

## DELETED SCENE #2

### LAITH THREATENS CHRIS

*(Chapter 14, in which Chris and Allara first meet, originally ended with a confrontation in with the Cherazii leader Cabahr Laith threatens to kill Chris.)*

 ON THE RIM of the gully, a Cherazim stood silhouetted against the fading sky. Chris recognized Cabahr Laith's voice and every muscle in his body tensed.

Laith slid down the side of the gully, followed by the old Riever Jupe. "The wondrous properties of oronborne don't combine with Cherazii blood in the same way they do with a human's. We're left to bleed on our own." He raised his hand, and a Koraudian sword swung into view. "As we often are."

Chris had zero doubt of the Cherazim's ability to kill him, and even less doubt that he intended to. He stepped away. "Before you chop off my head, maybe you should listen to the rest of the story."

Laith advanced. "What story, Gifted? You're a traitor like the last one. Maybe worse. Even Harrison Garnett didn't do the unthinkable, the forbidden, by bringing a living being across the worlds. That's unholy, that is. That's reason enough to kill you."

Quinnon angled a shoulder in front of Chris. "Hold where you're at, blue. If he deserves killing, it'll come to him."

Behind Laith, Jupe leaned both hands on his cane. "It is coming."

Laith took another step. He bared his blood-stained teeth. "I'll kill what needs killing."

Something clicked and whirred behind Chris. "As will I," Allara said.

Chris risked a glance back. She had drawn a pistol from her saddle holsters and pointed it at Laith's broad chest.

Laith snarled. "Searcher. You know who he is and you know what he's done. He deserves to die. How many of my people died today because of him?"

"You have no idea what he's done today. He *saved* what was left of your caravan."

Chris held his breath. A minute ago, she had wanted to kill him herself. Now, she was saving his life. Not that he was exactly in a position to argue with her logic.

Laith hesitated. The whites of his eyes flickered in the darkness. "I honor you, Allara Katadin, because of your chosen position as the Searcher. I am sworn to protect and aid you, and I have upheld that vow all my life. But you resisted the rightful punishment of the last Gifted as well."

The slow, questioning chirrups of the big yellow birds swooping overhead punctuated the silence.

At last, Allara said, "We all do what we think is right."

"And I think it right to kill this one for the crimes he's already committed, rather than wait for the further crimes yet to come."

"There won't be any more crimes. Not this time." She almost sounded as if she believed it.

Chris pushed Quinnon and Eroll aside and faced Laith, just out of reach of his sword. Not that it mattered. One lunge was all it would take to skewer Chris on its point. "What's happened has happened, and I am truly sorry for it. If I can, I will do everything possible to make it right."

Laith's sword lowered. "You make me laugh, Gifted." But he wasn't laughing. "There's nothing you can do except die now on my sword."

"Not today," Allara said.

"And when the day does come, get in line," Quinnon muttered.

Laith turned to Allara and pressed his fist to his chest. "Searcher. You saved lives today. We thank you for your assistance." The words lacked conviction.

She returned the nod but didn't lower the pistol. "Where do you and your people go from here?"

"We go where we've always gone. Our own way."

Jupe hobbled forward and pointed his cane at Chris. “And where is the Keeper you rode with? Even the Searcher can’t protect his part in this.”

Chris shook his head. “He’s gone. I don’t know where.” To join the Koraudians for all he knew.

Laith speared Chris with a last lingering look. “He, at least, is not beyond the reach of Cherazii justice.” He raised his sword in a mock salute. “Long live the Gifted. May you relish the havoc you’ve brought to our world.” He turned to scoop Jupe onto his back, then he leapt to catch the rim of the gully and clamber out.

Quinnon relaxed his shoulders and turned back to tighten the knot on Chris’s bandage. “Rotted blues. Think they should run the whole world just because they’re the higher and the mightier.”

Eroll swung the saddlebags over his horse’s rump. “When you start getting slaughtered for your principles, you either mutiny against them or you raise the flag higher than ever.”