

Masques

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Spell-checked. Some parts read.

ASSASSIN!

Wolf lay still on his back in human form, eyes glistening with rage. Narrow, luminous white ropes lay across his legs, chest, and neck. The killer stood over him, holding a sword that glowed gently, with a pulsating lavender light. A cold chill shot up Aralorn's back as she recognized the weapon: a souleater.

She shifted into the form of the small but deadly icelynx and leapt. The killer swept aside her rush with his sword arm, but not before she had raked his back with her formidable claws. Pale sword and paler cat fainted back and forth.

He managed to nick her as she leapt at his throat. Her off rear leg became icily numb and folded underneath her, but worse was the strange sucking sensation that consumed her. The sword was alive, and it was hungry—

With love to my parents:

Harvey C. Rowland 1917-1989

Betty J. Rowland 1920-1992

One

The great hall of the castle was his favorite room. At first she'd believed it was the grandeur that appealed to him—a weakness he freely admitted. Now she concluded that it was something more. Certainly the pleasure of desecrating with his dark arts the only room of the ae'Magi's castle that had been kept free of magic for over one thousand years was not lost on him. Even now she could see one of the guests glance nervously at the shadows in the corners of the room. People who couldn't use magic tended to get nervous in a room where magic was performed often.

Most of all, she thought, the reason he loved this room was the delight he took in watching the highest aristocracy of a dozen nations dancing gaily where only a few hours before a young child had screamed out his life.

Aralorn shivered and paced behind the ornate black bars of her cage.

The great hall was resplendent, lavishly decorated for the pleasure of the people who tripped lightly across the floor. Soaring ceilings were etched with tear-shaped skylights. Pale pillars dripped down to a polished ivory floor that reflected the jewellike colors of the dancers.

Aralorn's cage sat on a raised platform on the only wall of the room that lacked a doorway. From that perch she could observe the whole room and be observed in return. Or rather, they could see the illusion that the ae'Magi had placed on the cage. Slavery was frowned upon by many of the nearby kingdoms, and so instead of the tall, exotically blonde woman that the ae'Magi had purchased from a traveling slaver, observers saw a rare snowfalcon.

A chime sounded, announcing new visitors. Aralorn hugged herself as the ae'Magi greeted his guests with a warm smile. He'd smiled that same smile last night when he held the boy's pulsing heart in his hands.

Biting her lip, Aralorn gazed at the dancing royalty in an effort to distract herself. She matched names and countries to the dancers' faces with the ease of the professional spy that she was. Gradually she replaced the boy's dead eyes with dates and politics, but she still paced her cage restlessly.

There was a hypnotic quality to the kaleidoscopic, brilliant colors of the dancers: twisting around and around only to stop, rearrange themselves and swirl into motion once again. They surely felt it. Their laughing faces were strangely blank, without a hint of any other emotion than simple enjoyment. She saw the Duchess of Ti and the Envoy of the Anthran Alliance dancing cordially with each other. Four years ago the Envoy had the Duchess's youngest son assassinated, sparking a bloody feud that left bodies littering the Alliance like a plague.

The Envoy said something and patted the Duchess's shoulder. She laughed gaily in return, as if she hadn't had the Envoy's third wife killed in a particularly nasty manner only a month ago.

When the musicians paused for a break, people crowded around the Archmage, Geoffrey ae'Magi, drawn to his twinkling eyes and mischievous grin the way butterflies surround the flowering coralis tree. Like the coralis, he was extraordinarily beautiful, with blue-black hair, high cheekbones and the smile of a child with his hands caught in the cookie jar. But the true attraction lay in his gentle warmth and the uncanny ability to poke fun at himself and others without causing hurt to any. Before she'd come here, Aralorn herself had been more than half enamored of him.

When an insect lands on the sweet-smelling, scarlet flower of the coralis, the petals close and the flower digests its hapless prey over a period of weeks.

She turned away from the ae'Magi and back to the room. Leaning lazily against one of the pillars, a short, square-built young man wearing the colors of the royal house of Reth also observed the throng: Myr, Prince—no, King now, of Reth. His face was unremarkable except for the stubborn tilt to his chin that he'd inherited from his paternal grandfather, a formidable warrior and king. What caught Aralorn's attention was the expression of distaste that briefly crossed his face as he looked at the crowd, remarkably different from the vacuous smiles that everyone else wore.

He shifted unexpectedly and met her gaze. He looked away quickly, but then began to make his way through the crowd toward her cage. When he reached the platform, he tilted his head down so that no one could read his lips and asked in a low tone, "Do you need help, Lady?"

Surprised, she glanced quickly at the mirror that covered the back of the cage. The snowfalcon stared back at her indifferently. An old spy had once told her that the ruling family of Reth occasionally produced offspring who were immune to magic. Looking at Myr, she decided that it was more probable that he was unaware of the illusion that cloaked her than that he commonly asked caged birds if they needed help. Rethians deplored the practice of slave keeping, but it was a bold move to offer to help one of the ae'Magi's slaves to escape.

Intrigued, she responded as herself, rather than the slave she was supposed to be. "No, Your Highness, I am here to observe the ae'Magi."

"A spy." It wasn't a question. "You must be from either Sianim or Jetaine. They are the only ones who would employ female spies in as delicate a position as this." He seemed to be thinking out loud, because when he finished speaking a flush rose to his face as he realized how insulting his last remark sounded.

Aralorn, though, was amused rather than offended. With a half smile she clarified. "I get paid for my

work.”

“A mercenary of Sianim, then.” He eyed her speculatively. “I am surprised that they thought there was a need for a spy here.”

“Struth, so am I,” Aralorn allowed, giving him no more information. Having satisfied his curiosity as far as she was ever going to, she asked him a question of her own. “How did you see past the illusion of the snowfalcon that the ae’Magi placed on the cage?”

“Is that what you’re disguised as?” His smile made him look even younger than he really was. “I wondered why no one said anything about the woman he had in the cage. Slavery might be legal here, but most people don’t condone it.”

He might have said more, but something in Aralorn’s expression stopped him. He immediately straightened and stared at her as if she fascinated him.

“Ah, I see you admire my falcon. Lord.” The resonant voice could only belong to the ae’Magi. “She is beautiful, isn’t she? I purchased her several months ago from a traveling merchant—somewhere in the Northlands, I believe ... I thought she would go well with this room.” He waved a casual hand that managed to indicate the rest of the hall.

Aralorn had grown adept at reading the ae’Magi’s voice and it was just a little too casual. He was baiting Myr, and she didn’t know why—unless he too had heard rumors about the unusual talent that sometimes cropped up in Reth’s royal family.

* * *

reth was a small country in size, but rich in minerals and agriculture. It also had a well-trained army, left as legacy by Myr’s grandfather. Myr was a very new king and certain conservative political factions would have been happier had he been the same kind of puppet as his father. Myr seemed to have the politicians pacified, but it wouldn’t be hard for the ae’Magi to change that. Aralorn’s growing apprehension was more than professional; Reth was her homeland.

Myr turned to the magician with a smile and more confidence than a boy his age should have. “Yes, the ivory tinge is the same as the color in the marble here. It’s unusual to see a snowfalcon this far south; you must have paid a great deal for her.”

Aralorn hoped desperately that the amusement she felt didn’t show on her face, as the ae’Magi had little trouble seeing past his own illusion. Myr was quick.

They talked at length about falconry, something that Aralorn happened to know interested neither one of them. When they had exhausted the subject, the ae’Magi abruptly changed topics.

“Myr,” said the ae’Magi, “I wish to express my sorrow at the death of your parents. I feel some responsibility for their deaths, since they were returning from one of my parties when their coach overturned. I wish that they had decided to stay overnight—as I asked. The tragedy might have been averted.” The sympathy in the magician’s blue eyes offered solace. With professional interest, Aralorn heard the edge of guilt in his voice, he’d have made a wonderful spy with his acting ability.

He laid a fine-boned hand on Myr’s shoulder, effectively forestalling what the younger man might have said. “Please, hear me out. If you have need of anything, feel free to turn to me. I have connections and substantial power as the ae’Magi, and you may need what aid I can offer. It has never been easy to ascend a throne, especially now with the Uriah restless in the eastern forests. Not to mention that there

are always opposing factions or ...”—he hesitated, waving his hand expressively—“other enemies.”

Myr bowed his head quickly in gratitude; Aralorn hoped she was the only one who recognized his insincerity. “I shall do as you request, my Lord Magician. I know my parents counted you their friend.” He paused and then said, “I apologize, Lord, I have enjoyed our conversation, but I must excuse myself early. You see”—he leaned in closer with the air of a young boy confessing a secret™! just bought a new stallion and I’m not sure I trust him on the trails after dark.” His face lost its eagerness for a moment. “After what happened to my parents, sir, I feel the need to be overly cautious.”

The magician smiled understandingly. “I’ll summon your servants for you.”

Myr shook his head. “I left them outside with orders to meet me an hour before dark.”

“The gods follow you, then. With your courage and strength, you will do credit to your lineage. I wish that my own son were more like you.” To Aralorn’s sensitive ears, the magician’s voice held just the right amount of pain. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed before she’d been assigned here that his emotions were always exactly right. She shouldn’t have needed the opportunity, if that were the correct term, to observe his less savory endeavors to notice that there was something beneath the surface.

“Lord Cain could not be termed a coward, sir.” Myr’s voice held a matching amount of sympathy, as false as the ae’Magi’s.

“No,” said the ae’Magi, “I think that it would have been better for all of us if he were a coward. He would have done less harm. I have him under control now, but I don’t know how long I can keep him quiet.”

* * *

aralorn had forgotten about the ae’magi’s son. the ae’Magi kept his dark magics secret, but his son had performed in the broad light of day. For a while he’d been an embarrassment to the ae’Magi, stories of the atrocities that he committed flying rampant. She’d never met Cain; he’d faded out of the light before she’d become involved in her present occupation. She’d heard the rumors, though—they got worse with each telling. The stories put the ae’Magi in the role of the grieving father who was forced to exile his son. Aralorn suspected that Cain’s absence might be due to death rather than exile. It would have been inconvenient if someone had questioned where the ae’Magi’s son learned so much about forbidden magic.

“Be that as it may”—with apparent effort the Magician dismissed the thought of his son—“your servants probably will be awaiting you even now.”

“Yes, I should go. You may be sure I shall remember your gracious offer of assistance if ever I need help.” With that Myr bowed once more and left.

Watching Myr leave, the Magician smiled—the slight imperfection of one eyetooth lending charm to the perfect curve of his lips. “What a clever, clever child you have grown to be, Myr,” His voice purred with approval. “It is too bad you are forced to play your games with an adult.” Aralorn felt her apprehension turn to real concern for the welfare of the King of Reth.

It was late before the crowd began to thin and later still before everyone had gone, Aralorn fell more nervous as each person left, knowing that the meager protection they offered would soon be gone. After seeing the last couple out, the ae’Magi walked slowly over to the cage.

“So,” he said, swaying gently back on his heels, “the Rethian doesn’t see my pretty Northland bird.

When he looked at you, he looked where your eyes are, not where the eyes of the falcon would have been.”

Plague it, she thought, the man is too observant. The ae’Magi put one hand through the bars and caressed her neck. She leaned against him and rubbed her cheek on his hand, forcing herself to obey the vague compulsion of the charismatic spell that he maintained.

The ae’Magi tilted her face so that her eyes met his and said in a leading tone, “I wonder how he broke through my illusion.”

She’d had some time to think out her actions after Myr left. If he found out for sure that Myr was immune to magic, then it would be the king’s death sentence. She heaved an inward sigh and braced herself. “But he didn’t break through your spell, Master,” she answered without apparent thought.

He looked down at her expressionlessly, and she quit fighting the urge to curl into a ball on the floor of the cage. He made a small motion with a finger and she screamed as her body twisted helplessly.

Each time he did this to her was worse than the time before. She watched as the tendons pulled and stretched, protesting the sensations they endured. When it finally stopped she didn’t fight the tremors that shook her, telling herself that she was playing her part—but wondering deep inside whether she could have stopped had she tried. After she lay still he said softly, “I don’t like to be contradicted, child. He knew you were not a falcon.”

“Yes,” she said hoarsely, from her position on the floor of the cage. “He knew. I think that his magician broke the spell for him.”

“What magician?” The ae’Magi’s voice was sharp, almost worried.

“He was sitting over behind that pillar.” She pointed to someplace vaguely on the far side of the room.

“What made you think that he was a magician?”

“He made gestures like you do sometimes. He left with the king.” Aralom kept her voice to a whisper such as a frightened girl might use.

“What did he look like?”

“I don’t know; he stayed in the shadows.”

“What did the boy say to you?” He held the word boy just a little longer than necessary, apparently liking it better than “king.”

“I don’t remember ...” This time it was worse because she felt her mind begin to lose control of itself. As a mercenary she had learned not to let pain bother her too much; but whatever it was that he did with his spell didn’t work only on her body—though her muscles cramped hard enough that she could hear the bones begin to break. The now-familiar feeling of shame crept over her. *She should try harder to please the Master; why wasn’t she behaving herself?* Guilt wormed its way in along with a sensation of unworthiness. As suddenly as it had begun it stopped, leaving her shuddering and crying helplessly.

“When I ask you something, I expect an answer.” The ae’Magi’s voice was gentle.

“He asked if I wanted to be freed and I told him that I wanted to be here. I live only to serve you, Master. It is my honor to serve the ae’Magi ...” She let her voice trail off. That’s it, she cheered herself silently, placate him, stay in character; the gasps as she fought against crying and the whimper at the end

were a nice touch; artistic, really—it was too bad that she hadn't thought of them herself.

He reached a hand out to her and she cuddled against it, getting as close to him as she could, almost wishing that the spell he used to increase his charisma was more effective on her. As it was she experienced an overwhelming desire to bite the manicured fingers—or throw up. The cold, painted bronze of the cage dug into her side.

“What else did you say to him, Little One?” His voice was at its musical best.

She pulled back from him and gave him a wide-eyed, somewhat confused look even as she felt herself regain some of her sanity. “Did you want me to say something else to him? I didn't because I wasn't sure if you would want me to.” She deliberately widened her eyes as if she were pleading with him to be pleased with her, trying to keep herself from tensing in anticipation of the wild, twisting pain.

“No. You did well.” He absently patted her cheek. “You are learning more rapidly than I thought you could. I've been working lately and haven't had the time to do more with you. Tomorrow, when I've completed this spell, I'll see what I can do to remedy that.” If she were in any doubt about what he was talking about, the hand that ran lightly down her breast would have clarified it for her. The ae'Magi seemed satisfied that the shudder that ran through her at his touch was in response to desire. He smiled warmly at her and, humming a sweet tune, walked lightly through the archway.

Aralorn stared at herself in the mirror, the ae'Magi having dispelled his illusion of the bird. The flickering light from the torches gave a dancing appearance to the fine, blonde hair. The fragile face that stared expressionlessly back at her was extraordinarily beautiful. A thin sheen of sweat glistened on her forehead; the misty, sea-green eyes looked dazed and vulnerable.

Abruptly irritated with that vulnerability, Aralorn stuck her tongue out at her reflection. It didn't make her feel any better. She wrapped both arms tightly around her legs. Head bowed on her knees, she listened to the sounds the servants made as they banked the fireplaces and snuffed the torches, trying to think over the uncontrollable panic that the thought of his intimate touch brought on.

“Logic, Aralorn, logic,” she warned herself soundlessly. “If you leave now—granting that you *can* leave—he is going to doubt what you told him about Myr, which may not matter in the long run anyway.”

She tilted her head back and whispered with bleak humor, “But if I don't get out of here I'm going to break and tell him everything from the fact that Audreas the Vain is bald to the name of my first pony.” Decision made, she waited while the sounds of the castle diminished and the moon hung high in the sky, revealed by the clear panels in the ceiling.

When she was more or less satisfied that the people who were going to sleep that night were asleep, she knelt in front of the cage door. Grasping each edge she began to mutter quietly, sometimes breaking briefly into song or chant, grateful that the cage was not made out of iron, which her magic couldn't manipulate. The phrases she uttered were almost intelligible, as if a person were just not listening quite closely enough.

First her fingers, then her hands began to glow a phosphorescent green. Gradually the light spread to the metal between her hands. When all the metal of the gate held that soft flickering glow, she stepped through, leaving the spells on the locks intact. When she stopped singing the light faded abruptly—leaving the great hall even darker than before. She stood absolutely still to let her eyes get used to the darkness.

The only light in the room came from the moon through the skylights high above, which made it difficult to find the doorway. She exited the first one that she could find, hoping that it was one of the two which traversed the outer wall of the castle.

Before she entered the hallway she dropped to her hands and knees. Guards generally look at eye level, so that from her lower vantage point she should be able to see them before they saw her—an edge that could turn shaky odds to her favor. Her position also had the secondary benefit of making her a smaller target if she were seen.

The corridor was lighter, although not much. The stone of the floor was dry and cool to the touch as, still crouching, she ran a hand lightly over the walls. It took her longer than expected to find the small opening she was searching for. Panic clawed at her, and the temptation to run blindly down the hallway fought for control of her body. This, she thought with wry self-humor, must be how a pheasant feels just before it jumps out of hiding and into the path of the arrow.

She had almost decided to look for another way to leave when she found what she was looking for. Just above the bottom row of blocks, one end of a hollow copper pipe was cut flush with the wall. Silently, Aralorn blessed her hobby of collecting folk tales and the old man at a shadowy bar near Sianim who had told her the story.

A long time ago an apprentice to one of the ae'Magi discovered a rain spell in a book he was reading while the master was away. Three weeks later when the Magician came back the castle was flooded and the apprentice was camped outside. The Magician drained the castle by the simple technique of placing a drain pipe every sixteen stones in the outer corridors.

One such drainage pipe was under her fingers. It was bigger than she'd hoped for, being about four fingers in diameter. It cut directly through the thick stone wall of the castle to the outside. The air coming through it smelled like a moat.

“Ah, the sweet perfume of freedom,” murmured Aralorn with a strained smile.

She took a deep breath and concentrated—The familiar tingle spread through her body until it was all the sensation she could absorb, leaving no room for any of her other senses. Unable to see or feel, Aralorn focused on one part of the mouse at a time; nose first, then whiskers. It took her only the time it takes to breathe deeply three times before a very small mouse crouched where she had been.

She shrank against the wall underneath the pipe for a minute and waited for the Magician to investigate the magic that she'd used—but he didn't come. Human magicians weren't usually sensitive enough to detect that someone else was using magic, but the ae'Magi was a law unto himself. He'd said he was tired, so maybe (she hoped) he was asleep. The mouse shook herself briskly, twitched her whiskers, and scratched an itchy spot where the tingle hadn't quite worn off yet; then she climbed up into the dark tunnel of pipe.

Centuries of sludge had built up in the opening, and if several other bold rodents hadn't foraged through (perhaps to escape a castle feline) she wouldn't have made it—as it was, Aralorn was submerged in slimy stuff of unknown origin up to her belly.

It was dark which didn't bother her much, and smelly which did. As she was busy not thinking about the composition of the muck under her feet she almost fell out of the pipe and into the moat some distance below, only saving herself by some ungraceful but highly athletic scrambling.

She caught her breath and thought, “Okay, now what? I need to be something that can swim”—a whiff of the moat's unsubtle aroma cut through the stench of the pipe—“or better yet, fly. Hmm ...”

The little slime-coated mouse leapt. The air blurred and a white, domestic goose flapped awkwardly over the water, one wing dripping goo from the moat. Hampered by the wet wing, Aralorn was unable to gain any altitude and came to a flapping halt in front of the bushes that signaled the beginning of the woodland

surrounding the castle several hundred yards beyond the moat. She straightened her feathers and started to waddle into—the woods, carefully leaving the ooze-covered wing stretched away from the rest of her body.

From the shadows, a black form emerged growling, its ivory fangs catching the light of the moon as it landed directly in Aralorn's path. The goose squawked and dodged backward, resuming a human form just in time for Aralorn to fall on her rump rather than her tail. Instead of the tall, slender beauty she had been in the cage, she was a bit shorter than average, brown-haired, and plain-faced—only the sea-storm eyes remained the same. At this moment they glittered with unsuppressed fury.

“Allyn's toadflax! Wolf, what are you trying to do to me?” Mindful of the proximity of the castle, she lowered her voice to a soft tone that didn't carry, but did not lack for force either. “I could have died of shock.” She put her hand theatrically over her pounding heart. “I still might. Why didn't you warn me you were here?”

The Wolf stood over her, fey and feral, with the stillness of a wild thing. The deep, macabre voice was calm and passionless when he spoke without replying to her question. “You should have told me that you intended to spy on the ae'Magi—if I had known that you were contemplating suicide I would have killed you myself. At least it would be a cleaner death than any *he* would bestow.” Fathomless golden eyes gazed at her without emotion.

She looked at him for a moment, giving him the dominant position by remaining on the ground. “Do you know,” she said softly, “that you are the only person that I have ever talked to who had anything unpleasant to say about him? As far as I could determine he was the perfect gentleman. I even asked why I was being sent to spy there.”

She nodded her head at the dark shape of the castle, its silhouette almost blacking out the sky to the east. “I was told that there were rumors of an assassination plot and I was to investigate it and warn the Master Magician if necessary.” Her customary grin restored itself. “If there is such a plot, I can only wish them luck in their endeavors.”

“It has always amazed me how well he can blind people, even without the use of magic,” replied the Wolf. He looked at the castle with the stillness that was so much a part of him. His yellow eyes glistened, glowing with a light that might not all have been a reflection of the moon. A growl rose low in his lupine throat, and the hair on his neck and back stiffened with rage.

Aralorn cautiously set a hand on his back. In all the time she'd known him he'd always been slow to warm from his customary passionlessness, and although she'd seen him kill several times she'd never seen him quite this upset. “What's wrong?”

The Wolf quieted and lowered his head for a moment. Then he shook himself as dogs will and said softly, “Nothing. It must be the moon. I find that it sometimes has this effect on me.”

“Right. Uh-huh. The moon.” She nodded solemnly, then she caught his gaze and raised one eyebrow, the Wolf staring silently back at her. She gave up the contest immediately, knowing that he was perfectly capable of continuing the stare-down all night. “Shall we go, or do you want to wait for the Magician so we can destroy him and win the world back for goodness and light?”

The Wolf grinned ferally and snorted. “If we killed the Magician, the world would be more likely to draw and quarter us than praise us as saviors. So by all means, let us make haste so as not to be forced to destroy the ae'Magi.” He turned and made his way back through the brush with Aralorn following.

Several hundred yards from the edge of the woods a grey war stallion was tied to the trees, and at their

approach he whickered a greeting. Aralorn laughed as the animal lipped the plain tunic she wore and then drew back in obvious disgust at the taste.

“Where did you come from, Sheen?” She slanted a look at the Wolf and said to him, “Thanks. I wasn’t looking forward to walking back.”

Over the years she’d learned not to question him too closely. If he wanted to be a Wolf, who was she of all people to question it? But the knot that attached the colorful cloth reins to the tree would have been difficult to tie for someone with no fingers.

Aralorn untied the reins and mounted, only to dismount and shorten the stirrups. She sighed loudly as she untied the leather strings. Someone with much longer legs than hers had ridden the horse last. She’d known for a long time that Wolf wasn’t really a wolf, or at least not an ordinary one. The first time he spoke to her removed the last of the doubts that she had. She might not question him out loud, but she liked to make it obvious that it was cooperation and not stupidity.

“Sheen, how many times have I told you not to give strangers a ride? You never know where they might take you.”

The Wolf tilted his head to one side, and there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. He woofed softly in acknowledgement of her restraint. She laughed and continued to unweave the strings.

* * *

wolf was an enigma. even though he’d been drifting in and out of her life for nearly four years, she wasn’t sure if she actually knew anything about him at all. Every time she decided that she had him figured out, he baffled her again. She had been relieved when she’d decided that he wasn’t really a wolf. Her feelings for him, although still confusing, had been plaguing worrisome when she felt them toward an animal.

Sometimes she thought that he might be a renegade shape-shifter, one of her mother’s people—though he lacked the grey-green eyes that were characteristic of the race. But he could do too many things that were not possible for a wielder of green magic. Also, although she was not well trained in green magic, having been brought up by her human father, she knew enough to tell whether a spell was done by green magic or human. When Wolf cast a spell, it had a human feel to it, as well as a touch of something else that she couldn’t quite pin down.

That he was a human magician was more likely, but human magic—the kind the ae’Magi used—didn’t lend itself well to shapeshifting because instead of blending in with the forces of nature it sought to control them, and that required immense concentration which was impossible to maintain for extended periods of time. Most magicians had to sit still in isolation to perform any magic. To turn oneself into an animal for a prolonged period would require the strength of the ae’Magi Her normally deft hands faltered at their familiar task, so she stopped and gazed almost impersonally at her hands, which trembled without her consent. The mindless, babbling fear threatened her as she worked her way through her suspicion. He couldn’t possibly be the ae’Magi. Could he?

The Wolf watched her and saw the wear that three weeks with the ae’Magi had caused. He saw the tremor of her hands and smelled the sweat of her fear. He saw that the cheerful demeanor—that was her habit had been used like a mask and he lost the hope that she had by some miracle escaped unscathed. The desire to kill the Archmage rose in his throat and was set aside for future use. He saw the terror in her eyes, but until he stepped closer to comfort her he didn’t realize that she was afraid of him.

Instantly he halted. This was the one thing that he hadn’t expected. Four years, and never had he seen the fear that he inspired in everyone else. Not even when she had reason to fear.

The old ache of bitter loneliness, almost forgotten over the years he'd known her, was back with a vengeance, and with it came a strong desire to flee. *If* they had been somewhere else he would have left without a backward glance, but here near the castle she was still in desperate danger. Already he could smell the excitement of the Magician's "pets." She wouldn't be able to lose them on her own: and, despite her formidable combat skills, even at her best she couldn't handle more than two or three of them. After three weeks in confinement she was hardly at her best, so he stood and waited.

As she looked at him the gold eyes were no more readable than ever. She remembered the fever-bright agony that had been in them when first they met. He'd been caught in the harsh jaws of an old trap and had been there for some time, unable to free himself because the pain was great enough to block any attempt at concentration. His eyes had glittered their defiance at her with an eerie intelligence. For that reason, instead of killing him in mercy as had been her first thought, she sang to him in her mother's tongue and freed the mangled hind leg.

It had taken only a week for her to heal the leg, but he'd fought the fever for almost a month. He'd left as soon as he could stand up, at least for a while. One day she'd looked up to find him watching her with his uncomfortably canny eyes. After that he came and went, sometimes staying away for months at a time, then appearing without a word of explanation.

She remembered how long she'd worked to gain his trust. It had taken time to get him to let her touch him, more time before he would eat the food she gave him, and almost a year before he trusted her enough to reveal that he talked. She compared his remoteness to the Magician's easy smile and beautiful voice. If she ever met a corpse that talked, she imagined that its voice would be similar to the Wolf's. Wolf was not the ae'Magi.

She crouched down to look him in the eye, although she didn't have to lower herself far—he was a big animal "I'm sorry. I'm .. just a little shaky"—she gave a half laugh and held up an unsteady hand—"as *you* can see. He's got me doubting everything I know." She moved the hand to touch him and he quietly moved just out of reach.

She knew that she had hurt him, but before she could speak the stallion snorted softly. She turned back to him and saw that he was twitching his ears back and forth and shifting his weight uneasily.

"Uriah," commented the Wolf. "If they are getting close enough that even Sheen can smell them, we'd best be on our way. There are riding clothes in the saddlebags. Put them on; we may have a long ride ahead."

She wiped herself off as best she could on the simple cotton tunic. Ten years of being a mercenary had destroyed any vestige of ladylike modesty she might once have felt, but she hurried into the clean clothes anyway, as they could use every second to avoid a confrontation with the Uriah.

She swung into the saddle and let the Wolf lead the way at the careful trot dictated by the rough country and the dark. Had the Uriah been closer, she would have chanced a fall with a faster gait, but for now there was no need for panic. When she had rummaged for her clothes, Aralorn found that the saddlebags also contained oatcakes. She pulled a couple out and ate one as she rode, feeding the other to the horse. When she offered one to the Wolf, he refused. She let him pick the way, trusting him to do his best to rid themselves of the Uriah.

The Uriah were vaguely human-looking creatures that appeared more dead than alive, though they were almost impossible to kill. The insatiable hunger that drove them gave them a berserker's ferocity. They were normally found only in the far eastern regions that bordered the impassable Marshlands, but in the last decade or so they'd begun to turn up in unexpected places further west. But to find them this far west

was almost unheard of.

“Runyons!” She swore at her own stupidity. “They’re his, aren’t they?” The warhorse, slightly spooked by the nasty smell behind them and miffed by the slow pace they were taking, took exception to the sudden sound and bucked hard. She didn’t fall off, but it was a near thing, and it took a while to stop the curvetting completely.

The Wolf waited until the show stopped and then said, “Yes, they belong to him,” Without waiting to comment further he continued on, leaving Aralorn to follow as she could.

The sun began to rise on the silent travelers. Aralorn was quiet, first because she didn’t know what to say to Wolf and later because fatigue kept her silent. Three weeks with no exercise left her feeling as if she was recovering from a prolonged illness. Despite her tiredness, when the Wolf halted and told her they were stopping for the afternoon she protested.

“If we don’t stop and let the horse graze and get some rest, you’ll be walking tomorrow.” He spoke slowly and clearly, and his voice managed to pierce through her exhaustion.

She nodded, knowing he was right, but the urge to run away from the castle was stronger than her common sense, so she didn’t dismount. The horse arched his neck and blew, dancing suddenly on his hind legs as if preparing for battle, responding to the invisible signals of his rider.

Wolf was silent until he saw her sway in the saddle from sheer exhaustion. “I will stay on watch tonight, Lady. I know when the ae’Magi or his playthings are near and I won’t let them take you back.” His voice was softer, not *quite* as harsh as it had been that day.

Again she nodded but this time she dismounted and, with more instinct than willpower, began to untack the horse. The light saddle seemed to weigh more than she remembered and it was an effort to reach high enough to get the bridle off, but she managed. Sheen was well trained and needed no restraint to keep him close. She untied the sleeping roil and climbed in it without even dusting off her clothes. The Wolf stretched out beside her and the last thing she noticed was the comforting sound of the stallion munching grass.

Two

Aralorn breathed in ragged gasps and rubbed a shaky hand across the wetness on her cheeks. Sweating, and still half caught in her nightmare, she covered her ears with her hands to shut out the soft, seductive voice of the ae’Magi.

She observed the still-dark sky, wishing that she wouldn’t have to try to sleep again. Every time she closed her eyes, all she could see was the Magician’s fine-boned hand holding the ornate silver dagger he used to butcher his sacrifices. The spells that he used to increase his magnetism kept his victims, usually children, from objecting so they stood quietly between his hands. One brown-eyed boy was so caught by the spell that he smiled as the ae’Magi drew his knife.

The ae’Magi killed them without passion or pleasure. To Aralorn, life and death were passionate things, and to rob them of emotion made them seem meaningless.

She sat up abruptly and wiped again at her wet cheeks. The horse stood nearby, dozing with one hind foot cocked and his Roman nose lowered almost to knee level. Near Sheen, Wolf lay still. Only the glitter of his eyes in the darkness showed that he was awake as promised. His gaze was focused in the darkness of the trees. She knew that he must have heard her when she woke up, so his inattention was deliberate; her distrust had hurt him badly last night.

She spoke softly, knowing that he would listen, whether he appeared to do so or not. “I didn’t really think that you were the ae’Magi,” she said. When he made no reply, she pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them.

Aralorn thought hard for a moment, trying to put into words the feelings that had made her distrust him. When she spoke, her voice was muffled behind her knees. “It’s just that place—it ... twists everything. There is so much magic in the castle that I could almost see it. Almost every thought that I had was distorted in one way or another. He loves it, you know—the deception.”

She shuddered slightly and continued. “I’d see him drink the blood of a newborn baby and I’d find myself thinking how beautifully the light of the sacrificial fire colored his hair. It’s plaguing scary not to know whether your Feelings are your own or only the result of a spell.” Her hands tightened on her legs until the knuckles turned white.

“I have never been so frightened in my entire life. I always thought that I was strong-willed, but even with my mother’s blood to help me resist the spells, I couldn’t block the feeling that I wanted to please him, to make him want me,” Her voice died to a whisper at the last.

She leaned on one cheek, turning her head to look at him. “I might have been able to block it toward the last—when I knew what the spells were and how he worked them—but I couldn’t because I had to act as if the spell were having its effect on me. Sometimes I think ... that maybe I didn’t want, to block the spell because it made me feel so much better ...” She knew that she would have bruises in the morning from gripping her arms so hard.

She took a shuddering breath and concealed her face once more against her knees before continuing in a whisper, “I thought that once I left that everything would be back to normal, but it isn’t. I can’t get him out of my mind. I see his face every time I close my eyes.”

Slowly Wolf stood up and left his place. He sat down and leaned against her. She loosed her grip on her legs and ran a hand in the thick pelt. Although usually aloof, Wolf occasionally chose to act like a dog would. A cold nose worked its way under her arm and his warm, wet tongue licked at her chin until she squealed and pulled away with a quavering laugh, wiping at her face with her sleeves.

The Wolf smiled, as wolves do, and rolled over against her on his back. She rubbed his stomach (something that he *didn’t* allow in public) and one back leg snapped rapidly back and forth as she caught just the right spot.

After he felt he had cheered her up he said, “Don’t worry about it, Lady. I know that living in that place for any length of time will twist your thoughts and feelings until what you feel and what he wants you to feel are tangled together in a knot that would baffle a sage.” His voice was gentler than she had ever heard it, sounding like velvet on gravel. “Time will help.”

“I know,” replied Aralorn softly, still rubbing his stomach, and then she continued in a lighter tone, “but I’m not looking forward to the next decade or so.”

Wolf rolled over with his improbable quickness and nipped her lightly on the hand in response to her quip. He tacitly agreed with her unspoken decision that the discussion was too serious.

Aralorn tilted her head to the side, a slow grin twisting her lips. “So you want to fight, do you?” She tackled him and began a wrestling match that left them both flat on the ground and panting.

“Will you be able to sleep now?” he asked, rather hoarsely, even for him.

She nodded and rolled over until she was on the bedding, unwilling to use enough energy to get up and walk. She mumbled a “goodnight” that lost most of its consonants. He touched his nose to her cheek and woofed softly before curling up against her.

In the end, it was the stallion that woke them both. His high-pitched whistle split the early dawn. Aralorn leapt to her feet and had the bed rolled up almost before she opened her eyes. Bridling and saddling the horse took somewhat longer, as the obstinate beast wouldn't stand still. As she worked she kept an eye on the Wolf as he stared into the darkness. At his signal she left what was not already attached to the saddle and mounted the stallion, who was already trotting. Although not built for speed, Sheen managed a very credible gallop as he followed the Wolf's lead. The Uriah were close enough behind them that they could hear the howls the beasts made when they found their camp.

Aralorn had fought the Uriah before, and she knew that they were faster than any horse she'd seen. They were too close behind and gaining fast. She drew her unusually slender sword from its sheath on the saddle and slowed the stallion in preparation for facing the creatures.

Noticing that Sheen was slowing, the Wolf darted back and nipped at the stallion's heels, nimbly dodging the war-trained horse's well-placed kick. “No,” he snarled. “You don't stand a chance against the number that we have behind us. If you keep going I can lure them away.” With that the Wolf began to veer off, but Aralorn guided Sheen to block his path.

She shook her head and shouted over the sounds of the Uriah, “It's me that they want. They won't follow you, and even if they did it would mean that you would have to face them alone. Together we might stand a chance.”

“You know better than that, Lady.” His tones rang with impatience. “Against two or three maybe, but there are many more than that. You needn't worry about me; I can keep ahead of them on my own.” Here the Wolf paused a moment, as if he were choosing his words carefully. “They will follow me if given a choice between the two of us.”

“What do you mean by that?” Then before he could answer she said, “Cursed obscure Wolf. Never mind. We don't have time to argue.” It was getting difficult to talk and keep Sheen from bolting as the howls grew nearer.

He flashed his fangs at her in a mock smile as only a wolf can do. “Lady, this isn't the first time I've dealt with them, nor will it be the last.”

She didn't want to leave him. If she hadn't known he was no ordinary wolf she wouldn't have even considered leaving. But, against this many Uriah she would be more of a hindrance than a help. She heard the wails of the Uriah increase exponentially as they sighted their prey.

“Right,” she said abruptly. “I'll see you in Sianim. But, plague it, Wolf, take care not to let them ruin your fur coat.” With that she turned Sheen in the original direction and urged him on.

The Wolf stayed in the path of the Uriah and watched with yellow eyes as they came closer. When the tone of their calls changed and became even more frantic, he knew that they had recognized him, and he broke into a swift run, leading them away from the path taken by his companions. Aralorn, looking back, saw that the Wolf had been correct; all of the grotesque, humanoid forms followed the Wolf's trail.

Aralorn traveled during the dark and slept or at least tried to during the day—not because it was safer that way, but because she couldn't stand to wake from her nightmares alone in the dark. Sometimes she traveled for miles without seeing anything.

On the evening of the third day she left the forested mountains behind for the gentler hills and valleys of the lowlands. Traveling was faster there, and it was only another day until she caught sight of Sianim.

The fortified city stood on the top of an artificial plateau in the middle of a large valley. Nothing but grass was allowed to grow within a half mile of the hill, and even that was kept short. The plateau itself was steep-sided, and the road that led to the only gate into the city was narrow and walled so that only three people could ride side by side through it. Although it was good for defense, the narrow path made it a nightmare to get large groups of soldiers in and out of Sianim.

The origins of the city were shrouded in the dust of ages past: even the oldest known manuscripts mentioned it as a thriving city. Originally the city had been a center of trade, but the small armies hired by the merchants to accompany their wagon trains drew mercenaries from all over. People looking for groups of mercenaries to hire began to go to Sianim. Gradually the mercenaries themselves became the center of Sianim's economy. A school for training in the arts of war was founded, and as one event led to another Sianim became a city of professional warriors.

Mercenaries of Sianim were some of the finest fighters in the world. With the only other military school at Jetaine, which had the minor drawback of allowing no foreign males entrance within its walls. Sianim had little competition. In addition to training its own mercenary troops, Sianim also trained fighters for various kingdoms and principalities for a healthy fee. The elite guard for most of the rulers were Sianim-trained.

Because politics and war go hand in hand, Sianim also had a spy network that would have amazed an outsider. It was run by a slender, short, academician—several decades past his first youth but by no means ancient. It was to his small office tucked away in the rabbit warren of the government building that Aralorn went, after stabling Sheen.

She slipped through the worn door without knocking, for if the Spymaster had wanted privacy the door would have been locked. She closed the door, sat on a ratty-looking chair and waited patiently for Ren to acknowledge her.

He was reading aloud from a collection of poems by Thyre. Thyre wasn't one of her favorites; he reached too hard for his rhyme. Usually she fished a book from Ren's impressive library and read until he decided to question her, but today she just sat quietly listening. Since Thyre was notoriously long-winded, she had plenty of time to rest.

When Ren finished she was dozing peacefully, but she was edgy enough that the soft sound the book made as Ren stuffed it into one of the many bookcases made her jump. He offered her a glass he filled from the bottle on his desk.

Aralorn accepted it, but sipped cautiously. Bottles on Ren's desk could contain anything from water to Wyth, a liquor more affectionately known as Dragonslayer. This time it was *fehlt* juice, only a mildly alcoholic drink, but she set it down on a rickety table anyway. She had the rueful feeling that it would be a long time before she would take anything that could cloud her thoughts.

When Ren finally spoke he sounded almost nervous to her sensitive ears. "I trust that everything went smoothly as usual, hmm? Got in, got out, came here."

"Yes. I—" He cut her off before she could speak.

"Did you talk to him about the assassination attempt?" Ren sat down on the three-legged stool behind his desk.

"No, the—"

“Good,” he said breaking in once again before she could continue. “I would hate to have him upset with us, or think that we were spying on him—although I doubt that he would mind. I’m sure he would have understood that we gather information whenever we can. I trust that you were either able to put a halt to the assassins or discovered that the rumor I sent you to investigate was just a rumor.”

That he was babbling didn’t bother her; he always talked like that. He once told her that it distracted people, and they said things that they wouldn’t normally have said—just to get him to shut up. She used the technique herself upon occasion and found it effective.

What did bother her was that he wasn’t listening. Usually he listened carefully to everything she said and then quizzed her for hours about what she’d heard and seen. It just wasn’t like him to gloss over anything or stop anyone from speaking. He never, not ever, interrupted. The bright, black, beady eyes shifted restlessly ... as if he were embarrassed. She had never seen him embarrassed before, so it took her a while to identify the emotion that brought a red tinge to his face. Ren was ashamed that he had sent her to spy on the ae’Magi—the same Ren who had sent her to spy on his own brother!

None of her disquiet showed on her face; she’d been a spy too long to display her emotions unless she wanted to. She didn’t want to heed the intuition that was hinting that something was awry. She wanted to give her report with no more than the usual lies. (Not even Ren knew that she could alter her shape. Shapeshifters were not wholeheartedly approved, even when you found someone who actually believed in them.)

She wanted to ignore the insistent disquiet, but she couldn’t. While he talked she carefully edited what she was going to tell him, waiting with apparent good humor as he drifted from topic to topic until he got around to asking her about her mission.

Aralorn gave him a brief description of her method of entry; incorrect, of course. Someday Ren would find out just how poor she was at picking locks and would be deeply disappointed. She rattled on at length about the various heads of state at the gatherings the ae’Magi had held—obligingly going into as much detail as she could when Ren requested it. Evidently, he was only upset about her spying on the ae’Magi. She hedged when he asked her about Myr, saying only that she’d seen him talk with the Magician, but hadn’t been near enough to hear what was said. Time enough to inform Ren of the young king’s interesting talent after she found out what was making the Spymaster act so far out of character.

To distract him from Myr, Aralorn continued to the main reason for her mission and said with some caution, “I couldn’t gather any information on the assassination attempt. If there is one, it doesn’t originate from within the castle. I did get the impression that if there *is* such an attempt, the ae’Magi would be perfectly capable of handling it without need for our aid.”

She paused, to give herself time to choose just the right words. “I left early, I know. But, I felt so *uncomfortable*.” What an understatement! “I thought that I had better get out before he figured out who I was and took offense. He is very powerful as well as popular. If it were widely known that Sianim spied upon the ae’Magi, half of the world would be angry at us.”

“Ah, yes, I quite understand.” Ren nodded and picked up another book—his habitual method of dismissal.

If she needed confirmation that something was awry, she had it then. Ren would never, ever accept *discomfort* as a reason for leaving an assignment early. She should have been at the ae’Magi’s castle at least another se’nnight. Impassive-faced, she exited the room.

Alone, Ren relaxed and rubbed his hands together with great satisfaction. If that performance didn’t cause Aralorn to start thinking, then nothing would. He needed her to be suspicious and questioning, but

also cautious. He couldn't afford to come out and warn her; the ae'Magi had his own ways of learning things ... and if anyone would be subject to the Archmage's watchful eye, it would be the Spymaster of Sianim.

* * *

aralorn's feet were silent on the yellow stone of the steps; she was deep in thought as she wandered down the cobble street. She absently waved at acquaintances, though she didn't stop to talk. She shivered a little, though it was warm enough out. Why was he acting as if he'd never had a suspicious thought about the ae'Magi? Ren was suspicious of *everybody*.

She found the dormitory where she stored her few possessions more by chance than design and retreated through the halls to her room.

It was musty after her prolonged absence and in desperate need of dusting. There were only a few pieces of worn furniture placed here or there, but the room was small enough that it seemed cluttered. She sneezed once; then, ignoring the much-abused chair, she sat on the rough stone floor that was unrelieved by carpet or fur.

