

WOLFKIN

LORD OF WIND AND FIRE BOOK 01

By Elaine Corvidae

A DF Books NERDs Release

Copyright ©2003 by Elaine Corvidae

First published in 2003, 2003

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

WOLFKIN Copyright © 1996-2003 by Elaine Corvidae

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

A Mundania Press Production

Mundania Press LLC

6470A Glenway Avenue, #109

Cincinnati, Ohio 45211-5222

To order additional copies of this book, contact:

books@mundania.com www.mundania.com

Cover Art © 2003 by Stacey L. King

Composition and Design by Daniel J. Reitz, Sr.

Production And Promotion by Bob Sanders

ISBN: 1-59426-053-2

First eBook Edition * October 2003

Library Of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2003114035

Prologue

He crouched in the pose of a hunter: body taut, senses extended. His eyes glittered in the night, like gray ice set in a face the color of old bone. The wind scrabbled curiously at his threadbare black clothing, seeking to touch the thin flesh stretched tight over his ribs. Unkempt hair, the crimson of freshly-spilled blood, gusted across his face.

The wind smelled wrong, tasted wrong, he thought. More like the bitter wine of winter than the sweeter cider of autumn. He shivered with the dread of the lean, cold months that had been bred into the blood and bones of his kind.

He smiled sardonically at that thought. *My kind? And what kind would that be?*

The skeletal grasses rattled dryly around him, as if in commiseration. An enormous, dark shape moved nervously at the lip of the small dell in which he hid. Reaching out blindly, he laid a reassuring hand against the warhorse's warm hide. Iron muscles flexed under his callused fingers, and a velvety lip brushed his skin. The animal's familiar scent filled his nostrils, comforting.

It's an ill night to be out on the Kellsmarch, he thought. Wide, canted eyes scanned the vast plains, which stretched off to every side. The ivory moon shone down, illuminating every blade of grass with silver fire. *There's no cover out here, nowhere to hide.*

Damn your stony heart, Ax, where are you?

A pale shape gleamed suddenly on the other side of the dell. He leapt back, snarling, before realizing it was the wizard who stood there. A moment later, Ax's scent—'not exactly that of a normal human, but not really definable as anything else, either'—wafted to him on the breeze.

Ax bowed slightly, and a mocking smile touched his withered lips. "Forgive me, Yozerf Jonaglir. I did not mean to startle you."

And I'm a human. Yozerf looked away, as if the wizard hardly concerned him. "Trihychl. It's Trihychl."

Ax shrugged negligently. "It hardly matters to me what clan name your family chooses to skulk under these days."

Yozerf ground his teeth together in silent fury. But he was accustomed to bearing the offhand taunts of humans, and in this, at least, the wizard seemed no different from his brethren.

Pretending to ignore the jibe, Yozerf tilted his head to one side and glared balefully at Ax. "What do you want of me?"

"I think you know. It's time for you to pay your debt."

Yozerf transferred his malevolent stare to his hands, which rested lightly on his knees. *My debt.*

If I can survive whatever task he has for me, I'll be truly free for the first time in my life. No more wondering when he'll come, what he'll ask of me. Free.

But freedom through slavery? Is that even possible?

Wariness caused the hair to prickle on the nape of his neck. Ax smelled smug, but a sour whiff of fear

tainted the wind as well. Anything dire enough to worry the wizard, let alone make him afraid, was likely to be perilous in the extreme.

Although he knew it to be a futile gesture, he met Ax's stare with one of his own. Yozerf's gray gaze was inhumanly cold, challenging the wizard's deceptively mild expression. "And if I refuse to do your bidding?"

Ax inclined his head, and his smile sent a spike of ice through Yozerf's heart. "You could try. Thirty-four years ago, I used my healing arts to keep death from claiming you before you even drew your first breath. I gave you your life. Therefore, it is mine to do with as I will."

Hatred clogged Yozerf's throat, and he spat on the ground. "So you will throw me away as a pawn in some unfathomable game."

"My game is unfathomable only to you," Ax said, and now his voice was steel and stone, all pretense of goodwill flung aside. "I work solely for the good of Jenel. Not for my own aggrandizement, not for power, not for revenge. For my *kingdom*."

"Jenel is nothing to me," Yozerf hissed. "Hell can come take this kingdom and everyone in it—it is no concern of mine."

A wall of force punched into him, heaving him off his feet and slamming him hard against the earth. All the air left his lungs, and for an instant he lay stunned. The warhorse behind him screamed, and its hooves cut across the stars above his head. Gasping for breath, he forced himself to roll away from the frightened animal.

No sharp pains accompanied the movement—at least Ax hadn't seen fit to shatter his bones. *Undoubtedly because I couldn't perform his little task then.* Chest heaving, Yozerf came up into a crouch. His head still spun with the force of the blow, and he had to stretch a hand out to the ground to steady himself. The taste of blood filled his mouth.

Ax glared angrily from the other side of the dell, not even looking wearied from his display. "Jenel is my kingdom, and I work to defend her," the wizard said in a low, dangerous voice. "And so will you. You will not question me, only do what I say."

Yozerf rose slowly to his feet, careful to keep any sign of pain from his face. "I will do as you ask," he said quietly. "I would have done so anyway. Whatever else you might say of me, I never renege on a debt—not even one to a human. There was no need for force."

Ax chuckled softly, the sound melding with the sere rattle of the dead grasses. "Perhaps. But this way, you'll never forget who owns you."

Chapter 1

Suchen slipped carefully through the wood, moving in near silence. Each booted foot lifted and was set down with the utmost precision, avoiding anything that might rustle or crack. Her cloak, tunic, and breeks were dyed dull brown and gray, meant to blend in with tree trunks and bramble thickets. Alert blue eyes swept the forest about her, searching for movement, for tracks that would betray a trace of animals or humans. Her left arm held her bow steadily, and her right hand clutched an arrow ready to be aimed and fired within the space of a breath.

The wood held its silence like a crouching beast. Brilliant autumn leaves painted the trees in shades of crimson, gold, and orange, and a cool breeze scraped hoary branches together with a sound like the soft tittering of old women. The air smelled of damp earth and dead leaves.

Normally, Suchen reflected, she wouldn't have gone into the forest to practice stealth without the company of the Sworn to judge her success. But today the autumn air had infected her with a restless longing, a need to leave crowded, noisy Kellsjard and take this last chance at wandering alone before winter set in. She had ridden a quarter day to reach this wildwood on the very edge of the Kellsmarch, leaving her horse to forage at the grassy verge while she went ahead on foot.

She felt a twinge of guilt that she had neglected to tell anyone exactly where she was going. *But if the Sworn knew I was leaving Kellsjard, they would have wanted to come too. Or at least Peddock would have. And if not that, then Garal would be at me with worries about the mead, or the harvest, or the number of arrows in the armory.*

There were days, she reflected, when she grew heartily tired of lists of supplies and speculations about the weather. It was foolish, but even so ... sometimes she felt a formless sense of longing rise up in her heart, like the restless call of a migrating bird. But she could never quite say what she longed for, except that it was different from what she had now.

A sudden, prickling sensation raced down the back of her neck. *I'm being watched...*

She froze, muscles tensing with instinct honed during nine years of hard training. Her eyes scanned the trees about her with calm efficiency. When no sign of threat met her searching gaze, she pivoted slowly around on one heel to look behind.

Nothing. *Maybe it was just a deer. Or a bird. Or sheer paranoia.* Suchen completed her sweep, coming back to her original position, only to find the iron tip of her arrow pointed directly between the pale eyes of an old man standing not five feet from her.

She swallowed a yelp of shock, kept her arrow steady even as her mind yelled that no one could have come so close without her hearing him. *Least of all a frail old man.*

Certainly he seemed an unlikely sort to meet in an unsettled wood such as this. Long, white robes too pristine to have spent much time trailing along ground covered with wet, fallen leaves hung about a spare frame. Ivory hair tumbled luxuriantly down his back, matched by the snowy beard covering his chest. A pair of piercing blue eyes peered kindly at her from amidst a webwork of wrinkles. The scent of herbs and smoke drifted from the folds of his robes.

One explanation for his presence in this deserted wood and for his uncannily silent approach seemed immediately apparent. "Wolfkin?" she demanded, voice shaking. Gods, if he was truly one of those demons, her life was done now.

The old man chuckled and shook his head. "No. I'm no shape-changer, dear girl. You have nothing to fear from me. I merely wish to speak with you."

Suchen narrowed her eyes, her aim never wavering. "Who are you, old man? How did you move so quietly that I never heard you?"

He smiled thinly, blue eyes glittering with merriment. "You are Suchen Keblava," he stated abruptly. "Daughter of Reag Keblav, a not-inconsequential merchant in southern Jenel. Steward to Lord Auglar of Kellsjard, an unusual post for such a young woman."

A chill went through her. This was definitely not a chance meeting. "You seem to know me," she said with a steadiness that betrayed none of her concern. "Now, tell me who you are and what you want of me."

"Or you'll feather my throat with that arrow?" he asked, amused rather than fearful. "Very well. My name is Ax."

"Ax?"

"You know the name, I take it."

"The name, yes. Vague memories of her father's gossip about the court filtered back from childhood. Ax was a powerful wizard. He was exiled from Jenel nineteen years ago, after the death of King Horondus."

Ax smiled again, a grandfatherly sort of benediction that threatened to put her more at ease with him than she thought safe. "The infant Queen's Regency Council did exile me after her father's untimely death, yes," he agreed amicably. "I have traveled far in the years since, but have never forgotten that Jenel is where I truly belong. But I have returned for more pressing reasons than simple homesickness. He regarded her arrow thoughtfully. "I see you have trouble accepting my words. Perhaps this will convince you."

The old man reached out a withered hand, his fingers coming to rest flat against the gnarled bark of an old tree. He showed no signs of strain; he made no gestures, nor spoke any words.

But the dead leaves on the tree shuddered, fluttered to the ground in a drift. New foliage, the bright green of spring, sprouted from suddenly-swelled buds. It grew at a phenomenal rate, unfolding and darkening as if a season passed at the rate of a single breath. Bright white flowers bloomed, their sweet scent perfuming the cool autumn air. Half of them shriveled and fell to the ground, to be replaced by fat, red apples.

Suchen stared in amazement. Very slowly, she let her bowstring go slack, arrow dropping to hang loosely from her fingers. Her throat tightened with a mixture of fear and awe, and she bowed her head. "What ... what do you want of me, Ax?"

He chuckled softly, removing his hand from the tree's rough bark. "Do not fear, Suchen Keblava. I'm no evil sorcerer from a fairy tale, come to trick you into trading your soul. His demeanor sobered abruptly. "Although this task is far from pleasant."

"Task?"

He nodded. One hand gestured for her to draw nearer. "Tell me, daughter, what do you know of the Empire of Argannon?"

Suchen frowned uncertainly. "I know what anyone else knows. Argannon lies to the North. Maak separates Jenel from it to the northwest, dead Caden to the North, and Shalai to the northeast. Legend claims that it is ruled over by a great sorcerer, the Undying Emperor Jahcgroth. But no one in the Circle Kingdoms has had any contact with Argannon since the fall of Caden, over three centuries ago." She shrugged helplessly. "That's it."

He nodded reassuringly. "Excellent, child. Although it is true that Argannon has kept to itself for three centuries, that time of isolation is nearly at an end. The Emperor Jahcgroth is indeed a powerful sorcerer, skilled in the arts of necromancy. Through use of his black magic, he has foreseen that the next several years will bring with them terrible winters. Snow will fall as far south as Iddi. Spring will come but briefly, with many frosts to kill young shoots. Summer will be but a shadow, and autumn but the barest prelude to the deathly cold. Things will be better or worse in the Circle Kingdoms depending on how far south they lie. But in Argannon, it will be devastating."

Suchen's eyes widened at the grim predictions. Bitter winters, famine ... a shiver ran up her spine. This was something Auglar needed to know about, and soon, so they could start planning for storage and trade. "What will happen?"

Ax sighed, his eyes looking ancient and unutterably weary. "Jahcgroth is desperate to avoid the disaster he knows must come. That is why he plans to attack the Circle Kingdoms, to make himself ruler over them and bring his own people into the south, where at least some of them might survive. Already, the first stirrings begin. Homesteads in Shalai near the Wild Mountains have been attacked and looted. Horses return without their riders when patrols are sent to investigate. Full-scale war will break out before the snows fall twice more."

His eyes narrowed, hardening into shards of blue granite. "Jenel must not be caught unprepared. This kingdom and her allies must be ready to stand firm against the might of Argannon."

Suchen nodded shortly. "But what is it that you wish of me? I'm Auglar's Steward, not his general. You'd do better to talk to one of his Sworn."

Ax put his hand reassuringly on her arm. "I know exactly who and what you are, my dear. But my need right now is not for warriors, but for trustworthy folk who can complete a simple task for me."

"What task?" she asked again.

"A troublesome affair but an important one. In two weeks time, a young noblewoman by the name of Trethya Selista will be waiting a day's journey south of the village of Diicus in southern Jenel. I ask only that you join her there, and then escort her safely back to meet with Lord Auglar at Kellsjard. She has news that could change the course of the coming war. Lord Auglar will find it particularly valuable."

"Why me?"

"The girl will need another woman as a chaperone, of course. I think that one who can defend her life as well as her honor will be for the best. And as I said, this involves your lord quite closely."

"How?"

"Time will show," he said, and for the first time she caught an edge of impatience in his voice. As soon as he realized it, he caught himself and smiled. "Forgive me, but I do not have much time. I risk execution simply by being here, and I fear tarrying too long. Will you help me?"

She bit her lip. "Auglar will have to release me to go, you understand. But if he feels I should do as

you request, then I will."

"Excellent! That is all I could ask." He paused, tapping one withered finger against his lips. "I know that this has been very sudden and that the journey is long, so I am sending you an ally. Although he may seem unlikely at first, I ask you to accept him. He may be of greater help in the coming days than even I can guess."

The wizard turned away, as if he intended to return to the woods whence he had come, and then he stopped, glancing over his shoulder at her, his eyes suddenly dark. "One thing more. Ask Auglar what Lord Wren's letter said."

With that he vanished, as if he had never been.

* * * *

The wolf lay silent in the bush, his ears plastered back flat against his head. His thick, mist-gray fur bristled uncontrollably, and a faint growl shuddered in his throat. He hated being so near any city, but this one was particularly repellent. The mere thought of drawing any closer than a league to its outskirts caused the wolf's tail to flatten against his belly and his long legs to shake with fear.

This far away, it was impossible to smell the stink of Segg's streets: the acid fetor of garbage and unwashed bodies, the sour stench of bought sex, the rottenness of hunger. The wolf remembered the reek of despair still, as if it hung in an inescapable cloud about his own body. The sun had set, and a cool breeze whispered through the nearly-bare trees. Only a dirt track ran through this forest, used but little save by woodcutters who would have long ago sought the warmth of their huts.

A faint crackle, as of a foot on leaves, sounded in the early darkness. The wolf's furred ears perked up, and he raised his head a little. Keen eyes penetrated the gloom, reducing the world to a collage of sharp-edged shadows and gray-toned shapes.

He smelled her before he saw her, the musky fragrance of a human female blowing on the breeze. Fear-stink clung to her, mixed in with the rusty odor of blood.

She stumbled into sight: a small young woman casting frantic glances back over her shoulder. Black hair hung in a tangle about her pale face. Her delicate hands were dark with a tracery of blood. She was dressed in a rich gown of white silk stitched with metallic threads. Tiny slippers caked with mud and debris slid perilously on ground covered with wet leaves.

She paused a moment near the wolf's hiding place, still staring behind her as if terrified of pursuit. Her dark eyes were huge with fear, and her breath came quick from exertion. The smell of her fright was intense so close, and the wolf had to fight to keep his ears from lying back against his skull. After a long, tense moment, she gathered up the ruins of her full skirts in her hands and began to run again.

As soon as she was out of sight, the wolf slipped from his hiding place. Her musky human smell, obscured by the remains of sickeningly-sweet perfume, lingered in the air. Tilting back his head, the wolf tasted the wind, sifting it for any signs of pursuit. The scent of a rabbit came to him, setting his stomach to grumbling. Somewhere far off in the wood, two raccoons squabbled querulously over food. Other than that, all was silent and still.

No pursuit was good. The young woman in the beautiful gown so unsuited to flight through the woodâ€”disaster.

Stupid humans. Stupid, stupid.

Served them right.

* * * *

"And then he just faded away into the forest like a ghost," Suchen finished. She spread her hands apart in a helpless gesture. "Well? What do you think?"

She had returned to Kellsjard straight away, riding hard across the plain to the fortress so that she arrived shortly before sunset. Leaving her tired steed with the stable master, she had wasted no time making for the great hall where the keep's inhabitants gathered for dinner. It had been the work of a few moments to summon Lord Auglar, his wife Sifya, and his Sworn.

They retired to a small room at the top of one of Kellsjard's many towers. Wheel-spoke rafters blackened by soot hung low over their heads. A long, wooden table, which Auglar used for some of his studies, took up most of the round chamber. Shelves crammed with books and scrolls lined the walls, and the white bones of some animal stood mounted on a frame in one corner. An iron brazier heated the room, painting the faces of those near it with ruddy light.

Buudi Gyr, first among the Sworn, leaned back in his chair. He was a middle-aged man, his shoulder-length black hair streaked with silver. His features were rugged, as if a sculptor had chiseled them out and then abruptly left before polishing down the rough edges. "You believe that this man truly was the wizard Ax?" he asked quietly, his aristocratic accent a relic from the days of his youth.

Suchen sighed and scrubbed at her eyes with her fingertips. She was tired, both from the ride and incessant self-questioning. Her long braid had come half unraveled, and unruly strands of golden hair stuck out in all directions. "I've been asking myself that over and over," she replied honestly. "He did display magic—he was a powerful wizard. And would anyone claim to be Ax if he wasn't? After all, Ax was exiled—just returning to Jenel has put him under a death sentence."

"True," Buudi agreed slowly.

"But why come to Suchen alone in the wood? Why not come here, to Kellsjard, and talk to Lord Auglar directly?" asked Gless. He leaned forwards, peering at Suchen with wide, spring-sky eyes. Blonde hair, curled like a dandy's, flopped fetchingly about his face. He wore a decrepit jerkin, which had once probably belonged to a jongleur. Its slashed yellow sleeves revealed bright spots of red beneath, and its much-mended body was composed of strips of clashing colors. The extravagant lace cuffs of a gentleman's shirt peeked out from underneath, so old they had turned a very peculiar shade of yellow.

Suchen raised an eyebrow at the outfit. "Perhaps he feared for his sight," she suggested.

Gless grinned and blew her a kiss.

"Can we afford not to believe him?" asked the soft-voiced Uzco from the corner of the table. Serious amber eyes peered out from behind a cloud of hair the same color. His cheeks bore ritual scars that gave his already-delicate face a pointy look.

Buudi craned his head back to stare distractedly at the rafters. "Uzco has a point."

Until now, Lord Auglar had sat silently in his seat at the head of the table. A serious, intent young man, he had more the look of a scholar than of an aristocrat. Long black hair framed a sensitive face, startling against his pale, blue eyes. His gray and white clothing, though of good quality, was not much different from that of his Sworn. "I agree. If Suchen believes that the man she met was truly Ax, then I trust her judgment."

Suchen cast him a grateful smile. The smile faded, however, as she recalled Ax's cryptic final words. "Auglar ... there is one other thing concerning you. Ax told me to ask you about a letter you had received from Lord Wren." She shrugged, indicating her own puzzlement.

Auglar's face paled suddenly. He and Sifya exchanged a sharp look, and she reached to take his hand.

Buudi straightened in alarm. "What is it, my lord?"

The young lord shook his head. "He couldn't know about that letter," he murmured to Sifya. "It isn't possible. Wren sent it to me in utmost confidence, and I burned it the instant I read it, lest we all lose our heads."

"What?" exclaimed Buudi.

Sifya glanced piercingly in Buudi's direction. Auglar's bride of less than a year, she had been inseparable from his side for far longer than that. Flaxen hair, bound in two waist-length braids, framed an unremarkable face. Her blue gown was simple and matched the color of her fierce eyes. "I think you should tell them," she said softly to her husband. A peasant accent still tainted her words, despite all her efforts to eradicate it. "They are your Sworn—can you trust anyone more? And Suchen should hear as well."

"I suppose." He sighed and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Wren has involved me in nothing certain. He merely wrote to me of rumors, suspicions..." he trailed off, then shook his head. "Let me tell it from the start. Some of you may not realize this, being too young to truly remember King Horondus's reign, but the monarchs of Jenel have two main holdings, both in the south. The first is Nava Nar, within the port city of Segg. The second is Nava Yek, a rural winter palace normally used by the ruler's spouse or siblings. It has been traditional throughout the centuries that a very close relationship is maintained between the monarch and the two lords upon whose demesnes the palaces stand.

"As Nava Yek is surrounded by Wren's lands, he expected such a relationship upon assuming the lordship. And in fact, he was a friend to King Horondus before the king died in a hunting accident. Afterwards, however, things deteriorated. The Regency Council didn't seem anxious to keep up ties with anyone who had been close to the King."

"Such as Ax," Gless put in wryly.

Auglar nodded, his austere face grim. "Yes. Wren let things lie, knowing that eventually the infant Rozah would reach her majority. A year ago, she turned eighteen and was crowned Queen of Jenel. Wren spoke to her at the coronation—he described her as a wan, shy girl who didn't seem entirely certain of her own status. She assured him that he would be invited to Nava Yek when she wintered there.

"But that never occurred. The Queen never came to Nava Yek at all, but instead remained secluded within the main palace of Nava Nar. Nor did Wren ever receive any promised correspondence from her. Instead, things continued on exactly as they had during the reign of the Regency—now the Advisory Council.

"In his letter, Wren stated that he believes Queen Rozah is being held a virtual prisoner within Nava Nar. That the Advisory Council spent the last nineteen years filling the castle with their own sycophants, so that no one would challenge them if they never gave up their power. Wren believes that the Council is issuing proclamations in Queen Rozah's name without her knowledge or consent."

Shocked silence filled up the room. Outside, the bitter wind blew through the eaves, keening like a lost

soul. Coals shifted in the brazier, sending up a brief flurry of sparks. The tower creaked softly with the gradual settling of stone and wood.

"But ... but Rozah is Queen," protested Dara-Don, a big man with the soft eyes of a faithful hound. One hand crept up to touch the good-luck charm hung about his neck. "The lords would rebel if she was being held prisoner ... right?"

Sifya sighed wistfully. "If there was proof, yes. But without any proof, Wren's talk is nothing short of treason."

Suchen let the gravity of the statement sink in. If anyone else found out about this, it could mean the deaths of Auglar, Sifya, all the Sworn, and very likely herself as well. And Auglar had made many enemies during the war of succession that had followed his father's death, none of whom would scruple to use any weapon against him that they could. "What does any of this have to do with us?" with the task Ax set us? she wondered aloud. "Was he trying to warn us? And if so, of what?"

"I don't know." Auglar stared at the tabletop for a long moment, then slowly turned his gaze on Buudi. "This casts a new light on things, one that I don't like. This is too important to trust to ordinary soldiers. I want you and the rest to go south with Suchen."

"My lord"

"No."

"At least let one or two of us stay," Buudi said reasonably. "We are your bodyguards" who will protect you while we're gone?"

"I have other soldiers and guards, Buudi. Most of them I trust to guard me against mundane threats. But I don't trust them not to let slip word of treason, not if it comes to that. I don't have to tell you that Lord Fellrant would pay a very great deal for any scrap of information that might destabilize this demesne. You're going."

Buudi had no choice save to bow his head in acquiescence. "Then we leave on the morrow. The sooner away, the sooner back. Gather in the courtyard a half-hour before dawn."

"Hilwa isn't going to be happy about this," Dara-Don stated mournfully.

Suchen gave a mental sigh. Hilwa bemoaned everything connected with her husband being one of the Sworn. She cried when he went out to fight brigands, and then whined when he had to accompany Auglar on the annual progress around the demesne. She seemed completely oblivious to any honor Dara-Don received, instead scornfully repeating stories of how her father had supported his family as a farmer, without having to resort to swords and blood and danger. Suchen secretly suspected that Hilwa blamed their failure to conceive on Dara-Don's frequent absences.

"As if the rest of us are happy about it," Peddock muttered in his sister's ear.

Suchen shrugged. "Like Buudi said, the sooner gone the sooner returned. At least you get to sleep tonight" I'll be up until dawn writing instructions for Garal so he doesn't die from apoplexy when I tell him he's acting steward for as long as it takes us to get back."

"If we come back," Peddock replied sourly.

* * * *

The wolf stood just outside of a small clearing. Within the space between the trees crouched the young

woman.

Some of the fear-scent had ebbed from her, probably overcome by sheer exhaustion. Still, she was a miserable sight, even for a human. Her curly black hair was matted with leaves and sticks. The gorgeous white gown had been reduced to tatters smeared with mud. Cuts and scrapes from thorns and branches marred her pale face and hands.

She leaned against a tree, curled up tight. No fire burnedâ€”doubtless she had no way of making one. And the shelter she had sought was not the best, too far from a stream or from any real concealment. So far as the wolf could tell, she had no food, nor any means of locating it.

The wolf's ears flattened slightly. With a quick shake of his coat, he dropped his head to the freshly-killed rabbit lying at his feet. The salty taste of hot blood filled his mouth, setting his stomach to complaining. It would be difficult to find another rabbit this night.

Forcing his ears to perk up, the wolf took a firm grasp on the rabbit with his teeth and stepped directly into the clearing.

The woman's head jerked up. The moon was high and bright enough to show her the creature that had intruded on her campsite. The stink of renewed fear filled the clearing. Terror twisted her features, and she pressed her back against the tree with a faint moan. Delicate fingers darted into the folds of her gown, drawing out a small knife. The shaking of her hands caused reflected moonlight to skitter uncertainly off the blade, but she held it determinedly out in front of her, as if its presence alone could ward her from the animal.

The wolf eyed the blade in surprise. He had expected her to scream, or to freeze, or even to faint at his appearance. Disdainfully ignoring the uselessly small knife, he took two steps closer to the young woman and dropped the rabbit to the ground. His golden eyes sought out hers, forcing her to look at him. His ears perked up, and his tail lifted in a wolfish display of confidence. Then, satisfied he had shown her that he was neither afraid nor submissive, he turned and left the clearing.

The woman stared at the rabbit for a long time. The wolf watched from the shadows nearby, the smell of rabbit blood whetting his hunger until the waiting was torment. Eventually, however, she reached out and picked up the cooling corpse. After inexpertly butchering it with the tiny knife, smearing blood over her once-white dress, she began to tentatively nibble at the raw bits of meat.

Pleased that his charge at least had the sense not to starve, the wolf left in the vain hope that he might find his own dinner.

* * * *

Her desire for company no stronger than it had been earlier, Suchen made her excuses and retired to her own room. As she drew near the familiar door, she saw it swing open, and a slender figure stepped out.

Recognizing the Aclytese servant, Suchen nodded a polite acknowledgement. The woman was taller than Suchenâ€”indeed, was taller than many menâ€”but somehow seemed small the way she kept her eyes downcast. Her thick, silky brown hair was bound up tight against her head, so as not to get in the way while she worked. Violet eyes, overly-large and somewhat canted, flashed up briefly from a narrow face. â€œI just finished stoking the fire for you, mistress,â€• she said softly. â€œIt should last you the rest of the night."

Suchen nodded absently. Slipping past the servant, Suchen stepped into her room. The chamber was small but cozy, decorated here and there with the few extravagances her position allowed her: a heavy Undish carpet in front of the hearth, a small decanter of good wine, and a delicate statuette carved from

translucent ivory. A handful of candles burned in a candelabrum set atop a small table, their soft light seeming to throw more shadows than it dispelled. Beside the silver base of the candelabrum, bright against the dark polish of the table, lay a neatly-folded piece of parchment.

Curious, Suchen dropped into the velvet-cushioned chair by the table. Propping her feet up in the direction of the hearth, she picked up the note and studied it. The charging boar on the seal was all too familiar.

Staafon.

A year ago, the prospect of a letter from Staafon would have had her hands shaking with excitement. Now, however, only a dim weariness touched her. Breaking the seal with her thumb, she scanned the near-illegible writing.

When she reached the bottom of the letter, she tossed it carelessly onto the table. It teetered on the edge for a moment, and then fluttered forlornly to the floor. *Why am I not happy?* she wondered. *The man is my lover*—*I should be ecstatic.*

While growing up in Iddi, the chief mercantile city of southern Jenel, Suchen and Staafon had been as well acquainted with one another as an unmarried maid and youth of different social standing could be. Unlike her own family, Staafon's clan had been far from the top of the city's hierarchy of ruthless and powerful merchants. Still, his breeding had been good enough for her to know his name and to catch glimpses of him at parties from time to time.

After fleeing the city with Peddock, determined never to return in this life, she had not thought to see Staafon again. Their reunion eight years later had been pure coincidence. The young merchant, heading a caravan for his father, had by chance come to Kellsjard looking for new trade. Staafon had given her news of the city that had been her home for most of her life, shared mutual memories of growing up as a bourgeois elite ... and ended up in her bed.

It isn't as though I haven't had other lovers, Suchen reminded herself. In those first years following her escape from Iddi, she had been desperate to do anything that would distance her from the values of her former class. Still, she had always suspected that the quantity of her brief affairs stemmed more from convenience on the part of the men than from any real interest in her. For the most part, they had been guardsmen who probably would have sought out a whore if not being offered her services for free.

But Staafon is different.

She sighed and retrieved the letter from the floor. The parchment felt heavy and fine in her callused fingers as she reread the last few lines.

"I cannot wait to see you again. I think of you constantly, and it comforts me greatly to know that you will be waiting for me once again at the end of my long journey.

"I intend to finish the season in Kellsjard, shortly before winter closes the roads. Once I am there, we have important things to discuss concerning our future."

Vague guilt touched Suchen's heart. For some time now, she'd had the uneasy suspicion that Staafon intended to ask for her hand. It seemed likely that the "important things" he wanted to discuss consisted of his plan for them spending the rest of their lives irrevocably bound to one another.

And why shouldn't I marry him? she asked herself, striving to be practical. *I'm twenty-six years old*—*the best prospects of marriage passed me by a decade ago. And, with my looks, it's not as if*

any other man is going to want me for anything more than a brief bedding.

Suchen knew that she was plain as a wooden plank and had the figure to match. The bouts of sword training she had wheedled from the Sworn had left her in the habit of dressing in men's togs whenever they seemed more practical than skirts. Unfortunately, the effect was to make her body look more like that of a teenaged boy than that of a grown woman. Her nose was horsy, her jaw too strong, her lips too wide. Her hair, although a pleasing gold, was too thin and refused even the most basic attempts at styling.

Even Staafon acknowledges that I'm a bare step above ugly, she thought sourly. As he had pointed out before, he could have had many beautiful women, been married and started a family by now. Someone as plain as herself—let alone someone with such a stained reputation—should feel honored by his attentions.

But I am Steward to a Lord. That would bring Staafon prestige, and I'm sure he would appreciate my hand at his account books. And he loves me, I'm sure of it.

And yet ... the thought of Hilwa kept running through her mind.

The sense of formless longing that had driven her to the wood returned to gnaw at the edges of her heart. It was as if she had lost something unspeakably precious and had spent all her life searching fruitlessly for it. And nothing—not fleeing from Iddi, not winning the place of steward to a great lord, not marriage to Staafon—would ever be enough to fill the hollow place in her soul.

Chapter 2

The wolf slipped along the road like a ghost, his ears pricked high for any sounds. The carpet of fallen leaves rustled softly beneath his heavy pads. It had grown deeper in the two weeks since he had begun to follow the young human; the trees above were nearly skeletal against an iron-gray sky. The breeze smelled strongly of coming winter, like the rise of cold, dark water.

The first week of travel had been difficult, largely because the woman determinedly avoided all traces of human habitation. The chill nights were harsh, and she had nothing but a thin, ragged gown to protect her. Despite the food the wolf brought, the long days of walking and hiding wore down her body until the curves beneath the dress were far less pronounced than they once had been.

Eventually, however, following the road brought them to a large oak tree split down the center from a lightning strike. Apparently this was some sort of landmark, for she turned away from the road and struck out through the wood. After several hours of wandering aimlessly about, unable to read the forest well enough to realize that she was merely circling, she had by chance stumbled on a tiny cottage. It was half-wrecked, its wattle-and-daub walls worn away by rain, but the roof was sound. Although the wolf never ventured inside, the sweet fumes drifting from the half-blocked smoke hole led him to guess that a tinderbox had waited within.

For the next week, things fell into a sort of regularity, if anything so strange as their actions could be called regular. Shortly after dawn, the woman would creep down to the road and conceal herself near the tree as if waiting for someone. Curious and wary, the wolf prowled the road itself. Once a hunter shot at him, and another time he was almost captured while stealing a cloak for the woman from a nearby village. Foolish humans, who either thought he had come to eat their babies, or who coveted his fine pelt. The instances wakened his instinct to move farther into the wilderness, and he sometimes had to struggle to remain near the camp.

The day would pass gradually, the woman occasionally nibbling at some of the food she had saved from the wolf's gifts. Then, when the sun began to set, she would reluctantly return to the cottage. Once there, the wolf would bring her a portion of any kill he had managed to make, and she would set about cooking it for herself.

She appeared to have grown used to his occasional presence and no longer reacted with fear when she caught a glimpse of his smoky pelt or watchful eyes. The wolf wondered what she thought about her strange benefactor but did not spend enough time in her sight to find out. Most likely she accepted his gifts out of practicality, but would try to slay him with her tiny knife did he dare draw closer.

The wolf shook himself, tossing away the darkness of the last thought like water from his coat. That was the way things worked; there was no use in brooding. Far more practical to continue his daily watch on the road.

The breeze swung around from the south. His nostrils flared, caught the scents of unwashed human bodies, horses, and oiled metal.

The wolf stiffened, every muscle going taut as iron. His fur bristled, and an involuntary growl sounded in his throat. Fighting to control his reaction, he slunk back farther into the trees. As soon as he was out of sight, he raced away through the underbrush, headed for the woman's usual watching-place.

By ill luck, she was closer to the approaching men than the wolf was. As he ran, silent as a shadow across the carpet of fallen leaves, a sudden shout rang out in the stillness. "Up there!" yelled a rough, male voice. "I thought I saw a flash of white!"

Stupid human woman in her ivory dress.

There came the sound of heavy boots crashing through the undergrowth, followed by a yell of triumph. The woman's scream rang out as they dragged her into the road.

The wolf never paused in his ground-eating run. Hurling out of the bushes, he flung himself directly at the throat of the nearest intruder.

* * * *

The midmorning sun stared down at Suchen and the Sworn like a single, idiot eye. A few crimson leaves drifted slowly from the nearly-barren trees. All about them, the forest stretched in a vast silence broken only by the occasional call of a bird. The breeze blew in Suchen's face, bearing on it the rich scent of leaf mould.

Gless frowned at the wood about them, then peered thoughtfully at the overgrown road. His blonde dandy's curls swayed playfully in the wind. "Well, we're a day's ride south from Diicus," he said. "What now?"

"Now we sit out here like a bunch of fools and hope we don't get eaten by Wolfkin," Peddock muttered grumpily. "They're said to favor places like this."

Suchen shot her brother a look of annoyance. During their two-week journey south, he had made it more than clear that he thought they were on a wild goose chase. She was unsure why he had been so set against the journey, and he had refused to answer her questions when she confronted him privately.

Choosing to ignore him, she turned her attention back to the road. The wind picked up, unraveling her braid and making her cobalt eyes water. Beside her, Buudi's mount shifted restlessly, as if it had caught the scent of some predator. Buudi patted its neck idly with one sword-callused hand. "I suppose we could go on a little way and see if she's waiting for us somewhere up ahead," he began.

At that moment, a woman's high scream shattered the air like breaking glass.

Suchen and Buudi exchanged quick looks. "Stay back," he ordered brusquely even as he signaled the other Sworn to follow. Ignoring the command, she leaned low over her roan gelding and kicked her heels hard into its flanks. With a loud whinny, it leapt forwards, pounding down the road on Buudi's heels.

Low branches whipped past Suchen's face. Drawing her sword from its sheath in a hiss of steel, she peered past her mount's flying mane. The bucolic road seemed the image of sun-dappled peace until they went around the next bend and everything erupted into chaos.

A group of horses screamed and plunged frantically in the center of the road. Four men in mail fought to control the maddened steeds, shouting curses and instructions at one another. A fifth lay sprawled in the road, his throat a red ruin.

Ferocious snarls filled the air. Terrified, Suchen's own mount reared, and it took all her strength to keep it from throwing her to the ground.

The source of the animals' terror leapt and twisted in the midst of the mail-clad soldiers, avoiding the hooves of their panicked steeds with supple ease. A thick gray pelt covered a body that looked more than half-starved. Its fur bristled, and its bloodied jaws gaped wide in fury. Suchen got a confused impression of long white teeth and burning golden eyes, before the wolf suddenly ducked past a horse.

Two men stood on the other side of the mounts, pressed as far away from the crazed animals as

possible. Although their eyes were wide with terror, both kept a firm grip on the disheveled young woman cowering between them.

Snarling like a mad thing, the wolf flung itself at one of the men, avoiding a frantic sword-slash as it did so. Powerful jaws closed about the soft skin of the man's throat, and he fell, his scream turning into a gurgle as blood filled his lungs. With a wild shriek of fear, the other man let go of their captive and fled blindly into the wood.

"What by Hel?" Suchen gasped, clinging to her mount's back.

"Demon! Wolfkin!" Peddock shouted from behind her. "Kill it!"

The yell drew the attention of the other soldiers. Their faces white with fright, they gave up their battle with the horses. Given their head, the animals galloped south down the road, their frenzied pace suggesting they would flee until exhaustion.

The wolf lifted its head from the corpse of its last victim. A low snarl reverberated from between its red-stained teeth. Its golden eyes flicked at the Sworn, then at the young woman.

Suchen's horse suddenly ceased its frenzied plunging. Calm as if it stood in its own stall back at Kellsjard, it lowered its head and began to graze. As the rest of the mounts followed suit, a shocked silence descended over the road.

With a last growl, the wolf turned and melted into the wood.

Only the woman remained behind. She most likely had a beautiful face, but right now it was streaked with dirt and decayed leaves. She wore the tattered ruins of a silken gown stitched with gold, which whole could easily have fetched enough coin to feed a large family for several months. Like the dress, her fine slippers were in rags, displaying bruised and bloodied feet. Her hair was an insane tangle that reeked of wood smoke. If not for the gown, Suchen might have taken her for some mad witch-woman or Wolfkin.

The woman shrank back a little at the sight of them, her dark eyes flicking from one face to the next. Then her gaze lighted on Suchen, and some of the fear seemed to drain from her. Drawing herself up, she asked, "Are you Suchen Keblava?"

Although her voice was rusty from disuse, a noble's accent patterned its speech. Suchen gave her a cautious nod.

The woman bowed her head graciously. "Then I am Trethya Selista. Please ... I need your help."

* * * *

"My lady, will you tell us what happened here?" Buudi asked quietly.

They had built a small camp several miles from the site of the insane battle. The heat of the fire seemed to revive Trethya a bit, as did a few bites of their rations. Although the girl was taller than she was, Suchen had offered her some of her own mannish clothing. After a startled glance at the rough tunic and breeks, Trethya stripped out of her ruined gown without protest. With her raven-black hair combed and some of the muck washed from her face, she looked almost human.

Trethya glanced nervously at the ring of faces about her. Gless offered her a friendly smile, for once not flirtatious. After a moment, she tentatively smiled back.

"I ... what did Ax tell you about me?" she asked.

Suchen shrugged, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, as she did whenever reminded of her strange encounter with the wizard. "He wasn't exactly forthcoming, Lady Selista," she admitted frankly. "He said only that you were a noblewoman and that you had something to tell Lord Auglar. He didn't mention anything about menacing soldiers, or wolves, or anything else."

Trethya nodded silently. *She's young*, Suchen thought. *Maybe nineteen.*

Gods, I'm getting old if that seems young. After all, I was only seventeen when I fled Iddi, and I certainly thought I could care for myself then.

Still, as a noblewoman, chances are she's never set foot in a wood without a hunting party. She's scared, and that makes her seem younger and more helpless.

Besides, young or not, she's done damned well for herself, staying alive here while waiting for us to come. Wolf or no wolf.

Trethya absently smoothed her borrowed breeks, as if she still wore a skirt. "My father, Thane Selist, is a member of the Regency—I mean, the Advisory Council," she corrected herself quickly. "I grew up in Nava Nar. Since I'm about the same age as Queen Rozah, we were allowed to play together as children. I ... When she was crowned, she..."

Trethya stopped, as if uncertain what to say. Buudi leaned over and put one of his hands on her own. "My lady ... is she being held captive by the Council?" he asked softly.

Suchen froze at his daring—if his guess was off, they would all die with Auglar and Wren. But Trethya merely nodded, her eyes showing a sort of startled gratitude.

