original shorty story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

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I.

A Cold Welcome

The Night was black and the sleet came down almost horizontally like tiny daggers of ice. Two figures trudged through the slushy mess leading two saddled and one pack vorn, the animals wrapped in cloaks to protect their eyes and quiet protests.

"I hate this!" the smaller of the two swaddled figures screamed against the wind. Both figures were layered in cloaks and blankets, their feet wrapped in ice-crusting rags.

"Oh be quiet," the taller figure yelled back, "it's not my favorite way to spend a day either."

"A day!" the little one said. "Ku'zn, you got that stupid note two days ago in our nice warm inn."

"Shut up, Alma," Ku'zn commanded, "Kyra was bond-sister with me under Orancha, she knows me well enough not to have summoned me lightly."

The ice crusted mini caravan was moving along a carriage road in Oria, as it had been for two days through the growing storm. Ku'zn had received a note by Kota bird when she was almost at the Destina ferry crossing. The note had simply said, "I need your help, sister. Come to the Portal Inn at Kentak. Kyra."

How Kyra had known Ku'zn was within distance for the bird's ranging abilities was a mystery to Ku'zn.

"And what relic of me she's held onto all these years," Ku'zn thought, "to guide the bird's shadow sense to me?"

"There's the inn," Alma yelled, "I hope they have hot food-"

Suddenly the snow on either side of the trail exploded as two white-garbed figures attacked.

'Whaa!' Alma chose the moment of the attack to slip and fall backward, a clumsy shocked reaction that saved her life. The attacker's blade sliced through the bottom of Alma's airborne cloak as the teenager slammed onto the icy path.

Meanwhile the twin white fury hacked directly at Ku'zn's head. It was an over-hand blow that would have surely cleaved her from crown to chin had she not reacted with the speed of thought. She dropped the lead ropes and threw her cloak at the attacker to tangle him up.

This gave her a spare second to pull off the swaddling coat and blanket, bundling them and fling them to entangle Alma's attacker.

They hit the assassin with enough force to off balance him so that he fell to the ground beside the squelling Alma.

Ku'zn now only wore full-length buckskin pants and long sleeve shirt, but she could now get to her sheathed long knives which she drew.

Her attacker was free of the cloak and paused to reassess his prey.

Ku'zn stood over two meters tall, her long hair braided to a rope which hung almost to her waist and was just a shade darker blue than the fur which covered all of her body. Ku'zn was a daughter of the Z'n, the seafaring northern race of Altiva, the only furred race on the planet.

She bared her canine teeth with a growl as she kicked off her boots to allow her taloned feet to better grip the icy path. "Guild Assassin," she said, "you fight Ku'zn of the Firehawk clan, why?"

The figure clothed head to foot in white held a two handed sword. Only his eyes were visible through a gap in his concealing hood and they were focused gray pits of cold.

The assassin who fell beside Alma recovered quickly, rolling to his side preparatory to rising, but never got the chance for Alma leapt on his back and pulled her cloak over the attacker's head. She did her best to strangle him with the cloak, screaming curses at him at the same time.

Ku'zn met her attacker's charge with a growl and sidestep, parrying the sword with her right dagger. She sliced the back of the assassin's right hand with her other knife.

Unable to hold his sword with both hands, the man was still able to slash at her with a left-handed stroke to back her off.

"Ku'zn!" Alma yelled. The young girl was rolling around clamped on her attacker's back. He was unable to escape or directly injure her, but it was only a

matter of time until he broke free and did.

"Go, Z'n." Ku'zn's attacker said, "save her and die now, or let her die and fight me."

It was a fair assessment of the situation, for if Ku'zn went to Alma's aid the wounded swordsman would have a clear target in her back, but if she did nothing Alma would surely die.

Ku'zn smiled at the assassin, a mirthless sinister gesture that puzzled the man until she whistled. Immediately an antlered meteor crashed through the snow between the opponents as the cloak shrouded Craftdancer answered his mistress' call.

It gave the Z'n enough time to race to Alma and her opponent.

She used no finesse, simply grabbed the entangled assassin by his chin and slit his throat to the bone in one move.

His life spilled out over the pinned Alma, blinding her when she yelled, "Yuck!"

Ku'zn had no rest.

The second would be killer was upon her almost instantly, slashing at her back.

She dodged by twisting to her left, in the process tripping over the prostate Alma and the corpse.

The assassin pressed forward for a second slash but Alma heaved the body off herself into the man's shins so that he fell forward.