Never before had Ren seemed worried about where he sent her to spy. He cared little for politics, leaving that to the statesmen to whom he gave selected bits of information. Instead he thirsted for knowledge the way that some men thirst for food or sex. It was from him that she had gleaned many of the folk stories she collected.

He was no respecter of persons, not ever. When she had protested her assignment with the Sorcerer, he had laughed at her and quoted her his favorite saying: "He who does no wrong need not fear perusal." He used it so often and said it with such pride that she suspected that he had made it up himself.

When he sent her to the castle he'd made it clear that although nominally she was investigating the "assassination attempt," her main objective would be to gather information on Geoffrey ae'Magi. Why else would he send his most successful agent to spy on the castle when a simple note of warning would have done the same thing?

All of which led her back to her original question: why was Ren troubled about it now?

She sat for a while and came to no brilliant conclusions; but it was better than worrying about the Wolf—though she did some of that as well. Fretting about one was about as useful as fretting about the other—so she, being egalitarian at heart, gave equal time to each.

Finally, tired in mind and body, she stripped off her clothes and threw them on the floor. She stretched out carefully, slowly working each muscle until it was relatively limber. She pulled off the top covering of her cot, careful to take most of the dust with it. Then she collapsed onto the top of the bed and slept.

The nightmare came back. It wasn't as bad as it had been the first few days, but it was bad enough. She was only half awake when she touched the wall that her cot sat against and thought for a minute that she was back in the cage. She reacted as if she had touched something hot, rolling quickly away from it and landing with a thump, fully awake and surrounded by a cloud of dust from the blanket, on the floor.

She sneezed several times, swore, and wiped her watering eyes. Laughing, she thought that she should be glad that the Wolf wasn't here to see her make a fool of herself. It was obvious that she wasn't going to get any more sleep for a while, so she lit a small lamp and dressed, pulling on her practice garments—knee-length leather boots, loose breeches and tunic.

* * *

the nice thing about being home in Sianim was that even in the busy summer season there were always people in the practice arenas willing to go a few rounds; mercenaries tended to keep strange hours. She strapped on sword and daggers and slipped out the window and onto the narrow ledge just below.

Gingerly she traversed the narrow pathway until it was possible to drop onto the roof of the building next door. From there it was only a short jump to the ground. It would have been easier to exit by normal means, but she took practice where she could get it.

Outside, the street torches were already lit for the night, but people were still wandering around. There was a friendly brawl going on at one of the pubs with bystanders betting on the outcome.

She took a deep breath of air. The smell of Sianim was a fusion of sweat, horse, dust and ... freedom.

Aralorn had grown up stifled by the restraints placed on women of the high aristocracy, even outcasts. Reth might have outlawed slavery, but women of high estate were surrounded by a collar of rules strong enough to confine any drudge. If it hadn't been for her father she might have been forced into the traditional useless role.

The Lyon of Lambshold was an unusual man. When his illegitimate daughter came to him and stated her objections to the constant needlepoint and etiquette lessons that his wife imposed on his daughters, he taught her to ride like a man. He also taught her to fight with sword and staff. When she left home, he sent her off with his favorite warhorse.

She had tried Jetaine, but found that the women there were enslaved to their hatred of men even more than women on the outside were enslaved to their social position. Aralorn had never hated men, she just hadn't wanted to sit and simmer all her life. She'd often wondered what it would have been like for her if she'd been born a merchant's daughter, or someone who had to work for a living instead of an aristocrat who was expected to be an art object.

The thought of herself as an art object made her snicker. Even before she'd become battle-scarred she'd been short, plain, and too willing to speak her own mind.

The two men who had been following her were getting close enough to be bothersome. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed them slink behind a cart she'd just passed. Her left hand went automatically to her sword. Her right already held a dagger.

One of the thugs said to the other in a stage whisper meant to carry to her, "Runyons! She saw us again. I told you to change those shoes. They make too much noise."

She laughed and spun around to face them. "Struth! You're getting better, though. This time I honestly thought that you were just a couple of thieves."

The second one pushed the first sideways with a playful punch. "See, Kai? I told you that we'd do better blending in with the environment. Who pays attention to a couple of hog-lovers in this place?"

Kai twitched one eyebrow upward, managing despite the muck to look aristocratic. "*However*, if you had worn the shoes I told you to ..." He let his voice trail off and flashed the snapping grin that made him look more like his twin, Talor. With practiced ease he slipped out of his assumed character and flung an arm around Aralorn's neck. "Well, my dear, it looks like I have you at my mercy." Or at least that's what he meant to say. Actually, thought Aralorn, the last word sounded more like "eyah" than "mercy."

She turned to Talor and with a straight face remarked, "I need to bathe in muck more often. It seems to

work better than throwing him on the ground and making him look silly like I did the last time he tried to kiss me, don't you think?"

Talor assumed a serious demeanor, but before he could say whatever he intended to, Kai broke in. "Tell me. Lady, what villain gave you that perfume? Surely it must be cursed. Let me slay him for you that you may once again be your sweet-smelling self."

She laughed. "The funny thing is that I had almost gotten use to smelling like this. I was going to go to the practice ring but I think that I'll head to the baths first. Interested in a little fun?" Kai brightened comically until she added, "In the ring, of course."

Kai bowed low. "To my sorrow I have a previous engagement." He slanted her a grin. "Do you remember that redhead in the thirty-second?"

"Uhm-hmm," She raised an eyebrow, shook her head and then in an exaggeratedly sorrowful tone commented, "Poor girl, doomed to a broken heart." Then she grinned and said, "Have a good time, Kai." He waved and sauntered away.

Aralorn looked at Talor and inquired, "Does he really have a date with Sera?"

He laughed. "Probably not, but he will. Especially if he remembers to clean up first. He just doesn't like being beaten by a woman. The whole squad ribbed him about it for two weeks the last time you beat him. I, on the other hand, have no pride and, after you rid yourself of the unfair advantage you now hold"—he grabbed his nose with a hand to show her what he meant—"I will await you at the Hawk and Hound when you get back from the baths."

"Done." She gave him a mock salute and headed for the baths, grinning.

* * *

in one of the sparring rings the hawk and hound tavern provided, they faced each other warily with the body-length staves held lightly in their hands. Normally they were evenly matched, Talor being a better lighter than his brother, but Aralorn was still stiff. They fought together often, because no one else wanted to face them with staves.

Because they were sparring, they played with variations on training dances, and rather than hitting for body shots they tried to hit a small metal plate, which dangled from a belt. Normally there would be a third to call shots fair or foul and to award points at the sound of wood striking metal, but she and Talor were veterans and cared more for the sport than for the winning or losing. The ring that they had chosen was in the basement of the tavern, so they had no spectators. By mutual consent they stopped for a bit to rest before they proceeded out of the standard patterns.

"So, what was that smell anyway? It seems somewhat familiar but I just can't place it. Something like a cross between an outhouse and a pig barn." Talor's voice was somewhat unsteady because he was stretching out as he talked.

Aralorn leaned, unashamedly panting, against one of the waist high walls that surrounded the ring; she'd recovered most of her normal strength on the ride home, but not all. She started to think up a reason for the moat smell, but decided that there was no harm in letting him know what she'd been doing. It would go no farther than his brother, and both Kai and Talor knew when to keep their mouths shut.

"Well," she said, "unless you've been visiting the Magician's castle lately it probably wouldn't be too familiar. I wish the ae'Magi smelled as pure as his moat" Conditioned reflexes were the only thing that

brought her staff up to deflect his from her face. The sheer force of the blow numbed her hands, as she hadn't been holding the staff in a proper grip.

She ducked underneath his arm to come to the center of the arena and give herself some room for maneuvering. The move also gave her a chance to talk. "What are you doing?"

Talor's face twisted with wrath as he came after her. "How dare you! How can you be so disrespectful of the ae'Magi? You ungrateful witch!" Even as he swung he proceeded to call her, methodically, every foul name she'd heard. It was his rage that saved her, interfering with the timing and precision of his attacks. Time and time again she was able to block or turn aside his furious blows.

This unchecked anger was unlike him; a good warrior strives above all for control. It was also far too sudden. Since when had Talor become a devotee of the Archmage? She knew something was terribly wrong, but his ruthless barrage left no more time for speculation or analysis. She cleared her mind and concentrated on slaying alive.

Finally, one of his swings caught her hard behind the back of her knees and she fell backward, letting his staff carry her legs up with it. She turned the fall into a roll, going over backward on her shoulders and coming up on her feet. As soon as her feet touched the floor, she automatically raised her staff to guard position, trying to protect her face and torso.

The roll had forced her to take her eyes from her opponent, and she barely saw the flicker of movement as his staff came under her defenses. Rather than the standard sweep-strike, Talor had chosen to thrust. The end of the staff caught her low in the chest and drove the breath out of her body. Without the protective padding she wore, it would have broken ribs. Had his staff struck just a few finger-widths higher it would have been fatal, padding or not.

She twisted frantically to the side, trying to dive out of striking range. It was a desperate maneuver, exposing her vulnerable back to her opponent, and after the blow she'd just received she knew she was moving far too slowly. Even as she moved, she waited for his strike—knowing that there was no way for her to evade the impact of the metal-shod staff that would shatter bone like kindling.

The blow didn't come. She completed the diving roll and snapped to her feet, staff poised and lungs working desperately for air.

Talor stood in the middle of the ring, leaning against the staff. He shook his head like a wet dog and then looked up at her in dazed bewilderment. "What has happened to me?" He whispered the words. "Are you all right, Aralom?"

"Fine." She gasped the word out, her diaphragm not operating quite correctly yet. "Don't ... worry about it. No harm done, and I ... needed a workout. Your stick work has improved, but you're still a little slow on your returns Watch your hands. You hold on too tightly when you're mad, and it makes it easier for your opponent to force you to drop your staff." As she got her breath back she made her tone more baiting, trying to get him to forget what had happened. If she were correct about the cause, then it would do him more harm than good to worry about it.

He took the refuge she offered. "You need to pay more attention to the opponent's eyes. You watch the body too much, and that doesn't give you much advance warning. If you'd been watching more closely you could have avoided that last hit."

She dropped her staff and waved her hands out in the traditional surrender and said, "Okay, you beat me. My reputation is in tatters. Just do me one favor and don't tell your brother about it. Last time you beat me, he challenged me, and then I had to put up with his sulks for a week."

“I had to go out on maneuvers with him and he sulked for almost a month. Okay, I won’t tell him. Besides”—here he struck up an obviously false pose and looked down his nose at her—“it ill becomes a man to brag about beating a *woman*.”

For all of his humor Aralorn could tell that he was feeling uncomfortable, and she wasn’t feeling much better. The wild idea that she’d been toying with as an explanation was becoming more and more reasonable. Talor reacted to her unflattering observation about the ae’Magi the same way that she would have reacted to it when she had been in the Magician’s castle had she not had the benefit of unorthodox heritage. Somehow, the ae’Magi had increased the area of effect of his charisma spell greatly.

Talor excused himself as fast as he could, before the awkwardness grew further. When she turned to watch him leave she noticed the Wolf lying just inside the doorway, his head on his front paws. Talor stooped and patted him on the back, which Wolf answered with a small movement of his tail, but his clear yellow eyes never wavered from Aralorn’s face.

Aralorn waited until Talor was gone before dropping exhausted to the floor and patting the space beside her in invitation. The Wolf obligingly got up and trolled over and resumed his relaxed pose, substituting Aralorn’s shins for his chinrest.

They sat like that for a while, Aralorn running her hand through the thick fur—separating the coarse dark hair from the softer, lighter-colored undercoat. When her breathing had returned almost to normal, she broke the silence.

“It’s good to have you back,” she commented. “I take it that they didn’t kill you.”

“I think that is a safe assumption to make, yes.” His voice was more noncommittal than it usually was.

She gave him a half-hearted grin.

“How long have you been here?” she asked.

“Long enough to see you put your foot in it and almost let that clumsy young fool remove you from his life.”

She obligingly rose to his bail. “*Clumsy!* I’ll have you know that he is the second best staffsman in Sianim.”

“You being the first?” Amusement touched his voice.

She cuffed him lightly. “And you know it, too!”

“It looked to me as if he had you beaten. You might have to step into second place.” He paused and said in a quieter voice, “Finally noticed that people are a bit touchy concerning the ae’Magi, have you?”

She looked at him, startled. “Has it been going on for a long time? I hadn’t noticed anything.”

He grunted an affirmative. “I noticed it starting about a year ago, but it seems to have gotten much more intense.”

“It must be some sort of variation of the spells that he had at his castle, but I didn’t think that anyone could create a spell of this magnitude alone.” Aralorn’s tone was questioning.

“He’s not doing it alone,” replied the Wolf. “He started small. The villages near the Magician’s castle have quite a few people who are strong in magic. The side effect of having groups of young, virile

magicians apprenticing at the castle for several hundred generations.” His tone was ironic. “The adults that he couldn’t subdue he killed, because they were not suitable for his purposes. But the children ...”

Aralorn shuddered, and rubbed her arms as if chilled.

“I perceive that you’ve seen what he does with the children.” Wolf’s tone gentled. “Apparently he’s found some way to use them to increase his abilities. Fifteen years ago, in the village, if you made a negative remark about the ae’Magi, their reaction would be somewhat like Talor’s. Now the streets are empty of all but old men and women. He needs still more prey. Sianim, I think, is merely getting the backlash of the main focus.”

“What is the main focus?” she asked.

“Where is magic at its strongest? Where do many of the common villagers have the ability to work charms? Where has magic nourished, protected by strong rulers from the persecution that magic-users were subject to after the great wars?”

“Reth,” she answered.

“Reth,” he agreed.

“Crud,” she said.

Three

The inn was built snugly to keep out the bitter cold of the northern winters. When the snow lay thick on the ground the inn was picturesque, nestled cozily in a small valley between the impressive mountains of northern Reth. Without the masking snow, the building showed the onset of neglect. It lay about halfway between the small village of Kestral and the slightly larger village of Torin.

The inn had been prosperous while the trappers of the Northlands were bringing down the thick pelts of the various animals that inhabited the northern mountain wilds. For many years merchants from all over flocked to Kestral each summer because it was as far south as the reclusive trappers would travel. But over the last several years the trappers had gradually grown fewer, and what furs they now brought to trade were hardly worth owning.

The North had always been uncanny: the kind of place that a sensible person stayed away from. The trappers traded stories of the Howlaas that screamed unseen in Iron! of the winter winds to drive men mad. They told of the Old Man of the Mountain who could make a man rich, or turn him into a beast with nothing but a whisper. Now there were new stories, though the storytellers were fewer. One man’s partner disappeared one night, leaving his bedding and clothes behind although the snow lay thick on the ground. A giant bird was seen dying over a campsite where four bodies sat in front of a blazing fire. One trapper swore that he saw a dragon, though everyone knew that the dragons had been gone since the last of the Wizard Wars.

Without the furs, fewer and fewer merchants came. The inn grew less prosperous, depending more and more on the local farmers’ night out. The once tidy yard was overgrown and covered with muck from horses and other beasts, some of them two-legged.

Inside, the greasy tallow candles sputtered fitfully on the rough-hewn walls and would have tent a soiled air to a far more presentable crowd than the one that occupied the inn. The chipped wooden pitchers that adorned the tables were rifled with some unidentifiable but undeniably alcoholic brew. The tabletops themselves were black with grease and other less savory substances.

Rushing here and there amid the few customers, a woman trotted blithely between tables refilling pitchers and obviously enjoying the fondles that were part of any good barmaid's job. She wasn't as clean as she could have been, but then neither were her customers. She wasn't as young as she claimed to be either, but the dim light was kind to her wrinkles and much was forgiven because of her wholehearted approval of the male species.

The only other woman in the room was wielding a mop across the uneven floor. It might have done more good if the water she was using hadn't been dirtier than the floor. The wet bottom of her skirt did as much to remove the accumulated muck as the mop. As she passed close to the tables she deftly avoided the casual hands that came her way. Not that many did. Most of the customers were regulars and were aware that if someone got too pushy he was liable to end with the bucket over his head for his troubles.

Dishwater-blond hair was pulled into an irregular bun at the back of her neck. Her plain face was not improved by the discontented pout that held sway on her thin lips as she swung the mop.

Aralorn *was* discontented. A month after she'd finished in the Sorcerer's castle, Ren had called her into his office and told her that he was sending her to the middle of nowhere to keep an eye on the local inhabitants. The only reason that she'd been able to think of for her demotion to this kind of assignment was that Ren no longer trusted her; something that he had in common with most of the rest of Sianim. The story of what she had said to Talor had somehow become common knowledge and now even her closest friends avoided her as if she had a case of the pox. She'd accepted this assignment only because she'd thought that anything would be better than being an outcast.

After she'd spent the first day at the inn she'd decided that even the ae'Magi's castle had been a better option. At least there she hadn't been quite so bored.

Even though the business at the inn was brisk due to a high rate of alcoholism and infidelity among the people of both villages, not much happened. If the tavern had been located in the middle of a busy town she might have been resigned to staying there in hopes of picking up some information, even if her abilities were better utilized in a more perilous setting. However, the inn was mostly frequented by tinkers, drunken "family men," and occasionally by one very impoverished highwayman—the more skilled and ruthless of his kind having left for richer pastures.

The most interesting thing that had happened here so far was when she heard that the daughter of the Headman of Kestral ran off with somebody named Harold the Rat. When the highwayman came in next time looking more miserable than usual accompanied by a female who was taller than him by a good six inches, Aralorn concluded that he was the mysterious Harold and offered him her silent condolences.

The worst part of this monotony was that she had more time than she wanted to think about the ae'Magi. She knew that she should do something, but for the life of her she couldn't think what.

Tonight was worse than usual; the innkeeper's wife was sick and the innkeeper was doing all of the cooking—rendering the food even less edible than it usually was. This led to more than the usual number of customers getting sick on the floor—because the only thing left to do at the inn was drink, and the alcohol that they served was none of the best and quite probably mildly poisonous, judging by the state of the poor fools who drank it.

As the newest barmaid, the task of cleaning up fell to Aralorn. She'd found that this consisted mostly of moving the mess around until it blended with the rest of the grime on the floor. The lye in the water ate at the skin on her hands almost as badly as the smell of the inn ate at her nose.

She dipped the foul-smelling mop into the fouler-smelling water and occupied herself with the thought of what she would do to Ren the next time she saw him. As she was scrubbing, humming a merry

accompaniment to her thoughts, a sudden hush fell over the room.

Startled out of her reverie, Aralorn looked up to see the cause of the unusual quiet. Against the grime and darkness of the inn, the brilliant clothing of the two men in court attire was more than a little incongruous.

Not nobles surely, but pages or messengers from the royal court. They were usually used to run messages from the court to a noble's estate. What they were doing at this little, pedestrian inn was anyone's guess.

Unobtrusively, Aralorn worked her way to a better observation post and watched the proceedings carefully.

One of the pages stayed near the door. The other walked to the center of the room. He spoke slowly so that his strange court accent wouldn't keep the northerners from understanding his message. It was obvious to Aralorn from his stilted style that the speech had been memorized.

"Greetings, people. We bring you tragic news. Two weeks ago Myr, your king, overset by the deaths of his parents, attacked and killed several of his own palace guard. Overwrought by what he had done, his majesty seized a horse and left the royal castle. Geoffrey ae'Magi has consented to the request by the Assembly to accept the regency of Reth until such time as King Myr is found and restored to his senses. The ae'Magi has asked that the people of Reth look for their king so that a cure may be effected. As he is not right in his mind it may, regrettably, be necessary to restrain the king by force. As this is a crime punishable by death, the Regent has issued a pardon. If the king can be brought to the ae'Magi, there is every possibility that he can be cured. As loyal subjects, it is your duty to find Myr.

"It is understood that a journey to the royal castle will be a financial hardship, thus he will have just recompense for his service to his king. A thousand marks will be paid to the party that brings King Myr to the capitol. I have been authorized to repeat this message to the citizens of Reth by the Regent, Geoffrey ae'Magi." He repeated his message twice, word for word each time, then he bowed and left the inn with his companion.

"So," thought Aralorn, "the day isn't such a loss after all."

Wandering between tables, she caught bits and pieces of conversation and found that everyone thought that the ae'Magi had done them a great service by taking the throne. They didn't all agree on what ought to be done for the king. One man said that everything should be done to see that Myr was captured and taken to be cured. He was answered by agreeable muttering from his table.

Olin, the tanner from Torin, stood up, more than slightly drunk and spoke loudly. "Anyone who cares about Reth should kill Myr and ask for Geoffrey ae'Magi to take the kingship of us. Who needs a king what is going to attack his own folk out of the blue like that? Just think what'd be like havin' the Sorcerer for a king. We'd not worry 'bout those Darranians who're claiming our mines over in the east." He paused to belch. "N with the most powerful magician in the world, we could even drive those Uriah spooks outta the wilds. Then we could be rich again."

Not to mention that a thousand marks was more than a man earned in a lifetime of farming or mining, thought Aralorn. The tanner's speech wasn't odd, but Aralorn was surprised how it was received. The patrons of the inn shifted uncomfortably, and chose another topic to speak on; but they didn't disagree with what he'd said. The whole nation had adored their young king, who was promising both as a warrior and a statesman. Two years ago Olin's words would have gotten him into a rough argument or even a fight.

Moving unobtrusively. Aralorn took the slop bucket outside to dump it. That done, she walked to the

stables where Sheen was.

She received a lot of harassment from Ren when she took the warhorse with her on assignments because he was too valuable to go unremarked. Talor carried an old coin for luck when he went into battle: it must be much more convenient than a horse.

She did what she could to disguise his worth. He'd long ago learned to limp on command, which helped somewhat. She also left him ungroomed, but anyone with an eye for horses could see that he was no farmer's plug.

Here at the inn, she'd let it be known that he was the only legacy left to her when her elderly protector died. The innkeeper didn't ask her too many questions—just retained the better part of her weekly salary in payment for boarding the horse.

Aralorn scuffed her foot lightly in the dirt as she leaned against the stall door. Sheen moved over to her and shoved his head against her shoulder. Obliging she rubbed his jaw.

"It's got to be the ae'Magi's doing, Sheen. The last time I saw Myr he was hardly distraught enough to go berserk. I think that it is too convenient that the Assembly decided to place the ae'Magi as Regent, don't you?" The stallion whickered softly, as if in response. Aralorn laughed at his timing and gave him the carrot she'd taken before it would have gone to its death in the greasy pot of stew.

She tangled her hand in the coarse grey-black mane and listened to the munching sounds he made and continued with some enthusiasm. "I could go to Ren with this, but given his present attitude toward the ae'Magi, I don't, know what he would do. Myr needs to be protected from the ae'Magi. Since Myr is the king and immune to magic, he's the ideal hero to stand against the ae'Magi. Someone has to stand against him, and people would hardly follow a mercenary from Sianim.

"I only wish I had some way of contacting Wolf. Knowing him, he probably could tell us exactly where Myr went. It could take me quite a while to find him; I'm not nearly good enough with magic to locate anyone, let alone someone immune to magic." She paused and then smiled. "But I would be much better occupied looking for Myr than struggling with the futile battle to clean the floor of the inn."

Finished with the carrot, Sheen bumped her impatiently, asking for more rubbing. "Well, Sheen, what do you say? Should we abandon our post and go missing-monarch hunting?" The grey head moved enthusiastically against her hand when she caught a particularly itchy spot. Aralorn laughed softly: it looked for all the world as if he were nodding his head in agreement.

When Aralorn decided to move, she moved fast. She snuck into the kitchen and blessed her luck because no one was there. She located a large cloth that was almost clean and folded it to hold such provisions as would keep on a journey: bread, cheese, dried salt meat.

Cautiously she made her way upstairs without meeting anyone and crept into the room that had belonged to the only son of the innkeeper. He'd died last winter of some disease or the other and no one had yet had the heart to clean out his room. She murmured a soft explanation of what she was doing and why in case his unquiet spirit lingered nearby.

She took a pair of leather trousers and a tunic, neither of which were remarkable in any way. She found also a pair of sturdy riding boots and a set of riding gloves. Searching through a chest by the foot of the bed, she discovered a worn cloak, which she wrapped her loot in.

In her attic room she retrieved her sword from its hiding place inside the straw mattress (she generally slept on the floor, it being less likely to be infested by miscellaneous vermin). Before sliding the sheath

onto her belt, she drew the sword and ran a finger over its smooth, curiously colored surface. It was a sword she'd found hidden in one of the many cubbyholes of her father's castle—the pinkish-gold luster of the metal had intrigued her. Aside from Sheen, it was the only thing she'd taken from her home when she left. She wasn't that good with the plaguing thing, having found it most useful against beasts like the Uriah, creatures too big to be killed quickly with a dagger and not easily downed with a staff. She'd only brought it because she didn't know if she would be returning to Sianim.

She gratefully rid herself of the maidservant's dress and dropped it on the floor. She removed the knives from their position on her thighs and rethreaded the sheaths onto her borrowed belt. She donned the stolen garments and found that, as she expected, they were very tight in the hips and chest and ridiculously big everywhere else.

Most shapeshifters could switch their sex as easily as most people changed shoes, but she had never been able to take on a male's shape, perhaps because of her human blood. Fortunately, the boy whose clothes she'd appropriated had been slender, so that it was an easy thing to create a tall, angular, androgynously female body that could pass as a man's.

Once dressed she appeared to be a young man neither rich nor poor, who wouldn't look out of place on a sturdy draft horse. Most of the items in the room she left behind, though she was careful to take the copper pieces that she'd earned as well as the small amount of coins that she always kept with her as an emergency fund.

Quietly she shut the door to her room and made sure that the bundle that she was carrying wasn't awkward-looking. As she made her way down the stairs she was met by the other barmaid. Aralorn gave the woman a healthy grin and swept past her unchallenged.

In the stable Aralorn quickly saddled Sheen. The cloak and the food she packed into her copious saddlebags. She filled an empty sack that was lying nearby with grain and tied it onto the saddle. From one of the saddlebags she took out a small jar of white paste. Carefully, she painted the horse's shoulders with white patches such as a heavy work collar tends to leave with time. No farmer's plug, but he could well pass for a squire's prize draft horse.

On the road she hesitated before turning north toward Kestral. That was the direction that the messengers had been traveling. In the guise of a young farmer she could question them, as a servant would not. A better reason for looking north was that the northern mountains were the best place for someone seeking to hide from a human magician. For some reason, human magic didn't work as well in the Northland mountains as it did other places. There were stories of places where human magic wouldn't function at all. Users of green magic, on the other hand, found that magic was easier to work in the North—most of the remnants of the shapeshifters lived in northern Reth and the Northlands.

As Myr was from Reth, Aralorn felt that it was safe to assume that he was aware of the partial protection that the Northlands offered. There were very few other places as easily accessible that offered any protection from the ae'Magi. Unfortunately, the ae'Magi would also be aware that the Northlands were the most likely place for Myr to go; hence the messengers.

Although it was still late summer the air was brisk with the chill winds of the Northlands. The winds retained their bite this far north year-round, making Aralorn grateful for the soft leather gloves and warm cloak.

Several miles down the road she turned off to take a trail me highwayman had once described. The shortcut traversed the mountain rather than wandering around its base. With luck and the powerful animal under her, she could cut more than an hour off her travel time. Sheen snorted and willingly took on the

climb, his powerful hindquarters pushing his bulk up the treacherously steep grade. His weight and large hooves worked against him on the angular, rocky ground; and Aralorn held him to a slow trot which left Sheen snorting and tossing his head in impatience.

“Easy now, sweetheart. What’s your hurry? We may have a long way to go yet this evening. Save it for later.” One ear twitched back and he settled into stride, only occasionally breaking gait to hop over an obstacle in his way.

As evening wore on, the light began to fade; and Aralorn slowed him further into a walk as he began to stumble over rocks and brush made invisible by the play of light and shadow. Being unable to see clearly around him made the seasoned campaigner nervous, and he began to snort and dance at every sound. A branch snapped loudly to the left of them, and before Aralorn could pull him up, Sheen plunged off the trail and into the trees.

“Just you behave, you old worrywart you. It’s all right. Nothing’s going to get us but ghosts and vampires and other nice things that feed on stupid people who ride in the woods after dark.” She patted him reassuringly, silting back to ask him to slow down. The dark mountainside was too treacherous to allow her to pull up on the reins at the pace he was going.

The horse calmed marginally at her soft voice, so she babbled on. Gradually he slowed and stopped, lowering his head to snatch a bit of grass as if he hadn’t been snorting and charging a minute before.

Aralorn stretched and looked around to catch her bearings. As she did so she heard something, a murmur that she just barely caught. Sheen’s ears twitched toward the sound as well, if he hadn’t heard it too, she’d have been tempted to put it to imagination. Following the direction of the stallion’s ears, she moved him toward the sound. When she could pick up the direction herself she dismounted and whispered a command that would keep the horse in place until she called.

She crept closer, moving as slowly as she could so as not to make any noise. Several yards from Sheen she picked up the smell of a campfire. If it hadn’t been for that, even with the sounds to guide her she would have missed it.

Against the side of the mountain, rendered almost invisible by a gigantic boulder that had rolled down the hill, was a cave. When Aralorn carefully peeked around the boulder she could see the reflection of firelight against the rock walls, but nothing more.

Mouse time again, she thought. The wonderful thing about mice was that they were everywhere and never looked out of place. She’d long ago perfected many different kinds of mice because of their usefulness, so that the medium-sized, northern-type mouse looked perfectly at home as she scampered into the entrance to the cave.

The adrenaline smell of fear hit her as she entered the cave. Two men stood by a large pile of goods that ranged from swords to flour, but consisted mainly of tarps and furs. The scent of fear drifted clearly to her rodent-sharp nose from the more massive (at least in bulk) man as he cowered away from the other. He wore ornate facial tattooing of the merchant’s guild of Hernal, a larger city of the country Ynstrah, which lay several weeks’ travel to the south. It was unlikely that the merchant had wandered that far, at least not in his nightshirt.

The second man was tall and slender, but something about the way he moved told her that this man had either been a dancer or fighter and was in very good shape. He wore a hooded cloak that flickered red and gold in the light. Underneath the hood of the cloak he wore a smoothly wrought silver mask in the shape of a stylized fate.

Traveling players used such masks when they acted out skits—allowing one player to take on many roles in a single play without confusion to the audience. Usually, though, these masks were made out of inexpensive materials like clay or wood.

Each mask's face wore a different expression denoting explicit emotions. As a Rethian noblewoman, Aralorn had spent many a dreary hour memorizing the slight differences between concern and sympathy, weariness and suffering, and other such nonsense. She found it interesting that the mask's face displayed the curled lips and furrowed brow of rage.

In one hand the slender man held a staff made of some kind of very dark wood. On the lower end was the clawed foot of a bird of prey molded in brass; its outspread talons glowed softly orange in the darkness of the cave, as if it had been held in hot coals. The upper end of the staff was encrusted with crystals that lit the cave with their blue-white light.

The staff made it obvious that this man was a magician. If he had spirited the merchant and his goods from the south as she expected, then he was a sorcerer of no little power.

Hmm, she thought, maybe this mouse idea wasn't such a good one. Magicians have this strange way of finding mice that weren't really mice and not being very pleasant about it. Even as she thought about this, the magician turned with incredible speed. She didn't even have time to squeak before she was stuffed into a leather bag that smelled strongly of magic.

She tried once to shift back into her human shape, but as she'd expected she was unable to do so. Rather than panicking she relaxed and thought wryly that at least she wasn't bored anymore.

"How much, merchant?" the magician asked in Rethian. His voice was distorted with a strange accent—or maybe it was just the leather bag.

"Fourteen kiben." The merchant too spoke good Rethian but his voice was hoarse and trembling. Still, Aralorn noticed, the price he'd quoted was at least twice what the items were worth, unless there was something extremely valuable amongst them.

"Six, merchant." The magician's voice may have had an odd slur to it, but it was still effective in striking terror into the heart of the merchant. Aralorn had the feeling that it wouldn't take much to strike terror into this merchant's heart.

"Six, I accept," he squeaked. There was the sound of money changing hands, then a distinctive pop, which Aralorn thought either signaled the merchant or the magician and herself being removed to other places. There was a moment's pause and then a third person's voice spoke.

"Thank you, my friend. It worked as you said it would." The voice was reserved and of courtly accents. It was also young and belonged to Myr, sometime king of Reth.

"Hopefully our friend will not think to question all of the merchants in Hernal." There was something about the tone of the magician's voice that was familiar, but the accent kept throwing her.

"He wouldn't learn much even if he did. The merchant doesn't know where you brought him to."

The magician grunted. "He knows that it was in the North, because of the cold. He knows that it was in the mountains, because of the cave. That is more than we can afford to have the ae'Magi know."

Myr gave no vocal reply, but he must have nodded, because when he spoke again it was on a different topic. "What was that you grabbed off the floor?"

“Ah yes, that. Just a ... spy. Small but effective nonetheless.” Was that amusement she picked up in his tone?

The bag was opened and she found herself hanging by her tail for the perusal of the two men. She twisted around and bit the hand that held her, hard. The magician laughed, but moved his hand so that she sat comfortably on his palm.

“My Lord, may I present to you the Lady Aralorn, sometime spy of Sianim.” She twisted about to look at him; just how had he known her name? It wasn't as if she were one of the famous generals that everyone knew. In fact, as a spy she'd worked pretty hard to keep her name out of the spotlight. Her mouse shape now shouldn't make matters any easier. Then, without the additional muffling of the bag, she recognized the voice. It was altered through the mask and a human throat, but she knew it anyway. No one else could have that particularly macabre timbre. It was Wolf.

“So.” Myr's voice was quiet. “Sianim spies on me now.” Aralorn turned her attention to Myr. In the short time since she'd seen him he'd aged years. He was thinner, his mouth held taut and his eyes belonged to the harsh old warrior who had been his grandfather. Instead of state robes he wore clothing that a rough trapper or a traveling merchant might wear, patched here and there with neat stitches.

Aralorn jumped nimbly off her perch and resumed her normal shape, which was not one that he would recognize. Magic was used to change her form, but unlike human magic, shapeshifters didn't need magic to keep that shape, so that even someone immune to magic would see only the form that a shapeshifter wore. When he'd seen her at the magician's castle, she'd been a pretty blonde designed to catch the ae'Magi's eye.

“No, my Lord,” she answered. “Or at least not me. Sianim has spies on everyone. In fact, this is a rather fortunate meeting; I was looking for you to tell you that the ae'Magi's messengers have reported your lit of madness to all the nearby townfolk.” She spoke slowly and formally to give him a chance to adjust to her altered state.

Rethians were not less prejudiced against werefolk, just more likely to admit their existence. Since the shapeshifter tribes lived in the northern mountains of Reth and paid tribute yearly to the king of Reth in the form of finely woven tapestries and carefully crafted tools delivered in the night by unseen persons, the Rethians had a tougher time dismissing them as hearsay.

Folk tales warned villagers to stay out of the forests at night, or they would be fodder of the shapeshifters. Given the antagonism that the shapeshifters felt toward invading humans, Aralorn was afraid that the stories might not have it all wrong. The royal family tended not to be as wary, probably the result of the yearly tribute.

Myr glanced at the magician, who nodded his head and spoke. “Whether she was spying on you or not I cannot say. That she means you no harm, I will vouch for.” The slurred quality was not a product of the muffling of the pouch, after all, maybe it was the mask.

“She is something of a scholar, and I need someone to help me in my research. If she is not occupied with other things, it would do no harm to bring her to camp with us. She can fight, and Temris himself knows that we have need of fighters. Also, she stands in danger from the ae'Magi if he should discover who it was that spied on him.”

“You spied on the Magician?” Myr raised an eyebrow at her.

Aralorn nodded, “It wasn't my favorite assignment, but definitely one of the more interesting.” She let her face shift quickly to the one he'd seen in the ae'Magi's castle and then went back to normal.

Myr smiled. “Yes, I see. Welcome then, Lady. I invite you to join our small camp.” Myr gave a short bow of his head, which she appreciated as exactly the correct height for a male sovereign to give in polite invitation or acceptance to a female who was neither his subject nor fellow royalty.

She in her turn, dressed in the dead son of the innkeeper’s clothes, gave him the exact curtsy she would have given him as her father’s daughter. Rethian nobility overdid manners, so she knew he’d catch the subtle difference.

He did. “Who are you?”

She gave him an apologetic smile as she pulled at the uncomfortably tight front of the tunic. “Lady Aralorn of Lambshold.”

“One of Henrick’s daughters.” Myr’s voice carried a hint of incredulity.

Aralorn nodded, smiling apologetically. “I know, I don’t look much like him, do I? He didn’t think so either. I was quite a disappointment to him.” She rolled up the sleeves until she could see her hands again.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” said Myr. “I’ve seen you in court—a long time ago. You’re his oldest child?”

She laughed, “No, oldest daughter, but I have a brother a year older than I am. We two are the illegitimate get of youthful folly. My older brother’s mother was a household maid and my mother was a shapeshifter who seduced poor father in the nearby woods. With fourteen of us I can see where you could have trouble keeping us straight. My siblings are all copies of their father, rather unfortunate for my sisters, but my brothers are all considered handsome.”

She startled a laugh out of Myr at her description of her family. He’d met several of her sisters as well. They were all quite beautiful, golden like their father: like their father they overtopped most men by a good handspan. “How did you end up with Sianim?”

She tilted her head, thinking about how to best frame a reply. “I am too much my father’s daughter to be content with sewing a dress or Seaming how to converse. He taught me swordplay with my brothers because I asked him. When it came time for me to go to court it was obvious to both him and me that as a Lady I was hopeless. He gave me his own horse, armed me, and sent me on my way.” As she talked, she worked at rolling up her pant legs. Finally she cut the bottom off with her dagger.

“Somehow that sounds like the Lyon of Lambshold. He’s the only man I know who is unconventional enough to do that.” Myr shook his head.

Straightening up to her unimpressive height, Aralorn continued with a grin. “He said, if memory serves, that if no one had the nerve to laugh in his face when he was addressed as the ‘Lyon of Lambshold’ no one would say anything about an absent daughter.”

“If you are through talking, it might be best if we left for camp.” The harsh voice was distracted, and Wolf’s eyes focused on some distant point.

“Someone coming?” Myr changed in an instant from courtier to warrior.

Wolf grunted and then said, “Not here, but near enough that we ought to move out.”

Aralorn left them to their packing and ducked through the trees to grab her horse. As she checked the girth she muttered to Sheen, “I wonder what mischief our friend, Wolf, has been up to; and for what purpose.”

Four

When Aralorn awoke it was still dark. She slipped out through the tent opening, moving quietly to avoid disturbing the two women who had shared their quarters with her. She reined the crude flap so the cold early morning air would stay outside.

Most of the tents in the camp were makeshift. Several were little more than a rug stretched over a stick or rope in true field-soldier style. The only tent in the camp worthy of the name belonged to Myr, who shared it uncomplainingly with a number of the smaller children.

As she passed Myr's tent, near the firepit, she gave the dragon embroidered on the side a respectful nod, but it glared balefully at her anyway. The flickering light of the fire gave the illusion of life to the green-gold eyes.

Also near the firepit was one of the few wooden structures in the camp. The kitchen was little more than a three-sided shed, but it kept the food dry. The camp cook was already up, chopping something by lantern light, but he stopped long enough to give Aralorn a look no more friendly than the dragon's had been. Aralorn grinned cheerfully at him and kept on her way.

The camp was located in a small dale, no bigger than the largest of the riding arenas in Sianim, and lay half a day's ride north of the Rethian border. It was long and narrow, with a stream in the middle that she suspected would cover a much larger area in the spring when the top layer of snow melted off the mountain peaks. As it was, the ground near the stream was marshy and made soft, slurping sounds when she walked over to take a drink and throw water on her face.

The tents were all in the eastern end of the valley near the only obvious trail down the steep, almost clifflike sides. Those sides, heavily covered with brush on the top, were the strongest defense that the camp could have, rendering it almost invisible to anyone not already in the valley.

By the simple expedient of running a split-rail fence across the valley the narrow way, the western end had been turned into a pasture for most of the livestock—two goats, four donkeys, several horses and a scrawny cow. It was toward this part of the valley that Aralorn headed.

Knowing how well Wolf liked people, she thought that he would be as far from the tents as he could—although she couldn't see him anywhere in the dale. As she neared the pasture she was welcomed with a soft whinny. Sheen, only slightly inconvenienced by the soft leather hobble that bound his front legs, bounced up to her to get his nose rubbed. She'd hobbled him outside the pasture so that the owners of the two mares didn't end up with unwanted foals. He followed her for a while before wandering off to forage.

It took her a little time to find the faint trail running up the steep slope near the fence. The terrain was rough and treacherous with loose stones, and she thought ruefully that a person would have to be part mountain goat to try this very often—or part wolf.

Grabbing a ragged piece of brush, she pulled herself up a particularly steep area and found herself unexpectedly in a hollow that hadn't been visible from below. A small, smokeless fire burned near a bedroll. The rather large, Sank Wolf turned amber eyes to her and swayed its tail in casual welcome.

Since he wasn't using it, she seated herself on the bedroll and rested her chin on her raised knees. Casually she threw a few more sticks into the fire, leaving it for him to break the silence. Typically he explained nothing, but questioned her instead.

"Tell me about the camp." His voice was mildly curious.

“Why? You’ve been here much longer than I have.”

He shook his head. “I just want to know what you see—how much I need to explain to you.”

“Well,” she began, “there has been *ft* camp here for several months, probably starting this spring. Originally the person or people who started it didn’t know much about camping in the woods, so I’d guess that they weren’t locals. It looks like someone is in the process of reorganizing camp. If I were a gamester, I would place gold that Myr is the reorganizer.” She looked to the Wolf for confirmation.

Wolf nodded and Aralorn continued to speak.

“From what I can tell, most of these people came with not much more than the clothes on their backs. There are what, maybe fifty people here?”

“Fifty-four with you,” Wolf replied.

“Then over a third of them are children. There is no common class amongst them. I’ve seen peasants, townfolk, and several aristocrats. The children are, as far as I’ve seen, without family. They are almost all Rethian.” Aralorn lay back and made herself comfortable. “They have all the earmarks of refugees, and I’d lay my last gold that they are running from the ae’Magi.”

Wolf grunted an affirmative.

“How did they all get here, though? I could see northerners finding this valley, but I heard southern Reth accents too.”

“You, of all people, should know the reputation of the northern mountains,” replied Wolf.

Aralorn thought about what she had heard about the Northlands. “You mean the stories about how human magic doesn’t work? I thought that was nonsense. I saw you transport the merchant, and my understanding is that teleportation is a mage-level spell.”

Wolf shook his head. “I wouldn’t have tried it this far north even if we weren’t worried about the ae’Magi finding the valley. Small spells seem unhampered, but more delicate spells seem harder to work. Some people it affects more than others—the ae’Magi won’t travel into northern Reth. *Ft* doesn’t seem to have much effect on my magic”—he nodded at the fire, which flared up, dancing wildly with purple and gold flames—“but I wouldn’t have bet even the merchant’s life on it; so we traveled south. The effect seems to be highly localized, so we didn’t have to travel very far.”

“The stories about that aspect of the Northlands are common enough, even in southern Reth. I suppose that this area would be a good place to run to if you were trying to hide from a human magician,” commented Aralorn.

“I ...” He hesitated a minute and Aralorn got the distinct feeling that he changed what he was going to say. “I located this valley as a possible refuge, although I never intended to set up a camp of this size here.”