Probably didn't want to have to convict her own father aloud, Suchen thought sympathetically. *Poor girl.*

In her quiet, rich voice, Trethya spoke to them of the Queen's imprisonment, virtually echoing all that Wren had suspected. "I never thought it was right, I suppose," she added uncertainly. "But ... something finally happened to make me believe that what the Council is doing is truly wrong. About three months ago, arrangements began to be made between the Council and Argannon—arrangements for the betrothal of Emperor Jahcgroth to Queen Rozah, against her will and against the interests of Jenel."

Suchen exchanged a worried glance with Buudi. Everything that Ax had told them of Jahcgroth's plan to take over the Circle Kingdoms fit perfectly with this ploy. Perhaps the Council simply didn't realize the extent of Jahcgroth's ambitions and so sought an alliance with him ... or perhaps they knew exactly what was happening. It was enough to send a chill up her back.

"It was then that Ax came to me," Trethya continued, apparently oblivious to their worry. "He wanted me to leave Nava Nar, to warn Lord Auglar. He said that I am the proof the lords need to rise up against the Council. And he said that a woman named Suchen Keblava would be waiting for me a half-day's ride from Diicus, and that I would know her because she would be dressed like a man. He told me to trust you—that you would keep me safe. So I ... I left Nava Nar, as he asked. But I'm afraid that I've been found out. Those soldiers ... I think they were sent by the Council to bring me back."

Suchen glanced over at Uzco and Dara-Don, who had disposed of the corpses. "Did they have any livery, any medallions, anything to indicate where they had come from?"

Uzco shook his head, amber hair floating ethereal about his scarred face. "Nothing. Not even any personal items a man might be expected to carry with him."

Buudi nodded thoughtfully. "One more question, my lady, and then you can get some sleep." He smiled at her like a kindly uncle, and she seemed to relax a bit. "What was that creature with you? The one that killed the soldiers?"

Trethya looked away uncertainly, staring at the crackling fire as if she could scry the truth in its depths. Sparks flew up, dancing like living things until they died on the air. "I ... I truly do not know. The wolf brought me food the first night after I left Segg and afterwards as well. It brought me my cloak, too," she added, absently fingering the rough wool. "I thought that maybe it was someone's pet, either escaped or abandoned."

Dara-Don clutched at the good-luck charm about his neck. "Do you ... do you think it was a Wolfkin?" he whispered, voice hushed as if he feared that just mentioning the name would summon the shape-changers to him.

Peddock snorted and fed a twig into the fire. "Don't be ridiculous. If it had been a Wolfkin, it would have just killed her outright. You know those monsters eat human flesh."

It was one of the first sensible things Peddock had said on the entire journey. Suchen nodded her agreement. "Peddock is right. Most likely, it was nothing but a lost pet. We'll see no more of the creature."

* * * *

It was after sundown the next day when they cantered into the village of Diicus. Although small, it boasted an inn and space to stable their horses. A low, mud-brick wall separated the inn yard from the rest of the village. A few goats drowsed near the stables, and a last rooster crowed from its coop in back.

The hostel itself was a shabby, one-story affair. Its sloped thatch roof reached almost to the ground, obscuring the thin, wattle-and-daub walls. A simple sign hung on a rusted iron rod over the open door. The crude grapes and bed painted on it indicated that the building was both tavern and hostelry.

Warmth and light spilled out the door beckoning the weary travelers. Laughter floated from within; a woman's shrill squeal sliced Suchen's nerves like a knife. The aroma of roasting meat and baked bread set her stomach to complaining.

Trethya stared at the village in awe. The small cottages, the run-down inn, even the pigs in their sty seemed to fascinate her.

She acts as though she's never seen a village before, Suchen thought, amused. She had taken a liking to the young woman, the sort she imagined she might have felt for a sister. Part of it, she knew, was admiration for the fact that Trethya had the courage to flee everything she knew for an ideal. *On second thought, maybe she hasn't ever been in a small hamlet, given that she grew up in Segg. After all, according to all the stories, Segg is nothing short of a paradise. Art, culture, wealth, all are synonymous with the city. It even has a "what was it called?" a university, where people come to learn. Trethya has probably never seen a normal village in her entire life.*

"Don't worry when we get inside, my lady," she remarked back over her shoulder. Trethya started and looked guilty, telling Suchen that worrying was exactly what she had been doing. "Just don't speak to anyone if you can help it. The fewer who notice your accent the better. I know the accommodations aren't what you're used to, and we cannot treat you with the deference you deserve, but I hope you understand it's necessary."

Trethya offered a grave nod. Her large eyes flicked wistfully over the quaint scene before them. "I

think it's wonderful," she murmured.

Suchen smiled thinly, turning her head away so that Trethya couldn't see her amusement. The noblewoman would undoubtedly think it a great deal less than wonderful if she actually had to live the life of a poor peasant.

The stables were cramped but serviceable. The Sworn tended their own horses, instead of leaving that task to the somewhat drunken stableman. As they left, Suchen tossed an octarrii to the boy stationed in the corner. He caught the copper coin with a knowing wink, and she guessed that he spent many evenings filling in for his master.

Suchen stumbled slightly in the yard, where the mud had hardened in the shapes of hoof- and footprints. Entering the inn on the heels of her friends, she automatically glanced about the room. Rough-hewn tables filled the common area. Half of them were empty, while the other half hosted men dressed in simple homespun, their faces weathered from long exposure to sun and wind. At the center of the room, a pig turned on a rusty spit over the fire. Its charring flesh scented the wood smoke which, abetted by the greasy rushlights on the walls, formed a fog amidst the rafters.

Suchen followed Buudi to a table in one corner, far away from the other patrons. Trethya was carefully placed closest to the wall, in the most protected seat, and Suchen slid onto the splintery, unpadded bench beside her. As the Sworn followed suit, one of the inn's barmaids approached the table. Her heavily painted face and the low cut of her blouse proclaimed that she offered other services as well.

Catching sight of them, she grinned. "Back so soon? You were just here a couple of nights ago!"

Gless laughed and automatically checked to make certain his dandy's curls were in place. "I just couldn't live without you," he proclaimed grandly.

She giggled and gave him a promising smile. Trethya stared wide-eyed at the entire scene, as if uncertain what to make of it.

Suchen rolled her eyes. "Ale for us all, and dinner," she cut in.

The barmaid scowled at her. Her eyes went to Suchen's breeks in obvious disapproval, before bestowing an equally-contemptuous look on Trethya. Then, with a toss of her head, she flounced away, making certain that she gave everyone a good glimpse of her plentiful charms as she did so.

Suchen sighed. *Scorned by a doxy in a tiny, gods-forsaken village like Diicus. I have truly sunk to the bottom.*

"Why did she stare at us like that?" Trethya whispered.

"You haven't been outside much, have you?" Suchen muttered. "It isn't normal for women to wander around dressed like we are. I did it because it was more practical than a skirt for two weeks' worth of riding. But you don't have to if you'd rather not. Do you have any money?"

Trethya's confused expression was enough of an answer to that question. Suchen decided that Ax had been wise not to tell them precisely what they were getting into.

Gless's sky-blue eyes grew bright with mischief. Making a show of straightening the multi-hued sleeves of his gaudy jerkin, he asked casually, "So ... do you know how to play runes, Trethya?"

Appreciative of his attempt to cheer up their evening, Suchen eyed him with mock wariness. "I think I should teach her—you're likely to either take unfair advantage, or else turn her into a huckster."

Gless put on his most offended look. "Teach a lady anything improper? My dearest Suchen, you wound me. Such a dishonorable thought would never cross my mind! Now you'll have our poor Trethya thinking me a rapsallion."

"Forgive me, o righteous one." She pointed a scarred finger at him. "But I think you're the whole reason Buudi won't let us play for money. Afraid one of us might be forced to kill you in order to eat."

Trethya giggled shyly at their exchange. Gless chuckled and winked raffishly at her. "So, we'll play for something really important. Say, turns at watch?"

* * * *

Yozerf dismounted from his night-black stallion, eyes scanning the scene before him. The hairs on the back of his neck tried to stand up, and he had to fight to keep a growl out of his throat. To his sharp senses, the place stank of poverty and barely-concealed desperation. Oh, some here in Diicus were prosperous enough, that was true. But he had not missed the poor shanties hidden like a shameful secret in the woods outside the village.

The reek of the middens blew on the wind, and his stomach grumbled painfully. He had been reduced to scavenging out of garbage heaps many times before, and for a moment he considered assuaging his hunger. But no. If he were caught, he would be chased away from the inn. And that would be to no one's benefit. Certainly not to that of Ax's pet humans.

He paused a moment, wondering why he had to trouble himself worrying about these humans. Ax had refused to enlighten him on that score, and Yozerf wasn't used to considering anyone's good but his own.

Perhaps Ax sent me because he knows how stupid they are, he thought contemptuously. These humans called themselves warriors and yet allowed themselves to be tracked easily. Not by him—he would never have expected them to detect him by any means short of sorcery. But from his hiding place in the wood he had seen the other humans following, and their efforts at stealth had been laughable compared to his own.

Even as he watched, the last of the eight men disappeared into the inn. The fact that they had drawn so close to their quarry meant one of two things. Either they were incredibly bad spies—not impossible—or they had more than spying on their minds. A barroom brawl, a quick knife, a few dead bodies, and no one would ever know.

No one would ever know. Not even Ax. I could leave. Sleep outside the village tonight. And if Ax asked me what happened to his little humans, I could tell him the truth—a simple fight in a wretched tavern. Is it my fault if they get in a quarrel with strangers? Is it my fault they can't protect themselves from assassins?

Yozerf stared moodily at the amber light spilling out of the inn. Human laughter sounded from within, loud and shrill. It was no different from Aclytese laughter, yet it seemed to mock him, as if aimed in his direction.

Gods above, why did I ever come back to human lands? I should have stayed in the Eastern Forest when I had the chance.

Except that Ax would have found me eventually. And I'd still be here, forced to act as nursemaid for a bunch of humans who can't keep their own throats from being slit.

And I gave my word.

Taking a deep breath, he drew his hood far up over his face, shadowing his Aclytese features. A soft word to Windshade commanded the horse to stay where he left it, close to the gate in the inn yard. Like a warrior entering battle, he crossed the litter-strewn yard and went inside the building.

The common room was a chaotic assault on his senses. The stinks of spilled ale, old vomit, wood smoke, grease, and charred meat nearly made him gag. Human sweat mixed with the sweetish perfume of the barmaids. Rotted food from the midden clashed with the scent of fresh provisions. Striving to breathe shallowly, he looked warily about the room.

There they wereâ€”in the corner, away from the rest. The two women sat in the midst of them, but only one truly drew his attention. She bent over a handful of clay tablets etched with runes. One deft hand raised a pair of dice, poised to throw. Her hairâ€”golden, like that of many human femalesâ€”shone molten in the uncertain light of the rushes. Her face was fierce and proud, the harsh lines imbuing rare strength.

She glanced up for a moment, gaze passing over him briefly, pausing a moment on the shadowy hood. Her eyes were the luminous blue of cornflowers. His nostrils flared unconsciously, seeking her scent, but it was swallowed by the conflicting odors of food and smoke.

"Here now, are you going to have a seat or not?" demanded a shrill voice.

Glancing down in surprise, he saw one of the barmaids staring up at him. Her brown eyes held no patience and little curiosity despite his drawn-up hood. She smelled like quick sex, like food and cook fires and desperate boredom. Although amateurish paint and a blouse cut low by rural standards marked her as a prostitute, the normal flash of sympathy and kindred feeling failed to touch his heart.

"Ale," he muttered hoarsely, mimicking a peasant's accent.

The maid nodded and flounced away. Allowing none of his concerns to show on his face, even hidden from prying eyes as it was, Yozerf lowered himself into the nearest chair.

* * * *

Gless had won so many rounds of runes that the rest hardly paid him any attention, instead concentrating on the second place winner. On the other end of the scale, had they been playing for real turns at watch, Dara-Don wouldn't have been able to sleep for the next five months.

Suchen glanced about with a wicked grin as she prepared to cast the dice. The ring of faces surrounding her looked, if not happy, at least not openly worried. Which on some days was about all one could ask.

"Well?" Uzco asked mildly. "Are you going to throw, or sit there admiring the knucklebones all night?"

Suchen blew on the dice. "Maybe I should have suggested we play this round for pieces of clothing," she teased. "I have the feeling that I'm on a winning streak. All your luck's turned to me, Gless."

Trethya gasped at Suchen's suggestion, a blush staining her fair skin as she glanced hastily down.

Gless sighed and spread his hands apart. "Luck is a fickle woman, and I'll admit our relationship is a tumultuous one." He leaned forwards, one shirt cuff trailing unnoticed through a pool of spilled ale. "But I won't believe she's abandoned me until you throw those dice."

"Gladly," she replied, and tossed.

The two bone cubes sailed through the air, twisting and tumbling. Landing on the table with a triumphant rattle, they rolled several inches.

A thick, coarse hand came down atop them, pinning them to the tabletop. Startled, Suchen glanced up into a broad face half-hidden by a bushy black beard. The stranger was dressed in the rough, stained clothing of a common soldier. The acrid smell of sour sweat came from him, and it was an effort not to wrinkle her nose.

"Can we help you?" Buudi asked, a frown creasing his mouth. The other Sworn also aimed hostile glares at the man. Trethya shrank back a little, her eyes going from amused to fearful in a moment.

He lifted his dirty hand from the fallen knucklebones. "Snake eyes," he remarked, as if he had not heard the warning in Buudi's words. He grinned, revealing a row of crooked, brownish teeth. "Mind if me and a few friends join you?"

The man's slovenly look and rudeness set Suchen's teeth on edge. Fixing him with a stern glare, she replied, "Sorry. This is just a game among friends. No money involved."

He shrugged, leaning closer so that his stale breath brushed her face. "Well, we're all friendly."

Buudi straightened, one scarred hand moving to rest lightly on the hilt of his sword. "Sorry. We just finished playing. I'm afraid you'll have to find your entertainment somewhere else."

The black-bearded man stepped back, holding his hands up in appeasement. "Have it your way. But at least meet my friends first." One finger motioned slightly.

Suchen swiveled about automatically to see whom he beckoned. A group of about seven other men rose to their feet from where they had been drinking at another table. She vaguely remembered seeing them enter, just ahead of the strange man with his hood drawn up.

Trethya gasped harshly, one hand clutching at Suchen's sleeve. "Suchen! I know some of them from Nava Nar!"

Suchen was already moving, body turning smoothly about and rising from the bench. One hand gripped the hilt of her sword, whipping the metal blade from its sheath with an angry hiss. The black-bearded man behind her had already drawn a dagger with one hand and was reaching for his sword with the other.

Buudi swore furiously. "Ambush!" Then the room erupted into mayhem.

Suchen slashed viciously at black-beard, severing his sword hand at the wrist. He screamed in agony, waving his stump wildly. Warm blood splattered Suchen's face, its coppery stench clogging her nostrils.

Leaving her attacker to stumble away from the fray, she pivoted about to face the rest. A wild struggle had already broken out, engulfing their half of the inn. Uzco fought to hold off an assailant who had pushed him against a column with a bench. Buudi had leapt atop a nearby table, the quick lightning of his sword fending off two of the soldiers at once. Trethya crouched behind him, one hand clutched about the hilt of an ineffectually-small knife. Dara-Don and Peddock stood back-to-back, while two other men circled them warily, looking for an opening.

Gless slashed at the last soldier, blade drawing a line of blood across his arm. With an angry snarl, the man snatched at the nearest rushlight and flung it with all his strength at Gless's head. The Sworn ducked adroitly, striking at the man's legs as he did so. The torch sailed through the air, landing with a splat in the center of the spilled ale on their table.

The ale burst into flames and greasy smoke. Screams of panic filled the inn as barmaids and patrons strove to escape. Suchen cursed, amazed at how quickly the fire spread over the long-dead wood of table and bench. Heat struck at her face like an angry fist, and smoke stung her lungs. Holding up her hands before her, she took a step back.

And felt a coarse fist knot in her long hair.

Moving on instinct, she kicked back blindly, felt her foot connect with something solid. The hand in her hair loosened and she wrenched free, dropping into a crouch and bringing her sword about in the same movement. She found herself facing two men, both large and burly. Naked steel gleamed in their hands as they drew near, and she was pleased to see one limping noticeably. Shifting her grip slightly on the hilt of her weapon, Suchen prepared to fight for her life.

A ferocious, ululating howl shattered the air. A dark figure leapt over table and flames in a single, fluid motion that left the bottoms of his boots skimming through flames. The ruddy firelight lit his gaunt features from beneath, giving them a hellish cast. His cheekbones were too prominent, too sharp, and lent his face a feline look. His jaw narrowed to a pointed chin, and there was something in the lower half of his face that gave just the faintest suggestion of a muzzle.

The hair that blew back from the force of his leap was incredibly thick, incredibly silky, and incredibly *red*. Not copper or carrot like human hair—*red*, like the fresh flow of blood from an artery.

Is that ... an Aclyte?

He landed lightly, balancing on the balls of his feet in a ready stance. The two soldiers turned to meet him, their blades flashing red in the firelight. The Aclyte only smiled, as if they were no more than children threatening him with wooden sticks. There was something not quite sane about that smile, and Suchen felt her blood turn to ice before it.

As the soldiers came about from either side, the Aclyte pivoted lightly, lashing out in a prodigious kick that caught one attacker directly in the stomach. The man grunted and dropped like a sack of flour onto the fire-heated floor.

Never pausing, the Aclyte scooped up an abandoned ale mug from where it had been dropped on the floor. Although the remaining soldier brought up his sword in a deadly arc, the man avoided the rushing steel as easily as if he had been stepping around a motionless statue. The ale mug smashed into his attacker's face with stunning force. Bones shattered and the soldier fell back, clutching at his ruined nose and jaw.

Suchen stared at the Aclyte with a mixture of awe and fear. Her vision of Aclytes as quiet servants fell into ruin at that moment. *He moves like ... like an animal*, she thought, admiration somehow winning over dread. *Fast and graceful. As if he has no thought in his mind save for the attack and so holds nothing back.*

Will I be able to take him?

The Aclyte turned slowly towards her. The raging fire framed him from behind, glowing red on his bone-white skin. The light caught in his large, canted eyes, reflecting in them as it might in those of a hound. A spattering of blood the same shade as his hair decorated his face like darkling war paint.

Suchen raised her sword, centering and preparing herself for the fight.

The Aclyte shot her a scornful look, as if she was an imbecile. One hand reached out towards her, palm

up. "There isn't time for that," he snapped impatiently. His voice was deep and rich, like a velvet caress in darkness. The words were laden with a heavy accent Suchen had never heard before, as if the Keld was not his native tongue. "This entire building is about to burn to the ground. Unless you *want* to go up in flames with it, I suggest we leave now."

After a moment's hesitation, Suchen lowered her sword. Glancing about, she saw only flames and realized that more of the room was starting to burn. Smoke excoriated her lungs and made her eyes water. A few shadowy shapes were still running through the dimness, but for the most part everyone had fled.

"Suchen!" a voice shouted suddenly, over the din of the fire.

"I'm here, Gless!" she called back. The smoke burned her throat, and she started to cough. "Get out of here! Don't look for me! I'm coming!"

With a frustrated snarl, the Aclyte reached out and grabbed her wrist, too quick for her to jerk back. His delicate-looking fingers were strong as iron. Heavy calluses caught against her skin, as if he spent a great deal of time working hard with his hands. Without bothering to speak, he dragged her behind him through the smoke and flames.

They emerged moments later into the fire-streaked night. Suchen gratefully breathed in gulps of clean air, easing the pain in her chest. All about her was chaos. Men dashed frantically past, flinging buckets of water from the well onto the blaze. Voices shouted, hoarse with panic and fear. The innkeeper shrieked and moaned, wailing over the loss of his livelihood. Horses whinnied shrilly, and Suchen saw Buudi and Dara-Don leading them from the stable to safety.

Peddock's plain face appeared in the ruddy glow of the burning building. "Suchen!" he shouted in relief. He rushed towards her, a grateful smile stretching his soot-streaked face.

Then he stopped, tawny eyes darting to the shadowy figure standing at her side. With a snarled curse, he ripped his sword clear of its sheath, leveling its point at the Aclyte's chest. "What sort of demon is this?" he demanded.

The Aclyte gave him a look of complete disdain, as if Peddock was the lowliest imaginable creature who offered not the slightest threat to his own well being.

Suchen took a step forwards, holding up one hand. "Stop it!" she said harshly. "He helped me."

Peddock's eyes narrowed. "Helped you? This creature? It's an Aclyte, isn't it?"

The expression on the Aclyte's face went from mask-like indifference to cold malevolence. His gray eyes burned with an icy fire, and for a moment Suchen thought that he would strike out at Peddock in some unimaginably terrible display of fury.

Then, suddenly, the moment was gone. Giving Peddock a glare of withering contempt, he knocked aside the threatening blade and stalked past, headed across the inn yard.

"Did you see that!" Peddock cried, blood suffusing his face. "I'll teach him to show the proper respect to a human!"

"Stop being an idiot," Suchen snapped. Shoving her brother aside, she trotted after the Aclyte.

He moved across the yard with an easy motion, almost a lope, deftly navigating between running people.

He was making for the other Sworn, who had gone to help Buudi and Dara-Don with the horses. Uzco sat to one side, doubled-over and clutching weakly at his ribs. Trethya knelt by him, one hand resting on his shoulder, as if she had no idea what to do beyond offer comfort.

Part of the inn collapsed, flinging out a great blaze of amber sparks into the starry sky. Panicked, one of the chargers reared, tearing its halter from Gless's grip. He yelped in surprise, ducking wildly to one side as the terrified animal lashed out with its hooves. Its eyes showed white, and it screamed loudly, its fear spreading to infect the other animals as well.

Damn it, they're going to bolt! Suchen thought, breaking into a run.

But before she could get there, the Aclyte reached out one pale hand and deftly caught the frightened steed's halter. Iron-shod hooves capable of crushing a man's skull slashed the air near his head, but he showed no fear. Instead, he simply laid his free hand on the beast's muscular neck.

To Suchen's amazement, the warhorse calmed instantly. Its hooves ceased churning the wind and dropped back to the ground. Heaving sides stilled to a more natural pace. Its enormous eyes went from rolling white to placid brown. With a curious wicker, it nosed at the Aclyte's pockets, as if looking for a treat. Buudi and the rest stared in shock.

"I ... Thank you," Buudi said, inbred manners rescuing him from confusion. His face was streaked with soot and blood. The flames picked out the silver strands in his dark hair, causing them to glint red in the light.

The Aclyte shrugged, handing the reins back to Gless, who took them hesitantly. The dandy's blue eyes were nearly round as he stared at the Aclyte's exotic appearance.

Suchen drew up, reaching for the reins of her own steed. "Um, Buudi, this is..." she trailed off, realizing she hadn't the faintest idea who he was.

"My name is Yozerf Trihychyl," he supplied. A note of urgency strained his deep voice. "Let us dispense with the introductions for now, shall we, first among Auglar's Sworn?"

"How do you know who we are?" Peddock demanded from where he had come to stand at Suchen's shoulder. He squinted suspiciously at Yozerf, as if certain the Aclyte had something to do with the evening's disastrous events.

Yozerf pinned him with a disinterested gaze that suggested he was of no more importance than some strange bug. Turning his back on the seething Peddock, he raised a crimson brow. "Buudi Gyr, we do not have time for this foolishness. If you believe the men who attacked you were the only ones searching for your young charge, then you are an idiot. I strongly suggest that we get out of Diicus as quickly as possible."

Buudi stared at him, rugged features distorted by curiosity. "How do you know these things?"

"Because he's in league with them," Peddock spat furiously. He moved to one side a little, interposing his own body between the staring Trethya and the wild Aclyte.

Yozerf ignored him. "Because Ax sent me," he replied shortly.

Buudi blinked in surprise. "Suchen said that he would send us an ally, but ... I thought that you would join us on the way south. Why have you waited until now?"

Yozerf smiled a thin, bitter smile that never reached his cold eyes. "Because you did not need me

before now. But you will. As this night should have already taught you, your task is far from over."

Chapter 3

They stopped in the small hours between midnight and dawn. Deciding it best to take Yozerf's advice, they had mounted up and left Diicus and its burning inn behind. The going had been difficult in the darkness, the moon intermittently covered over by cloud. The road stretched out before them as a slightly-paler strip of night, the shadows of trees indistinguishable from the potholes which might break the leg of an unwary mount. Invisible branches lashed out, scratching faces and snagging in hair. Occasionally, the hoot of an owl broke the silence, but for the most part they heard only the creak of their saddles and the dull thud of hooves.

It would have been impossible to go far in the darkness if not for the mysterious Aclyte. Yozerf took the lead after curtly telling Buudi that he could see far better in the dark than any of them. The huge, black warhorse he rode was difficult to make out in the night, only the occasional white flash of Yozerf's hands or face giving them any visual reference. Undoubtedly realizing that they were unable to see him, he called out to warn them any time that a potential hazard presented itself. There was something eerie, Suchen thought with a shiver, about his deep, accented voice floating disembodied from the path.

Or maybe it's just that I don't like stumbling through the darkness after someone I met less than an hour ago.

Exhaustion forced them to halt for what little remained of the night. They made camp in a small clearing off to one side of the dirt track; from the scattered charcoal that showed through the grass, Suchen guessed that the open space was used for that same purpose often. In grim silence, they tethered the horses, unsaddling and grooming the weary animals before tending to their own needs. Suchen watched the stranger out of the corner of her eye. He had deliberately tied his own horse slightly apart from the rest and now stood with his back to them.

At least he seems to take good care of the horse, Suchen thought. Not unusual—horses were valuable animals, and anyone who depended on one would be a fool not to care for it. Still, there was something almost solicitous in the way he checked its hide for burs or scrapes. As he bent down to inspect a hoof, the horse tried to nuzzle his hair, and he patted its velvety nose affectionately.

The Sworn set about making camp with the efficiency of long practice gained from years of chasing down the bandits that harassed travelers on the verge of Auglar's demesne. Gless and Dara-Don collected a few sticks and fallen branches. Uzco used them to get a fire going. Trethya helped as best she could, her soft hands following Uzco's instructions. Only Yozerf remained aloof, watching them all with inscrutable eyes, his white face expressionless.

Their tasks done, they settled into a loose circle about the campfire, Trethya protectively seated between Buudi and Dara-Don. The Aclyte paused by them, still standing. He was very tall, Suchen noted, at least four inches over six feet. But he was also very slender: muscles long against the bones, shoulders narrow rather than broad. After a brief moment of hesitation, as if he truly wished he could simply be somewhere else for the nonce, he sank gracefully into the empty place between Suchen and Buudi.

The way he moves, Suchen thought, remembering back to her impressions during the fight at the inn. *All unconscious grace and controlled power.* A little shiver ran down her spine, and she eyed the Aclyte warily. Up close, he looked even more exotic, even more alien, than he had before. Although the unrelieved black of his clothing had made it difficult to tell from a distance, she now saw that both tunic and breeks were badly patched and worn, nearly threadbare in places. *Still, he seems neat enough and appears to take good care of his gear.*

Feeling her gaze on him, he glanced over at her. A chill, feral smile curved his sculpted lips. His eyes caught the firelight, glowing green as an animal's. Suchen stared back at him, unnerved.

"Thank you for coming to our aid," Buudi said, interrupting the moment. "You said earlier that Ax sent you to us."

Yozerf inclined his head elegantly. "Correct." Bitterness flashed like lightning across his features. Then the expressionless mask was back in place, as if nothing had ever disturbed it.

Peddock glared at Yozerf coldly, as though certain the Aclyte was a liar and worse. "So you say. Do you have any proof of this? Why would Ax send an Aclyte to us? Surely he could have had more than his pick of humans."

Yozerf gave him a stare bitter as acid. "I could have left you to fight it out with the soldiers alone." The maligned edge to his voice suggested that might not have been such a bad course of action.

Peddock scowled, but before he could say anything further, Buudi held up his hands in a sharp gesture for silence.

"There's no need for this," he said calmly. "None of us have spoken to anyone else about our mission. The Council either already knows that Trethya is with us, or they will soon enough. But there's no reason for them to think that we have anything to do with Ax. I think that we can accept Yozerf's story at face value."

The Aclyte gave him a sardonic little bow.

Buudi ignored the irony in the gesture. "Do you know why we are here, then?" he asked.

Yozerf stared at Trethya a moment, until his unnerving gaze caused her to look away. "Yes." He bowed slightly to her. "My lady."

Buudi nodded his approval of Yozerf's polite gesture. In a quick, perfunctory manner he introduced each of the Sworn. He came to Suchen last. "This is Suchen, Steward of Kellsjard."

Yozerf's eyes touched hers, his intent gaze seeming to bore directly into her skull. She stared back, feeling like a small bird entranced by the stare of a serpent. After a moment, an odd little smile warped his mouth, and he inclined his head regally.

"An honor, Steward," he murmured gravely.

Peddock glared at the Aclyte with undisguised venom.

Yozerf turned back to Buudi, as if unaware of Peddock's baleful stare. "I was told of your task, Buudi. It did not surprise me to see those soldiers from Nava Nar—were they the first you encountered?"

Peddock's scowl turned into a look of triumph. "How do you know that's where they came from?" he demanded.

Yozerf glanced at him in annoyance. "It seems the most obvious conclusion. After all, that is where Lady Trethya is traveling from and where the Council resides."

Peddock frowned at him uncomfortably but seemed unable to think of a reply.

Buudi sighed. "They were not the first, and mostly likely not the last. We'll have to ride fast and get

Lady Trethya back to the safety of Kellsjard as soon as possible."

Suchen nodded absently in agreement. Years of habit had caused her to take charge of all the little details surrounding matters of food and supplies. "We won't need to resupply until Rhiaht, I think," she said slowly. "We have enough rations to keep us until then, and it's a big enough city that staying there for a while shouldn't present too much danger."

"Perhaps," Yozerf said.

"Then there's nothing left to debate tonight," Buudi said. His scarred fingers picked unconsciously at a frayed patch in his breeks. "We'll rest here until dawn and then start back for Kellsjard as quickly as we can."

Yozerf lifted his head like an animal scenting the wind. "Will Lady Trethya be safe there?"

"As safe as anywhere. Auglar is related to Queen Rozah, although the relation is a distant one. I'm sure he will do whatever is needed to keep Lady Trethya safe, considering her importance to the Queen." Buudi paused briefly, but Yozerf offered no comment. "Will you come all the way to Kellsjard with us, then? Ax said you had many talents which might be useful."

Yozerf pressed his lips together, as if striving to keep in the words. Then he nodded, once, sharply. "I will," he replied, but there was no pleasure in his voice.

* * * *

The sky was filled with thick, iron clouds, which rode so low they brushed the treetops. The wind whistled shrilly out of the North, bearing the taste of snow even though the air was still too warm for it to actually fall as such. Earlier, while Dara-Don bent over the tiny scrap of mirror he used during his morning shave, he had predicted that winter was probably already beginning to blanket the Northern reaches of the Kellsmarch with snow. There seemed no reason to disagree.

The rushing wind caught at Suchen's hair, blowing loose strands wildly about and seeking to unravel the braid completely. Shivering, she pulled her cloak tightly about her, glad for the warm bulk of her horse. Turning in her saddle to peer back at the Sworn, she saw a line of quiet, thoughtful looks as each man turned over in his mind what had happened the day before. None of them were happy, and the fact that they might still be pursued hung over everyone's spirits like a dark pall. Trethya, who now rode behind Uzco on his charger, looked pale and troubled. Only Yozerf's reaction could not be judged. He had once more drawn up his black hood so that it shadowed his face.

The Aclyte had been in her thoughts ever since she had woken. His hauteur had become more blatant this morning. While the Sworn set about the business of breaking camp, Yozerf withdrew and busied himself with his horse. Any attempts at friendly conversation had been terminated immediately by a mocking word or a contemptuous stare. It was as if, having kept his promise to Ax by joining them, he now had no intention of acknowledging their existence.

Suchen scowled down at her hands where they held the worn reins. *What could Ax have been thinking, sending us this arrogant, cold-blooded creature?* She wondered. *What skills could he possibly have that would make putting up with him worth it?*

Hoping for another opinion, she urged her roan up beside Buudi's mount. Buudi glanced over at her curiously, but said nothing.

"I don't like him," Suchen stated without preamble.

"I see. Do you not like him as the Steward of Kellsjard, who has been charged with keeping Trethya safe, or as Suchen Keblava, who must deal with him on a personal level?"

"Both."

Buudi nodded thoughtfully. "This is a rather hasty judgment for you, Suchen. I would have expected you to be the one to wait, to give him a chance. Why, exactly, don't you like him?"

"Well, for one thing, he's too beautiful for his own good."

Buudi grinned. "Ah, you've noticed that as well?" He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "There are some who claim that it's nothing short of the worst perversion to be able to appreciate beauty in an Aclyte, but I've always thought they just weren't looking very closely. Don't tell Wildstorm I said that. Heaven forfend I give him any cause to be jealous. I would never hear the end of it, and scribes do have such a way with words."

Suchen grinned despite herself. She liked Wildstorm and would have preferred to have him as her assistant instead of Garal. The young scribe had wandered out of the Shalai highlands five years back, the product of an unorthodox education in a monastery that had left him the ability to read and produce a beautiful script. He had put a gleam of life back into Buudi's eyes, restored something to him that had been lost when he was stripped of titles and land due to an affair with another man.

But, sadly, the amiable Wildstorm was not the topic of conversation. "The truth is, Buudi, I don't trust Yozerf. When he speaks to us, I feel like we're being mocked. And he keeps apart—I'm sure you saw how he slept with his horse last night, instead of near the fire with the rest of us. As if its company was preferable to ours."

"Or as if he trusted it to warn him if we decided to slit his throat while he slept," Buudi supplied.

Suchen frowned at the suggestion. Buudi and the rest were Sworn, for the gods' sakes, not brigands. "Either way, it only adds weight to my argument."

Buudi peered at the passing scenery thoughtfully, shaggy hair blowing into his face. "Have you tried talking to him?"

"He hasn't made himself very approachable," she pointed out dryly.

"No. Have we?"

She bit her lip. "Do you think I should?"

He glanced over at her, brown eyes serious. "It might be a good idea, steward. Ax sent him to us, so we're stuck with him for the duration. And the fate of Jenel may very well rest on our ability to work together as a unit. If we can't get Trethya safely to Kellsjard, there's no telling what might happen."

Suchen hauled on her horse's reins, pulling it aside so that the rest could pass by. Yozerf rode next-to-last, Dara-Don's solid bulk at his back. When his enormous black warhorse drew abreast of her, she fell into pace beside him.

Yozerf looked up quickly, nervously, long nostrils flaring like those of a wild animal scenting danger. But the look was gone an instant later, and his face lapsed back into chill remoteness.

"So," she said, trying to think of something to say which didn't sound totally inane, "what do you think of Ax's warnings of war?"

He watched her, eyes cold. "You don't much care for me, do you, steward?" he asked, cutting straight to the heart of things.

Suchen felt a blush sting her cheeks. Still, there seemed no reason to bandy words about if he wanted bluntness. "No. I don't trust you, and I don't like your attitude."

"Ah. I suppose I don't exactly fit in with the rest of you," he said. One hand gestured towards his alien features, and a sardonic smile twisted his wide lips.

"Are you saying that we don't want you because you aren't human?"

His chin came up, defiant and proud in response to her glare. "It would hardly be the first time," he replied dryly. "And I would be amazed beyond words were it to be the last." One hand twirled a loose lock of hair about a finger, as if to display its strangeness. "I make you uncomfortable, don't I, steward? Not because I'm an Aclyte" but because I am an Aclyte and I refuse to act like a slave."

"There is no slavery in Jenel."

"Oh, forgive me, Lady. Aclytes are not allowed to own property, cannot even marry legally. They lack even the basic rights of the lowest peasants. Many grow up in ghettos, only to see their children starve to death before they can reach adulthood. *Any* attack on a human, no matter how justified, is a crime punishable by death. But you are right—they *can* choose to die or to watch their children starve rather than bow to a human master. So I suppose they are not slaves after all."

Suchen frowned, taken aback by the bitterness of his words. "Then perhaps you should find other Aclytes to travel with."

He shrugged carelessly, voluminous black cloak rustling with the movement. "The blood in my veins has been tainted by a human father. Half-breeds such as myself cannot produce offspring, and most Aclytes are practical enough not to want to waste food on anyone who can't increase their dwindling numbers." His mouth twisted slightly. "I am ... outcast."

He's lying. She stared hard at him, but his features were as sharp and alien as ever. "Human blood?"

He inclined his head mockingly to her. "Fortunately, it doesn't show."

Bastard. "You obviously don't want to be here anymore than we want you," she snapped. "Why are you here, then? Why didn't you just tell Ax to find someone else?"

His eyes went flat and dark, and for an instant fury flashed like lightning in their gray depths. "Because Ax did not ask me—I was compelled." Hate showed in the words, like a face looking out from behind a tree. "Do you think Ax won't use whatever tools he has in order to get his way? An appeal to your sense of duty was enough." Lips curled into a sneer of contempt. "But what do I care for Jenel?"

She frowned, recalling the kindly old man she had met in the forest. *Yozerf appears to hate everyone—and he seems the type to cast things in the worst possible light.* "Compelled you?" She let her skepticism show in her tone, was rewarded by a sharp look.

"Aye. Ax is a healer. Long ago, at my birth, he kept me from dying, and in doing so made my life his property. Ax owns me. And *that* is why I'm here, Suchen Keblava. Because he has finally found a task disagreeable enough to be worth my life."

* * * *

The travelers stopped that night at a small inn in the village of Hyytr. The hostel was tiny and cramped, and the boards of its outer walls were so badly warped that the light inside illuminated the yard outside. Smoke belched from the hole in the center of the roof, as well as through a number of incidental openings in the rotting thatch.

The sun had already set in a blaze of bloody crimson by the time they trotted through the low wooden palisade surrounding the inn. The stench of animal dung and garbage came from the churned dirt of the yard. There was no groom to be seen, so they tended their horses themselves before heading towards the inn. Trethya walked in their midst, staring about at the squalor with enormous eyes, as if she had never even imagined that such a thing could exist.

Yozerf paused briefly outside the door, nostrils flaring at the stink of smoke and spilled ale wafting from the door. Suchen stopped also, watching him. After their earlier conversation, he had refused to speak again all day, more withdrawn than ever. As for her part, she had spent the afternoon turning his words over and over in her mind, wondering how much she could believe. Surely Ax would not have sent them someone untrustworthy ... but surely that grandfatherly old man wouldn't have forced the Aclyte to join them against his will, either.

But is Yozerf deliberately lying, or does he truly believe what he told me?

The cause of her concern lifted a pair of white hands and carefully drew his hood up to conceal his insane hair. Shadows closed over his features, softening them.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked. "It's going to be warm inside."

She sensed rather than saw his glacial gaze move to her face. "It makes me a little less conspicuous," he replied grimly.

Sizing up his height and slender build, she snorted. "If you say so. Come on" the Sworn have already gone inside."

This inn was even more squalid than the one in Diicus. Within, all was obscured by a haze of bluish smoke, which stemmed from the poorly-ventilated fire pit and from the guttering torches hanging on the walls. The fumes were impregnated with the stink of burning meat, and Suchen could dimly make out a half-cooked animal of some sort turning on a dirty iron spit above the fire.

The sweltering atmosphere reeked of stale beer, sweat, rancid food, urine, and other less definable smells. A number of the inn's patrons"for the most part bearded, lank-haired men in grimy leather armor"halted their conversations to look up suspiciously through the gloom as they entered.

Buudi grimaced in disgust, the lines carved beside his mouth in sharp relief. His shaggy-haired head motioned towards a table near the open door, where a cool breeze might be caught. Two rough-hewn logs served as benches about the table. Suchen slipped into place on one next to Buudi. After a brief pause, the hooded Aclyte perversely chose to slither into the space beside her. Peddock shot a dour look at him, as if warning Yozerf against getting too near. Suchen sighed and tried to ignore them both.

A buxom, ill-kempt barmaid flounced up to the table. Suchen had to stifle a giggle"surely, nature had nothing to do with the bizarre shade of orange coloring the woman's hair.

"What'll it be?" the barmaid demanded.

Gless leaned over, blue eyes shining. He grinned and winked roguishly at her, one hand automatically moving to check that his dandy's curls were in place. "A bit of ale for me, love, and some soup if you

have it."

The barmaid took the rest of their orders, moving around the table until she had gotten to Suchen. When she asked for ale and stew, however, the woman turned and started away without ever having even glanced in Yozerf's direction.

"Wait!" Suchen called, startled. The woman turned back, and she indicated Yozerf. "You forgot one of us."

The barmaid's rouged lip curled slightly. "We don't serve his kind in here," she snapped. "If he wants something, he's welcome to sort through the middens out back."

Shocked, Suchen stared, her mind spinning for a reply. "Isn't his coin as good as ours?"

Yozerf touched the back of her hand lightly, and Suchen found herself staring into his luminous gray eyes. "Leave it," he murmured. "I have enough left in my packs not to need to scrounge the middens. Though the gods know I've done it before." A faint, mocking smile touched his lips. "Given the state of this place, my rations are likely to be more healthful than anything they serve."