Ku'zn rolled back into the falling swordsman's path and stabbed upward with both her short swords.

Both blades bit deeply into the falling assassin but were knocked from the Z'n's hands as the man fell bleeding onto her.

He was still alive and determined. He pulled a dagger with his left hand and attempted to gut Ku'zn. His strength was ebbing however, and the Z'n was able to grab both his wrists. She squirmed out from beneath him to roll beside him and dove straight at his neck with her face.

It was like a lover's nuzzling touch, pushing aside the folds of the assassin's head wrap to grind her teeth to the flesh of his neck. Then she bit hard, shaking her head

violently back and forth to tear at his throat.

It was too much for the thrice-wounded assassin; with a fresh spurt of blood and shudder he died.

As suddenly as it had begun it was over.

It was still and silent save for the wind that howled like a wounded beast.

And still the sleet fell.

Craftdancer bleated in confusion and Alma, once she shed her gore covered outer clothes, vomited, cursing all the while.

Ku'zn rose to her knees, spit out a hunk of her foeman's throat and recovered one of her long knives in anticipation of another attack. When none came she grabbed some snow to wipe the blood from the fur of her face.

"Ku'zn," Alma said though chattering teeth, "What happened?"

The gore soaked Z'n looked at her blankly, and then with a nod toward the bleeding wound in her right side, fell over.

II.

Too Much Room at the Inn

"Somebody help me," Alma yelled as she dragged the semi-conscious Ku'zn through the door of the Portal Inn.

The howling wind followed the two in like a faithful pet and nudged them forward

No one in the room moved as the teen struggled to get Ku'zn on top of one of the rough-hewn wooden tables. Ku'zn's side was bleeding despite the snow that Alma had used to pack the wound.

The teen got Ku'zn on her left side and pulled up her tvek skin shirt to reveal the long deep slash.

"I need some bandages," Alma yelled. Then she noticed there was still no movement in the room and looked up.

"Close the door, girl," a voice colder than the wind outside ordered Alma, "The chill is bad enough in here."

There were seven people in the room, six of them seated stiffly at the tables and the seventh, the one who had spoken, behind the plank and barrel bar. The speaker was a cowed figure; clothed head to foot in white exactly like the attackers from outside. The figure also held a Vladestan hand crossbow, cocked and pointed so as to cover everyone in the room.

"Well, girl," the masked figure reiterated, "close the door. And you, innkeeper, - bring some bandages for the Z'n."

Alma did as bade, and then hurried back to the Z'n.

Ku'zn was slipping in and out of consciousness and called to the teen. "Alma," she murmured, "see to Craftdancer."

"Oh never mind him," Alma said, "You're all cut up."

"I'll be alright; see to him."

"I ah-can't there's an as-"

"Do as she says, little one," the shrouded figure said, "She will be well tended."

Ku'zn lolled her head to the side to focus on the speaker. "Assassin," she hissed, her lips curling into a smile, "give me a moment to catch my breath and I will give you the same as your brethren outside."

The cowled assassin nodded. "You have not changed with the passage of years, Z'n. Have your rest: you and the girl will not be harmed and I will be here when you wake."

The skinny innkeeper appeared at Ku'zn's side with linens and a pail of warm water. He set about cleaning the wound that brought curses and growls from the Z'n.

"Let me do that," one of the women at one of the tables said. She was a heavysset woman with bright auburn hair. "I have experience with those kind of wounds and with Z'n."

The assassin motioned for her to do it.

"Go ahead, girl," the woman said to Alma, "see to the animals. I will see to her."

Alma hurriedly stabled and fed the vorns, taking care that they were covered with extra blankets against the wind that slipped between the boards.

By the time she returned to the inn's main room, Ku'zn was propped up on two benches that had been placed together. The innkeeper and the heavysset woman had shaved the Z'n's side and were cleaning the wound.

Alma knelt by the Z'n and held her hand. "I watered and feed them and wiped them down." She said, "I put blankets on them too." Ku'zn's eyes were closed but she nodded.

"Good," she whispered. "Alma, this is Kyra, my bond sister."

The woman attending the Z'n looked up. Despite her size she had delicate features and gentle brown eyes. She gave a strained smile. "Don't worry, girl," Kyra said, "this fur ball is pretty tough. I'm gonna sew her up, now."

Alma let out a hurt animal sound at that and Kyra smiled. "I've done it before on her, so don't worry. " She pulled a leather sewing needle out of a small kit, threaded it and set to work.

"And don't let her call you a pink skin continental any more," Kyra added, "see, under the fur she's as pink as you or I."