He gazed with an air of bemusement over the camp. “I don’t know how these people found this valley in particular. You can ask, but everyone has a different story. It is unreasonable that fifty people, most of whom have never been a mile outside of their own front doors, would wander blithely into a hanging valley that would be hard for a forester or trapper to find.”

After a slight pause he continued. “As you speculated, they are all running from the ae’Magi, in a manner of speaking—the way that you would have been fleeing from Sianim if you had made a few more

negative comments about the ae'Magi. Most of them were driven from their villages by the townspeople.

“Except for Myr, everyone in camp can work a little magic. The adults didn't have enough ability to be trained as magicians and escaped the ae'Magi's control that way. The children are young enough that they were not yet sent for training.”

“The ae'Magi controls the trained magicians?” Aralorn was startled into silting up. “I know that he is the ae'Magi, but I thought that was like a guildmaster. You make it sound like it's more than that.”

“It is,” replied Wolf, his hoarse voice softened to keep it from carrying. “After the Wizard Wars, it was decided that the magicians could not be allowed to go without controls. I don't know exactly what the means of control are, but I do know that the control is real. The ae'Magi can stop a trained magician from using his magic, rendering them as vulnerable to the ae'Magi's spells as magicless people are.”

Aralorn turned until she faced him. “Why aren't you under his control?”

Wolf moved in a lupine version of a shrug. “I either broke the ties of the binding, or I wasn't in training long enough, I am not sure which.”

Aralorn and Wolf sat in silence, watching the camp stir in the valley below them. Aralorn stretched her feet out to the fire, which still flared uneasily, as if waiting for another command.

Watching the red play of flame reflected on her feet in the dim Sight, she ventured a question. “How long have you been helping Myr?” She noticed with self-directed amusement that her tone was disinterested, revealing none of the jealousy she felt. It had surprised her to feel resentful of Myr, but she had gotten used to being the only one to whom Wolf revealed himself. When she found out that not only was there someone else close to him, but that he knew things about Wolf she didn't, it bothered her.

Wolf spoke slowly, like one who was turning his thoughts into words for the first time, “I have been looking for a way to move against the ae'Magi for a long time. It came to my attention that Myr didn't hold the ae'Magi in the same esteem that most people do; apparently Myr is not susceptible to magic. I am still not sure what use he will be against the ae'Magi, but it seemed prudent to watch him. At first *I* did little more than observe, but after Myr's parents were killed, I introduced myself and offered my help. For the most part all that I did was offer advice and block a few spells laid to cause permanent accidents.”

“Accidents like a carriage overturning unexpectedly,” offered Aralorn.

Wolf nodded. “Or an archer's arrow going astray; things that immunity to magic does not shield against. I am not sure if I helped much in the end. The last attack that the ae'Magi set against Myr was more subtle. Did you hear what happened?”

Aralorn shook her head. “The first that I heard about it was back at the inn, when some messengers from the capital rode in and spouted nonsense. Myr was supposedly crazed with grief and attacked one of his own men.”

Wolf snorted with disgust. “Myr was in his personal courtyard in the palace when he was attacked by an elemental. They made enough noise that I went out to investigate. I think that Myr would have won even if I hadn't been there.” Wolf shrugged and continued. “When it was dead, the demon transformed into a more mundane creature—one of Myr's personal guards. We were still standing over the body when the better part of the castle guard ran into the courtyard. They attacked and we managed to flee. Here is where we've been ever since.”

“What now?” asked Aralorn, drawing pictures in the dirt near the blankets.

Wolf let out a sound that passed as a laugh. “Now, Myr is trying desperately to prepare this camp for winter and I am trying to find a way that I can move against the ae’Magi.” He paused and then said in a tone that reeked of frustration, “It’s not that I don’t have the power. It is the training I lack. Most of what little I do know I’ve learned myself, and it’s not enough. If I could find just one of the old magicians not under his spell I could find something to use against him—instead I have to wade through piles of books that may be utterly useless.”

“I will help with the books,” offered Aralorn, “if they’re in a language I know.”

“I had intended that you should. If I have to read through the dusty old relics, you might as well suffer too.” He was teasing her, knowing that she would devour every time-scarred tome with a zealot’s passion. “How many languages do you read? I’ve heard you speak three or four.”

Aralorn thought for a minute. “Including dialects? Ten, maybe twelve. Sometimes I can pick out the essentials in a related language.” She grinned at him, “Father was a fanatic on it. He got caught in a battle one time trying to negotiate a surrender—someone else’s—and the only person who spoke both languages had been killed. When I started collecting stories I Seamed a lot of others. Anything very old, though, will be in the ancients’ tongue. I can pick my way through that but I’m not fluent.”

He gave her a wolfish laugh. “And they always said that collecting folk tales was a useless hobby.” He continued more seriously. “I’m short on time, and we can get through more material than I can alone. If I even had the name of a magician with a spell that could stop him, I could save time. I have a library near here, and if you can go through the secular books it would leave me free to work with the grimoires.”

Aralorn made a point of looking around at the mountain wilderness that surrounded them. “You have a library nearby?” she questioned in a falsely bright voice.

“Yes,” he replied succinctly.

“Yes,” she repeated. “You are aware that if it were anyone but you telling me this, I might not believe them.”

Gravely he met her eyes. If she hadn’t known him as well as she did, she might not have seen the faint humor in the amber depths.

Faintly from the valley rose the sound of a metal spoon hitting a cooking pot—the time-honored call to meal.

Wolf rolled lithely to his paws, changing almost as he moved into the tall, masked figure that was his human form. Courteously, he extended a hand to help her to her feet.

Aralorn accepted the hand a little warily, finding that Wolf in his human form was somewhat more intimidating than the wolf was. As a human he maintained the grace that he had as a wolf. She watched enviously the easy way he negotiated the slope that she scrambled and slid down.

A stray thought caught her as she struggled down the slope. At the bottom she caught his arm to stop him when he would have set out for the camp.

“Wolf, I think that I may have caused a problem for you.” Anxiously she bit her lip.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“During the ball at the Magician’s castle the night I left, Myr saw me in the cage where he should have seen only a bird. The ae’Magi saw him talking to me and questioned me about it. I told him that I’d seen a magician help Myr break the illusion spelt, hoping to keep Myr’s immunity to magic from the ae’Magi.” She kept her eye on the contrast her hand made against the black silk of his sleeve: it was hard to remember that the masked figure was Wolf. “What I didn’t know was that Myr *did* have a magician aiding him. Did I cause you any problems?”

He stood silently for a minute before he said, “I don’t think so. That was probably why he went from straying arrows to sending elementals—the timing is about right. But since we survived it, there was no harm done.”

* * *

Myr was up and arranging breakfast with a dexterity that Aralorn found fascinating to watch. She let herself be organized with a bowl of cooked grain that made up in amount what it lacked in flavor. After the food she’d eaten at the inn, she felt no inclination to complain. Wolf neither ate nor removed the mask, a situation that seemed an established pattern, since no one commented on it.

As she ate, Aralorn took the time to observe the people. The introductions she’d received the night before had been needfully brief, and many of the people had been asleep. She could only place the names to a few of the faces.

The sour-faced cook was a smith from a province in southern Reth. A large snake tattoo wrapped itself around one massive forearm, disappearing into his sleeve. She noticed that for all his gruffness, his voice softened remarkably when he was talking with the children. His name was Haris.

Edom sat a little apart from the rest. He had the dark, straight hair and sallow skin typical of parts of western Reth, the legacy of interbreeding with the dark Darranians. His hands were the soft, well-cared-for hands of an aristocrat. He was an oddity in the camp. Too old to be a child, yet younger than till the adults. He was a recent arrival and still looked as if he felt a little out of place.

All but two of the children had been sleeping when she’d arrived at the valley. Those two were now seated as close to Myr as they could get. Stanis had the red hair and freckles of the Southern Traders and the flamboyant personality to go with it. The second boy, Tobin, was a quiet shadow of his friend. Stanis tugged impatiently at Myr’s shin until he had the young king’s attention. Then he settled back on his knees and started talking with grand gestures of his arms that looked a little odd on a boy of ten or eleven summers.

Aralorn was just about to look away when she saw Myr’s expression sharpen with alert interest. He looked around for Wolf and waved him over. Aralorn followed.

“Stanis, tell Wolf what you just told me.”

Stanis hesitated for a moment, but the enjoyment of being the object of attention manifestly won out over any shyness that he felt around the intimidating magician.

“Well, yesterday afternoon when it was time to eat lunch, nobody could find Astrid. Me and Tobin thought that she might have been playing up near the old caves. So we all went up there to see if she still was. Edom was too scart to go in but I wasn’t. We looked for hours and hours. Then when we all got back out together she was waiting with Edom.

“She said that she met a nice man who knew her name and took her out of the caves. Edom says that he didn’t see no one with her when she came out. And Haris said that he thinks that she wandered into the

month of one of the caves and fell asleep and dreamed about the man. But I think that she met a *shapeshifter* and Tobin does too, only he thinks that it could have been a *ghost* too.”

Aralorn suppressed a smile at the boy’s delivery—he’d gotten most of that oat in one breath.

“What do think, Wolf? Astrid doesn’t tell stories, for all that she’s but a child. Who do you think she saw?” Myr’s tone was quiet, but it was evident that the thought of someone living in the caves (wherever they were) bothered him.

Wolf thought for a moment. “It’s entirely possible that she did meet someone. Those caves interconnect with cave systems that run throughout the mountain chain. I have seen many strange things in these mountains and heard stories of more. I know for a fact that there are shapeshifters in this area.” He didn’t even look at Aralorn as he said that. “I’ve never seen anyone in there, but if a shapeshifter doesn’t want to be seen, he usually isn’t, I wouldn’t worry too much. From his actions it is apparent that he means us no harm.”

Myr relaxed a little, relying on the older man’s judgement. Stanis looked pleased with himself—Wolf had agreed with *him*.

* * *

after breakfast aralorn found herself cornered by Myr, and before she knew it she was agreeing to give lessons in swordsmanship. Myr divided the adults into four groups, to be taught by Aralorn, Myr, Wolf and a one-armed ex-guardsmen with an evil smile and the unlikely name of Pussywillow. The other three were all much better with a sword than Aralorn was, but luckily none of her students was good enough to realize how badly outclassed she was.

The first part of any low-level lesson was a drill in basic moves. Haris Smith-Turned-Cook handled the sword with the same strength and sureness that a good smith uses in swinging a hammer. He learned rapidly from a word or a touch. Edom had the normal flaws of adolescence—all elbows and awkwardness. The others were in the middle range. Given three or four years of steady sword work, they would be passable, maybe.

She fought her first bout with Haris, deciding to face the best fighter first—when she was fresh. It was a good idea. He might not have had much experience with a sword, but he had been in more than one dirty fight. If she’d had to rely on only her swordsmanship to fight him, she might have lost, but she’d been in a few dirty fights herself.

When she finally pinned him, Haris gave her the first genuine smile she’d seen on his face, “For a little bit of a thing, you fight pretty well.”

“For a hulking brute, you are not too bad yourself,” she said, letting him up. She turned to the observers. “And that is how you light on a battlefield. But not in a training session on swordsmanship. The sword got in his way more than it helped him. If he were fighting in a battle today, he’d be better off without his sword. That will not be true in a month, for any of you—I hope.”

The others were easier, so she lectured as she fought. By the time she was facing the last student, Edom, she was short on breath. Cleaning the inn had been good for keeping in shape, but a two-hour workout with a sword was enough to test her powers of endurance.

She opened with the same move that she’d used in all the other fights—a simple sidesweep that all the others had been able to meet. Edom fell, which should have shown him to be an utter idiot with a sword. She heard a few suppressed sniggers from the audience. But something about the fall struck her as a little

off; if he had fallen from the force of the blow he shouldn't have fallen quite as far as he had. She wasn't big enough to push him that distance without more leverage than a sidesweep allowed for.

She helped him up and handed him his sword. Grasping his wrist, she showed him the proper block and swung again. He met it that time, clumsily. She worked slowly with him at first, gradually speeding up. He progressed slowly, with nothing more odd than ineptness showing in his fighting.

She worked with him on three blocks, aiming different attacks at him and showing how each block could be used. She was getting tired, and made a mistake that a better swordsman would never have made. She used a complex swing, difficult to execute as well as counter, and misjudged it. Horrified, she waited for her sword to cut into his leg.

He blocked it.

He shouldn't have been able to, not at his level. She wasn't sure that she could have blocked it. She certainly couldn't have executed the combination that he used. She stepped back and met his eyes. Softly, so that no one but she could hear, he said, "Can I explain in private?"

She considered a minute and nodded. Turning back to the others she dismissed them, sending them to watch Myr, still fighting nearby.

Alone, Edom met her gaze. He shuffled a foot in the dirt. "You ..." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat and tried again. "You know that I'm not quite what I appear to be. I'm not even Rethian, I'm from Darran. I don't know if you know it, but Darran is under the ae'Magi's influence too, I didn't know what to do. I played along with it as long as I could and then I left." He shrugged. "I don't know why I came here; something ... drew me here, I guess. It seemed as good a place to go as any. I found the valley full of people like me, hiding from the ae'Magi, But they were all Rethians, Given current feelings between Darran and Reth, I could hardly tell them that I was a nobleborn Darranian.

"So I told them that I was the son of a Rethian merchant. I thought that it was a good idea. I speak Rethian with a faint enough accent that I could pass for any number of western provinces, and it explained the richness of my clothes.

"Then Myr came and started this swordsmanship training, Where would a merchant's son get trained in Darranian-style swordsmanship? So I faked it."

Aralorn found herself grinning despite herself. "Quite a problem, I agree. What I would do is tell the truth to Myr; he's not as prejudiced as most Rethians are. Let him figure out a way to let you explain your sudden ability." She waved a hand in the vague direction of the rest of the camp, "With the lack of trained fighters here, Myr can't afford to waste your abilities."

Edom smiled then, looking slightly relieved. "I'll do that now. It would be nice to be useful, instead of sitting on the sidelines all the time." He gave her a brief bow and then ran off to where Myr was fighting.

Aralorn smiled and stretched wearily. Tired as she was, it had felt good to work out with a sword rather than a mop—if it was almost as good as playing at staff.

The exercise had made her hoi and itchy, so she wandered over to the creek. It took her a while, but she found a place deep enough to wash in with a large, flat rock that she could kneel on and avoid the worst of the mud. She ducked her head under the water, its icy temperature welcome on her overheated skin.

As she was coming up for air she heard a newly familiar voice say, "See, I told'ya she had a funny-looking sword. Look, the handle's made out of metal."

Aralorn took her time wiping her face on her sleeve and smoothing her dripping hair away from her face. Stan is and his silent but grinning companion, Tobin, stood observing her. She hid a smile when she recognized Stanis's solemn-faced, feet-apart, hands-behind-his-back pose. Myr did that when he was thinking.

"Have you killed anyone'?" Stanis's voice was filled with gruesome interest.

She nodded, rolling up the long sleeves of the innkeeper's son's tunic.

"You're not supposed to fight with swords that don't have wooden handles." The silent Tobin at last had spoken.

"Yeah," said Stanis. "If you kill a magician, his magic will kill you."

She nodded again. "I only wound magicians with my sword. When I kill magicians, I always use my knife."

"Oh," said Tobin, apparently satisfied with her answer.

They were silent for a moment; then Stanis said, "Tobin wanted to know if you would tell us about killing someone."

Aralorn nodded and sat cross-legged on the grass, far enough away From the stream so that the ground was relatively dry. Far be it from her to give up the chance to tell stories.

That was where Wolf found her. Her audience had grown to include most of the camp. He walked quietly closer until he could hear what she was saying.

"... so we snuck past the dragon's nose a second time. We had to be careful to avoid the puddles of poison that dripped from the old beast's fangs as it slept.

"Dragons' cars are very acute—so acute that we all were holding our breath when we neared it. We would have made it if Wikker hadn't dropped one of the bejeweled, golden goblets. He dropped it right on the fiend's glistening muzzle"

"What happened'?" asked a hushed voice from the crowd.

Aralorn smiled mysteriously and said, "It ate us, of course."

There was a short silence, then a sheepish laugh as they realized that she'd been telling them a tall tale from the beginning. Wolf was close enough to hear Stanis's disgruntled, "*That's* not how it should have ended. You're supposed to kill the dragon."

Aralorn laughed and ruffled the boy's hair. "There is another ending to the story. I'll tell you it later. Now, though, I think that I hear someone calling us for lunch."

* * *

after lunch the wolf touched aralorn on the shoulder and motioned for her to follow him. They slipped quietly out of camp and scaled one side of the valley. Once on the top they followed a faint trail through the trees that led to a cliff honeycombed with caves.

Wolf chose one of the dark entrances and lit the way through the tunnels with his staff. Aralorn hadn't noticed that he was carrying the staff while they were walking, but she supposed that it was just part of being a mysterious mage.

“Wolf, these caves would make a much better winter shelter than the tents. Why aren’t you using them?”

Wolf motioned her to a small branch and halted her with one hand on her arm. He tilted the staff slightly, until she realized that directly in front of them was a dark hole. “I don’t know how far down that one goes, but there are some holes that seem almost bottomless. If there were no children, you might risk it, but it’s too difficult to keep them from wandering. We are storing a lot of the supplies in a few caves near the surface, and I drew up a map for Myr of a section that is pretty isolated from the main cave system. If it becomes necessary to move the camp into the caves, we can. But it is safer in the valley.”

Aralorn looked at the blackness in front of them and nodded. She also stayed close to Wolf the rest of the way through the caves.

They came to a large chamber that he illuminated with a flick of a hand. The chamber was easily as spacious as the great hall in the ae’Magi’s castle. Carved into all the walls were shelves covered with hooks. Wooden bookcases were packed tightly with more books and stacked in rows with only a narrow walkway between them. Here and there were careful slacks of volumes waiting to find a place on the crowded shelves.

Aralorn whistled softly. “I thought that Ren’s library was impressive. We’re going to read all of these?”

Wolf shrugged. “Unless we find something before we have to read them all.” As he spoke he led her through one of the narrow pathways between bookcases to an open area occupied by a flat table that held an assortment of quills, ink and paper, On either side of the table were small padded benches.

Aralorn looked around and asked, “Where do you want me to start?”

“Anywhere. Normally, I know, you can tell if something is magic, but for your safety let me look at the books before you open them. There are spells to disguise the presence of magic, and some of the grimoires are set—with traps for the unwary. I’d prefer not to spend valuable time trying to resurrect you,” he said.

“*Can* you resurrect people?” She kept her voice mildly curious, though she’d never heard of such a thing actually happening.

“Let’s not find out,” was his reply.

“So, what do I look for, I mean other than a book titled. *Twenty-five Foolproof Ways to Destroy a Powerful Evil Magician*?”

He gave a short laugh before he answered. “Look for a name of a mage who fought another magician. If I have a name I

might be able to find his grimoire. You also might note down any object that could be of use. Although magical items are notoriously hard to find—even if they’re not the creation of some bard’s overactive imagination—and we don’t have the leisure time to go on a quest.”

Aralorn inspected one shell’, pulled out a book at random and took it to the table. She ran her fingers lightly over the metallic binding of the book. Originally it had been silver but it had tarnished to a dull black. She could read the title only because she once coaxed Ren into teaching her the words inscribed on the old wall mosaics in some of the older places in Sianim. Reluctantly she put it away without opening it, knowing that it wouldn’t have anything of use. The people who used that language had disliked magic to such an extent that they burned the practitioners of it. They had been a trading people, and merchants in general were not overly fond of magicians. She thought about the chubby merchant she’d seen in

another cave and smiled; maybe merchants had reason to dislike magicians.

It took several more tries before she found a book that suited her and passed Wolf's inspection. This one was about three hundred years old and told the history of a tribe of tinkers that used to roam the lands in great numbers. They were scarcer now and tended to keep to themselves. Whoever wrote the book she was reading still believed in the powers of the old gods, and he intermixed history and myth with a cynicism that she thoroughly enjoyed. Taking a piece of blank paper, she kept careful note of anything that might be potentially useful.

Her favorite was the story of the jealous chieftain whose wife was unfaithful. Frustrated, he visited the local magician, who gave him a large bronze statue of the demigod Kinez, the faithful. When his wife kissed a man in its presence it would come to life and kill the unlucky suitor. The chieftain had the statue placed in his wife's wagon, and after several of her favorites died she sinned no more, or at least found another place to sin.

She got her revenge, though. At last satisfied that his wife would be faithful, he entered her wagon and started making love with her. Unfortunately he forgot to remove the statue first. She became chieftain and ruled for many prosperous years.

* * *

wolf often wondered why it was that magicians had such wretched handwriting. The fine motor skills prerequisite to spellcasting should be reflected in decent writing: his own was very nearly flawless. He painstakingly cross-checked the word he was trying to decipher with several others to compare the letters. As he was writing the actual word neatly in the space above the original, he heard Aralorn laugh softly.

Safe behind the mask, he smiled at the picture she made with her quill scratching frantically along the paper. Her handwriting wasn't any better than what he'd just been attempting to read. The hand moving the quill was calloused and ink-spattered. Ink also resided in blotchy patterns across her face where she'd pushed back her hair. Reluctantly he returned to his reading.

* * *

aralorn finished her book and replaced the slender volume on its shelf. When she found another likely-looking candidate. Wolf was deeply engrossed in his grimoire, so she sat to wait.

"Wolf," she said suddenly, startled by a strange thought.

He held up a hand to ask her to wait while he finished, which she did with some impatience. Finally he looked up.

"What is the difference between human and green magic? I have always thought that it was that human mages draw the magic from themselves, while green magic users draw power from the outside world, but didn't you *say* that the ae'Magi had found a way to link to outside power?"

In typical Wolf fashion he started his answer with a question. "How much training have you had in magic?"

She grinned at him. "Not much. You human mages are not especially open to sharing knowledge even amongst yourselves, and the shapeshifters are not exactly fascinated by intellectual pursuits. The only thing I know about magic is how to use it, and in that I'm by no means an expert. I spent enough time with my mother's people to learn how to shapeshift and a few minor magics."

He grunted in acknowledgement and then paused to choose his words. “The difference between human and green magic is generally explained the way you explained it to me, but as Ren would say, generalizations have a habit of ignoring much of the truth.

“The ancients said that magic existed in a secret pool in the castle of the goddess of nature, and she used this magic to make the seasons change and the grass grow. One day a clever man found a way to steal some water out of the pond without the goddess knowing about it. He was the first human magician.

“Based on that story, you might picture magic as a pool of raw, unshaped power that gradually seeps into the natural world to act as nature would have it—making the trees grow and the sun rise. My understanding of green magic is that it is the magic already harnessed by nature that the green magician can use. He alters, rather than creates; the magic makes the grass grow faster or slower, makes a wind blow stronger or not at all. The magic that he uses is nature’s magic already shaped. It is safer and perhaps easier to use, but it is not as flexible as the raw stuff.

“Human magic works in this manner, at least for most magicians. First, the human magician must tap into our magical pool. It is like drinking through a straw—when one runs out of breath, the liquid stops flowing. The magician then takes this raw power he has gathered and uses it to form a spell or pattern that he shapes himself. The more magic the magician can pull, the stronger he is, but he needs to know the patterns to shape the magic into.

“If he cannot shape the magic, he must release it as raw power. Raw magic let loose in the world will take the form of fire and burn itself out: fortunately few magicians can call enough power that uncontrolled magic could do much more than start a campfire.

“For most magicians it is the gathering of magic that is the most difficult. Containing it and making it follow one’s will is generally a matter of memorizing a spell or two, although a large amount of raw magic is more difficult to shape than a smaller amount.

“The ae’Magi has developed a way to leach energy so that he can use it to hold open the magical channels longer than he otherwise could have. He has greatly increased the amount of power that he can capture at any one time, making him stronger than any wizard living.”

“You said that it works this way for most magicians, not for you?” asked Aralorn.

“Quick, Lady, very quick.” His yellow eyes caught hers like a bird of prey. He seemed a stranger to her, hostile almost.

Aralorn set her chin and stubbornly refused to let herself feel threatened. “How does it work for you?” She rephrased her question.

Suddenly he relaxed and she had the feeling that if she could see behind his mask he would be smiling. “I forget sometimes how difficult it is to intimidate you. Very well then, yes, it is different for me.

“When I started working magic, it wasn’t obvious at first that I was different. It wasn’t until I started working the more powerful spells that the difference made itself felt. Most magicians are limited by the magic that they can draw into themselves; I am limited more by the amount of magic I can shape into a spell.

“I suspect that the ae’Magi, who was my teacher, knew long before I did, as I lacked anyone with whom to compare myself. The ae’Magi doesn’t take on many apprentices. When I was ten or eleven, the ae’Magi decided to try to use me to gather more power. He had me gather all the magic that I could so that he could use it.”

Wolf fell silent. Aralorn waited for a minute and then asked, “Something happened?”

Wolf made a sound that could have been a laugh. “Yes, something happened. Either the method that he was trying to use wasn’t successful or he wasn’t ready for the amount of power I drew, but before he could do anything I destroyed most of the tower that we were in. The stones were melted. I don’t know how he managed to keep us alive, but he did.

“It was three months before I could bring myself to collect enough magic to light a candle.” He paused for a minute, collecting his thoughts.

Aralorn waited patiently for him to continue or not, as it suited him. He had told her more about himself in the last five minutes than he’d told her in the four years she’d known him. If he chose to stop, she wasn’t going to push him.

In time he began again. “He began to experiment with drawing power from others. Not with me, because that first experiment had proved such a disaster. It was during these experiments that he found that with the aid of certain rituals—rituals forbidden even before the Wizard Wars—he could use the power of untrained magic-users, especially children. They don’t have the defenses that others do.” He stopped again, his golden eyes bleak.

“For a long time I helped him,” he continued finally, his sepulchral, emotionless voice making it sound as if he were telling the story about someone else, “even though I knew what he was. I used dark magic. I worked his will and gloried in the power and the madness of it. I knew what he was and hated him and myself, but it didn’t matter. He has a magnetism that binds as solidly as iron.”

His hands gripped the table until they were white-knuckled, giving the lie to his passionless voice. “I don’t know exactly when it was that I began questioning what we were doing.”

He released his grip on the table abruptly, and when he spoke again Aralorn thought he was changing the subject. “When I was young, the passages of the Magician’s castle fascinated me. I wandered through them for hours, sometimes. There are places in the passages that haven’t seen human hands for generations.

“About a year before I left the castle, I found an abandoned library; it fascinated me. Almost everything that I had read before I found the library were grimoires and the like. The books in the little room were of another ilk entirely. Someone had collected books about people—histories, biographies, myths and legends. I learned from what I read.” He hesitated. “What I learned made my current occupation ... distasteful. So I left. Departing the castle was easy enough; but changing what I am has proven to be much more difficult.”

She could tell by the stiffness of his body that he was hurting and decided to lighten the mood. “If you change into one of those zealots who give everything they have to the poor and go around all the time telling everyone else to do the same, I will feed you to the Uriah myself.”

She startled a reluctant laugh out of him and he shook his head in mock reproof. “*You* ought to watch what you say around me. I might forget that I have repented of my evil ways and turn you into something really nasty.”

Five

The next morning Myr decided that the camp needed improvement more than the refugees’ weapon skills did. So after breakfast, anyone who could ply a needle was sent to turning the yards of fabric, recently purchased from the accommodating merchant, into a tent. The design of the tent was Myr’s own, based

loosely on tents used by the northern trappers.

When the project was finished there would be three large tents that could house the population of the camp through the winter. The tents would be stretched over sturdy frames, designed to withstand the weight of the snow. The walls of the tent were sewn with a double wall; it could be stuffed with dry grass that would serve as insulation in the winter. A simple, ingenious flap system would make it possible to keep a fire inside the tent.

The rest of the camp was put to work building what Myr termed “the first priority of any good camp”—the lavatories. The risk of disease was very real in any winter camp, and any military man knew stories of regiments destroyed by plagues due to the lack of adequate waste facilities. Myr’s grandfather had been a fanatic on the subject. Myr, thought Aralorn with private amusement, was like his grandfather in more ways than one.

Aralorn searched futilely for Wolf and ran into Edom looking frustrated as he was trying to stop the tears of a little girl in a ragged purple dress.

“I want Mummy. She always knows how to fix it so her hat doesn’t come off.” Clutched in the child’s grubby hand was an equally grubby doll.

“Astrid, you know that your mum isn’t here and can’t help you,” said Edom impatiently.

“Hello, Astrid. May I see it?” Aralorn held out her hand. Astrid looked at the hand distrustfully for a minute before carefully placing the doll and its hat on Aralorn’s palm.

Years of being the oldest daughter of fourteen gave her the experience to twist the hat on at just the right angle so that it slipped firmly over the doll’s wooden head. Astrid took the doll in one hand and smeared her tear-wet cheeks with the other.

“Can you see if you can get all of your young ones over here?” asked Aralorn. Astrid nodded and ran off.

Turning to Edom, Aralorn said, “I take it that you are supposed to be keeping an eye on the children?”

Edom rolled his eyes. “Always.”

“I can relieve you for a while, if you like,” she offered. He nodded and took off with a grin. She wondered if he’d be as pleased when Myr cornered him for latrine duty.

She had the children sit in a semicircle around her. Before she began she looked at their faces to help her select a story. Her information source, Stanis, had told her that most of them hadn’t been there much over a month. None of them had any family at the camp and, judging by Astrid’s tears, they were all feeling lost.

She sat cross-legged and began a Rethian folk tale that most of them would be familiar with. “Once upon a time, when the old gods walked the earth and interested themselves with the affairs of men, there lived a smith in a small, isolated village. The smith was a craftsman of great skill and his name was known far and wide. Although he was a gentle man, he lived in a time of war and so spent most of his day shoeing the great warhorses of the nobility, mending their weapons, and creating and repairing their armor. These things he did so that he would have money to live, for food was scarce and dear. At night, in the privacy of the forge, he created works of marvelous grace and beauty to take his mind off the ugliness that war brings.

“It came to pass that Temris, the god of war, had broken a favorite sword in battle. He heard of the smith’s skill and so came to the village one night and knocked upon the smithy door.

“The smith had been working on a piece of singular beauty—a small, intricately wrought tree of silver, bearing upon each branch a single, golden fruit. Temris saw it and coveted it and, as was the custom of the gods when they wanted something from a mortal, demanded it.

“The smith, who had seen the devastation that war had caused those that he loved, refused, saying that he who was the creator of the ugliness of war could not demand the beauty of peace. The smith cast the statue to the ground, and such was the strength of his anger, he shattered it into a thousand thousand pieces.

“Temris was angered and he spoke then to the smith. ‘I say now, smith, that you will forge only three more pieces and these will be weapons of destruction such as the world has never seen.’” Aralorn let her voice drop dramatically and was rewarded by a gasp from someone in her audience.

“The smith was horrified, and for many days he sat alone in the forge, not daring to work for fear of Temris’s words. During this time he prayed to Mehan, the god of love, asking that he not be forced to build the instruments of another man’s destruction. It may be that his prayer was answered, for he was seized by a fit of energy that left all the village amazed. For three fortnights he labored, day and night, neither eating nor sleeping until his work was done.

“The weapons he created could only be used by humans, and would only harm those who preyed upon mankind. He built Nekris, the Flame, which was a lance made of a strange material: a red metal that shimmered like fire. It was Nekris that King Taris used to drive the sea monster back into the depths when it would have destroyed his city.

“The second weapon was the mace, Sothris, the Black. The weapon that, according to legend, was responsible for one of the nine deaths of Temris himself. It was used during the Wizard Wars to destroy some of the abominations created in the desperate final days.

“The last weapon was the sword, Ambris, called also the Golden Rose. There are no stories about Ambris. Some say that it was lost or that the gods hid it away for fear of the weapon. But I think that it was hidden until a time of great need when it will appear to slay a great monster.”

“Donkey warts!” exclaimed Stanis in approval. “Do you know any other stories? Ones about swords an’ gods an’ stuff? I like ’em with blood an’ fight’n, but Tobin says that it might scare the young’ uns.”

Aralorn grinned and started to reply, but noticed that Wolf was waiting nearby. “It looks like I’ll have to wait and tell you a story another time. I’ve got one about a boy, his dog and a monster named Taddy.” She organized a game of hide the stone and sent the children oil running.

“Did you ever realize how closely the traditional description of Ambris resembles your sword?” Wolf commented, walking toward her when the children were gone.

She laughed and shook her head, saying in mock seriousness, “Talar has a black mace, and there was a bronze ceremonial lance on the wall of the Red Lance Inn in Sianim. I guess we don’t have to worry about the ae’Magi. We’ll just take the Smith’s Weapons and destroy him.” Then she gave him a sheepish smile. “I will admit, though, that when I found it in the old weapons hall at Lambshold, one reason I took it with me was its resemblance to Ambris.”

She drew the sword and held it up for his inspection. It gleamed pinkish gold in the sunlight, but aside from the admittedly unusual color it was plain and unadorned. “It was probably made for a woman or a young boy; see how slender it is?” She turned the blade edgewise. “The color is probably the result of a smith mixing metals to make it strong enough not to break even if it is small enough for a woman. Even the metal handle isn’t unusual; before it was understood how common magic-users are there were many

swords made with a metal grip. It has only been in the last two hundred years that metal grips have become unusual.”

“There might be no magic in her, but ...”—Aralorn executed a few quick moves—“she’s light and well balanced and takes a good edge. Who can ask anything more than that? I don’t need a sword for anything else, so she suits my purposes. I don’t use a sword when a knife or staff will do, so I don’t have to worry about accidentally killing a magician.” She resheathed the sword with a final pat.

“I brought Edom back with me.” Wolf indicated the tall boy running with the smaller figures. “He was pleased to resume his duties.”

Aralorn grinned, “He decided it was better than digging trenches, I take it?”

Wolf nodded.

* * *

the route that they took to the library was different this time; Aralorn wasn’t sure whether it was deliberate or just habit. Wolf traversed the twisted passages without hesitating, ducking the cave formations as they appeared in the light from the crystals in his staff, but she had the feeling that if she weren’t there he wouldn’t need the light at all.

The library was as they had left it. Aralorn soon started skimming books, rather than reading them—but even so, the sheer volume of the library was daunting. Once or twice she found that the book that she arrived at the table with wasn’t the one that she thought she had picked up. The fourth time that it happened she was certain that it wasn’t just that she picked up a different book by mistake. The book that she had taken off the shelf was unwieldy; the one that she set in front of Wolf to check over was little more than a pamphlet.

Intrigued, she returned to the shelf where she’d gotten the book and found the massive tome she thought she’d had, sitting where she’d found it. She tapped it thoughtfully, and then smiled to herself—wizards’ libraries, it seemed, had a few idiosyncrasies.

Wolf had taken no notice of her odd actions, but set the thin, harmless book on her side of the table and returned to the unreadable scribbles of a mediocre and half-mad warlock who passed away into much-deserved obscurity several centuries before: safe from the curses of an untrained magician, however powerful.

Aralorn, returning to the table, listened to his muttering with interest. The mercenaries of Sianim were possessed of a wide variety of curses, mostly vulgar; but Wolf definitely had a creative touch.

Still smiling, Aralorn opened the little book and began reading. Like most of the books *she* chose, this one was a collection of tales. It was written in an old Rethian dialect that she didn’t find difficult to read. The first story was a version of the tale of the Smith’s Weapons that she hadn’t read before. Guiltily, because she knew that it wasn’t going to be of any help defeating the ae’Magi, she took quick notes of the differences before continuing to another story.

Whoever had written the volume had been an extraordinarily good storyteller. Aralorn quit skimming the stories and read them instead, noting down a particularly interesting turn of phrase here and a detail there. She was a third of the way through the last story in the book before she realized just what she was reading. It was a fable told to illustrate a moral; in this case the theme was “think before you act.”

Apparently the ae’Magi (the one ruling at the time that the book was written) had, as an apprentice,

designed a new spell. He presented it to his Master, to that worthy's misfortune. The spell was one that nullified magic, an effect that the apprentice's two-hundred-year-old Master would have appreciated more had he been out of the area of the spell's effect.

Aralorn hunted futilely for the name of the apprentice-turned-ae'Magi or even any indication when the book was written. Unfortunately, during most of Rethian history it had not been the custom to note the date a book was written or even who wrote it. With a collection of stories, most of which were folk tales, it was virtually impossible to date the book reliably within two hundred years, especially one that was probably a copy of another book.

With a sigh, Aralorn set the book down and started to ask Wolf if he had any suggestions. Luckily she glanced at him before a sound left her mouth. He was in the midst of unraveling a spell worked into a lock on a mildewed book as thick as her hand. He didn't seem to be having an easy time with it, although it was difficult to judge from his masked face.

"Doesn't that thing ever bother you?" She asked in an I-am-only-making-conversation tone as soon as the lock popped open with a theatrical puff of blue smoke.

"What thing?" He brushed the remaining blue dust off the cover of the book and opened it to a random page.

"The mask. Doesn't it itch when you sweat?"

"I don't sweat." His tone was so uninterested that she knew that it was a safe topic to push, even though he was deliberately avoiding her point.

"You know," she said, running a finger over a dust pattern on a leather book cover, "when my father took me to visit the shapeshifters I thought that it would be really fun to be able to be someone else whenever I wanted. So I studied and learned and worked at it until I could look like almost anything I wanted. My father, though, had the uncanny knack of finding me out, and he was a creative genius when it came to punishments. Eventually I got out of the habit of shapechanging at all.

"The second time that I visited with my mother's people, I was several years older, I noticed something that time that made me think twice about shapeshifting. If a shapeshifter doesn't like something about himself, he can just change it. If his nose is too long or his eyes aren't the right color, it is easily altered. If he did something that he wasn't proud of, then he could be someone else for a while, until everyone forgot about it .. They, all of them, hide from themselves behind their shapes until there isn't anything left to hide from."

"I assure you," commented Wolf dryly, "that as much as I would like to hide from myself, it would take more than a mask to do it."

"Then why do you wear it?" she asked. "I don't, mean out there." She waved impatiently in the general direction of camp. "I am sure that you have your reasons. But why do you use it to hide from me too? I am hardly likely to tell everyone who you are."

He tensed but answered with the same directness that she had shown. "I have reasons for the mask that have nothing to do with trust or the lack of it." She'd noticed before the curious slurring to his words that the Wolf did not have, although the coarse sepulchral tone was the same.

She held his eyes. "Don't they? There are only the two of us in this room."

"Cave," he interjected mildly.

She conceded his correction but not the change of subject. “‘Cave,’ then. A mask is something to hide behind. If I am the only one here to look at your face, then you are hiding from me. You don’t trust me.”

“Plague take it, Aralorn. I have reasons to wear this mask.” He tapped the silver mask. There was enough temper in his eyes, if not his voice, that a prudent person would have backed down.

Not even her enemies had ever called Aralorn prudent.

“Not with me,” She wouldn’t retreat.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath and opened them again. The glitter of temper had been replaced by something that she couldn’t read. “The mask is more honest than what is beneath it.” There was emotion coloring his voice, but it was disguised so it could have been as mild as sorrow or as wild as the rage portrayed by the mask.

She waited, knowing that if she commented on his obscure statement he was fully capable of sidetracking her into his peculiar philosophical mishmash until she forgot her purpose.

When he saw that she wasn’t going to speak he said softly, “I find that trust is hard for me to learn, Lady.”

There was nothing obvious holding the mask on his face, no hidden straps to hinder him when he put his hands up and undid the simple spell. He gripped the mask and took it off smoothly. She probably only imagined the slight hesitation before his face was revealed.

She had thought that it was his identity that he hid. If she had been another person she might have gasped. But she had seen burn victims before, even a few who were worse—most of those had been dead. The area around the golden eyes was unscarred, as if he’d protected them with an arm. The rest of his face matched his voice. It could have belonged to a corpse; it had that same peculiar tight look, as if the skin was too small. His mouth was drawn so tightly that he must have trouble eating. She knew now why his voice had sounded muffled, less clearly enunciated than it had been when he took wolfshape.

She looked for a long time, longer than she needed to so that she could think of the best way to react. Then she stood up and walked around the table, bent over and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Returning to her seat she said quietly, “Leave your mask off when we are here alone, if you will. I would rather look at you than a mask.”

He smiled warmly at her, with his eyes: his lips were capable of no such feat. Then he answered what she didn’t feel free to ask. “It was that spell of which I lost control. I told you that uncontrolled magic takes the shape of flame.” As he spoke he clenched his fist and then opened it to show her the fire it held. “Human flesh burns easier than stone, and the ae’Magi wasn’t able to extend his shield to me fast enough.”

It took effort but she sensed that he was still uncertain, so she grinned at him and playfully knocked his hand aside. “Get that out of here. You, of all people, should know better than to play with fire.” She knew by his laugh that she had taken the right tack and was glad for the years of acting that allowed her to lighten the mood.

Obediently he extinguished the flame, and with no more ceremony than he usually exhibited he turned back to his book. Aralorn went to the nearest bookcase and picked out another book. After it had been duly inspected for traps and pitfalls she opened it and pretended to read as she pondered on several other questions that popped up. Things like: why couldn’t a magician, who could take on the form of a

wolf indefinitely, alter his face until it was scarless? The most likely answer to that was that he didn't want to. *That* led to a whole new set of questions.

She was so engrossed in thought that she jumped at the sound of Wolf's voice as he announced that it was time to leave. She set the hook she'd opened on the table on top of the book she'd forgotten to tell Wolf about. Tomorrow was soon enough for both books. As she started after Wolf she caught a motion out of the corner of her eye, but when she turned there was nothing there. Nonetheless, she felt the itch of being watched by unseen eyes all the way through the caverns.

As they left the caves, Aralorn noted that there were faded markings just inside the entrance. Some sort of warding was her guess, although she wasn't familiar with all of the symbols. Wolf had probably put them up to keep unwanted visitors out of the cave, although they didn't seem to have had much effect on whatever it was that was in his library. They hadn't stopped the little girl, Astrid, from her explorations either. With a shrug Aralorn followed Wolf outside.

Outside the grey skies carried the dimness of early evening. Reluctant drops of rain fell here and there, icy and cold on her skin. There was no wind near the caves but Aralorn could hear its relentless spirit weaving its way through the nearby trees. She looked apprehensively at the sky. It was still too early for snow, but the mountains were renowned for their freak storms, and the icy rain boded ill.

Seeing her glance, the Wolf said, "There will be no snow tonight at least. Tomorrow, maybe. If it hits too soon we might have to move them into the caves. I would rather not do that; it's too easy to get lost, as it has already been demonstrated. Next time there might not be a rescue." She saw that he had replaced the mask without her noticing when he did it.

* * *

if it did not snow, it might as well have. the storm that hit that night was violent and cold. The wind carelessly shredded the makeshift tents that still comprised most of the camp. Everybody huddled in the tents that leaked the least and waited out the storm. It left as abruptly as it had struck. With the wind gone, the body heat from the huddled people warmed the remaining overpopulated tents. Tired as they were, everyone, with the exception of the second-shift night watch, was soon fast asleep.

Aralorn woke to the sound of a stallion's, whistle. There was probably a mare in heat. She swore softly, but when Sheen whistled again she knew she had to go quiet him before he woke the camp. It probably would be a good idea to check on the horses after the storm anyway.

She reached under the furs she slept on—not an easy feat with so many others sleeping on the furs too—and strapped on her knife. Carefully, she stepped over the slumbering bodies and threaded her way to the door.

Once outside she jogged toward the corral. Sheen's light grey underbelly was easy to see against the darkness. Just as he was about to cry out again he saw her and came toward her, hopping because of the hobble. She checked him over, but saw nothing unusual.

Me shifted abruptly as if the wind brought a scent to his nose. His attention was focused high on the ridge surrounding the valley. Every muscle tensed and only a quick word from Aralorn kept him quiet.