The barmaid colored sharply at his words and spat defiantly on the floor. "Just don't let him get any ideas about sleeping in the commons tonight. It's the stables or the yard for his kind, but the rate's just the same as for the rest of you."

An uncomfortable silence descended over the table. Most of the Sworn stared in any direction but Yozerf's. Peddock smirked at the Aclyte but was wise enough to keep his tongue still. Suchen peered at the scarred and battered table top in front of her. Some desperate lover had begun to inscribe a paean to his paramour into the wood with a knife-tip. The spelling was atrocious, and the whole thing ended in the middle of a word, as if he had suddenly decided the lady in question wasn't worth laboring through the alphabet.

How could that woman be so rude to his face? she wondered in dismay. But the truth was, she knew exactly how. *I remember Father and Mother making references to the servants when they were in the same room, as if Aclytes didn't have the brains of a dog, to recognize their own names.*

And more reluctantly, *Maybe he had some reason to be so suspicious of my motives earlier.*

"I don't understand," Trethya whispered. She alone stared at Yozerf, as if trying to fathom the cause of the barmaid's reaction.

A faint smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "No? Then be glad of it."

Suchen winced at the anger underlying his tone. She could sense the tension in his body even through the inches of air that separated them. "I'm sorry," she said aloud. Forcing her eyes up from the table, she discovered Yozerf watching her curiously, head tilted to one side. "You can share some of mine, if you'd like."

The twisted half-smile she was rapidly coming to detest warped his mouth again. "Aren't you afraid of ... contamination?"

"Why are you?"

To her surprise, he actually laughed. "TouchÃ©."

"You can have some of mine, too," Trethya put in eagerly.

Gless's curls bounced and shone in the light as he leaned over. "We'll all share that way, you'll get plenty, and no one will have to settle for much less than they would have had to start with."

Buudi smiled in relief as the tension around their table eased. "An excellent suggestion, Gless."

Suchen glanced over at Yozerf; his lips were pressed into a tight line, and fierce pride shone in his wild eyes. But after a moment, he nodded shortly. "I ... thank you," he said at last.

You're too proud, Yozerf, she thought. *Too proud by far. But at least you know when to swallow your pride and do what's intelligent.*

"Well, he can eat *after* I'm through," muttered Peddock, obviously revolted at the idea.

The barmaid returned and unceremoniously plunked down seven mugs of ale and seven bowls of watery gray soup with unidentifiable bits of meat and vegetables floating in it. Gless sniffed cautiously at a spoonful of the broth, sensuous mouth twisting into a moue at the unappetizing smell. With a sigh, he forced it down, and then dropped the none-too-clean spoon back into the bowl before shoving it over to Yozerf.

"Don't worry," he told the Aclyte with an encouraging smile. One arm gestured expansively so that the trailing cuffs of his gentleman's shirt nearly caught fire from the fish-oil lamp on their table. "When we reach Kellsjard, we'll eat like kings, I swear. Auglar never stints on his board."

Yozerf gave him an uninterpretable look and swallowed some of the broth.

Suchen took a cautious sip of her ale, decided it was weak rather than unhealthy, and handed it to her unexpected dinner companion. His fingers brushed hers briefly; thick calluses, unlike those caused by sword work, covered their tips. It was almost as if he had been running about on his hands as well as his feet. Shaking her head at the silly notion, she glanced over at Gless. "How about a tale, to pass the time?" she asked.

And to ease some of the tension.

Dara-Don bounced eagerly up and down in his seat, good-luck charm flying. "Tell us about Caden," he demanded with the air of a child begging an elder for a favored tale. "Yozerf would like to hear that one, too," wouldn't you?"

Everyone glanced uneasily over at Yozerf. Mentally, Suchen winced no telling how their Aclytese companion would take a story about the one-time kingdom of his people, betrayed and decimated by Jenel.

Yozerf cocked his head slightly, as if considering what his reaction should be. One hand came up, made a seemingly-careless gesture. "Tell, if it is your wish," I know the history as well as any."

Gless hesitated, glancing uncertainly at Buudi. "Doubtless Buudi could tell it better than I. He has an interest in Caden's history, you see."

Buudi smiled faintly, brown eyes focused on the weak flame of the lamp. Its glow burnished the silver in his hair, softened the rugged lines of his face. "You tell it, Gless. I'm sure that the tale as you heard it from your grandmother would be far more interesting than as I read it in Vlasen's *Treatise on the Death of a Land: The Pagan Kingdom of Caden and Her Aclytese Rulers.*"

Gless grinned. "If you wish." He took a sip of his ale and folded his hands carefully before him on the rough wood of the table, pliable mouth relaxing as he dropped into thought.

"Long ago, when Jenel was nothing more than a collection of warring barbarian principalities, the Cadean people came from the far North, driven by the deathly cold which gripped the lands at the foot of the Great Ice. The mountain-ringed land they found was bountiful and uninhabited save for the mighty dragons, which drew their magic from it. Sick of wandering, the Cadeans struck a bargain with the dragons before settling there to create a great and powerful kingdom. The tales of it and of its ruling house are many, but know this: they were not human, but Aclytes, as were many of their people. Their clan name was Jonaglir, and their line was an ancient and powerful one, dating back to before humankind ever opened eyes on the stars.

"For three-thousand years the Jonaglirs and their dragons held sway in Caden, weathering through war and disaster. They made treaty with Jenel, Shalai, and Maak, forming the alliance of the Circle Kingdoms. But then that treaty was broken.

"Three centuries ago, Jahcgroth fought his way to power in Argannon and looked for an alliance with Caden. Caden's Queen Telmonra refused his offer, but soon came to regret her rashness. Those who ruled Jenel at that time, of a different house than our own Queen today, coveted the power of the dragons for themselves. So, through treachery and through might, they waged war on Caden.

"Filled with anger over Telmonra's slight, Jahcgroth cast a mighty spell, imprisoning the dragons within a lake of ice. Without their strength, the Cadeans had no chance. Alone and beleaguered, the kingdom fell. Soon, Jenel's vanguard beat upon the gates of Cade Kwii, Caden's capital and greatest citadel.

"Then all who were left of Jonaglir, together with their remaining liegemen, retreated unto the throne room and stood grouped about their Queen. The Jenelese burst through the stout doors and slew the clan of Jonaglir unto the last babe.

"But before her blood had spilt on the flagstones, Queen Telmonra warned that Caden should henceforth be as poison, so that nothing built by the hand of man would stand erect, and nothing planted by the hand of man grow. The rulers of Jenel laughed and prepared to raze Caden's many forests for farmland. Soon they laughed no more—each word the dying Queen had spoken was true. Homes raised above the ashes collapsed no sooner than the last stone was set in place. The seeds sown in the fields lay fallow, refusing to take root.

"And at last, knowing that their victory was for naught, all men quit the land of Caden. And for near three hundred turnings of winter unto spring, no living man has set foot within the dead kingdom. Weeds grow among the marble and gold streets of the capital city, and sparrows nest on the throne that seated the fiercest monarchs ever known to the southern world.

"And the bodies of the great dragons lie trapped in the lake of ice, their ghosts on the wind above, mourning the shed blood of Jonaglir."

Gless's voice fell away into silence. The barmaid, who had found more promising pastures on the other side of the room, let out a shrill screech of laughter that was a bit too loud to be genuine.

Yozerf stared thoughtfully at the ale mug he and Suchen shared. The shadow cast by his hood enveloped his delicate, inhuman features. What did he think, hearing that story? Like most Jenelese Aclytes, he was probably descended from men and women captured during the war and brought forcibly into Jenel to act as servants for their conquerors. Any Aclytes who had managed to flee Caden on their own had sought refuge in Shalai and Maak. Or, she thought with a sudden chill, perhaps some had fled to Argannon as well.

As Yozerf didn't seem inclined to make any comment, Buudi shifted slightly on the rough planks of the bench. One scarred finger idly traced a pattern in the wet ring left behind by his ale mug. "A great

tragedy," he said sadly.

Yozerf lifted his head slightly, light illuminating his mouth though his eyes remained in shadow. "There are some who might say Caden's loss was for the good."

Peddock snorted, tossing back his ale. The firelight caught on his short cap of hair, burnishing it to bronze. "I would say so!" he exclaimed, putting his tankard down with a thud. "In Iddi, we know that the Jonaglirs were a clan of death-hungry cannibals who bathed in the blood of their slaughtered subjects in order to remain young far beyond their normal span of years."

Buudi cut in quickly, before Yozerf had a chance to react. "That isn't true, Peddock. According to any reputable source, such tales are just fancy."

The stubborn jut of Peddock's lower lip indicated that he was in the mood to argue. "Maybe, if your books say so." He did not sound in the least convinced. "But even if the tales aren't true, imagine what a kingdom run by Aclytes would be like! That would be like having a donkey drive a cart while the human pulls it!"

Yozerf hurled himself half-across the table in a fluid move too quick for Suchen to follow. With a savage jerk, he hauled Peddock out of his seat, slamming him into the edge of the table.

"Stop!" shouted Suchen, launching herself at Yozerf in an attempt to save her brother from his own stupidity.

The Aclyte's lip curled back from his teeth in a furious snarl. His eyes reflected the light like an animal's, the pupils glowing green. Peddock shrank back, hands scrabbling wildly at Yozerf's inexorable grip. "Let go of me!" he cried. "Help! He's trying to kill me!"

"If I were trying to kill you, you would already be dead," Yozerf hissed. For an instant, he seemed caught between rage and some other emotion Suchen couldn't begin to guess at. Then he flung Peddock back into his seat with a contemptuous gesture. "I'm going to bed." A moment later, he vanished out the door in a swirl of black cloak.

Suchen rose hastily. "Why did you do that?"

Her brother stared at her sullenly. "I was only speaking the truth—something the rest of you seem afraid to do. We learned about them at home in Iddi, remember Suchen? They aren't like us, and the sooner we're rid of him, the better."

Coldness settled in the pit of her stomach. "I would have thought you wouldn't want to remember *any* lessons we learned™ in Iddi."

"*He* was the one who attacked *me*!"

Uzco arched an amber brow, his hand paused halfway to his tankard. "Can you blame him? Lucky he decided to civilized about it, though."

"Uzco is right," Buudi interrupted before Peddock could speak again. "He may have frightened you, but the rest of us didn't even have to pull him off before he let you go." His brown eyes studied Peddock thoughtfully. "He was angry, but I don't think he truly meant you harm."

Peddock sputtered helplessly, the look on his face that of a man who has been betrayed by those he trusted most.

Suchen shook her head, turned away from him, and strode out the door. Her boots thumped dully on the dirt floor of the inn, the churned earth outside. Cool air flowed over her, welcome after the stifling heat within. The light spilling from the windows served more to heighten the shadows in the yard than to illuminate anything, and she picked her way carefully.

It took her eyes a moment to find his black cloak in the night. He stood in a corner of the inn yard, staring up at the stars.

"Steward," he said calmly, even though he had made no move to turn and see who approached.

"Yozerf," she replied. Coming to stand by him, she tilted back her own head and stared at the stars. They shone down in their awful glory: bright, hard, and utterly indifferent.

"I always hated that story, you know," she heard herself say after a moment. A little shiver worked its way up her back. "I had an active imagination when I was a child—too active, maybe. When the bards sang about the final stand at Cade Kwii, I ... I could *see* it all so clearly. I could imagine how awful it must have been for the Jonaglirs, going into death knowing that everything they had ever loved was gone."

He didn't reply for a moment. "Have you come to chastise me for handling your brother roughly?" he asked at last.

She peered closely at him, trying to discern any nuance of expression. Moonlight left a silvery sheen on the soft wool of his cloak but failed to reach within his hood to touch his features. "Perhaps I should congratulate you on your restraint."

He snorted, tossing his head back. "I don't think Ax would free me if I ruined our little alliance by killing one of you."

Had there be a trace of humor in his tone? It seemed impossible. "Perhaps not. I've asked Peddock not to provoke you again."

"He was being honest. I may not like what he has to say, but better the angry words spoken before my face than the unsuspected knife in my back."

"You don't trust us, do you?"

"Should I?"

"We don't mean you any harm. I don't understand why you seem to think that we do."

He paused, then shook his head. "Forgive me if I judge you badly, human woman. But the years have taught me that it is better to be cautious." His lips curved into a bitter smile. "To trust is to die."

Suchen frowned, studying him thoughtfully. Did he truly believe that? And if so, what sort of cold, unforgiving world did he see through those gray eyes?

Yozerf sighed and gestured towards the inn. "Go to sleep. It's what I'm going to do."

Suchen nodded reluctantly. Hugging herself against the chill, she turned and went back into the warmth and humanity of the inn, shutting the door behind her.

* * * *

The wolf laid his ears back, unhappy over being so close to humans, but having no other choice. He

snuffled around the side of the stables, grateful that he could soothe the natural fear of the horses, turn it to trust. Their scent was comforting, familiar, and the wolf breathed of it deeply.

The sword-woman had gone inside. That was good, it was easier to think things through without her nearby. Her scent lingered, musky but pleasant. A mental image accompanied the scent, joined by that of the black-haired man. Queen wolf, king wolf? But no, that wasn't right, they weren't mates. Human relationships were different from pack, must remember that.

The wolf paused, long legs stiff. The cold breeze ruffled his gray coat, but he didn't even perceive the chill through the thickness of fur. No pack feeling, he reminded himself sharply. He must entertain no pack feeling towards the humans. And why did instinct seem to urge that he should?

After all, the humans were fools. Too deaf and nose-dead to realize that they were still being followed. They would be surprised when the attack came, like silly pups who mistook a snake for a play-stick.

Warn them somehow or not? He was a lone wolf and they a foreign pack. A faint growl tried to fight its way up his throat and was swallowed back. With a sharp flick of his thick tail, the wolf trotted off into the shadows, in search of more food.

Stupid humans.

Chapter 4

The path the travelers followed widened out to a wagon-rutted trail, which wove through the brown boles and overhanging boughs of a heavy forest. Dark clouds covered over the sky, threatening rain. A brisk, chill wind rattled the branches and flung damp leaves at Suchen's face. *Not a day for traveling*, she thought grumpily. When they had left the inn that morning, after rousing Yozerf from his makeshift bed in the stables, Uzco had cocked a knowledgeable eye to the heavens and proclaimed that they would see rain before the day's end. And Uzco was seldom mistaken when it came to the weather.

Suchen sighed and drew up her hood to block the cold wind. Her hair hung limp from the damp, unraveling from its braid as quickly as it could. She indulged herself briefly in a fantasy of sitting in front of a warm hearth somewhere, wrapped in blankets, a cup of Undish coffee in her hand. Not that she'd had any coffee in the last nine years, she thought wryly—it was far too expensive an import for anyone but the wealthiest of southern merchants.

No sense brooding on the weather when there's nothing you can do to change it, she told herself. On impulse, she slowed her horse, dropping back in line to where Yozerf rode. As before, he was second from the end, although the task of keeping a covert eye on him had devolved to Uzco today.

The Aclyte had been behaving strangely this morning. *Strange even for him, that is*. Every time she had glanced in his direction, he had been twisting about in the saddle and staring back, past Uzco, as if there was something absolutely fascinating in the road behind them.

She cast scar-faced Uzco an acknowledging grin, before turning her attention on Yozerf. "You seem preoccupied this morning. Why all the backward looks? I'm sure it's not because you miss Hyytr."

Gray eyes regarded her suspiciously, as if he thought a changeling had replaced her in the night. Then he shrugged, giving a little shake of his head. The insane mass of his crimson hair rustled against the inside of his hood, begging to be let out. "I'm not certain. I think ... I have a feeling that"

The sudden hiss and thud of an arrow striking the ground next to Suchen's horse cut off his words.

She let out a warning yell, jerking her mount to one side before the archer could improve his aim. Yozerf snarled a curse, drawing his sword and wheeling around to face the danger. Uzco's bow was in his hands in a moment, but precious seconds fled while he strung it.

There were eight of them in all, coarse, heavy men with the hard-bitten look of career soldiers about them. Their tabards were plain, and the rest of their gear seemed chosen for its anonymity. They might have been any one of the many small warrior-bands that roamed Jenel.

The only thing that marked them apart was the pack of hounds milling about their horses' hooves. Dun and shaggy, the beasts were incredibly long-legged, their bodies whip-thin beneath the heavy coat of fur. They were built for speed, Suchen saw—but, unlike the greyhounds her father had kept, these were scent-hounds, not sight hunters.

Suchen had only an instant to take it all in before the soldiers charged. "Go! Now!" Buudi shouted at Gless, who happened to have Trethya riding behind him at the moment. Gless hesitated a moment, then spun his mount and kicked its flanks, disappearing down the road in a cloud of dust.

The rest of the Sworn hurled themselves across the road, striving to block anyone from following Trethya and Gless. Buudi dove into the fray with a wild howl, sending up the first clang of steel on steel as his sword locked with another.

Suchen flung up her own weapon in a block as a blade scythed towards her head. Her heart pounded, and she struck out blindly, only to find herself on the defensive again a moment later. This soldier was better than the one she had faced in Diicus, and eight years of practice against the Sworn wasn't the same thing as actually fighting for her life. She found herself trying to signal her horse to back away and focus on the fight at the same time, unable to do either with any effectiveness. The soldier's sword deflected off her own, entangled a moment in the thick leather of her sleeve, and then drew a line of blood down her arm.

A black charger thrust itself between Suchen's mount and that of her attacker, its teeth bared to bite. Yozerf let out a howl and swept his sword through the soldier's defenses and into his gut. The man began to scream, a hoarse sound that seemed barely human.

"Come with me!" Yozerf grabbed her mount's bridle, dragging it along after his own. They surged away from the battle, across the road, and down a sharp slope towards the woods.

"No!" Suchen yelled in protest. "We can't leave the Sworn! We have to hold the soldiers until Trethya has a chance to escape!"

"We couldn't have held them much longer," Yozerf snapped back. "Maybe this way we can at least confuse the trail for their hounds!"

Lightning flashed in the gray sky, and the first cold raindrops struck Suchen in the face. Within moments, the scattered drops transformed into a downpour. Rain lashed at her exposed hands and soaked through her clothing. Yozerf hauled both steeds to a stop, then slithered down to lead them by hand. Suchen joined him on the ground. It was impossible to move through the forest quietly—leaves crackled, fallen branches snapped, and underbrush rattled. Birds fell into alarmed silence at their noisy intrusion.

Once past the edge of the road, the going became easier, as there was less undergrowth. The land sloped sharply, and Yozerf headed down as though he knew exactly where he was going. Branches whipped Suchen's face, stinging her eyes. Rain-slick leaves slithered from under her on the steep slope, and she prayed her horse wouldn't step into a concealed hole and break its leg.

Voices echoed faintly from the roadway above, mixed in with the eager cries of the hounds. *They are following us*, she realized with a mixture of hope and dismay. *Maybe we'll give Gless and Trethya a chance to escape after all.*

The slope leveled off. Glancing about, Suchen saw that the forest had changed subtly. The trees were spaced more widely, the undergrowth sparse. The rush of water over rock sounded like a beacon through the patter of rain on leaves.

They came to the edge of a stream. Although not large, it was deeply cut enough that anyone down in it wouldn't be easily seen from above. Stopping, Yozerf dropped to one knee. "Take your boots off," he ordered, face hidden by the wild fall of his hair.

She complied quickly. Grasping the reins firmly, the Aclyte led his mount down the embankment. Eyeing the steep slope with some trepidation, Suchen followed. Her horse stumbled but managed to keep its footing long enough for them to reach the shallow stream.

The water was icy cold, stinging her feet and making her gasp. Silt squelched under her toes, and rounded rocks shifted treacherously underfoot. Tiny fish darted about in the water, none coming close to her chilled ankles. The banks towered up on either side, overhung with trees and twisted roots. A flock of black birds took off into the rain, squawking in surprise.

Yozerf led the way down the stream for several hundred paces to where an enormous oak tilted precariously out over the water. The bank had been undercut, exposing the tree's great mat of roots. Yozerf made a peremptory gesture towards the hollow.

"You and the horses can hide there," he said. "Your feet will be out of the water if you pull yourself up into the deeper wash-out beneath the roots."

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

He glanced back over his shoulder at her, pale face grim against the blackness of his cloak. Gray eyes glittered like those of a wild animal that knows it is being hunted. "I'm going to lead them away. With luck, I'll be able to keep them from following us any farther. If not, at least one of us will survive."

She nodded, accepting his logic, knowing that they couldn't run much farther with the horses in tow. The red earth of the stream bank was slimy with rain. Its rich scent filled her nostrils as she scrabbled for a purchase that would keep her out of the water. Grimly silent, Yozerf passed his boots to her, followed by his mount's reins. She shortened her grip on them, pulling the horses close so that they were at least partially hidden by the outcropping. Her roan rolled its eyes, not liking the situation at all.

Yozerf paused a moment. His crimson hair, now thoroughly soaked through, had turned the reddish-brown of dried blood. One delicate, long-fingered hand lifted and stroked his horse's night-dark hide in an affectionate gesture. "His name is Windshade. So you'll know, in case I don't return." Then he was gone, wading back upstream.

Suchen sat in silence, straining all her senses. Her heart beat loudly, and she forced herself to calm. The stream chattered incessantly, swishing over rocks and roots. Rain dripped from the few leaves still clinging to the trees and splattered on the ground and in the water.

Gradually, she became aware of voices calling to one another. A dog barked fretfully, and Suchen's roan jerked at the sound, wet reins whipping through her grip before she managed to regain control. Leaves crunched underfoot just uphill from where she was concealed. If they came down to the stream to check for footprints, they would most certainly see the horses.

"The hounds are confused," shouted one voice, dangerously close. "We need to water the animals" "mayhap we can find some tracks as well."

"All right," grumbled another. "Let's"

At that instant, the hounds set up a terrific baying. Underbrush crashed as they sprinted off, heading upstream in the direction Yozerf had gone.

"Hounds have got something!" one of the men shouted excitedly. A louder crashing ensued as men and mounts both headed after the dogs. Then silence descended once again on the forest.

* * * *

The wolf peered out from beneath a tangle of fallen trees and vines, his tongue lolling in a lupine grin. Leaves stuck to his fur, and the ground was unpleasantly damp against his pads, but there was much to be glad about.

The hounds had obediently outdistanced the hunters, who were even now yelling and cursing as they fought their way through the undergrowth. The dogs stood stiff and watchful before the wolf, thin tails wagging eagerly. They would be even easier to control than horses. Pack animals by nature, they *wanted* someone to tell them what to do. A slight twist to their thoughts to convince them that the wolf was their

pack leader and they were all but whining for him to give them some command.

Go. The wolf concentrated, visualizing, implanting in their minds the idea that they must run ahead of their human masters. They must find the proper scent, that of an animal the wolf knew did not frequent these southern forests. Eventually, never finding what they sought, they would return home to their kennel.

Goodâ€”they had it. The wolf sent them impressions of approval. They wriggled ecstatically, so happy to follow pack-order and do what they were told. Springing up, they began baying and yammering once again, tearing frantically off through the brush. A few moments later, their supposed masters stumbled after.

Once they were gone, the wolf slithered out of his hiding place. Clever he was, yes, to use the blundering humansâ€™ own slaves against them. Fastidiously eyeing the damp leaves stuck to his fine, gray coat, he began to shake vigorously.

* * * *

Yozerf glided quietly over the leaf-littered ground, his bare feet making no more sound than the soft patter of rain through the trees. He kept his movements cautiously slow, every sense alert for danger. The cries and curses of the soldiers, the barking of the hounds, echoed loudly enough to silence any forest creatures. The repellent smell of unwashed human bodies came to him on the breeze, and he crinkled his nose in distaste. Sharp gray eyes caught the occasional flash of color as the men thrashed about through the undergrowth.

"Damned hounds!" a soldier yelled suddenly. "They've taken leave of their senses!"

Yozerf grinned thinly, displaying small, sharp teeth. The hounds were confused, their masters even more so. He saw the soldiers growing more and more separated from one another as they fought to either keep up with their dogs, or to hold the creatures back from yet another false trail.

Like a black ghost, he drifted through the wood for a time, waiting patiently for the right moment. It was not long before he was rewarded. Two of the soldiers halted in a small glade. One of them, muttering angry imprecations at the hounds, stopped to relieve himself on a tree. The other stamped ahead.

Yozerf drew out a slender length of black rope from his left cuff. The rain and the wind masked the faint sound of his approach. With a single, quick move he wrapped the makeshift garrote about the soldier's throat.

The man's hands scrabbled wildly at the thin rope biting into his flesh. A faint sound escaped his mouth, and Yozerf tightened his grip even further, cutting off breath and blood. The soldier's eyes bulged horribly, his tongue protruding from his lips as his face purpled. Struggles gave way to feeble twitching, then to lax unconsciousness.

Yozerf held the garrote tight for a while longer, giving death a chance to take hold. His impassive face showed nothing of pity as he relaxed his grip and let the man slump to the ground.

He was a fool to hunt quarry of which he knew nothing, Yozerf thought, sparing a scornful glance for the twisted face. In the ghetto where he had grown up, every confrontation had only three possible outcomes: kill, submit, or die. And the prime lesson for those who wanted to opt for the first two choices was as simple as it was harsh: know your enemy, his strengths and weaknesses, and exploit them without mercy.

As he turned away from the body, a branch crackled loudly to one side. The other soldier emerged from the undergrowth, brushing a streak of sap from his brow. "Those damned hounds have run off

altogetherâ€”â€• he started.

He stopped, all the color draining from his face at the sight of the corpse, its sightless eyes filling with rain. Scrabbling frantically for his weapon, he drew a deep breath to shout for help.

Yozerf struck with deadly speed, propelling himself across the clearing before the man could cry out. One hand impacted hard with the soldier's nose, shattering the bones and driving them up and back into the head. Not wasting precious seconds to decide whether or not the blow had been fatal, Yozerf tracked the man's fall, bringing his foot down hard on the exposed neck before it even had the chance to touch the ground. The windpipe gave easily.

Yozerf stepped back, scanning the glade. The killing gave him no pleasure, only the knowledge that the chances of his living through this fool's errand increased a little more with each death. Any other emotional reaction he might have entertained remained buried, shunted aside by the harsh demands of survival.

Tugging his hood forwards over his face, he moved off silently in search of his prey.

* * * *

Suchen's legs were beginning to cramp. The damp cold had eaten its way into her bones, and she was starting to become seriously worried. Although she might not be overly fond of him, she didn't want the Aclyte to be captured. What would befall him at the hands of his captors, she couldn't guess, other than it would be distinctly unpleasant and probably fatal.

Besides, worrying over Yozerf kept her from worrying about the Sworn and Trethya.

A white wraith-face appeared suddenly over Windshade's back. Startled, Suchen grabbed wildly for her sword hiltâ€”then relaxed when she realized it was only Yozerf. He had the good grace not to smile at her reaction to his soundless approach. A wet oak-leaf was plastered to his sopping hair, and there was dirt and leaf-mould caked under his fingernails. Other than that, however, he looked as perfectly composed as if they were meeting at some social gathering.

"They're gone,â€” he stated flatly, reaching for Windshade's reins.

Suchen frowned, relief warring with suspicion. â€œWhat happened?"

He shrugged. â€œI killed some of them.â€” The grimace transformed into a ferocious smile.

"How many?"

"Four. They were all that I could find. Perhaps your friends attended to the rest."

Four men ... by himself? Dear gods.

She remembered how he had fought that night in the burning inn, how he had moved with a savage, animal grace. The men who had faced him then had never stood a chance. Likely these hadn't either.

A chill went up her back. Ax had promised that Yozerf would be useful to them. And so he was, like a glittering sword given into their hands.

But the trick to the sword is knowing which end to grab. Who's holding the hilt in your case, Aclyte?

Or are you a blade broken, with no safe edge to reach for?

"I hope so," she said aloud. "I hope they're safe."

Yozerf shrugged. "They're Sworn. Surely they know how to fight."

"I hope so," she said again. Then she shook her head, trying to let go of the worry. She had no way of knowing what had befallen her friends after Yozerf had fled with her, and nebulous fears would only twist her into knots. "Let's get out of this damned water."

He inclined his head gracefully, face an expressionless mask once again. "I saw a shallow ... it isn't large enough to be a cave. More of a washout, but deep enough for both of us to fit into with some room left over. The light is starting to fail, and I think we're both wet and cold enough for now."

She nodded. "Lead on, then."

* * * *

The cave was very small, not worthy of the name. It had been carved out in some flood, when water had swirled around and under a rocky outcrop, digging away the soil. But, by positioning the horses in front of it, they were at least out of the wind and the rain.

Yozerf crouched outside by Windshade, waiting for Suchen to change into some spare clothing from her pack. His only spares were even more decrepit than what he currently wore, and it looked as though he would spend a cold, damp night indeed. Still, he had endured worse, enough to know it wouldn't kill him.

The human woman had shown a surprising amount of good sense today, he reflected. When the time had come, she had proved herself as quick and strong as he had first judged her to be. And afterwards she had not spent time bemoaning her friends, or uselessly wishing that he had let her remain behind with them.

And why didn't you, eh Yozerf? So she was losing her fight. Humans die every day—what is it to me? Ax didn't send me to protect her, only Trethya.

He dipped his head a little, watching rainwater pour off the edge of his hood. None of these humans, with the possible exception of Peddock—he spared a mental snort of contempt for Suchen's brother—were what he had expected. Although he had been careful to squelch any attempts to converse with him, they had still offered him their own food last night and had shown him no overt hostility.

No. No, they aren't what I expected, not at all. None of them have so much as raised a hand to me. Perhaps ... perhaps this entire experience isn't as bad as I feared it would be. Perhaps—

No. He cut off the dangerous line of thought violently, before it could go a word farther. His face grew rigid, and he forced a hard shell to form around his heart and soul, impenetrable. A gift of food, a few kind words—was he so easily fooled? These humans had no more interest in him than in a curious-looking dog. When things grew difficult—and, given the persistence that the Council had displayed so far, they would—would the humans be his friends then? Would they be worried about an Aclytese half-breed?

They aren't my friends, he reminded himself fiercely. *Don't be an idiot. Don't make the mistake of relaxing, of viewing them as allies to be counted on. To do so could be fatal.*

He sighed wistfully. His hands rubbed absently at his wrists, as if imagining the scars hidden under his sleeves yet ached after all this time.

To trust is to die.

* * * *

Night fell early outside the rock shelter, hastened by the thick clouds. As the temperature plummeted, Suchen reluctantly agreed to a small fire. Tiny yellow flames danced and crackled, fed by some of the tinder carried in their packs. The scent of smoke soon filled the air, mixing with that of wet wool and damp earth.

They had eaten quietly, not speaking to one another past what was necessary. Now, Suchen leaned back against the sloping wall of the washout—there was hardly enough room even to sit upright—and watched her strange companion. He crouched like a gigantic raven near the entrance, staring out intently between the horses' legs. His wet cloak was spread with hers to dry by the fire, and he looked oddly thin without it, as if he had gone a long time without enough to eat.

"What are you looking at?" she asked finally, searching for some way to break the silence.

He didn't glance back at her and risk ruining his night vision with the fire. "Come and see," he replied. "But move slowly, or else you'll startle them."

Wondering what could possibly be so fascinating, Suchen crawled slowly to the edge of the earthen cave and peered out. It took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. When they had, the Aclyte pointed towards the stream below.

Three deer stood at the water's edge, bending their heads to drink. They appeared ghostly in the darkness, so frail and delicate they might have been made out of twigs. One raised its head and looked about nervously, its large eyes dark and liquid in the night.

They seemed like something magical, transformed from the ordinary by the rain-swept night. Suchen felt an involuntary smile stretch her face as she watched their quick movements. Then all three bounded suddenly away, their white tails flashing behind.

She felt a surge of disappointment, and her smile crumpled. "Did I frighten them?"

There was an odd expression of serenity on Yozerf's face, replacing the normal hauteur. His sculpted lips relaxed slightly, as if in an unguarded moment he might actually be capable of a real smile.

"No," he replied, his deep voice like soft velvet in the night. "The raccoon frightened them. See?"

She nodded as the animal waddled out onto a sand bar in the stream and thrust its tiny, black hands into the chill water. "Look how thick its fur is," she said with a grin. "It must never get cold."

He chuckled softly, and she looked at him in surprise and pleasure. "You seem to know a lot about the woods," she said after a time of watching the raccoon scurry about the sand bar. "Did you grow up near here?"

He shook his head, hair rustling softly over his shoulders. "No. I grew up in Segg," he admitted, as if it were something to be ashamed of.

Segg—the jewel of Jenel. The Crowned City, home of the monarchs for generations. For a moment, Suchen felt a stab of envy—what she would have given to grow up there! There was nowhere else in the Circle Kingdoms so sophisticated. Its architecture was famous, from its soaring cathedrals to the fabulous domed forum where Lord Igen and his Thanes met in conclave. Controlling Jenel's only large, easily-accessible port, it was a natural center of art, learning, and trade.

But something about Yozerf's tone suggested that his experience of the place had been very different. She remembered his bitter words the day before, remembered how the barmaid—no exalted personage herself—had treated him. Perhaps it would be best not to ask him any more questions about Segg for

now, rather than risk shattering the open mood that seemed to have taken him.

The forest, at least, seemed a safe enough topic. "Then how did you learn so much about the wild places?" she prompted.

He shook himself, as if coming out of a bad dream. "I ... When I left Segg for the last time, I went to the Eastern Forest which bounds the known world." He smiled a little at her gasp "no one went far into the Forest, except to cut wood from its eaves. The only story Suchen knew of anyone venturing farther concerned Lord Auglar's father. And he had never come out again. "I lived there alone for three years, seeing almost no one save for the animals. I learned a great deal, then."

She nodded thoughtfully. She wondered why had he come back. *Loneliness*? The very idea that the cold, haughty Yozerf could be lonely defied reason. Still ... perhaps her companion had depths to him she had not before suspected.

"I grew up in a city myself," she said. "Iddi."

"Ah." He gave her a sideways look from the corner of one eye. "The daughter of a merchant, no doubt. Your bourgeoisie accent gives you away."

She blushed a little, surprised to find bitterness in her soul over not having severed every possible tie. "Yes, I suppose it does."

"And how does a merchant's daughter end up the steward of a powerful Northern lord?"

Suchen remained silent for a while, mulling over what to say. Not the whole story "not to someone she hardly knew, someone as hard and cold as he.

"I had to leave Iddi," she began awkwardly. "I just ... I had to. And so did Peddock. I had managed to learn a little about the sword because I needed to learn how to protect myself." She paused, waiting for him to ask what dangers a rich merchant's daughter would possibly need to protect herself from. He didn't.

"At any rate, we headed North once we had left. We went as far as we could as fast as we could, in case anyone followed. We happened to stumble into Kellsjard at just the time the succession war started. Lord Auglar's father had died under mysterious circumstances, his body never found. Several cousins saw it as an opportunity to try to claim the demesne for themselves. And Lord Fellrant wasn't above mustering an army of his own. After all, if he could take control of the demesne, he would be Lord over half of Jenel.

"It was a desperate struggle. Kellsjard suffered through half a year of siege, with us stuck inside. My background taught me how to do numbers and sums, so I offered to help when it came to tallying up rations, distributing blankets. That was how I met Lord Auglar. I suppose he must have been impressed, because he asked me to be his steward, seeing that the last one had died when cholera broke out shortly after the siege began. It was then that he gathered the Sworn to him. That's why they're such an odd bunch" Auglar picked them from those warriors he grew closest to during the siege. All of them except Buudi and Uzco were more or less chance travelers who happened to wind up on the wrong side of the walls when the armies surrounded us."

"And your brother? Is he Sworn because of this, or because Auglar wanted to give you something?"

His perceptiveness startled her. "What makes you say that?"

Yozerf shrugged. "He is less confident than the rest. Like a man who thinks himself playing a part and

is terrified that everyone else will someday discover it."

"Maybe." She shrugged. "And that's all there is to my story, really. I've spent the last nine years as Auglar's steward. Not a bad life, if not the most interesting one, either. Until now. Until Ax came to me."

A sleepy yawn widened her mouth, nearly cutting off her last words. Stretching out uncomfortably in the cramped space of the cave, she wrapped her blankets securely about herself. Pebbles dug into her back and side, and the scent of river clay so close to her face was annoying.

Yozerf returned his attention to the rainy night outside their tiny camp. "I'll sit first watch."

A part of her was uneasy at the idea of trusting the watch to someone she had known so short a time. Still, there seemed little choice otherwise. "Very well. Good night, Yozerf."

He wrapped a blanket about his thin shoulders, half-hiding the wild tumble of his hair. "Sleep well, Suchen," he murmured back, his accent giving her name an odd inflection.

Chapter 5

The next morning, they left their hiding place in the wood and cautiously made their way North along the road. It was a beautiful morning, perfect and pristine, as if the rain of the night before had washed the world clean. Sunlight slanted through a kaleidoscope of brilliant autumn leaves. Cold-weather birds sang and twittered happily as they hopped through the underbrush in search of seeds and berries. The cool air smelled clear and sharp.

Despite the serenity of the morning, the two travelers remained on their guard. Suchen rode wrapped tightly in her cloak, one hand resting on her sword hilt. At her side, looking like some dark dream come to life, Yozerf continuously scanned the landscape around them. Occasionally, he would flare his nostrils and glance about, as if scenting something beyond her nose's ability to detect.

They made their way back to the site of the previous day's battle. Yozerf located two bodies concealed near the road; neither belonged to any of the Sworn.

"They may have escaped, then," Suchen said hopefully.

Yozerf nodded. "We need to find them, and quickly. Is there anywhere we might meet up with them? Anywhere they might wait for you, if it seemed safe?"

"We were going to stop in Rhiaht. If they were going to wait, it would be there. Supposing they think I'm still alive at all," she added glumly.

Yozerf gave her a feral grin. "They undoubtedly think that I murdered you in the forest. Your brother probably wanted to stay and look for us, but Buudi was wise enough to press on and catch up with Trethya and Gless while the hounds were distracted by our trail."

"Probably," she agreed ruefully. "I wonder why the hounds came after us? There would have been two tracks, one from us and one from Gless and Trethya."

Yozerf shrugged. "Who knows what goes on in the mind of a hound?"

They followed the road North towards Rhiaht. At first Yozerf remained on edge, carefully scanning the wood about them for any signs of pursuers. But as morning gave way to noon he seemed to relax slightly, as if confident at last that they were alone on the road.

Suchen cleared her throat awkwardly in an attempt to break the silence that had settled in between them. Yozerf turned gray eyes on her, unreadable as a glacial wall. *Wonderful. Probably putting the evil eye on me.*

"We should get to Rhiaht in three days," she said. "Have you ever been there?"

Yozerf glanced away disinterestedly. He had not pulled his hood up this morning, instead allowing the sunlight to touch his austere features and blood-crimson hair. "I don't particularly like cities," he replied shortly. Whether he meant the comment to be affirmative or negative was anyone's guess. "And besides, most of them lock their gates until dawn, while I prefer to travel at night and find my bed just before sunrise." The tone of his voice suggested that the fact she chose to travel by day was an extreme, and rather unnecessary, inconvenience.

Suchen blinked. "Why?"

"It's easier to hide."

She remembered the way he had led them away from Diicus, guiding them around potholes in the road, which to their eyes looked just like all the other shadows. Given the fact that he could apparently see quite well in the dark, his choice to skulk about in the night hours didn't seem so strange.

"I bet you would be invaluable during a night raid or strike," she mused aloud. "Gods, but we could have used you during Fellrant's siege of Kellsjard."

He looked at her, impassive mask cracking to reveal surprise. "Do you think so?"

She grinned over at him. "Of course. You're obviously a fighter." She pointed at the night-black steed trundling along docilely beneath him. "That monster?" "Windshade, you said his name was?" "is certainly no cart horse. And most people don't carry a sword they don't know how to use."

He nodded thoughtfully, brushing aside a fold of his voluminous cloak. Although the scabbard of the weapon was badly battered, the blade itself was of fine workmanship. The hilt was of some white metal Suchen was wholly unable to identify, set with a single, clear stone near the crosspiece.

"That's a beautiful blade," she said. "It looks very old."

"It is. It came from Caden. More than a thousand years ago, the people saw a great light in the sky one night and heard a tremendous sound. When a few gathered up their courage to go see what had happened, they found that half a mountain had been devastated. Trees were flattened for leagues around, and an entire village had been wiped away. In the center of a great crater they found a large fragment of iron. Four swords were forged from it. This one is Starsong. It has been passed down in my family ever since."

"Oh." She wondered how long his talkative mood would last and decided she should take advantage of it. "Are you a mercenary?" The guess seemed reasonable enough, given his words about being an outcast two days before.

His mouth tightened slightly, as if with pain. "I have been many things, Suchen Keblava," he said softly. His gray eyes fixed on his mount's black ears, refusing to look in her direction. "But sometimes, yes, when recklessness is required for survival, then I am a mercenary."

She put her head to one side, not certain she fully understood his comment. "What do you mean?"