Alma did look and gave a giggle when she saw it was true.

"As soon as I can move I will brain you, Kyra." Ku'zn said through gritted teeth while the sewing went on.

"We both know my head is too hard for that threat to have any weight." Kyra said absentmindedly.

"I missed you too." Ku'zn said and then nodded of to sleep.

"You don't remember me, Z'n?" The assassin asked.

Ku'zn focused through the pain in her side to look closely at the woman. The only real features visible were deep green almond shaped eyes, but the Z'n world was one of more than sight and touch. "I remember your scent," Ku'zn said. " You were the guild woman at DragonthroatLee Zan Kar by name."

The assassin nodded.

"We guild members do our best to conceal our identities," she said with a touch of amusement in her voice, "but we have met too few Z'n to have given any thought to how we smell. We shall have to change that."

"What are you talking about?" Alma said. She found it hard to just sit quietly with the crossbow pointed her way. She was careful, however, not to get too close to Ku'zn in the event that the warrior had to move quickly.

"Tell her, Z'n," the assassin said, still amused. "It will disadvantage neither of us."

Ku'zn laughed at that.

"The guild killer and I were part of a group of travelers stranded in another storm, a shadowstorm, in Cozen years ago." She looked over at Kyra. "It was some months after we parted, sister; it was where Orancha, our bond holder, perished."

"You are too o modest, Z'n." the assassin said, "tell the rest."

"There were many deaths at Dragonthroat," Ku'zn continued, "some from this woman-"

"And some from you," the assassin injected.

"-but most from a shadowbeast." Ku'zn directed her stare to the assassin's eyes. "Then we fought shoulder to shoulder."

Alma knew she was missing much of what was going on, but also was aware that

there was great violence waiting to happen.

**"We need not fight now at all," Ku'zn continued, " we have no personal quarrel-
unless you object to the fate of your brethren outside."**

**"That was, as your Kovar priest would say, 'By-the-Rhythm.' They did as they
must and you did as you must." The assassin made a point of continuing to scan the
room to let the other 'guests' know they were not forgotten.**

"Then why hold us?" Ku'zn asked again.

**"A precaution, dear Z'n. If when my employer arrives and your friend here is the
one I was hired to kill, then I want to know where you are."**

**"Why would you kill Kyra just because she stole some money from someone
else?" Alma asked.**

**"It is what I do, child: I am guild sworn to do as my employer wills. Life. Death.
It matters not."**

Guild Assassins are consecrated to Shirra, goddess of the slain," one of the other prisoners said. He was a balding man of middle years. He had a square cut face and clear green eyes that now marked him as 'distinguished' but that his earlier days would have been truly handsome and he knew it. His voice was cultured and his manner and clothes were shabbily gentile. He was clearly a gambler by trade and constantly kept shuffling a ryut card deck as a nervous habit. He seemed emboldened by the congenial tone between the warrior women, missing entirely the dark undertone. "And each death to them is a prayer to her."

"Just so, " the assassin said, " and I pray frequently.

III.

Do and Die

"How did you get into this Tvek-Dung?" Ku'zn asked Kyra.

The Heavysset dancer was seated on a bench beside the Z'n. She held a full tankard of ale that her companion Adola had brought to her.

Adola was almost as tall as Ku'zn with rich purple-black skin and full lips that seemed fixed in a shy smile. Her head was shaven like an Iskarian monks but her dotting attention on Kyra was decidedly not monkish.

"Innocently," Kyra said between gulps, "we just-"

"The last time you did anything innocently," Ku'zn said, "you had just been weaned."

"We just-" Kyra continued unaffected by the Z'n's interpolation "-wandered into this inn and the guild-killer pointed that crossbow at us."

"But how did you know in advance enough to send a Kota bird for me?"

When Kyra looked at a loss to answer Adola stepped in. "We did not," She said, "Kyra and I met when I came to merchant Lykot's to dance for him."

"A wine merchant," Kyra said, "a fat unscrupulous lout-"

"And when we met," Adola added, "We knew we had to be together."

"How does sending a Kota bird to ask me for help come into this," Ku'zn said in frustration, "-and what of mine did you have to key the bird to me?"

Kyra laughed. "Remember when we got into that bar fight in Burlon over the 'ugly statue?"

"Oh, Windmother," Ku'zn gasped, "you didn't-"

"Yes," Kyra said. " She pulled a pendant on a chain from the hollow between her pendulous breasts. "I had the tooth I knocked out of you made into this."