It could have been only the scent of one of the two guards Myr posted every night in shifts or, more probably, a wild animal of some sort. For her own peace of mind, Aralorn decided to trek up the side of the valley and see if she could locate whatever was disturbing the stallion. She commanded him to silence again and started the climb.

The terrain was more cliff than anything else. There was an easier climb over more open ground, but she chose to stay in the sparse cover of the tough brush that grew here and there. Once on the crest, crouched in the dense thicket of young willows that surrounded the valley, she glanced back down to see if Sheen was still upset.

His attention was still focused, but he could have been just watching her. Swearing softly to herself, she crept through the brush. If it had been a wild animal it was probably long gone, or waiting for a nice tasty human to join it for its evening meal—wasn't it dragons that were supposed to enjoy feasting on young women?

It was mere chance that she found the cause of Sheen's alarm.

She tripped over it before she saw it—or rather him. He was very dead. She called a dim light bail that would allow her to get a better look at the corpse without drawing attention to herself.

It was one of the guards—Pussywillow, the one-armed veteran. He had been killed recently because the body was still warm, even in the chill of the wet foliage. What really bothered Aralorn was the way he'd been killed. He'd probably been knocked out, judging by the lump on his head. With him unconscious and unable to struggle, it had been an easy matter to cut his heart out of his chest and carve the runes on it.

Impulsively she traced a symbol over a rune. She didn't know a lot about human magic: she didn't even know a lot about her own type of magic. But she did know that certain symbols and runes held a power of their own independent of green or human designation. Once when she and Wolf had been traveling she had seen him trace the symbol with a stick held in his jaws. Curious, as always, she asked him the meaning of it. Wolf told her that it was a powerful symbol that simply promoted good rest and taught it to her at her request. She hoped it would help.

She started to run around the edge of the valley without worrying about cover. She almost hoped to draw the attention of the killer; she was better able to take care of herself than almost anyone else in the camp. From the signs around the body there had been only one person, but he was skillful.

Heart pounding, and not from effort, she searched the darkness for some clue as to his whereabouts. Less than halfway around the camp she found the other guard. Her heart lay, still faintly beating, on the grass that was too dark even in the night.

She had probably been killed after Aralorn found the first body. The killer, safe in his knowledge that there was no other guard to worry about, had taken his time and done the ritual more properly, though still without active magic use that might have alerted Wolf, or anyone else in the camp for that matter. The guard had been awake for the ceremony, gagged so that she could make no sound. A small pewter drinking glass lay near the body, stained dark with blood.

Gently, Aralorn closed the open eyes.

Taking stock of her position, Aralorn realized that she was no more than a hundred yards from Wolf's camp. It would be wiser to have two people looking for the killer. Finding the camp from her position on top of the rim was not as easy as finding it from the bottom; there were no faint trails to lead her to it.

Just as she decided that her time would be better spent trying to find the enemy, she saw the light from the meager campfire Wolf preferred. With a sigh of relief she made her way down the steep slope, taking the path slowly to avoid twisting an ankle.

Without warning a violent surge of magical backlash drove her to her knees. She waited until the wash of

magic dulled to a point that was no longer painful before struggling back to her feet. Forgetting caution, she grabbed a stick and used it for balance as she slid down the hill, announcing her presence with a modest avalanche of stones and dirt.

She slid to a stop just above the small, flat area that Wolf had appropriated as his camp. Wolf lay still on his back in human form, eyes glistening with rage. Narrow, luminous white ropes lay across his legs, chest, and neck. Edom stood over him, his attention momentarily diverted to Aralorn. Half raised in his right hand he held a sword that was *not* the sword he'd been using in the sparring match. It glowed gently, with a pulsating lavender light. The sight of it sent a cold chill up Aralorn's back as she recognized the weapon for what it was: a souleater. The blades were as rare as they were unnatural. Aralorn had only seen one before, but there were a lot of stories about them. Even minor wounds from a souleater could be mortal.

The section of the ledge that she stood on was just far enough above Edom to be out of the sword's reach. She drew her knife and shifted it lightly by the blade in a thrower's grip. At this distance she didn't even need to aim, so she had it in the air before he would have been able to see what it was she threw. He certainly shouldn't have been able to dodge it, but her blade landed harmlessly on the ground behind him.

The speed of his move told her that he was a much better fighter than he had shown himself to be. Easily good enough that he could have fooled her into thinking him unskilled. Darranians being singularly prejudiced against women, he probably simply hadn't bothered.

His face, revealed more by the light of the souleater than the modest campfire, appeared older—although that could simply have been a mistake of the light. He smiled.

She was unarmed against him. Normally that wouldn't have worried her, but the souleater made the situation anything but normal. She could only hope to hold out until someone from the camp got there. No one who was tuned into magic could miss the disturbance that Edom's unholy sword was causing, now that it was active. Already she could hear voices from below.

All the shapes that she could take quickly were suited to her chosen trade as a spy: the mouse, several types of birds, a few insects. Nothing that would hold off an experienced swordsman for long enough to keep both her and Wolf alive.

She took an apparently involuntary step sideways, away from Edom, and lost her footing. She made sure that the fall carried her past Wolf's ledge and on down the hill into some brush.

Edom had two options; either he would follow her down, getting more distance between that sword and Wolf, or he would turn to finish Wolf off—giving her the extra few seconds that she needed. He turned back to finish his business with Wolf.

She chose the first form that she could think of; it was deadly enough, though small. The icelynx had little trouble with the steep climb and was leaping silently at Edom's back before he even had his sword raised at Wolf.

Warned by the brief shadow she caused when she ran in front of the fire, Edom turned—sweeping aside, her rush with his sword arm, but not before she raked his back with her formidable claws. Hissing and growling, she faced him as she crouched between him and the still form on the ground.

Pale sword and paler cat feinted back and forth: she just out of reach of the lethal sword; he careful not to expose himself to the poisonous fangs of the icelynx.

Suddenly Edom spoke softly as if not to antagonize the cat, though his tone carried anxious desperation. “It’s Aralorn. She’s a shapeshifter; don’t you see it? I came up to ask Wolf about something and I found her here, with Wolf like that. You’ve all heard of the arcane practices of shapeshifters. Help me before she kills him.”

Aralorn didn’t have to look to see what her nose had belatedly informed her. A ragtag band from camp had just shown up to rescue the wrong person. In a form she was unfamiliar with, Aralorn was without the power of speech and unable to defend herself.

Edom continued to speak, even as he tried to maneuver closer to Wolf. “I’ve heard that shapeshifters need to kill when the moon is full. I guess that Wolf, out here alone, seemed an easy victim. I found this sword near; it must be Wolf’s. She seems afraid of it.”

The scent of humans and metal was getting stronger, and Aralorn knew that she had to move before she was unable to do anything. Despite the legends, shapeshifters were quite vulnerable to cold steel weapons. Disregarding the sword, she leapt at his throat while he was distracted by the sound of his own voice.

She missed as he threw himself flat on the ground. However, Edom managed to nick her with the sword as she passed him. Her off rear leg became icily numb and folded underneath her, but worse was the strange sucking sensation that consumed her. The sword was alive, and it was hungry.

Edom quickly regained his feet. On three legs, fighting the pull of the sword, she didn’t have much of a chance. Aralorn watched as the sword descended.

Abruptly it was jerked out of its intended path. Aralorn could feel the sword’s intense disappointment as Edom was suddenly consumed in flames. The smell of burning flesh offended her feline-sensitive nose almost as much as the light bothered her nocturnal eyes.

Apparently someone—she found out later that it was Stanis—had finally thought to remove the ropes that held Wolf down. Wolf did a more thorough job of burning Edom than was absolutely necessary, but then it must have been maddening to lay there and know what was going on without being able to do anything about it.

She yowled at him demandingly. With her leg numb and the odd dizziness that accompanied the wound, she was stuck where she was. He also made her nervous, putting so much effort into burning a dead body. He needed a distraction. When the yowl didn’t do it, she rolled until she could bite him on the ankle, hard enough that he could feel it, but not hard enough to release the venom in the glands underneath her fangs.

Abruptly she was gathered up and set gently down on his bedroll. Wolf grabbed his staff from wherever it was that he put it when he wasn’t using it and balanced it on its feet so that he could examine her wound in more certain light. She noticed with interest that the rest of the camp was staying well away from them. Well, Wolf’s pyrotechnics had been pretty impressive.

Wolf traced a quick design over the wound with a finger; Aralorn decided that it was to break the sword’s hold rather than close the wound, since human magic-users were not the best healers. Nothing seemed to change. He frowned and traced it again; this time she could feel that power that he used. Still nothing happened. She meowed at him nervously. He ignored her and chanted a few words.

Abruptly he stood and looked inward the crispy skeleton that was all that was left of Edom, Aralorn rolled to stand shakily on her three good legs to see what he was looking at. At first she didn’t see it, but a flicker of movement caught her eye. It was the sword. Edom, or the thing that was Edom, had kept its

grip on the sword. Now it lay a good foot away. Except for the flicker that caught her eye at first, she didn't see it move again.—but it was undeniably closer to her than it had been when she first saw it.

The coldness that numbed her leg seemed abruptly to be spreading and Aralorn lost her precarious balance and fell, missing exactly what Wolf did.

With a harsh, almost human cry of anguish that she heard only partly through her ears, the sword broke. Abruptly the numbness ceased and for a brief moment the pain made her wish it back; then it was only a small cut that bled a little.

The icelynx twitched its stubby tail and exploded to its feet with legendary speed. When she was sure all her legs were working, Aralorn arched purring against Wolf, who was still kneeling beside the blankets.

When she'd stood she heard someone cry out, reminding her that there was an audience. Looking at all the fear and hostility in the surrounding faces, Aralorn decided that it might defuse matters if they weren't being reminded that she was a shapeshifter. She transformed herself into her usual shape and dusted off the innkeeper's son's tunic that was looking the worse for wear from her roll down the wet hillside. Without appearing to, she kept a close eye on the others. It was then that she realized that most of their fear was aimed at Wolf.

He had furnished an excellent display of what happens when a wizard of his power loses his temper. They all must have known that he was powerful, but knowing something and seeing it were different matters. Most people lacked the casual acceptance of gore that mercenaries had. It didn't help that Wolf didn't wear his mask to sleep in and his horribly scarred visage had been clearly revealed in the flaring light. He wore his mask now, but the knowledge of what lay underneath it was with them all. What was really needed right now was someone to take control.

Aralorn looked around to see if she could find Myr, but he was conspicuous by his absence. There was always the possibility that he was still asleep, unaffected by the magic disturbance that awoke the rest of the camp; but, given what she knew about him, Aralorn thought that unlikely. The noise alone should have brought him by now.

As the thought crossed her mind, Myr—his clothes covered with bits of brush and blood—took the same path down the side of the hill that she had. Plague it! She must have woken him up when she went to check on the horses. If he'd been following her around, there was a good chance that he thought that she'd been the one who murdered the guards. As she had not been trying to hide anything, her footprints would be much more conspicuous than Edom's were.

Myr ignored the commotion in favor of investigating the blackened corpse. Aralorn wondered how much he hoped to learn from the scorched, skeletal remains. When he stood up he seemed slightly paler, though it could have been a trick of the light.

Composedly, he directed his question at Wolf. "Who was it?"

"Edom," answered Wolf in his usual chilling tones. If Wolf's hand hadn't been locked on her shoulder with a bruising grip, Aralorn would have thought him unaffected by the events of the night. It was obvious from the incredulous looks they directed at Wolf that most members of the little gathering were disturbed by his calmness.

"Is he the victim or the attacker?" asked Myr, voicing the question that was on almost everyone's mind.

"The attacker and the victim, though he didn't intend to be the latter," answered Aralorn, deciding to take part in her defense. She continued to tell them what she had done and the discovery of the dead guards.

“When I saw the runes, I knew that the ae’Magi had something to do with it because I’ve seen him use those patterns before. I came to see if Wolf wanted to help track him down and found Edom with his nasty little sword drawn, standing over Wolf.”

An unfamiliar voice asked, “How do we know she’s telling the truth? She could have laid a spell on Master Wolf so that he thinks that she has the right of it. Shapeshifters can do things like that. Edom was just a boy. Why would he attack Wolf? As for magic rituals, I spent three days teaching him how to move a stick without touching it. He didn’t have hardly any magic at all.”

Wolf spoke, and even the most unobservant could see that he was not in control of his temper yet. “Edom was the assailant tonight. I could see what was happening, even if I could do nothing about it.

“I have known Aralorn for some time. She does not have the skill required to deceive my eyes. Also, the sword Edom fought with was a souleater. It did not belong to me; and Aralorn, with her shapeshifter blood, could not have held anything so unnatural for long enough to draw it.”

Myr nodded. “It’s dark, but from what I could tell, the guards were dead before Aralorn found them.”

Tobin spoke up from his position as Stanis’s shadow. “Edom had a lot of books in his tent written in Darranian.”

There was a brief silence. Aralorn almost smiled as she saw the meaning of Tobin’s words echo in the minds of all present. It was Tobin’s testimony that bore the most weight. A shapeshifter, being, after all, native to the Rethian mountains, was better than a Darranian. The last war with Darran was not so long past and the stories of the atrocities they committed (doubtless the worse for the telling) were still strong in everyone’s mind. If Edom was a Darranian it put an entirely different light on the events of the night.

All the same, nobody but Myr met her eyes as they left to collect the bodies.

They buried the guards in rough graves dug in the night, as Wolf said they should. He had counteracted the runespell as best he could, but runes enacted on living flesh were stronger than they might otherwise be. He never made clear the exact purpose of Edom’s runes, but he said that burying the bodies would give strength to his own spells.

When the last shovelful of dirt had been spread, Wolf raised his hands and spoke words of power and binding. Two great stones formed out of nothing rested side by side on the freshly turned earth. Each stood as tall as a grown man, and glowed with symbols that faded rapidly until they were merely large rocks.

The huddled group of people stood uneasily for a minute. The sting of death was no new thing to any of them, but that didn’t make it any more pleasant. They all shared guard duty, and it could have been any of them. None held any illusions that they would have escaped better than Pussywillow had. The magic they had witnessed this night had its effect as well. Most of them were not quite comfortable with magic, even though they could work a touch of it themselves.

Gradually they drifted back to their tents until Aralorn, Myr and Wolf were left alone by the cairns.

Myr hit the stone he was standing near with a clenched fist, hard enough to break the skin. He spoke with quiet force. “I am tired of feeling like a cow waiting for slaughter. If we didn’t realize before this that the ae’Magi is just biding his time until there isn’t something more interesting to turn his attention to, we know that now. Edom is ... was too young to be anything but a minor servant, and we almost didn’t stop him in time. When we face the ae’Magi, we don’t stand a chance.”

“Edom was more than a minor servant if he worked the runes that were on the bodies,” commented Wolf calmly, having recovered most of his usual control. “Carrying a souleater is not much easier. Don’t make the same mistake that the ae’Magi is: he is not invincible.”

“You think that we have a chance against the ae’Magi?” Myr’s tone was doubtful.

“No, but we can bother him for longer than he thinks that we can.” Aralorn’s tone was light and teasing, but her face was tightly drawn, with something more than weariness. “Now, children, I think that it is time for us to go to sleep. Don’t forget that we have the sanitary facilities to dig in the morning. Wolf, if you don’t mind, I think that everyone would be a little more comfortable if I sleep in your camp rather than the tent I’ve been sharing. Let them meet their shapeshifter in the light of day.”

Six

Somewhere in the darkness a nighthawk cried out in defeat: and a mouse escaped for another night. Aralorn sympathized with the mouse; she knew exactly how it felt.

Nothing remained of the blackened body except a slight scorched smell, as if someone had left the stew on the fire too long. Edom’s remains had been gone when she arrived with her belongings. She supposed that Wolf had disposed of the body somewhere; she hadn’t been inclined to ask.

Now that the excitement was over it was time to rest, but she couldn’t do it. When she closed her eyes she could all but feel the not-quite-cold metal cutting her and tearing at more than the flesh of her thigh. Every time she managed to doze off she had nightmares; either she arrived too late to help Wolf, or the sword’s bite had been more conclusive.

The blankets she used seemed too thin to protect her from the slight chill in the air, she pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them in an effort to get warm, but even that didn’t seem to help. She shivered convulsively and knew that it was due to fear rather than the night air.

She sat up and rested her forehead on her knees. She closed her eyes, but that didn’t stop the jumbled images from presenting themselves to her.

If she hadn’t decided to find out what was bothering Sheen, or Edom had been just a little swifter in his work, Wolf would be dead now. Not only would that have meant the end of any chance of defeating the ae’Magi, but she would have lost her enigmatic Wolf. Some part of her was amused that of the two results, it was the second that bothered her the most. Ren would not approve.

She was so intent on her thoughts that she didn’t notice that Wolf had gotten up until he sat down beside her.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly.

She started to nod and then abruptly shook her head without lifting it from her knees. “No. I am not all right. If I were all right, I would be asleep. I am not asleep; therefore something is wrong.” As she spoke, still without looking up, she scooted nearer to him, until she was leaning against his shoulder.

There was a pause, and then he slid an arm around her shoulder. “What’s wrong. Lady?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Is there something I can do?”

She let go of her legs and snuggled closer until she was almost sitting in his lap. “You’re already doing it,

thanks. I'm sorry; I've never been this jittery after a fight.”

“I don't mind.” He sat still, holding her almost awkwardly, but his warmth seeped in and alleviated the cold that blankets hadn't been able to dispel.

Aralorn relaxed, but felt no pressing need to move away. “I must be turning into one of those women who moan and wail at the first chance that they get, just so a handsome man will take them into his arms.”

“Hmm,” he said, apparently considering what she had said, “Is that why they do it? I have always wondered.”

“Yup,” she said wisely, noticing that he wasn't holding her as stiffly. “Then,” Aralorn continued, “she has her way with him and he has to marry her. It's nice to know that I haven't fallen to that level ... yet.”

She paused and then said, “I was just getting a little chilled and thought to myself, ‘Aralorn, what is the easiest way to get warm? The fire is nice but moving requires *so* much effort. Ah yes,’ I said to myself, ‘why didn't I think of it before? There is all of that heat going to waste on the other side of the fire.’ All that it took was a few broad hints and presto, you're here: instant heat.”

“Yes,” he said, tightening his grip in a brief hug, “I can see how that works, underhanded of you.”

She nodded happily: the tension caused by the nightmare dissipated with the familiar banter. “I thought so too. I got that way by being a spy—we are taught how to be sneaky.” She yawned sleepily, closing her eyes. “Oh, I meant to ask—who is keeping watch on the camp?”

“Don't worry about it,” he answered her. “The ae'Magi won't have planned two attacks in the same evening, and he won't find out about Edom's failure until he doesn't report. Magical communication isn't all that it could be in these mountains.”

“Right.” Her voice slurred as she spoke. As she shifted to a more comfortable position she decided that Wolf was more comfortable to sleep on when he was wearing human shape; he smelled better too.

Wolf waited until she was asleep before he set her back down on her blankets. He added his blankets to hers and tucked it carefully around her. He brushed a hand against her cheek. “Good night, Lady.”

He shifted into his wolf shape and stretched out beside her and stared into the night.

* * *

as she had expected, aralorn was alone when she woke up. Wolf's longest absences were the result of a display of affection on his part, as if it was something with which he was not comfortable or, she thought with sudden insight, felt he didn't deserve.

To her surprise, her reception at camp was cordial. She collected a few wary looks and that was all. Maybe, having so recently been the object of persecution themselves, they were less inclined to judge someone else. More probably, decided Aralorn, Myr was keeping them too busy sewing and digging to worry about her one way or another.

If the adults showed little reaction, the children were fascinated by their shapechanger. They wanted to know if she could change into a rock (no) or a bird (they liked the goose, but would have preferred an eagle or better yet a vulture) and if shapeshifters really had to drink blood once a year, and ... she was grateful when Wolf came to get her. For once she was tired of telling stories.

“I hope,” she said, as they reached the caves, “that they don't believe half of what I tell them.”

“They probably don’t,” Wolf replied. “Your problem is that they will believe the wrong half.”

She laughed and ducked into the opening in the limestone wall.

When they reached the library, she noticed that her notes had been scattered around. One of the pages that she had been writing on the previous day was conspicuously situated on the space where Wolf worked in. Looking closer at it, she saw that it was the one that she’d been using to jot down the stories she’d found in the last book she’d read the day before. She never had gotten around to telling Wolf about the apprentice’s spell that negated magic.

Wolf took up the paper and read her closely written scribblings with interest. While he did so, Aralorn looked carefully around the library and wondered what kind of a breeze could pull a sheet of paper out from under the books that were still neatly stacked where she had left them.

“I assume that if the apprentice were given a name, you would have mentioned it?” Wolf asked as he set down the paper.

She nodded. “I don’t remember overseeing that story before, so it can’t be very well known.”

Wolf tapped the paper impatiently with a finger. “I *have* read that story somewhere else. I know that the one that I read gave his name. I just need to remember which book I read it in.” Wolf stood silently a minute before shaking his head in disgust. “I can’t think of it now. If I keep trying I may never remember it. Let’s work on this mess”—he waved his hand vaguely at the bookcases—“and hopefully I will remember later.”

They sat in their respective chairs and read. Aralorn waded through three rather boring histories before she found anything of note. As she was reading the last page of the history of the Zorantra family (who were known for developing a second-rate wine), the spine of the poorly preserved book gave way.

While inspecting the damage, she noticed that the back cover consisted of two pieces of leather that were carefully stitched together to hide a small space inside—just big enough for the folded pages it contained. Slipping the sheets out of their resting place, she examined them cautiously.

By this time Wolf was used to Aralorn laughing at odd moments, but he had just finished deciphering a particularly useless spell and so was ready to relax for a minute. “What is it?” he asked.

She grinned at him and waved the frail cluster of parchment in his general direction. “Look at this, I found this hidden in a book and thought that it might be a spell or something interesting, but it looks as though someone who had the book before you acquired it was quite an artist.”

He took the sheets from her. They were covered with scenes of improbably endowed nude figures in even more improbable positions. He was about to give it back to her when he stopped and took a closer look. His eyes were in the shadow, and the burn scars made his face as impassive as his mask, so she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. After a moment he crumpled the pages and they burst into flame—but the flame was the wrong color and burned too hot.

“You were right on your first guess, it is a spell. It’s a rather crude representation of how to summon a demon.”

“Demons?” asked Aralorn. “I didn’t think that there were any such things, or do you mean elementals, like the one that tried to kill Myr?”

Wolf tilted his head and then laughed without humor. “This from a shapeshifter? Yes there are demons, I’ve summoned them myself. Not many magicians are willing to try it. Mistakes in the spellcasting can be

dangerous, and it's getting difficult to find a virgin who can be forced to submit to the process. The ae'Magi never had a problem with it, though; his villagers could always produce some sort of victim.

"This depiction was not entirely accurate: it isn't necessary for the magician to participate in the sexual activities unless he wishes to."

Wolf continued to talk, outlining the practices of summoning demons. It wasn't something she'd want to listen to on a full stomach, and if Aralorn hadn't been a mercenary she wouldn't have been able to sit coolly through it all—but a reaction was what he wanted, and she'd be plague-stricken before she gave it to him. So she maintained a remote facade while she listened. This, she decided, was his way of driving her away after the closeness of last night.

"... Afterwards it is necessary to dispose of the focus, or the demon will be able to use her again to return without summoning. The blood of a woman used in such a fashion is valuable, as is the hair and several other body parts, so the proper method of killing the girl is to slit her throat," His voice was clinically precise. His glittering eyes never left hers.

She listened to his detached description of the horrors he'd committed and decided that she must be in love, because what she really heard was the self-directed hatred that initiated his lecture. Doubtless he'd participated in the twisted ceremony of demon summoning and probably worse. Aralorn was even more certain that it now revolted him as much as he intended it to appall her.

She waited until he was starting to run out of details, cupping her hand under her chin in feigned boredom. Then she said, "Fine. You're a vile person. You've done things that a normal human being would find abhorrent. All right. You've stopped doing them ... I hope. Now can we get back to work?"

There was a long pause; then Wolf commented in the same dry tones he'd been using before. "You are frustrating at times, aren't you?"

She grinned at him. "Sorry, Wolf. I can't help it; melodrama has that effect on me."

"Pest," he said, his tone not at all affectionate, but then his voice seldom showed what he thought.

"I try," she said modestly, and was pleased when his eyes warmed with humor.

Deciding that the crisis was over, she walked to a bookcase several rows away from the table, out of sight of Wolf, to give them both time to calm down and sort things out. Absently, she plucked a book from a nearby shelf. She started to open it when it whisked itself out of her hands and leapt back on the shelf with a loud thud.

She stared at it for a minute, and then at Wolf, who was seated half of the room away with his back toward her, muttering to himself as he wrote. There was no one else in the library.

Carefully this time, without opening it, she picked up the book and examined it. Now that she was paying attention, she could see the faint magical aura that was just barely visible woven into the cotton that covered the thin wood that lent the cover its hardness.

She dutifully presented the book to Wolf for inspection. It was hardly a surprise when he found that it was indeed trapped. He broke the spell easily enough and gave it to her without a word.

She sat down with the book, for lack of anything better to do. It contained the autobiographical history, exaggerated, of a mediocre king of a long-forgotten realm. As a distraction, it ranked right up there with sewing and digging holes in the dirt.

“Wolf,” she said, staring at her open book.

“Hmm?”

“Is there someone besides us in your library?” She kept her tone carefully nonchalant.

“Hmm,” he said again, and there was a quiet thump as he set his book on the table. Aralorn did the same. He tapped the dark wooden surface of the table. “What prompted you to ask?”

She told him of her odd experiences, leaving out the last incident to spare herself his censure. When she was through he nodded, commenting, “I’ve seen a few things that cause me to consider the possibility that there may be something here. These mountains have a reputation for odd happenings, like Astrid’s guide through the cave, A ghost or spirit of some sort would not be out of place.”

* * *

when they left the caves it was still light outside. the skies were slightly overcast, but the wind was from the south so it was warm enough. Aralorn took a deep breath of air and Wolf’s arm at the same time.

Smiling, she asked, “Have I thanked you yet for rescuing me from the tedium of mopping the floor of the inn for another six months, or however long Ren decided to leave me there?”

His stride broke when she took his arm, but when she spoke he resumed his customary gait. “No, I don’t believe that you have. I am certain that I will find the proper way for you to express your gratitude. I noticed just today that the library floors are starting to get a bit dusty.”

Aralorn laughed softly and quickened her pace a bit to keep up with him. He noticed what she was doing and slowed his stride until her shorter legs could keep up.

They were traveling in comfortable silence until Wolf stopped abruptly and snapped his fingers. He spoke hurriedly. “I know where else I read that story. It will take me a few days to get the book. Tell Myr that I’ve gone seeking a clue. Between the two of you, you should be able to handle anything that happens. Don’t go to the library without me; I’d rather lose a few days’ work than have you turned into a rock if you opened the wrong book.”

Aralorn nodded. “Take care of yourself.” She hugged him quickly and stepped back.

He took the wolf’s shape and disappeared into the woods without a sound. It wasn’t until he was gone that she thought to wonder how the camp would take the fact that she was returning without Wolf after the events of last night. Edom’s death would not have vindicated her of all suspicion. With a wry smile she resumed her course.

At the camp, Aralorn skulked around until she found Myr organizing a hunt for the next day, as the camp supplies were getting low. She caught his attention and then waited for him to finish. Listening to him work was fascinating. She had worked in a number of courts and seen the best politicians in the seventeen kingdoms work their wiles, and none of them even came close.

He reassured and soothed and organized until he had a small, skilled party who knew where to go and how to get back—without any of those who were not chosen feeling slighted or overlooked. With everybody as edgy as they were, this was a major accomplishment. If Myr survived to regain his throne, he would be a ruler that Reth would not soon forget.

“What did you need, Aralorn?” Myr asked, approaching her after he sent the others to their appointed tasks.

“Wolf is going to be absent for a few days. He is looking for a book that might be able to help us fight the ae’Magi.” She kept her voice noncommittally informative, not certain whether he would accuse her or not. He had no reason to trust her, except that Wolf did, and Wolf was gone.

Myr started to nod and then caught the problem. “Since you are the only one who heard that, the first thing that people are going to wonder is if you were really the villain last night and have completed your nefarious plot today.”

Aralorn nodded, relieved that he seemed not the least bit leery of her. “I didn’t think of it until Wolf was already gone, or I would have made him come back to camp before he left. I thought that you might want to break the news rather than I.”

Myr nodded. “I’ll tell them that he left and leave out the details. There are enough things to worry about—we don’t need another.” Abruptly, like an extinguished candle, the taut energy that generally characterized him was gone. He just looked very tired.

“You need to let them look after themselves for a while. They don’t really need you to tell them what shoe they should put on which foot or how to make stew,” she commented.

Myr laughed involuntarily. “You saw that one, huh? How should I know how much salt to put in? I’ve never cooked anything in my life—anything that was edible, at any rate.”

“I wish I could help you more; but even if they aren’t terrified of me, I’m not someone they can trust. You have my sympathy, for what it’s worth. Anything I can do, just ask.”

“Thank you, Aralorn.” He glanced up at the cloudless evening sky. “I wish that all the tents were done and we had twice as much food. The winter comes without much warning here. I once knew a man who could predict the weather. He told me that the air had a tartness to it before a snowstorm, but I could never smell it.” He was talking to himself more than Aralorn. Abruptly he turned on his heel and headed toward the center of activity.

Aralorn watched as he stopped and laid a hand on the shoulder of an older woman plying a needle. Whatever he said made her smile.

Aralorn had watched him on and off when she’d been in the Rethian court, and he’d impressed her. At fifteen he’d been working in the background to keep his father from destroying Reth without undermining his father’s seat on the throne. Here, he gave the people something to do so that they wouldn’t sit and think about what they’d lost and what their fate was to be. He was a master at the art of ruling—but it cost him. He looked as if he’d seen ten years more than his eighteen. She wondered if he’d live to see his nineteenth year. He probably wondered about that too.

Since Wolf had asked her to stay out of the library, Aralorn did her best to keep busy. It wasn’t difficult. Without Pussywillow or Wolf, only she and Myr had the training to teach the motley band of rebels how to fight.

Haris was easily the best; the heavy muscles that he’d developed swinging a smith’s hammer lent an impressive strength to his blows. Like most big men he was a little slow, but he knew how to compensate for it. In unarmed combat he could take Aralorn, but not Myr.

The rest of the camp varied from bad to pathetic. There was a squire’s son who had at one time been quite an archer, but he was old and his eyesight wasn’t what it had been. One of the farmers could swing a scythe but not a sword. Then there was the farmer Traven, whose greatest asset as a fighter was his size, which he more than made up for by his gentleness.

“Okay now, keep your sword a bit lower and watch my eyes to see where I’ll move. Now, in slow motion I’m going to swing at you. I want you to block overhanded, then underhanded and then thrust.” The big farmer would have been a lot better off if he could forget she was a woman. The only way that she could get him to strike at her was if she did it in slow motion. But when they sped things up, he wouldn’t use his full strength. She was about to change that if she could.

“Good,” she said when he had completed the maneuvers. “Now at full speed.” He blocked and blocked, but his strike was slow and careful, lacking the power that he should have been able to put behind the blow. Aralorn stepped into it and inside. With a deft grip and twist, she tossed him over her head and into the grass. Before he had a chance to move, she had her knee on his chest and his sword arm twisted so that it would hurt him; maybe enough that he would fight her when she let him up.

There had been a collective gasp from her audience when she tossed the farmer on his back. The move looked more impressive than it was, especially since he easily outweighed her by a hundred pounds.

Stanis, who was watching, put a finger on his chin and said, “I wouldn’t pin ’im that way, Aralorn. Two coughs from a cat and I’d be out of it if it’d been me you caught.”

Aralorn raised an eyebrow and let Traven up. Stanis had been born to a group of traders, traveling clans no better than they should be. It was very possible that he had a few good tricks up his sleeve.

“Right, then. Come on, Stanis,” she invited.

He did. She must have pinned him a dozen times, but he kept slipping out of her grasp. Drawn by the noise, Myr quit his bout to come and watch too. Soon the whole crowd was cheering for Stanis as he broke away again and again. Aralorn quit finally and raised her hands in surrender.

“Magic?” she queried Stanis as she shook his hand.

Stanis shook his head, gave her a wary look, then grinned and nodded. “Most of ’em are easier with magic, but there’s a few tricks that the Clansmen know if ya wanna learn ’em.”

So Stanis took a turn at teaching. He must have been a very good thief, and doubtless there were a few magistrates who were looking for him; though, thought Aralorn with a smile, they’d have a hard time keeping him.

When it was time to dig latrines, sew, or hunt, Aralorn watched over the children. It was nice to have a ready audience who believed every word that came out of her mouth, at least until they got to know her better. Keeping thirty-odd mischievous magic-loving tots out of trouble kept her from getting restless while Wolf was away. It also kept her from latrine duty.

* * *

the snowstorm struck without warning two nights later. Within moments the temperature dropped below freezing. Without a tent to cover her, since she was still sleeping in Wolf’s camp, Aralorn woke as the first few flakes fell. Instincts developed from years of camping had her gathering her bedding before she was really awake. Even so, by the time she had left Wolf’s chosen spot and made it into the main camp, most of what she carried was already covered with snow.

At the camp, Aralorn found that Myr, efficient as ever, was shuffling people who had occupied inadequate tents to the few that looked like they would hold up in the storm. Seeing her trudge in, Myr motioned her toward his own tent.

She found it full of frightened people. The storms of the North were legendary. Although their camp was

protected from the brunt of the storm by the steep walls of the valley, the angry howl of the wind was so loud that it made it difficult to hear.

Evaluating the situation, Aralorn casually found a place for her blankets, lay down and closed her eyes, ignoring the slight dampness left on her bedroll after she had brushed the snow off. Her nonchalance seemed to work, because everyone quieted down and they were mostly asleep when Myr returned to his bed.

By morning the worst of the storm was over, but the snow was knee deep, and in places it had drifted nearly waist-high.

Aralorn was helping with the fire when Myr found her and pulled her aside. “I’m no magician, but I do know that this is a freak storm. Feel the air. It’s already getting warm, the snow is starting to melt. The storms come suddenly here, I know—but this is more like the spring storms. The winter storms hit and don’t ease for weeks. Did you notice anything unnatural about it?”

Aralorn shook her head and sneezed; sleeping in damp bedding wasn’t the best thing for one’s health. “No, I wondered about that myself, so I tried to check. I couldn’t find any trace of human magic in the storm—although there was something strange about it, I’ll grant you.” She shrugged. “If the ae’Magi was causing that storm, he was trying to hide it, and he could certainly do that, at least from me—although storms aren’t something that human magicians are generally good with. The trappers who hunt these parts for furs would tell you that it was the Old Man of the Mountain who caused the storm.”

There was a brief silence; then Myr, who was beginning to know her, smiled slowly. “I’ll take my cue. Who is the Old Man of the Mountain?”

She grinned cheerfully at him. “The trappers like to tell a lot of stories about him. Sometimes he is a monster who drives men mad and eats them. Other times he is a kindly old man who does things that kindly old men can’t do—like change the weather. He is invited to every trapper’s wedding or gathering, and a ceremonial place is laid for him when the trapping clans meet in their enclave each year to decide which trapper goes where.”

“Is it just a story or is there such a person?” he asked.

Aralorn shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve met trappers who swear that they have met him. But I’ve never seen the story in any book. No human magician could perform the feats that he is credited with, and I’ve never seen a shapeshifter wield that kind of power—most of them concentrate on the little stuff. Great feats are not their strong point. There are damn few other wielders of natural magic, and none of them would be inclined to live in the mountains—or have any dealings with humans.”

His curiosity satisfied, Myr changed the subject. “I wish I knew how long this weather was going to last. We need to get some food, and I can’t send the hunters out in this. They don’t have the skills to hunt in the snow. Only two or three of them have the skills to hunt at all, and none are experienced with northern weather.” As he spoke he paced back and forth restlessly.

“Don’t worry so.” Aralorn’s tone was brisk. “If we starve, there is nothing that you can do about it. However, Sheen’s not been getting much exercise lately and I’m not too bad with a bow. I also know how to set traps if we need to. Keep your hunters home, and I’ll see what I can do for our larder.”

Myr’s face cleared. “If you would, I can put the hunting party to work hunting wood instead.”

She hadn’t intended to leave just then, but the relief on his face kept her from putting it off until afternoon. She recovered her gear from the storage tent, commandeered a pair of boots, and borrowed a crossbow

and arrows from one of the erstwhile hunters.

* * *

sheen snorted and danced while she saddled him and took off at a dead run when she was only half in the saddle, a dramatic departure that was met with ragged cheers and good-natured laughter. When she was able to pull him up and scold him, they were already headed up the main trail out of the valley.

It wasn't as difficult to navigate the mountain once they were out of the valley, as the harsh winds had swept the snow away from many places. The deep snow was usually avoidable, and when it wasn't, the heavy horse had little trouble forcing a way through.

There were few tracks in the snow. Aralorn wasn't familiar enough with the northern animals to know if they were waiting in shelter for the snow to melt—or if something else was keeping them away. Several miles away from the valley she stumbled upon tracks that she'd never seen before. The prints were several hours old and smeared hopelessly by the melting snow. Whatever it was, it was big—she found a branch as big around as her leg that the animal had snapped off a tree. She looked at the branch a minute and guided her nervous mount away from the thing's trail.

“Anything that big, Sheen, is bound to be too tough and stringy to make good eating. Besides, it would be a pain to drag the body back to camp.” The big horse snorted at her and increased his speed.

Several hours later Aralorn wiped a gloved hand across her nose and squinted against the glare of the sunny, snow-covered meadow. The oiled boots that she'd found in the storage shed worked well to keep out the water. She appreciated them all the more for the fact that all of the rest of her was wet. The brush was laden with the heavy, wet snow, so that even riding she got drenched. There was a lot of undergrowth on the steep slope behind them. The sun had melted enough of the snow that water ran down everywhere to make the ground muddy and slick. To make matters worse, the light sneezes of this morning had turned into a full-blown, plaguing cold.

“You know, Sheen”—she patted his glossy neck, also somewhat damp—“I think that I would prefer it if it were really cold. At least that way we would be just chilly and not wet too.”

She pushed a soggy strand of hair out of her face with a sigh. The sun was starting the trek toward its evening rest, and they hadn't seen so much as a rabbit. It was unusually bad luck. The camp was far enough away from commonly hunted areas that the game animals were unafraid of people. Just on the walk from the camp to the caves, Aralorn generally saw several deer. Today even the birds were scarce.

Maybe whatever large beastie that left its traces for her to find had scared off all of the prey. She hoped not. That would mean that it was probably something that people should be running from, too. She wished Wolf were here to tell her what it was. A grin caught her lip as she thought about what his response to being viewed as a rescuer of ladies in distress would be. The picture of herself as a lady in distress caused her smile to widen a bit. She still wished for his comforting presence.

Absently she looked at the meadow and admired the pristine beauty of the untouched snow that gleamed subtly with all the colors of a rainbow, more startling because of the dark, dense forest surrounding it. She was deciding whether it was worth crossing the meadow to the river that ran on the other side or if she ought to head back up the steep muddy path and start back to camp when she noticed that there was something odd about the peaceful meadow.

She stiffened at the same time that Sheen noticed them. “Yawan!” The filthy word described exactly the way she felt. Stupid, stupid to have missed them when in front of her, the whole meadow was moving slowly. The covering of deep snow completely masked their scent, or maybe the cold kept them from

rolling. Whatever the case, not two feet in front of her a Uriah rose from its snowy bed. It wasn't the only one. There must have been at least a hundred of the defiled things, and though none of them were on their feet, their heads were turning toward her.

The path behind was no escape. The slick mud would slow Sheen much more than it would the Uriah. Cold slowed them, but not enough. The best ways to stop them were fire and running water. There were no fires around that she could see, but running water there was aplenty.

All this took less than a second to run through her head. She squeezed Sheen with her knees, and bless his warrior's heart he plowed right into the meadow filled with moving mounds of snow. The Uriah howled and Sheen redoubled his speed, leaping and dodging the creatures. One of them stood up, reaching for the reins. Aralorn shot it in the eye with a bolt from the crossbow; it reeled back but recovered enough to catch Aralorn's stirrup. Desperately she hit it hard with the butt of the crossbow, breaking the arm off the body at the shoulder. Sheen struck it with his hind feet as it fell.

The cold must have had a greater effect on their speed than she thought it would, because—much to her surprise—Aralorn made it to the river while the Uriah were still sluggish. Sheen protested the cold water with a grunt when he hit, but struck out strongly for the other side. Aralorn took a good grip on Sheen's mane and lay flat on the fast-running surface, letting the water take most of her weight.

The river was deep and swift, but narrow. The horse towed Aralorn to the far bank without mishap. The current had swept them far enough downstream that the Uriah were no longer in sight, but she thought that she could hear them above the rush of the water. When she turned back to mount again, she noticed that the arm she'd severed from the Uriah still held fast to her stirrup.

There was a story about a man who kept a finger from a Uriah's hand for a trophy of war. Ten years later the Uriah who owned the finger showed up on the man's doorstep, Aralorn didn't believe that story, not really; she just wasn't enthusiastic about riding around with a hand attached to her saddle.

Aralorn pried at it with grim haste. The thing was strangely stubborn, so she finally used an arrow as a lever to pull it away. As she worked she noticed that it wore a ring of heavy gold—stolen from some poor victim, she supposed. Ren would be fascinated—Uriah were not generally looters; their primary interest was food.

She threw the arm and its ring in the river and watched in some satisfaction as it disappeared in the depths. She reloaded the crossbow from habit; it obviously wasn't much good against Uriah. Mounting Sheen, she headed in the general direction of camp, hoping that there would be a bridge over the river between here and camp.

The only thing that the Uriah could be after this far north was Myr—assuming that Wolf was correct in labeling them servants of the ae'Magi. They had obviously been caught by the storm and incapacitated by the sudden cold. If the storm hadn't stopped them, they would have reached the camp early in the morning.

Now, she had a chance to warn Myr.

Shaking with cold, she urged the stallion to a trot that he could maintain until they made it back to camp. As they went, she sawed at the girth and dumped the saddle and bags to the ground to reduce the weight, keeping her seat somehow while they fell. She retained her grip on the loaded crossbow.

The river was between the Uriah and Aralorn, but it stood between her and the camp as well. She rode as far as she could, looking for a bridge, but there was none. The only choice was to swim again. When they came out of the water the second time, Aralorn was blue with cold and Sheen was stumbling

heavily. Warming was one of the easier magics that she knew, but it took her three times to get it right.

She rode right into the camp, scattering people as she went. She stopped finally in front of Myr's tent. Drawn by the sound of horse hooves, Myr ducked outside just as Aralorn slipped off the stallion's back.

"What's wrong?" he asked, taking in her appearance.

"Uriah ... about a hundred of them. They're coming." Aralorn panted heavily, her voice hoarse with what was turning into the grandfather of all colds. "I think that the caves will be safer. Leave the tents behind, but take all the food, blankets and weapons that you can."

He was acting before she finished speaking. The children, under the leadership of Stanis, were sent ahead with such things as they could carry. Myr had the majority of the camp packed and on the trail to the caves before anyone had time to panic.

Aralorn and Myr brought up the rear of the procession. Aralorn, listening for the Uriah behind them, chafed at the slow pace they were forced to take because most people were on foot—but then again, even a dead run would have been too slow. She walked beside her exhausted horse and hoped that Sheen wasn't so tired that he wouldn't give warning if the Uriah got too close.

By the time they arrived at the caves, Aralorn found herself mildly surprised that they had beaten the Uriah there. Myr put her in charge of organizing supplies while he worked on sorting out living quarters.