He smiled, but it was a smile with no warmth. "You've seen the way your brother reacted to my presence. You know your own reaction?" "was it not you who told me I wasn't welcome? Things are no different anywhere else, and many who have said that have been far less gentle than you were. I can't count the times I've been attacked in the mercenary camps. After all, what's one more body in such a place? And when it came to the work itself ... often, before I acquired Windshade, I was consigned to the worst positions in the army, the ones only the most desperate or foolhardy would agree to hold. Being mounted cavalry helps a little, but I've often had to fight to keep possession of Windshade against those who thought they could simply take him away from me."

He shook his head grimly. His features were drawn and harsh, like unyielding marble, but the look in his eyes was wild. "And there have been many who thought that they were not required to pay me for my services." A hint of malevolent anger crept into his expression. "But, as with those who believed me easy prey, they quickly learned otherwise."

A chill walked down Suchen's spine at his baleful words and fell look. For an instant, she felt as if she had inadvertently drawn too close to a dangerous animal. Buried instinct urged her to get away from him, quickly.

He's so alien, so ... different from anyone else I've ever encountered. And that unknown quantity made him perilous.

And yet ... another part of her felt a distinct kinship with him, as impossible as that would have seemed to her only two days ago. Hesitantly, uncertain whether her words would spark his volatile temper, she said, "I know how you must feel."

He glared at her, as if to say that she most certainly did not.

Ignoring the look, she forged ahead, determined to have her say. "I don't exactly fit in very well, you know. I stumbled into being steward by pure luck. As far as I know, I'm the only woman with such a position anywhere in Jenel. Even worse, I do sword training with Auglar's Sworn. Most people find it disgraceful. I've been accused of trying to be a man instead of a woman too many times to count. You saw how that barmaid in Hyytr looked at me because I was wearing breeks."

Yozerf returned her stare with one equally determined. "But she wouldn't have refused to serve you."

"Perhaps not," but part of that would have been because she didn't want to anger the men by throwing their whore out! she snapped back. "I'm just saying that there aren't many women out there with swords or a head for numbers, and it hasn't been easy for me."

He gave her a mocking bow from his saddle. "But, my lady*n'ykar*, you chose this course. You have power, prestige," tell me what you have suffered for it!"

Her eyes narrowed sharply. For an instant Yozerf looked taken aback, as if realizing suddenly that he had said something wrong.

"Fine," she said coldly. "No one in the world has suffered but you. Everything I ever wanted has just been handed to me on a silver serving-dish. No one struggles but you, no one hurts but you."

For an instant, the mask of impassivity disappeared utterly from his face, to be replaced by an expression of intense passion. Soul-deep rage, grief, bitterness, and pain flashed across his features. He stared at her, half-frenzied, as if he would deny it all.

Then the moment was gone. Yozerf's face smoothed out into emotionless marble once again. "I see," he said, voice thick with icy hauteur. "And I suppose you are a compassionate saint." He bowed once again: angry, bitter, and scornful.

Suchen stiffened at the note of contempt in his voice. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at him furiously. "You sit there, and you feel sorry for yourself, and you think no one likes you because you're an Aclyte. But that isn't it. No one likes you because you wield your arrogance like a cudgel. You hate everything, and the instant anyone displays even the slightest compassion for anyone else, you attack them with your mockery. You're so involved in your own self-pity that you can't stand the thought that anyone might ever prove you wrong by actually liking you."

"Well, congratulations. You're safe from me, because I can't wait until you're gone."

And with that, she clapped her heels to the flanks of her steed and galloped away down the road.

* * * *

The rest of the day passed in frigid silence. Suchen did her best to ignore her companion, save when absolutely necessary, and he seemed glad to do the same in his turn. *Be happy, Yozerf,* she thought. *You've gotten your way.*

They made camp shortly before sundown. The wind whistled a lonely dirge through the branches overhead. Silver-edged clouds scudded fitfully across the swollen face of the moon. The small fire Suchen built seemed to burn unnaturally bright in the empty darkness of the forest.

Careful not to meet the unnerving gaze of Yozerf's gray eyes, Suchen set about chewing her evening's rations of dried meat and rock-hard bread. There was little flavor to the food, but at least it hadn't yet grown moldy.

Yozerf ate little, as if he had fewer rations to spare than she did. The firelight reflected off his bone-white skin and found gold highlights in his long mass of blood-hued hair. He chewed and swallowed quickly, his burning gaze darting about as if he feared some unknown assailant might snatch the food from his lips. There was a half-starved look about him, Suchen thought, not only in the leanness of his black-clad body, but in the wild hunger which lit his eyes.

A starving animal is dangerous ... what about a starving Aclyte? She wondered uneasily. And yet something about his fey look called to her, like a half-remembered song. Abruptly, she remembered the feelings of formless longing that had haunted her soul for so long, as if there was something of that same wildness in her, struggling to be free....

I must be more tired than I thought, she reflected, packing the rest of her rations away in the panniers.

Dinner over, she glanced uneasily across the fire, wondering what her strange companion might say or do next. It seemed too much to hope that he would quietly retire, especially given his admitted predilection for night roaming.

And indeed, she saw, he had turned his back to her and was rummaging through his own packs. Finding what he sought, he moved back over to the fire, pointedly ignoring her presence. Firelight glinted dully off leather polished smooth by long handling. The familiar crackle of stiff binding came to her ears. One of Yozerf's long, white hands moved reverently over cream-colored parchment, as if he meant to soak the meaning from the words written there through touch alone.

"You can read?" she asked, startled out of her self-imposed silence.

His eyes moved to her face, reflecting the light in that eerie way of theirs, until they were reduced to a pair of burning, green orbs. His mouth quirked sharply down, small creases springing up to either side. "Don't be ridiculous. Most people don't have tutors to gift them with knowledge."

Suchen stiffened, stung by the venom in his words. He stared back at her, as if daring her to respond. The orange glow of the flames touched his sculpted features, his delicate lips, and his lean body. He was beautiful, she thought distractedly "beautiful as an untamed eagle, whose talons would savage anyone who dared try to take it.

Anger drained away, replaced by a strange feeling of sorrow. Nothing she ever said would breach the barriers he held between himself and the world. This eagle would remain forever in the sky, not even consenting to draw closer to the dull earth below.

Why do I even care? Why do I allow him to make me so angry and then keep trying to talk to him, even when he obviously doesn't want to have anything to do with me?

To Hel with it.

"You're right," she said quietly. Her voice was low, steady, and a little sad. "We don't have anything in common. The lives we've led have been too different. There's no reason for us to even speak

to one another, except when necessary. I won't bother you any more."

She turned away, reaching for her blankets. If he was going to stay up, he might as well sit the first watch. It would give him time to revel in his aloneness.

"It has pictures," he said.

Startled, she swiveled about on the ball of one foot. "What?"

He tilted the book a little in his hand, so that the firelight picked out a motley of green, blue, and red ink. "Pictures," he repeated, but without that edge of impatient scorn she had grown used to. "I found it last spring. I stumbled on a burned caravan up near the borders of Lord Fellrant's lands. The brigands had killed or carried off everyone, but they had somehow managed to miss the book. I had intended to sell it, but some of the pictures were so lovely, I couldn't bear to part with it." He sighed ruefully. "Hardly the most practical of things to be lugging about the countryside, I suppose."

Suchen stared at him, amazed at the length of his speech. *What kind of person carries around a book he can't even read?* she wondered, bemused.

The same kind of person who acts as if he can't stand my company one moment and is being perfectly civil the next.

Uncertain what to make of his sudden change of heart, she considered her next words carefully. "I ... I could teach you to read, if you'd like."

He stared at her a moment, as if weighing her words against some unknown criteria in his mind. Then he bowed his head gracefully. "I ... think I would like that."

Still hesitant, Suchen rose and went to sit by him, feeling as if she approached an animal without knowing whether or not it would bite. As she sank cross-legged on the leaf-strewn ground, he inclined the book so that she could see it better.

"What kind of creature do you think that is?" he asked, pointing to one of the illustrations.

The beast looked very much like one of the great mountain cats found in Shalai, except that its coat was yellow, and a thick ruff of brown fur covered its neck. Scanning the pages "written in a neat hand that probably meant a monk or professional scribe had copied the text" Suchen picked out the pertinent line. "It says it's something called a 'lion.'" She put her finger beneath the word to show him.

"Lion," he repeated slowly. He cocked his head a little, hair cascading loosely over the shoulder nearest her. A faintly sweet scent, like that of clean fur, drifted from the silky locks. "Do you think such a creature might exist somewhere?"

She smiled despite herself, her own curiosity piqued by his. "I don't know. Maybe somewhere." She paused a moment, glancing at him from the corner of her eye, unsure whether she should tempt fate by asking. "Yozerf ... why? I thought you didn't want to have anything to do with any of us, let alone me."

His canted eyes slid about, and for a moment there was the darkness of self-doubt in their silvery depths. Then he gave her a feral smile, displaying small, sharp teeth. "Perhaps you give up too easily," he suggested.

She smiled back. "Perhaps. Or perhaps not. I'd trade all the sestarii in Auglar's coffers for a glimpse into your thoughts. You're unpredictable, and that makes you dangerous."

So why am I not afraid of you?

* * * *

It took them two more days of steady riding to reach the city of Rhiaht.

They went cautiously during that time, constantly alert for any signs of pursuit. But either no more attackers had been sent after them for the time being, or they had targeted Buudi's group instead. That possibility, Yozerf guessed, troubled Suchen more than she cared to admit. Not only did she have to bear natural concern for her friends, but she also seemed deeply worried about what would happen should the Council retake Trethya.

And well she should be, he thought grimly. Without our noble companion, everything is lost. All of Auglar's proof of a conspiracy will be gone, and the Queen of Jenel will be wed to the Emperor of Argannon.

Not that it mattered to *him*, of course. So far as he was concerned, Hel could take Rozah and all of Jenel. *And* the treacherous Emperor of Argannon as well, for that matter. Both kingdoms had betrayed his ancestors—surely they deserved one another.

But Suchen seemed to care, and that made it, at least a little bit, his business.

Stupid, stupid, stupid fool, he thought angrily. He knew all too well the insanity of trusting in others, the madness of dropping one's guard enough to allow a space where treacherous friendship might seep in. She invoked his admiration, yes—but also his rage, with her self-righteous certainties. The only wise course of action would have been to allow her to sever all ties with him except for the most basic.

And yet, when the chance had come ... he had passed it by. It was as if his tongue had a life of its own, completely at odds with his mind. While his brain looked on in horrified fascination, his mouth blithely made peace between them.

Gods, I'm practically begging her to knife me in the back. Why didn't I take the opportunity I created? What's wrong with me?

Still, having given in to the deluded instinct that urged him to trust her, to learn more about her, there seemed little point in holding back now. So during the two days of their journey, he made a conscious effort to behave the way he imagined normal companions might. He responded to her comments conversationally, he asked questions about her life at Kellsjard, and he pointed out features of the landscape that he thought might interest her. It appalled him to realize how little about the forest world she really knew.

Sometimes, he wondered if she was equally appalled by his ignorance of ordinary concourse. Did his attempts to behave like a friend ring hollow to her? Did she wonder what had happened to him, that he was so utterly removed from what others would consider normal life?

If she was, she didn't say. And he didn't have the courage to ask.

So there came an exchange of sorts. At night, she taught him the shapes of the Keld alphabet and helped him to puzzle out some of the words in the first pages of his book. By day, he went out of his way to show her the tiny birds, hidden animals, and delicate plants she would have ridden past without ever seeing.

And so it was with dread that he regarded the approach to Rhiaht. One reason was that he simply hated any large city. They were all far too reminiscent of Segg, as if it had merely been an extreme exaggeration

of traits to be found anywhere in Jenel. The other was that it was at least possible they would stumble into whatever remained of the Sworn. One blunder into the shaky beginnings of a friendship was more than he could cope with—what would he do if there were any more?

It was mid-morning by the time the gates of Rhiat loomed up before them. Tall walls of multi-colored stone, quarried from nearby hills, reached imposingly towards the cloud-studded sky. Gates wrought from enormous iron slabs warded the southern entrance to the city. Elaborate tracteries, depicting humans, animals, and plants, covered them in complex patterns. Beyond the open gates, the warm red-tiled roofs of homes and businesses could be glimpsed.

Yozerf's nostrils flared involuntarily, although he wished he could shut out the stench of the city. Too many humans were crowded into one place, and the odor of garbage, sewage, and smoke hung like a pall in the air. The short hairs on the nape of his neck stood up, and he had to fight off the urge to turn tail and slink away.

A long line stretched from the main gate, where customs officials demanded the business and inspected the wares of everyone entering the city. Chickens clucked nosily from wicker cages. Goats and sheep bleated and shuffled nervously in their herds. Beggars wandered to and fro among the crowd, cups held out in supplication. Occasionally, a merchant's wife or mistress would part the colorful curtains which enclosed the front of a covered wain, her jewels and brocades a bright spot amid the drab grays and browns of animal hides and peasant clothing.

The perfume of herbs and incense drifted from some of the mighty merchant wains, mixing with the stench of sweat, dust, and animal dung. Yozerf pulled his hood far over his face and tried not to breathe too deeply.

At length the line inched forwards, until they were standing just before the open gates. Two bored-looking guards eyed them insolently. —What by Hel have we here?— one of them demanded, eyes scanning Suchen's thin body in surprise. —Are you a man or a woman?"

Yozerf eyed the man in distaste and wondered if it would be a good day, and Suchen would ask him to kill the offender.

Suchen stared levelly at the guard, sunlight sparking like fire off her golden hair. Her fierce sapphire eyes held his for a moment, until he glanced aside.

"We've come to meet some friends in the city," she said crisply. "We won't be staying long."

Uncertain what to make of her, the guard glanced instead at Yozerf. His blunt, human face relaxed into a grin as he spotted more familiar quarry. —Oh, really?— he asked conversationally. Two steps brought him near to Windshade, and Yozerf felt the great horse's muscles tense slightly. The guard smelled of sweat and metal, but by the slight paunch on his belly Yozerf guessed that he seldom saw anything resembling real combat.

"What's this?" the man demanded, peering up with hostility writ clear across his face. —This animal looks far too fine to belong to an Aclyte. I think that maybe you're some kind of thieves."

Suchen's breath caught in a hiss of outrage. Yozerf, however, merely stared impassively down at the guard. Part of his mind imagined leaping from Windshade's back and joyfully tearing the man's throat out. The rest, however, considered the situation logically.

As the guard reached towards Windshade's bridle, the horse suddenly shied away. Huge teeth snapped down wickedly, and the guard yelled in pain. Cradling his injured hand to his chest, he stumbled back

and glared balefully at the charger.

Yozerf eyed the man coldly. The bite had not been severe enough to warrant revenge—he had been very clear on that point when instructing the horse to attack. It amused him that the pathetic human had no means of knowing that any instruction *had* been given in the first place.

"Windshade is a trained warhorse," he said coldly. "No one can touch him save for me."

Suchen took his cue and scowled at the guard accusingly. "Do you really think anyone could steal such a mean-tempered beast?" she demanded.

The guard glowered at them. Behind him, his companion strove to hide an amused smirk. "Get on with you, then," he muttered, gesturing towards the gate.

Once they were safely through, their backs to the guards, Yozerf permitted himself a chill little smile.

Inside, the city assaulted his delicate senses with all the brutality of a rapist. The mixed scents of perfume, alcohol, sweat, urine, food, and rotting garbage filled his nostrils, making him want to gag.

Every type of humanity seemed to press about Windshade's flanks, swirling through the crowds that clotted the small market bordering on the gate. Aristocrats dressed in rainbows of silk stepped along in dainty slippers, holding pomanders to their noses. Beside them stumbled reeking beggars. A prostitute who smelled like old sex brushed close by, and Yozerf shuddered at the familiar odor.

Vendors hawked their wares or pounded hammers, while wandering musicians strummed lutes and sang for coins. The thunder of hooves and wagon wheels provided a deeper undercurrent for high-pitched laughter, shouting, neighing, and singing.

The streets were narrow and winding, paved with uneven cobblestones. On either side stood old, dark-beamed houses, their plaster fronts painted with a myriad of competing colors. Many of them had second stories that overhung the street, turning the thoroughfare into a dark slot. The cobblestones under the horses' hooves were slimy from accumulations of dung, garbage, and waste from the shops. The gutters, which flowed down the center of the street, were filled with sewage, blood from butcheries, and rotted food. Lean dogs ran among them, nosing through the muck for some edible scraps.

Yozerf could feel his spirit shrink back, like a child afraid of a parent's blow. His features hardened into a rigid mask. His gray eyes raked the crowds like a frigid wind, looking for danger. Although several passers-by gaped openly at the strange pair, no one made any hostile moves towards them. Still, his nerves remained keyed up, like harp strings wound too tight.

The streets they passed through gradually grew less crowded. The buildings pulled back, and the nature of the shops changed. A goldsmith sang a happy song from his storefront, a tailor examined a bolt of fine cloth, and a cobbler haggled with a well-dressed woman over the price of a pair of slippers. The fresh scent of baking bread cut through the air.

Suchen swiveled about in her saddle to face him. Her golden hair had come half-undone from its braid and hung into her eyes. It gave her a fey, pleasing look. "The Dragon's Brood Inn is just up ahead. We stayed there on the journey down—Buudi and the rest might be there."

Although the hated accent of the *n'ykar* scarred her voice, he had done his best to learn to ignore it. Now he nodded stiffly in reply. Her eyes narrowed a little at his reserve, but she made no comment.

The inn was a large, two-story affair. Its whitewashed walls gleamed proudly in the sun. From above its closed door, there hung a small sign, which depicted lithe, snake-like creatures emerging from broken

eggs. Little goutts of fire blew from their snouts, and bat-like wings arched proudly. Yozerf felt a rush of bitter irony at the sight.

A smartly-dressed groom emerged from the spacious stables appended to the side of the inn. Although one brow arched slightly at the sight of them, he made no comment on either Suchen's clothing or Yozerf's race. As they drew into the hay-scented stables, Suchen let out a little gasp of relief. "There's Buudi's mount," she exclaimed, pointing. "And Gless's, Uzco's, and the rest."

Good, thought Yozerf as he handed Windshade's reins to the groom. At least now I won't have to explain to Ax how all his little pawns got killed while I was gallivanting about the countryside with Kellsjard's female steward.

The air inside the inn smelled pleasantly of good food, wood polish, and candle smoke. The common room was large and well ventilated, and furnished with clean benches and tables. Beeswax candles—unlit for now—hung in lanterns suspended from the dark ceiling beams, or stood encased in pots of red or green glass.

Yozerf approached one of the pots warily, tentatively reaching out a finger to touch the smooth surface. *Real glass, he thought in amazement. He swallowed uncomfortably, realizing that even if the innkeeper allowed him to remain on the grounds, he doubted he could pay even for a space in the loft. Well, if the Sworn want to stay here, they can damn well pay for me to stay as well.*

At that moment, boots clattered down the well-built stairs to the right. "Suchen!" shouted Gless joyfully, springing over the rail and dropping the last few feet to the floor. The two humans embraced gladly. "Thank the gods you're safe." Spring-sky eyes glanced over her shoulder. "And you," he added quickly.

Yozerf's mouth warped into an icy half-smile. "Of course."

Suchen brushed her hair from her eyes. "I might not have made it back if not for Yozerf," she said seriously.

Surprised, he turned to her, briefly met her gaze. Uncertain how to react to praise, he shrugged a little, woolen cloak sighing about his shoulders.

Gless's eyes took on a new light of respect. "Is that so? Then by all means, come and tell us what happened."

* * * *

The sun had almost set by the time Suchen finished relating their tale. The Sworn had all gathered together in the two-room suite they had rented for Trethya. The outer room would be used by whomever was set to guard her through the night, while the inner one would provide the privacy appropriate for a lady of her station. The Sworn would sleep in the common room. Uzco had been sent downstairs with enough jentarrii to pay for two more bodies on the common room floor, although Yozerf doubted he had been foolish enough to enlighten the innkeeper that one of them was an Aclyte.

The room was small, filled with the musky scent of the humans crowded inside. The bed was neatly made with clean linens, and there was a washbasin and a brazier of coals. Trethya sat quietly in the only chair, her dark eyes wide as she listened to Suchen describe the narrow escape from their pursuers. Suchen herself sat on the bed with Buudi and Peddock, while the rest of the Sworn had arranged themselves about the floor. Yozerf lurked in one corner, back to the wall and eye on the door.

"And that's about all there is to tell," Suchen concluded, leaning back on the bed so that it creaked

softly under her weight. Her blue eyes flashed briefly to Yozerf, and he guessed that she was not going to tell them about the reading lessons. It might have been out of respect for his privacy. More likely, it was out of shame that she'd had such close dealings with an Aclyte.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Trethya with a relieved smile. "Everyone was worried that"

She stopped herself suddenly, eyes flicking towards Yozerf automatically. It wasn't difficult to guess what her next words would have been.

"That I betrayed you all and killed Suchen? That I was in league with our pursuers?" he asked, voice dreadfully calm. Anger washed through his veins, twisting his gut. He wanted to stalk out the door, slam it behind him, collect Windshade, and never come back to any of them.

But Ax would hardly condone that, would he?

And Suchen? Suchen might be disappointed.

Carefully gaining control over the emotions raging through him, he forced his face to remain impassive. Only his eyes glittered with any hint of his feelings.

Trethya wilted beneath that baleful gaze. Contempt for her timidity sliced through him, and she cringed even further beneath it.

"N-No," she whispered, staring desperately at her hands. "That wasn't what I was going to say"

He drew himself up proudly, tossing his mass of blood-red hair back over his thin shoulders. "Do not lie, my lady," he growled. "It ill befits one of your station."

"Think a moment," Buudi said quietly.

Yozerf winced at the sound of yet another upper-class accent. His lip twitched slightly, as if he would snarl at the Sworn, but he held the impulse in check. *Damned nobles. Almost as bad as n'ykar, with all the power and wealth in Jenel in their hands.*

I hate you all, I swear to the gods....

Buudi's brown eyes watched him quietly, ignorant of Yozerf's black thoughts. "You are quick to anger, and maybe with reason," he went on mildly. "But we had only met you two days before" surely you wouldn't trust a stranger so easily. Then you suddenly snatch Suchen and drag her away from a fight" apparently to get her out of harm's way. Except that after the soldiers broke off their attack and we headed after Gless and Trethya, we never saw any trace of the two of you. What would you have thought in such circumstances?"

Yozerf bristled silently. *Damn him. He's just trying to put a reasonable face on things. If I had been a human, they would have had no such qualms.*

Would they?

Unwilling to admit that there might be some truth in Buudi's words, Yozerf glanced away from the Sworn's gaze in a gesture of submission. The light from the glass-paned window gleamed dully off one of the buckles studding his badly-scuffed riding boots.

"Now, however, you have proven yourself," Buudi went on, undeterred "and perhaps, in his human

blindness, not recognizing the submissive posture of gaze and head and stance. "That" along with the fact that Ax himself sent you to us" should be enough to put your mind to rest when it comes to our doubting you." He offered a friendly smile.

So easy, first among the Sworn? No" it can't be true. It harms you none at all to lie to me for the sake of peace. And it will harm me none at all to pretend I believe you.

Yozerf nodded stiffly. "If you'll excuse me," he muttered, slipping out the door and away from the pervasive stink of humans.

He had gone only partway down the corridor, headed for the stairs and the common room below, when a footstep sounded behind him. Spinning about, his sharp eyes picked out the gleam of Peddock's tawny hair in the dimness of the hall. The man reeked of distrust and anger" and fear.

"Don't think that we're fooled by you, Aclyte," Peddock called softly. His thick, bourgeoisie accent was laced with contempt. "I know how treacherous and undependable your kind are. So don't get any ideas about selling us out" I'll be watching you very carefully."

A grim smile touched Yozerf's lips. *You've no idea how I value you, Peddock. You are honest" you speak your thoughts to my face. You do not tempt, do not hold out the tantalizing lure of friendship and trust. You are the voice of sanity, to guide me through this wilderness by reminding me exactly what I am" and exactly what I can and cannot expect to have from humans.*

He bowed slightly in acknowledgement to Peddock, then turned and stalked away.

Chapter 6

Suchen propped her elbows on the table with a feeling of contentment. The common room of the inn was pleasantly warm, and good food filled her belly. A tall mug of frothy ale stood before her on the polished table. The light of lanterns and candles filled the room, painting everything with an amber glow.

Most of the Sworn had eaten dinner together in the common area, while Buudi and Trethya supped in the room above. As they would be moving on again in the morning, Suchen took the opportunity to savor the thick broth and fresh-baked bread dripping with butter. The relief her friends felt at her return had greatly lightened the mood, and they sat conversing cheerfully once the buxom barmaid had cleared the empty dishes from their table.

Now Suchen glanced idly about the room. For the most part, it was filled with a better class of patrons than the hostels they had been in recently. Well-to-do-merchants, artisans, craftsmen, and high-ranking city guards sat shoulder-to-shoulder at the tables. The air was filled with the rough sound of speech, interspersed with the clank of tankards and eating-knives.

Yozerf sat in a chair near the wide hearth, like a dark raven dropped into a flock of peafowl. Although the innkeeper had given him a few harsh looks, one or two coins dropped into the man's palm discreetly, so that Yozerf would not know he had helped matters considerably. As she watched, the Aclyte contented himself with staring broodingly into the fire, white index fingers tapping thoughtfully at his lower lip. His long hair hung in a mad tangle about his sharp-edged face, his gray eyes reflecting the firelight eerily.

Before she entirely realized what she was doing, Suchen rose and crossed the room, dragging another chair over by Yozerf's. He flicked up a curious brow as she lowered herself into it, and then looked pointedly in the direction of the Sworn. Glancing over her shoulder, Suchen saw that they had all stopped talking and were now staring at her as if she had done something odd indeed. Gless winked saucily, grinning as if he were privy to a wonderful secret.

Knowing Gless, he probably thinks that Yozerf and I were having wild orgies every night out in the woods, she thought, torn between disgust at Gless's assumptions and the acknowledgement that the thought wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"Your friends don't seem to know what to think," Yozerf commented. "Except Gless, why does he look so smug?"

"Because he's an idiot," Suchen muttered. She risked another look back at the Sworn. "Thank goodness here comes something to distract them."

That something was a group of women, all clad in such a way as to suggest that they made their living as prostitutes. It wasn't unusual for an inn and a brothel to have an agreement, Suchen knew, and these women all looked as if they belonged in so fine an establishment as the Dragon's Brood. Their shining hair was carefully-styled, their face paint not too thick. With the unerring instinct of their kind, most of the women moved straight towards either the Sworn or the members of the city guard. Only one remained behind, looking vaguely uncertain. Another turned briefly, said something to her, and then went back to smiling seductively at Gless. After a brief hesitation, the young woman shook off her uncertainty and headed straight for Yozerf and Suchen.

Her brown hair fell free about her shoulders, swaying gently as she walked. Her bodice was cut low to reveal small breasts, and her skirt had been slit high on either side to reveal tantalizing glimpses of her legs. Paint stained her eyelids lavender, her lips red as cherries. Cheap bangles chimed about her slender

ankles. Sickeningly-sweet perfume emanated from her in a wave, itching in Suchen's nose. Yozerf sneezed explosively.

"Good even, my lord," the girl said, voice low-pitched and sultry. Her eyes flickered nervously to Suchen. "My lady. 'Tis a cold night, isn't it?"

Suchen glanced over at Yozerf, wondering whether he would take the young woman up on her offer. He seemed so wary of others that it was difficult to imagine him buying company. But Suchen knew all too well how overwhelming the needs of the body could be. Perhaps, if desire was strong enough, he would.

But she hoped not.

Yozerf cocked his head to one side like a heron looking for fish in a pond. His eyes were luminescent in the dim light as he carefully studied the girl's figure and face. "You haven't done this for long, have you?" he asked bluntly.

The girl stared at him, thrown off-balance. "Iâ€”my lord?"

Yozerf made a brief gesture with one hand. "Do not worry, child." "I don't hold your inexperience against you. I only asked because I fear your friends have played a trick on you."

He glanced over to where some of the other women had clustered about the Sworn. Gless already had one in his lap, and Peddock and Uzco were exchanging smiles and flirtatious talk with two more. Dara-Don, looking deeply disappointed, reluctantly shook his head as another made her advances.

Yozerf sighed, returning his gaze to the girl. The gentleness of his voice as he spoke to her was startling. "Although many Aclytes have been forced into prostitution in order to eat, we do not use such ... *services* ourselves. Like hawks and wolves, we mate for life. While our mate lives, we take no other, and often death finds us before another lover."

Suchen stared at him, amazed. To take only one lover in one's life ... women of her former class were supposed to do so, of course, and woe to any who got caught behaving otherwise. But to do it by *choice*.... "Men as well as women?" she asked, her surprise showing clear in her voice.

Yozerf nodded gravely. "It is the way we are." He turned his attention back to the girl, wiping an errant strand of hair from his eyes. "How old are you, child?" he asked wearily. "Thirteen?"

Suchen frowned slightly at his assessment. *Surely not*" she looks at least sixteen to me.

But the girl nodded reluctantly. "Aye."

The corner of Yozerf's sculpted lips flexed down thoughtfully. One long-fingered hand reached out to touch her jaw, turning her head from side to side. "The paint helps you look a bit older," he conceded. "But it would help even more if you outlined your eyes with a soft bit of charcoal, or kohl if you can get it." He mimed putting it about his own eyes. "And a little rouge on your cheekbones, to make them look higher. That will help, I think." He smiled, very slightly. "That, and not wasting your time on Aclytes again."

The girl nodded again, obviously bewildered. "Thank you for your advice," she said hesitantly.

He shook his head sharply. "Don't thank me, human child. I've merely told you how to better do a job that will likely be the death of you." Then his eyes softened a bit. "One last thing."

One hand disappeared into the folds of his cloak, to emerge with a silver jentarrii. "Your friends

thought to have a laugh at your expense," he said with a conspiratorial smile as he dropped the coin into her palm. "Perhaps now you shall be the one laughing."

The jentarii, Suchen guessed, was at least what the girl could have commanded for a bedding. *Possibly more. And Yozerf can't afford it.*

The girl made a small curtsy and hurriedly backed away, as if afraid that Yozerf might change his mind. Within moments, she had scooted out of the common room door and disappeared into the night, jentarii clutched in her hand like some mystical talisman.

Yozerf sighed and settled back into his chair. The amber light of the fire picked out the fine lines that tugged at the corners of his mouth. His austere face was troubled, and a little crease sprang up between his crimson brows.

Suchen stared down at her callused hands, thoughts deeply confused. She had accused him of being blind to anyone's pain but his own. Now those same words lay like bitter bile at the back of her throat.

A long moment of silence unwound between them. Suchen listened to the laughter of the other whores dallying with the Sworn, the clink of ale mugs, and the clatter of cookware from the kitchen. Then Yozerf shifted his weight, black clothing rustling like soft wings against the padded chair. Unfolding himself gracefully from his seat, he reached a hand out to her. "I'm going outside for a bit, I think. You may come, if you wish."

His skin felt a little rough against her own, the pads of his palm and fingertips callused in strange patterns. But his touch was light, deft, and there was a wiry strength in his wrist and arm as he pulled her to her feet. They made their way out of the crowded common room, hardly even noticed by the boisterous drinkers.

The air outside was chill, a sharp contrast to the warmth of the fire within. The yard was ill lit, only a few flickering torches throwing any illumination into its corners. The wind smelled of the stinks of the city, but there was a pure, cold scent beneath them that bespoke the fast-coming winter. The stars blazed out their fury above, like diamonds scattered across the dark gown of night.

Yozerf moved ahead of her, his stride graceful as a dancer's. It was hard to see him with his dark clothing, but the crimson flag of his hair beckoned her on. He slipped into the stables. The building was warm with the body heat of the animals. The grooms and hands were all gathered at one end, gambling and drinking in a small room. Yozerf avoided them, slinking past the horses in their stalls. He paused briefly to murmur a word to Windshade, and the horse nickered gently.

A stout ladder led up to the hayloft. Yozerf scrambled up it, settling himself with his feet hanging down from above. After a moment, Suchen joined him.

The air smelled overpoweringly of hay and horse. Faint lamplight streamed up from below, lighting Yozerf's sharp features from beneath. He stared contemplatively into the darkness but made no move to speak.

Suchen frowned mentally. This seemed a strange place to retreat to "had he been another man, she might have suspected him of trying to lure her into a lover's tryst. *Perhaps the horses give him comfort,* she thought illogically.

There were so many things she wanted to ask him. His remarks on how many Aclytes went into whoring against their own nature, his advice to the girl in the inn....

There was a good market for beautiful young boys, she knew.

The thought sickened her, made her supper sit uneasy in her stomach. So instead she sighed and tilted back her head, watching her breath steam in the cold air. "Do you like the inn?" she asked. *Good, Suchen. Convince him you're totally inane.*

"It is ... very different from any other place I have been in," he answered after a long moment.

"We stayed here on the way to Diicus. It's very old" or at least, there's been an inn here on this spot for a long time. The name is left over from when Caden stood and traffic ran between there and southern Jenel."

Yozerf nodded absently, nothing but a shadow to her vision, outlined in the amber light filtering from below. "None of it is true, you know," he said softly.

Suchen frowned, puzzled. "None of what?"

"The inn sign, for one" dragons never hatched from eggs. But, more deeply, the story about the founding of Caden that Gless told a few nights ago. The things people outside of Caden always believed about the dragons and the Jonaglirs."

His deep voice was like velvet in the darkness. Its accent changed the name oddly, from the Jenelese pronunciation "Jon-uh-gilir" to something more like "Yawn-ah-gleer."

"Then what is the truth?"

He laced his hands together, hunching forwards so that his cloak and hair slithered about him. "Three-thousand years ago, a great tribe made up mostly of Aclytes, but also of humans, fled the growth of the Great Ice in the far North. They were homeless for a long time, for everywhere they went there were already people living there" people who fought them in order to keep what they already had."

"As with Argannon now."

She couldn't see his expression, but there was a faint smile in his tone. "Indeed. Eventually, however, they found a land bounded on all sides by great mountain ranges. The land within was rocky, wild, and high, but it was a place to live. They named it Caden, "Cade" being a word for "home" in the Aclytese dialect they spoke. "Caden" meant simply "home of the people."

"After having wandered so long, the Cadeans worried that something might happen to take their home from them. So all of their mages" and those they had were great and skilled" gathered together in the center of the kingdom, where the citadel of Cade Kwii would be built. There they worked one of the most powerful magics ever known. They took a great stone, part of the mountain itself, and infused it with magic. Then they sacrificed the man who was then their leader, Osha Jonagilir, on the stone. As his blood was given to it, so was the blood of his clan linked to it" and to the rest of Caden, from its wild mountains to its hidden glades to its shyest animals."

"That's what allowed Telmonra to curse the land, so that Jenel couldn't take it," Suchen guessed.

"Exactly," Yozerf agreed, seeming pleased. "Although I would not say that she cursed it, merely preserved it from Jenel's conquest. But there was another magic related to the stone as well. The people felt that some great protectors were needed, to keep Caden from harm. And so certain members of the clan Jonagilir volunteered to become those protectors. They gave up ... everything. Their families, their lives. What you would call their "humanity," had they been human. And, through the power of the

stone, they became the first dragons.

"And so it was that, every generation, some of the Jonaglirs were required to make that sacrifice, to use the Dragon Stone to become those mighty creatures of wind and fire, so that their land might survive."

Suchen drew in a long breath of wonder. The courage, the dedication, it would require to give up everything thus.... "That is a very heroic story."

He nodded in quiet reverence. "Aye. But in the end it was all for naught. For three thousand years, it worked ... but then Jahcgroth came. In those desperate times, beleaguered by the other Circle Kingdoms, all the Jonaglirs save for Telmonra, her young son, and a few children and pregnant women agreed to become dragons, in order to fight better. And, as Gless said, Jahcgroth tricked them all, and there was no one left with the blood—no one else who *could* be transformed."

He sighed and tilted back his head, staring up at the roof beams. "But your brother would say that it was all for the good, *n'ykar* woman."

Suchen watched him thoughtfully. "I wouldn't. Will you tell me what that word you keep using means?"

He hesitated, then shrugged. "There is no equivalent word in your tongue. Roughly, it means 'parasite.'™ In the ghetto I grew up in, however, it was meant primarily to refer to your class, merchant's daughter. Generally, it was they who came into the lower city to whore, or gamble, or sometimes to kill for the pleasure of killing. Although the palace looms over Segg, the merchants are the true powers within the city itself. It is they who make us their slaves in all but name, they who satisfy their lusts for sex or blood or danger on us."

For a long moment, Suchen stared at him. She wanted to yell at him, to accuse him of judging everyone in her former class on the basis of the actions of a few.

Although, gods know, so many are as despicable as he believes, she thought uneasily. She could remember too well some of the young men in Iddi who disappeared into the lower city at night. They took their bodyguards with them, so that anyone who attempted to dissuade them from their pleasures could be easily dealt with.

"No wonder you don't care much for me," she said finally. "But I ask you to watch me, so that I can prove to you that I'm not like those people. So you can see that you don't have to hate me."

He raised his head like a hound scenting the wind, and there was a wild look in his gray eyes. "I don't hate you, Suchen Keblava," he said softly. "Although I did try." One white hand rose, forestalling any further comment on her part. "Go back to the inn, Suchen. Go back to your friends. There's no use in old tales of a dead kingdom, and even less in the old tales of my life."

She rose, putting one booted foot on the ladder. Her sapphire eyes focused unflinchingly on his alien face. "How old were you?"

He looked at her in surprise, and then shrugged. "Eight."

"Men?"

"Of course."

She nodded, hating the knowledge. Hating that anything so ugly could ever happen to someone so wild, so proud. "I'll go in, if you want to sit alone," she said quietly. "But all my friends aren't in the

inn tonight."

* * * *

When Suchen returned to the inn, the Sworn had vanished with their women, except for Dara-Don who sat watchful downstairs. Feeling too high-strung to sleep, she walked quietly up the solidly-built staircase to the second floor and knocked softly on Trethya's door.

"Buudi, it's me," she called softly.

"Come in."

She pushed open the door tentatively. The suite consisted of two rooms: a sitting room and a bedchamber. The light of candles washed the paneling, drawing a mellow glow from the wood. A small desk stood against one wall, the remains of dinner on it. Two comfortable chairs were arranged on the reed-woven floor mat. The air smelled of food, candle smoke, lavender, and tea.

Trethya smiled wanly from one of the chairs. The travel had not been easy on her; purple shadows ringed her dark eyes, and her cheeks were hollow. Still, her black hair was bound neatly in place, and the rough tunic and peasant skirt she had acquired here in Rhiaht were clean. Suchen bowed her head slightly, once again touched by admiration for the young aristocrat. "My lady."

Buudi glanced at her from his own chair. The candlelight caught in the silver in his dark hair and emphasized the lines tracking from his eyes and mouth. "Good, I'm glad you've come," he said with a little smile. "I think it would be more appropriate if you slept the night here, rather than myself."

Suchen nodded distractedly. "Very well. Dara-Don is downstairs. The rest found themselves some wh—some ladies looking for company," she corrected herself hastily, so as not to offend Trethya's noble ears. "But I'm sure they'll be back soon. Yozerf and I went out to the stables for a while to talk. He's still there as far as I know."

Buudi frowned a little, obviously not happy with having their forces so scattered. Trethya's slender hands tightened about her delicate teacup. "Yozerf frightens me," she murmured, staring into her tea, as if to read her future in the leaves. "Not that I think he's treacherous," she added. "But ... he's just so ... so *strange*." She trailed off.

Some of Suchen's respect drained away. She struggled not to let her disappointment with Trethya show. "Yozerf is different, my lady," she replied stiffly. "But that doesn't make him something to fear."

Buudi looked at her curiously. But, before he could ask what had caused Suchen to change her opinion so, a soft knock sounded on the door. A light, female voice drifted through the heavy wood. "I've come to take yer dishes down, m'lady."

Impeccable timing, Suchen thought as she went to open the door.

A delicate young woman stood in the hall, brown hair loose about her shoulders. She smiled, revealing a missing front tooth, and bobbed a quick curtsy. "I'll just be a moment, m'lady," she murmured, slipping inside and closing the door behind her.

Suchen frowned at that—"why did the girl bother closing the door, when she would have to open it with an armload of dishes only a minute later? The action seemed rather scatter-brained for someone used to serving.

The girl, however, didn't seem to notice what she had done. Instead, she moved towards the table with a sweet smile, before coming to an abrupt stop halfway across the room.

What now? Suchen wondered. Thrusting a hand into the pouch at her belt, she fished about for an octarrii to reward the servant and hasten her from the room. "Here," she began, "now just take the crockery and—"

The girl glanced back at Suchen from over one slender shoulder. Her eyes were red as flames, the pupils pits onto a night darker than death itself.

Suchen grabbed for her sword before her mind truly registered what she had seen. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Buudi snatch Trethya's arm and jerk her back, their chairs clattering to the floor. Candlelight flickered down Suchen's blade as she launched herself—

The girl moved, so quick that her motion was but a blur to Suchen's sight. One hand struck her hard against the cheek. Suchen's head snapped back, pain flaring in her temple. Without knowing how it had happened, she found herself lying on the floor, ears ringing.