Young Alma who had watched this exchange with growing confusion finally spoke up. "Ku'zn," she said, "I thought you said she was your friend, how come she hit you." Now both Kyra and Ku'zn laughed together.

"We had an artistic disagreement over a statue in a bar,"

Ku'zn said, "and we were so roaring drunk words failed us."

"Before we got it settled," Kyra finished, "the rest of the bar got involved and some where in the middle of it I hit Ku'zn with a stool and I got this." She held up her trophy.

"The thing of it is," Ku'zn finished, "we were arguing over who the statue looked most like-I said me-she said her. It was so ugly." The two women laughed again. Then Ku'zn got serious, "But why the Kota?"

"Lykot had me under civil contract," Kyra said, "but Adola was crystal bonded to him; and he wanted more from her than the dancing she was bonded to do." She got a pained look on her normally cheerful face. "Finally it was too much for either of us to bear so we smashed her crystal bracelet and made a run for the frontier."

"It was that night Kyra heard about the Z'n that stirred Oriana up so much," Adola said, "she said it had to be you."

"So," the Z'n said, sipping the wine-beer mix called sack that she preferred to straight wine, "You think Lykot hired the assassin to stop you here until he could get here?"

"It's a fair guess," Kyra said, "It was because I feared just such an action that I summoned you."

"It would be a wrong guess," the 'bald gambler said. "It be a sure bet that the Zonir gang is after my old rumped hide; they are the ones who paid her." He had a deck of pyrut cards in front of him and was busy cheating at solitaire.

"Are you so certain you were not innocently snared in a trap for them?" Ku'zn asked.

"Like a Kova priest," the man said, tapping his chest" Leron Ryln is a believer in chance." His tone was all too convivial to be discussing assassination," But only to a point," he continued, "I won far too much money from the Zonir bunch at their own rigged gambling house and they could not object openly without informing the public and the authorities that they are crooks." He made an expansive gesture. "Thus our lady assassin."

He placed a card in the spread before him and grimaced." Hmm, I should have won with that card." He smiled to himself, "No matter, a least I will die wealthy."

"It is my husband who hired her." It was a tall, dark haired woman who spoke. She was just past middle aged, and though plain, it was that clear life of late had been hard on her.

"Easy Killian," her companion, the last of the prisoners said. He was a brutish, eye-patched man with the bearing of a soldier and the air of a commander. "No need to borrow trouble."

"But, Gorton," Killian said to her companion, "It must be him." She directed her attention to the room. "My husband, General Kema, is a brute of a man; charged with border security. He is constantly in danger from Markoffan extremists and Juva smugglers. It had made him distant and paranoid. I was nothing to him but a possession. The aloneness was the worst-" she looked over at the rough warrior who held her hand and smiled. "Then Gorton came and listened to me; it was then I know I had to leave Kema."

"But we knew he would pursue us," Gorton said. "We never anticipated this-" he looked pointedly at the assassin.

For her part the assassin made no comment on al the discussion though she listened intently to it all.

At last the assassin spoke in a low controlled voice. "My employer sent word to the Guild hall in Secora to hire me and my guild brothers to hold all who had already had stopped here. You, Z'n, did not figure into all this; had you given the correct sign, my brothers would have thought you our employer since you were not here already they obviously thought it expedient to 'subdue' or kill you."

"Expedient," Ku'zn laughed. "Not so."

"Indeed," Lee Zan Kar agreed. "I will receive certain signs from my employer when they arrive and then and only then I will kill whichever of you I am told to." She took in each of the occupants of the room with her intense look, "until then sit quietly and you may yet leave here alive and well."

"This is wrong," Lady Killian said, "stepping directly toward the assassin. "Have you no heart?"

"Sit down, dame," the assassin commanded. The upset Lady Killian continued forward and the assassin stood. "Stop," she said.

"No Killian," Gorton yelled. He stood and grabbed her as the assassin suddenly threw a slender dagger at them.

The thin throwing knife hit the eye-patched warrior just as Lady Killian screamed.

"I told you to sit down," Lee Zan Kar said calmly, "and I meant it."

V.

Masks Removed

The main room of the inn was silent except for the quiet sobbing from Lady Killian. Gorton checked that General Kema was dead and that his guard was finished as well.

"The worst part of this whole thing," Gorton said as he surveyed the violence he had initiated, "was having to put up with her and play the soft shoulder. It made my gorge rise."

"I see the sense of your plan now," the assassin said, "You could not get to him without his guards around, but if it were his wife he was pursuing, and her 'lover', then he would take only his most trusted guard and keep his destination secret."