When he had a chance, Myr sought Aralorn out. "This is only going to delay them, you know that. I've been told they can track a man as well as a hunting dog." Myr spoke in a soft voice designed not to carry to anyone but Aralorn. "I don't have much experience with Uriah. All that I know is that they are very hard to kill and are almost as immune to magic as I am. Is there some sort of defense that we can mount?"

Aralorn nodded. "They don't like fire, so make sure that there are torches ready. This lot"—she swung a hand in the general direction of others in the cavern—"will fight better with torches than swords."

Myr gave her a tired smile. "And no worries about how to light the torches either, with this assortment of amateur magic-users. I think that the only one who can't light a torch with magic is me. Haris!" He caught the attention of the smith who was organizing the storage of supplies. "I want a bonfire laid in the entrance and someone who can light it from a distance stationed to watch for the Uriah."

Haris nodded, and Myr returned his attention to Aralorn. "There are three or four here who should be able to light the fire from a good distance. I'll station them in relays."

Aralorn shivered in her still-damp clothes. "I don't know if they'll come inside the caves. There is some kind of warding near the entrance; you can see the markings if you want to look. Wolf must have set them. I suspect that the warding was the reason that Edom wouldn't enter the caves. Do you remember?"

Myr nodded. "When we were looking for Astrid, yes."

Aralorn continued. "If it works like the spells that shape-changers use, the Uriah won't even see the caves unless we are lighting fires and running in and out to attract their attention. The trail that we took up here is virtually a stream from the melting snow, so that in a little while there will be no sign that we came this way."

"I'll see that everyone stays inside." Myr started to go; someone was calling to him from a storage cave. "Aralorn?"

“Yes?”

“Change your clothes for something dry, before you catch lung-fever. You can use something of mine if you need to. My packs are marked over against the far wall.”

“Thanks.” She made her way to his packs, unmistakable because of the embroidered dragon that glared at her as she rifled through his belongings. True shapeshifters could probably alter the clothes that they were wearing, but Aralorn had no idea how to go about it. She pulled out a pair of plain trousers and a tunic of a dark hue (she couldn’t see the color in the shadows of the cave) and, best of all, a pair of dry cotton stockings.

With clothes in hand, she hunted down an unoccupied cranny and exchanged the wet clothes for the dry ones. The oil coating on the boots worked boiler in snow than in rivers. The water had run in from the top and been prevented from leaving by the oil on the outside, so that they were marshy inside. Aralorn dried them out as best she could and pulled them on over her newly acquired socks. She had hoped for better results.

She surveyed herself wryly when she was done. Myr was not tall, for a man, which left him only a head or so taller than she. He was, however, built like a stone wall.

Well, she thought, lugging at the front of the tunic, at least she wouldn’t have to worry about it being too tight.

The camp was starting to look organized again. Rather than upset Myr’s plans, Aralorn found the cave that was functioning as a temporary corral and began a better-late-than-never rubdown on Sheen. He stood quietly with head and tail lowered—a sure sign that he was as tired as she was.

Stanis found her there using a handful of hay in an unequal battle against the mud on the stallion’s belly.

“Aralorn. I think Astrid went back to camp.” His normally cheerful expression was anxious.

“What? ... Why?” Aralorn left off grooming, dropping the straw as she spoke.

“I can’t find her anywhere an’ neither can Tobin, we searched an’ searched. She was crying all of the way up here because she left the doll her mother made her at camp. We tried to tell her that it would be all right, everyone knows that Uriah don’t eat dolls, just people. But I haven’t seen her since you came in, and neither has anyone else.”

She knew that it was foolish—if Astrid had gone back to camp she would be dead by now—but Aralorn would not be able to live with herself if she didn’t look.

“How many people have you told this to?” She was fitting her bridle to one of the camp horses, since Sheen was too tired to make the trip back into camp.

“Lots of people know I’m looking for her, but you’re the only one that I told what I thought happened to her. I tried to tell Myr, but Haris was talking to him and lots of other people.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to sneak out of here and go look for her. I don’t want you to tell anyone that I’ve gone. Keep looking for her here. She was pretty excited about the man who helped her find her way out of the caves.

She may just have wandered deeper into the cave to see if she could find him. Wait until Myr isn’t busy and then tell him where I’ve gone; that should take long enough that I’ll either be back or I’m not coming back. Tell him that I said not to send anyone else after me. There aren’t enough people to spare. I’m just

going to sneak down to our camp and see if I can spot her. If I don't see her, I'll ride right back up.”

She paused only long enough to get her sword. As she belted it on, the thought occurred to her that if she were going to have to keep using it against Uriah, it would behoove her to get more proficient at wielding the plaguing thing.

It wasn't easy, with her limited magical powers, to sneak through a cave filled with magic-users, albeit weak ones. The gelding, sulky at leaving the other horses munching dinner, complicated matters as well. She almost left him behind, but although he made it a little bit more difficult to escape undetected, he also gave her an edge if she were discovered or had to rescue the girl. The mice and birds that she could easily shapeshift into weren't much use against Uriah, and she was too tired from her frantic ride to try anything else.

Once out of the occupied caves, she gave up trying to remain unseen. The guards didn't challenge her as she took the horse past them. They were looking for Uriah coming in, not people going out.

* * *

outside, the screaming cries of the uriah were clearly audible as they fought over the provisions that had been left behind. At least she hoped that was what they were lighting for, but the thought of what could happen to a lone child made her urge the horse to a speed that wasn't quite safe in the early evening shadows, darting through the underbrush. She drew her sword so that it would be ready.

She stayed off the trails and followed a creekbed to the far side of the valley near Wolf's camp, so the Uriah couldn't easily follow her back trail to the caves. It wasn't until she got to the valley that she realized that Astrid would have followed the main trail down.

She was turning to go when she heard a whistle from down below, She would have known it anywhere. Talor had always been tone deaf—giving his signals a peculiar flat sound all their own as well as making it unclear exactly what he was signaling. In this case it could have been either “all clear” or “help.” Given the circumstance, Aralorn picked the latter.

Without hesitation she urged the horse down the slope. The only excuse that she had for her action was that she was exhausted and reacting from instinct instead of thought. Her borrowed horse was not as sure-footed as Sheen, and stumbled badly on the rocky slope. The horse made a lot of noise, and ended up sliding most of the way down on a small avalanche of his own making.

Well, she thought, so much for the element of surprise. Maybe her grandiose arrival would at least see her immortalized in song; sadly, no bards or troubadours seemed to be present.

The gelding was still sliding uncontrollably when she ran into a small group of Uriah. As they easily pulled down the horse beneath her, Aralorn jumped clear, hoping that the horse would distract most of them and give her a chance to find either Talor or Astrid. Her jump took her clear of the feeding frenzy, and earned her only a scraped shin and modest bruises. By the time she regained her feet there were two Uriah nearly upon her. She used the split-second before they attacked to search for a possible escape, but everywhere she looked there were more of them converging.

Bleakly, she thought of another of Ren's homilies—it only took one stupid move to topple a throne. She used her sword in a useless attempt to defend herself and waited to die.

It seemed like it took forever. She swung and limbs fell, still writhing as if unwilling to accede to death with somber dignity. She swung until her arms were heavy and her tendons burned like slow acid in her shoulders. Her body was covered with myriad scrapes. Surprisingly, none of her wounds was in itself

serious; but collectively they sapped her strength and dulled her reflexes. The Uriah just kept coming. The horse's screams had stopped, for which she was profoundly thankful. It had been stupid of her to come running; any human who had been here was beyond anyone's ability to help. She had little talent as a mindspeaker, but she sent a cry to Wolf anyway not being one to give up. Then she bit her lip and grimly hacked away.

Her arms were numb by the time that it dawned on her what was going on. She timed her strokes to the refrain in her head: *stupid, stupid, silly hitch*. They could have killed her anytime they wanted to, but they didn't want to. They were trying to capture her to take back to the ae'Magi for questioning. The thought of that redoubled her efforts. If she could win herself enough space, she could draw her knife and eliminate the chance of being questioned by the ae'Magi again. Her sword, although shorter than normal, was still too awkward to kill herself with before they stopped her.

She spun around with a killing stroke when she heard something approach behind her. She caught a quick glimpse of his face and recognized Talor: she'd forgotten about him. Frantically she avoided hitting him by a narrow margin. Then she got a clear view of him—something was wrong. Bile rose in her throat as she brought the sword back up again, but before she could strike she was caught from behind and held helpless.

What happened next was enough to top her worst nightmares. The thing smiled—and it was Talor's smile despite the rotting flesh—and it said in Talor's teasing voice, "I told you to always follow through on your strokes or you would never make a swordmaster."

She thought that she screamed then, but it might have been just the sound of a Uriah, lucky enough to feast on the horse.

Seven

The wolf leapt neatly over the small stream that hadn't been there the week before and landed in the soft mud on the other side. The moon's light revealed other evidence of the recent storm—branches bent and broken from the weight of a heavy snowfall; long grass lying flattened on the ground. The air smelled sweet and clean, washed free of heavy scents.

Knowing that the camp was near, Wolf increased his speed to a swift lope despite his tiredness. He reached the edge of the valley and found it barren of people. He felt no alarm. Even if the storm hadn't driven them to the caves, the meltwater from the heavy snow that turned most of the valley bottom to marsh would have.

With a snort he started down the valley side nearest where he had made his private camp. He decided to stop there and get his things before going on to the caves. Aralom's bedroll was gone, but his was neatly folded and dry under its oilcloth cover.

He muttered a few words that he wouldn't have employed had there been anyone to see, and took on his human form. Warily he stretched, more than half inclined to stay where he was for the night and join the others in the morning.

He'd always been solitary by nature. As a boy and while an apprentice, he'd spent time alone as often as he could manage. He had become adept at finding places where no one would look. When he left his apprenticeship behind him, he'd taken wolfshape and run into the wilds of the Northlands, escaping from himself more than the ae'Magi. He had avoided contact with people because, after he'd been alone in the woods for a while, they'd made him as uncomfortable as he made them. He hadn't seen a human in months when he had been caught by that stupid trap.

He would have eluded it easily (it hadn't been well hidden), but he'd taken sick the day before and was half delirious from fever. Between fever and pain of the metal jaws, he'd been unable to spring the trap by himself. By the time that Aralorn had found him, he'd been more dead than alive.

He left when he was able to do so, but he didn't go very far. Aralorn fascinated him; he'd never met anyone so content. On impulse he'd returned to her—though the attraction he felt for her made him nervous.

Absently Wolf moved his bedroll with the toe of his boot. He made a sound that was not humorous enough to be a laugh. He'd been running away from and to Aralorn for a long time. She had caught him in a spell, and he hadn't even known that she was weaving one.

He'd told himself that he was a disinterested observer at first. It was a woeful attempt. No one, but no one, could be objective around Aralorn. She was always *doing* something; and somehow she managed it so that everyone else was involved too. She had a way of finding the ridiculous in everything. It had been a long time since laughter had made Wolf feel anything but repulsed—the ae'Magi laughed so easily.

Needing someone made him *very* uncomfortable. He didn't remember ever needing someone before. It wasn't until he'd found out that Aralorn was spying on the ae'Magi that he knew how much she meant to him. Even the thought of her there made him shake with remembered rage and fear.

He wasn't quite certain when his interest had turned to need. He needed her to let him laugh, to be human and not a flawed creation of the ae'Magi. He needed her trust so that he could trust himself. Most of all he needed her touch. Even more than laughter, he associated touch with the ae'Magi—a warm hand on his shoulder (cut it so, child), an affectionate hug (it won't hurt so much next time ...)—Aralorn was a tactile person too, but her touch didn't lie. It made him uncomfortable to feel her hands on him, but he craved it anyway.

He picked up the bedroll and finished his descent into the valley, since it was the shortest way to the caves. When he arrived at the valley floor, even his dulled human nose caught the scent. Uriah.

Alert now, he looked around him and noticed the signs of hasty packing as well as the fact that the tents (including the one that Myr had worked so hard to get finished) were torn into pieces by something other than the wind. He jogged into the main camp to get a closer look. Here the scent was stronger and everywhere were signs of anger vented on inanimate objects.

Human bones were conspicuously absent, and he felt a faint sense of relief. Myr must have had enough warning to get the camp into the caves. As long as the Uriah hadn't been within sight when the people entered the caves, the wards would keep the entrances hidden from the Uriah.

Wolf started once more for the caves when he saw something white in the drying mud. Curious, he investigated and found a horse's skeleton. To his relief, it was too small to be Sheen.

It was picked clean, with only a wisp of mane to distinguish it. The leg bones had been cracked so that all the marrow could be sucked out. It wasn't until he noticed the distinctive patterns on the silver bit that lay nearby that he knew that Aralorn had been riding the horse.

He found another pile of bones, also picked clean, fifteen or twenty paces away. They all had the peculiar twists of the Uriah. He found three skulls—she'd accounted for three of them. He had hoped that if he looked long enough, he would find her among the dead—something inside him laughed mockingly at the thought.

He left his bedroll forgotten among the ruins of the camp and took wolf shape to run toward the caves.

On the way there he found the pitiful remains of a small child; a dirty battered doll lay nearby. Astrid—he remembered the doll. He knew then why Aralorn had confronted the Uriah. Rage sang in his blood. He restrained it with a pale sense of duty and the faint hope that Myr would know something to help his search, and continued rapidly to the caves.

He planned quickly as he ran so that he wouldn't think too much on other things. He was conscious of a numbness that crept over him, covering hot rage with a thin coating of ice.

The furious arguments were audible even before he entered the darkness of the cave.

“Silence!” Myr's voice cracked with tiredness, but its power was still enough that it stopped the bickering. “There is nothing that we can do. Aralorn and Astrid are gone. I will not send out parties to be picked off two at a time by the Uriah. We will wait here until I am satisfied that they are gone. Even if Aralorn and Astrid were still alive, even if our whole party went down to the camp and found them prisoners of the Uriah, it wouldn't matter. We could not take them.”

Wolf stopped in the shadows of the entrance to the great cavern. Myr stood in front of him, facing the main room so that Wolf had a clear view of Myr's profile. The light from the torch revealed the tired lines of his face. “It wouldn't matter because four Uriah could destroy all of us, however we were armed. They would kill us and we'd be lucky if we killed one of them. Aralorn knew that when she went out looking for Astrid. She stood a better chance than any of us because she has dealt with them before. Had I known what she was doing, I would have stopped her, but I didn't. I will, however, stop any of you who try to leave now. When the sun comes up I will look.”

“Afraid of the dark, princeling?” A swarthy man stepped out of the crowd. His face was unfamiliar, so he must have arrived after Wolf left. He was an aristocrat, from his clothes—less impressed with the boy-king than *the* peasants were.

Wolf spoke then from the darkness of the entryway. “As you should be. If I were him, I would send you out on your own to find out what happens to fools in the dark.” Wolf stepped to the left of Myr, clearly revealed in the light of the torch. When he was sure that all eyes were upon him, he took his human form with all the theatrics that even the ae'Magi could have used. Masked and cloaked, he stood with a hand on his glowing staff that made Myr's torch look like a candle. “As it happens, it is unnecessary for anyone to go out.

“Astrid is dead.” Wolf pitched his voice so that it carried to everyone in the room without echoing. “I found her remains as well as those of the horse that Aralorn was riding. I found no trace of Aralorn's body. I suspect that she is a prisoner of the ae'Magi.” He could tell from their reaction that most of them hadn't realized that this attack too had been engineered by the ae'Magi. He couldn't work up the effort to care. “He will concentrate on her until he finds out where we are now. To break Aralorn, he will have to do the questioning himself; she is too well trained for conventional methods to work. He will probably not consider this an urgent matter—he is too busy ferreting out the locations of other magic-users in Reth. He may give Aralorn enough time to find a way to kill herself.”

He paused and continued in a disinterested voice, this time speaking directly to Myr. “My advice is for you to stay here for now. It is probably quite safe for you to go out for a while yet. The ae'Magi won't expect you to be this close to the original camp. If I am not back in a fortnight it would be best for you to move on.” Wolf started to leave but turned back. “I would find a way to block off the paths that I didn't map for you so that no one is hurt or lost. You could follow these caves for a hundred miles if you wanted to.” He left then, as quietly as he came in.

* * *

he knew all the ae'magi's castles, even those acquired after he'd left. He had made a point of exploring each of them, partially to see if he could, but also because he might find that he needed the knowledge. Even as he had done so, he'd been amused that Aralorn's passion for information had passed on to him. Now he was grateful for the habit.

First he went, traveling by magic, to the Archmage's Castle since it was the ae'Magi's preferred residence as well as the closest one to the camp—about four days' ride. He took the time to see if the ae'Magi was in residence, not that it would have kept Wolf out if he had been. He searched the dungeon twice, certain that she would be there, but he didn't see her among the pitiful captives of the ae'Magi. He looked through the castle, even the stables, but saw no sign of her anywhere. Then he continued on to the next hold.

He searched through the night and all the next day, even the royal palace of Reth and the small cottage in which the ae'Magi had been born. Finally he had to admit defeat. He thought that she must have been able to kill herself, because he found no trace of her anywhere that the ae'Magi was remotely connected with. For lack of anything better to do, he returned to the caves.

* * *

aralorn traveled out of the northlands on the back of the Uriah who had captured her—she would *not* think of it as Talor. The smell of the thing at this close range was debilitating, and she was glad enough for the cold that stuffed up her nose. She had been stripped of her weapons with ruthless efficiency and bound hand and foot. The constant jostling of the thing's shoulder in her midriff was giving her a headache that made it difficult to think clearly.

They stopped when they were out of the mountains and dumped her ignominiously face-down on the ground. By turning her face to the side she could see them moving restlessly, snarling irritably at each other. For the most part they ignored her, but she received enough hungry looks that she tried to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. She tried shapechanging once when nothing was paying attention to her, but the pain in her head kept distracting her.

She was concentrating for another attempt, but this time the distraction came in the form of a thud originating just out of her field of view. One by one the Uriah dropped to the ground; only the glitter of their eyes gave indication that they were not asleep—or dead.

“Sst. Filthy things. Why he uses them I cannot imagine,” The voice was a light tenor, speaking Rethian with a high-court accent. Her position on the ground limited her field of view, but she could see the elegant shoes topped by the embroidered stockings of a true dandy.

“So,” the soft voice continued, “you are the prisoner the ae'Magi is so anxious to get.” She was pushed over on her side by a magical shove and got her first look at the magician. His face was handsome enough, although overpowered by the purple wig he affected. She didn't know him by sight, but his ability to immobilize an army of Uriah and his dress let her put a name to him: Lord Kisrah, a minor noble whose abilities had been invaluable to Myr's grandfather in the last war. Her father told her once that he was a competent tactician and diplomat, high praise from a man who despised the courtier type.

“Not very much of you, is there? From all the fuss the ae'Magi is putting up over you, I had expected more—although you would clean up well enough, I suppose. It is too bad that you chose to attack the ae'Magi in such treasonous fashion.” He shook his head sadly at her, and she noticed with shock that his eyes were kind. “Get set now. I'm going to transport you to the ae'Magi's castle. I don't like transporting humans, it's too hard on them. But the ae'Magi is concerned about Prince Myr. It's not right to take advantage of a man whose mind is turned by grief, and we need to get to him as soon as

possible.” He rubbed his hands together a minute in preparation. “The ae’Magi is much better at this thing than I am, but he is busy with other mailers, so I will have to do.”

His magic hit her body with enough force that she almost passed out. She hit a hard stone floor, sweating and coughing. If she wasn’t careful she was going to die of lung-fever before the magician could get his hands on her. She laughed at the thought, bringing on another fit of coughing.

Ungentle hands grabbed her upper arms with bruising strength, but the man grunted as he picked her up—she was a lot heavier than she looked. It had been daylight outside, so the gloominess of the torchlit stone walls and her hair, which had come undone from its customary braid and now hung over her face, rendered her effectively blind.

She was stripped with ruthless efficiency. To take her mind off what *that* meant, she tried to recapture a stray thought she’d had just before Lord Kisrah had sent her over. She had a vague notion that it might be important. Her aching head didn’t want to cooperate.

“Look, here, Garogue, she ain’t as small as she looks!” Rough laughter and comments she would have felt better not hearing as a second guard neared.

Think, Aralorn, she told herself. I was relieved that ... that I had not met Lord Kisrah before. Her face felt hot and tight, in spite of the coolness of the stone under her feet. Lord Kisrah would not recognize me as the Lyon’s daughter. She waited a minute before the significance of that thought hit her. I have, however, met the ae’Magi as the Lyon’s daughter. He was intrigued with the color of my eyes—my shapeshifter blood.

Gods, she thought bleakly, if he realizes who I am, he can use my father against me.

While the guards were preoccupied she tried again to change. Not a drastic change this time, just an adjustment to her face and eyes. Her features sharpened until they were as common to Rethian peasant stock as her medium brown eyes. With a bit more effort, her skin darkened to add authenticity.

“Too bad we can’t do nothin’ with her but look.” A calloused hand ran over her hip.

“Yup, don’ you ever think nothing else. Just you remember what happened to Len. He thought the ae’Magi wouldn’t ever know. Besides, we usually get a turn at ’em.”

She was dragged forward again, her exhaustion making her more of a dead weight than before. Her head contacted the stone wall when she was swung over a broad shoulder.

“Yawan! They sure grow these Northerners heavy!” More laughter, but by then Aralorn was beyond caring.

* * *

it was late night when wolf returned to the camp. he expected everyone to be asleep. Instead he came upon Myr seated on a rock in front of the caves and polishing Aralorn’s sword by the light of the moon.

“Where did you find it?” Wolf asked. Startled, Myr leapt to his feet, holding the sword at ready.

Seeing Wolf, Myr resumed his former position on the rock. “Oh, it’s you, Wolf. No luck?” Myr didn’t need to see Wolf’s nod to know that Aralorn had not been found; the Wolf’s posture was evidence enough.

Myr held the blade up to the light. “I found it in a small cave off the entranceway this evening. Someone

had made an attempt to clean it but they didn't do a very good job. I suppose that one of the children found it, and left it there when he realized what it was. I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd clean it—no sense letting a good sword rust.”

“No,” agreed Wolf, lying down facing Myr with his muzzle on his paws.

After a while Myr asked, “Where did you look?”

So Wolf told him: it took some time. Myr listened, running the soft cloth over the odd-colored blade. When Wolf was done, Myr thought for a minute.

“How did you look for her? I mean, did you just look? Couldn't a shapeshifter change her shape and escape?”

Wolf shook his head. “Once she's in the dungeons, she wouldn't be able to change. The bindings in the dungeons are all cold iron.”

“Iron does suppress magic?” Myr said, only half asking.

“Green magic, yes.”

The night was still except for the noise the soft cloth made on the sword. Then Myr said, “I'd met her once before, did you know that? It took me a while before I could pin down just where, because I was only, hmm, seven? A more pompous, self-centered, proper little brat than I was you'd be hard pressed to find. At the time I didn't realize exactly who she was, but she had the same mannerisms. Equal with anybody and observing protocol only because it suited her. I was offended, but my grandfather laughed and kissed her hands and said something about counting on her to liven up a dull reception.”

There was a brief pause before he continued with his story. “You have to understand that I've been raised reading people's faces all my life. I saw that she really respected the tough old man, and the lack of sincerity in her manners was merely dislike for the untruths that protocol demanded. It was a lesson that I took to heart.” Myr paused, absently noting that the blade was almost clean.

Myr set the sword aside and said, “What I'm getting to is this: the ae'Magi was at court a lot in those days. My grandfather thought the world of him. If I met Aralorn at court, wouldn't he have? She's not ... pretty, but she is memorable.”

Wolf caught his breath sharply during Myr's comment and said a filthy word. “She would be much more conscious of that than we are, so if it occurred to us, then it occurred to her too. Knowing who she is would allow him to use her family as a lever against her. With that in mind, she would do her best to make herself unrecognizable. How long is it since she was taken?”

“Four days.”

Finally the Wolf spoke again. “She's in one of the dungeons, obviously—otherwise she would have escaped. I think that it is probably the first place I looked—in the Archmage's Castle. When I searched the last few castles, I was thorough—I had gone too quickly at first. She doesn't have much time; the dungeon masters in his keeps are not renowned for their gentle treatment of the prisoners—to say nothing of the ae'Magi himself. She should be safe from him, though; he's got other concerns that are more important.”

Wolf paused to think before he continued. “If she's not there, I'll come back here to check in with you. If she escapes, this is the only sanctuary that she has to come to.” On those words, the Wolf melted into the forest shadows, leaving the young king sitting on his rock.

* * *

“myr has a magician with him. what does he look like?” The ae’Magi’s voice was really extraordinary, thought Aralorn. Soft and warm, it offered sanctuary—but she knew those tones, and terror cat-footed toward her.

But not even that fear, combined with the cuts he was making on her arm, was enough to hold her attention for long. The pain from centuries of magic woven tightly into the stones of the dungeons made what he was doing to her body seem surreal. She wondered if she ought to tell him that if he used iron manacles in the torture chamber as well as in the cell that she would be much more aware of what he was doing; the iron blocked her meager talents from picking up on the twisted magic that a thousand years of magicians had left in the stone of the dungeon.

A bucket of cold water brought her attention back to her body. It felt good against her hot skin at first, but then the chill made her shake helplessly. In a rational moment she smiled; the lung-fever would take her soon, in a few days, if she could just hide it from him so that he wouldn’t turn her into one of the dead things that hung restlessly in her cell. She’d been grateful when she’d lost her sight and she didn’t have to look at them anymore—if only she could do something about hearing them.

He wasn’t using magic on her as he had the first time she’d visited his castle. Maybe the dungeon inhibited his magic as well—or maybe he was using all his magic for something else.

* * *

baffled, the ae’magi looked at the pathetic figure hanging in front of him. He had seen her smile while he was cutting her, and it bothered him. She wasn’t one of those who enjoyed pain; she didn’t seem to even feel it. Torture wasn’t working on her.

She seemed confused sometimes, though. Perhaps stealth could get him what pain could not.

“Sweetheart, sweetheart, listen to me,” said Myr’s voice, his tones as gentle as a young man could make them.

Aralorn jerked in reflex at the voice.

“Sweetheart, I know that you hurt. I’ve come to get you out of here, but you need to tell me where Cain is. We need him to get you out.”

She frowned and said in a puzzled voice, “Cain?”

“Yes,” said Myr; she heard a touch of anger in the voice now. “Where is Cain?”

Myr wouldn’t be angry with her. The certainty came from somewhere. She should know who Cain was, though, and it bothered her that she didn’t. That didn’t mean that she wanted the person who had stolen Myr’s voice to know that.

“Dead,” she said then, with utter certainty. Somewhere a part of her applauded the edge of melancholy she gave to her voice. “He is dead and gone.”

That hadn’t occurred to him, it simply hadn’t occurred to him. The ae’Magi paced the length of the chamber. It wasn’t possible. Angrily he stripped off the gloves he’d fastidiously donned to separate him from her filthy flesh.

It would ruin everything if his son were dead. All his efforts would be for nothing. He raised the knife to

her throat and then thought better of it. Turning on his heel, he stalked out of the chamber. As he passed through the guardroom he left orders to have her moved back into her cell and, as an afterthought, told the dungeon master that if he could find out where the rebels were hiding now, he would give him a silver piece.

* * *

the master magician's castle was over a thousand years old, and the result of those years on the dungeon was not lovely. The smell made Wolf choke as he slunk into it from the hidden entrance. Magic had taken him to the castle, but he'd been forced to use mundane methods to enter.

No one saw him as he emerged. The night guards were in the room that was the only passageway from the main dungeon, other than the hidden ones, of course. There was no need for their presence in the actual dungeon, unless they were escorting a captive to or from the cells.

He stood on a wide stone walkway, in human shape. On one side were seven cells, sunken the depth of a grave, in the old style. On the other side was the torture chamber, also so sunken. It was unoccupied at the moment. The only hint of life came from the smoldering coals in the raised hearth in the center of the cells.

There was no light in the dungeon other than Wolf's staff, but it was sufficient. The ring of keys was still kept on its holder near the guardroom door for convenience's sake.

He slid the nearest door open and stepped in. The prisoners watched him with fear, hatred, or indifference. He took wolfshape because of the wolf's sharper senses and immediately regretted the necessity. The smells of a dungeon were bad enough to a human nose, but the Wolf's eyes were watering as he backed out of the cell. She wasn't in there. He found the same at the second and third cells.

In the last cell, chained corpses littered the floor and hung on the wall like broken dolls, but they moaned and breathed with the pseudo-life that animated Uriah. They watched him with glittering eyes as he shifted again to wolfshape to sample the air. She was here. Back in human form again, he waded through the corpses, indifferently pulling free when one caught at his foot.

He found her at last. Her skin was darker and her face was different, but she was muttering to herself, and it was her voice; her scent under the filth. Her breathing was hoarse and difficult, breaking into heavy coughing when he shifted her against him to take off the irons. He swore softly at the wounds they left on her ankles and wrists.

Gently he picked her up, ignoring the smell of dungeon that clung to her. He stepped over the huddled bodies of her fellow inmates with no more attention than if they had been bundles of straw. Although he had no hands free to carry it, the staff followed him like an obedient dog.

As he closed the cell door and locked it again, he heard voices in the main guardroom. Swearing softly under his breath, he moved back into the shadows. The secret door he'd entered through was a crawl space, too narrow to get through quickly with Aralorn unable to move on her own.

He touched the mask with his staff and it disappeared. A brief moment of concentration, and the scars followed.

Trying to avoid causing her any further hurt, he positioned Aralorn on his shoulder, holding her in place with one hand and letting the other hang carelessly free. The staff disappeared, leaving only its light behind.

The sound of the inner door opening left the guards scrambling for their weapons, until they saw who it was that stood there.

Wolf carelessly tossed the keys on the rough-hewn table, where they left a track in the greasy build-up as they slid. When he spoke, it was with the ae'Magi's hated voice, soft and warm with music.

"I think that it would be wiser from now on for the guard in charge to keep the keys on his person. It is too easy for someone to enter the dungeon by other paths. There is no reason that we should make it any easier to get into the cells than it already is."

Without looking at the men again he walked to the far door, which obediently opened to let him through and closed after him. The wide staircase that led to the upper floors stretched in front of him, leaving but a narrow space against the wall, supposedly to allow access to the area under the stairs that was sometimes used for storage. It was this path that he took, ducking as he moved under the stairway.

He needed no light; most wizards see well in the dark and he better than most. Unerringly he touched the exact spot that triggered the hidden door. As he stepped through he whispered a soft spell, and the dust under the stairs rearranged itself until it looked as it had before he had walked there.

With the stone door shut behind him, the passage was as dark as pitch, and there was little light for even his eyes to pick out. Tiny flecks of illumination that found their way through openings in the mortar made the towering walls glitter like the night sky. Their presence gave ample warning against lighting the way—lest someone in a dark room on the other side of the wall witness the same phenomenon.

Wolf kept one hand against a wall and the other securely around Aralorn and felt the ground ahead with his feet. He slowed his progress when a pile of refuse he kicked with his foot bounced down an unseen stairway. With a grim smile that no one could see, he started blindly down the stairs.

There were shuffling noises as rats and other less savory creatures scrambled anonymously out of his way. Once he almost lost his footing as he stepped on something not long dead. A growling hiss protested his encroachment on dinner.

Only when they reached the last of the long flight of steps did he decide they were far enough down that he dared a light. The floor was thick with dust; only faint outlines showed where he had disturbed the dust the last time he'd been here several years before, raiding one of the hidden libraries.

Content that the passage had remained undiscovered, Wolf walked to a blank wall and sketched symbols in the air before it. The symbols hung glowing orange in the shadows until he was finished; then they shimmered and moved until they were touching the wall. The wall glittered in its turn before abruptly disappearing—opening the way to still another obscure passage, deep in the rock under the castle. He continued for some time, twisting his way this way and that through passages once discovered by a lonely boy seeking sanctuary.

Twice he had to change his route because the way he remembered was too small for him to take carrying Aralorn. Once the passage was blocked by a recent cave-in. Several of the corridors showed signs of recent use, and he avoided them as well. They surfaced finally from the labyrinth, several miles east and well out of easy view of the castle.

He shifted her from his shoulder then, cradling her in his arms though she was harder to carry that way. There was nothing that he could do until they reached safer ground, so he trod swift of foot through the night-dark forest, listening intently for sounds that shouldn't be there.

He wished that he hadn't had to show himself, because now, after all of his caution, it was going to be

obvious that he was mixed up with Myr's group. The ae'Magi had been seeking him for a long time. Now the attacks on Myr's camp were going to intensify. There was no way that they could withstand the ae'Magi's direct attention.

It was possible that the guards wouldn't mention the incident to the ae'Magi—but it was always better to be prepared for the worst. He was going to have to stage his confrontation with the Archmage soon. He hoped now that he had the name of the apprentice, he could find the way to dispel the magic.

He wasn't looking forward to the coming battle. Old stories of the Wizard Wars, Aralorn could tell them by the hour, spoke of battles of pure power between one magician and another—the great glass desert, over a hundred square miles of blackened glass, gave mute evidence of the costs of such battles. If he, with his strange mutations of magic, ever got involved in a battle on those terms, the results could be far worse.

It might be far better to let the magician extend his power. Even the best magicians live only three to four hundred years, and the ae'Magi was well into his second century. Expending his power the way that he was now, even taking into account the energy¹ he stole, would take years off his life. A hundred years of tyranny was better than the destruction of the earth.

The glass desert had been fertile soil once.

He walked until well after the sun rose, following no visible trail—losing them in the wilds as best he might. He stopped when they reached the cache he'd set up on his way here, far enough off the trails that they should be safe for a while.

He opened the bedroll awkwardly, unwilling to set her on the hard ground, and gently placed her on the soft blankets. His arms were cramping and sore from carrying her, so he had to stretch a bit before he did anything else.

Her darker skin hid the Hush of fever, but it was hot and dry to his touch. Her breathing was hoarse and he could hear the fluid in her lungs. He rolled the second blanket up and stuffed it under her head to help her breathe. Efficiently, gently, he cleaned her with spell-warmed water.

On the dark skin it should have been more difficult to see the bruises, but her skin was grey from illness—revealing the darker patches. Some were obviously old, probably from her initial capture. But fresh bruises overlaid the old ones.

Three ribs were either broken or cracked; he wasn't well enough trained in healing to tell the difference. The ribs and a large lump on the back of her head seemed the worst of her wounds—both were more likely the result of her initial capture than any torture.

Her fingernails had been removed, swollen knuckles revealing the violence of the method used to pull them. The toes on her right foot were broken, the smallest torn off completely. She had been whipped with efficiency from the top of her shoulders to the backs of her knees. But these would heal in a few weeks, except of course for the misplaced toe.

He pulled out the bag of simples that he had brought with him. He wasn't a healer by any means, but he'd picked up enough to bind her wounds.

When he was through cleaning her back, he covered it with a mold paste and wrapped the bandage around tight enough to help her ribs. He splinted the toes and cleaned and bandaged her ankles, hands and wrists.

It was while he was working on her wrists that he noticed the large sore where the inner side of her arm had been skinned. He stilled, then very gently covered the sore with ointment and wrapped it.

It was one of the ae'Magi's favorite games. The inner arm was tender, and a man who was skilled with a skinning knife could cause significant pain without incapacitating his victim. The ae'Magi usually did—something extremely nasty first to “soften” the victim.

Carefully Wolf opened Aralorn's mouth and examined the inside of her cheek, the roof of her mouth, under her tongue, and her teeth. Nothing. He looked inside her ear and said a few soft words of magic. Nothing. As he turned her head to look at her other ear, something sparkled in the sun. Her eyes.

Carefully Wolf held her face in the sunlight and examined her eyelids. They were both, on careful examination, slightly swollen, but it was the seepage that told the real story.

He held his open hand several inches over her eye and murmured another spell. When he look his hand away, he held four long, slender, steel needles, barbed like a fisherman's hook. The needles were sharp enough that they slid in with little pain, but every time the eye moved the sharpened edges of the needle cut a little more. They were not the expensive silver needles, but the cheaper iron-based steel—made primarily for coarser work.

He looked at them for a minute and they melted, leaving his hand undamaged. As he removed them from her other eye, he wished passionately, and not for the first time in his life, that he knew more.

True healing was one of the first things taught to a shapeshifter, but for a human magic-user it was one of the last arts learned. Increasing the efficacy of herbs was the best he knew. He doubted that in this case even a shapeshifter could heal her eyes—he seemed to remember something about wounds made with cold iron being more difficult than others. He put her in a soft cotton shirt that reached to her thighs. For lack of a better idea, he put a cold compress over her eyes and bound it tightly in place.

He had reached the end of his expertise. Tiredly, he covered her with another blanket and lay down next to her, not quite touching. He slept.

* * *

her world consisted of vague impressions of vision and sound. She saw people she knew, strangely altered. Sometimes they filled her with horror, other times they drew no emotion from her at all. There was Talor as he'd been the last time she'd seen him in Sianim—then something happened to him and he was dead, only he was talking to her and telling her things that she didn't want to hear.

Sometimes she floated in a great nothingness that scared her, but not as much as the pain. Her body was a great distance away, and she would pull back as far as she could because she was afraid of what she would find when she returned. Then, like the stretchy lubris rope that children played with, something would snap and she would find herself back in the midst of the pain and heat and terror. Someone screamed; it hurt her ears and she wished they would stop.

* * *

this time her return was different. besides being hot, she was also wet and sticky. The pain was dimmed to bearable levels; even the ache in her side was less. There was something that attracted her attention and she concentrated, trying to figure out what it was. It had called her back from her nothingness into somewhere she'd much rather not be. She decided in a moment of pseudo-rationality that she needed to find it and kill it so she could be free to go away.

She looked for it in her dreams, and fragments of memory touched her. There was something terribly wrong with her eyes. Cold iron whose wounds were permanent. It had bitten and chewed and ...

She shied away and found another piece of memory. Magic horribly distorted and twisted, making dead men breathe. It frightened her. There was no safety in death here, and she wanted the sanctuary that death should offer. Then the cold iron cut off her awareness of the dead things that shared her space. She had never felt so helpless; it gave her a dispirited claustrophobia that made her strain repeatedly against the bonds, until she exhausted herself. Bonds that most well-trained, full-blooded shapeshifters could have gotten out of, but she had all the weaknesses and too little power.

There ... while she was fighting ... she almost had it. The thing that had pulled her back and made her hurt again, it was sound, a familiar sound. Why should that bother her?

She was so tired. She was losing her concentration, and pictures came more rapidly until she was lost in her nightmare memories again.

* * *

they'd been camped in the same place for three days. it worried him because they were much too close to the ae'Magi's castle, but the thought of moving her worried him more. Instead of getting better since being out of the cell, she seemed worse. Her eyes were seeping with the pus of infection. Her fever was no higher, but it was no lower either. Her breathing was more difficult, and when she coughed he could tell that it hurt her ribs.

As he watched her, he tormented himself with guilt. Had he been quicker to find her, she would have stood a better chance. The needles had been used on her eyes only recently.

As it did when he was angered, the magic in him flickered fey; nudging him, tempting him. Usually he controlled it, twisting it toward his own ends, but this time he was tired with worry, guilt and sleeplessness. The magic whispered, seducing him with visions of healing.

His eyes closed, without conscious thought he stretched out carefully beside Aralorn. Gently he touched her face, seeing the wrongness there—the slight fracture in the skull that he hadn't been aware of. As he gave control away to the seductive whispers of his magic, he found that he could feel her pulse, almost her thoughts. Sex notwithstanding, this was closer than he'd ever been to another human being. With anyone else he would have lashed out, done anything just to get away—to be safe alone.

But this was Aralorn and he had to heal her, or ... he caught a flicker of the desperation of that thought, but was soon lost in the peace of his magic. He floated with it for what could have been a hundred years or a single instant. Gradually the fear of the loss of control, so well learned when his searing magic had leapt out burning, searing, hurting, crept upon him—breaking the trance he'd fallen into.

He opened his eyes and gasped for air. His heart was pounding, and sweat poured off his body. Great shudders racked him. He turned his head enough to look at Aralorn.

The first thing that hit him was that he *was* looking at Aralorn. The guise she'd donned was gone. The bruises on her legs looked much worse on her own relatively pale skin. Fever brought unnatural color to her pale cheeks.

When he could, he bent over and removed the bandage from her eyes. The swelling had almost completely gone, and her eyes appeared normal when he carefully lifted her eyelids. He felt carefully where he'd seen the break in her skull, but could locate nothing.

Almost too tired to move, he pulled her head on his shoulder and drew blankets neatly around them. He knew he should stay up and keep watch—there was no warhorse to share guard duty with—but he hadn't been this tired since his early apprentice days.

* * *

It was morning when Aralorn awoke, still slightly delirious. She'd had dreams of the quiet sounds of the forest before, and she let herself take that comfort now. She knew that all too soon she would have to face reality again. The nice thing was that the times reality crept in were getting farther and farther apart.

She thought about that for a minute before she realized that there was a man beside her. Delirium took over then, and she was drowning slowly. It was very hard to breathe, and she lost track of the forest while she strangled.

The soft sounds of a familiar voice lent her comfort and strength, but there was something wrong with the voice. It was too soft; it should be cold and rough, harsher. She associated unpleasant things with the warmer tones. The voice she wanted to hear should be dead like the Uriah, like Talor. She could hear someone whimpering and wondered who it was.

She ate and it tasted very good, salty and warm on her sore throat. She drank something else, and a part of her tasted the bitter herb with approval, knowing that it would help her breathe. *Wasn't there some reason that she didn't want to get better*—but she couldn't decide why she wouldn't want to get well, and while she thought about it, she drifted back to sleep.

Wolf watched her and waited. Without the unquenchable energy that characterized her she looked fragile, breakable. Awake, she had a tendency to make him forget how small she was.

He raged when she cried out in terror. She was not a mindspeaker, but he had some talent in that direction. Her mind called out to him, out to her father, to no one, almost ceaselessly at times. Although she babbled out loud, she said nothing that would have been any use to the ae'Magi were he listening.

She was quiet finally, and Wolf sat propped up against a tree, near enough to keep an eye on her, but far enough away that he wouldn't disturb her slumbers.

He should never have been able to heal her. Indisputably he had. Even if he did nothing more than eliminate the paths the needles had cut into her eyes, it was more than human magic allowed for. Less dramatic but even further outside the bounds of magic, as he understood it, was the fact that she now wore the appearance that was hers by birth.

He'd always had the ability to do things beyond the generally accepted bounds of human magic—taking wolfshape for extended periods of time was one of those. Before now he could attribute this to the enormous power he wielded. Human magic could heal, but it required a more detailed knowledge of the human body than he had acquired; killing required much less precision. Human magic could not recognize a shapeshifter's natural shape and restore her to it ... as he had done.

His magic had blithely crashed through the laws of magic established for thousands of years. What *was* he that he could do such things?

He found no answers. He'd seen the woman who bore him only once that he could remember. She'd seemed ordinary enough—for a woman who had spent a decade in the ae'Magi's dungeon. But the ae'Magi had got a son on her and kept her alive afterwards. She must have been more than she seemed.

Wolf had been the result of an ... experiment, perhaps: one that had gotten out of hand.

Aralorn stirred, catching his attention. He got to his feet with relief at being drawn from his thoughts, and went to her.

Eight

Aralorn was in the habit of waiting until she knew where she was and who she was supposed to be before she opened her eyes—a habit developed from frequently being someone other than herself. For some reason it seemed more difficult than usual. The warm sun on her face seemed as much out of place as the sound of a jay squeaking from its perch somewhere above her.

She moved restlessly and felt a warning twinge from her side that was instantly echoed from various other parts of her body. As a memory aid she found it effective, if crude.

