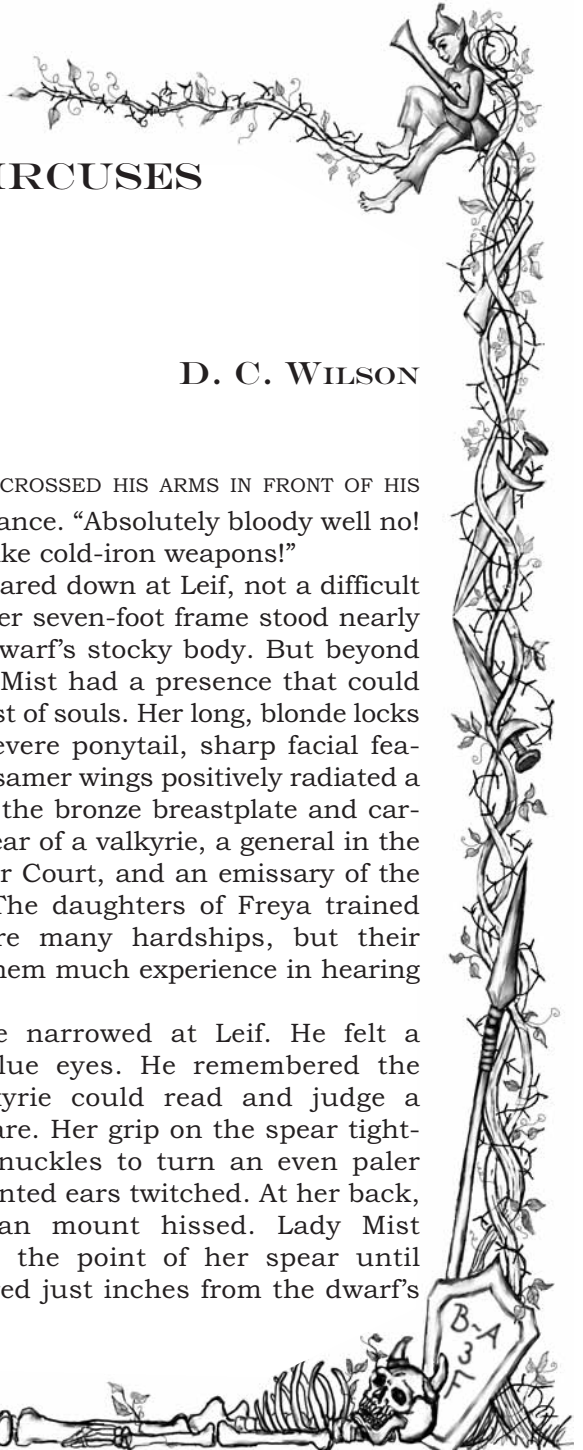


# WAR AND CIRCUSES

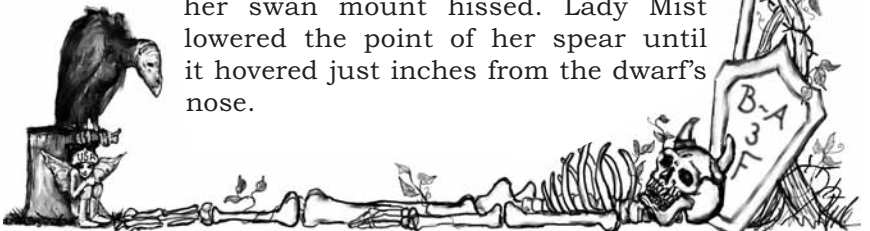


D. C. WILSON

**N**O! No!” LEIF CROSSED HIS ARMS IN FRONT OF HIS chest in defiance. “Absolutely bloody well no! I will not make cold-iron weapons!”

The fae woman glared down at Leif, not a difficult accomplishment as her seven-foot frame stood nearly twice as tall as the dwarf’s stocky body. But beyond her height, the Lady Mist had a presence that could overwhelm the hardiest of souls. Her long, blonde locks pulled back into a severe ponytail, sharp facial features, and purple gossamer wings positively radiated a regal aura. She wore the bronze breastplate and carried the ash wood spear of a valkyrie, a general in the armies of the Summer Court, and an emissary of the Queen of Summer. The daughters of Freya trained themselves to endure many hardships, but their drilling did not give them much experience in hearing the word “No.”

Lady Mist’s gaze narrowed at Leif. He felt a chill from her ice-blue eyes. He remembered the legends that a valkyrie could read and judge a man’s soul with a stare. Her grip on the spear tightened, causing her knuckles to turn an even paler shade. One of her pointed ears twitched. At her back, her swan mount hissed. Lady Mist lowered the point of her spear until it hovered just inches from the dwarf’s nose.



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Leif took a step back on reflex.

The valkyrie took a step toward him. "You. . . ."

Whatever retort the emissary had prepared was interrupted by Kate. The selkie stepped in front of Mist, her hands raised in a placating gesture. "Perhaps you could give us some time in private to consider your request."

Leif snorted. Mist could have skewered him like a pig at that moment, but he was too angry to care. "That's nothing to review. The circus is not part of either Court."

Lady Mist glared back at Leif. "For once, I agree with the digger," she said, using the derisive term that fae nobility used to describe dwarves.

Leif swung his arm up, batting the spear aside, and lunged forward. Kate, however, put her hand on his forehead, giving him a firm push with just enough force to hold him back. Her palm felt cold and damp against his skin. The selkie's natural moisture seemed to cool his temper. Reluctantly, he relented.

Kate wagged her finger at Leif. "Such a decision affects the entire circus." She turned to look at Mist. "And I believe that all of our people should have a chance to discuss it before we make a final decision."

Lady Mist's eyes shifted from Kate to Leif and then back to Kate. She stiffened her body and snapped the spear up into a ready position. "Very well. I shall return tomorrow for your final decision." The valkyrie turned on her heel and started to walk out of the tent. She paused at the entrance and looked at the worn tent flap. She reached over and fingered one of the many holes in the striped canvas. "Be sure to mention that the Queen will reward those who perform loyal service. If your sense of duty does not compel you, perhaps gold will, *digger*."

Leif clenched both of his fists as the warrior fae exited the tent. Her swan followed after her, pausing only to deposit a fragrant parting gift in the middle of the entrance.

Leif swore. "The gall of that jack-booted, arrogant thug! To think that she thought she could just stroll in here, into my circus and order our people to fight *their* war!"

Kate put her hand on Leif's shoulder. Water trickled down his back. He looked sharply up at the selkie. She always looked wet, part of the heritage of being a sea fae. But now, rivulets of water poured down her body, matting her red hair to the sides of her face and leaving beads of moisture along her neoprene wet-suit. "Your anger didn't make things any better."

Leif exhaled and nodded. "You're right, but what did she