"Exactly," Gorton said, rubbing the wound in his arm. "I commend you on your restraint in only wounding me," he said, "I am not so sure I would not have killed me to make an example in a similar circumstance."

"It was as I said," the assassin said, reloading her crossbow, "I did not know if my employer-you as it turns out-had a use for any one hostage."

"As it turns out," Gorton said with a dark laugh, "I have quite a few uses for me. Once I announce that Markoffan fanatics slaughtered the general and his party, I will take charge of the investigation and my star will rise."

"You killed this fellow Durana, I take it?" The assassin asked.

"Yes," Gorton said, "I regret that a bit, fellow was an excellent barber."

"And now us," Ku'zn said drawing all eyes to her. "We are witnesses."

"But we have nothing to do with this," the inn keeper said in a desperate voice, "He has no reason to hurt us."

"Yes he does," Kyra said. She held Adola to her in a fierce hug. "Even if we did not figure it out or hear his confession we know what really happened; No Markoffan plot. One of us could talk someday no matter how we promised not to."

"I am glad you are practical people," Gorton said, "so refreshing after her dreamy eyed idealism." He looked at the assassin and nodded. "How best to do it is the question."

"No," Ku'zn said, "The question is how someone with honor could work for a tvek dung like you, Gorton." She stared straight at Lee Zan Kar. "I understand the initial contract, but surely this exceeds all propriety."

The assassin, her face still masked by the hood she wore, nodded her head. "A point of law, of certainty." She said, "I have lost two guild brothers and my contract was for 'an individual' which can be extended to guards, servants, etc. which might be needed to accomplish the main contract, but-"

"I will pay more," Gorton said. He seemed to sense something beyond his control happening between the two women and he did not like it. "This is begun, it must be finished."

"Then let him finish it," Ku'zn said standing. "If this one-eyed deceiver can kill me with his own hand he just might make a general. If not, I can save the army another bad leader." The room was deadly quiet save for Killian's sobbing.

"No, Z'n," Gorton said with a smile, "A good leader delegates. Assassin, I will take care of these others: kill this Z'n as a contract at full fee." Alma gasped and

reached to grab Ku'zn's arm but stopped herself so as not to encumber the Z'n. Instead she reached behind her and grasped a tankard to conceal in the fold of her skirts as a future weapon.

"If I accept this contract it will be on my terms," Lee Zan Kar said. She looked at Ku'zn and the blue furred woman nodded. "I wish no one in this room harmed until I return," she said, "at which time I will assist you if you require it."

"Done." Gorton said. The assassin walked to him and handed him the crossbow.

"My Zn-K-Dar is on my pack animal," Ku'zn said, "and we will require space."

"Lead on then, Z'n," the assassin said in a steady voice. "But remember how well I throw blades."

Ku'zn turned to Alma and kissed the girl on her forehead. "Courage, little nuisance," she said, "and do nothing until I return."

"Boasting, Z'n?" Gorton said.

"Promising," she said with venom in her voice, "Z'n's do not boast."

VI.

Duel

The two women walked in silence, pushing through the wind and snow to the little stable that joined the inn. Once out of the driving snow Ku'zn went to the pack animal and unwrapped the two shafts and leaf shaped blade that comprised the travel form of her Zn-K-Dar (the long tooth of the people).

The Z'n-Ka-Dar was made from a single sapling in which slivers of steel and carved crystal had been driven at odd angles while still growing. It had prospered two more seasons before being cut down and dried. This was light and unusually strong in deflecting cuts from any weapon, even crystal blades.

It was Tee Kay, Ku'zn's continental lover who had shown her how to saw the shaft of the lance in half and join the two sections with a locking ring that allowed her to carry it in densely populated areas.

"You have found a way to live with the dishonor of working for such as Gorton, but it will not be for long," Ku'zn said when the lance had been assembled. The two women stepped out of the stable and walked to a flat section of windswept trail between the buildings.

"You come dangerously close to boasting, Z'n." The assassin said, "But you are correct: Gorton is not a man I am proud to contract for. I will fulfill my contract though, make no mistake. " Ku'zn stopped and turned to face the woman.

"I am Ku'zn of the Firehawk clan and I face you in fair contest." She declared.

"I am Lee Zan Kar, wife of Lee Zan Do who has proceeded me to the dark of Lady Shirra: I fight you in fair contest."

The assassin drew her shortsworads between blinks and stood ready for Ku'zn's charge.