The problem was, she had no idea how she had gotten from the ae'Magi's dungeon to where she was. Deciding that it was unlikely that she would come to any earth-shattering conclusions lying around feigning sleep, she opened her eyes and sat up—an action that she had immediate cause to regret. The abrupt change in position caused her to start coughing—no pleasant thing with cracked ribs. She collapsed slowly back into her prone position and waited for her eyes to quit watering.

Breathing shallowly, she restricted herself to turning her head to examine her current environment. She was alone in a small clearing, surrounded by thick shrubs that quickly gave way to broad-leafed trees. She could hear a brook running somewhere nearby. The sun was high and edging toward afternoon. Mountains rose, not far away, on at least three sides. They were smaller than their Northland counterparts, but impressive enough.

The blankets that Aralorn was more or less cocooned in were of a fine, intricate weave. She whistled softly at the extravagance. Just one of them would cost a mercenary two months' salary, and she was wrapped in two of them with her head pillowed on a third. She should have been too warm, bundled up so heavily—but it felt good.

The bandaging on her hands and wrists was neatly tied and just snug enough to give support without being too tight. Whoever tied them was better at binding wounds than she was—not a great feat. She didn't bother to examine the other bandages that covered her here and there; preferring not to scrutinize her wounds in case too many body parts were missing or nonfunctional.

It occurred to her then that her eyes should belong to the category of missing and nonfunctional items. The method the ae'Magi had used to blind her had been ... thorough; enough so that she had not thought that even shapeshifter magic could heal her. The ae'Magi was a master torturer.

She shivered in her blankets. The unwelcome thought occurred to her that it would be possible for a strong magician to create the illusion of this meadow. Much easier than healing her eyes. She looked nervously around, but she was still the only occupant of the clearing.

Somehow, she'd been assuming that Wolf had found a way to get her out of the ae'Magi's dungeon. It was more likely a ploy by the ae'Magi, either to get more information from her, or to toy with her for a while.

Deciding that if it were the ae'Magi who was going to show up, she didn't want to face him lying on her back, so she found a slender tree growing near her head. She pushed herself back until she bumped into it. Gradually, so as not to trigger another coughing spell, she raised herself with its support until she was sitting up with her back against the tree. She waited for a minute, and when she didn't start coughing she slid herself up against the tree until she was standing, more or less.

She didn't hear him until he spoke from behind her. His voice was without its usual sardonic overtones, but it was still blessedly Wolf's. "Welcome back. Lady."

She turned her head with a smile of greeting that left her when she saw his face. Only years of training kept her from giving her fear voice; even that couldn't stop the involuntary step backward that she took. Unfortunately, her feet tangled in the blanket that had covered her and she fell awkwardly.

From her position on the ground she looked up at the ae'Magi's face. He too had stepped back, albeit more gracefully. He raised a hand to his face and then dropped it abruptly. His face emotionless, he waited until she finished coughing and could talk.

Aralorn found herself grateful that she was unable to speak for a minute, because it gave her a chance to think. The ae'Magi's face it might be, but Wolf's yellow eyes glittered at her—as volatile as the face was not. She would not hurt him again by suspicion.

Before she could clear her throat enough to say anything, Wolf spoke softly. "If I thought that you could make it to safety alone, I would leave you in peace. Unfortunately that is not possible. I assure you that I will leave as soon as you are back ..."

She ended his speech with a rude word and, assuming as much dignity as she could muster sitting on her rump amidst the tangle of blankets, said hoarsely, "Idiot! Certainly I knew that you were the ae'Magi's son, Cain. Just how many apprentices do you think the ae'Magi has had? I know the name of every one of them, thanks to Ren. How many magicians do you think would have the power to do what you did to Edom? Just how stupid do you think I am?" She paused to catch her breath before continuing. "Why are you always hiding from me? First the wolfshape, then the mask and the scars. Do you distrust me so much?"

"No," said Wolf with a brief touch of laughter in his eyes; not many people would have the courage to attack him like that. Trust Aralorn to do it even when she was so weak she couldn't stand up. "I just had forgotten this." He waved a hand in the general direction of his face. "The scars are legitimate; I acquired them as I told you. It wasn't until I left the service of the ae'Magi that I realized that I could get rid of them the same way that I could take wolfshape. All things considered, I preferred the scars. When I got you out of the dungeon, it was necessary to appear to be the ae'Magi in order to get past the guards. I must have forgotten to resume the scars. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to startle you."

With an expression that wasn't quite a smile Aralorn commented, "When I die of heart failure the next time you frighten me like that, you can put that on my gravestone—'I didn't mean to startle her.'" As she talked, she looked at him carefully, seeing things that hadn't been apparent, at first. His face was without the laugh lines around the eyes and mouth that characterized the ae'Magi's. There was no grey in the black hair, but the expression in his eyes made him look much older than his father. Wolf's eyes, Wolf eyes they were—with a hunter's cold, amoral gaze.

"Does Myr know who you are?" she asked.

He nodded. "I told him before I offered my assistance. It was only fair that he knew what he was getting into."

There was a slight pause and then Aralorn said, "The ae'Magi asked me about you, about Cain." That much she *could* remember.

Wolf raised an eyebrow. "What did you say?"

Aralorn raised hers in return. "I told him that you were dead."

“Did he believe you?” he asked.

She shrugged, and started to tug discreetly at the heap of blankets that intermingled with her feet. “At the time he did, but since you chose to rescue me, he’ll probably come to the conclusion that I lied to him.”

He let her struggle with the blankets until she was through talking and then he said, “Let’s get you into a more comfortable position”—he indicated her makeshift hobble with a careless hand—“and back under the covers with you before you catch your death, shall we.” His voice was a wicked imitation of one of the healers at Sianim.

Even as he untangled her and restored her makeshift bed to its previous order, she could feel an imp of a headache coming on. “Wolf,” she said softly, catching his hand and stilling it, “don’t use the scars. You are not the ae’Magi—you don’t have to prove it.”

He tapped her on the nose and shook his head with mock despair. “Did anyone ever tell you that you are overbearing, Lady?” He resumed his efforts and tucked a pillow behind her head.

“Where are we, and how long have we been here?” It was an effort to keep her eyes open any longer, and her voice slurred as she finished the sentence, ending in a racking cough. As she hacked and gasped for breath, he held her upright. She didn’t notice that it helped any, but the feel of his arms around her was pleasant. The hazy thought occurred to her that she’d left Reth to go to Sianim to get away from the feeling of being protected; she didn’t think that he’d notice that the last few coughs were suppressed sounds of self-amusement.

He listened to her laughter and chose to ignore it outwardly, knowing that it came from weakness as much as amusement. “We’re about a day’s brisk walk away from the Master Magician’s Castle. We’ve been here for three days. As soon as you wake up we’ll start on our way.” He couldn’t tell how much of it she heard, but it didn’t matter. He’d tell her again when she woke up.

* * *

the next time aralorn regained consciousness, she was fed and dressed in a tunic and trousers she recognized as her own before she had a chance to do any more than open her eyes. She was propped up with brisk efficiency beside a tree and told to “stay there.” Wolf then piled all of the blankets, clothes and utensils together and sent them on their way with a brisk wave of his staff.

“Where did you get my clothes?” Aralorn asked with idle curiosity from where she sat leaning against a tree.

“From Sianim, where you left them.” With efficient motions he was cleaning the area they had occupied until only the remains of the fire would give indication that someone had camped there.

She raised an eyebrow at him, crossed her arms in front of her, and said in a deceptively mild tone, “You mean all the time that I was all but bursting out of the innkeeper’s son’s clothes, you could have gotten mine for me?”

He grunted without looking at her, but she could see a hint of a smile in his flawless profile.

“I asked you a question,” she said in a dangerously soft tone.

“I was waiting for the tunic seams to finally give way ...” He paused to dodge the handful of grass she threw at him, and then shrugged. “I am sorry, Lady. It just never occurred to me.”

Aralorn tried to look stern, but it turned into a laugh.

Wolf brushed the grass from his shoulders and went back to packing. Aralorn leaned back against her tree and watched him as he worked, trying to get used to the face he wore.

In an odd sort of way he looked more like his father than his father did. The ae'Magi's face was touched with innocence and compassion. Wolf's visage had neither. His was the face of a man who could do anything, and had.

"Can you ride?" he asked, calling her back from her thoughts.

She considered the state of her body. Everything functioned—sort of, anyway. Riding was certainly better than any alternative she could think of. She nodded. "If we don't go any faster than a walk. I don't think that I could sit a trot for very long."

He nodded and said three or four brisk words in a language she didn't know. He didn't bother with the theatrics in front of her. The air merely shimmered around him strangely. Not unpleasant—just difficult to look at, much nicer than when she changed shape. The black horse snorted at her and then shook itself as if it were wet.

She stood up stiffly, trying not to start coughing again. When she could, she walked shakily up to him, grateful to reach the support of his neck. Unfortunately, although Wolf's rendition of a horse wasn't as massive as Sheen, he was as tall, and in her weakened condition she couldn't climb her way up. After her third attempt, he knelt in the dust so that she could slip on his back.

They were following an old trail that had fallen into disuse; the only tracks on it were from the local wildlife. The woods around them were too dense to allow easy travel, but Wolf appeared to know them: when the trail disappeared into a lush meadow, he picked it up again on the other side without having to take a step to the left or right. His gaits, she found, were much smoother than Sheen's, but the motion still hurt her ribs.

To distract herself she thought up a question almost at random. "Where did you find a healer so near the ae'Magi's castle? I don't remember everything, but I do remember getting hit on the head and having something done to my eyes that was ... unpleasant." The dust of the road set her coughing. When she could talk again she said, "You got rooked if you paid very much; any healer worth his fee would have taken care of the ribs and cough too."

Wolf twitched his ears and said in an odd tone, even for him, "He didn't have enough time to do much. Even if there had been the time, I wouldn't have trusted him to do more than what was absolutely necessary—he ... didn't have the training."

Something felt wrong about his answer. Aralorn had an inkling that she should be paying more attention to the way he phrased his explanation, but she was in too much misery between her ribs and her cough to do much more than feel sorry for herself.

Wolf kept to a walk, trying to make the ride as smooth as possible for her. He could discern that she was in a lot of pain by the way her hands shook in his mane when she coughed, but she made light of it when he questioned her. As the day progressed she leaned wearily against his neck and coughed more often.

He continued until he could stand it no more and then he called a halt at a likely camping area, far from the main thoroughfares and out of sight of the trail they'd been following. Aralorn slid carefully off him and kept sliding until her rump hit the ground.

Wolf regained his human form before making a cushion of evergreen bows and covering the result with the blankets. While Aralorn slept on the makeshift bed. Wolf stood watch, feeling the weight of too many

sleepless nights on his eyes.

The night was peaceful, marred only by Aralorn's harsh coughing. It got so bad toward the morning that she finally stood up and started breaking camp, despite the pain in her ribs. Wolf sat her firmly down on the ground with a growl that would have done credit to his wolf-form and finished erasing all traces of their presence.

Dawn's light had barely begun to show before they were on their way.

Once she was sitting up rather than lying down, Aralorn's coughing mercifully eased. It helped that today they were cutting directly through the woods, and there was less trail dust to exacerbate the problem. When her modest herb lore identified some beggar's-blessing on the side of the road, she could look at the day's journey with some equanimity.

The narcotic alleviated the pain of her ribs and some of the coughing, although it did make it a little more difficult to stay on Wolf's back as it interfered with her equilibrium. Several times only Wolf's quick footwork kept her from falling off.

Wolf decided that the giggling was something he could do without, but found that on the whole he preferred it to her silent pain.

Thus the second day of travel was better than the first, and it was the last. When they stopped, Wolf took a good look at Aralorn, pale and dark-eyed from the drug she'd been using. She'd refused food, because beggar's-blessing would make her sick if she ate while under its effects.

The end result was that she was weaker now than she'd been when they started this morning. He had not transported them by magic, because he was afraid that it would be too hard on her, but he didn't think that it could be as severe as trying to continue the way they were. Although it was only four days' ride on a fast horse, at the pace they were holding it would take another eight days to make it to camp.

He donned his human form once again, with his scars, and added the silver mask before he bent and lifted her semiconscious form in his arms. Without a word of warning to her, he transported them into the Northlands.

Transporting people wasn't easy, and it was as hard on the passenger as it was on the magician. It was difficult enough that most magicians preferred travel on horseback or coach rather than by magic, even in the spring when the roads were nothing more than a giant mud puddle. Transporting someone into the Northlands, where human magic had a tendency to go awry, was madness, but the cave where he had brought the merchant was far enough outside the effect of the Northlands that it should be possible. That would leave them with only one day's ride to their camp. Concentrating on the shallow cave, he pulled them to it, but *something* caught them and jerked them on with enough force to stun Wolf momentarily ... He landed on his knees on the hard stone floor of his library.

There was no time for wonder. Aralorn was unconscious. He set her down gently on a leather couch that he used occasionally for sleeping and stroked back the sweat-matted hair, loose from its usual braid. He covered her with his cloak to protect her from the normal chill of the cave and set his claw-footed staff beside her so she would have light if she awoke while he was talking to Myr.

* * *

in the castle of the archmage, the ae'magi sat gently drumming his fingers on the burlwood of his desk. He was not in the best of moods, having tracked an intruder from castle to hold trying to discover who would be foolhardy enough to trespass and powerful enough to get away with it.

The room that he occupied was covered in finely woven carpets. Great beveled windows lined the outside wall behind the desk, bathing the room with a warm golden glow. On the opposite wall was a large, ornate fireplace that sat empty in deference to the warmth of late summer. In front of the fireplace, the pretty blonde girl who was the Master's newest pet combed her hair and looked at the floor. She trembled a bit. A month as his leman had made her sensitive to the ae'Magi's mood, which was vile today.

Facing the desk was one of the dungeon guards; he held his cap deferentially in his hand. He spoke in the low tones that were proper when addressing someone in a position so much higher than his own. He was starting to feel nervous, as the ae'Magi had been silent for some time.

Finally the ae'Magi spoke. "You saw Cain take one of the female prisoners?" he asked, gentle-toned.

"Yes, Lord. I remembered him from when he lived here, but I didn't realize who it was until he'd already gone. Last time I saw him he were all scarred up, but I 'membered meself when he were a tyke he looked a lot like you, sire." The old guard fell pleased with himself for bringing the matter to his lord's attention for, as he told his wife this morning, "My Lord is the best of masters, he's not one to punish a man for a common mistake. It always was difficult to tell the father from the son. Most likely I'll get a promotion for noticing something amiss at all." His wife had spent all that night darning his best uniform for his audience with the Lord.

His wife wouldn't have to darn his uniforms again.

"Clean up the dust and leave me."

Shuddering, the twelve-year-old silk merchant's daughter swept the ashes of the guard into the little shovel that was kept near the fireplace. She left quickly, grateful that someone else had taken the brunt of the Magician's wrath this time.

Alone he sat at the table in his study and tapped at the table even more gently than before.

"So it *was* Cain helping the boy king. The bitch lied. There are few other sorcerers who could have taken Edom and none that could walk into my dungeon and steal from me. What is worse is that I had the bait to call him into my trap and didn't even know it. He must care greatly about her to risk traipsing in and out of my demesne."

Moodily he took the stopper off the crystal decanter which sat on a corner of his desk and poured amber wine in a glass. He held it up to the light and swirled the liquid, admiring the fine gold color—the same shade as Cain's eyes. He tipped the glass and drank it dry.

"There are, however, some compensations, my son. I know that you are actively working against me. You cannot remain invisible if you ready yourself to attack, and I will find you. Maybe you have already made that mistake. I know that you have a weakness for this girl, and I do have a source of information on her. She will make it possible for me to use you for my purposes."

He whispered a minor summoning spell and waited only a short time before he was answered by a knock on the door. At his call, the Uriah who had once been Talor entered the study.

"You told me that you were familiar with the girl you look from Myr's campsite," the ae'Magi said.

The Uriah bowed his head in assent.

"Tell me about her. What is her name? Where do you know her from?" The problem with Uriah, the ae'Magi had found, was that communication was not all that it could be. Information could only be gotten

with detailed questions, and even then a vital fact could be left out.

“She is called Aralorn—I knew her in Sianim,” it replied.

“What did she do in Sianim?”

The Uriah shrugged carelessly. “She taught quarterstaff. Trained horses. She did some work for Ren, the Spymaster, I don’t know how much.”

“She worked as a spy?” The ae’Magi pounced on it.

“She never came out and said so. Most of us did some work for Ren the Mouse at one time or another, but I think, from the number of her unexplained comings and goings that she worked for him more often than most.”

“What was she like? What were her strengths and weaknesses?”

The Uriah hesitated. “She is extraordinarily good with disguises. She can blend in anywhere. She is deadly with a quarter-staff or knife. The only other weapon I’ve seen her use is a sword. She is competent enough, but no expert. She may know a little magic, although she never said anything about it.”

“Why do you think that?” The ae’Magi was starting to tense in his chair.

“I saw that wolf of hers when she first found him. He was in rough shape. He was almost healed not a week later. She always claimed that she simply had a way with herbs.”

The Magician looked a lot like his son when he let the perpetual smile drop from his face. “You say that she was a healer? That she was good with disguises?” There was a thread of panic in the Magician’s voice, the Uriah noted with a touch of satisfaction even as it indicated its agreement with a slight bow.

“Describe her to me.”

“She is short and pale-skinned, even with a tan. Brown hair, blue-green eyes. Sturdily built. She moves fast.”

The ae’Magi compared the description to the girl in the dungeon and came to an interesting conclusion. “Shapeshifter,” he murmured, “You said she had a wolf?”

“Yes.”

The ae’Magi remembered abruptly that he’d recently had another escape from his castle. That girl had been aided by a wolf that had killed a pack of the ae’Magi’s Uriah.

While the ae’Magi was distracted the Uriah stealthily moved closer to him, hand on sword, fierce craving in its eyes.

“Leave me,” the ae’Magi ordered abruptly, backing his command with magic. The Uriah skulked out, growling with frustrated hunger.

Alone, Geoffrey ae’Magi, Lord of the Magicians, set his boots on the finely polished surface of the desk and contemplated the empty fireplace.

* * *

aralorn was too tired to wake up when the covering was pulled back, letting the cool air sweep over her warm body. She moaned when gentle hands probed her ribs, but felt no urgent need to open her eyes. She heard a soft sound of dismay as her hands were unwrapped. A touch on her forehead sent her back into sleep.

* * *

it was the sound of voices that woke her the second time, a few minutes later, much more alert. The nausea that was the usual companion to both beggar's-blessing use and magical travel had dissipated.

She noticed that she was in the library, covered with a brightly colored quilt. A familiar cloak, Wolf's, lay carelessly tossed over the back of the sofa. She started to sit up, only to realize that the clothing scattered on the floor was what she had been wearing. Hastily she pulled the blankets up to her neck to protect her dignity just as Myr came around a bookcase.

"So he did manage to find you," commented Myr with a wide smile. "I see that you're more or less intact after your experience with the ae'Magi's hospitality. I must say, though, that it will be a long time before I loan you any of my clothes again. I didn't bring many with me." The pleasure and relief in his voice was real; she was surprised and not a little flattered that he cared so much about someone he'd known such a short time.

Aralorn smiled back at him and started to say something, but noticed that Wolf, who had followed Myr, was focusing intently on her hands. She followed his gaze to where her hands gripped the top of the blanket. Ten healthy nails dug into the cloth. The beggar's-blessing had left her wits begging too; she hadn't even noticed that she didn't hurt at all.

Aralorn nodded and answered Myr. "Yes. Though he wasn't the best of hosts. I only saw him two or three times the whole time I was there."

Myr perched on the end of the sofa near Aralorn's feet and looked, for once, as young as he was. "And he prides himself on his treatment of guests," he said with a mournful shake of his head. "It doesn't even look like he left you any mementoes."

"Well," said Aralorn, looking at her hands again, "actually he did, but I seem to have lost them." She met Myr's interested look and waved her hands at him. "Last time I looked, my hands were missing the fingernails."

"How is your breathing?" asked Wolf.

Aralorn took a deep breath. "Fine. Is this your healer's work?"

Wolf shook his head. "No, I told you that he was not experienced enough to do more than he did." Wolf glanced at Myr. "I saw a few new people here; are any of them healers?"

"No," replied Myr, disgust rich in his voice, "nor are they hunters, tanners, or cooks. We have six more children, two nobles and a bard. The only one who is of any help is the bard, who is passably good with his knives. The two nobles sit around watching everyone else work or decide to wander out in the main cave system so that a search party has to be sent out."

"You might try just letting them wander next time," commented Wolf.

Myr smiled slowly. "Now there's an idea." Then he shook his head with mock sorrow. "No, it wouldn't work. With my luck they'd run into the dragon and lead it back here."

“Dragon?” asked Aralorn in a startled tone, almost dropping her blanket.

“Or something that looks an awful lot like one. It’s been seen by two or three of the hunting parties, although it hasn’t seen them yet,” replied Myr.

“I guess I must have found its tracks the day I ran into the Uriah—or at least I found the tracks of something big. It was about six miles away and traveling fast. Where have you sighted it?” asked Aralorn.

“East and north, never closer than ten miles. Do you know anything about dragons? Something along the lines of whether or not they eat people would be helpful,” said Myr in a hopeful tone, sitting down on one arm of the couch.

“Fraid not. The only ones that I’ve heard of are in stories where, for some reason, they seem to only eat virgins chained to rocks. Since I haven’t heard of anyplace nearby where there is a steady supply of virgins chained to rocks, I would suppose that it is a safe bet that this one has differing dietary requirements,” she answered in a dry tone, and then nodded at Wolf. “Why don’t you ask the magical expert around here?”

Wolf shrugged. “The closest that I’ve ever gotten to one was the one asleep in the cave underneath the ae’Magi’s castle. Since it had been asleep for several centuries, I didn’t learn much. I thought, though, that it was supposed to be the last of its kind—the reason that it was ensorcelled rather than killed.”

“Well,” said Myr with a lifted eyebrow, “if this creature isn’t a dragon, then it is closely related. I’m not too sure that I’m comfortable with it being so close.”

“Maybe it’ll eat the nobles that are giving you such a bad time,” suggested Aralorn. “You might try chaining them to a rock.”

She found that she was starting to get tired, so she leaned back against a cushion and closed her eyes. She didn’t sleep but drifted quietly, listening to the others talk quietly. She found it comforting. There was something she wanted to ask. She sat up abruptly when she remembered what it was.

“Astrid,” she said, interrupting them in the middle of a discussion on the best method of drying meat. “Did someone find her?”

“I did,” replied Wolf, “or what was left of her after the Uriah finished.”

Aralorn swallowed, and in a hoarse voice not at all like her own she asked, “Will she ...”

“Will she what?” asked Myr.

Aralorn watched her hand as it traced patterns in the quilt and asked in a low voice, “Will she become one of them, now?”

Myr started as if to say something, but held back, wanting to hear Wolf’s answer first.

“No,” answered the ae’Magi’s son. “There is a ritual that must be followed to turn men into Uriah. She was simply eaten.”

She spoke in a monotone, still not looking up. “I’d always heard that they were the creation of some long-forgotten magician who left them to infest the Eastern Swamp—protecting something hidden there. I assumed that the ae’Magi just found some way of controlling them.”

“He found out how to control them, yes. He also found out how to make them—it was in the same

book.” Wolf reached casually to a shelf near Myr’s head and pulled a thin ratty volume out of a shelf. “This book, as a matter of fact.”

Myr looked over Aralorn’s bent head to meet Wolf’s eyes. “That’s why you put the stone over the guard’s graves.”

Wolf nodded, replacing the book in the shelf. “The runes that Aralorn traced over the bodies, and the fact that Edom hadn’t completed the ritual—the heart must be eaten—should ensure that they rest quietly. I just didn’t want to take chances.”

Aralorn spoke almost to herself. “Talor was one of them. I heard Talor’s signal—he was always a little off pitch. I thought that he was caught by the Uriah and needed help.” Her hands gripped the quilt with white knuckles although her voice was calm. “I guess that was more or less the case, but there was no way that I could help him.”

Scenes she had suppressed whipped violently through her mind like a madman’s dream. They were without sound, because a violent blow to her head had set up a buzzing clamor that eclipsed any other sound. There were more faces that she knew, viewed from the thing that had been Talor’s back. Twisted and rotted almost beyond recognition she saw the faces of friends, comrades-in-arms.

A sharp sting on her cheek brought her back, shaking and gasping. Wolf sat on the couch beside her, and she buried her head against his shoulder and shuddered dry-eyed, grateful for the firm arms wrapped around her back.

“The worst of it was, he knew me,” she whispered. “It was still Talor, but he was one of *them*. He talked to me, but he looked at me like a farmer looks at dinner after a hard day’s work. I didn’t even know that Uriah could talk.” Then, with difficulty, because she didn’t have much practice, she cried.

Myr took Wolf’s cloak and covered her back where the quilt left her exposed. He touched her hair a little awkwardly and said quietly to Wolf, “She won’t appreciate my presence when she recovers. I’ll tell the others that she’s well. Stanis has been blaming himself for her capture—he won’t eat. It will be a weight off his back to find out that she’s been rescued and is here unhurt.”

Wolf nodded and watched him go. He rocked Aralorn gently and whispered soft reassurances. He was concentrating on her, so that the voice took him by surprise.

“Tell her to stop that.”

Wolf brought his head up, alarmed at the strange voice. It was heavily accented and firmly masculine if a bit fussy. It also didn’t seem to come from anywhere, or rather there was no one where the voice came from.

“Tell her to stop that, I said. She’s driven Lys away, and I simply won’t abide that. I have allowed her here because Lys likes her—but now she’s made Lys go away by thinking of all of those bad things. Tell her to stop it, or I will have to ask her to leave no matter what Lys says.” The voice lost a little of its firmness and became sulky.

The sound of someone else in the room distracted Aralorn, and she pushed herself up away from Wolf’s chest, wiping her nose and eyes alike with the sleeve of the tunic she snagged from the cave floor. She too looked at the conspicuously empty space at the end of the sofa near her feet. Magical invisibility consisted of blending into shadows and turning eyes away rather than absolute invisibility; when someone actively *looked*, the invisible person could be seen. There was nothing at the end of the sofa.

“Can you see him?” she asked Wolf, thinking that it might be another side effect of the beggar’s-blessing. She never had liked drugs.

When he shook his head, she directed her questioning to the man who wasn’t there. “Who are you?”

“That’s better,” said the voice, and there was the distinct pop of air that accompanies teleportation.

“He’s gone,” Wolf confirmed.

“What do you think?” asked Aralorn, settling back onto Wolf, her voice husky from crying. “Was that our friend who gives us a hand with the books?”

“If I were a hazarder, I would lay you odds for yes.” Wolf’s voice was somewhat distracted, as he was feeling slightly uncomfortable with Aralorn lying relaxed and naked in his arms. It hadn’t bothered him before, when she’d been upset.

He started to shift her off him with the end goal of getting as much distance on his side as possible. Before he could do more than move his hand to her shoulders, she turned her face into his neck, terminating his resolve with the simple gesture of affection. He’d found himself craving her affection more and more lately. Although, he thought with a touch of self-derision, in this case “affection” might not be the proper expression.

Self-absorbed, he only caught the tail end of Aralorn’s question. “Say that again?” he asked.

With her face tucked safely out of sight, she smiled and repeated herself. “I asked how long you left me alone in the library.”

“Not more than fifteen minutes, less probably.”

She made a sound of amazement. “I’ve never heard of anyone who could heal that fast. No wonder I feel like a month-old babe: by all rights I should be comatose now.”

“Powerful,” Wolf agreed. “But something was funny about him; did you catch it?”

Aralorn nodded. “It was odd in a voice that young, but he sounded a bit querulous, maybe even senile.” She closed her eyes, and the companionable silence lulled her toward slumber. More asleep than awake, she murmured with a touch of her unquenchable curiosity, “I wonder who Lys is?”

When Wolf made no attempt to add to or answer her question, she drifted unprotestingly off to sleep.

Golden eyes glittering. Wolf cradled her protectively—against him. He thought about shapeshifters, and the ae’Magi’s half-mad son who wandered into these caves to find solace one night, led by a small, grey fox with ageless, sea-green eyes.

Nine

From her station on the couch, Aralorn watched Wolf deposit another armload of books and set them on the floor beside the worktable. The table, her chair, and most of the floor space were similarly adorned.

“Did our apprentice write all of these?” Aralorn made a vague gesture toward the stacks before continuing to put a better edge on her knife.

Wolf turned to survey the piles. He let the silence build and then growled briefly, “Yes.” With that he stalked back into the forest of bookcases.

Aralorn grinned, sheathed her knife and levered herself to her feet, weak from days of enforced inactivity in the ae'Magi's dungeon as well as being healed of the damages inflicted during her visit there. Scanning the nearby shelves, she found a book on shapeshifters and wobbled with it to the table, careful not to fall. Wolf had already made it clear that he would rather that she stay put on the couch for a couple of days; if she fell, there would be no living with him. She cleared off her chair and space enough to read. Now that the search had been narrowed to books that were likely to be trapped. Wolf had forbidden her to help. Aralorn decided if she couldn't be useful, at least she could enjoy herself.

Wolf balanced the books he carried on another stack and eyed the collection. "I suppose I might as well start on these."

"I didn't think that even human mages were that verbose," commented Aralorn as she handed him her book.

He looked at it carefully and handed it back to her before he replied. "Most mages restrict their writings to the intricacies of magic; Iveress, 'our apprentice,' fancied himself an expert on everything. There are treatises here on every subject from farming to governmental philosophy. He was long-winded, brilliant and had the annoying habit of sliding in obscure magic spells in the middle of whatever he was writing when the spell occurred to him."

"Better you than me," commented Aralorn sympathetically before burying herself in her book.

The author of Aralorn's book had never met a shapeshifter; they were rare and adept at hiding even in his time. Instead the writer collected all the bits of lore and odd tales ever spun to create a powerful, mythic race whose main hobby seemed to be eating innocent young children who lost themselves in the woods.

Aralorn was interested to observe that shapeshifters could only be killed by silver, garlic or wolfsbane. The author was of the opinion that shapeshifters could take the shape of only one animal, and he devoted a section to horrific tales of shapeshifter wolves, lions and bears (mice, she supposed, were too mundane).

She shared bits and pieces of the better wolf-tales with Wolf, as he waded through a volume on pig-training. He responded by telling her how to train a pig to count, open gates and fetch. Pigs were also useful for predicting earthquakes. Iveress included three spells to start earthquakes.

Aralorn laughed and returned to her reading. At the end of the book, the author included stories "which my research has proven to be merely folk tales" to entertain his readers. Aralorn supposed that it was no mere coincidence that the "mere folk tales" were the only stories in which the villain was not a shapeshifter.

She read the first story, then thoughtfully closed the book and glanced curiously around the room. Nothing was moving that shouldn't be today. Wolf set the pig book aside and was reaching for another one when Aralorn started to speak in a low voice.

"Once upon a time there was a young shapeshifter who spied a young girl alone in the woods." She didn't need to use the book to help her memory, but kept her eyes on Wolf. "Curious, because she was in a place no young girl should be, he followed her to her home. She lived alone in a cottage near enough to the village that she could walk there easily, but far enough that her visitors were few. She was an empath, forced to live away from her family and relatives by her gift.

"The shapeshifter, entranced by her beauty of face and spirit, took to following her around in the guise of a crow or squirrel. Finally, when he could keep his love hidden no more, he revealed himself to her. She

loved him too, for not only was he as comely as all werewolves are, he was sweet of spirit as well.

“They lived together for several years with no one knowing of their alliance—for the hatred and fear with which humankind looked upon shapeshifters was more than returned. Once a month the shapeshifter returned to his village to assure his people that he was well. Once a week the empath made her way to the human village.

“One day a Southern Trader saw her as she left the village for her home in the woods. He asked about her and found out that she lived alone. Like most of his kind he was no better than he should be, so when he finished his trading with the villagers, he and his fellows took the path that the girl had used. She would bring good prices in the slave market in the south.

“It happened that it was one of the times that the shapeshifter was visiting his family. He returned to find the cottage empty, with the door swinging in the wind.

“He tracked them as they headed into the wild Northlands. The girl had told them that her lover was a powerful magician, and so they took to the North, where human magic is hindered. The shapeshifter was a child of the Northlands, and the harsh winds brought him news of his beloved’s path, but even so he was too late.” A moaning sound echoed through the caves as she finished the last words. Wolf tilted his head slightly so she knew that he heard as well.

“When he reached the slavers’ camp,” she continued, “he found nothing left of the would-be slavers except mindless bodies. The girl, terrified and alone, had evoked an empath’s only defense, projecting her terror and pain onto her tormentors. She was alive when the shapeshifter found her, so he took her to a cave, sacred to his kind, where he tried to heal her. The worst of her wounds were of the spirit that even a shapeshifter’s magic may not touch; and though her body was whole, she spoke not a word to him, but stared through him, as if he were not there.

Not entirely sane from his grief, the shapeshifter swore to keep her alive until he could find a way to heal her soul. And so he lives on, with his beloved, from that day until this.”

Wolf raised an eyebrow at her and nodded slowly. “The Old Man of the Mountain.”

“That’s what the book says,” replied Aralorn. “And ‘Lys’ is an old version of the shapeshifter word for ‘sweetheart.’”

Wolf nodded slowly. “Our voice from last night. But I have never heard of a shapeshifter with the power that the Old Man is supposed to have.”

Aralorn rubbed her cheek thoughtfully, leaving behind a streak of black dust. “The older a shapeshifter is, the more powerful he is. Like human mages, it is not unusual for a shapeshifter to live several hundred years. A really powerful shapeshifter can shift himself younger constantly and never grow old. They are a nonviolent race, and the only reason that you don’t see a shapeshifter much older than several hundred years is that they are constantly changing to new and more difficult things. It’s difficult to remember that you are supposed to be human when you change into a tree or the wind. An uncle of my mother once told me that sometimes a shapechanger forgets to picture what he is changing himself into and he changes into nothing. There is no reason why our Old Man of the Mountain couldn’t be several thousand years old rather than just a few hundred. That would make him incredibly powerful—maybe on par with the old gods.”

She stopped as something occurred to her. “Wolf, there was a snowstorm the night before the Uriah came. If it hadn’t slowed them down, they would have come upon us at night and slaughtered the camp.”

Wolf shrugged. “Snowstorms are unpredictable here, but I suppose that it could have been he who caused the storm. I suspect that we’ll never know.”

They went back to reading. Aralorn found it more and more difficult to concentrate as the little energy she’d regained dissipated. The words blurred in front of her eyes, and soon she was turning pages from habit.

She dozed off between one sentence and the next while Wolf was in the stacks looking for another pile of books. When he touched her shoulder, she jumped to her feet and had her knife drawn before she opened her eyes.

“Plague it, Wolf! One of these days, you are going to do that and I’ll knife you by mistake. Then I’ll have to live all my life with the guilt of your death on my hands,” she snapped.

Her threat didn’t seem to bother him much as he caught her and lowered her to her chair as her legs collapsed under her. “It’s time for lunch. You are too thin,” he said with disapproval, and then added, “Speaking of knives, Myr recovered your sword and brought it here while you were sleeping. I put it under the couch.”

Her face lit with a smile. “Really? I thought that it was gone for good when Talor knocked it out of my hand.” She retrieved the sword and returned to her chair, where she could inspect the blade for damage. “I don’t know why I’m so attached to the plaguing thing when I’m such an inept idiot with a sword.”

She was interrupted by the sound of running feet. Stanis popped into the room at a dead run. Having run the better part of the mile or so of tunnel that connected the library to the living quarters of the rest of the camp, he only had breath to gasp out one word: “Uria!” But that was enough.

Aralorn tangled with her chair when she tried to push it out of the way too fast, but kept from falling with the aid of a firm hand on her arm. She was again helped back into her seat.

Wolf, who had somehow donned his mask again, looked her straight in the eye and said, “You stay here.” His voice left no room for argument. He shifted into the wolf and melted into the tunnel.

Just because she hadn’t argued didn’t mean that she intended to obey him. She waited until he was safely gone before stumbling for the sofa to grab the sword belt and scabbard.

“Aren’t you going to do what he says?” Stanis asked. He wasn’t one for following the rules, but he knew that if Wolf ever told him to do anything in that tone of voice he would do it, fast.

Aralorn glanced up as she sheathed the sword. “It’s written on my file in Ren’s office at Sianim: ‘Does not take orders well, will occasionally listen to suggestions.’ Did it sound like he was suggesting anything to you?”

Stanis shook his head; then, noticing that she was adjusting the position of the sheath and not looking at him, said, “No.”

Finished, she shrugged. “Then I’m not going to do what he said.”

Stanis led her through the tunnels, because the way was not marked. With her hand on his shoulder for support, she kept their speed to a brisk walk.

As she swung over the barricade erected to keep people from wandering the tunnels, Wolf and Myr were talking on the far side of the large cave. As far as she could tell, all the people were gathered in this room, the largest of the occupied caves, From what Stanis had told her, it was furthest from the outside.

Even here she could hear the enraged howls of the Uriah.

For the most part the people in the cave were silent, the children huddled in a far corner, except Stanis, who was standing behind her. After taking a quick look around, she stalked leisurely toward the conferring men.

“... why they aren’t just coming in, I don’t know how long they’ve been there, A couple of hunters went out an hour ago, and they weren’t there then. The first time that we knew anything about them was when they started that howling. That’s when I sent Stanis to get you.” Myr’s hands flexed on the hilt of his sword, and then gripped it white-knuckled. “I’ve brought all the rest of us to this cave, as it’s furthest from the outside. The opening is narrow enough that they can only come in one or two at a time.”

Aralorn broke in, ignoring Wolf. “If we stack the bodies back in the opening, we’ll buy ourselves some time. It won’t take many to block the entrance, and then they’ll have to eat their way through before any more can attack.” There was a horrified gasp from someone in the huddled masses and she realized belatedly that “force” would have been a better choice than “eat,” if less accurate.

Wolf, apparently saving his lecture for later, spoke. “It’s interesting that they haven’t already come in. By the sound of it, they are standing right outside the entrance and howling. They are not notorious for their patience. The ward on the entrance that I’ve reinforced would not be enough to keep them out, only make it difficult for them to find.”

“Edom couldn’t go into the caves,” Aralorn commented.

“But that was just fear of closed-in spaces.” Myr’s tone grew less assured as he talked.

“Perhaps.” Wolf’s tone was thoughtful. “There are wards that will keep out specific animals—such a spell could be altered to keep out beings who exhibited certain emotions or types of magic. There is another explanation as well. Aralorn said that one of the Uriah talked to her—the Uriah that I have seen were not capable of it. The ae’Magi must have altered them in some way. If he has made them more intelligent, it is possible that they are waiting for something before they attack.”

“Wolf, do you know of any exit from the caves that opens to another side of the mountain?” Myr asked.

Wolf nodded. “Yes, I’ve thought of that. We could send most of the people through and leave a few fighters to slow the pack. Once across the river they would be safe, at least until the Uriah found a place to cross.”

“It’s better than nothing,” agreed Aralorn. She waited until they were engrossed in the planning before she slithered around them. Once in the tunnel she drew her sword and held it in a fighter’s grip. Someone had painted signs on the walls of the tunnels to facilitate travel, and it was a simple matter to follow the arrows to the outside by the magelight she held cupped in one hand.

The howls were louder as she turned into a cave marked “Door to Outside” over the top. She smiled at the awkward lettering even as the cold sweat of fear gathered on her forehead. Cautiously she crept forward through the twisted narrow channel.

The Uriah were there, howling with frustrated rage at the wall of flame that covered the entrance. Someone, Aralorn noted with absent approval, had also set up the wood for a bonfire where the tunnel narrowed—it sat unlit, a good ten feet behind the fire that blocked the entrance. Aralorn couldn’t feel the heat from the first fire, but toasted bodies of Uriah lay twitching feebly just outside the cave as evidence to its effectiveness.

Shaking with the aftermath of adrenaline, Aralorn leaned against the side of the cave and watched as another Uriah, incited by her presence just inside the barrier, dove into the flames. Nausea touched even her hardened stomach as she watched the hungry flames engulf it.

“Aralorn!” If the unexpectedness of his voice hadn’t made her jump, the underlying anger in it would have. It was only bad luck that there was a low spot in the ceiling.

“Plague take you, Wolf! I was supposed to hurt you the next time you startled me like that, not myself,” she hissed, putting her hand to her head where the rock had cut it.

After evaluating the flaming entrance in one quick glance, he steered her away and set his staff upright on its clawed feet. With a hand on her chin, he used the other to explore the damaged area despite the fact that she squirmed and batted at his hand. In clipped tones he said, “You need a plaguing bodyguard. It seems like every time I’ve turned my back on you lately, you are getting hurt one way or another.”

To her surprise he bent down and pressed his cheek against hers. She hadn’t experienced the healing of a green magic-user very often, barring her more recent experience. Generally she hadn’t been in any shape to know exactly what it was that they did, but she knew enough to know that this was very different. This was not purely physical, there was an emotional link too; a meeting on a more primal level.

It was over before she could analyze it further. Wolf stepped back as if bitten; she could hear him gasping for breath beneath his mask. She looked at him in wonder, knowing enough about human magic to realize that he shouldn’t have been capable of doing what he just had done.

“Wolf,” she said quietly, reaching out to touch him. He backed away, keeping his head away from her and his eyes closed.

“Wolf, what’s wrong?” When he said nothing, she took a step back to give him room. “Please, talk to me.”

He flung his head up then, and blazing yellow eyes met hers. When he spoke, it was in a whisper that his ruined voice made even more effective. “What am I? I should not be able to heal you. The other things—the shapeshifting, the power I wield—they could be explained away. But magic doesn’t work this way. It doesn’t take over before I can react and do things that I don’t ask of it. I swore that I would never ..., never let anything control me the way that my father did; but even he left me free will in the end. This ... does not.”

“It was you who healed my eyes.” It was an inane comment at best, stating the obvious. She wanted to give herself time to think. There _was something that she should be grasping, a puzzle to be solved if she could just figure out how to look at it.

“Yes,” he said.

“Were you trying to?” she asked.

He obviously forced himself to relax, and leaned against the wall as he spoke in closer to normal tones. “If you mean did I try to heal you with a spell, no. I just ... wanted you to quit hurting.” She could almost see the effort he made to open up to her, this man who was so private.

He continued with his eyes closed again. “I was so tired. I hadn’t slept much since I found that you were gone.” He opened his eyes to look at her. “You were getting worse and I couldn’t do anything about it. I do not recall what I was thinking, precisely. I had done all that I could for you and knew that it would never be enough, and something made me lie beside you and this magic took over.” He clenched his

hands in what was *very* near revulsion.

“Who was your mother? Do you know?” asked Aralorn quietly. “I’ve heard a tot of stories about Cain, the son of the ae’Magi, but none of them ever mentioned his mother.”

Wolf shrugged, and his voice had regained its cold tone when he answered. “I only saw her once, when I was very young, maybe five years old, I remember asking Father who she was, or rather who she had been, for she was quite dead, killed by some experiment of his, I suppose. I don’t remember being particularly worried about her, so I suspect that it was the only time I saw her.”

“Describe her for me,” requested Aralorn in a firm voice that refused to condemn or sympathize with the boy he had been.

“I was young; I don’t remember much. She looked small next to my father, fragile and lovely—like a butterfly. The only time I ever heard him say anything about her was when some noble asked about my mother. He said only that she was ‘flawlessly beautiful’.”

Aralorn nodded, her suspicions confirmed—“I would have been surprised if she had been anything else.” She smiled at him. “Would it help you to know what is wrong?”

“Do you know?”