The girl grinned down at her. Only she wasn't a girl anymore. Even as Suchen watched, her simple dress ripped and split, torn asunder from within. Creamy skin took on a scarlet hue. Iron muscles writhed, sculpted and strong. Nails elongated into crimson talons, which dug into the woven mat upon the floor. Leathery wings spread and lifted from muscular shoulders, their clawed tips touching either wall and blocking the door. The sweet face melted, to be replaced by a fanged muzzle like that of a gargoyle.

The crimson eyes locked on Suchen's. Pure terror rushed through her, the like of which she had never known when facing any mortal opponent. Her muscles felt nailed into place. Bile clawed at the back of her throat. Her hands shook, and she wanted only to crawl away into a corner, to cower far away from the thing's unholy gaze....

Trethya screamed. One dainty hand snatched wildly at the teapot and flung it with all her strength at the creature. The ceramic shattered, hot liquid spilling over the crimson skin.

The monster hissed in pain, baleful eyes narrowing into slits. Snarling lowly, it moved past Suchen, intent on the one who had dared to assault it.

Trethya glared at it defiantly. "I'm not afraid of you!" she shouted, even though terror thickened her voice.

The sight of her fierce—if futile—challenge broke Suchen from her own paralysis. Swallowing hard against her fear, she rolled over, scrambled to her feet, and brought her blade down with all her strength on the thing's thick tail.

It shrieked in fury as the sword bit deep, releasing a fountain of thin blood. Spinning with amazing agility, it slashed at her with its claws, but she was already dancing back. A moment later, it snarled and writhed again as Buudi's sword found its own mark in the creature's side.

"Run, Trethya!" Buudi shouted. His dark eyes looked like holes against the pallor of his frightened face. "We'll occupy it until you can escape!"

Not needing to be told twice, Trethya scooted for the door. Hissing in anger, the creature flung itself after her, mighty wings battering furiously to block her flight. Suchen let out a wild cry and brought her sword shearing across one wing. Thin bones severed, and leathery membranes tore with a hiss. Dashing beneath a fountain of blood, Trethya wrenched open the door and disappeared through it.

With a roar of rage, the creature moved as if to follow her. Buudi interposed himself between it and the door, sword flicking towards its belly. The tip barely grazed the skin as the monster struck the blade

easily aside. Turning from the guarded doorway with a snarl, it crashed through the inner door into the bedroom. The sound of breaking wood and glass was loud in the night.

Suchen rushed after it, slipping in the blood trail from its nearly-severed wing. More blood clung sickly warm to her face and hands, and her skin tingled faintly, as if touched by acid. She stopped before the shattered window and peered out into the night.

Unable to fly with its maimed wing, the creature had dropped straight down into the courtyard. Staggering to its feet, apparently unharmed by the fall, it twisted its head about as if seeking something. *If Trethya flees outside, she'll run right into it*, Suchen realized with a sick wrench to her stomach.

Something moved in the shadowy inn yard. Startled, the creature swung its head aroundâ€”

A gray blur of fur and snapping fangs catapulted through the air, straight for the monster's throat. The gargoyle-like creature howled in fury, claws slashing viciously at the attacking wolf but unable to get good purchase in its thick fur. The wolf snarled frenziedly, teeth ripping into flesh. Thin, acidic blood spurted into the air, and the creature's legs crumpled as its throat was torn out. Leaping clear of its prey, the wolf stood stiff-legged, watching intently.

The crimson glow in the monster's eyes faded as the fires of life died away. Its flesh shriveled, dissolving into a thick, red mist. For a moment, it seemed that the mist would take on another form and rise to attack again. Then, abruptly, it lost coherence and faded into the ground.

When Suchen thought to tear her eyes from the spot and look, she saw that the wolf had vanished as thoroughly as the mist.

"What happened?" cried Buudi from behind her.

She left the window and sat down slowly on the edge of the bed. *Oh, nothing really. A serving girl turned into a horrible monster, and then a wolfâ€”in the middle of the city no lessâ€”decided it made a most attractive prey.*

"The world's gone mad," she replied mildly.

Chapter 7

Staying the rest of the night at the Dragon's Brood was out of the question. Too many people had heard the screaming and shattering glass, although so far as Suchen knew no one else had witnessed either the horrible monster that had attacked them, or the wolf that had been their savior. As the rest of the Sworn came running towards the sounds of battle, Buudi, Dara-Don, and Yozerf hastily saddled the horses, while Suchen looked after Trethya.

Unfortunately, there was no immediate escape from the city. The gates were kept closed and locked from sundown until dawn, and it was doubtful that they could invent any reasonable explanation that would convince the guards to let them through at this hour. Thus, their only alternative was to find shelter somewhere close to the gates for the rest of the fast-waning night.

Eventually, they found themselves in a rude chamber in one of the worst inns in Rhiaht. The place reeked of fish oil, mildew, and unwashed bodies. Prostitutes entertained in the rooms to either side, while river hands down the hall cursed each other over a dice game.

"So," Suchen said quietly, once they had all settled in the uncomfortable little room, "does anyone have a guess what that thing was?"

Trethya shivered and clasped her hands in the lap of her homespun skirt. Her curly black hair hung in a tousled mess about her heart-shaped face, making her look even younger than usual. The rough straw pallet crinkled beneath her legs as she shifted her weight uncomfortably. "I ... They're called Red Guard, I think. That's what the ... what my father called them."

Yozerf's eyes reflected the dim light, transforming into green coals that seemed more suited to an animal's face. "*Kk'ithii'kk*," he murmured. "That is their name in the Aclytese tongue." He transfixed Trethya with a calm stare, which caused her to shrink back a little. "They are shape-changers, yes? Creatures which can take on human form as well as the gargoyle body that you saw."

Peddock's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "How could you possibly know that, when you didn't even see it?" he demanded. "Did the Council tell you about them when they sent you to spy on us?"

Yozerf threw him a withering glare. "I know of them through tales. They are supposedly minions of Jahcgroth, bound to his service through blood sacrifice."

Trethya nodded her agreement. "They may belong to Jahcgroth. I never saw one until about a year and a half ago. I think that must have been when the Council had their first contact with Argannon, although I didn't know for sure until I heard about the plan to wed Queen Rozah to Emperor Jahcgroth.

"After that, the Red Guard were everywhere. The Council uses them as bodyguards and to stand watch over the Queen. I think that they aren't all equally powerful" there seems to be some sort of internal ranking according to might that no one understands but the Red Guard themselves. "She shrugged self-deprecatingly. "I suppose I got used to them, as much as it's possible to get used to something like that. That's why I struck back at the one in the inn."

"Instead of cowering in terror like the rest of us," Suchen put in dryly. "Give yourself some credit, my lady." She glanced briefly at Buudi. "If we ever needed further proof that the Council has allied itself with Argannon, or at least been duped by Jahcgroth, this would be it."

Buudi nodded grimly. "I imagine they were offered as a gift, but it wouldn't surprise me if Jahcgroth had other plans for them as well. After all, if the Council should eventually decide that they don't like the

way things are going ... well, it would be very convenient for him to have those monsters close at hand to silence any dissenters."

"What bothers me is this wolf creature," Peddock said. He scowled down at his scuffed boots. "It's got to be a Wolfkin—a demon, just like that Red Guard thing."

Trethya sighed unhappily, dark eyes confused. Her hands twisted and untwisted in her lap. "Maybe ... but it didn't hurt me in the wood. If it was a Wolfkin, wouldn't it have eaten me?"

"Maybe all those gifts of meat were to fatten you up," Peddock suggested dourly.

"Don't be any more stupid than you must," Yozerf snapped. "If it hadn't attacked the Red Guard, Trethya might be taken now. Or dead."

Blood suffused Peddock's plain face, and he took a threatening step forwards. "Defending Wolfkin now, are you? Maybe you don't just *look* like a demon—maybe you *are* one, in league with the Wolfkin and the Red Guard to confuse and mislead us!"

"That's enough!" Suchen exclaimed, appalled at the turn the conversation had taken. "We're all tired, and that leads to our saying things we'll regret later." She leveled a stern glare at Peddock, who responded with a betrayed expression.

The other Sworn looked uncertain and fearful. Despite Suchen's encounter with Ax and despite the fact they knew that the wolf had been guarding and feeding Trethya in the forest, this was the first direct contact they'd had with something so uncanny. The first time they had been threatened with incomprehensible magic, rather than with flesh-and-blood warriors.

At least Yozerf seems calm enough. Which isn't saying much, considering he's a part of the strangeness that seems to have suddenly beset us.

Buudi gestured vaguely to the corners of the room. "Find somewhere to lie down and go to sleep. We don't know enough to make any educated guesses about the nature of the creatures, and further discussion will only lead to argument. Two of us will stand watch, while the rest sleep. Peddock, Gless, you've both had a chance at enjoyment tonight, so you might as well be the ones to suffer now."

Peddock glowered, as if he suspected Buudi of punishing him for speaking against Yozerf.

As if in answer to Suchen's thought, the Aclyte suddenly appeared at her elbow. She started badly, taken off guard by the silence of his approach over the squeaky floorboards. He inclined his head apologetically, but she thought she caught the flash of a mocking smile as he did so.

"Steward, first among the Sworn," he murmured, gray eyes flicking to Buudi's rough-chiseled face. "May I speak to you in private?"

Buudi nodded wearily, although his expression suggested that he wished Yozerf had waited until morning. The three of them slipped out of the rented room and into the hall. Shrill laughter echoed from elsewhere in the decrepit inn, accompanied by a male voice roaring out a song favored by the boatmen who worked Jenel's rivers.

"Do you want to get to Kellsjard alive?" Yozerf asked bluntly.

"And what by Hel do you think we've been trying to do?" Suchen snapped. "Or do you imagine we've only been fighting so far in the hopes that we can die a *really* horrible death at the hands of monsters?"

Buudi put a calming hand to her shoulder. "Explain," he ordered quietly.

Yozerf leaned against the wall, his bone-white face a lighter smear amidst the shadows. The rest of his body, swathed in its black clothing, blended eerily into the darkness. "You are all warriors in your own way. I know that you all fought at the siege of Kellsjard, and I know the Sworn have faced down brigands every season since. But that never prepared you for this task that Ax, in his infinite folly, chose to delegate to you. You're used to battling against men armed with plain steel, just like yourselves. But fleeing across the whole of Jenel, hunted by unearthly creatures, with no keep or supply lines to back you up?"

Buudi nodded gravely. "You are right, Yozerf," he admitted freely. "When Ax asked us to bring Lady Trethya to Kellsjard, I never realized that it would be like this. We didn't know anyone would be hunting her. Certainly we never expected to encounter shape-changers."

The Aclyte inclined his head in a gesture of respect for Buudi's admission. His mad tangle of hair slithered softly across his shoulders, obscuring his triangular face. "I can get us to Kellsjard alive." His tone was matter-of-fact rather than boastful. "But you'll have to agree to everything I ask for. Traveling by night, avoiding any villages, cots, or hamlets. Stealing whatever we might need rather than buying it, so we won't be seen. Everything. Otherwise, we'll never live to see Kellsjard's walls."

The dark bluntness of the statement was unnerving. Buudi looked away for a moment, as if the empty shadows could give him counsel.

Yozerf sighed impatiently. "I don't care what sort of face you put on it to make it palatable to the rest of your humans, but I advise you to listen to me. Even if you don't like it."

With that, he spun in a swirl of cloak and stalked back into the room. Buudi raised a black eyebrow. "It seems the matter is settled," he said dryly.

Suchen nodded absently. "Don't worry. Yozerf won't lead us wrong."

"You trust him, then?"

She considered the question a moment, examining her own attitudes towards the half-breed. "I do," she said finally. "I don't know why he feels Ax compelled him to do this, or how. But I do believe that he's committed to seeing it through, no matter how unsavory it is to him."

Buudi nodded thoughtfully. "I see. You know him best, and I trust your judgment. We'll try crossing the Kellsmarch his way. The gods know, after tonight, I'll do anything necessary to keep us away from those monstrous Red Guard."

* * * *

They left Rhiaht the next morning at dawn, as soon as the Northern gates opened. Upon exiting the city, the travelers left behind the rolling hills and light forests of southern Jenel and entered the Kellsmarch.

The vast plains of the Kellsmarch covered roughly one-half of Jenel but represented only a fraction of its population. Few people dared to eke out a living upon the miles and miles of empty, wind-swept grasslands. The thin soil was too poor to farm successfully, rendering the land fit mostly for grazing herds of sheep and cattle.

Most large settlements clustered along the Great Trade Route, which split the Kellsmarch down the center and divided the demesnes of Lord Auglar and Lord Fellrant. The Route began in the desert lands of Undah far to the south, traveled through the length of Jenel, and forked into two branches, which went

northeast to Shalai and northwest to Maak. Three centuries ago, a third branch had run straight North to Caden, but now its paving stones were cracked by ancient trees and covered over by grass.

Normally, they would have followed the Route to Kellsjard, which lay near the Shalai branch. Yozerf, however, had other plans.

He led them away from Rhiaht, angling out across the pathless plains. Gone sepia with the onset of winter, tall grass swished about the horses' legs. An occasional scrub tree broke up the monotony of the flat grasslands, but for the most part they were lost in an unending ocean of dry stalks. The wind rolled unfettered, blowing grit into eyes, chapping exposed skin, and whipping hair into tangles.

Once he judged them far enough from the city, Yozerf called for a rest near a small copse of trees. "These will provide cover for the horses and ourselves." His gray eyes flicked over them disdainfully. "I trained Windshade to lie down at my command, to hide in shallow dells when need be. I suppose we'll have to make other plans for your animals, though."

Peddock scowled at the Aclyte. "Buudi, is this wise?" he demanded, voice raised to be heard over the constant moan of the wind. "He could be leading us into a trap."

Buudi frowned. "I've made my decision, Peddock," he growled. "And I am still first among the Sworn, am I not?"

Peddock glowered, but retreated into dour silence.

"We'll stay here until nightfall. Try to get some sleep—we'll be traveling until dawn," Yozerf went on, as if Peddock had never spoken. "Two will stand watch at all times, one near the camp, one farther out. Although the plains aren't good for hiding, being able to see someone coming from far away will work to our advantage." He dismounted and led Windshade towards the scrawny copse. "There will be no fires and no unnecessary moving about. That is all, for now."

Buudi nodded crisply. "We will do as you say."

* * * *

They traveled thus for a week across the Kellsmarch. The wide plains unraveled before them like a vast, monotonous carpet. Wind screamed unbroken over the land, stunting any trees into twisted growth.

By day, they slept and hid. By night, they rode swift but cautious. More than once, Yozerf called an abrupt halt and slithered off Windshade's back, disappearing into the inky blackness without a trace. A few times he was gone for up to an hour, other times, for only minutes. Suchen guessed that he was scouting the terrain, although what it was about one stretch of plains that alarmed him more than another, she could not tell.

For most of that time, they saw no one else. Occasionally, they spotted the distant smoke of villages or the glow from a lone herdsman's fire. Once, Yozerf—who inevitably took the farther-out position during his watches with Suchen—materialized with word that a shepherd was coming their way, and they would have to move quickly.

Suchen found it difficult for her body to adjust to the new rhythm. For the first three days, her mind was often half-fogged from weariness. When they lay down in the bright sunlight, it was hard to relax enough to sleep, but when they moved out at night, sleep was the only thing she really wanted to do. She fought her body's urgings grimly, knowing that dull wits could be lethal.

This lack of rest, combined with their isolation, served to fray tempers quickly. Peddock descended into

constant grumbling, often aiming his barbs at Yozerf, as if the Aclyte was personally responsible for everything that had befallen them. Buudi had to intervene once before a fight over rations broke out between Gless and Uzco, something that never would have happened under normal circumstances. Dara-Don abandoned his daily ritual of shaving in front of the small scrap of mirror he carried, and the scruffy beard darkening his cheeks gave him an uncharacteristically serious look. Trethya grew increasingly pale, and the drying tracks of tears often showed on her face when they arose in the evenings.

Only Yozerf appeared unaffected by the rigors of their journey. He moved across the plains with a relentless, animal grace that seemed never to succumb to weariness no matter how far they traveled in a night. Often, Suchen wondered if he didn't long to jump from Windshade's back and run ahead, flinging off the shackles of their slowness.

She continued to tutor him with his book, in the brief moments of early morning while they ate breakfast before settling in for the day. At times, he would practice forming the letters himself, scratching them into the dirt with a stick. Although the attempts were on par with the atrocious handwriting of a child, he seemed oddly determined to better them, as if striving to prove some obscure point to either himself or to her.

The Sworn took their budding friendship with varying degrees of acceptance. Gless, who was also unable to read, often peered curiously over their shoulders. Buudi, the most educated of them all, took to offering advice, and sometimes even spoke with them as they rode at night. Uzco and Dara-Don held themselves more distant, as if uncertain how to approach Yozerf.

Peddock, however, spent most of his time glowering acid at the Aclyte's back. It seemed that the closer his sister grew to the stranger in their midst, the more determined he was to uncover some failing on Yozerf's part.

* * * *

Three nights' ride from Kellsjard, the travelers made their daily camp. Dawn lightened the eastern sky and turned the west a soft gray. The gibbous moon hung low, streaks of cloud whipping across it. Frost covered the dead grass, and the breath of humans and animals alike steamed in the frigid air. The sun was rising noticeably later now, and most of the Sworn had settled into their blankets well before the first watch of the day began.

Yozerf and Suchen would take the watch together, as had become their habit over the last few days. But for now, as dawn began to lighten the sky enough for human eyes to see, they lingered at the camp, hunched over his book.

The volume had proved to be a bestiary, filled with many creatures whose existence seemed, at the least, questionable. "Leviathans of the sea that blow water through holes in the tops of their heads?" he remarked skeptically after finishing one particularly fantastic passage. "How could such a thing be?"

Suchen shook her head thoughtfully. "Perhaps they're creatures of magic, like the dragons of Caden you told me about," she suggested.

He glanced over at her idly, intending to make some reply. Instead, however, he found himself simply watching her in silence. The first light of dawn touched her golden hair with warmth. The amber glow limned her profile, lingering over her straight nose, wide lips, and strong jaw. Her eyes were dark in the dimness, azure wells in which a dropped stone would never strike bottom. The sweet, musky scent of her came to him, mixed in with the smells of leather, horse, and metal.

Feeling his gaze upon her, she glanced up curiously. Their eyes met, and Yozerf felt something constrict

about his throat and chest. Her lips parted slightly, as if she meant to speak, but no words came.

For a few moments, in the silence and the dawn, there was nothing else. Nothing save for each other, and the closeness, and the moment.

One of the horses snorted loudly, stamping a hoof. Yozerf pivoted about instinctively, one hand going to his sword's hilt. Beside him, Suchen sighed in annoyance. "That damned gelding of Dara's is after Gless's mount again," she muttered, rising to her feet with a quick movement. "I'll tie it over by Windshade" maybe it will find him more companionable."

Yozerf nodded absently. A bittersweet feeling touched his heart, which he tried to leave behind by climbing hurriedly to his feet. "Very well. I'm going to take up position a few hundred yards out."

She had already started towards the horses. "All right. I'll see you in a few hours, then."

He watched her walk away, following the movement of hips and shoulders and hair. Then, aching in body and spirit, he turned and trudged off towards the empty hours without her.

Chapter 8

It was noon when the walls of Kellsjard at last came into view. So close to the keep, Yozerf had agreed to push on through the daylight hours, although he worried what the lack of sleep might do to the humans'™ perceptions.

The day was a rainy, blustery one. Iron-gray clouds covered over sky and sun. The wind had grown icy and smelled of winter. This far North, autumn had been cut short, and soon snow would blanket the plains.

Kellsjard was built on a steep hill formed from a far-flung spur of the distant Dragon Mountains. The village surrounding the keep looked much like any other small settlement on the plains. Wattle-and-daub houses predominated, mixed in with a few sturdier stone structures. The thatched roofs had been built sharply peaked, their sides slanting down at a greater angle than Yozerf was used to seeing in the south. He guessed that the style was to keep heavy snow from settling and collapsing the structure. A pall of smoke from cook fires hung over the village, its homey scent comforting. A few animals could be heard bleating or crowing, but for the most part they had been taken inside the houses to shelter from the foul weather.

As they drew closer, Yozerf was afforded a better view of the keep itself. Although the Sworn had spoken of it with fondness, he was unprepared for its eclectic appearance. The original Kellsjard had been a blocky stone garrison situated at the pinnacle of the hill, meant to hold off attacks from Shalai in the time before the alliance of the Circle Kingdoms was formed. Over the centuries, however, the keep's lords had added onto the structure according to the style of their own times, often with little regard for the rest of the building.

The result was a chaotic jumble, as if some giant had carelessly dropped a score of different buildings on top of one another. Delicate, fluted spires stood side-by-side with square, utilitarian towers. Fanciful marble colonnades erupted from rough stone walls only to go nowhere. Tiny courtyards sprouted between wings, many of them with entrances sealed off during later building sprees. Gray slate roofs abutted pink tiles, which ran into copper plates gone green with age. To make matters worse, the keep had spilled down the steep sides of the hill, so that one could walk from the first story of the original stone fortress to the third story of a lower wing without the use of stairs.

Suchen had been riding in silence beside him. Now a happy grin cracked her wide mouth, banishing some of the shadows and hollows that exhaustion had put on her face. "So, what do you think?" she asked eagerly, pointing towards Kellsjard.

Yozerf cast a look of disbelief at the bizarre structure. "Surely no one actually lives there."

She chuckled. "If you think it seems strange from the outside, imagine what it's like trying to navigate the corridors within. The place is a veritable maze. I think half of Auglar's staff exists only to guide confused visitors back to their rooms. And it certainly doesn't make my job any easier. There are storerooms *everywhere*, and keeping track of what is in which is enough to drive me mad some days."

Her gaze went back to the structure, shining bright with excitement. Yozerf's heart lifted at the sight, despite all his attempts to keep it down where it belonged. Giving up the battle, he contented himself with watching the way her breeks shaped her legs.

They made their way slowly through the village. The Sworn chatted eagerly amongst themselves and waved cheerfully at familiar faces. Yozerf tugged his hood up as far as it would go, shadowing his features from curious stares. Trethya looked about with a mixture of trepidation and relief scrawled

across her features.

The gates to the keep were flung open, revealing a portcullis and long tunnel. Guards dressed in the blue-and-white livery of Auglar's house hailed the travelers enthusiastically. The portcullis creaked its way upward, and the clatter of their horses' hooves echoed loudly in the long tunnel.

The broad courtyard on the other side was largely deserted due to the inclement weather. The smells of smoke, middens, privies, and kennels blew on the stiff breeze. A large flock of crows flapped away, their hoarse calls ringing off the stone walls.

An enormous stable abutted the outer wall, and the travelers led their animals inside. Within, the building was warm and sealed from the wind. The smell of horses, clean straw, and saddle soap perfumed the air. Several fine-looking animals peered curiously out from their spacious stalls. Extending his perceptions slightly, Yozerf sensed that they were content with their lives here, although restless from confinement due to the rain.

The head groom greeted them cheerfully from where he was mucking out a stall, but left them to tend to their own mounts. Yozerf chose a stall near the entrance for Windshade, just in case the two of them needed to make a hasty exit, and set to currying the glossy black hide while the horse investigated the feed trough.

At least I don't have to worry about Windshade's comfort, Yozerf thought affectionately. He vaguely recalled hearing that the long-vanished Lord Auger had possessed a great passion for horses, which apparently had been passed down to his son. Which led to another worry. What if he sees Windshade and recognizes fine horseflesh and good training decides he wants him?

But Suchen wouldn't allow such a thing ... would she? Realizing that his feelings for Kellsjard's steward were not exactly objective, he pushed away the reassurance. He would simply have to be on his guard.

A faint tendril of musky, human scent came to him through the smells of horse and hay. "Greetings, Steward," he said without looking up.

"I've got to learn how you do that," Suchen muttered. A moment later, she peered around Windshade with an impish smile. "Ready?"

He nodded and stepped away with a final pat for the horse. *I'll return tomorrow, to make certain you're all right*, he thought, projecting vague reassurances. Windshade swished his tail and nickered through a mouthful of hay.

Suchen held open the stall gate for Yozerf to pass. "You'll like it here, I'm sure," she said. "It's very comfortable, and Auglar is a good host. I'll be glad to show you around, until you learn the twists and turns of the place."

"Thank you."

She hesitated, not moving from where she stood by the stall. "It's the rest of us who should thank you." Her blue eyes dropped self-consciously, then lifted again. "I don't know if we would have survived to see these walls again without your help. I ... I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for us."

He stared at her a moment, surprised and moved. It had never occurred to him that anyone might thank him for seeing his little band of humans to safety. Her words touched him deeply, and the soft timbre of her voice sent unfamiliar warmth coursing through his veins.

On impulse, he reached out and took her hand. Bending over her fingers, he brushed his lips lightly across their backs. She swallowed visibly, and there was a little tremor in her words when she spoke. "That's a salute for a noblewoman. And I'm no great Lady, Yozerf."

"You are to me."

They stared at one another silently, as if some force bound their gazes together, not permitting them to look away. Desire knotted in his groin, constricted his breath. Every detail, from the way the light sparked off her eyelashes, to the sensual fragrance of her body, seemed agonizingly clear.

Oh, gods...

At the far end of the stables, the oblivious groom began to whistle a ditty. Suchen started a little, then smiled. The spell broken, Yozerf released her hand and straightened.

What have I done?

They left the stables behind, the cold wind like a slap in the face, deadening smell and making eyes water. The Sworn were hurrying across the slick cobblestones before them, gray and brown cloaks billowing wildly in the wind.

Rather than go in through the huge, bronze-barred doors leading into the original part of the keep, they headed for a smaller side entrance in another wing. Smiling with recognition, a guard swung the plain, unadorned door open ceremoniously.

As he stepped inside the keep, Yozerf halted, barely stifling a gasp of wonder. Although this was merely a foyer—and not even at one of the main entrances—its richness and elegance surpassed anything he had ever seen. The granite walls had been plastered over and painted eggshell blue. Colorful tapestries, which depicted lords and ladies dallying in gardens and forests, covered the walls. Sumptuous carpets were scattered across the floor, turning it into a mosaic of emerald, topaz, and amethyst. Velvet-covered chairs crouched on claw-shaped feet. The air smelled of wood polish, candle smoke, lavender, and humans.

"At last!" exclaimed a strong, light voice with an aristocratic accent. "You've returned safe!"

Startled, Yozerf's head whipped about. Belatedly, he cursed himself for allowing the elegant surroundings to distract him. Only a few feet away stood a tall, slight man with a straggling mop of long, black hair. His face was thin and sensitive, his eyes a shocking shade of blue. His skin was pale, as if he didn't get outdoors too often, and his fingers were stained with ink. He smelled strongly of relief and gladness.

Although his dress appeared simple—blue tunic over a white shirt and gray breeks—Yozerf noted immediately that it was very finely-made indeed. A simple gold chain hung about his neck, its heavy links clinking as he strode through the foyer. This, then, must be Lord Auglar.

His guess was confirmed when the young man embraced Buudi warmly. The first among the Sworn let out a tired chuckle. "Believe me, my lord, you aren't nearly as glad to see us home as we are to be home! We've had Hel's own time getting here." He stepped back, beckoning Trethya forwards. "Lord Auglar of Kellsjard, this is Lady Trethya Selista."

Auglar offered a courtly bow in response to her quick curtsy. "Ah, yes, Lady Selista. I imagine that we have much to talk about."

Trethya's face was grave but determined. "Yes, my lord, we do indeed."

Auglar's piercing eyes swept the room, fixing suddenly on the only other stranger there. Yozerf stiffened slightly, automatically lowering his gaze in a gesture of non-aggression, and waited to either be dismissed as inconsequential, or to hear Auglar demand why an Aclyte had been allowed to dirty his fine carpets.

"I see we have another newcomer as well," Auglar said. His voice was curious but not hostile. Yozerf risked a surprised glance and found the lord's pale eyes fixed on him.

"This is Yozerf," Suchen said quickly, stepping over to stand by him. The light of beeswax candles turned her hair a mellow shade of gold as she looked up with a smile. "Ax sent him to us" and a good thing, too. We might not have come back otherwise."

Auglar extended a hand. Yozerf eyed it warily, and then cautiously put out his own. The young lord's clasp was firm, although his nobleman's fingers were soft and smooth.

"Then you are welcome indeed," Auglar said seriously. "We'll have a room prepared for you on the same hall as those of the Sworn, if that's agreeable to you."

Not knowing what to say, Yozerf bowed deeply. *A lord, asking me to stay under his roof in a room? Actually deigning to touch me?*

The strange happenings that had shocked Suchen and the Sworn—the wolf, the Red Guard—had fazed him not at all, because he already knew that the world was not a stable and sane place. But this ... this put him completely off. *What can he want? Yozerf wondered frantically, even as he kept his face an impassive mask. There must be some reason for him to treat me as if I were human—what could it be?*

"We haven't slept since yesterday and haven't seen a bath in even longer," Buudi said to Auglar. "However, I think we need to speak with you, even more than we need sleep."

Auglar nodded quickly, lean face going solemn. "Of course. Let's go to my study."

He led the way swiftly through the hall, the rest trailing behind. The obvious wealth of the keep left Yozerf dumb with amazement. Beeswax candles or clean-burning lamps with panes of clear glass illuminated the rooms. Candelabra chased with gold or silver stood upon delicate tables inlaid with ivory. Many of the rooms had their own fireplaces, the mantelpieces above carved with intricate bas-reliefs. Beautiful carpets covered much of the floor, while the tapestry-decorated walls were either plastered or paneled with dark wood.

They passed through several chambers done in this sumptuous style before coming unexpectedly on a spiral stair. The wide stair had risers of pink marble. Graceful angels carved from the same stone held up the banister.

They went up two floors, passing by ornate suits of armor decorating the landings. From there, they traversed a maze of interconnecting corridors, eventually finding themselves in a starkly different area of the keep.

Here the walls were plain stone, hung with old tapestries to keep some of the heat in. The attempt didn't work particularly well, Yozerf noted—his breath steamed in the frigid air with every exhalation. Their boots rang on naked stone, and only the occasional torch lit the dim hall.

Once at the end, Auglar pushed open a door that looked much like any other. The room it opened onto, however, was clearly part of his private apartments. Comfortable chairs, some of them rather worn, stood scattered about a sturdy wooden table. A large stack of books perched on the edge of the table,

accompanied by an inkpot and several quills. Soft carpets and furs covered the floor. The gentle scent of wood smoke came from the hearth that brightened and warmed the chamber. The portrait of a handsome man hung over the mantelpiece.

As they entered, a young woman rose from where she had been sitting near the hearth, reading a book. A pair of flaxen braids framed a face that tended more towards the strong than the pretty. Her blue eyes were sharp, intelligent, and matched the color of her simple gown. A belt of gold links rang softly when she moved. Her scent was markedly different from that of most human women.

"Ah, there you are!" she began in a voice tinged with a rustic accent.

Then she stopped, and her eyes narrowed sharply, her gaze going unerringly to Yozerf. Delicate nostrils flared briefly, and she seemed to straighten and stand taller. The scent of surprise and uncertainty sharpened her musk.

Yozerf directed his gaze to the carpets, hands hanging limp, making no aggressive movements. After a moment, the young woman spoke again. "I see we have an unexpected visitor."

Auglar nodded, going to stand with an arm about her shoulders. Briefly, he repeated what Suchen had said about the Aclyte in their midst. Then, with a proud smile, he added, "And, Yozerf, this is Sifya, my wife."

His wife! Does he "could he" know?

Keeping his expression absolutely neutral, Yozerf bowed deeply. "My lady," he said respectfully.

Sifya inclined her head slightly. "Be welcome here, Yozerf."

Auglar moved on to introduce Trethya to his wife. Once he had finished, they all found chairs, and Sifya moved to pour wine in the battered cups which lurked in a cabinet. Yozerf stationed himself in one corner and sipped carefully at the wine. Its sweet flavor and delicate scent held little resemblance to the so-called wine he had drunk in the few taverns which would admit Aclytes, and he had to take care not to overindulge.

Once they were all settled, Buudi launched into their tale, aided by Trethya and Suchen. As they spoke, Auglar's expression became more and more grim. When they reached the part about the Red Guard, Sifya reached over and silently took her husband's hand, her own look betraying a mixture of rage and fear. He patted her fingers absently, even though Yozerf suspected Sifya's action had been more for his comfort than for hers.

When Buudi had at last finished, Auglar rose slowly from his chair and stalked to the room's only window. The last gray light of the miserable day framed him with its cold brilliance as he stared bleakly out at the courtyard.

"So," he said finally, "everything Wren suspected is true." Ink-stained fingers rubbed tiredly at his eyes.

"I'm afraid that it is," Buudi replied quietly. His brown eyes remained on Auglar's back, as if the lord's slightest movement might indicate something of crucial importance.

Auglar nodded thoughtfully. A few strands of his mop of black hair tumbled into his eyes, and he flicked them back with a practiced move of his head. "One of the things that troubles me the most is your encounter with the Red Guard," he said finally. "I don't want to have to face an army of mortal men" but if it comes to that, it's something we have all done before. But against magical creatures ...

unless Ax returns to help us, I wonder whether we can hope to prevail."

Suchen leaned forwards in her chair, her slight form tense. "What about Jiara?" she suggested. "Perhaps she can help."

"Perhaps," Auglar allowed. "But Jiara is a healermage. I've never even seen her cast a spell which didn't have something to do with curing the sick or injured. Powerful as she is, I suspect that the narrow focus of her magic will be a hindrance."

"Then we'll have to take as many non-magical precautions as possible," Sifya replied crisply. "Lady Trethya, I have several kinfolk here at Kellsjard to winter with us. I think that one of them, a cousin by the name of Elfwyn, could serve as a handmaiden for you, if you would allow it. Not only will she be useful as such, but she knows how to fight with the dagger and short-sword, and will be at least some protection."

"If you suggest it," Trethya agreed slowly. A frown creased her delicate features. "But won't she object to, um, acting the part of a servant?"

Sifya grinned, exposing her teeth. "I'm not from a noble family, my lady. Surely you heard about the scandal last year, when one of the most prominent lords in Jenel married an unknown commoner?"

Trethya seemed to retreat at the question. "I ... that is, I never gave much heed to gossip."

Auglar cast a smile over his shoulder. "I suppose we weren't scandalous enough to rate at court, my dear," he said lightly. "Although, to hear some of my thanes talk, you would have thought the world was coming to an end."

Sifya made a rueful moue. "I thought Thane Ormond was going to die from apoplexy. He was in the midst of maneuvering his own daughter towards Auglar and wasn't at all happy when I became the Lady of Kellsjard in her stead. He's probably still convinced that I used some sort of trickery or witchcraft to ensnare Auglar."

Her husband smiled down at her. "You never needed anything but yourself to enchant me, my dear."

Trethya straightened her slight shoulders, drawing their attention to her. Dark eyes met Auglar's with open regret. "Lord Auglar ... thank you for your help. I know that I've brought a great deal of trouble on you ... but I didn't know where else to turn. And Ax said that you would be glad to help the Queen."

Auglar sighed and turned his gaze back to the window. The stance of his body radiated tension, and fear curdled his scent in Yozerf's nostrils. *And well he might be afraid.*

"I will keep you safe here, Trethya, I promise that," Auglar said at length. "But as for what I intend to do about this problem you have dropped in my lap ... I have to think on it."

Disappointment crumpled Trethya's features, but she nodded stoically. "I ... I understand."

"I hope so. Consider this from my position. If I make any hostile moves against the Council, Jenel's entire army will be at my doorstep. Other than Lord Wren, I don't know that I have *any* other potential allies among the lords" and if I try to face the rest of the kingdom alone, Kellsjard will surely fall and a lord loyal to the Council will be put in my place. Also, I could face rebellion from within. I have three thanes wintering here at Kellsjard."

Sifya rolled her eyes. "Including Ormond."

"If I tell them that I'm plotting treason, I might not survive to see the armies march on me in the spring." Auglar smiled fleetingly, a spare grin that held no mirth. "To say that I am in a difficult position would be to put things mildly."

Trethya's shoulders slumped. Several of the Sworn looked anxious, as if they had expected Auglar to immediately mount an army and race to Nava Nar to overthrow the Council.

Yozerf aimed a scornful glare at them. *Idealistic fools. No wonder Ax sent me to watch over them.* "At last, a human who speaks sensibly," he remarked.

Sifya let out a short bark of laughter. "That's the first time I've ever heard those particular words used to describe my husband," she said with a ferine grin.

Auglar smiled thinly. "I haven't decided yet. If I can think of some way other than warfare, I won't hesitate to pursue it." His thin shoulders slumped. "I saw rebellion once, Lady Trethya. My father disappeared rather unexpectedly in the great eastern forests. He had a passion for hunting, you see, and thought that such untouched woods would be a prime place to find game. I think he may even have had some idea of expanding Kellsjard's influence into them, perhaps settling them to an extent." He gestured to the portrait above the mantel. "He was, if nothing else, an ambitious man.

"The lessons learned during the rebellion taught me to be cautious. While I consider, I think it wise to keep a careful eye out for those Red Guard creatures—and for anyone else sent here by the Council. Which means watching everyone coming into Kellsjard from now on very carefully. You may have lost your pursuers temporarily on the Kellsmarch, but if anyone had reason to suspect the identity of my Sworn, they'll be on our doorstep before long."

Suchen sighed and rubbed her eyes. "So much for our safe haven for Trethya."

"There is no such thing as safety," Yozerf said. He glanced briefly at Trethya, shared a look of understanding. "Not for the two of us. And now, not for you."

And to think you never realized before now that Ax was asking you to be swallowed up by the shadows we have lived in our whole lives...

Several of the Sworn paled. Peddock glared but could make no contradictory reply. Suchen absently brushed back a lock of golden hair that had come loose from her braid. "No," she agreed. "But it's too late now."

* * * *

The interview with Auglar ended soon afterwards. Elfwyn took charge of Trethya, leading the young noblewoman away to the private quarters prepared for her so that she could bathe and dress in a manner more appropriate to her station. While Auglar and Sifya remained behind to confer together, the Sworn, Suchen, and Yozerf quit the study to search for their dinner.

The great hall of Kellsjard was enormous, occupying most of the original fortress. Rough-hewn walls of dark gray stone reared up to several times the height of a man. Huge beams, blackened with age, supported a roof of slate tiles. Giant tapestries hung across the walls, interspersed with ancient weapons and musical instruments. Three enormous tables filled the upper half of the room, arranged to form a rough U. The middle table stood upon a raised dais, undoubtedly reserved for the lord's family and important guests. A long fire pit ran down the center of the hall, between the lower tables. The air smelled thickly of smoke, ash, cold stone, dust, and food.

As the travelers entered the crowded, noisy confines of the hall, a glad shout rang out over the clatter of

tableware and the buzz of conversation. Curious, Yozerf craned his head to see the man making his way towards them.

He was perhaps twenty-seven years of age, his blandly handsome face retaining a sort of boyish softness that made him look even younger. His blonde hair was cut severely short, and he wore a rakish velvet cap. Green eyes gleamed warmly over a welcoming smile. Fine woolen hosen clad his legs, disappearing into suede boots dyed a delicate shade of purple. A velvet doublet covered a body going slightly paunchy from too much good food. The belt at his waist was finely-tooled leather, hung with a bejeweled dagger that seemed the only weapon about him. The scent of patchouli obscured his human musk and made Yozerf want to sneeze.

"Suchen!â€• the man cried gladly, his voice stained by a bourgeoisie accent. â€œThey told me you had come back!"

Suchen's blue eyes went wide with surprise. For an instant, she seemed about to step away from the man and flee from the room. â€œS-Staafon?â€• she gasped in surprise.

"Of course.â€• He beamed as he drew up to her. â€œSurely you got my last letter, when I said I'd be staying the winter here? I was so worried when I found you gone!"

"I-I did,â€• she stammered uncertainly. She cast a wild look over her shoulder in Yozerf's direction, and then turned back to Staafon. â€œGet your letter, that is. Things have been so hectic, Iâ€• I suppose I forgot how much time has passed."

Staafon smiled brilliantly, revealing a mouth full of white, even teeth. â€œOf course,â€• he agreed reassuringly. â€œI understand completely, my love."

And so saying, he put his arms about her and drew her in for a kiss.

Yozerf felt all the blood drain from his heart. For a moment, his mind refused to comprehend what his eyes told him was true.

But he had never been one for denial.

Suchen broke off the kiss, taking a quick step back. â€œIâ€• I'm glad to see you, Staaf,â€• she said with a pallid smile. â€œWe came to get some dinner, before seeking our beds. It's been a very long journey."

Staafon nodded, smiling at them all. One arm found its way about Suchen's slender waist, holding her securely to his side. â€œI'm sure you're very weary. You can join me at table, and then I'll accompany you to your quarters, to ... help you unpack.â€• He offered her a sly look. Gless guffawed loudly.