The Z'n, however, stood firm, the snow swirling around her in a mini squall; the flakes sticking to her fur and the growing red stain that was growing on the bandage at her side.

"Her blades are crystal," the blue furred warrior thought, "my steel will shatter in direct assault; I will have to fight with deflection." It was all the thought she allowed herself before she spun her lance in attack and their battle was joined!

The assassin attempted to penetrate the Zn-ka-dar's net of steel with multiple short, slashing chops, hoping to hack her way in close to the Z'n.

Ku'zn however, like most of her people, could manipulate the eight-foot lance with mercurial speed. She spun, counter spun it and blocked with a deftness that frustrated the assassin's most sophisticated attack. She even forced Lee Zan Kar to parry

several lightening quick slashes and lose ground.

Ku'zn had learned to fight with two short swords from Tee Kay and it gave her a particular skill in evading attacks from the assassin as she could anticipate much of what the woman could do with the crystal blades.

The assassin was an experienced fighter and knew that her only advantage was to push inside the range of the lance to nullify Ku'zn' reach advantage.

There was no time for words, no space to feel the stinging cold of the wind and snow; the two were elemental forces of nature themselves, focused beyond thought on one intention; the death of their opponent.

No thought of safety or victory entered into the equation, neither fighter cared at that moment if they survived the conflict as long as their antagonist perished in the fray. Such was their skill that no technique could be used twice without their enemy adapting to it and no action anticipated for they moved faster than thought itself to reply to all aggression.

The one to make the first mistake would lose. It was that simple.

Ku'zn's right foot slipped on an icy patch and the assassin took advantage of it. She drove both her swords straight for the Z'n's heart.

Ku'zn sensed rather than saw the double attack and threw herself backward to one knee at the same time she spun the z'n-k-dar horizontally. The broad blade of the

lance sliced through the over extended right leg of the assassin just below the knee as cleanly as an axe would have.

Suddenly---the fight was over.

Lee Zan Kar lay in a spreading pool of crimson on the frozen snowy ground. She threw one of her crystal swords at the Z'n but the furred warrior dodged it easily. The assassin then drew her second blade and drove it into the frozen ground beside her to signify that she would make no second gesture.

Then Ku'zn approached, but out of respect for the prowess of her opponent still stayed out of arms reach.

The blood loss from the severed leg was massive and neither woman had any illusion it could be stemmed in time to make any difference: Lee Zan Kar was dying.

"Z'n," the assassin said in a clear voice, "I thank you for a clean death; I join my husband now."

"I will sing a death song to the Windmother for you," Ku'zn said. "You fought with honor."

"I would not let Gorton wait for you too long, he is desperate. Tell your priest he picks his friends well," the assassin said with a weakening voice, "Tell him-" then her voice was replaced by the wind and she was dead.

The crystal blade beside her abruptly shattered, falling to the ground as faceted

powder. Ku'zn knew the second blade shared the fate as well, both linked by blood and spirit to their owner.

":Go with the wind," Ku'zn said. A sudden fierce gust of wind slammed fresh snow against her and staggered her with its power. She was forced to lean on her z'n-k-dar in order to stay upright. She smiled despite the stab of pain in her side the movement caused.

"And thank you for letting me know you heard, assassin," she said to her fallen foe, now " I have something to do."

Gorton stood beside the Ovar wood door, cross bow in hand.

Lady Killian was a sobbing mess, kneeling beside her husband's body.

"Ku'zn can't fight her, she's hurt!" Alma insisted. She edged closer to Gorton as she spoke looking for chance to use her hidden tankard.. "You have no right to do this," Alma scolded. "You-"

"Stop there, girl," Gorton commanded pointing the crossbow at her head, 'or I will not wait for the assassin to finish tonight's work."

"How could you," lady Killian screamed, "I trusted you."

"Then you've learned a lesson a bit too late," He sneered.

Suddenly his sneer turned to a startled expression as the blade of Ku'zn's lance burst through his chest and the wall behind him..

His finger spasmodically squeezed the trigger of the crossbow and its quarrel fired into a support beam beside Alma's head.

The door flew open and Ku'zn and storm exploded into the room. She glanced at the pinioned Cyclops gurgling his life away on the wall beside her and said," I just saved you from paying on your contract, continental." Then she collapsed into Alma's startled arms.

"You've pulled out of Kyra's stitches, "Alma chided the Z'n. "what am I going to do with you?"

"Take care of me," Ku'zn said in weak voice, "You're getting good at that."

The End