She nodded. “Your mother must have been a shapeshifter, or some other green magic-user—but the ‘flawlessly beautiful’ sounds a lot like a shapeshifter. That feeling that the magic is taking control of you is fairly common when dealing with green magic, I suppose because you are dealing with magic shaped by nature first and only then by a magician. You need learn to work with it so that you can modify it. If you fight it, it will prove stronger than you.”

He stared at her a bit and then joined her on the floor without speaking, holding his silver mask in lightly clenched fingers.

“I suspect,” continued Aralorn, “if you hadn’t been taught how magic should work, you would have discovered your half-blooded capabilities long since. You were told that you couldn’t heal, so you didn’t try.”

“It fits,” said Wolf finally.

“I should have thought about it sooner,” apologized Aralorn. “I mean, I am a half-breed. It’s just that I’ve never met another half-breed. I could tell that you weren’t a shapeshifter, so I just assumed that you were simply an extraordinarily powerful human magician.”

Wolf gave a half laugh with little humor in it. “It sounds just like an experiment the ae’Magi would try. To a Darranian, it would be the ultimate form of bestiality. Just the thing to spark his interest,” Wolf observed sourly.

Aralorn leaned over, pushed aside, his mask and kissed him on the unscarred mouth with a kiss that was anything but romantic. “You beast, you,” she said.

He got to his feet and pulled her to hers, his eyes warmed with relief, humor and something else. Gripping her shoulders, he kissed her with a passion that left her breathless and shaken. He stepped back and returned the mask to its usual position.

“We’d better get back and tell Myr he can relax. It doesn’t appear that the Old Man is going to welcome the Uriah into his cave anytime in the near future,” he said, offering her his arm to lean on.

She caught her breath, smiled and tucked her arm through his. “Do we tell the whole camp that we are being protected by the Old Man?”

“It might be the best thing. I have the feeling that we shouldn’t push his hospitality by wandering around too much. The best way to see that it doesn’t happen is to tell them the whole truth—if they’ll believe it.” Wolf slid through a narrow passage with his usual grace, towing Aralorn beside him.

“We are dealing with people who have some minor magic capabilities; are following a dethroned king who just barely received his coming-of-age spurs; who number among their acquaintances not just one half-breed shapeshifter, but two half-breed shapeshifters—one of whom, incidentally, wears a silly mask. We could tell them that we were in the den of the old gods and that Paris, empress of the dead, conceived a sudden passion for Myr and it probably wouldn’t faze them,” was Aralorn’s reply.

Wolf laughed and Aralorn pulled him to a halt. “Wait. Did you say that the ae’Magi is Darranian?”

He nodded. “Peasant stock. Apparently his Master was very surprised to find a magician who was Darranian—used to tell jokes about his Darranian apprentice. My father smiled when he talked about how he killed his teacher.”

Aralorn let her hand drop and followed thoughtfully.

Wolf was first in the tunnel that opened into the main chamber. He hissed and jumped back, narrowly avoiding Myr’s sword.

“Sorry,” said Myr. “I thought that you were one of the Uriah. You should have said something before you came in. Did you find out why the Uriah aren’t coming in?”

“Our guardian of the cave doesn’t want them in,” replied Aralorn, coming up beside Wolf. She was in her element now, with a captive audience and a story to tell. She projected her voice and told them the story about the origin of the Old Man of the Mountain and finished with the barrier that was keeping the Uriah out.

Wolf observed that she made the tale sound as if it were part of shapeshifter history rather than a forgotten story in the book. Usually she did it the other way around—turning an unexciting bit of history into high adventure. He hadn’t realized that she could do it backward.

As she had predicted, the refugees accepted her story. For some reason most people seemed reassured to have a guardian, even if he were guarding the cave and not them. People believe what they want to believe; right now they wanted a miracle, and Aralorn was giving it to them.

Responding to Wolf’s look, Myr joined him just outside the cave, leaving Aralorn to her work.

“We may be locked in here for some time,” Wolf informed Myr. “The Uriah are being kept out of the caves with some sort of fire show, but they can smell food in here, and there is no way to determine how long they are going to howl at our door. Do we have enough food to last us a week or so?” Wolf asked.

Myr shrugged. “We have enough grain stored to last us into next summer, feeding animals and people. We’re short on meat, which is why I sent out the hunters this morning, but for a week we can do without. If it turns into a month we can always slaughter a goat or a sheep to feed ourselves. Our real problems are going to be morale and sanitation.”

Wolf nodded. “We’ll have to deal with morale as it comes. I might be able to do something about the sanitation, though. The blocked-off tunnel where you’re storing grain leads to a cave with a pit deep enough that you can throw a rock into it and not hear it hit bottom. It’s fairly narrow, so you should be

able to put some sort of structure over it to keep people from falling into it.”

“That should relieve Aralom,” commented Myr, a smile lighting his tired face for the first time since he’d heard the Uriah.

Wolf nodded seriously. “She was really worried that before this was all over she’d be pressed into digging latrines.”

Myr laughed wearily and pushed his hair out of his face. “I should have asked this before. Is it possible that the Uriah can find their way in here through another entrance?”

“Maybe,” answered Wolf, starting to head toward Aralom, who was swaying wearily as she finished her story, “but there are only two other entrances that I have found, and they were all heavily carved with runes. If this entrance is protected, I suspect that all of them are.”

* * *

outside, the uriah quieted and sank to their knees as a rider came into view. His horse was lathered and sweating, showing the whites of its eyes in fear of the Uriah. But it had learned to trust its rider, and Lord Kisrah was careful to keep the Uriah motionless with the spells of control that the ae’Magi had taught him.

He dismounted near the entrance to the cave. The wall of flame had subsided somewhat when the Uriah backed away, but it was still higher than Lord Kisrah’s head. He could see the runes just inside the entrance, but he couldn’t touch them to alter their power.

He sketched a symbol in the air that glowed faintly yellow and passed easily through the flames. It touched a rune and the flames started to die down, low enough that he could see a man walk into the cave opening.

“You are not welcome. Leave this place.” The man was almost inhumanly beautiful, and Lord Kisrah caught his breath in admiration. Abruptly the flames returned; for the first time Lord Kisrah could feel the heat on his face.

He hacked up and tried to push the flames down again with no effect. The third time he tried it, the Uriah began stirring as his hold on them weakened. With a curse, he desisted. He led the horse back through the Uriah until he had some space.

“You will stay here until the ae’Magi releases you,” he ordered briskly. “If someone comes out of the cave, you will not harm them. Take them prisoner—you know how to contact me if that happens.” He mounted the horse and let it choose its own speed away from the Uriah.

* * *

“thank you, lord kisrah. I am sure that you did your best with the warding—but the old runes are tricky at best, and in the North they could easily be the work of one of the races that use green magic.” The ae’Magi smiled graciously.

Lord Kisrah looked only a little less miserable in his seat in the ae’Magi’s study. “I got a look at some of the runes there, and I’ll look them up and see what can be done about them. The magician had no trouble with my spell, though. He’s more worrisome than the runes.”

“I agree, sir,” purred the ae’Magi. “I intend to find out just who he is. Can you describe him for me again?”

Lord Kisrah nodded and set aside the warmed ale he'd been drinking. "He was no more than medium height. His hair was blond, I think, although it could have been light brown. His eyes were either blue or green—again, the light made it difficult to tell. He couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five and could have been younger except that he was so powerful. His voice was oddly accented, but he didn't say enough that I could tell much about the accent, other than the Rethian he spoke was not his native tongue."

"There was no way that his hair could have been darker? His eyes golden?" queried the ae'Magi softly.

Lord Kisrah shook his head. "No. His eyes, maybe. They were some light color. But his hair was light." He yawned abruptly.

The ae'Magi stood and offered his arm for support to the young nobleman. "I am sorry; I have kept you up talking and you are almost dropping from exhaustion." He led him to the door and opened it, clapping his hands lightly. Before he clapped a second time, a pretty young serving girl appeared.

"Take Lord Kisrah to the blue room, Rhidan, and see to his comfort." The ae'Magi turned to his guest. "Pray follow the girl—she will attend to your every need. If you want anything, just ask."

Lord Kisrah brightened visibly and wished him a good night.

Alone in his study, the ae'Magi brooded, disliking the thought of yet another magician in his way. Abruptly he got to his feet; all this worry could do no good. It was too late at night to try to think and he was too frustrated to sleep. He motioned abruptly to the pale young girl who had sat in her corner, unnoticed by Lord Kisrah. Obedient to his gesture, she dropped the clothes she wore and stood naked and submissive before him.

He cupped her chin in one hand and stroked her body gently with the other. "Tonight," he said, "I have something special in mind for you."

Ten

Aralorn went back to work taking care of the children to give herself something to do. It was harder than it had been before. There was no place for them to run and play, and they were restless with the Uriah just outside. To distract them, Aralorn taught them the letters of the alphabet and how they fit together to form words. And then she told stories until she was hoarse.

"So Kai bet the whole troop that he could sneak into camp and steal the pot of coffee on the coals with no one seeing Mm." Seated on a bump in the floor, Aralorn checked to make sure that most of the children were listening. "He and Talor were raised in a Trader Clan, just like Stanis. When he was little he learned how to be very quiet and to sit still in shadows so no one could see him.

"That night they doubled the guard on the camp and assigned a special guard just to follow Kid around. Two men sat and just watched the coffeepot. But despite all of that, the next morning the pot was gone. The guard who was supposed to be following Kai around had actually been following Talor, who looked enough like his twin to be mistaken for him in the dark." Aralorn smiled at her intent audience. Stories about the twins were always guaranteed attention-holders.

"Kai was not only good enough to get the pot, he also painted a white 'X' on the back of every one of the guards without them knowing it."

"Wow! Can you do that, Stanis?" asked Tobin.

“Aralorn,” Myr said quietly, putting his hand on her shoulder.

She turned from watching Stanis preen under the attention. “What’s wrong?” Myr looked a bit pale.

“It’s Wolf. He’s in the library. I think that you need to see if you can calm him down.”

* * *

the library was engulfed in shadows when she cautiously peered into it; it felt warmer than usual. The only light came from Wolf’s staff, which glowed a dull orange. Wolf sat in his usual chair, motionless. Only the scorched smell in the library suggested that the scene wasn’t as peaceful as it looked.

Using her own magic, Aralorn lit the chamber. One of the bookcases was nothing but ashes on the cave floor. Thoughtfully, Aralorn wandered over to it and kicked the ashes. The bookcase next to her burst into flames and was reduced to the same state before she even felt the heat. She winced at the destruction of the irreplaceable books.

“Runyons, Wolf,” she asked in calculatedly exasperated tones, “isn’t this hard enough without losing your temper?” She turned to look at him. He wore his mask again.

“I have it, Aralorn,” he murmured softly. “I have the power to do anything.” Another bookcase followed the first two. “If I didn’t have so much yawaning power, I just might be able to do something with it. There’s a spell here to remove the ability to use magic from a magician who is misusing his power. I can’t use it. If I tried, we’d have another glass desert on our hands.” His eyes glittered with the fires of his magic.

Aralorn went to him and sat on the floor beside him, resting her head against his knees. “If you had less power, there would be no way to lake the ae’Magi. You would never have been able to free yourself from the binding spells that keep all of the other magicians bound to his will. There would be no one to resist him. Quit tearing yourself into pieces and winning the battle for the ae’Magi. You are who you are. No better and no worse.”

It was quiet for a long time in the library. Aralorn let her light die down and sat in the darkness with Wolf for a long time. No more bookcases burned in magic fire. When Wolf’s hand touched her hair, Aralorn knew that it would be all right.

* * *

aralorn trotted up the tunnels at a steady pace, walking now and again when she ran out of breath—which she fell was far too often. Slowly, though, her strength was coming back, and she had to stop less frequently today than she had the day before. Morning and night for The past four days, she had run the tunnels from the library to the entrance, trying to rebuild the conditioning that she’d lost.

Her path was free of people for the most part. The library was quite a distance from the main caves, and most of the refugees respected Wolf’s claim that the Old Man of the Mountain wanted to keep them out of the tunnels, Aralorn was of the opinion that Wolf didn’t want to spend his time searching for lost wanderers, because she’d seen no sign that the Old Man objected to anyone’s presence. Although the path to the library was carefully marked out and considered part of the “occupied” caves, it was seldom that anyone besides Aralorn, Wolf or Myr went there.

The few times someone came to the library with a message, they looked nervous traveling the dark tunnels. Wolf said that they were waiting for the wrath of the Old Man to full on them. Myr said that it was Wolf, not the Old Man, that they were frightened of—Myr was probably right.

The two nobles had ignored the ban on the inner caves twice. The first time Myr brought them back. The second time Wolf went after them. Wolf wouldn't tell her what he'd done to them, and neither of them volunteered information, but they came back white-faced and had been remarkably subdued ever since.

As she came to the outer caves, Aralorn slowed to a walk. There were too many people around for her to dodge at a faster speed. When she started down the path that led to the entrance, the first thing that she noticed was the sound of her own footsteps. It took her a minute to realize that the reason she could hear them was because the Uria were not howling.

Sure enough, when she reached the entrance, the only evidence of the flaming barrier was the pile of Uria bodies that lined the outside of the cave. The bonfire Myr had ordered laid near the entrance was still unlit. Other than the bodies, there was no sign of the Uria or the barrier that had kept them out.

She stepped around the corpses, moving cautiously to see if there were any lying in wait. After so many days in the caves, the sunlight nearly blinded her. The air smelled fresh and pure, without the distinctive odor that accompanied Uria. Only a slight burnt smell marred the fragrance of the nearby pine.

The source of the singed smell wasn't only the corpses in the cave. It looked as if a ball of fire had been spewed from the cave's mouth. A blackened path in the grass and soil began from the entrance and traveled in a straight line a fair distance before disappearing. Within the blackened area were ten or fifteen bodies of Uria. They were in much worse condition than the bodies in the cave, as if they had been gnawed upon by a large scavenger.

Aralorn followed the burnt path up the mountain and found that the trail abruptly stopped on a wide, flat area. She started back and was several lengths down the slope when she realized that she might be thinking backward. What if the fireball hadn't come *from* the cave, but had been launched *at* it? Muttering to herself, she trotted back to where the trail had stopped.

Tracking wasn't her specialty, but it didn't take her long to find what she sought. When she was looking for them, they were hard to miss—very large, reptilian footprints with marks beside them that could be trailing wings. Just like the ones she'd seen the day she'd been taken by the Uria.

"Well, Myr," she said thoughtfully, examining the teeth marks on one of the corpses, "I think I know what dragons eat."

* * *

"so," said Myr in dry tones after Aralorn related her discovery, "we exchange Uria for a dragon. Wonderful."

"At least the dragon's quieter," commented Aralorn, leaning against the cave wall and watching Myr pace.

The main cave was almost empty. Myr sent out a party to look for the missing hunters as well as a party to look for meat. He'd also ordered several watches on the lookouts.

"At least we knew something about the Uria," Myr complained. "A dragon ..." He broke off when the sounds of ragged cheers echoed into the cave, followed by the missing hunting party and the searchers.

When the welcoming was done, Haris the smith, who had led the party, told their tale, "We came upon a herd of mountain sheep and got two, so we headed back. About halfway here we stumbled upon some tracks, as if an army were wandering around out. We followed the trail and pretty soon we could smell 'em and knew that they were Uria. Since their path was the same one we were on, it was obvious that

the things were coming here.

“Figuring that we were too late to make much difference, we worked our way up the side of the mountain until we could see the Uriah. We couldn’t see the cave, but the way they were swarming around showed that you must have found a way to keep them out. We decided that there was nothing we could do but wait. Our vantage point was far enough away that the chance of the Uriah seeing us wasn’t considerable.”

Hans cleared his throat and then said, “Late last night, just after the moon had set, I heard a cry like a swan makes, only deeper. I was on watch and it wasn’t loud enough to wake anyone else up. Something big flew over the top of us, but I couldn’t quite see it. After something passed overhead I saw a flash of golden fire down here and heard the Uriah step up their noise. Then it quieted down.

“This morning it looked like the Uriah had left, so we started home. The reason it took us so long to get here is that there are still a lot of Uriah scattered about. We were dodging two parties of the things when we almost ran into a third. It’s a good thing that they smell so bad, or we wouldn’t have made it back at all.”

* * *

a war council was convened with myr presiding. they kept careful record of where the Uriah were seen, and hunting parties were directed away from those areas. Wolf took time out from his research to produce a detailed map of the area on sheepskin, which was hung on a wall of the central chamber.

With tactics that drew grunts of approval from Wolf and admiration from Aralorn, who had seen a few of the great military minds in action, Myr developed a series of Uriah traps in key locations.

Each group of hunters had a rough copy of the map, and if they ran into a group of Uriah they would lead them to one of the traps. The Uriah were slowed enough by the cold of the deepening fall that the humans could outrun them most of the time, especially since they were careful only to go out when it was coldest.

Hans suggested an adaptation of a traditional castle defense and created a tar trap that was one of the most effective. The easiest way to kill a Uriah was with fire. So pots of tar were hung here and there, kept warm by magic. Ropes were carefully rigged so that they would not easily be tripped by wild animals. When they were pulled the pots tipped over, and the motion triggered a secondary spell that lit them on fire, dousing the Uriah with flaming tar. The spells on the traps were simple enough that everybody, except for Myr, could do them after a little coaching from Wolf.

With this renewed purpose, the small group became a close-knit community, the grumblers fewer. Every evening they would all sit down and talk, when complaints and suggestions were heard and decided upon by Myr. Looking at the scruffy bunch of peasants (the nobles, by this time, blended right in with the rest) consulting with their equally scruffy king, Aralorn compared it with the Rethian Grand Council that met once a year and hid a grin at the contrast.

Only Wolf was excluded from the camaraderie, by his own choice. He made them nervous, with his macabre voice and silver mask. Once he saw that they were intimidated by him, he went out of his way to make them more so. He was seldom with the main body of the camp, sleeping somewhere deep in the caverns and spending most of his waking time in the library. He attended the nightly sessions with everyone else, but kept his own council in the shadows of the cave’s recesses unless Myr asked him a question directly.

Most mornings Aralorn spent entertaining the children. Occasionally she went out with a hunting party, or alone to exercise Sheen and check the traps. The afternoons she spent in the library with Wolf, keeping

him company and reading as many books as she could.

The nights she spent in the library as well, for she was still having nightmares and didn't want to wake the whole camp. Night after night she woke up screaming, sometimes seeing Talor's face, alive with all that made him Talor, but consumed with a hunger that was inhuman and wholly Uriah. Other times it was the ae'Magi's face that she saw, a face that changed from father's to son's. It was because of the latter that she didn't tell Wolf about her dreams.

Late in the afternoons Myr usually joined them, talking quietly with Aralorn while Wolf read tirelessly through books on rabbit breeding, castle building, and three hundred ways to cook a hedgehog.

It was on one such occasion that Myr came in to find Aralorn watching as Wolf carefully measured powders in a beaker. Aralorn looked up with a welcoming smile and waved him over.

"Wolf thinks that he found the spell. We're going to try it out outside. No telling what would happen if he worked it in here with all of the grimoires, especially since we don't know the range of effect." Aralorn spoke quietly, so as not to disturb Wolf's concentration.

They watched as he took a small vial from the open leather pack on the table. Opening it, he poured a milky liquid into the grey powder mixture, which became red mush and gave off a poof of noxious fumes. He donned his mask and cloak; then, ignoring his audience, he capped the beaker and took it and an opaque bottle and strode toward the exit, leaving Aralorn and Myr to trail behind.

"Won't the spell be affected by whatever it is that restricts human magic in the North?" asked Myr in a whisper to Aralorn, but it was Wolf who answered.

"No," he said. "It is a very simple spell. I only seem to have problems with working more delicate magics."

He led them to the valley, where they were unlikely to have anyone interrupt them. Aralorn found herself holding the containers while, at Wolf's direction, Myr paced off circles, each bigger than the last until the dirt looked like an archery target. Wolf disappeared into the underbrush and reappeared holding a handful of small stones. He set several of them in each ring, floating about knee-high above the ground.

"This shouldn't be a particularly powerful spell; if I can get it to work, it doesn't need to be. If he doesn't know that it's coming, then he won't know to block it. Aralorn, stand over by the old firepit so that you are out of range of the spell. It won't hurt Myr, but I don't know what this could do to a shapeshifter," Wolf said as he sat on the cold ground in the middle of the innermost circle.

"How old is the ae'Magi?" asked Aralorn, moving to the position he'd indicated.

Wolf shrugged gracefully and gave her a half smile. "You aren't going to kill the ae'Magi the way that Iveress killed his Master. The Master was ill and near death, kept alive only by magic. As far as I know, the ae'Magi is nowhere near death, unfortunate as that may be—at least not from disease."

"What are our chances if the spell works as it is supposed to?" asked Myr. "Will you be able to kill him? I've seen him fight."

Wolf shrugged. "If the spell takes him by surprise, then the odds are about even. I used to spar with him often and sometimes I beat him, sometimes not. This spell gives us a chance, but that's all it does. If he recognizes the spell, it is easy enough to counter. That would leave us with only magic. I've learned a lot since I last faced him." He looked at Aralorn. "I've learned some things about what I can do that he doesn't know, but even so he would easily best me that way. Without magic, at least we stand a chance

of killing him. Perhaps.” Looking unconcerned, Wolf returned to his work.

Aralorn and Myr watched as he poured the substance into the beaker. Wolf shook it and then poured it onto the ground in front of him, where it gathered into a glowing pool of violet patterned with inky swirls. Dipping a finger into the pool, he used the liquid to draw several symbols in the air. Compliantly the purple substance hung in the air as if on an invisible wall. Wolf repealed the procedure with his left hand.

He picked up the pool in both hands then. It swayed and oozed, never quite escaping its confines. He held it up and blew on it gently.

Pain hit Aralorn hard enough to knock her to her knees. She fought to maintain consciousness for a moment, but she never felt herself hit the ground.

When she recovered, she felt the hard strength of Wolf’s thigh underneath her car. Carefully she looked around. The spell was obviously directional. It had knocked down the stones in a “V” pattern with Wolf at the apex. She had been sitting on the edge of the path of the spell; apparently the firepit hadn’t been far enough away.

“How long was I out?” she asked hoarsely, trying to sit up.

She was propelled down again with a none too gentle hand, as Wolf answered, “Not too long.”

“How do you feel?” asked Myr, concern evident in his voice.

“Like the entire mercenary army of Sianim just got through inarching over my head.” She closed her eyes and let herself enjoy their concern. She loved sympathy.

“Not too bad, then,” Myr teased lightly.

“Not too,” Aralorn replied, and decided that her headache had subsided enough so that she could open her eyes again.

“Wolf,” said Myr. With Aralorn alive and well, the young king turned to the issue at hand. “Do you think that the ae’Magi will let you complete the spell? It seemed to take a lot of preparation.”

“I won’t need to,” answered Wolf, relaxing against the wall of Haris’s former kitchen. “With a spell this simple, it’s easy enough to re-create the effect, once I see the pattern to push the magic into. It really is something only a beginning magic-user would have created. Take all of the most common spell components mixed together, add the first five symbols learned in magic and blow—poof: instant spell. What is really amazing is that it didn’t blow up in his face. It came uncomfortably close to doing that with me.” He tapped Aralorn’s nose in emphasis. “Next time I tell you that you will be safe somewhere, don’t listen to me.”

“What are you going to do now that you’ve found it?” asked Myr.

Wolf took off his mask wearily. In the bright light of the winter sun, Aralorn noticed the strain he’d been under written into fine lines and dark shadows under the golden ambient eyes. “What else? I storm the Castle of the Master Magician and challenge him to a duel. Whereupon he engages me in best Aralorn-storytime fashion. Then either I win, and go down in history as the cruel villain who destroyed the good wizard, his father; or he wins.” Wolf’s voice was coolly ironic.

“If he wins, what happens?” Aralorn spoke from her prone position and showed no intention of moving. “I mean, what is he trying to do? Do you have any idea at all?”

Wolf played with a strand of hair that had worked its way out of her braid while he answered. "I've been thinking about that for a long time, trying to remember what it was that he wanted most. You asked me about that once before; I think I know the answer now.

"I thought at first that it was mere power he wanted. When I was his apprentice, that seemed to be it. He could link with me and use the power that I gathered for his own spells; much, I believe, in the same manner that he now uses the magic released by the death of the children he kills. But there was an incident that scared him," Briefly, Wolf explained his destruction of the tower for Myr's benefit.

Myr whistled. "That was you? I'd heard a story about that; I've forgotten who told me. They said that the tower looked like a candle that someone forgot to blow out. The very stone was melted."

Wolf nodded. "He started to try using control spells on me, but I left before he had much success. But what surprised me was that he continued to try to get me back under his control. He's been looking for me for a long time. If it were only power he wanted, then he's wasted a lot more of it trying to find me than he could ever get from me. I am more powerful than most magicians, but Lord Kisrah is very strong as well, and the ae'Magi never attempted to tap into his magic. The magic that he gets from one of the children he kills is probably more than he could get from me, because my defenses are stronger."

"Revenge, then?" suggested Myr. "Because he thought that he had you under his control and you escaped?"

"So I thought," answered Wolf, "until Aralorn told me that she thought that I was half shapeshifter and that some of the magic that I am using is green magic."

Myr started. "Are you? That's why you have so little trouble taking the shape of a wolf. I thought it was unusual."

Wolf nodded. "Most of the magic that I use is human magic. Since I found out that I could use it, I've been trying to work with the green magic. It is bound by much stronger rules than what I'm used to; so, except for shapeshifting. I find it much harder to work. Even so, it might give me an edge over the ae'Magi."

Wolf paused and then continued. "The question still remains, what does the ae'Magi want from me? He is a Darranian and while the animalism of having sex with a shapeshifter might appeal to him, I couldn't conceive that he would raise the resultant offspring as his own. Not until I realized that it was the green magic that he wanted. Green magic that I didn't use until I left his control."

"But why green magic?" asked Myr. "I can't imagine that he values shapeshifting that highly."

"Healing," said Aralorn softly, beginning to see where Wolf was headed.

Wolf nodded. "Exactly. As you told me, Aralorn, a shapeshifter can heal himself until he is virtually immortal. What the ae'Magi hopes to do is to reestablish the link that he had with me and use green magic to give himself immortality."

"No point in ruling the world unless you have time to do it in," offered Myr.

"Yes," agreed Wolf. "There was another clue as well. Neither of you were particularly well acquainted with Uriah as they were a few years ago. I was in the ae'Magi's castle when he created the first of his, using his own spell. The Uriah that I knew were barely able to function. They could not even understand speech as well as a dog can. Now, from what Aralorn says, he has some that even retain the memories of the person that they once were."

“The Uriah in the swamplands were created during the Wizard Wars; they are close to being immortal,” commented Aralorn.

Wolf nodded. “They don’t die unless they are killed. If he could get them just a bit more pretty, he’d probably turn himself into one.”

Soberly, Myr said, “I don’t think that he ever intended to turn himself into a Uriah. I’ve known him for a long time too. There is no way he would turn himself into something that by its very nature is a slave to its need for food—pretty or not. If a Uriah retains most of its personality, then it is possible that it also retains its ability to work magic. I would guess that he wants to kill you, Wolf, and turn you into one of his Uriah, obedient to his command, but just as powerful as you have always been.”

Blank-faced, Wolf considered Myr’s comment and said, “I hadn’t thought of that. But I think that you are right. I’ll have to make sure that it doesn’t happen, hmm?”

There was a heavy silence and then Aralorn said in a bright tone, “Speaking of Uriah, do you realize what a mess we are going to have to clean up when the ae’Magi is dead and we have several hundred masterless Uriah roaming the countryside? Sianim is going to be making good money off this.”

* * *

wolf worked at the spell for days, until he could direct it better, but the force of the spell varied widely. Wolf muttered and finally even went back to mixing the powders, but the spell still wouldn’t stabilize. He decided to try a few different herbs that might refine the reaction. He didn’t have all that he needed, so he left to do some trading in the South.

* * *

the sun was drifting toward evening, turning the peaks of the mountains red. Aralorn shifted contentedly on her rock near the cave entrance. Several days ago someone found a huge patch of berries, and the whole camp had spent the better part of two days harvesting the find. Haris had been mixing them into everything and today had managed to cook several pies. Given that the only thing that he had to cook on was a grate over a fire, it was probable that he’d used magic to do it, but no one was complaining.

Licking her fingers clean of the last of the sweet stuff, Aralorn ran an idle gaze up the cliff face and caught something out of the corner of her eye. It was a shadow in the evening sky that was gone almost as soon as she saw it. She got to her feet and backed away from the cliff, trying to figure out just what it was that she saw, calling out an alarm as she did so.

The four or five people who were out milling about with various chores started for the entrance at a run. Stanis and Tobin were coming up the trail to the valley with a donkey cart laden with firewood. Although they heard the alert too, they weren’t abide to increase their pace much because of the donkey and they weren’t about to abandon the results of their labors.

Aralorn distractedly glanced at them and then looked back at the cliff, just in time to see the dragon launch itself. The scales of its belly and wings mimicked the evening sky closely enough that it appeared only as a moving shadow, despite its nearness.

Aralorn headed for Stanis and Tobin as fast as she could. Seeing her, they abandoned the donkey and began running themselves. As she neared them, the shadow on the ground told her that the dragon was just overhead. She knocked both boys to the ground in a wrestler’s tackle and felt the razor-sharp claws run almost gently across her back.

The dragon gave a hiss that could have been either disappointment or amusement, and settled for the donkey, which it killed with a casual swipe of its tail. As it ate it watched idly as Aralorn drove the two boys into the cave and stood guard at the entrance.

Aralorn met its gaze and knew that her sword was pitifully inadequate for the task, even if she were a better swordswoman. She had some hope that the runes that had kept the Uria at bay would do the same to the dragon, but dragons were supposed to be creatures of magic and fire. A flaming barrier would be of little use.

She heard the sounds of running footsteps behind her and then Myr's exclamation when he saw the dragon. He drew his grandfather's sword and held it in readiness. Aralorn noted with a touch of amusement that his larger sword looked to be a much more potent barrier than her own.

"How big do you think that thing is?" asked Myr in a whisper.

"Not as big as it looked when it was over the top of me, but big enough that I don't want to fight it," murmured Aralorn in reply. The dragon paused in its eating to look over at them and smile, quite an impressive sight—easily as intimidating as Wolf's.

Myr stiffened. "It heard us."

Aralorn nodded reluctantly. "And understood what we said. Well, if you have to die, I guess a dragon is an impressive way to do it; maybe even worth a song or two. Just think, we are the first people to see a dragon in generations. Aside from Wolf, of course."

"He is beautiful," said Myr. As if in approval of his comment, a ripple of purple traveled through the blue of its scales.

"Watch that," said Aralorn. "I think that he can alter his color at will; when I first saw him he was nearly invisible. It could make him even harder to fight."

"It makes you wonder why there aren't more dragons, doesn't it?" commented Myr.

Finished with the donkey, the dragon rose and stretched. No longer completely blue, its scales showed highlights of various colors. Only its teeth and the claws on its feet and the edges of its wings were an unchanging black. When it was done it started, almost casually, toward them.

Myr stepped out from the meager protection of the cave entrance into the fading light and Aralorn followed his lead. Something about Myr appeared to catch the dragon's interest: it stopped and whipped its long, swanlike neck straight, shooting the elegant head forward. Brilliant, gemlike eyes glittered green and then gold. Without warning it opened its mouth and spat flame at Myr. Its aim was so exact that Aralorn wasn't even singed, although she stood near enough to Myr to reach out and touch him.

Myr, being immune to magic, was untouched, although the same could not be said about his clothes. The hand that held his sword was steady, though his grip was tighter than it needed to be. He was no coward, this King of Reth. Aralorn surprised herself with a bit of national pride.

The dragon drew its head back and said, in courtly Rethian that Aralorn felt as much as heard, "Dragon-blessed, this is far from your court. Why do you disturb me here?"

Myr, clothed in little more than the tattered remnants of cloth and leather, somehow managed to look as regal and dignified as the dragon did. "My apologies if we are troubling you. Our quarrel is not with you."

The dragon made an amused sound. "I hardly thought that it was, princeling."

“King,” said Aralorn, deciding that the contempt that the dragon was exhibiting could get dangerous.

“What?” said the dragon, its tone softening in a manner designed to send chills up weaker spines.

“He is king of Reth and no princeling.” Aralorn kept her voice even and met the dragon’s look.

It turned back to Myr and said in an amused tone, “Apologies, Lord King. It seems I have given offense.”

Myr inclined his head. “Accepted, Lord Dragon. We owe you thanks for driving away the Uriah, sent by my enemy.”

The dragon raised its head with a hiss as its eyes acquired crimson tones. “Your enemy is the ae’Magi?”

“Yes,” answered Myr.

The dragon stood silently, obviously thinking; then it said, “The debt dragonkind owed your blood is old and weak, even by dragon standards. Long and long ago, a human saved an egg that held a queen; a feat that we were most grateful for, as we were few even then. For this he and his blood were blessed that magic hold no terrors for them. For this deed of the past I would have left you and your party alone.

“Several hundred years ago, after the manner of my kind, I chose a cave to sleep in—waiting for the coming of my mate. I chose a cave deep under the ae’Magi’s castle, where I was unlikely to be discovered.

“I was awakened a few decades past by savage pain that drove me out of my cave and into the North. Dragons are magical in a way that no other creature is; we live and breathe magic, and without it we cannot exist. The ae’Magi is twisting magic, binding it to him until there will be nothing left but that which is twisted and dark with the souls of the dead. The castle of the ae’Magi has protections that I cannot cross, and the power that he has over magic is such that if I were to attack him, it is possible that he could control me. That is a risk that I cannot take. Except for the egg that lies hidden from all, I am the last of my kind. If I die, there will be no more dragons.” It stretched its wings restlessly.

“King,” it said, “your sword is new, but the hilt is older than your kingdom, and token of our pledge to your line. If ever I can aid you, without directly confronting the ae’Magi, plunge the sword into the soil, run your hands over the ruby eyes of the dragon on the hilt and say my name.” Aralorn heard nothing but the rushing of the wind as the dragon spoke its name for Myr. Then in the deepening light of the evening it reared back on its hind legs and fanned its wings, changing its color to an orange-gold that gave off its own light. Soundlessly it took flight, disappearing long before it should have been out of sight.

“Beautiful, isn’t he?” Wolf’s familiar hoarse voice emanated from somewhere behind and between Aralorn and Myr. It comforted Aralorn that Myr jumped too.

* * *

the herbs that wolf brought back did work better. Once he got the spell just as he wanted it, he began working it without the props until he could direct it effortlessly. When he could drop the ensorcelled rocks in any pattern he chose, he spoke to the council.

“I have what I need to face the ae’Magi. I will leave tomorrow for his castle.”

“You aren’t going alone,” said Myr. “This is my battle as well. He killed my parents to further his plans. You will need someone at your back.”

Wolf shook his head, “You are too valuable to your people to risk yourself in such a way. If you are

killed, then there is no one to rule Reth. If I am killed, your immunity to magic may be the only weapon left against the ae'Magi."

"Wolf's right," agreed Aralorn, "but so is Myr. Wolf, the ae'Magi is not the only thing that you will have to face. He has quite an assortment of 'pets.' They will tire you out before you even reach the ae'Magi."

"True," said Wolf. "However, I know how to avoid most of the monsters. The ae'Magi will see that none of them kill me. Even if he wants me dead, he wants to do it himself. If there is someone else with me that I have to worry about and guard, then it will be more of a liability than an asset, I'll leave at first light." He turned on one heel and walked away, without giving anyone a chance to argue further.

* * *

that night, as aralorn lay drowsing on the library couch she'd commandeered as her bed, she heard voices talking to each other, a man's voice and a woman's. Being half asleep, she didn't think to question why she was hearing anything.

The woman spoke first. "I'm worried about them. There are too many things that can go wrong with what they're planning. I wish that they'd paid attention to what you tried to show them."

"I did what I could." Aralorn recognized the voice of the Old Man. He sounded a little petulant.

"It's up to them." The woman's soft voice soothed agreeably. "She's healed him enough that he might be able to carry it off. Can't you give them a clearer hint, though?"

"No. It isn't our concern. As long as he leaves you alone, I don't care what the ae'Magi does." He sounded like a little boy pouting.

"Of course you do, dear heart." She might have been shaking a finger at him from the tone of her voice. "Who was it that brought that young wolf to shelter here? Who gathered all of the people to shelter from the human Archmage's wrath?"

"I'm worried that I've interfered too much." The old shape-shifter's voice sounded completely rational for the moment. "My time is past. I should have died with you, Lys. It is not right to be a ghost and not be dead. If I tell them what to do, it might cause more harm than good. I fear that I have let you talk me into too much." There was a pause and then he said in a resigned tone, "Ah, well, once more then. Can she hear me?"

"Yes, she's listening."

"Then, daughter of my brother's line, you must go with him to the ae'Magi's castle and take what is yours with you." Aralorn felt a hand on her cheek and then she heard the rush of air that signaled the shape shifter's exit.

Once they'd left her, she found that she wasn't as sleepy. She sat up and waved on the lights. "So now you are hearing voices. It is sad to say, Aralorn, but you have definitely lost whatever touch of sanity you once had. That bodes well for the coming adventure, though—only an insane person would go to the ae'Magi's castle three times. Once was enough, twice was too many, but my little voices tell me that I'm going to make it three." She shook her head in mock disgust. Knowing that she wasn't going to get any more sleep she got up, strapped on her knives and began working out. By the time she had warmed up she knew how she was going to arrange to accompany Wolf.

Before first light hit the mountainside, she snuck out on four feet, following her nose to the small cave Wolf occupied. She'd never been in it before and was distracted from her intended goal by the

opportunity to see a different side of her mysterious magician. He kept a small magelight glowing to keep the room from the total darkness that was natural to the cave. Wolf himself was lying with his back to her on a cot against the far end of the room. Although it was spartan and immaculate, she could tell by the smell that Wolf had occupied it for a long time. Being a mouse had its advantages.

Fascinated, she wandered around, noticing that for all of its surface plainness there were touches that showed an appreciation of beauty in small things. A small knob of rock reaching up from the floor was polished to a high gloss. A large clear glass vessel was placed in a secure nook: the tiny fractures that spiderwebbed the glass glittered even in the dim light. Wolf moved restlessly on the bed. Aralorn waited to make sure that he was still sleeping before she crept into the pack that lay out of place near the entrance, trusting that its position signified that it was something that he was going to take with him.

She made a place for herself amongst the various items and sat very still. She didn't have to wait long. Although he had announced that he would leave at first light, she wasn't at all surprised that he was leaving well before that. It had been obvious that neither she nor Myr had been particularly happy with his decision to go and face the ae'Magi alone.

To her relief he swung the pack up and carried it with him when he left. She hadn't quite figured out what she would have done if he'd left it.

She felt the roar of dizziness that signaled the magical leap from one place to another. When the sensation passed she scrambled for a secure position where the shuffling contents, which seemed to consist of nothing but hard angular objects, were not as likely to squish her. Even in human form it seemed that Wolf's favorite gait was a ground-eating run.

Apparently he transferred to a point several miles from the castle, as he ran for a long time. Battered and bruised, Aralorn was beginning to wish that she'd never heard voices in the first place when he stopped.

When Wolf opened the pack, the first thing that he saw was a bedraggled grey mouse, who looked at him with reproachful eyes and said, "Would it have hurt to pack something soft, like a shirt or something?"

He picked her up out of the bag and held her at eye level in the palm of his hand. He shook his head with reproach. "When one comes along without being invited, one cannot complain about the accommodations."

"Oh, dear," said the mouse, in a shocked voice. "I hope I am not intruding."

He took off the silver mask and sat cross-legged on the ground—careful not to knock her off her perch on the palm of his hand. "I don't suppose that you would go back, would you? I trust it has occurred to you that it would be very easy for the ae'Magi to use you against me."

She ran up his arm and poised for an instant on his shoulder. "Yes," she replied, cleaning her whiskers, "but it also occurred to me that my friend was going off alone to kill his father. Granted that he is not the typical father, but I don't think this is as easy for you as you'd like everyone to believe."

She hesitated for a minute before she continued. "I know how he is. How he can twist things until black seems white. His power is frightening, but it is not as dangerous as his ability to twist thoughts with words. I was only there for a short time; you were raised by him. It doesn't seem to me that exposure would make you immune to him; rather the opposite, I think. Perhaps having someone with you might make it easier."

Wolf was still. Aralorn abruptly jumped to the ground so she could see his face. She might as well have

saved herself the trouble, because his visage revealed no more than it usually did.

“I couldn’t have lived with myself if something happened to you and I was not there.” She shrugged and twitched her whiskers. “Besides, why should you have all the fun? He will see only a mouse, if he looks. I will do nothing unless you are killed: then I will destroy your body so that he cannot work his will.”

He wanted to send her away, not just for her safety, but because he didn’t want her to know what he’d been before, even though he’d done his best to tell her himself. These feelings that she brought out in him were so painful and confusing. It was easier when he had felt nothing, no pain, no guilt. No desire. His father had taught him how to be that way. When Wolf had seen what he was becoming, it had terrorized him into escaping. The desire that he felt, to return to what he had been, left him with a touch of the same terror. Aralorn was right. He needed her to keep him from returning to his old ways. The knowledge that she was watching might be enough to strengthen him.

“Stay,” was all that he said.

He turned then, apparently ignoring her. Kneeling, he emptied the contents of the backpack, a motley collection of jars which he organized in an overtly random fashion. He stripped himself of his clothes and began a ritual of purification using the water from a nearby stream.

Aralorn watched for a while, but when he started to meditate she went for a scurry—mice seldom walk. Once out of sight, where she wouldn’t pull his concentration back to her, she shifted into her own form.

She stopped when she had a good view of the castle. It was funny how she always pictured it as black on the outside, the way it appeared both of the times that she left it. In the sunlight it sparkled a pearly grey, almost white—like something out of old stories. She could almost visualize the noble knight riding out to face the evil dragon. She hoped in this story the dragon (accompanied by his faithful mouse) would defeat the knight.

She clenched her fingers into the bark of the tree she stood next to and turned her cheek against the rough texture, closing her eyes against the very real possibility that this story would turn out like all the rest—the knight living happily ever after and the dragon slain.

When the shadows lengthened into dusk, Aralorn—once again the mouse—snuck back to where Wolf sat with closed eyes, the last light resting on his clean-shaven, unblemished face with loving affection. Aralorn fought the chill that crept over her, knowing that if he looked, the all-too-discerning golden eyes would see her anxiety. It was unsettling to be in love with someone who looked like the face in her nightmares. Ah, well, at least he was handsome.

She leapt blithely onto his leg and ascended quickly to his bare shoulder, feeling a slight malicious pleasure when he jerked in surprise. When he turned to glare at her, she kissed him on the nose and then began to clean her forepaws with industry. With a sound that might have been a laugh, he ran a finger lightly up her back, rubbing her fur the wrong way. She bit him—but not too hard.

He smoothed her hair and set her down on the ground so that he could regain his clothing. She noticed that it wasn’t the same outfit he’d taken off. It wasn’t like anything that she’d ever seen him wear. The main color was still black, but it was finely embroidered with silver thread. The shirt was gathered and puffed, hanging down well over his thighs, which was just as well, because the pants were indecently tight, from mouse-height anyway. She could see the faint flickering of magic in the fabric, so assumed that the clothes he wore were the magician’s equivalent of armor.

When he was dressed he replaced her on his shoulder and strode out of the clearing like a man who was at last within reach of a much coveted goal. He talked to her while he walked.