Jealousy poured through Yozerf's veins like acid. A growl clawed madly at the back of his throat, seeking to escape. His vision narrowed down into a long tunnel, with Staafon framed at the end, his soft throat exposed.

No!

He watched as the Sworn enthusiastically greeted Staafon. Suchen managed to slip away from her lover's side in the happy chaos. She turned to stare back at Yozerf, and there was something in her eyes that tore at his defenses. He looked away quickly.

"I'm sorry for being rude, Yozerf,â€• she said. â€œI should have thought to introduce you at once. Staafon Iglan, this is Yozerf Trihychl."

A look of puzzlement creased Staafon's handsome face at her pronouncement. "You found it necessary to purchase a servant, then, dearest?" he asked, confused. "I would have thought that Auglar would have let his own steward take one from the keep. And if Kellsjard is short-handed, why, I've brought a number of human servants whom I trust implicitly. There was no need for you to do this."

Bastard, bastard, bastard.

"Staafon!" Suchen gasped, horrified. Her sapphire eyes darted wildly to Yozerf's face, as if Staafon's words had shamed her as well. "Yozerf is no servant! He's our friend, and a warrior."

Staafon eyed Yozerf. "If you say so." His pleasant face lit up with another smile. "Shall we go eat?"

The Sworn seated themselves along the benches of one of the lower tables. As Staafon moved to take his seat by Suchen, she swiveled about on the hard bench and glanced up at Yozerf. One hand motioned for Gless to scoot over and make room for the Aclyte at her other side.

Yozerf would have preferred to skulk a bit apart from everyone, left alone with his thoughts and the hope that he might be able to snatch food from a plate without the humiliation of having to beg for a share of theirs. His icy eyes flicked up to the well fed Staafon, and a surge of bitterness went through his soul like a blast of winter wind. Without speaking, he eased himself onto the bench beside Suchen.

She smiled at him warmly, oblivious to his inner turmoil. "Staafon is the son of a merchant in Iddi," she confided. "We knew one another a little, when we were younger. He's come a long way since then."

Yozerf stared down at his thin fingers, acutely aware of the bones pressing against his skin, of the haunted look periodic starvation had given him. "I see."

Apparently realizing that he wasn't in a mood for talk, Suchen fell silent. As servants brought platters of food out for them, the Sworn began to eagerly relate the story of their journey to Staafon. Midway through, Dara-Don's plump wife, Hilwa, arrived. Their reunion consisted of loud praise for his safe return, interspersed with tearful demands as to why he had been forced to leave at all. Shortly afterwards, a pale young man with tribal scars on his cheeks slid onto the bench beside Buudi. From the greeting they gave him, Yozerf gathered that he was Auglar's personal scribe and that he bore the name of Wildstorm.

Yozerf ignored everyone, focusing his attention on the meal. None of the servants seemed to think it terribly odd that there was an Aclyte sitting at table as if he were human. Soon he had a trencher heaped with boiled and shredded beef, a bowl of vegetable stew, and a tankard of the mead that the Northern Jenelese preferred over ale. It was more food than he had seen at once in a long time—indeed, he was hard-pressed to recall ever having been fed so well.

He attacked the meal like a starving thing. His eyes darted nervously about in the fear that one of the servants would suddenly run back in, denounce his presence, and whisk anything left of the meal away. It was hard to suppress the urge to growl warningly at those about him.

Gless eyed him with mock-wariness. "Try not to get too carried away—I'd hate to have you devour my arm by accident."

Yozerf glanced at the brilliant stripes of clashing colors that made up Gless's tunic. "I would never eat anything so hideous."

Gless tossed back his head and laughed aloud. One hand clapped Yozerf's shoulder, and the Aclyte had to restrain the instinctive urge to snap at it. The hand tightened suddenly, and a look of concern touched Gless's robin's-egg eyes.

"You are thin! Nothing but bones under that cloak," he exclaimed. Then he smiled suddenly. "Well, no worries" a few weeks of eating like this, and you'll be fat and lazy as the rest of us."

Yozerf gave Gless a cold look, hoping that would keep the dandy from his pathetic efforts at cheer. After a moment, the Sworn let his hand drop from Yozerf's shoulder and turned his attention to plaguing Uzco instead.

Staaфон's voice boomed out, boisterous and cheerful. "My fortunes are changing, Such." It took Yozerf a moment to realize that the last word was a reference to Suchen" a pet name such as lovers had, he supposed enviously. "I've done things recently that my father only dreamed about."

Peddock leaned in eagerly from Staaфон's other side. "Really? Tell us everything." He offered a happy smile in Suchen's direction. Yozerf reflected wryly that this was the first time he had ever seen Peddock in a good mood.

"I've made trading contacts in Segg" excellent ones, I might add," Staaфон said in a self-satisfied tone that put Yozerf's teeth on edge. "What a city! Perhaps you'd like to live there someday, Such."

Suchen glanced down at the table. "I ... I don't think so. I've heard that it isn't a very nice place."

Staaфон laughed. "Don't be foolish! Even the palace is there, for the gods' own sakes. There could be nowhere more fit for us." He smiled, showing his white, even teeth. "And if it's the expense you're worried about, then put it out of your mind. As I said, my fortunes are changing. My father worked for years to raise our profits above a middling level, refusing to turn over the caravans to a younger, quicker man. But now, all of that has changed."

"All of it."

Chapter 9

Yozerf sat on the edge of his bed and stared out the window. Rain tapped against the bubbly glass panes like the clicking claws of some beast seeking entrance. Beyond, the vista was nothing save grayness: sky, wall, and village.

It had been difficult finding his way to his room; Kellsjard was indeed a maze, just as Suchen had said. Fortunately, a helpful human servant had seen him wandering through the corridors like an aimless ghost, and had directed him here.

A part of him still expected outraged guards to show up at any moment and demand to know what he was doing. After growing up in a crumbling tenement which slept twelve to a room, and then spending the rest of his life sleeping in stables, kitchens, and beneath the moon, the chamber he found himself in was like something from a dream of heaven.

The quarters he had been given were actually a suite of two rooms. The outer was a sitting room, decorated with brocade-covered furniture, rich tapestries, and fur rugs. Two exotic wooden masks hung above an ornate marble mantelpiece. A wine carafe made of glass stood on a table with two goblets, also of glass.

The bedroom was equally comfortable. A massive bed with a down mattress took up most of the room, and an enormous wooden wardrobe swallowed much of the rest of it. The chamber shared the hearth wall with the sitting room, so that it also had a small fireplace for warmth. The air smelled heavily of wood polish, cedar, and human musk.

Flames crackled merrily in the hearth, speaking in their own archaic tongue. The smell of smoke was reassuringly familiar amidst this fantasy of riches. Beneath him, the softness of the bed beckoned his weary body, but he knew that his own troubled thoughts would never allow him rest.

Staaфон's bland, handsome face swam before his mind's vision, hearty laughter dinning in sensitive ears. The overwhelming stink of patchouli seemed to clog Yozerf's nostrils yet, covering over the language of scent the way a mask might blind the eye.

If only I could have liked the man—or at least respected him, Yozerf thought bleakly. But then, what would that have changed? Staaфон would still be handsome and wealthy, would still be able to offer Suchen all the things her heart could possibly crave. Food, security, children, a future...

And Yozerf would still be only himself.

A damning fate indeed.

It was just that ... for the first time in longer than he could remember, he'd started to wonder if someone else could share his blankets without making him want to scream, or cry, or die inside.

The truth was, he'd lived his life like a gods-be-damned priest, so focused on survival that he had lost even the habit of thinking about a mate. There had been one or two Aclytese ladies who'd shown interest over the years, but that hadn't lasted past learning that he was a sterile half-breed. He might have lied—it didn't show, not on his face. But something in him resisted that depth of dishonesty.

Before that there had only been the one attempt with Sweet Gin, the only person in the world he had ever really trusted. But that had ended in humiliation for him and tearful anger for her. And before that was nothing but the street and selling his body to anyone who'd give him the promise of money, or drink, or

drugs, or food.

So many years spent just struggling to survive, so many years in a bleak wasteland of night. Fighting, killing, running, even the smallest gestures of compassion furtive lest another see and take them for weakness. He was tired of it, tired down to the roots of his soul. He wanted to rest, to stop fighting, and to stop being alone. But the years ahead stretched out as empty as all the ones behind.

There was no reason for Suchen to suffer even a fraction of that. Staafon could make certain she never would. While Yozerf could only drag her down into darkness with him.

How long Yozerf sat there in silence, he did not know. The sun lowered further to the horizon, until only the bloody light of its setting remained to illuminate the sky. A few late-roving birds warbled outside, searching the middens for food. Grateful for something to distract him from his own thoughts, Yozerf went to the massive wardrobe and rummaged through the flat pack he had tossed inside. Drawing out a crust of hardened bread, which was all that remained of his meager rations, he went to the window. The glass panes were on a hinge, and he opened them. After shredding the bread into crumbs, he made a small pile on the sill, out of the wind.

There. At least the crows, sparrows, and finches he had seen hopping about the yard and the middens would have a little extra to eat. They would need it with this early cold.

Even as he watched, a small bird with scarlet plumage landed on the sill. It cocked a suspicious eye at the crumbs, as if expecting them to fly away like so many tiny insects. When they remained in place, it cautiously began to peck at them.

As he watched the bird, Yozerf felt some of his own problems grow distant. A faint smile tugged at his lips, lightening the harsh angles of his face into something gentle.

A furtive knock sounded on the outer door. The bird started and fled back into the sky. The soft look vanishing from his face, Yozerf hastily closed the panes once again. One hand on his sword's hilt, he strode back through the suite and opened the door.

An Aclytese woman stood outside, her eyes properly downcast. Her brown hair, pinned in a coil atop her head, shone softly in the candlelight. Her clothes were simple but well made.

"Greetings, my lord," she began, bobbing a curtsy. Her eyes half-lifted, then blinked in surprise at the sight of him.

"They" they didn't say that you are one of us," she exclaimed, startled into speaking their own tongue.

It had been many years since Yozerf had heard the Aclytese language spoken aloud. Still, it was his first tongue, and even after all this time seemed to come far more easily than the Keld. "Didn't they?" he asked, a little surprised himself. Still, it was but one more oddity "if Lord Auglar would put him into such lavish quarters, rather than banishing him to the stables or the servants' wing, who knew what else the man might do?" "My name is Yozerf Trihychl."

She stared at him in a sort of wonder, her eyes fixed on his spill of crimson hair. "You haven't dyed it," she murmured distractedly. One callused hand began to reach out, as if to touch the silky locks, then pulled back in sudden embarrassment.

A part of him wanted to laugh aloud in bitterness at the irony. Most Aclytese men dyed their hair dark brown or black in order to look more human. A man's coloring was associated with attracting a mate,

much like the brighter plumage of male birds. Although Yozerf had not intended his display as a sexual one, but rather as a gesture of defiance at the humans around him, this woman had definitely been affected by it.

And yet the human female he craved was completely insensible to such a thing.

Still, this woman's obvious attraction wouldn't last long. Only one thing was required to completely destroy any interest in him. "I am a half-breed," he said shortly, with a gesture at his hair. "Please believe that I'm not trying to attract a mate."

A faint blush spread across her cheeks, and she dropped her violet eyes once again. "I'm sorry" "I didn't mean to stare." She glanced back up, shyly. "It's just that I haven't seen"

She stopped again, a frown creasing her brow. Yozerf stared back at her, wondering if a horn had suddenly sprouted from the middle of his forehead. Her gaze fastened on his, as if it were a lodestone and she an iron filing.

Still moving with the slowness of shock, she raised one hand and pointed accusingly at him. "Your" "your eyes," she gasped softly. "Your eyes are gray."

Yozerf froze, like a hunted animal caught in lantern light. Then, moving quickly, he grabbed her thin wrist and pulled her into the suite. The door clicked firmly closed behind them, and he put his back against it. His mind raced wildly, searching for an explanation. "So they're gray? The color came from my human father," he lied desperately.

This can't be happening. Not today, not after everything else.

She shook her head, denying his words. "No Aclytes have gray eyes," she whispered flatly. She swallowed once, convulsively, the smooth, white column of her throat working hard. "My mother told me" she remembered, everyone in the Sharneth clan remembers."

His heart sank like a stone at her words. *Sharneth clan" in Caden's day, they were high lords, blood-sworn to defend the Jonaglirs and the throne.*

"Only the Jonaglirs," she went on, undeterred by the dismay on his face. "The Jonaglirs always had gray eyes, to show their pact with the Dragon Stone. It was the mark of their blood."

Her expression had gradually shifted from shock to dawning hope. Reaching out a trembling hand, she stopped just before touching him. The *need* on her face, the need to believe, touched his heart and spirit unexpectedly.

"Please," she murmured softly, voice unsteady. "Tell me the truth. Are you Jonaglir?"

Yozerf sighed. It was of no use" and what did any of it matter anymore? It had been so long since Caden had fallen that even Aclytese memory had mostly forgotten the time when they had ruled a kingdom.

"Yes," he said finally, then held up a hand to forestall any exclamation from her. "We have been hiding under other clan names for three centuries now. But, before your imagination runs away, listen to me. I am a half-breed, and thusly sterile as a mule. And my mother was made barren with my birth. I am the last of my clan. There will be no more Jonaglirs, no more descendents of Aclytese monarchs."

Her face crumpled, but she nodded her acceptance. "It is not your fault, my lord," she murmured.

The reverence in her voice startled him—surely, no one had ever spoken to him before with such respect. He watched her narrowly, dangerous as a hidden blade. “I am no lord, Sharneth,” he replied harshly. “I grew up in the muck and the mud, subject to the whims of wealthy humans. The dragons are dead, the Dragon Stone lost somewhere in Caden's wilderness. There's nothing left of the world that my ancestors ruled. I am no lord.”

She raised her eyes and gave him a look of defiance such as he had felt on his own face many times. “You are Jonaglir. And thus you *are* my lord. It is not for you to decide my allegiance—that choice is mine alone.”

He shook his head in disbelief. A part of him wanted to lash out at her for her madness. “I'm a penniless mercenary! There's nothing for you to *be* loyal to!”

She took a step back, eyes widening a little at the not-quite-sane expression on his face. But she refused to look away. “Perhaps not,” she responded levelly. “But I remember the old stories, and if they are not done yet ... then I want to see their endings.” Very formally, she bowed. “My name is Kelayna Sharneth, my lord. I was asked to tend to your needs, and so I shall. I will serve both you and Lord Auglar, as I have vowed.”

Yozerf shook his head, confused by her insistence on bowing to his blood, but unable to see any way to dissuade her short of outright violence. Attacking a female of his own species clashed with deep instincts, and he realized in frustration that he would simply have to put up with her madness.

“No one can have two lords, Kelayna,” he replied with a twisted smile that made her face pale. “But you are welcome to try.”

* * * *

Kelayna left Yozerf's chambers shortly after nightfall, with promises to return the next day with another Aclyte by the name of Sevarin. From the way she spoke of him, Yozerf suspected that, although the man was not yet her mate, there were feelings between them.

He shook his head bemusedly as Kelayna left. The day had been both strange and trying for him. Suchen's unexpected lover, his own welcome here in Kellsjard, and an Aclytese woman who wanted to swear loyalty to a house that had no more power than her own...

And it was as yet far from over.

He sighed and went to the window. Carefully opening the panes, he peered outside. He had noted the roofs with relief when he had first seen Kellsjard. With their many layers and styles, they made the perfect road for someone wishing to move about unseen. The rain had made things treacherous, of course, but he had gathered a great deal of experience climbing on roofs while living in Segg, and he was confident of his own skills and reflexes.

After reassuring himself that none of the guards patrolling the walls would spot him, he carefully squeezed out the window. His searching hands found a rain-slick gargoyle, and he quickly levered himself up by it. From there, it was but a short distance to the sloping tiles above.

Like a shadow, Yozerf slipped through the moonless night and was gone.

* * * *

Suchen spotted her door with relief. Garal had cornered her after dinner, waving stacks of papers and supply requisitions in her face and insisting that she take a look at things tonight. The gods knew her assistant was competent enough that she didn't fear him running the keep into starvation and plague, but

for some reason he seemed to have a terror of taking any action on his own. By the time they had finished, her eyes ached and her head pounded with a headache that made the letters of Garal's notes jump and dance on the page.

But now, at last, it was over, and she could find her bed. Her *own* bed, with its comfortable down mattress and its familiar pillows. She doubted that she would stay awake longer than it took her body to hit the sheets.

But, as she reached up to push the door open, the sound of footsteps hurried down the hall towards her. Glancing up, she saw the torchlight gleam off Staaфон's golden hair and rings. His face broke into a happy smile. "Ah, Suchen" thank goodness I managed to catch up with you! Please, forgive me for leaving so precipitously during dinner, but my own steed is ill, and the foreman thought I should have a look at her myself."

Suchen sighed inwardly. When Staaфон's foreman had rushed in just after dinner, calling his master away to see to the animal, Suchen had assumed that the matter would occupy Staaфон for several hours at least. Such intrusions were nothing unusual" wherever he went, Staaфон traveled with an entourage of retainers and guards, all guaranteed to interrupt at the most inconvenient of times.

Although tonight, I wish they had kept him a little longer.

Guilt went through her at that thought. "Of course" think nothing of it," she said with forced lightness.

He smiled and held out his arm. She took it automatically, as if she hadn't spent nine years away from Iddi's young blades and their gallant manners. The velvet of his doublet felt soft under her fingers, and sweet perfume wafted from him, filling her nostrils. It was an effort to turn to her door now, knowing that he would be accompanying her through it as a matter of course.

Face it, Suchen, she thought with a mental sigh. You didn't think of him once the entire time you were gone.

Her shock at seeing him here had been ridiculous. As he had pointed out, he had sent her a letter promising to come winter at Kellsjard with her. But somehow she had managed not to think about the letter or what its contents might mean" had managed to not think of Staaфон, period.

Now, he beamed down at her. One hand reached out to close the door behind them, while the other drew her reluctant body against his.

What's wrong with me? I haven't seen him in months" I should be attacking him out of frustrated desire, not wanting to get away from his touch.

Perhaps it was his comments earlier that evening. Not only the ones about Yozerf, which had filled her both with anger at Staaфон and with shame at herself for being linked with anyone who would say such things. No, every word he had spoken grated against her nerves. His endless talk of trading, of the fluctuations in currency, of his new contacts in Segg" all had struck her as trivial and boring at best, and self-aggrandizing at worst.

Why didn't I ever notice before?

Nor was he finished, apparently. "I have a surprise for you," he murmured with yet another happy smile. "Go look on the bed."

Half-dreading what his surprise might be, she did as he asked. On the bed lay a fine gown of bronze silk,

embroidered with a lace-work of gold flowers.

A surge of annoyance touched Suchenâ€™s Staaфон had come into her room without her permission or knowledgeâ€™but she put it aside as a sign of how tired she was. Going to the bed, she lifted the dress, feelings its softness against her hands. *Now where by Hel am I going to wear something like this?*

"It's beautiful,â€™ she said dutifully.

Staaфон nodded eagerly, pleasure beaming out of his face. â€™It will have to be fitted of course, but not to worryâ€™I brought a seamstress with me from Iddi. She's skilled enough that Lord Auglar himself used her services a day or two ago, while we were waiting for your return.â€™ He smiled warmly, stepping closer. â€™Would you like to try it on for me?"

Suchen stared back at him. His features were too blunt, she thought distractedly, his green eyes too small and set too close together. *But, then, he's human*, she reminded herselfâ€™and wondered why she should have so strange a thought.

"Maybe later,â€™ she hedged.

"Whatever you wish, my love.â€™ Stepping forwards, he slipped his arms about her. He smelled of patchouli and the delicate soap used to wash his velvet clothing. His lips pressed against hers, tasting of mead and apples.

Suchen pushed him away. Startled, he frowned down at her in puzzlement. â€™What's wrong, sweeting?â€™ One smooth-skinned hand began to trace the curve of her small breast.

"I'm tired, Staaф,â€™ she replied, more sharply than she had intended. A quick step back left his hand hanging on empty air. She pressed her fingers to her forehead, wishing ... she didn't know what. â€™Pleaseâ€™we've had a long journey. I would really like to rest."

He frowned slightly, and for an instant she thought she saw a flicker of suspicion in his eyes. Then it was gone, and she wondered whether exhaustion wasn't playing tricks on her senses.

"Then just relax and let me please you,â€™ he suggested with a knowing smile. â€™You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I suppose. It's just thatâ€™â€™ she stopped, unable to phrase even to herself what was wrong. Although his nearness and touch had begun to awaken the shadows of the craving she normally felt for him, it almost seemed that the response was one of habit rather than true need.

"Just what?â€™ Staaфон murmured, but not as if he really wanted an answer. His hands came to rest at her waist. â€™We haven't seen each other in too long. Surely you don't want me to think that you've lost interest?"

She looked away, staring at the candle burning slowly down on the table. No other man had ever shown any real interest in her, as Staaфон well knew. She couldn't afford to reject himâ€™a wealthy man such as himself could turn his attentions elsewhere easily enough if he thought her unwilling. Did she really want to risk spending the rest of her life without love just for the sake of a single night's sleep?

"No,â€™ she murmured woodenly. â€™I wouldn't want that."

This time, when he bent to kiss her, she did not resist.

* * * *

The wolf stood stiff-legged, his entire body taut. The wind brought him the scents of the human village and the keep on the hill: dung, sweat, and smoke. Rain beat harmlessly against his fur, unable to penetrate the thick warmth. Although the night was black, the wolf's sharp vision easily revealed the pack before him.

There were about ten of them in all. They had been waiting here, performing their duty as guardians of this place—of their territory. Their singing had drawn the wolf closer, guiding him through unfamiliar land, until he faced them at last.

One of the wolves, a big, black-furred male, growled lowly. His hackles were raised, tail erect, ears forward. His scent was one of hostility, but not of fear. He would do his best to drive the intruder away, then, and would not hesitate to fight.

The mist-gray wolf stared back at the black male. His own hackles stood up, and a growl rumbled out of his throat. He didn't want to fight—he couldn't win, not if the entire pack decided to attack—but at the same time, he could not allow himself to be driven off. He adopted a stance of active submission, lowering his tail and body, communicating with scent that he was not a threat, that he was in fact afraid of the pack.

The black male was unsatisfied. He would have the intruder on his belly, and then gone. White fangs gleamed as, snarling, he gathered himself to attack.

Without warning, another member of the pack snapped and growled at the black male. Startled, he backed away, communicating puzzlement.

It was a she-wolf who had dared thwart him. Soft gray fur covered most of her body, spotted with white on her muzzle and underbelly, and a blonde saddle across her shoulders. Although much smaller than the male, she held herself defiantly, staring him down.

The gray wolf cocked his head, seeking to untangle what had happened. The ten wolves had once all belonged to a much greater pack, but the she-wolf and two or three others had broken away and come to this place. Although she recognized the black male as a pack member, and a high-ranking one, this was *her* territory, and she was the queen wolf here.

For a moment, the wolf expected things to come to blows and gathered himself to join the she-wolf's side. Then, abruptly, the black male took on a posture of deference. The danger passed.

The she-wolf's head swung to regard the lone one once again. Golden eyes stared challengingly at him. Understanding what was required, the wolf lowered his gaze, made himself submissive.

Satisfied, the she-wolf turned and moved off into the night. The rest of her pack followed slowly, the black with one or two backward glances. Soon the gray wolf was alone on the plains once again.

Success. The she-wolf and her pack would let him stay.

Now he could continue his watch over the humans—if their own foolishness didn't kill them first.

* * * *

Suchen closed her eyes and tilted her face up towards the ceiling. Although her attempts at passion were half-hearted at best, Staafon seemed not to notice. His hands, smooth as a noble's, tugged her tunic over her head.

The slap of boots against stone came from the corridor outside. A moment later, someone pounded heavily on the door. Staafon ignored the sound, reaching for her belt.

The pounding came again. With a muffled sigh that held more than a particle of relief, Suchen shoved him away. "I have to answer it," she said, pulling her tunic back on. Staafon frowned in annoyance but made no comment.

Uzco stood on the other side of the door, scarred face white within his cloud of amber hair. "Suchen," he gasped, grabbing wildly at her wrist. "Come quickly! It's Auglar! He's been attacked!"

Chapter 10

Auglar's quarters were a maelstrom of activity. Worried-looking guards stood outside the doors, blades naked in their hands. Suchen clasped her fingers tightly about her sword hilt as she shouldered her way through the press, hard on Uzco's heels. Staafon trailed after her, his soft mouth uncharacteristically firm.

The innermost chamber was packed with people, its air warm from too many bodies. The Sworn were crowded along the walls, Trethya in their midst. Beside them waited the three thanes wintering at Kellsjard. Thane Ormond, a man who had aged neither elegantly nor well, stood farthest from the bed, a disapproving look plastered across his pinched face. Thaness Tyassar, a devastatingly beautiful woman rumored to have a penchant for muscular guardsmen, hovered worriedly near him. Thane Fremont sulked apart from them all, a white handkerchief held up before his drawn face to protect from contagion.

In the center of the room crouched an enormous bed, its curtains drawn back. Auglar stretched out upon it like a corpse laid out for the funeral. His skin had taken on a ghastly pallor, beside which his linen nightshirt looked less than white. Purple shadows bruised the flesh about his sunken eyes, and lines of tension radiated across his haggard face.

A woman stood by the bedside, one hand resting on Auglar's forehead, the other on his heart. Her eyes were tightly closed, and her brown hair spilled unbound over the shoulders of a hastily-donned robe. Suchen's spirits sank at her taut expression.

After a long, silence-filled moment, the woman relaxed slightly. Her hands dropped to her sides, and her eyes opened. "He's alive," she said curtly, her voice thick with a peasant accent. "But I can't wake him."

"And who are you?"

Suchen jumped at the soft, velvet-deep voice at her shoulder. How Yozerf had managed to appear there without anyone realizing he had entered the room, she couldn't begin to guess. Still, a feeling of relief washed over her, surprising her with its intensity. She hadn't realized how much she had come to value him, both for his sword skill and for his sharp mind. How used she had become to turning to her side and seeing the sharp plains of his alien face looking back at her.

"This is Jiara," she explained. "The healmage Auglar mentioned this afternoon."

He nodded, luminous eyes fixing on Jiara's plain face. "What has happened?" he asked without bothering with a greeting.

"Straight and to the point," I like that. Jiara wiped a hand across her brow. "I'm not certain what happened. She glanced down at the young lord's white face, deep misgiving showing in her eyes. "Only that he was attacked" by magic."

Buudi blanched. "How?" he asked sharply.

Jiara shook her head. "I don't know, for certain. I can sense a little of the enchantment used against him ... and it frightens me. Somehow a spell meant to cause death was cast upon him. Most likely it used something of Auglar himself, such as hair or fingernail clippings, to link itself to him. Apparently, Auglar realized something was happening to him. He staggered out of the room and into the corridor, where he collapsed in front of the guards. I came immediately and did what I could. I managed to alleviate the effects of the spell" which is the only reason he's alive now. Had I been absent, or even a few minutes later in coming, he would surely have died. But, without knowing more clearly what I'm fighting against, I

can't completely break the enchantment. And until I can, Auglar will remain unconscious."

Buudi frowned, the lines about his mouth and eyes etched deeply in the candlelight. "So the assassin is a mage?"

Jiara shook her head, loose brown hair rustling about her shoulders. "Not necessarily. Some magics can be activated by those without the gift, so long as the core spell itself is prepared by a mage beforehand and the caster makes no mistakes in the ritual." She spread her hands apart helplessly. "Unfortunately, my magecraft isn't strong in such areas. I'm a healer—I work through instinctive magic and the body's own resources, not through ceremony and ritual. If I saw the components used to cast the spell, I might be able to break the link between them and Auglar."

She paused grimly, green eyes dark in the dimness. "But if not ... Auglar will soon die, as surely as if the spell had struck him down tonight."

A loud commotion sounded from the outer room. Seconds later, Sifya thrust her way past Yozerf. On her heels strode a dark-haired man whom Suchen recognized as Sifya's brother, Brenwulf. With a wild sob of despair, Sifya flung herself down by Auglar, clutching frantically at his cold hands. "What's happened? Oh, gods, if only I had been here to protect him!"

Thane Ormond took a quick step forward, thin face creasing in suspicion. "Where have you been?" he demanded sharply. One hand plucked nervously at the rich ermine of his cape. "Guards were sent as soon as Lord Auglar was discovered. They said you weren't anywhere to be found."

Brenwulf shot a venomous look at Ormond. "Leave my sister alone," he snarled.

Ormond's eyes hardened. "I won't be spoken to that way by peasants," he snapped stiffly. His cold gaze fixed on Sifya, shot through with suspicion and dislike. Then he turned abruptly and left the room. The other two thanes followed close on his heels.

Buudi rose to his feet, scrubbing tiredly at his eyes. "We'll leave you to your privacy, my lady," he said softly. Sifya nodded distractedly, all her concentration on her unconscious husband.

They left the room, speaking to one another in subdued voices. "We should have been here!" Gless moaned.

Buudi shook his head. "Auglar told us all to rest tonight. He said he had made due with regular guards while we were gone and had survived the experience well enough."

"We shouldn't have listened. It was our *duty*," Uzco said grimly.

"Sifya is going to need us," Buudi reminded them. "I'll stay with her tonight. Uzco and Dara-Don will stand guard over Auglar and make certain that whoever did this doesn't have a chance to undo Jiara's work."

"But Hilwa—" Dara-Don started, then stopped.

Suchen bit her lip, feeling both helpless and useless. "Is there anything I can do?"

Buudi shook his head. "Go to sleep, Suchen. I'll let you know if we need anything."

She went, deeply subdued. Staafon took her arm, escorting her to the spiral stair that led up to the third floor where her quarters lay. The corridor was cold, and his breath steamed a little as he peered at her with concern. "Such—" he began.

She held up a forestalling hand. "Staaaf, please. I know you want to help, but I would rather just go to bed right now. Your quarters are near here, so there's no reason for you to make the trek all the way up to the third floor where I am."

He frowned. "Is it safe for you to be alone?"

Suchen nodded. "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself, remember?"

"All right," he relented. Giving her a quick kiss, he turned and strode away.

Feeling vaguely relieved, she headed for the stair. As she set her foot on the first riser, a deep, soft voice resonated from the shadows. "I hope that I'm not disturbing you, Lady Steward."

She started, putting a hand to her sword hilt. Something moved in the shadows, and the light from the guttering torch at the bottom of the stair reflected off a white face and two pale hands. "I don't know why I bother to be surprised anymore," she muttered, sending echoes flying like startled birds. "No, you aren't disturbing me."

And that was true, she realized. She had sent Staaafon away because his very presence seemed to demand things from her—and because, right now, she had nothing to give that wasn't tied up with the attack on Auglar and what it implied for herself, Trethya, and the Sworn.

"You know what this means, don't you?" she asked quietly. "The Council did this, Yozerf—and it was more than coincidence that they struck now, the first night Trethya arrived." She swallowed thickly. "There is a traitor here."

He looked away, shadow falling across his austere features. "I know." He frowned into the dark. "And I worry that we may have more troubles than that."

"What then?"

"I dislike the way Thane Ormond looked at Sifya tonight. There are currents in the air here, circles of distrust and resentment that frighten me. But perhaps I am wrong." He paused briefly, then suddenly stretched out a hand to her. "Come with me. Please," he added, softening the request. "I don't think these things are ones we should discuss here, in so open a place."

She automatically gave her hand to him and allowed him to lead her up the stair. His fingers were chilled from the cold, dank air of the keep. He kept his touch butterfly light, as if afraid she would snatch her hand away. She firmed her own grip; after a moment, his callused fingers curled about her own.

They emerged into the long hall their quarters lay upon and headed for Yozerf's door. Suchen glanced about, feeling a faint dread of spotting Staaafon waiting for her in the shadows. Her lover was absent, however, and she gratefully followed Yozerf inside the suite of rooms she had assigned him.

The hearth fire was well stoked, and someone had left a flagon of wine on the table beside it. An enigmatic smile twitched at the corners of Yozerf's lips, but he made no attempt to explain, merely poured them each a cup. Suchen accepted the wine with a murmur of thanks. Its rich flavor eased her nerves and left a pool of warmth in her belly.

Yozerf said nothing further, merely allowed her to marshal her thoughts. She went to stand near the heat of the flames, clutching her wine cup forcefully. Frustration burned through her, and she ground her teeth together in anger. "A dagger in the back, an assassin with a crossbow ... any kind of physical attack at all, I could deal with. There would have been a chance of catching the assassin at the time of the assault. A chance to battle him on his own terms. But to have Auglar struck down by this ... by foul

magic and know that there's nothing any of us can do...â€• She shook her head sharply. â€œI haven't spent nine years keeping my sword skills sharp for this!"

He looked at her curiously. â€œThen why have you?"

She paused, mulling over how much of an answer to give him. Their conversation in the loft in Rhiat came back to her forcefully. â€œI ... Did I tell you that my first lesson in the sword came from one of your people? And a woman no less. I had sneaked down to the kitchen to get food and water. Father ... Father had locked Peddock in the basement two days earlier, because he miscalculated a sum in the account books. I was scared that he was going to die without something to drink. And she was standing there, talking to one of the servants in the doorway. I think she'd just stopped by for some food herself, or perhaps some gossip, or maybe to visit a relative on the staffâ€•I never knew. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, Aclyte or human, and I understood for the first time what the poets meant when they described a woman whom men would kill for. Then I saw her sword, and I knew that she would never need anyone to do her killing for her.

"I didn't talk to her, but she must have seen ... something. Something in my face, maybe, that told her more than I would have wanted. She came in my bedroom window that nightâ€•don't ask me how by Hel she got onto the grounds after darkâ€•and asked me if I wanted to learn how to defend myself. I met her a few times, when I was able to slip away. She showed me the basics, although I realize now that I didn't know as much as I thought. But after that I never really felt completely helpless again."

Yozerf said nothing. She turned to look at him, found him staring into the fire as well. His face was expressionless, but his eyes contained all the rage in the world.

"It wasn't so bad.â€• Suchen said hastily. â€œI mean ... not for me. Peddock's value didn't rest in his face, so he got the worst of it. There wasn't a lot that Father could do to me if he wanted to arrange a good marriage someday. And Mother just sort of melted into the background. The funny thing is that he was really well liked in the community. I mean *liked*, not just because he had money. Everyone thought he had such a good sense of humor."

"Ah.â€• Yozerf's mouth quirked oddly, an expression she couldn't read.

"Anyway, I learned more of the sword the hard way, during the siege of Kellsjard. And later I made sure the Sworn would include me in their training, because I never wanted to feel like that again."

"I understand."

They lapsed into silence. Suchen cast an uneasy glance at his profile and saw that he was still watching the fire, as if it held some secret message for him. â€œI should go,â€• she said, feeling suddenly embarrassed. â€œI'm sure you didn't want to spend the evening listening to my old problems."

"No.â€• He reached out quickly, caught her sleeve. â€œI'm honored that you trusted me with your story. I wish...â€•He trailed off a moment, as if uncertain what to say. â€œI want you to know that I would never do anything to harm you or Lady Trethya."

It seemed an odd thing to say, and she wondered what had inspired it. Still, the gift of loyalty freely offered was not something to turn away from. â€œThank you."

To her surprise, he smiledâ€•not the bitter, twisted smile she had grown used to, but one that was genuine, if a little sad. â€œIt is not much. But it is all that I have to give."

"It's more than you know."

For a moment, he simply watched her, as if fascinated by something he saw in her face. The firelight brought out gold highlights in his insane mass of hair and lent a touch of unnatural color to his pale skin. His fine nostrils flared slightly, as if scenting something beyond her limited senses.

One long-fingered hand half-raised, as if he would touch her. It hung in the air between them for a timeless instant—then dropped back to his side once again. “It’s late, and tomorrow will come early for us all,” he said, turning away with sudden brusqueness. “You should leave.”

She nodded, quickly gathering her cloak into her arms. “Of course.” She paused for a moment on the doorstep. “Thank you.”

He made a negligent motion with his hand. “The wine was from Kellsjard’s cellars. There is no need to thank me.”

She smiled warmly back at him, saw an answering spark in his eyes. “That isn’t what I was referring to.”

* * * *

The next morning, a heavy pounding on her door awakened Suchen. Half befogged with sleep, she pulled on her clothes as she stumbled to the door. Expecting Staafon, she was surprised to see Peddock, his face drawn and pale.

“Bad news,” he said quietly, glancing back over his shoulder. “You’ll hear it soon enough, but I wanted to give you warning. Thane Ormond has arrested Sifya on charges of using witchcraft in a murder attempt against Auglar. They’re imprisoning her now.”

Chapter 11

"They have no right!" raged Brenwulf. "Sifya is Lady of Kellsjard, and Ormond a mere thane! Even if he did have any right to arrest her, she *loves* Auglar! She would never do what these fools are accusing her of doing!"

Suchen frowned. Although a part of her wanted to rant along with him, years of experience—aided by the fact that Sifya was apparently in no immediate danger—told her that losing control now would help no one.

Yozerf stepped away from the wall he had been lurking against, eyes narrowed and teeth exposed. "Don't be a fool. Ormond has the right for one simple reason—he has the backing of the other two thanes. The fact that three nobles of this demesne have chosen to accuse a woman who was a peasant up until a year ago is enough."

Brenwulf glared at him hotly. "What he's done isn't even legal!"

Yozerf's mouth twisted with contempt. "The strong write their own laws. To them, legality is whatever is most convenient. Ormond sees Sifya as a usurper who has reached too far above her station, and he fears that she will reach higher still with Auglar dead and her in control of Kellsjard. That is all you need to know—concerning yourself with questions of *rightness* and *legality* is a waste of time and energy. Now, for the gods' sakes, sit down and be silent!"

Brenwulf scowled at Yozerf, as if considering taking out all his anger and frustration on the one who dared challenge him. Yozerf glared back, refusing to be cowed. After a moment, Brenwulf slumped sullenly into a chair. Suchen let out a silent sigh of relief as the oppressive air lightened slightly.

In the chaos following Sifya's arrest, the Sworn had gathered to consult with Brenwulf, whose status as Sifya's brother made him Auglar's closest relative. Buudi had ordered Trethya to stay near them, perhaps fearing for her safety. Suchen had come herself to hear the news, and Yozerf had somehow attached himself to her shadow. Hilwa and Staafon had both joined them, as well—Staafon to offer his advice and help, and Hilwa to seek comfort from her husband's presence. Now they all lurked like conspirators in a tiny tower room. Although cold and smelling of mice, the room had the advantage of being seldom used, and was unapproachable save by a narrow spiral stair.

Suchen thrust her hands firmly into her sword belt in order to keep from them fidgeting and betraying her own worry. "At least Sifya isn't in the dungeon," she pointed out, hoping to soothe some of Brenwulf's fury. "She's confined to a set of quarters away from Auglar, yes, but at least they're pleasant."

Brenwulf gave her a scornful stare worthy of Yozerf. "It's still a prison," he pointed out tightly.

Yozerf shot him another penetrating glare. "Suchen was trying to point out that things could be far worse—for *all* of us."

Hilwa wrung her work-roughened hands together. Her broad, plain face twisted into a mask of unhappiness. "But what are we to do?" she wailed.

Suchen's mouth tightened into a taut line. "I know what I'll be doing. Thane Ormond has requested that I meet with him this afternoon. He claims to want to know how well Kellsjard is equipped for the winter."

"He wants to know what we have that's worth anything," Peddock exploded. "He has to be behind what happened to Auglar—he's already setting himself up to either become the next lord, or to strip Kellsjard bare before another can be appointed!"

"Or he wants to test me," Suchen said bitterly. "Wants to know if he'll have to lock up Kellsjard's steward along with its lady."

"Be careful," Yozerf murmured. "Don't give him cause to suspect you'll be trouble."

Buudi leaned forwards, causing the hard, wooden chair he sat on to creak in protest. "We don't know for certain that Thane Ormond has anything to do with the attack on Auglar. He may just be taking the opportunity he sees. I will speak to him and the other thanes and try to reason with them." His wide mouth twisted. "Unfortunately, given my disgrace, I doubt they'll choose to listen. Therefore, the only course of action open to us is to obey Sifya's last instructions to the Sworn—to find the real traitor."

Yozerf linked his long-fingered hands together. Canted gray eyes flicked from Suchen's face to Buudi's. "Did you know any of the guards who came for Sifya—any of the ones in Kellsjard's livery?"

Buudi shook his head. "They were all Ormond's."

Suchen thought she saw the direction of Yozerf's question. "It won't hurt to use our friends among the guards to find out how things lie. My guess is that there are three factions among them: those willing to follow Ormond, those loyal to Lady Sifya, and those who aren't certain what to do."

Buudi nodded. "We can find out who was on duty last night—both on the walls and in the hall Auglar's quarters are on. Perhaps one of them saw something that might help us." A spark enlivened his brown eyes now that a firm course of action was forming before him. "Hilwa, you work in the kitchens—could you possibly find out if anyone among the servants there saw or did anything suspicious last night?"

She looked doubtful. Dara-Don gave her hand a tight squeeze, and she glanced up at him. "I ... I guess I could try."