“I thought of confronting him in the castle itself, but it has been the center of so much magic that I really don’t know how this spell would affect it. I suspect that at least some of the construction of the older parts of the building was done purely by magic. Without magic, it could collapse on top of us. I don’t know about you, but I thought it might be interesting to survive long enough to find out just what the ae’Magi’s loyal followers will do to his murderers. That is, if we manage to make it that far.”

“I’d forgotten that aspect of it,” answered Aralorn. “Will his spell still be in effect when he dies?”

“Probably not, but people will still remember how they felt. We will remain the villains of this story.” Wolf leapt easily over a small brook.

“Oh, good!” she exclaimed, holding on tightly with her fore-paws. “I’ve always wanted to be a villain.”

“I am happy to please my lady mouse.”

“Uh, Wolf?” she asked.

“Umm?”

“If we’re not going to the castle, where are we going?”

“Well,” he said, sliding down a steep section of his self-determined path, “when I lived in the castle, he had a habit of going out to meditate every night. He didn’t like to do it in the castle because he said that there were too many conflicting auras—too many people steeped in magic had lived and died there in the past thousand years or so. There is a spot just south of the moat that he used to like to use. If he doesn’t do it tonight, he probably will tomorrow.”

Aralorn sat quietly, thinking of all the things she’d never asked him, might never get a chance to ask.

“Wolf?”

“Yes?”

“Has your voice always been the way it is?”

“No.” She thought that was all of the answer that she was going to get until he added, “When I woke up after melting the better part of the tower”—he pointed to one of the graceful spires that arched into the evening sky—“I found that I’d screamed so loud that I damaged my voice. It is very useful when I want to intimidate someone.”

“Wolf,” said Aralorn, setting a paw on his ear since they were on relatively smooth ground, “not to belabor the obvious, but your voice isn’t what intimidates people. What *does* intimidate people is your habit of scorching anyone who bothers you.”

“Do you think that might be it?” he inquired with mock interest. “I had wondered.”

She laughed, and looked at the castle as it rose black against the lighter color of the sky. She had the funny feeling that it was watching them. She knew that it wasn’t so, but she was grateful that she was a mouse all the same, and even more grateful that she was a mouse on Wolf’s shoulders. She leaned lightly against his neck.

She knew that they were near the place Wolf had spoken of, from the tension in the muscles she balanced on. A stray wind brought the smell of the moat to cut through the smell of green things growing. It almost disguised another scent that touched her nose.

“Wolf!” Aralorn said in an urgent whisper. “Uriah. Can you smell them?”

He stopped completely, his dark clothes helping him to blend in. His ritual cleansing had left no human scent to betray him, only the sharp/sweet scents of herbs. Even a Uriah couldn't track in the dark, so unless they had already been seen they were safe for a moment. Wolf scanned with other senses to find where the Uriah were. It wasn't hard. He was surprised that they hadn't run into one before. His father, it seemed, had been busy. There were a lot of the things around, waiting.

Once he had watched a spider at her web. Fascinated, he had tried to see what she thought about, waiting for her prey to become entangled in the airy threads. He got the same feeling from the Uriah. He wondered if he were the victim of this web.

He thought about turning back. If the ae'Magi were aware that he was here, it might be better to return another time. In the end he shrugged and continued on with more caution. The ae'Magi knew his son well enough to know that he would be coming sometime; a surprise appearance would make no difference either way.

Aralorn buried her face in the pathetic shield of Wolf's shirt, trying to block out the smell. For some reason the smell of them was worse than the sounds that they had made outside of the cave. Hearing Talor's voice, seeing his eyes on that grotesque mockery of a human body, had made her want to retch and cry at the same time; it still did. By the time she'd gained control, Wolf stopped for a second time and set her on the ground, motioning her to hide herself. He hesitated and then shifted into his, familiar lupine form before gliding into the clearing.

The ae'Magi sat motionless on the ground, his legs and arms positioned in the classic meditation form. A small fire danced just between Wolf and the magician. The newly risen moon caught the clear features of the Archmage ruthlessly, revealing the remarkable beauty therein. Character was etched in the slight laughter lines around his eyes, and the aquiline nose. His eyes opened, their color appearing black in the darkness, but no less extraordinary than in full light. His lips curved a welcoming smite. The warm tones vocalized the sentiment in the expression on the ae'Magi's face.

“My son,” he said, “you have come home.”

Eleven

If Wolf wanted to believe that smile, Aralorn could see no sign of it from where she sat hiding under the large leaves of a plant that happened to be growing near the ae'Magi. Wolf lay down and began cleaning the toes of his front feet with a long pink tongue.

The ae'Magi's face froze at the implied insult and then relaxed into a rueful expression. “It was always so with you. Say walk and you run, stop and you go. I should have expected no joyous reunion, but I had hoped. It warms my heart to see you again.”

The wolf who was his son looked up and said, “We have no audience here. Do you take me for a fool? Should I return as the long-lost son to his loving father? Let me know when you are through making speeches so that we may talk.”

Aralorn marveled at the perfect response the magician made. A hint of tragedy crossed his face, to be supplanted by a look of stoic cheerfulness. “Let us talk then, my son. Tell me why you are come if it be not out of love for your father.” It hit her then that something was wrong, but she couldn't figure out just what it was. “I pray you be seated.” He indicated a spot not too near him with his left hand. It was just in character to politely offer Wolf a seat, making him look like an unruly child if he didn't take it. If he did

take it, it would give the ae'Magi the upper hand to have had Wolf obey his first request. He'd reckoned without Wolf, who looked not at all uncomfortable and made no move to come closer to the ae'Magi.

"I do not play your games. I have come to stop you. Everywhere that I go, I see one of your filthy pets. You are annoying me and I will not put up with it." Wolf put no force behind his words; the gravelly tone carried threat enough.

The ae'Magi stood and stepped slightly to his left so that the fire no longer was a barrier between himself and the Wolf. "I am sorry if I have caused you bother. Had I had known that the shapeshifter woman was yours, I would never have taken her. She didn't tell me about you until we were done and there was nothing I could do about it. Did she tell you that she cried when I ..."

Wolf rose to his feet with a growl of rage and stalked toward the figure. Abruptly Aralorn realized what it was that bothered her about the ae'Magi. He cast no shadow from the light of the fire. She noticed something else; Wolf's path would take him right across the place that the ae'Magi would have had him sit at.

"Wolf, stop!" she yelled as loud as she could in mouseform, hoping that he'd heed her. "He has no shadow. It's an illusion."

Wolf stopped, muting the feral tones in his throat. Her voice broke into his unexpected rage, forcing him to reason. He did then what he should have done first. Sniffing the air, he smelled only the taint of moat and Uriah; no lire—no human.

Ignoring the pseudo-ae'Magi, Aralorn the mouse scampered to the space that Wolf had been baited toward. "There's a circle drawn in rosemary and Uiarrnud root here."

"A containment spell of some sort," commented Wolf. "It's probably best if we don't trigger it." His voice was calm but his body was still stiff. He growled a word and the image of the ae'Magi froze in mid-sentence.

"Is he monitoring it, do you think?" asked Aralorn, bouncing away from the circle toward Wolf.

"I doubt it. Both the illusion and the trap are simple enough spells that he wouldn't have to." He regained his human form and picked up Aralorn, setting her on his shoulder. "If I had triggered the containment spell, it would probably have alerted him then."

"Like a spider's web," said Aralorn softly.

"Just so," agreed Wolf.

"Where to now?" Aralorn asked, "Do we wait for the Uriah to attack or do we look for the ae'Magi?"

"For someone who should be scared and cowering, you sound awfully eager." Wolf stood staring at the silhouette of the ae'Magi; his voice wasn't as emotionless as usual.

"Hey," replied Aralorn, trying to break the mood, "it's better than spending the winter cooped up in the caves."

Wolf made no answer except to run an absent-minded hand over the smooth skin of his cheek. Aralorn waited as patiently as she could and then said, "He knew that you were coming."

Wolf nodded, "He's been expecting me for a long time. I knew that. I should have been more alert for something like this. Aralorn, when he had you here, did he ..." His voice tightened with rage and stopped.

“No,” she said instantly. “The first time he was working on a spell and wanted to save his energy—much to my dismay.” Sarcasm crept into her voice. “The second time he was too interested in finding you to worry about it. You shouldn’t let him pull your strings so easily.” She curled her tail against his neck in a quick caress.

The tension eased out of him. “You are right, Lady. Shall we go a-hunting sorcerers in the castle? Perhaps you would prefer a Uriah or two to begin with, or one of my father’s other ‘pets.’ I believe that there are a few that you haven’t seen before. Would Milady prefer to be outnumbered a hundred to two or just one to two? We can be accommodating.”

“Then, of course,” said Aralorn, “once you have attained your goal we can arrange to have the castle fall on you so that you will escape mutilation from the outraged populace that you have saved from slavery and worse. Sounds like something I want to spend my day doing.” She thought that Wolf might have been smiling as he headed downhill and away from the castle, but it was hard to tell from her vantage point.

The woods grew increasingly dense as Wolf walked further from the castle. A hoot from an owl just overhead made Aralorn-the-mouse cringe lighter against his neck. “Lots of nasties in these woods,” she said in a mouselike voice void of all but a hint of humor.

“And I,” announced Wolf in a grim voice that was designed to let Aralorn know that it was time to be serious, “am the nastiest of all.”

“Are you really?” asked Aralorn in an interested tone. “Oh, I just adore nasties.”

He stopped and looked at the mouse sitting innocently on his shoulder. Most people cowered under that look. Aralorn began, industriously, to clean her whiskers. When Wolf stared to walk again, though, she said in a stage whisper, “I really do, you know.”

* * *

they emerged from a particularly thick growth of brush into a narrow aisle of grass. In the center of it sat an oddly shaped altar dedicated to one of the old gods. It was so heavily overgrown with moss and lichen it was almost Impossible to tell the original color of the stone. There was nothing unusual about finding the altar, as such remnants dotted the landscape from well before the Wizard Wars. However, the altar itself was unusual.

“Oh, dear,” said Aralorn drolly, “I suppose that it must have belonged to one of the fertility gods, hmm?”

It stood as tall as a man and almost as big around. When Wolf touched it, it slid sideways with a creak and a groan, although it didn’t appear to be difficult to move. Wolf slipped inside the dark hole that was revealed and started down the ladder. Aralorn darted off of his shoulder and down his arm to get a better look.

“The ladder is a lot newer than the altar,” she commented, flashing back to her post and tucking a paw inside his collar.

“I put it up myself, when I saw that there was some kind of exit from the tunnels up here. There was no sign of another one, so I suppose it must have rotted completely away. Plague it, Aralorn, you’re going to fall and kill yourself if you don’t stay put!” The last was said as she darted out on his other arm to get a closer look at the tilework on the wall. He picked her off his wrist and set her firmly back on his shoulder. “Just wait until we get down and you can have a better look.”

Once on the floor, he closed the opening with a wave and let his staff light the hall that they stood in. Aralorn scrambled to the floor and took her own shape, sneezing a bit from the dust. She scuffed a foot on the floor, revealing a dark, polished surface. The ceiling was as high or higher than the great hall in the castle and the walls were covered with detailed mosaic patterns of outdoor revelries of times gone by. The ceiling was painted like the night sky, giving the overall impression of being outdoors. Or at least that was what Aralorn assumed. The years had covered the tile on the walls with cracks and knocked down whole sections. The ceiling was badly water-damaged, showing the stonework that held it up through gaps left by fallen plaster.

Reluctantly, Aralorn followed Wolf through a gap in the wall that led to a drab little tunnel that looked as if a giant mole had dug through the earth. It branched several times, but Wolf never hesitated.

“How many times did you get lost exploring this?” asked Aralorn in a soft voice.

Wolf shot her an amused look. “Several, but I found a book hidden in one of the old libraries that detailed some of the passages and there was a copy of the master plans in the library I found here in the tunnels. The passages are extensive; it’s a wonder the whole thing hasn’t collapsed. There are only fifteen or twenty large rooms like the one we started in, most of them about in the same condition. If we make it through the next few days, I’ll show you a library that makes mine look small. I don’t know all of the passages. There are a lot of secret panels and hidden doors, magical and mundane, that make it difficult to find most of the interesting places. Like this one.” Wolf waved a hand and a large section of the tunnel just disappeared into a finished and ornate corridor.

When they stepped through, the opening disappeared—leaving a blank wall in its place. The end of the corridor widened into a huge room with a water fountain at its center. The floor had once been wood, now mostly rotted away, leaving a walkway that was uneven and hazardous. Aralorn stumbled and tripped forward, staring at the frescoed ceiling and the elaborate stone carvings on the walls. When she started muttering about ““where the fourth Earl of Such-and-Such met with the Queen to defeat the Sorcerer What’s-His-Face.”” Wolf put a firm hand on her shoulder and led her patiently around the old traps and pitfalls. He enjoyed her enthusiasm quietly, as any comment on his part was likely to spark a full-blown story.

He led her through several other unexpected doorways before they came to stairs that led up to the castle itself. The first place he took them to was the master’s suite. It consisted of eight interconnected rooms, all covered with tapestries of great age. The rooms were empty except for the silk merchant’s youngest daughter, who was crouched sobbing in a corner.

Her nakedness made her look even younger than she was. The white skin of her back was mottled with bruises and lash marks. An arcane symbol whose meaning eluded Aralorn was etched into one shoulder in bright red.

Wolf, who recognized the symbol, grabbed both of Aralorn’s arms when she would have reached out to touch the girl. He pushed Aralorn behind him with more speed than gentleness and gripped his staff in one hand. Noiselessly he drew his sword in the other.

“Child.” The word was gentle, his tone sad—for him; but he gripped the sword and held it in readiness. It was fortunate that he did so.

With a chilling cry and uncanny speed she turned and leapt. Once her face had been uncommonly pretty, thought Aralorn. Now the skin was drawn too tightly against the One bones. Her china-blue eyes were surrounded by pools of blood red. Her full lips were stretched over pearly teeth, the kind that all of the heroines in the old stories had—with a slight difference. The lower set of teeth were as long as the first

two knuckles of Aralorn's ring ringer. Her mouth gaped impossibly wide as she launched herself at Wolf. He knocked her aside easily enough, for her weight was slight, and in the process cut her deeply in the abdomen. He ended her suffering with a cut to the back of her neck.

Death was no stranger to Aralorn, so examining the body didn't bother her—much. "One of your father's pets, I assume?" It was a comment more than a question.

Wolf grunted an affirmative and touched the symbol on her back. "She'd have been a lot harder to fight if she hadn't been so new at it. She didn't even know how to attack."

Aralorn jerked the embroidered bedspread off the bed and covered the pathetic little body with it before following Wolf into the next room in the suite.

The study was a wonder in cultured taste, not that Aralorn expected anything else. Wolf walked to the desk and picked up a sheet of paper. He laughed humorlessly and handed it to Aralorn. It read simply, "I'm in the dungeon."

"Apparently," said Wolf, "he *was* monitoring his little trap. He probably knows that you are with me. I want you to go back. Now."

She looked at him consideringly. "I probably should tell you that I will, and then just follow you in."

"You would, wouldn't you?" Wolf's voice was soft. He glanced at a decanter on the ae'Magi's polished desk. It imploded loudly enough to make Aralorn jump. "Plague it, Aralorn, don't you see? He will use you against me. He already has."

Aralorn felt her own temper rise to the surface. "Plague it, yourself," she hissed. "Do you think that I am some weak helpless *female* who can do nothing but stand around while you protect her? I am not helpless against *human* magic or anything else he's likely to throw at us." She made human sound like a filthy word.

He was silent for a long moment and then he waved his hand with an haphazard motion and the decanter re-created itself, leaving the desk unblemished. He walked over and pulled the stopper. Taking a token drink from the neck of the bottle, he met Aralorn's glare. "I owe you an apology. Lady. I'm not used to caring about anything; it's ... uncomfortable."

She tilted her chin up at him, flags of temper still on her cheeks, then she took the decanter that he was still holding and took a mouthful herself. She set it on the desk and muttered something that he wasn't supposed to hear.

"*What?*" Obviously he did hear it.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him, tapping a foot impatiently on the floor. "I said, quote: 'It's a good thing that I love you or you'd be Uriah bait': unquote. Now that's settled, why don't we go find ourselves an ae'Magi?" Without waiting for him, she stalked out the door into the hallway.

"Aralorn, you're going the wrong way if you want to find the dungeons." If it had been anyone else, she'd have thought that his voice was meek.

She followed him through the twists and turns of the castle halts that were almost as convoluted as the secret tunnels. The dimly lit passages that had seemed threatening and huge when she had gone through them alone were not as intimidating as she remembered them.

Apparently there were no humans in the castle this late at night; at least they didn't see any. The Uriah standing at guard here and there paid them no heed. Aralorn was careful to keep her eyes from their faces, but she recognized Talor's boots anyway. Wolf's grip was steady on her shoulder as they went by it.

When they passed the entrance to the great hall, she couldn't resist the opportunity to look inside. The black bars of the cage were discernible in the moonlight, but the light wasn't good enough to see if it were occupied.

The stairway that led down to the lower levels was well lit and smelled of grain and alcohol. Each storage room on the first sublevel was carefully labeled as to contents. Most of them contained foodstuffs, but other labels read things like weapons, fabric, and old accounting records.

The second sublevel was only under one part of the castle. Here there were several small sleeping quarters intended for the use of apprentices; at least so Aralorn judged them by the traditional sparseness of the cells. The only other rooms were obviously intended for labs, but judging from the dust that coated the tables they hadn't seen use for some time.

The dungeon was on the third sublevel, deep below the earth's surface. Like the caves, the temperature was consistently chilly, but not cold. The smell was overpowering.

Aralorn felt the hair on her arms move with the magic impregnated in the walls of the castle at this level. Countless magicians had bespelled the stones of the castle here to prevent the escape of the inmates, and the half of Aralorn that wasn't human told her that the spells had been strong enough to keep in some of its prisoners even after they died. It occurred to her that they were lucky that neither of them were full-blooded shapeshifters—they could sense the dead almost as clearly as the living. A shapeshifter wouldn't keep his sanity for very long in a place such as this.

Without the fever that kept her from shielding herself from the human-twisted magic, she could block out enough of the emanations that the pain was nominal. She ignored the discomfort that was left and kept close to Wolf.

The guardroom was empty. By prearranged plan, and it took a strong argument to convince Wolf, she entered the dungeons first—because it was unexpected, and the more off-base they could throw the ae'Magi, the better off they were.

The first thing that she noticed was the lack of sound. There had never been a cessation of the moaning and coughing—sometimes the noise had driven her crazy. Now it was still and silent. The light was dim; Wolf's staff had stayed in the guardroom with him, so she couldn't see inside the cells. She crept carefully down one side of the path and hid in the shadows.

It wasn't hard to tell when Wolf entered the dungeon. His staff bounced daylight throughout the room. Aralorn saw then what she hadn't noticed before. The ae'Magi stood at the far end of the room. He, too, carried a staff, massive and elaborately carved, which he tilted as if it were a lance, it wasn't aimed at Wolf, but at her. She dropped instantly to the floor, which vibrated with the force of the explosion of the wall behind her. She was so distracted that she almost missed the Wolf's countermove, designed to force the ae'Magi to deal with him.

As planned, it caused the ae'Magi to turn to Wolf. While he was watching his son, Aralorn pulled one of her knives and threw it at the ae'Magi. She hit him in the chest. She only had a moment to congratulate herself before the knife passed through him without effect and clattered harmlessly to the floor behind him. The ae'Magi didn't even glance her way.

With a philosophical shrug she stayed on the floor where she was and prepared to watch the fight. It would have looked odd to someone who was not sensitive to magic and could only see two men gesturing wildly at each other. Aralorn could feel the currents of magic moving back and forth, gaining momentum and power with each countermove, but the only gesture that her limited experience with human magic allowed her to recognize was the deceptively simple spell that Wolf had been working on. She was also the first one to understand what would be the results of an anti-magic spell let loose in the dungeon of the ancient seat of the master magicians. A dungeon seeped in magic of centuries of spells.

Since she was already on the floor, all that she had to do was flatten herself tighter and hope that it was enough. Then the spell hit and chaos reigned.

She didn't know if it knocked her out, or just blinded her: either way she lost track of time. The first thing that she saw clearly was Wolf sitting on the floor and leaning awkwardly against a wall, his staff clenched in his right hand. She scurried to him on hands and knees.

"Are you all right?" she queried anxiously.

"Yes," he said, holding his staff out to her, as if he needed both hands to get to his feet.

Aralorn heard the noise behind her and twisted her head to see the ae'Magi getting to his feet even as she reached for the staff. She turned back to Wolf to warn him and noticed something she would have noticed right away if she hadn't been so dazed—she'd been in enough rights to know a broken back when she saw it. She saw the same knowledge in his face. He smiled at her with a haunting sweetness as she touched the staff. He said something that might have been, "I love you too," but a jolt of magic traveled up her arm and she blacked out.

When she woke up the floor she was looking at was bare stone, not cobbled as the floor in the dungeon was. But it was by the musky smell of the books that she knew where she was.

"No! You stupid son of a ... Plague take you, Wolf!" Her scream was muffled by the rows of bookshelves in the library. Helplessly she pounded a fist on the floor, letting her rage keep back her tears.

"The sword!" She didn't see anyone, but a firm hand pulled her to her feet. He materialized and shook her by the shoulders. His features were the too-perfect features of a shapeshifter.

"The sword, you stupid girl! Where is the sword?"

Aralorn had been through a lot. She had long since outgrown any patience with being manhandled. With a deceptively easy twist recently learned from Stanis, she freed herself and backed away.

With the distance between them, she could see the aura of age that clung to him, despite the smooth skin on his face. He was only a few inches taller than she was and far more beautiful to look upon. At another time she would have been more courteous to the Old Man of the Mountain, but Aralorn wasn't in the mood for politeness.

"What, sword are you talking about, old man?" she spat.

"The sword! The sword!" His arms swung widely in one of the overblown gestures that shapeshifters favored. He dropped into their language, and Aralorn had to struggle to understand the dialect he spoke. "You haven't let the ae'Magi get his hands on it, have you? Where is it? He mustn't have control over it."

"What sword?" Aralorn's voice was harsh with impatience; she needed to travel back to the castle, and a goose wasn't, the swiftest of fliers. "Sir, you will have to explain yourself more clearly."

“Your sword, did you leave it there? Didn’t ...” He stopped and looked behind her.

Curious, she looked behind her and saw her short sword, the one that she had left in its usual place under the couch, floating gently in the air behind her. She could almost see the person holding the sword—it was like looking at an image in rough water.

“You didn’t take it?” The Old Man’s voice was filled with disgust. “What is wrong with you? I’ve given you so many hints I might as well have come out and told you what you needed to do! If it weren’t for the fact that Lys cares about that Wolf, I would let you stew in your own pot.”

He stalked to the sword and took it from the apparition that held it. He unsheathed it and swung it once. “This is the third of the Smith’s great Weapons.” He gave it a name, but Aralorn was too distracted to translate it. “If the ae’Magi gets his hands on her and realizes what he has, there will be no one who can stand against him. You were supposed to take her with you and use her. I take it that your silly little spell didn’t work?”

He didn’t wait for her nod but continued on. “I thought that he just might pull it off. Here”—abruptly the shapeshifter’s voice lost its force and became querulous like that of a very old man—“take it and go back. I’m very tired—maintaining this shape is burdensome. Lys?” He shoved the sword at Aralorn and was gone with an abrupt pop.

Aralorn took the sword and looked at it. It looked no more magical than it ever had, but still ... it did match the description given for the Smith’s sword.

Sheathing it abruptly, she slipped it onto her belt. With Wolf’s staff in one hand, she ran out of the library to find Myr.

Twelve

Myr was never difficult to locate. Aralorn simply had to look for the largest group of people and head in that direction. She found him just outside the cave entrance giving knife-fighting lessons to a group of the younger refugees. He glanced up and saw her as he was avoiding a crudely wielded blade; the distraction almost cost him a slitted throat.

He talked for just a minute to his former opponent, who was white-faced and shaking; it was no light thing to come so close to killing a king. Aralorn shifted impatiently from one foot to the other as Myr dismissed the class and strode to her.

He took a long look at her, noting the scrape on her cheek that she’d gotten rolling across the floor, the filth that clung to her, and Wolf’s staff that she held clutched in one hand. He didn’t demand any explanations, merely asked in a businesslike tone, “What do you need?”

“I need you to call the dragon to take me back to the ae’Magi’s castle. I can’t get there fast enough by myself.” She noticed with detached surprise that her voice was steady.

Myr nodded, gestured for her to wait for him and ducked back into the caves. He returned carrying his sword in one hand, the belt dangling from its sheath, and led the way through a thicket of brambleberry to a smallish clearing.

Carefully he unsheathed his sword and gave a rueful look to the blade that years of his grandfather’s warring had left unmarred. Then he drove it into the sandy soil, trying not to wince at the grating sound. Another time Aralorn would have smiled.

When he was done calling the dragon he stood quietly beside her, not asking her what had happened. It was Aralorn who finally broke the silence.

“We made it into the ae’Magi’s castle. He was waiting for us in the dungeons. I think that Wolf’s spell would have worked anyplace else. There was too much old magic and the spell wasn’t strong enough and backlashed. I was on the floor already so it didn’t hit me very hard. The ae’Magi was knocked out momentarily. Wolf ...” Her voice cracked and she stopped, swallowed and tried again. “Wolf’s back is broken; he tricked me into touching his staff and sent me back here. I don’t know how fast a dragon can fly. Even if it consents to take me to the castle it will probably be too late.” She laughed then, though it could have been a sob, and clasped the staff tighter. “He may have been right and it was too late when he sent me back.”

Myr didn’t say anything, but he put a comforting hand on her shoulder. A cold wind swept down the mountainside, and Aralorn shivered with impatience as much as chill. Even though she was watching intently, she didn’t see the dragon until it was overhead. Silver and green and as graceful as a hummingbird, the great reptile landed and eyed them with interest—or perhaps hunger.

“I need you to get me to the ae’Magi’s castle as fast as possible.” Aralorn had no more regard for protocol than she had ever had. The dragon tilted its head back in offense.

Myr’s grip tightened warningly on Aralorn’s shoulder as he said, “Lord Dragon, the only one of us who stands a chance of facing down the ae’Magi is by himself at the castle. We need to get there to help him or the ae’Magi has won. You are our only chance of doing so in time.” Aralorn started at the “we,” but decided not to protest as it was likely to offend the dragon even more.

The dragon hesitated a minute and then asked, “Speed is important?”

“Very, Lord Dragon,” Aralorn said carefully, keeping a respectful tone.

It nodded, saying, “I can travel much faster than flying, but it means that because of your safeguards against magic I cannot take you, King Myr. The shapeshifter half-breed I can take.”

Myr looked unhappy, but he nodded his acceptance. When the dragon lowered its belly to the ground and folded its wings, Myr helped Aralorn up, as she was hampered by the necessity of keeping the sharp claws at the end of Wolf’s staff away from the dragon.

The scales on the dragon’s back were slick, but otherwise it was no worse than riding a horse bareback. The wings beat steadily until they caught an updraft, then flattened and spread wide, letting the wind pull them south.

Abruptly the dragon lurched forward and Aralorn felt a now-familiar dizziness seize her and clutched the fist-sized scales reflexively. When she was able to focus her eyes again, the castle of the ae’Magi lay just below.

Shouting so that the dragon could hear her past the sound of the wind, Aralorn said, “Land wherever you can find a safe place, Lord. I can find my way in.”

In acknowledgement of her words the dragon changed its angle of flight until it was losing altitude fast. Aralorn’s ears popped painfully and she tightened her grip on the dragon’s scales until they cut into her hand. When the dragon landed, the jolt loosened Aralorn’s grip and she landed with a thud next to an impressively armed forepaw.

She rolled to her feet with more speed than grace. She turned to face the dragon and bowed respectfully.

“My thanks, sir, and apologies for my clumsiness.” Without waiting for a reply, she shifted quickly into a goose and flew as fast as she could to the castle.

The moat didn't smell any better than it had before, and it took her some time to find a pipe that was not plugged with grime and still intact. Once she found one, she balanced precariously on it until she could turn into a mouse. Even in the mouseshape she had trouble negotiating the tricky business of crawling into the pipe from the top, but she managed without falling into the moat.

The corridor that she entered was only dimly lit by wall sconces, and from what she could see it was not one that she'd been in before. She considered staying a mouse, but decided that she would have a better chance of recognizing something familiar if she were in human form, since she'd been in human form while she was following Wolf.

When she took her own shape again, the staff appeared beside her. She hadn't been sure that it would. She wondered if it had changed with her, like the sword and her clothes, or if it were following her on its own. The thought caused her to pick it up gingerly as she started down the hallway.

There were still Uriah posted in the halls. As before, they allowed her to pass without bothering her, though they followed her progress with their eyes. She kept a steady, rapid pace, hoping that she would find a clue to where she was soon enough to be of some help to Wolf.

The castle was eerily silent, so that when she heard sounds coming from inside a room she stopped impulsively and opened the door. Lord Kisrah looked up startled from where he'd been eating breakfast in bed with a giggling young beauty.

“Lord Kisrah, you wouldn't be interested in showing me the way to the dungeons, I suppose?” asked Aralorn. She wondered if she should pull her sword or knife. She didn't have a chance to act. Something flashed at her out of Lord Kisrah's hands. Instinctively, because it was already in her grip, she moved the staff to block it. When the flash hit the dark, oiled wood, the crystals on one end of the staff, which up to this point had been dull and lifeless, flared brightly and Lord Kisrah's magic dissipated without a sound.

Unwilling to let him get another spell off, Aralorn attacked with the staff. Lord Kisrah, unarmed, not to mention unclothed, didn't have much of a chance against Aralorn wielding her favorite type of weapon. Her first blow broke his arm and her second knocked him unconscious on the floor next to the bed.

Aralorn turned to his bedmate with apologies on her lips, but something about the girl made her tighten her grip on the staff instead. Focused intently on the unconscious man, the red-haired woman slithered out of the bedclothes, knocking the bedtable with their food onto the floor.

Remembering the harpy that she and Wolf had met earlier, Aralorn tapped the girl's shoulder gingerly with the clawed end of the staff. She hadn't realized how sharp the claws were until they drew blood. She felt bad about it until the girl turned and Aralorn got a good look at her.

The girl snarled and Aralorn jumped back and seriously considered leaving Lord Kisrah to his fate. As the girl moved, her shape altered rapidly into something vaguely reptilian with a large, spiked tail and impressive fangs. It was fast and strong enough that when its tail hit the post of the bed, the wood cracked. It was also, thankfully, stupid—very stupid. It jumped at Aralorn with a shrill cry and impaled itself on the claws of Wolf's staff.

Dying, it changed back into its former beautiful self and the woman blinked her green eyes and said softly, “Please ...” before she was unable to say anything.

“Plague it,” said Aralorn in an unsteady voice as she retrieved the staff in shaky hands. She backed into

the corridor and started down it when she noticed the hungry gaze of one of the Uriah focused on the bloody end of the staff. She thought of Lord Kisrah lying like an appetizer beside his bedmate's corpse; she went back and shut the door to the bedroom and locked it with a simple spell that Lord Kisrah would have little trouble breaking when he woke up.

Just as she was about to give up hope, Aralorn rounded a corner and found herself in the great hall. From there it was a simple matter to find her way to the dungeon. She was concentrating so hard on doing so that the whisper took her by surprise.

"Aralorn," said the Uriah from its position in the shadows near the stairway that fed down to the dungeons.

She came to an abrupt halt and spun to face Talor. "What do you want?"

It laughed, sounding for a minute as carefree as he always had, and then said in a harsh voice, "You know what I am. What do you think that I want. Aralorn?" It took a step closer to her. "I hunger, just as your companion will shortly. Leave, Aralorn; you can do no good here."

Aralorn shifted her grip on Wolf's staff from, her right hand, which was getting stiff and sweaty, to her left. "Talor, where is your brother? I haven't seen him here."

"He died making the transition to Uriah," it said softly, and smiled. "Lucky Kai."

Aralorn nodded and turned as if to go down the stairs. Instead she continued her turn, drawing the sword as she moved. Smith's Weapon or not, the blade cut cleanly through the Uriah's neck, beheading it. The body fell motionless to the stone floor.

"Sweet dreams, Talor," she said soberly. "If I find Wolf in your condition, I will strive to do the same for him."

With the sword in her right hand and the staff in her left, she started down the stairs. The lower levels were darker, but now Wolf's staff was emitting a faint glow that allowed her to see where she put her feet. As she started down the third set of steps it occurred to her that she didn't really know what she planned to do. Alone against the ae'Magi, she had no chance. Not only was he a better magician by infinite orders of magnitude, but if he was Wolf's equal with a sword then he was a much better fighter than Aralorn.

The smells of the dungeon were strong now, and the stench didn't help her stomach, which was already clenched with nerves. In the guardroom she abandoned the staff because she didn't know how to stop the crystals from glowing.

Not wanting the sword to make any noise, she sheathed it and then dropped to her belly, ignoring the filth on the cold stone floor. Slowly she slid into the dungeon, keeping to one side. The voices that had been indistinct were now intelligible. She heard Wolf speaking, and the huge weight of grief lifted off her shoulders.

"... why should I make this easier for you than I already have? This is a very easy shield to break through; most third-year magicians could do it. Would you like me to show you how?" Wolf's voice was weaker than she'd ever heard it, but there was no more emotion in it than it ever had. "It docs have the unfortunate effect of incinerating whatever the shield is guarding."

"Ah, but I have another method of removing your protection." The ae'Magi's voice was a smooth contrast to his son's. "I have been informed that the girl whom you so impetuously sent away has

returned all alone. She should be here momentarily, if she isn't already.”

For an instant Aralorn plastered herself motionless to the floor before her common sense reasserted itself. It really didn't matter if the ae'Magi knew she was coming; the element of surprise wasn't going to help her much anyway. What did matter was that somehow Wolf had managed to hold the ae'Magi at bay, and no matter how much Wolf cared for her, he knew that it was more important that the ae'Magi not be able to control Wolf's powers. He wouldn't give himself to the ae'Magi just to save her skin ... she hoped.

She inched forward a few steps more until she could see Wolf revealed by the light of the ae'Magi's staff. He sat in almost the same position that he had been in when she left him. He had drawn a single orange line of power around himself, and there was something different about his position. She looked carefully and saw that he was cautiously moving his toes. She smiled; he had bought enough time with his barrier to heal himself.

Aralorn drew the sword and stepped into the light in front of Wolf. She expected an immediate reaction, but the ae'Magi was pacing back and forth with his back to her.

“... you should not have crossed me. With your power and my knowledge, you could have become a god with me. That's all that the gods were, did you know it? Mages who had discovered the secret to eternal life, and I have it now. I will be a god; the only god, and you will help me do it.”

All of the dictates of honor demanded that she call attention to herself before she could attack, Aralorn, however, was a spy and a rotten swordswoman besides, so she struck him in the back.

Unfortunately the same spell that had rendered her knife useless previously was also effective against the sword, which slid harmlessly through him and knocked Aralorn off balance. She turned her fall into a roll and kept going until she hit a wall. Although the sword hadn't done the magician any harm, the metal grip had heated enough that she was forced to drop it on the ground. It had something to do with hitting a magician with metal, she supposed.

“Ah,” said the ae'Magi with a smile, “who would think that the son of my flesh would fall for a silly girl who is stupid enough to try the same trick twice.” He turned to Wolf and started to say something else, but Aralorn quit listening. She couldn't believe that the Archmage was just dismissing her. She decided not to question her luck and began to shapechange, trusting that Wolf would see her and keep the ae'Magi's attention long enough that she could complete the transition to icelyn.

“Don't discount Aralorn so lightly; you may be surprised,” commented Wolf, stretching the stiff muscles of his neck. “Certainly I never thought that she could get back from the Northlands so quickly. Perhaps the Old Man of the Mountain sent her back.”

The ae'Magi snorted in disbelief, “You could not have sent her so far; the Northlands would have blocked such transportation. I do not care where she was. As for the ‘Old Man of the Mountain’ myth, there is no such person or I would have run into him long since.”

Wolf curled his lips in the dim light of the ae'Magi's staff. “If you are so sure that the old gods are real, why not a folk tale as well?”

The keener senses of the icelyn made the smell of the dungeon worse, and she curled her lips in a silent snarl of disgust as she stalked slowly toward the ae'Magi. She crouched down behind him and twitched her stub of a tail, waiting for just the right moment before she sprang.

Her front claws dug into his shoulders for purchase while her hind legs raked his back, scoring him

deeply. But that was all that she had time for before the ae'Magi's staff caught her in the side of the head with enough force to toss her against a wall. As she lay dazed, her eyes focused on Wolf.

On his knees, Wolf carefully retraced the circle of power. Reaching out almost casually, he snagged his staff where it apparently had been waiting for him in the darkness.

"Father," he said getting to his feet.

The ae'Magi turned and, seeing Wolf, brought his staff up and look up a fighting stance. It was quiet for a moment and then Wolf struck. Some of the fighting was physical, some of it was magical, most of it was both—accompanied by a very impressive lightshow.

Aralorn watched from her corner and got slowly to her feet. Anything that she could do as an icelyn was likely to do as much harm as good with so much magic flying around. She look back her human shape, from habit as much as anything else. She started to lean against the wall and watch, when she caught a glimpse of the sword, half buried in the filthy rushes on the floor. On impulse she picked it up; the heat that had made her drop it was gone.

Atryx Iblis, the Old Man had called it in an archaic dialect. "Atryx" was easy; it meant "devourer."

"Iblis" took her a while longer but when she understood it she smiled and held it at ready, waiting for a chance to use it again.

Healing himself had weakened Wolf, and he was showing it. His blocks were less sure and he lashed out in fewer and fewer attacks. The ae'Magi was also tiring; the blood he was losing to the deep slashes that Aralorn had made on his back was bothering him. But it was Wolf who slipped in the muck on the floor and fell to one knee, losing his staff in the process.

For a second time Aralorn attacked the ae'Magi's back with the sword, but this time she stabbed him with it instead of cutting him and then released the grip. The sword Ambris hung grotesquely from his chest, though it was doing no apparent harm. Without taking his eyes off Wolf, the ae'Magi swung the tip of his staff at Aralorn and said a quiet phrase.

Nothing happened, but the Smith's Sword was glowing brighter than either of the staves, bathing the dungeon with pink. Wolf got to his feet and retrieved his staff, but made no move to attack. Frantically the ae'Magi grabbed the blade and pushed the sword out, cutting his fingers in the process although the blade slid out easily enough and fell, shimmering, to the floor.

Aralorn grabbed it, heedless of the heat, and sheathed it as she said conversationally, "The Old Man says that it's one of the Smith's Weapons. *Atryx Iblis*, he calls it—Magic Eater."

The ae'Magi's staff was dark now, just an elaborately carved stick to his touch. The ae'Magi's hands formed the simple gestures to call forth light and nothing happened. Turning to his son, he said, "Kill me, then."

Passionlessly, the predator the ae'Magi had created looked at him with glittering yellow eyes and then said in his macabre voice, "No."

Wolf turned to Aralorn and, gripping her arm tightly, transported them to the meadow where they'd faced the ae'Magi's illusion, leaving the Archmage in the darkness, alone.

* * *

wolf stepped back from aralorn almost immediately and stood looking at the Magician's castle. Aralorn

looked at his brooding face and wondered what he was thinking.

He spoke softly. "I am still what he made me, it seems."

"No," said Aralorn in a positive voice.

"Do you know what I just did? I mercifully"—he bit off the word—"left him bleeding, to face a castle full of Uriah that he no longer controls. I would do it again."

"A kinder fate than he had in mind for you," Aralorn reminded him, examining the burns the sword had left on her hand. "He has as much chance of escaping from the Uriah as Astrid did. He may escape anyway. There seem to be a lot of secret passages around."

She smiled then. "You also eliminated the threat that his faithful followers would attack us after we killed the ae'Magi. He will either disappear, or be found mostly eaten by his former pets."

Wolf caught her hand and the burns disappeared from it, along with much of the dirt. Aralorn laughed softly and wiped her other hand on his cheek, showing him the smudge on it. "This time, you are almost as dirty as I am."

She caught his arm and tugged gently. "Come on. Let's go find Myr and let him know what's happened. Then I have to get back to Sianim and let Ren know that there is going to be a plaguing awful mess of Uriah running around that someone's got to clean up. If he works it right, Sianim stands to make a lot of gold off this."

Finis

The first baron of Tryfah, Seneschal of the Royal Palace (also known as Hans the Smith), stepped into the kitchen to examine the food being prepared for the feast celebrating King Myr's formal coronation. Seeing the Seneschal slip into the kitchen, the Lyon of Lambshold, who currently held the title of Minister of Defense, decided to join him.

In the main kitchen, the cook who ruled there sprawled asleep in her rocking chair near the dessert trays, a nasty-looking wooden spatula in one hand. The new court taster stood silently near the stove.

The new cook was a marvel; the fowl had never been so moist, the beef so tender, and her sweets were beyond comparison. More wondrous still was that she was able to maneuver her bulk around (though no one but the hulking taster who lurked in the corner had ever witnessed it) and cook.

"So," commented Hans, "the mercenaries have offered to help clean up the Uriah."

"Aye," snorted the Defense Minister, "for a discounted rate, since their troops will be in the vicinity clearing the Uriah out of Darran as well. They've already cleared out the ae'Magi's castle." His hand crept out involuntarily to hover over one of the lacy sugar cakes.

"I wouldn't," muttered the Seneschal to the Lyon, nodding at the massive hand that was tightening around the spatula's handle though the cook's eyes had remained closed. He cleared his throat and remarked in a louder tone, "Likely they were hoping to find the ae'Magi in a state to pay them, but I heard that they couldn't find a trace of him anywhere." There was a trace of satisfaction in his tone.

The Lyon snatched his hand back and said absently, "Eaten, most likely, poor man. Sianim'll probably make the next ae'Magi pay them before they turn the castle over to—" He was interrupted by a shout from one of the pages who seemed to be taking over the castle lately.

“Hans! ... umm, excuse me ... I mean, my Lord. Myr ... uh, King Myr wants to know if the delegation from Ynstrah is here yet. He can't find them anywhere, though the gatekeeper says that they came in last night.” The page stood at the top of the stairs, pulling at the velvet surcoat he wore.

“Tell him I'm coming, Stanis,” grunted the Seneschal.

The Lyon gave a last look at the cakes as he followed Hans up the stairs.

When they were safely gone, the small, bright sea-green eyes of the cook opened, almost concealed in the folds of her face. She shifted her amazing mass out of the chair and waddled to the bakery trays. Taking a cake in her pudgy hand, she threw it to the guardsman who served as taster. He caught it easily despite the eyepatch he wore.

“I told Ren that we wouldn't learn anything at an event this size,” she said. “There isn't enough privacy for any good plotting. The only thing that ever happens at a state occasion is an assassination attempt, but Myr has already hired Sianim guards to stop that.”

The guard nodded his head—he'd heard her complaint more than once. He examined the little delicacy with his good eye before biting into it, saying, “You could have let him have the cake, Aralorn. They're easy enough to make.” Another cake appeared in his hand as he spoke and he tossed it to Aralorn.

“I couldn't undermine the authority of the castle cook,” said Aralorn in a shocked voice, while catching the treat with a dexterity that was out of character. “Besides,” she added, taking a bite of her cake, “this way they'll enjoy the two that Hans snitched even more.”

Wolf sauntered to the dessert trays and saw that there were indeed three delicacies missing. “Should we tell Myr that his Seneschal is light-fingered?”

“Not unless he wants to pay for the information. You need to start thinking like a mercenary, Wolf.” Aralorn licked her fingers. “By the way, where did you learn to cook like this?”

Wolf bared his teeth at her and said, his voice as macabre as always, “A magician needs must keep some secrets, Lady.”