Buudi smiled warmly. "Thank you."

Yozerf frowned slightly, as if mulling over an idea. "I have ... made an acquaintance among the servants here," he said slowly. "An Aclytese woman. I could ask her to do the same amongst the chamber maids and men, and amongst the other Aclytes as well."

"Just what we need—more Aclytes," Peddock muttered.

Suchen fixed him with a cold stare. To Yozerf, she said, "Are you certain you can trust her?"

He looked away, his eyes going to the fanciful window through which gray-toned light seeped like a trickle of dirty water. "I don't trust anyone," he said finally. "But do I think she had anything to do with this? No, I do not."

"All right," she agreed. A part of her wished deeply that he had said, "*I don't trust anyone*" except for you, Suchen. She shoved the thought roughly aside.

"If I might add something," Staafon put in with deference. When Suchen turned to him, he smiled and put a warm hand over her own. "If you or the Sworn ask questions, no one is going to want to answer them. They know where your loyalty lies, I'm sure. I have my own retinue here, however, and if my caravan guards should happen to ask a few innocent questions, it might be put down to outsider

curiosity. I trust them all implicitly," he added quickly. "I picked each and every man who came here myself—their loyalty to me is beyond doubt."

Buudi nodded gravely. "Thank you for your offer, Staafon."

Suchen murmured her thanks as well. She noticed Yozerf's sleet-gray eyes fixed on the hand joined with Staafon's, and quickly drew it free. Staafon seemed not to notice, and a moment later she found herself questioning her own action. She and Staafon were lovers, after all—"why shouldn't they hold hands?"

Yozerf's impassive face gave her no answers. Instead, he fixed his gaze on Buudi, commanding attention with his intensity. "One more thing," he said. "I think that one of Sifya's kinfolk should be on guard in Auglar's quarters at all times along with one of the Sworn."

Brenwulf cast Yozerf a startled look of gratitude, as if he had been wondering how to phrase the same request. Buudi, however, frowned in puzzlement. "Why?"

Yozerf offered him a thin, bitter smile. "Why? Because they're family, of course."

* * * *

Yozerf found Kelayna industriously cleaning the rooms in one of Kellsjard's many living quarters. The furnishings were simple, and the faint smell of ink hung in the air, making him suspect that this particular room belonged to a scribe. Kelayna's soft, brown hair was tied up in a knot, and she wore a stained and mended shift. A bucket of dirty water stood by her as she scrubbed a smudge from the floor. The caustic scent of the soap nearly over-rode her own smell—slightly sweet, and less musky than a human female's.

He knocked lightly on the open door. Startled, she looked up—and an expression of gladness flooded the sharp features of her face. The look put him off his guard—he could think of almost no one else who had ever been so happy to see him. Normally, folk cursed and drew back, or at least looked uncomfortable at his appearance.

"My lord," she exclaimed breathlessly, clambering up from her kneel to bow deeply. The dress was wet over her knees, and she brushed at it self-consciously. "I heard about what happened last night. Are you safe?"

He nodded, and she sighed in relief. Then sorrow shadowed her face. "This is a terrible thing. Lord Auglar has been a good master and has treated all the Aclytes in his service well. I fear what will become of us should he die and one of the thanes take his place."

Yozerf winced mentally—he knew only too well what might become of them. The pale skin of his back and shoulders was marked by lash scars from the brief period he had spent as a stable hand for a lordly *n'ykar*. Causing the man's favorite mare to dash his brains out against a low-hanging branch had been some consolation.

For a moment, resentment stirred in him—this woman had not known such hardship. He began to tell her that she should well get used to the idea and count herself lucky that she'd had this much time to live, if not exactly in comfort, then at least in safety.

But there was something about the look on her face that halted his tongue. She watched him gravely, but with an odd certainty in her violet eyes, as if he truly *was* a lord. As if she truly expected him to be able to *do* something.

He frowned mentally, vexed at the responsibility her offer of loyalty burdened him with. What sort of

madwoman was she? Why couldn't she be reasonable like so many others he had known and reject him for his half-breed blood?

Why did her family still have to remember the old tales about his ancestors' and the old loyalties to them?

I'll regret this. I know that I will.

Just as I knew I would regret friendship with Suchen, but went ahead with it anyway.

"I need your help," he said bluntly.

She nodded quickly, seeming glad he had asked. "Anything, my lord." She hesitated, and then held up a hand. "If you will wait a moment. The friend I mentioned to you last night, Sevarin, is working near here. I would like for him to hear this as well, if you've no objections."

"Why not?" he muttered. But she had already slipped out.

The Aclytese man who returned with her was tall as all their kind, although he lacked Yozerf's stature. There was a look of bitterness and resentment chiseled across his young features. Like most Aclytese men, he had dyed his hair a deep black. His clothing was simple, the gray and brown homespun worn by anonymous servants everywhere.

He stopped abruptly upon entering the room. His restless eyes stilled, fixing on the wild, flamboyant tumble of Yozerf's crimson hair. Jealousy flared like fire, blazing all across his face for just an instant, before quickly being covered.

A mixture of anger and annoyance raked Yozerf, and he smiled icily at the young man. "Pleasing human tastes has never been an interest of mine," he said. Sevarin's face turned a deep shade of red.

Then he noticed Kelayna's expression, the way she distanced herself a little from Sevarin and stood closer to him. From her perspective, at any rate, a bit of jealousy on Sevarin's part must seem no bad thing. Cold amusement went through Yozerf at that. The mere idea that anyone could envy him anything seemed bitterly laughable.

"Well?" Kelayna asked sharply, shooting a keen glance at Sevarin. "Are you just going to stand there like a fool before our lord?"

Sevarin frowned. Then, properly chastised, he bowed quickly. "I no speak Aclytese good, lord," he said by way of explanation.

Yozerf inclined his own head, nostrils flaring. The youth smelled of fear, he realized, the scent of envy fading before it. Sevarin watched him uncertainly, his stance and body language revealing that he was far less sure than Kelayna about this whole business of fallen lords and ancient loyalties. Still, he seemed willing to take the older woman's lead.

"Then we will speak in the Keld," Yozerf replied gravely, momentarily banishing his accent for effect. "It can have its uses."

He offered Sevarin a feral smile. After a long moment, the young man with the restless eyes and resentful mouth gave back one of his own.

* * * *

Suchen stepped out onto the roof of a tower, feeling as though she had been dragged through a wringer.

The flat roof had been one of her favorite places in Kellsjard ever since she discovered it as a lookout post during the siege. The sturdy tower, made from a bluish-gray stone not native to the area, was the only relic of the particular building spree that had given rise to it. A host of small, delicate minarets butted up rudely against it, like fairy children crowded about a thick, solid soldier.

Normally, Suchen came to the tower roof to enjoy the view of the distant Dragon Mountains, which could be glimpsed from its height on fair days. Today, however, was anything but fair. As she closed the trap door behind her, the wind tore it from her grasp and slammed it shut. Cold knives of air cut through her clothing and stabbed at her exposed skin. Shivering, she drew her cloak tight about her body.

At least the cruel weather assured that no one would disturb her, she thought ruefully. No one else would be mad enough to be out here. She propped her elbows on a crenellation at the tower's edge and stared broodingly out across the plains. The village below looked like a collection of children's toys, the sheep herds beyond mere wisps of breath. The mountains were shrouded from view by cloud and distance, and she felt a vague disappointment at not seeing them.

"A lovely view, isn't it, steward?" Yozerf asked.

She glanced about, thinking that she had not heard his approach over the wind. But the roof stretched out empty before her.

"Where are you?" she called, puzzled and a little disturbed.

A dark chuckle came in answer. "Down here."

Squinting against the wind, Suchen leaned over the edge of the tower and looked down. Almost directly below her jutted a bird-faced gargoyle used to drain rainwater from the tower's flat roof. Yozerf sat straddling it, elbows resting on its horn-crowned head. His crimson hair snapped wildly in the wind, and his black clothing made him seem kin to the many ravens that perched on other roofs about Kellsjard.

"What are you doing down there?" she exclaimed, laughing at the incongruous sight.

He craned his head back, and she realized that he had been staring fixedly at the invisible mountains, as if he could somehow sense their presence. "Thinking."

"Same here." She shivered as the wind leached the warmth from her body. "This is one of my favorite places in Kellsjard. No one else comes here often. I like to sit up here, look out over the land, and consider things in silence."

A look of contrition immediately crossed his face. "Forgive me" "I didn't mean to intrude. I'll leave, if you like."

She shook her head quickly. "No, stay." She smiled down at him. "I don't mind sharing with you. It can be our secret."

"Thank you." He paused. "So what did you come here to think about, if you don't mind telling me?"

She let out a long sigh. "Everything. Nothing. I just got finished with Thane Ormond. He wanted a full accounting of all Kellsjard's resources. While I was trying to explain things to him, he kept interrupting and asking questions. Have I ever noticed anything strange about Sifya, had I heard any rumors of witchcraft? Why wasn't I at the keep when he arrived last week, and what did the Sworn have to do with it? Who is Trethya and why is Auglar interested in her?"

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that Trethya is a distant cousin of Auglar's from the south. I said that the Sworn and I had to go because her father was afraid to let her travel without a fully-armed and trustworthy escort, because he had heard how barbarous it is here in the North."

"Did he believe you?"

"I don't know. I tried to pretend to be bookish and distracted, as though I had no real idea of what goes on in Kellsjard past the numbers on my ledger. I don't know if he believed that either."

Yozerf swore softly.

"He may not really care, though. If he isn't our traitor, that is. If he's just making a power play, then all he cares about is whether or not the Sworn and I will oppose him. I tried to make him think that it didn't matter to me one way or the other, so long as the keep was stocked for the winter and all the numbers added up in the account books. But I can't imagine what will happen to the Sworn. He'll never believe that they support him."

"And what of the other thanes?"

"Buudi thinks Tyassar and Fremont are simply following Ormond's lead. Tyassar isn't too happy about things but isn't confident enough of Sifya's innocence to say anything. Or it might be that she resents Sifya a little for much the same reason Ormond does. She was a candidate for Auglar's bride, just like Ormond's daughter. And Fremont apparently has an appetite for scandal."

"Foolish sheep," Yozerf muttered with dark scorn. "Are they blind, not to see how they endanger everything?"

Suchen sighed. She had been entertaining similar thoughts herself. "They don't know that they are," she pointed out, struggling to be fair in the face of Yozerf's quick condemnation. "They don't know anything about the Council's perfidy, about Trethya" about the fact that Auglar is considering an act which may well leave *him* branded a traitor. They only know that their lord has mysteriously been attacked by magic and that his wife, a woman some of them never liked or trusted in the first place, seems unable to account for her whereabouts at the time. Suchen frowned. "Which bothers me a little as well, truth be told."

Yozerf leaned back to face her more directly. His icy eyes matched the color of the iron-gray clouds scudding across the sky behind him. A gust of wind snatched at his black cloak, unfurling it over oblivion. "I said before that I don't trust anyone," he said quietly, so that she had to strain to hear over the wind. "And, in a personal sense ... perhaps that's true. However, in this case, I will say this to you: you may trust Sifya and her kin. Of no one else be certain."

Suchen leaned farther over the crenellated wall to peer at him. "Why do you say that?"

He shook his head, silvery-gray eyes going distant. "As much as I deplore admitting this ... I am coming to believe that Ax chose me to do this for reasons other than spite. This is Sifya's home, Suchen, and Auglar her mate. These things bind her and her kin very strongly. They would all die in the defense of Kellsjard and Auglar. And of Auglar's unborn child."

Suchen's head jerked up. "What?"

"You didn't know? It seemed obvious to me."

He rose casually to his feet, his black boots perched precariously on the gargoyle's slick surface. The wind screamed around the cornices and snatched at his cloak and hair, flinging both out over the abyss that yawned between gargoyle and courtyard. Suchen's heart skipped at the sight, and her hands unconsciously clutched at the stone crenellation.

Yozerf seemed oblivious to the danger. Before she could yell at him to be careful, he gathered himself and sprang lightly. His hands caught at the edge of the roof, and he pulled himself easily to safety.

Once he had regained his feet, she glared at him. "Don't do that!"

"Why ever not?"

She bit her lip, angry that he had frightened her. "I thought you were going to fall."

His controlled expression faltered at her words. He looked away suddenly, the wind-blown stream of tangled hair hiding his sharp features from her. "Save your concern for those who deserve it," he replied roughly. Brushing past her, he headed for the trap door. "Come on. The only use we'll be to Auglar if we freeze solid on this roof will be as gargoyles. And I fear that will last only until the spring thaw."

Chapter 12

Yozerf moved quickly but silently through Kellsjard's corridors, on the way back to his rooms.

According to Suchen, the efforts of the Sworn among the guard had borne little fruit. One or two of Kellsjard's soldiery had approached them cautiously, swearing loyalty to Auglar and Sifya. But ugly rumors about an alliance between the Sworn and Sifya were beginning to circulate amongst those not so certain of their Lady's innocence.

The loud clatter of smashing crockery sounded suddenly from a nearby corridor. Startled from his reverie, Yozerf reached instinctively for his sword before his mind analyzed the sound. Realizing that it most likely came from a servant dropping her burden of dinnerware, he forced himself to relax.

But not for long.

"Stupid bitch!" shouted a male voice badly slurred with drink. "Look!" you've spilled wine all over my tabard. The crack of a hand on flesh sounded loudly, along with the sharp cry of a woman in pain.

A snarl erupted uncontrolled out of Yozerf's throat. He ran lightly down the hallway, his boots making no sound that his quarry might hope to hear. Skidding to a halt before a cross-corridor, he peered down it cautiously.

A mustached man dressed in the plum tabard of Staaфон's retainers stood halfway down the hall. The alcoholic reek of him poisoned the air, nearly overpowering all other scents. Broken crockery lay strewn across the stone floor, mixed with a puddle of spilled wine. With a muffled curse, the man raised his hand once again to strike.

The target of his wrath was none other than Kelayna. Her large eyes even wider with fear, she started to duck away, but he grabbed her long hair with one hand, forcing her head back.

Rage and the desire for vengeance crackled through Yozerf's blood like lightning. Moving in eerie silence, he leapt forwards even as Staaфон's retainer prepared to strike again. One booted foot lashed out, catching the man in the knee.

With a wild scream, the human dropped to the floor, clutching frantically at his leg. Twisting about desperately to see who had come upon him so silently, he bellowed out another curse.

"Gods-be-damned Aclyte! I'll see you hanged for this! I'll tell your master!"

"I have no master," Yozerf snarled. Taking a quick step forward, he brought his foot down hard on the man's right hand and ground it into the stone floor. A satisfying cry of anguish shattered the air.

Yozerf's hands twitched, aching to reach for dagger or sword and have it done with. Instead, he glanced over at Kelayna. "Are you all right?"

She nodded quickly. A lock of hair that had been torn loose from its bindings fell into her eyes. "Aye, my lord."

Yozerf dropped down into a crouch, bringing his face close to the pain-contorted features of Staaфон's retainer. "I'd like to kill you," he said conversationally. "And, under ordinary circumstances, I would, and give the matter no more thought. But things here are far from ordinary, and any unexplained bodies in the linen cupboards could cause further problems whose consequences I can't guess at. So I'm

going to let you go. But I suggest that you think a moment before telling your friends or your master what happened. After all, what would they think if you admitted that a lone Aclyte managed to do this to you, eh? That wouldn't make you seem like much of a man, now would it?"

He took his heel off the mustached man's hand and stood up. Face purple with rage, Kelayna's assailant staggered to his feet, gasped in pain, and hobbled away clutching at his knee. Yozerf watched him go carefully. Although he doubted that the man would report him now, bullies seldom forgot slights. But Yozerf was used to worrying about a dagger in the back and believed that it was something he could handle well enough.

Kelayna began to pick herself up, reaching for the shattered crockery. "Thank you, my lord," she said seriously, fixing him with her violet eyes. Although the smell of fear was still on her, it was growing stale already.

He shrugged, reaching to help her with the broken shards. Startled, she flung out a restraining hand. "My lord, no!"

He eyed her with bitter amusement. "Why? Because it is beneath me? I assure you, Kelayna, that very few things are. Otherwise, I wouldn't still be alive today."

She hesitated, and then nodded. "Thank you, lord. I was carrying these back to the kitchen, when that brute deliberately knocked them out of my hands. I suppose he thought it a grand joke."

Yozerf smiled thinly, but it was a dangerous smile. "Now perhaps he knows that when he jokes so, he cannot be certain who will end up laughing."

She grinned. "No." Then her look sobered. "I had meant to come to you later, lord. I've heard nothing from the other servants that sounded suspicious. The only ones who came to Lord Auglar's quarters all yesterday merely swept and changed the linens" and that was many hours before the attack."

Yozerf nodded thoughtfully. "Still, Jiara said that something of Auglar's" something of his body, such as hair" would have to be taken for the spell. Perhaps they took something from the room and gave it to the spell caster later."

"Perhaps. But, lord, they were all trusted servants, people who have been here at Kellsjard since Lord Auger ruled."

Yozerf frowned mentally" there was that word again, "trust." Trust had been used to blind eyes before, and in his mind it certainly did not rule out the servants as possible conspirators.

"I have a ... a request, lord, if you'll permit me," Kelayna said, breaking into his thoughts. "Tomorrow is Hallow Night, and we are holding our annual celebration in a deserted storehouse near here, which Lord Auglar gave to us. It would mean much to everyone if you would come. It would mean much to me."

Yozerf turned over her words as he finished piling up the broken crockery. In the south, Hallow Night celebrations were covert, held far from any humans who might disapprove and seek to stop them. The old gods had not been worshiped openly since Caden's fall, and many Aclytes faithful to them would travel for days just to participate. The idea that a human lord might actually offer them a place of safety where they could conduct their rites seemed nearly incomprehensible.

"Perhaps," he hedged. "But it's been many years since I went to a celebration of any kind" and I

attended them infrequently before that. Also I don't believe in the godsâ€”not the Aclytese ones and certainly not those worshiped by the humans. It might not be appropriate for me to come."

Kelayna watched him thoughtfully. He wondered vaguely if she had ever even heard of anyoneâ€”Aclyte or humanâ€”who openly professed an utter lack of belief in divine beings. â€œIf you do not wish itâ€”â€• she began regretfully.

"Noâ€”no.â€• It would be good to get away from Kellsjard's pervading air of gloom. To get away from humans. â€œI'll come, if you ask it."

"Thank you, lord,â€• she said with a bright smile, gathering the shards into her skirt. â€œCome to the main gate tomorrow, at the second hour after noon. One of us will be there, and will take you to prepare for the celebration."

Yozerf rose with her. â€œVery well."

* * * *

The wolf raced across the open plain, drawn by the chorus of unearthly howls sent out by the rest of the pack. Their baying cut through the cold air of night, reaching up like strands of silver wire toward the impassive moon.

The tall grass, which lashed about his shoulders, was already covered with a rime of frost. Above, the stars blazed out in the wild glory they displayed only when winter gripped the world and turned the air to glass. The smell of blood drifted on the wind, mixed with an acrid stench that set the wolf to growling. His hackles rose, and his muzzle wrinkled up to expose long, white fangs. Bursting through the tall grass into a clearing trampled down by the battle, he found himself facing the pack and their prey.

The black male immediately broke away from the pack and headed purposefully towards the interloper. The gray wolf quickly adopted a posture of active submission. After a curious sniff, the black turned away and moved restlessly towards the body in the center of the broken stalks.

The wolves had encircled the human keep ever since the night before. More wolves from the black's pack, called down from the forest to the North, had augmented their numbers. Every moment, they had scented for the Unnatural Ones, watching and waiting for an attack that they did not know for certain would come.

That uncertainty no longer existed. The gray warily encircled the scene of the fight. A cart stood off to one side, tools and stink of iron revealing that it had once belonged to a tinker. A large horse, which reassuringly smelled like a horse, stood perfectly calm in its traces, blowing out great breaths of steam.

The body in the center of the clearing was that of a gargoyle-like monster, such as the gray wolf had slain in the human city far to the south. Its wings had been torn into ragged strips by many fangs. Its claws were tipped with the blood of its attackers, and fur was caught in its massive teeth. Its throat had been torn away, leaving nothing save a bloody ruin.

Even as the gray watched, the body began to shiver, as if with returning life. Its limbs curled in on themselves, growing fainter and less substantialâ€”until, at last, all that remained was a formless mist. Then that too was gone, blown away on the winter wind.

Snarls erupted from the pack all around, but the gray ignored them. Instead, he turned his head back the way he had come. On the horizon, the keep stood upon its hill, framed boldly against the rising moon.

The wolf's human pack was threatened. He must return, and watch, and wait for the moment he would

be needed to strike. With a quick shake of his fur, he rose and loped back across the plains. Two or three others followed. They had pack mates of their own to watch out for.

* * * *

"What's wrong?" Staafon demanded, a puzzled frown on his face.

Suchen tried to smile up at her lover. They stood outside her door once again—and, once again, Staafon obviously expected to be allowed within.

The day had not been fruitful, she reflected unhappily. Not only had none of the trusted friends that the Sworn had among the guards been able to give them any hints as to the assassin's identity, but many of those "friends" had refused to even speak with them, tainted as they were by their loyalty to Sifya. Nor had Staafon's contacts among the servants or guards had any better luck, although at least his retainers had not been openly shunned.

It's up to you, Yozerf, she thought. Bring me some good news from the Aclytes, please. At least a little hope.

"I'm waiting for someone," she replied, resting her hands on the warm velvet covering his chest. "You wouldn't want him to come knocking on the door at an inopportune moment, would you?"

It sounded like a good excuse—but one that, unfortunately, brought up more questions. "Who?" Staafon demanded, blonde brows drawing together in a puzzled crease. "And why would a man be coming here, to your quarters, at this time of the night? It doesn't seem ... proper."

Suchen considered simply telling him that it was none of his business who came to her rooms, nor at what time they chose to do so. But then he would inevitably point out that being her lover made it his business. "If you have to know, Yozerf is supposed to let me know whether or not he's heard anything useful from his contacts among the Aclytes."

Staafon's suspicious frown transformed into one of concern. "I understand. But should he be meeting you here, alone in your quarters? I don't want him getting any ideas that are above his station."

Suchen felt her expression go cold. "And what ideas would those be? I can see whomever I want to, Staafon, wherever I choose" Aclytes included."

"Such, dear heart, I apologize. What say we wait for him here together?"

"I'm really too tired for company tonight, Staaf. Yozerf won't be here for long, and the instant he's gone, I'm going to sleep. Do you understand?"

His expression darkened into a cold look she had never seen before. "I understand," he replied stiffly. "I understand that you're not too busy or tired to talk to this Aclyte, but can't do the same for me."

Suchen bit her lip. "Don't be mad," she begged, touching his shoulder. "But, please, give me the space to concentrate on other things. Once the crisis has passed, I promise I'll have plenty of time for you. All right?"

He nodded, still wearing that icy expression. They kissed, and he stalked away.

Suchen sighed and rubbed tiredly at her eyes. Lifting her head, she resolutely turned to open her door.

"He only wishes to be near you," Yozerf murmured from a few paces away.

Suchen jumped, then scowled at him. "How much did you hear?"

Yozerf shrugged. His white face had closed into an impassive mask she could not even begin to read. "Enough. I'm sorry to be the cause of conflict between you."

"It isn't your fault." She shoved open her door, beckoning him in after her. "Staaaf is just used to being able to have my attention whenever he wants it."

Yozerf shrugged a second time as he followed her inside. "Perhaps. Or perhaps he only wants to feel as if he is a help to you."

Suchen snorted. "Perhaps. But right now, even you're more helpful."

Yozerf turned his head aside quickly—but not quickly enough to hide the wince of pain that momentarily distorted his features.

Feeling like an idiot, Suchen put a hand to his shoulder. His muscles felt tense as iron wires. "I'm sorry—that came out completely wrong. Forgive me."

He took a step back, pulling loose from her touch. "No matter. I spoke with Kelayna. She has nothing new for us." In brief, brisk tones he detailed all that the Aclytese woman had said.

Although put off by his brusque tone and worried that she had offended him, Suchen listened carefully. When he was done, she stared thoughtfully into the hearth. Apparently unwilling to even look at her, Yozerf watched an invisible spot in the air between them with such intense concentration that she expected a flame to spring to life from the force of his stare.

"There must be someone, somewhere, who saw something," she said finally. "But I'll be damned if I know who, if not the servants."

"I ... I'm sorry I haven't brought you anything useful," he murmured, seeming to relent suddenly. He closed his eyes briefly, a gesture of weariness that she understood all too well.

"Don't blame yourself." She sank into a chair, motioned for him to take the other.

He shook his head. "No, thank you. I need to find my own bed. And there is little need to give Staaafon any cause for suspicion." He smiled, but the look was oddly wistful. "But I had wondered ... I've been asked to join in an Aclytese festival tomorrow night. Hallow Night, it's called. You were kind enough to share your secret retreat with me earlier today ... I would like to be able to show you a little of my world in return."

She found herself deeply touched by the hesitant words, by the hopeful offer. A part of her mind wondered what Staaafon would think of that, if he objected to her spending even a short time unchaperoned with Yozerf.

It's my life, not Staaafon's.

"Of course," she said. Yozerf looked up, and for a moment she thought she saw an expression that mixed both joy and pain on his face. Then it was gone, before she could be sure. "I'd love to."

Chapter 13

It was nearing sundown the next day when Suchen went to keep her appointment with Yozerf. The night wind was rising, biting easily through her thick, woolen cloak. She had dressed for the weather in a long skirt, worn over leggings, and a heavy jerkin. Both collar and skirt-edge were fringed with wolf pelt. Gloves shielded her hands from the chill, and she walked briskly through the village in an attempt to keep warm. Despite her quick pace, it was impossible not to notice the uncharacteristic silence in the little hamlet, as if the entire village held its breath, waiting for the next event in a dire sequence.

Yozerf awaited her beside one of the small, stumpy plants that passed as trees on the plains. His scarlet hair blew on the fierce wind like a twisting flame. His voluminous black cloak was drawn closely about his thin body. Beneath its folds, he wore a calf-length kilt and his ordinary black boots. As Suchen drew near, she saw that he had painted blue geometric shapes across his white face. One triangle covered half his forehead, and a thick line bisected his nose. Another triangle followed the curve of his left cheekbone, while a third traced the hollow beneath the right one.

He had done something to his hair as well, she realized. Small, thin braids had been worked into it, seemingly at random. Raven feathers, bits of bone, and the water-polished fragments of broken shells threaded the braids. They clicked together softly as he tilted his head to study her.

"I wasn't certain you would come," he said by way of greeting.

She shrugged, and then smiled tentatively. "You asked me to. That was reason enough." One gloved hand gestured at his kilt, face, and hair. "What does it mean?"

He turned and began to walk slowly away through the long grass. Dead stems cracked beneath his boots and clutched like skeletal hands at the edge of his cloak. "Kelayna was kind enough to fashion the kilt for me. It represents the colors of my clan," he said finally. The cloth was ebon, save for a single line of silvery-gray the same shade as his eyes. "The paint is mainly decorative, with no meaning outside the fact that it is traditionally worn at religious celebrations and on battlefields. The hair adornments..." he paused for a moment, glancing absently up at the leaden sky. "Each one has meaning. They are personal, and reveal my ... mood, I suppose is one word, or intentions, to others."

Suchen studied the objects more closely. Raven feathers, shattered pieces of bone, broken shells. *Death?* She wondered uneasily. *But the death of what?*

He pointed ahead, breaking her from her thoughts. "We're there."

The rectangular bulk of an old storehouse jutted up out of the pathless sea of grass. Vines climbed over its stone walls, and the rafters at one end had been bared to the sky like the ribs of a decaying corpse. The light of a great fire within streamed out windows and the gaping doorway, bearing with it laughter and music.

As they approached, the sounds of celebration became more distinct. The music was foreign to Suchen's ear, a thudding bass of drums overlaid by the unearthly calling of flutes and stringed instruments never played by human hands. The singing ranged wildly, from high, sweet notes to rough cries and howls. The air was thick with the smell of burning wood.

They stopped at the gaping hole that had once held a door. Suchen stared inside, torn by wonder and shock at the strangeness of it all. In the center of the clean-swept stone floor burned a huge bonfire, its red light illuminating every corner of the roofless room. Its heat extended out in a wave, enough to warm the flesh so blatantly displayed. For everyone there, both male and female, was dressed only in a

brightly-colored kilt and boots.

It took Suchen only a moment to see the reason behind the display; their bodies were covered by tattoos. Each had a different pattern, intricately looping and weaving over backs, breasts, and armsâ€”in short, anywhere not likely to be exposed by the clothing they wore when among humans.

Like Yozerf, most of the men had small objects twined into their hair. The women wore their locks unbound, shades of brown and black sliding sensuously over shoulders.

Someone cried out, gesturing towards the doorway. Painted faces with sharp, alien features turned in their direction. Large, luminous eyes stared in silent judgment. An acute feeling of nervousness gripped Suchen's belly, and she realized that, for the first time, it was she who was exotic and strange.

And to many of these people, the enemy.

A young man strode suddenly from the midst of the gathering, his arm upraised, finger pointing accusingly. â€œWhat is *she* doing here?â€• he demanded angrily.

Yozerf took a step forwards. His arms spread to either side, letting his cloak drop. Like the rest of them, he wore no shirt or tunic beneath it, although he had wound strips of black cloth around both forearms, concealing the flesh beneath. Paint rather than actual tattoos covered the skin of his back. Its design was utterly different from the rest, with their repeated motifs. A dragon, done in such intricate detail that the ripples of his muscles gave it the illusion of independent life, coiled up his back. Its triangular head rested against one shoulder blade, while its tail vanished beneath the kilt. Out-spread wings covered his shoulders and upper arms, their tips nearly meeting above his heart.

"She is my guest, Sevarin,â€• he said, deep tones ringing out clearly across the crowd.

Another man spoke, this time in a tongue Suchen did not know. His words were all liquid vowels, interspersed with abrupt consonants and an odd, clicking sound unknown to the Keld. Whatever he said, it did not sit well with Yozerf. A dangerous coldness touched his eyes, and he started to make some protest.

Before he could, however, the crowd before him parted suddenly. An Aclyte, who looked to be middle-agedâ€”putting his actual years at around eighty, Suchen guessedâ€”strode through. Unlike the rest, his entire body was tattooed with the pictures of various animals, plants, and landscapes, and the geometric shapes on his face were equally permanent. Also unlike the others, save for Yozerf, his hair was not a shade of brown or black. Rather, it was a luxurious mane of dazzling turquoise, gaudily festooned with feathers and ribbons.

He held up one hand, and everyone fell silent. â€œYou have done as is your right,â€• he said to Yozerf, in a deep, rich voice that carried easily to every corner of the vast building. â€œBut as others have opposed her entrance, you must perform the ritual for a dangerous guest, to ward off bloodshed."

The young man who had first spoken glanced around uncertainly. â€œBut she doesn't know what it means. It won't guarantee anything."

Yozerf fixed him with an icy glare. â€œIf you had bothered to learn anything from your shaman, Sevarinâ€”including your native tongueâ€”you would know that I am agreeing to answer for her conduct.â€• Before Sevarin could formulate a reply, Yozerf deliberately turned his back on him.

Gray eyes gazed down on Suchen intently. â€œWill you trust me?â€• he murmured, too low for any other to hear.

Uncertain she fully understood what was happening, Suchen nodded nevertheless. Yozerf took her hand. His fingers felt cool against hers, and she noticed again the odd pattern of calluses on his skin, so different from those left behind by the sword. Extending her arm between them, he turned it wrist-up. His free hand gently shoved back her sleeve to expose the flesh beneath, fingers trailing up the soft, sensitive skin of her inner arm.

His eyes never leaving her own, he bent over her wrist, as if he meant to kiss it. His breath was warm on her skin, and she felt the slightest silken brush of a lip. Then, suddenly, he twisted his head so that one tooth lightly nicked her flesh. Though surprised, she held herself firm and showed no reaction, drawing a murmur of approval from the watching Aclytes.

Yozerf smiled his own approbation. She felt the moist, sensual caress of his tongue against the wound, licking away the single drop of blood he had drawn. Reaction to the caress thrilled through her body, surprising her so that an awkward blush heightened her cheeks.

He straightened and turned abruptly towards the assembly, one hand lifted in a gesture Suchen was unable to interpret. With a wild whoop, the music started again, and dancers flung themselves into the space before the bonfire.

"What happened?" Suchen asked, startled and relieved that the attention of the room was no longer pinned on her.

"An old ritual. The letting, and ingesting, of a small amount of blood symbolizes a link between us. Once, long ago, a similar ritual was used to swear loyalty to a lord. In this case, it means only that you are my guest and that, if you do any harm here, I am as answerable for your actions as you are. There have been times when both parties of the oath were executed for a crime committed by one." He smiled at her, real warmth in the expression. "I suspect that I have no need for such worries."

She smiled back at the compliment. They drew away from the doorway, into the light and warmth near the edge of the crowd. A keg of cider had been broached and its contents heated in a kettle above a smaller fire. Someone brought two mugs to Yozerf, who gravely passed one to her.

Suchen scanned the scene before them as she took a sip of the hot, spiced drink. Bunches of colorful fall leaves and dried grasses had been tied to the remaining ceiling beams. Streamers of bright cloth decorated the walls and floated from the dancers'™ hands. Although Yozerf had said this was a religious celebration, she saw no effigies of gods.

"What does it all mean?" she asked.

"It's very different, I suppose, from anything you've seen before." A pair of tall, thin children raced past, squealing with laughter. "The tattoos indicate the clan one is born into. That's why you see so many panthers and eagles here"™the celebrants are mainly members of the same two extended families."

"Oh." Suchen watched the crowd for a moment, picking out various totems. "Why don't you have tattoos?"

Yozerf's mouth quirked slightly. "Half-breeds are often not marked," he replied tightly. "And it's not as common a practice in Segg, anyway. Many of us there are whores, and, while some men find the tattoos appealing, most don't. It would be a foolish thing to starve because of a tattoo."

"Oh." Her mind searched for a more comfortable topic. "Who is that man with the turquoise hair? The one sitting over there with the drummers."

Yozerf glanced automatically over at the man who had spoken for Suchen earlier. "He's the local shaman. Most of the time, he stays out on the plains, far away from humans. He comes near Kellsjard only to tend to someone so sick they cannot journey to him, to exorcise ghosts from a place, or to attend the celebrations. It was he who painted my back."

"He's a talented artist." Suchen hesitated, afraid of offending. "So, um, why aren't there any pictures of your gods?"

Yozerf smiled slightly. "How could one hope to depict a goddess?" he asked. "That would be like trying to draw the entire world in a single painting" or so I understand. He took a sip of cider. "And they aren't *my* gods."

At that moment, a woman with flowing brown hair emerged from the press of dancers. With a wave of her hand, she called out exuberantly to Yozerf, beckoning him towards the celebration. He sighed and put down his mug of cider where it would not be kicked over. "That is Kelayna," he explained. "I am apparently expected to join in the dancing. I'll be back soon."

Suchen nodded, watching him move away after Kelayna. Sudden dislike constricted like a coil about her heart, and she realized that the idea of watching Yozerf dance with the beautiful Aclytese woman was rather upsetting.

Trying to distract herself, she observed the other dancers. The music pulsed and soared all around, thrumming in her blood, her bones, in the stone beneath her feet. Everywhere she looked, sweat gleamed on taut bellies, lean arms, and full breasts. Hair flowed and floated about shoulders and faces. Lips parted, and eyes squeezed shut, as if those who danced were in the grip of some unfathomable ecstasy.

Suchen felt the wild urge to join in, to lose herself in the music, to fling aside every restraint in the name of the dance. Her pulse quickened, and her own lips parted unconsciously as she looked now for one particular dancer.

He was there, framed in the red-gold light, his mass of insane hair seeming to have been taken from the same source as the bonfire. In defiance of her assumption, he danced alone, as if entranced in a world of his own. His lithe grace filled every movement with a sensuality she had never dreamed of in a man. So close to the flames, a sheen of sweat covered his body, as if his white skin had been dusted in gold. The paint did not seem to be running, however, which meant that it could most likely be removed only with soap. Suchen wondered who it was he had intended to have help him scrub the painted dragon from his back at the end of the night.

As if he had heard her thought, he turned and stared directly at her through the crowd. His wild gray gaze pulled at her with an almost physical force. Unable to restrain herself any longer, Suchen flung herself into the press, weaving through the dancers. But when she reached the place she thought she had seen him, it was empty. Her breath coming fast, she glanced around frantically, unable to see over the tall bodies all around.

A pair of long-fingered hands came around from behind, lightly sliding down her upper arms. A shudder of desire went through her, and she leaned back into the caress. Through the shoulders of her jerkin, she could feel the lean muscles of his chest, his arousal hard against the small of her back. She heard the rustle of hair as he lowered his head, felt his breath touch her ear, making her shiver uncontrollably.

Then, suddenly, he was gone. Startled, she opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed, only to find him standing directly before her. His breath was coming short as her own, and in his eyes there was a wild look she had never seen directed at her before by any man. As if she were desirable and more "past desire and into soul-deep *need*."

It was at that moment that the screaming began.

Suchen spun towards the front of the building, her sword coming clear of its scabbard with a steely hiss before her mind even registered what was happening. The crowd around them stampeded, streaming towards the windows and ragged holes in the walls in a desperate attempt at escape. Women shrieked in fear, and somewhere a child began to cry.

Standing on tiptoe, Suchen caught a confused glimpse of men on horseback. Whips glittered in the firelight. Aclytes staggered and fell beneath the onslaught, and the cries of those caught by the lash filled the air.

Rage at the merciless attackers swept through Suchen, leaving no room for fear. Shouting an incoherent battle cry, she shoved her way through the fleeing crowd, making for the intruders. Yozerf ran beside her, lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl of fury, though what he would do against armed men on horseback she could not begin to guess.

Breaking through what remained of the struggling crowd, Suchen brought up her sword to attack—and froze in place as her eyes locked on a familiar face.

"Dearest gods—*Staaфон!* What are you doing!"

Staaфон spun about, relief stamped across his handsome features. "Suchen! Thank the gods, you're safe!"

Before she could comprehend his words, he had swept her into a fierce hug, heedless of the sharp steel in her hand. His velvet doublet was crushed against her face, the smell of patchouli overwhelming the stinks of smoke and sweat in the air. She shoved him away violently.

"What's going on here?" she demanded again. For the first time, she noticed that all the attackers wore the plum and green of Staaфон's own household guard. They stood in a protective circle about the lovers. Of the Aclytes, no sign remained save for the bonfire, the cider keg, and a few smears of blood on the floor. To her relief, Yozerf had followed the example of his full-blooded kindred and vanished. No doubt he lurked somewhere nearby, watching and listening.

Staaфон reached out his hands for her, and she twisted away again. "Answer me, damn you!" she shouted at him.

He made a quick gesture of appeasement. "It's all right, Suchen," he murmured in the soothing tone normally reserved for someone needlessly distraught. "Everything's going to be fine. Some of my men heard the rumor that these Aclytes were planning some sort of—of unholy ritual. When I heard that you had left the keep to meet with them, I admit I panicked." He gestured at the room. "This sort of thing would never have been tolerated in Iddi—and with good reason."

Suchen stared at him, torn between white-hot anger and perplexity. "What by Hel are you talking about?"

He returned her stare, as if she had lost her senses. "What do you mean? I'm talking about what those—those *creatures* were doing here! Unholy rites! Demon worship! Black magic of the foulest kind!"

His words left her dumbfounded. True, the celebration must have seemed as alien to his eyes as it had to hers, but to believe that it was some sort of magical ritual ... "They were celebrating a holy night—dancing, singing, enjoying themselves! It was no different from the celebrations any Jenelese

peasants might hold for the Godsmass!"

Two spots of crimson appeared high on his cheeks. "It most certainly was," he hissed, appalled. "Can't you see, Suchen? These Aclytes were probably a part of the magic that laid Lord Auglar low. Only tonight, your so-called friend lured *you* here, so that they could turn their evil to bewitching you!"

Suchen gaped at him. Half her mind simply refused to believe what she was hearing. It was too mad for comprehension. The other half was boiling with rage.

Rage won. "Damn you, Staafon," she snarled, drawing away from him. "I don't know where you're getting this ... this filth, and I don't care. Hearing you say these things ... it sickens me that I ever slept with you."

"Suchen, listen to me! Please! I believe that you were in terrible danger. I won't say that all the rest were wittingly involved, but I *saw* you with that—that demon you think is your friend! The look in your eyes—by all the gods, he was bewitching you!" He reached out desperately for her.

She avoided his touch. "Whatever you think you saw had nothing to do with sorcery."

"Suchen, please—"

"Stay away from me, Staaf," she warned, slamming her sword back into its sheath. "Until you can see how vile your conduct has been here tonight—I don't even want to lay eyes on you."

She turned away and stalked off into the night. Staafon and his horsemen followed her all the way back to Kellsjard, the merchant pleading and cajoling. She shut his words out of her mind, until she could finally close her door hard in his face and shoot the bolt home.

* * * *

That night, Suchen dreamed.

Her beloved's hands slid sensuously down her prone body. Required to do nothing save relax and enjoy, she sighed with pleasure and locked her legs more tightly about his waist. Starlight streamed through the window, glowed off his white skin, and edged his crimson hair in frost. Looking up, she met his clear gray eyes, read in their depths a mixture of need and love that encompassed all of her: body, mind, and soul. A faint smile played briefly over his lips, lighting her heart with joy.

She moaned softly, responsive to his every caress. Intense pleasure passed over his features, and he flung back his head, sending his hair flying in a wild arc. His great dragon's wings unfurled, black as the night, until their clawed tips touched the ceiling and enfolded them both in darkness.

Chapter 14

Suchen was still trying to shake off the lingering effects of her dream, when Staafon caught up with her the next morning.

In fact, the entire previous evening had haunted her thoughts ever since awakening, distracting her even during the rather gloomy conversation with Buudi that began her day. He had spent many unproductive hours arguing with the three thanes, trying to convince them to release Sifya. Ormond had flatly refused—although at least he had made no move so far to either put her on trial, force her to confess, or lock her in the dungeons.

Now, as Suchen strode down the corridor, boots tapping crisply on the naked stone, her mind once again wandered back to the night before. The dream itself seemed easy enough to explain, after the events of the Hallow Night celebration. It was what she had seen—*orthought* she had seen, she corrected herself hastily—in Yozerf's expression during the celebration itself that tripped up her thoughts.

It simply wasn't possible that he could have looked at her with such desire. Suchen held no fond illusions when it came to her attractiveness. Her father, who considered himself an honest, practical man, had made certain of that. All too well she remembered his reaction when she had failed him with her inability to be the perfect, well-mannered daughter he wanted.

"You may look like a cow, but by the gods, must you have all the grace of one as well? Or "Be thankful that I have enough money to provide you with a fine dowry. We'd never find you a husband else. As it is, I'll have to pay him twice as much to compensate him for having to look at you."

Her hand unconsciously brushed across the crescent scar on her cheek. At least that was the only time he had ever broken her skin in a rage, so as not to spoil what little looks she had. Unlike poor Peddock, whom he had beaten mercilessly whenever her brother made a mistake in the book-keeping, or forgot the value of Jenelese currency in Undah, or committed some other unpardonable sin.

Well, Reag Keblav was far in the past for both his children, but she could at least thank him for giving her the ability to accept her own plainness. No, she had been mistaken last night, let her own hunger tint reality.

And yet ... gods, what she had *felt*, what she had been so certain then that he felt as well, had been so *intense*.

And so right.

A boot scraped softly on the stone floor behind her. She turned quickly, heart lifting with the idea that it was Yozerf, summoned in answer to her longing. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, however, she realized that she should have known better—Yozerf seldom moved in anything less than utter silence.

It was Staafon who hurried down the corridor after her. His blonde hair was neatly brushed, and his velvet doublet and silken hosen were impeccable. The bejeweled dagger glittered prominently at his belt. He held up his hands in a pacifying gesture, the sunlight streaming through the high windows flashing off his rings.

"Before you start yelling, just let me speak a moment," he said hurriedly.

Suchen's eyes narrowed. *Damn it, I don't want to go through this again*"

But I do owe it to him to at least listen, another part of her mind argued. She nodded guardedly for him to continue.

A smile of relief lit his features. "Thank you. I've come to say that I'm sorry. You were right last night, and I was wrong. When I heard that you had gone off with ... your Aclytese friend, I overreacted. And now I've come to ask you both for forgiveness."

Suchen frowned slightly. This change of heart seemed uncharacteristic, to say the least. Prior to experiencing Yozerf's determined pig-headedness, she had considered Staaфон the most stubborn person she'd ever met. Getting him to see that his opinions were wrong was nearly impossible. "I don't understand," she said suspiciously. "Last night, you were convinced that I was about to fall victim to some horrible spell. Don't you still think so?"

He shook his head emphatically. "No. I spent all last night thinking about what you said, Suchen, and about how angry you were. And I realized that you were right." Green eyes glanced up contritely. "Please. Just give me a chance to apologize to you both."

It didn't seem like Staaфон ... but at the same time, she could hardly refuse such a generous gesture. And perhaps, she thought, he truly had listened to her. Perhaps he realized that he had been less than ideal as a friend and lover, and wanted to make up for it.

Perhaps, as he had said the night before, he had seen what was passing between herself and Yozerf at the celebration, and had reacted out of jealousy.

"I had to ask a few servants to locate either of you," you haven't exactly been staying in one place." He smiled broadly. "One of the maids said your friend was in his room only a short while ago. Perhaps, if we hurry, we can catch him before he leaves."

Suchen hesitated. She had no excuse to refuse, and she did want to see Yozerf. *But not because of that damned dream*, she told herself firmly.

Liar.

They traversed the keep in silence. It was unusual for Staaфон to remain quiet for so long "perhaps this was part of his newfound humility. For her part, she was glad that he didn't continually wheedle at her to go ahead and forgive him, which she had more than half expected him to do. Perhaps last night had been a shock for him. Perhaps it had made him realize that he needed to change his behavior in more than this one instance.

But that didn't seem like Staaфон either.

When they arrived at Yozerf's door, Staaфон announced their presence with a polite knock. Several moments went past, with no answer save for silence.

Suchen sighed. "We missed him," she said, half-annoyed that they would now be required to comb the keep. "Perhaps we should check the stables. He spends a great deal of time with that black monster he calls a horse." She started to move away, then stopped when she realized Staaфон wasn't following.

"Perhaps he's sleeping, after all the ... excitement of last night," he suggested delicately. Another sharp knock followed. Then, when no answer came, Staaфон put a hand flat on the polished oaken panel of the door. It swung open soundlessly under his touch.

"What are you doing?" Suchen demanded, surprised.

Staaфон cast her a worried look. "I just want to make sure that ... that what happened last night hasn't had an unforeseen consequence. Some of my men *were* very angry at the idea that the Aclytes might have had something to do with Auglar's condition."

Suchen swallowed the words that sprang immediately to her tongue. *The idea that you planted in their heads. If anything has happened to Yozerf because of this, you'll be sorry we ever met.*

"Very well." She stepped quickly past him into the outer chamber of the suite. Just a quick look around would be enough. Seeing nothing amiss in the sitting room, she moved towards the closed inner door. A light touch sent it swinging back.

The bed was unkempt, Suchen noted immediately, objects left strewn randomly across its surface. Seeing no sign of Yozerf, she started to step back, when something about the scene tugged at her subconscious. Frowning, she looked closer—and let out a stifled gasp.

A piece of parchment covered with strange runes lay on the bed, its corners pinned down by empty cups. Beside the bed stood an incense burner upon a low table, the acrid smell of its contents still faintly flavoring the air. A rough pentagram had been chalked onto the stone floor. Black candles stood at each point, cold wax dribbling down their ornate holders.

In the center of the pentagram lay a white cloth. On it rested several strands of black hair, a scrap of embroidered fabric, and strands of golden hair.

"Dearest gods!" cried Staaфон in horror.

Suchen ignored him. Words deserted her, and she stared blankly at what could only be an enchanter's paraphernalia, trying to find some explanation.

Staaфон was at no such loss. "Look," he hissed, pointing a shaking finger at the white cloth in the center of the pentagram. "That bit of embroidered garment—it came from one of Lord Auglar's tunics, I would swear to it! And that black hair must belong to him." All the color drained from his face, and he turned slowly towards Suchen. "And the other hair ... it's yours, Suchen. It must be. My gods, I was right not to trust him. He *was* trying to bewitch you—just as he bewitched Auglar.

"Yozerf is the assassin."

His words struck her like cold water. "No," she whispered. Her horrified eyes were riveted on the hairs. "It isn't possible. Yozerf helped us—he wouldn't betray us like this."

"He only seemed to help you, Suchen. He wanted you to bring him here, to Kellsjard and Lord Auglar, without arousing suspicion."

"No!" she looked up at him wildly. "He wouldn't do such a thing!"

Staaфон's expression was bleak. "You never knew him—not really. I'm sorry, my love, I truly am." He glanced away, and then turned purposefully towards the door. "I'm going to inform Thane Ormond. We can't leave the Aclyte loose to work his mischief a second longer."

His footsteps faded from the suite. Alone, Suchen turned slowly and moved into the outer room.

"I would never do anything to harm you or Lady Trethya." It had seemed such an odd thing to say at the time. But if Yozerf had been doing harm to others around them—if perhaps his conscience

had pricked him in that momentâ€”then it made perfect sense.

He told me to trust Sifya and her kin. But never, not once, did he tell me that I could trust him.

* * * *

Yozerf crouched in the hayloft above the stables. The warm smell of horses filled the air, mixed in with the scents of leather and hay. Occasionally, voices drifted in from the courtyard outside, but for the most part it was peaceful.

He had come here around dawn, seeking a haven for his battered spirit. The celebration last night had been nothing save pure insanity. Drugged by the exuberance of the dance, by the sights, the smells, he had forgotten whom he wasâ€”*what* he wasâ€”and allowed his desire for Suchen to dictate his actions. If things had gone on, he might have attempted to seduce her, and perhaps irrevocably shattered one of the only true friendships of his life.

But things had *not* been allowed to continue. Her *lover* had come.

Yozerf's lip twisted into a snarl of hatred. Staafon was no different than any other *n'ykar*, interested only in his own pleasures, caring nothing for anyone else. Surely it had seemed fine sport to him, to set upon hapless peasants who were doing no harm.

How could she love someone like that? The very thought filled him with cold rage. By choosing Staafon as her mate, she condoned the merchant's cruelty.

And she betrayed Yozerf.

He sighed, trying to force back his feelings with reason. She had been infuriated with Staafon. That much he had seen and heard from his hiding place nearby. And yet...

His thoughts were futile, dead leaves blowing in the wind. Pulling himself back to reality, he regarded the silken ball of fur nestled asleep in his hands. When he had come here, seeking peace among the horses, he had discovered a cat nesting in the loft with her newly-whelped kittens. Delighted, he had soothed her natural wariness of letting strangers near her brood, and she had allowed him to touch and even hold one. He had laughed aloud when the minuscule tabby, its eyes still closed, tried to nurse from his fingertip.

But, no matter how much he might want to remain here with the kittens, the world outside awaited him. With a regretful smile, he kissed the soft fur atop the kitten's head and returned it to its mother's side.

The ladder to the loft groaned faintly under his weight as he climbed down. Absently brushing stray bits of hay from his black clothing, he swung open the door and stepped into the courtyard. The mid-morning sun blinded him momentarily, and he squinted painfully against it.

"There he is!â€” someone shouted out of the brightness.

Yozerf knew that toneâ€”urgent and full of anger. He spun about on the ball of his foot, ready to run even before his eyes cleared to register the dozen or so guards rushing towards him with drawn swords.

He didn't wait to find out why they were coming at himâ€”he knew too well that life and death could be decided on the basis of such hesitations. His mind raced, flicking through options. There was no time to get back to Windshade without having the stable doors blocked against him. That left him with only one choice.

Run.

He sprinted across the courtyard, making for the keep's main gate. The soldiers swerved to cut him off. Yozerf stretched his long legs to their fullest, but saw that two of them would still intercept him.

He never paused, merely leapt and lashed out in a violent kick, which caught the first soldier in the chest. Not bothering to watch him fall, Yozerf twisted, ducking past the other with a graceful speed born of terror.

No more guards stood between him and the gate. Heart pounding madly in his ears, Yozerf flung himself into an all-out run. Voices shouted behind him, screaming for the portcullis to be lowered. A moment later, the telltale shriek and clatter of gears proclaimed that the men in the guardhouse above had heard.

The massive iron portcullis plunged towards the earth, spiked points hurtling down with deadly force. Driven by the instinct to escape, no matter the consequences, he hurled himself to the ground and rolled.

His body caromed hard off the bars as the portcullis thundered into place. Dazed and winded, he nevertheless scrambled to his feet as the guards closed in. Thought fled, and with a cry of desperation he fought back blindly, until the sheer mass of numbers brought him struggling to the ground.

* * * *

Suchen raced down the spiral staircase leading into Kellsjard's depths, hard on Buudi's heels. The rest of the Sworn clattered down behind her, their footsteps echoing off dank, niter-incrusted walls. Beneath them waited the keep's ancient dungeons: twin rows of tiny, square cells on either side of a single hallway. The walls wept moisture, and the foul stink of fungal rot and age filled the cold air.

A group of guards stood in a cluster before the door of the only occupied cell. Thane Ormond, his thin face looking even more pinched with displeasure than usual, waited in their midst. Staafon hovered on the fringe of the small crowd, looking wildly out-of-place in his velvets and silks.

"We heard that you've arrested Yozerf," Buudi said in clipped tones as he strode towards the guards.

Ormond turned a look of distaste on the Sworn. "Indeed we have. Steward Keblava discovered the incriminating evidence in his room."

"Lies!" cried a deep voice rough with fury.

Suchen's heart contracted, and she shoved her way heedlessly through the guards until she stood before the scarred oaken door of the prison cell. A judas with a badly rusted iron grate punctured the door just above her eye level. The torchlight falling through the bars revealed Yozerf pressed against the other side. A dark bruise decorated one cheek, and his hair tangled wildly about his thin face. His lips were drawn back in a brutal snarl, as if he would bite out the throat of anyone who dared approach too near.

The gray eyes that met hers held a faint gleam that could not be called sane. "They say that you accuse me," he hissed. Beneath the fierce defiance there lay a flicker of fear. But not for his safety, she realized. The fear was that Ormond and Staafon had indeed told him the truth.

She wanted to deny it. "I haven't accused you," she said slowly. "But I am the one who found the ... evidence ... in your room."

For an instant, all the fury drained from his face. A look of utter devastation crossed over his features, like a man who has been told that his last reason for living is gone. Suchen took an unconscious step forward, stretching out a hand towards him.

The expression of loss faded, as if he realized suddenly that he had given too much away to his betrayers. An insane grin slowly warped his mouth, and he laughed once, sharply. "Damn you!" damn all of

you to Hel," he groaned, a hysterical chuckle edging the words. "I should have known it would come to this. I allowed myself to feel friendship towards a group of humans" what other outcome could I possibly have expected?"

"Yozerf," she whispered, aghast.

"No!" His eyes narrowed with hatred, though it was impossible to say whether the emotion was directed towards the gathered humans or towards himself. "Save whatever pathetic words you would speak to me. It's clear enough what has happened here. There is a traitor loose in Kellsjard, but you simply can't believe that it could be one of you. So your solution is to lay the blame on the outsider, on the different one."

He drew away from the bars, so that the shadows closed over his face. "So now I suppose you'll all congratulate one another, and feel safe and happy. But it won't last. Because the traitor is still out there among you. And once you've executed me, he" or she "will strike again." He turned sharply away, as if the sight of them disgusted him.

It was too much for her to bear. "No! Yozerf, listen!" she exclaimed, pressing close to the grate. "I don't believe that you did it!"

He stopped, but did not look back. "Don't you?"

"No." The fierceness of her tone made him glance over one shoulder in surprise. "Believe in me."

He swallowed, white throat working convulsively. "Can I afford to?"

Suchen heard his footsteps retreat across the stone floor, the faint rustle of straw as he sat down in a corner. She stared blankly at the grate, unable to think of anything to say, until one of the guards abruptly shut the judas.

Buudi turned towards the thane. "Ormond, I must have words with you about this."

Ormond arched a curious brow. "Whatever for? If you seek to defend him, the proof is undeniable. Or if you are worried about the Sworn being named his accomplices ... well, I assure you, he will be interrogated thoroughly."

Buudi's wide mouth tightened sharply, and his brown eyes grew hard. "I won't stand by and let you torture anyone, certainly not someone who I'm not convinced is guilty."

Ormond gave him a pitying look. Motioning briefly to the guards, he walked away, headed for the upper reaches of the keep once again. Two soldiers took up their stations to either side of the cell.

"Wait!" Suchen called frantically. Ormond paused and cast a weary glance over his shoulder. "Listen to me, please! I can prove Yozerf's innocence!"

The thane looked bored, as if nothing she had to say could possibly be of interest. "And how is that?"

"There was a piece of parchment in his quarters with some runes written on it, probably a spell. But when I first met him, Yozerf couldn't read at all. I've been teaching him, but even so he can only make out a few words in the Keld. He could never read a complicated spell in a strange language."

Ormond's expression of disgust was so thorough that all her hope melted before it. "Don't be a fool, woman," he snapped. "Those Aclytes have their own devil's tongue. It was undoubtedly written in that. Just because he's led you to believe that he can't read a decent human language doesn't mean that he

isn't perfectly fluent in his own."

"Then ask one of the servants here if it is written in Aclytese. If notâ€œ"

"Then it proves nothing,â€• Ormond cut her off impatiently. â€œNow, if you'll excuse me. My time is too valuable to waste in debate with gullible women."

The thane spun on his heel and left, the set of his shoulders declaring him impervious to any further arguments. Suchen watched him go despondently.

Buudi's hands tightened into fists. But just as it looked like he might storm after Ormond and throttle the thane, Staaфон held out a placating hand. â€œPlease, all of you,â€• he said quickly. â€œWe must speak."

Buudi hesitated, as if attacking someone would be infinitely preferable to more talk. Then he nodded his shaggy-haired head. â€œVery well."

* * * *

Lavish goods brought with his caravan decorated Staaфон's suite. Deep Undish rugs, elaborately woven with floral patterns, covered every inch of the floor. Furs and cushions supplemented the chairs, and a divan reclined elegantly along one wall. A delicate table inlaid with mother-of-pearl stood in the center of the room. Pomanders and incense perfumed the air. Beeswax candles, unlit for now, stood in battalions along the mantelpiece and tables.

Although Staaфон gestured towards the chairs, Suchen found herself unable to sit. Instead, she paced about the room like a caged animal ready to rend its captors to bits.

A soft knock at the door heralded the arrival of Uzco, Trethya on his arm. Buudi had deemed it too dangerous to leave the young noblewoman out of their sight, not while Ormond might yet make another move.

"I asked you here because Thane Ormond has taken something of a liking to me,â€• Staaфон announced. He settled himself in a chair near the hearth and motioned for Suchen to join him. She shook her head and kept pacing.

Staaфон shrugged and went on. â€œIn fact, he has asked me to help with the interrogation of the prisoner."

Suchen stopped and spun to face him. â€œYozerf didn't do it,â€• she said with utter conviction. â€œI don't care what arguments Ormond comes up with."

Staaфон looked at her sadly. â€œHow can you say that? Ask yourself, Suchenâ€œ"how much do you really know about Yozerf? And how much of that can you really trust to be true? Do you have any real idea what he did before you met him?"

Suchen hesitated. â€œHe ... he said he was a mercenary,â€• she said uncertainly. But Yozerf himself had said that was a dangerous business for an Aclyte. Personally, Suchen suspected banditry in his not-so-distant past, but was not about to make mention of it now.

"There, you seeâ€œ" a man who would sell himself to the highest bidder. Why can't you believe that the Council would offer him more than Lord Auglar ever could?"

She hesitated, uncertain what to answer. â€œIt's true that we haven't known Yozerf for very long,â€• she said slowly, groping for the words to express her feelings. â€œBut ... I know, in my heart, that he

was not the one who attacked Auglar. I know Yozerf. He could have betrayed us a dozen times before now, yet he didn't. He's been nothing but a friend to us" at the fight in Diicus where we met him, when the soldiers tracked us through the wood"

"But those situations could have been faked," Peddock argued. His lower lip took on a stubborn jut. "They only made him seem our friend, so that we would trust him and bring him here. But I always suspected that he was up to something."

"Enough" let's not argue," Buudi said quickly, holding up a scarred hand to forestall any reply from Suchen. The lines stood out about his mouth and eyes, and Suchen wondered if there was more gray in his hair than there had been before their return to Kellsjard.

"We don't know for certain whether Yozerf is guilty or not," Buudi went on. "I for one think that, were he our traitor, he would have been far more clever. Yozerf is too paranoid to simply leave evidence lying out where it could be easily seen. Servants move in and out of our quarters all the time" someone most certainly would have noticed it eventually. No, I think that the very obviousness argues that Yozerf is *not* the one we seek."

Suchen nodded, relieved at Buudi's clear thinking. "Then we have to free him."

Buudi frowned and looked away. "I know how you feel, Suchen. But at the same time ... our position here is very precarious. Ormond is just waiting for any of us" you included" to give him an excuse to issue warrants for our arrest. And if he does that, he might take the opportunity to find out who Lady Trethya really is, provided he doesn't know already. If we help Yozerf to escape, we'll give Ormond everything he wants. We'll have to flee Kellsjard ... and abandon Auglar and Sifya to their fates."

Peddock nodded. "I agree. I'm not saying that I *want* Yozerf to come to a bad end, but surely it would be better for him to be executed than for Auglar to die because we weren't here to help! If Auglar perishes, who will be left to raise an army to save Queen Rozah? Who will stand against the Council? Yozerf's death would be tragic" but Auglar's would be an outright disaster."

Dara-Don's weathered hand closed over the good-luck charm dangling at his neck. His broad face was marked with unhappiness. "Peddock does have a point," he agreed reluctantly.

Trethya shifted uneasily, skirts rustling with a murmur of silk. "I don't want Auglar to die," she said quietly, her large, dark eyes moving from face to face. "But I don't believe that Rozah would want her reign to be founded on the deaths of innocent people, either."

Peddock snorted. "I would hardly use the word "innocent"™ in connection with Yozerf, my lady."

Suchen stared at the sculpted curlicues adorning the mantelpiece. One callused finger reached out and traced them, feeling the cold hardness of the stone. "I won't leave Yozerf to die," she said, not looking back at the others. "Even if it means that I must act alone."

"Suchen, no!" exclaimed Staafon in alarm. He rose to his feet, crossing the soft carpets to stand beside her. The flames from the hearth reflected softly off his face, tinting his skin red. "I won't let you do this. I won't let you throw away our future over this Aclyte's life!"

"It isn't your choice," she replied softly.

His mouth tightened. "Please, Suchen ... at least let me try to help your friend first. As I said before, Thane Ormond has asked me to join him in the dungeons in a few hours, to question the prisoner. If

Yozerf is innocent, then I'll clear his name. And if you're wrong, then ... then I'll be sorry."

"I'm not wrong."

"He's your friend," Staafon reminded her gently. "You aren't exactly unbiased."

She looked away. Nothing Staafon said could convince her that she was wrong. Not for reasons of pure logic—after all, every word Yozerf had ever spoken to her, every gesture he had ever made, could have been a mask to cover his own perfidy. Even the fact that he claimed to have been sent by Ax was no proof—the wizard had certainly not mentioned him by either name or race. It would have been simple for a Council spy to have killed their real ally and taken his identity.

No, she believed Yozerf because she felt, on an instinctive level, that all the little glimpses he had given her of himself were true looks behind the mask. And embittered towards humanity as he might be, compassion and loyalty also ran deep threads through his soul. She couldn't believe he would have violated those principles.

Slowly, she raised her sapphire eyes to meet Staafon's green. "Please, Staafon," she whispered, putting all her heart into the plea. "Please, keep him safe, I beg of you."

He embraced her suddenly, drawing her close against his velvet doublet. "Don't fret, my love. Promise me that you'll leave it up to me and forget this mad scheme of yours. Your friend will be perfectly safe, perfectly unharmed."

"I can't make that promise," she responded softly. "But I will wait until after you've had a chance to speak with him and with Ormond before I do anything." That was a promise she knew she would keep—after all, she couldn't expect to make a credible attempt to free Yozerf until long after nightfall.

Which left far too many hours in between during which the worst could happen.

The conclave broke up after that, the Sworn and Trethya drifting away while Staafon prepared to join Thane Ormond in the dungeon. Wandering into the hallway, Suchen found herself suddenly bereft of purpose, like a ghost unable to influence events, only watch.

Two figures lingered, waiting for her. A streamer of sunlight came in through one high window, touching off the gaudy colors of Gless's jerkin. Uzco stood beside him, amber eyes grim above the ritual scars decorating his cheeks.

Gless glanced about uneasily, as if afraid of being overheard. "We wanted to say that we're with you, Suchen," he murmured. "I know that Staafon has the best intentions in the world, but I'm worried about what might happen to Yozerf when he isn't there."

Uzco nodded in solemn agreement. "You've but to let us know when, and we'll be ready to go to the dungeons with you."

Gratitude filled her heart, and she clasped both their hands firmly. "Thank you, my friends," she replied with the shadow of a smile.

* * * *

Yozerf sat upon the wooden stool the guards had brought in, hands bound securely behind his back. An iron brazier illuminated the cell, its ruddy light making the wet walls look as if they had been washed in blood. The shadows of the men crowded into the room humped huge and grotesque.

A guard was positioned to either side of him, both staring straight ahead, as if oblivious to their charge.

More guards clustered about the doorway, ready to rush in if needed.

Staaфон was clothed impeccably as always, in a dark brown velvet doublet and charcoal gray hosen. The hilt of his dagger gleamed red in the brazier's light. Thane Ormond stood at his side, thin face distorted by a look of smug self-satisfaction. Beside and a little behind them was Ormond's own scribe, dressed in a monastic robe and armed with quill, ink, and parchment to take down Yozerf's confession.

A confession that he didn't doubt he would give. Yozerf had suffered enough pain in his life not to entertain any grandiose notions about his own ability to withstand torture.

Ormond linked spider-thin fingers together beneath his chin. Dark eyes glittered like the backs of insects. "Shall we begin?" he asked, his breath steaming from the cold that the brazier was only beginning to dissipate.

Staaфон nodded graciously. Turning to Yozerf, he fixed the Aclyte with venom-green eyes. "What is your name?" he asked.

Yozerf supposed the question to be largely rhetorical, but answered nonetheless. "Yozerf Trihychl."

Staaфон nodded slightly to one of the guards standing to either side of Yozerf's stool. The man moved in front of Yozerf, drew back his hand, and brought it across the Aclyte's face in a numbing blow. Yozerf gasped involuntarily, head snapping to one side.

"What is your name?" Staaфон asked again, as if he would be perfectly content to keep asking until the world ended.

Yozerf drew his head back up. Loose hair straggled into his eyes. His right cheek felt afire, and the taste of blood filled his mouth. "Yozerf Trihychl," he snarled.

Again, the guard struck him. His head reeling, Yozerf forced himself to focus on Staaфон. *What can he want?*

Ormond sighed impatiently and gestured to the guards waiting outside the cell. They parted, allowing two more to enter. Between them, clenched tight in their gloved hands, they dragged a stumbling figure.

It was Kelayna. Her brown hair hung in tangles about a face swollen from tears. An ugly bruise darkened one cheek, and reddened teeth marks showed on her throat. The bodice of her simple gown had been ripped apart, revealing the tattoos that marked her breasts. The stench of blood and the men who had abused her smeared her skin, making Yozerf want to gag. When she caught sight of him, she struggled to hold herself upright despite her condition, as if she would not allow him to see her shamed.

Rage filled him, an insane fury that would have had him at Ormond's throat had guards and bonds not held him back. He aimed his lunatic's glare at Ormond, saw the man flinch back.

"Everyone in this room will die for this," he hissed with a dreadful certainty.

Staaфон smiled lazily. "I think not, Aclyte." He reached out one hand, grabbed Kelayna's hair. She gasped and flinched back from his touch.

"This creature was heard to call you 'my lord' by one of my own men," Staaфон went on softly, staring at Kelayna's fear with detached interest. "Since it was obvious that she was a part of your conspiracy, we arrested her for questioning. With a little persuasion, she was quick enough to tell us your real name."

"My lord, I'm sorry" Kelayna whispered.

The shame in her voice hurt him like a physical wound. Closing his eyes, he said, "Do not feel ashamed, Kelayna; you have done no wrong. I understand." Blackness touched his heart. "Better than you know."

He opened his eyes and stared balefully at Staafon. "Let her go. Let her go from this place, and I will cooperate. I'll sign any confession you want."

Kelayna stared at him in horror. "My lord, no!"

"You're in no position to bargain, Aclyte," Ormond replied stiffly.

Yozerf prayed that a show of cooperation would convince them otherwise. "My name is Yozerf Jonaglir," he said clearly. The scribe's quill pen scratched dryly against parchment, recording his words. "I have conspired against Jenel and plotted to kill Lord Auglar by use of magic."

Staafon smiled his approval. "Very good." He nodded again to the guards. To Yozerf's relief, they let go of Kelayna, who immediately turned and fled. He could hear her feet slap against the stones of the hall as she ran, and no one moved to halt her.

Run, Kelayna. Take Sevarin and run as far from here as you can.

I'd kill them all for you, if I could. By our laws it's not my place to extract vengeance until after you, your female kin, and your mate have all declared themselves unable to do so. But I would gladly forget the laws. And I swear I'd make them suffer.

But I'm not even going to live to revenge myself, let alone you.

Ormond folded his arms across his skinny chest. "You are the descendant of the Jonaglirs who once ruled Caden, yes?"

"Yes."

"And, in retribution for their defeat by the holy armies of Jenel three centuries ago, you plotted to destroy this kingdom, yes?"

It didn't matter what lies he told them now; they would resort to torture if he refused, which would only give them what they wanted eventually. Better to spare himself any further pain; and, hopefully, give Kelayna time to escape the fortress. "Yes."

Ormond nodded his satisfaction. "And you were aided by other Aclytes who recognize your authority over that of their human lords."

"No!" Yozerf glanced about wildly, horrified at where this might lead. "No, I swear, I was alone in this! Perhaps tailoring the lie to fit human preconceptions would help. "I tried to corrupt them, but my father was a human peasant, so I wasn't recognized as being a legitimate heir."

Believe me, you monster, he willed. Don't turn this into a purge of Aclytes in this demesne.

Or, gods forbid, across all of Jenel.

Ormond scowled. "I don't believe you."

Terror and indecision gripped Yozerf in twin claws. Nothing he said would convince Ormond, so why

not agree with the lie? If he cooperated, maybe they wouldn't torture him. After all, what had the Aclytese race ever done for him? Scorned him as an outcast half-breed, useless in his inability to sire children, tainted by his father's blood. What had they ever done that he should suffer even a moment for their sakes?

Kelayna's face came to him, along with the memory of her fierce loyalty, of her eagerness to help. Of her *need* for something to believe in.

She had already suffered for him. If she had not chosen to honor the ancient ties that bound their clans, she might be free and happy, not irreversibly scarred by what had been done to her.

Kelayna would have to bear the burden of what had happened for the rest of her life, which could be as long as another eighty years. Whatever befell him now, it was certain he would have to bear the memory of it only a few days at most, until the hangman's noose took his life.

It was still one of the most difficult things he had ever done, knowing what the consequences of his words would be. "It is true," he said quietly, steadily. "The other Aclytes had nothing to do with this. I will not change my statement."

Ormond frowned in annoyance. "We shall see. Staaфон?"

"I'm ready."

The thane nodded and left the cell, as if the coming scene would be far too distasteful for him to view. Several guards went with him. Staaфон watched them go, and then turned to Yozerf. One of the soldiers came forward, placed a coiled whip in the merchant's soft hand.

Fear coursed through Yozerf, though he struggled not to show it. There was one last card he might play, one last desperate hope. "If you do this, Suchen will never forgive you," he said, praying he sounded brave.

Staaфон let out a short bark of incredulous laughter. "Won't forgive me?" he demanded, still chuckling, as if at some monstrous joke. "You stupid, naive Aclyte. She knows all about this."

An icy hand gripped Yozerf's heart. "No," he whispered, struggling to deny his deepest fear.

Staaфон smiled pityingly at him. "Yes. You fool, lusting after her like a dog after a bitch in heat. As if she would ever have anything to do with an outcast like you." The smile turned cruel. "We laughed at you when we lay in one another's arms."

Under normal circumstances, he would never have believed. But alone, and afraid, and hurting, Staaфон's words had the dire ring of the truth most feared.

Yozerf closed his eyes, black despair washing over him. He barely even shuddered at the sound of the whip uncurling.

Chapter 15

Night gradually began to draw its shadows over Kellsjard. Clouds gathered in, dyed gory red by the sunset. The smell of rain on the verge of sleet touched the cold air. Guards patrolled the walls with metronomic regularity, while the other inhabitants of the keep prepared to go to the great hall for supper. High up in one tower, Sifya stared out a window, listening for the baying of wolves.

In his prison deep below Kellsjard, Yozerf was oblivious to all of this. He lay where they had left him, on his side in the middle of the floor. Consciousness came and left like a fickle guest unwilling to share a room with pain.

Gradually, he became aware of the smell of stone and rotted hay, of blood and vomit. The peculiar odor of an injured body, too subtle for a human to detect, was thick in his nose. After a while, he realized the body was his.

Agony flamed in all his nerves, a constant scream that threatened to bring back the darkness he had lain in for so many hours. Although he could not move to see the extent of his injuries, he knew that he had been hurt badly. His torso ached from the deep bruising which covered it, and broken ribs stabbed sharply into muscle. His groin throbbed with the pain from repeated kicks, so much that it made him faint to concentrate on it too long. The taste of blood filled his mouth. An attempt to crack open his eyes resulted in the discovery that one was swollen almost completely shut and the other only a little better off.

As for his back ... it felt as if the whip had stripped every scrap of skin from it. He told himself that wounds often felt far worse than they actually were, that it couldn't really be that bad. But, gods, it hurt.

It hardly mattered. They had done as they wished with him, and it was over now. No need to worry about his chances of healing, either, since he would certainly be executed within the next day or so.

As he lay in a shell of misery, the faint sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway. Yozerf listened more out of habit than from any real interest. The steps drew level with the door of his cell and stopped. Yozerf waited for the guards to speak, but no sounds came, and he realized that they had not even bothered to leave anyone to watch over him. There would have been little point—he obviously was not going to be able to escape.

Keys jingled, then turned with a rusty groan in the lock. The door swung slowly open, grating a little where its uneven edge caught on stone. Torchlight streamed into the cell. A worn black boot came into Yozerf's field of vision.

Instinct more than anything made him struggle to look up. Through a blur of light, he saw a familiar, mustached man in plum livery standing over him. The man grinned callously and drew out his dagger.

So they aren't even going to wait for a public execution, Yozerf thought bleakly.

A high-pitched shriek sounded from outside the cell. The man staggered forwards, eyes going wide in shock. As Yozerf watched in confusion, he stumbled a few steps further into the cell, then collapsed onto the floor. A knife hilt protruded from his back, blood slowly soaking his fine tunic.

Kelayna stepped in through the door. Her face was set in a hard mask, and the look she cast the fallen man was nearly demonic in the intensity of its hatred. Sevarin's pale face showed behind her shoulder, its youthful cast wiped away and replaced by a harsh, grim expression.

Horror washed through Yozerf at the sight of them, and he struggled to sit up. His long hair had become

matted in the wounds on his back, and he had to grit his teeth not to scream as great clots of blood tore free. Warmth trickled down his side, but he ignored it.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded incredulously. Screams had reduced his deep voice to a feeble croak. "Why didn't you escape when you had the chance?"

Kelayna looked away. She was shaking badly, he saw, and the courage it must have taken for her to return here was beyond his power to imagine. "I couldn't leave you to die, my lord," she whispered.

Sevarin reached down to help Yozerf. "Dearest gods ...*monsters*. Can you walk?"

Yozerf accepted the proffered hand. The room swayed crazily as he rose by stages. His abused body protested "it needed sleep and inactivity to heal itself, not more pain. For a moment, he thought he would throw up, although his stomach had already been emptied during the worse moments of the torture.

You can't let them down by passing out now, he told himself angrily. For the gods' sakes, try to be like Kelayna.

The room steadied a little. Taking a deep breath, he replied, "Have I some other choice?"

* * * *

They managed to make it to the first level of the keep without being seen. As they staggered past the small guardroom off the dungeon hallway, Yozerf glanced worriedly inside, wondering why no one had rushed out to stop them. Four guardsmen sat slumped over a game of runes. Two lay facedown on the table, while the other two lolled limply over the backs of their chairs, their throats slit. Four wine cups sat on the table, and Yozerf guessed that whatever poison had been put in their drinks had worked quick enough to keep them from fighting back against even someone as untrained in violence as Sevarin.

It's never wise to anger the servants, he thought, more than a little light-headed.

Sevarin half-supported him the entire time. Once they were clear of the dungeon stair, however, Yozerf transferred his weight to the stone wall. Looking carefully at the corridor about them, at the scene visible through the window at one end, he thought he could roughly guess where they were in relation to the other parts of the keep. Not with certainty, given the maze-like convolutions of Kellsjard, but close enough for his purpose.

Kelayna glanced anxiously over her shoulder. "My lord, I know you need rest, but"

He held up a hand, forestalling any further words on her part. "Listen to me carefully, both of you. I want you to leave the keep, now. Run, as far and as fast as you can. Disappear, and never return."

She stared at him, bewildered. "But ... aren't you coming as well?"

Grief touched him unexpectedly. "I can't."

"But they'll kill you if you stay!"

He closed his eyes against the sight of her anguish and confusion. By all rights, he knew that he should take her advice and flee. But Suchen's face arose in his memory like a ghost: open, laughing, and trusting.

Staafoon had claimed that she knew of her lover's perfidy and joined him in his hatred for Yozerf. And yet, he remembered the last words that she had spoken to him, begging him to believe in her. When it came

to a choice between her word and Staaфон's, there was no choice at all.

"It's odd," he murmured wistfully. "When I first came here, I thought that this might be a place of new beginnings for me. But now I know that it is but a place of endings." He sighed. "Either I or the traitor will die before the next dawn. Probably both of us. But whatever the outcome, it will all be done with at last."

Kelayna's eyes widened. "You know who the traitor is?"

Yozerf turned and made for the window at the end of the hall. "I think so. That, or hatred and the need for revenge have blinded me. I don't really care which."

* * * *

Suchen paced the confines of her room like a prisoner measuring the dimensions of her cell. The day had dragged by with agonizing slowness as she formulated her plan for rescuing Yozerf. Her mind refused to keep itself on Kellsjard's accounts, so she sought anything that would keep her hands busy. From sharpening and re-sharpening her sword, she had gone to mending all her damaged clothing, then to polishing her boots, then to straightening the room ... anything to make the time go more quickly.

A bell tolled dolefully from a grim tower perched oddly atop a wing of the keep originally built in a far lighter and more airy style. Relieved that the dinner hour had finally arrived, she started immediately for her door—only to be brought up short by a knock on the other side.

Staaфон was there, dressed in a tunic of plum silk and a cloak lined with ermine. His jeweled dagger hung proudly from his belt. A broad smile stretched across his face at the sight of her. "Ah, Suchen—I thought I'd come escort you to dinner." He glanced about her room, as if searching for something. "Perhaps you might wear the gown I bought for you?"

She blinked at him incredulously. Wear the gown? "Staaфон—what about Yozerf?" she demanded.

Staaфон looked uncomfortable. "Ah, yes, him. Perhaps we could discuss it while we dine?"

A chill gripped Suchen's heart, and she considered summoning Gless and Uzco and carrying out her rescue plan now. But its success—tenuous at best—depended on the deserted corridors and empty stables found only in the depths of night. Grinding her teeth, she nodded and quickly walked out the door still wearing her everyday clothes.

* * * *

Yozerf's foot slipped on stone made slick by rain. His fingers tightened convulsively on the gargoyles he was using to haul himself up to the roofline. Water poured past him out of their mouths, spilling into the dark chasm of one of Kellsjard's many hidden courtyards.

Pain seared his back, points of fire awakened by every raindrop. Abused muscles shook from the strain of use. Broken ribs ground together, drawing short, involuntary gasps from him with every movement. Gritting his teeth against anguish and weariness, he raised his foot and placed it more carefully atop the head of the lowest of the nest of gargoyles. He had little time left before his escape was discovered, but anything less than absolute caution would undoubtedly send him plunging to his death. The twin goads, to hurry up and to slow down, tore at his nerves.

Taking a deep breath and forcing himself to calm, he continued his upward climb. By the time he reached the relative safety of the roof, his over-taxed body was shaking from the cold and wet. His breath puffed out in front of him in an icy plume, and his hands trembled visibly as water dripped from them.

Around him, chimneys belched smoke into the frosty air, as if they were vents opening onto Hel's domain. He stumbled along the sloping slate roof, half-leapt and half-fell across a narrow gap, levered himself up onto a higher roof sheathed in copper plates, and finally crept down over ceramic tiles. A waterspout offered itself as a ladder, and he clambered slowly down it, until he was within reach of the window he sought.

The window was latched, but a quick blow shattered one of the expensive glass panes. The shards slashed the back of his hand, but he was past caring about anything but getting out of the cold. Unlatching the window, he slipped inside, dripping wet and shivering. His legs gave out beneath him, and he fell to his knees.

Blessed warmth bathed his face and hands, radiating from a banked fire in the hearth. Its ruddy glow lit the confines of the bedchamber, draping the corners in shadow. Deep rugs covered the floors, soft and inviting. Gold glittered dully from a gilded carafe, from the rings that held back the bed curtains, from the solid mass of a seal. The air smelled heavily of patchouli, but the odor was underlain with the reek of bitter incense, too faint for human senses.

He closed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to collapse. He lost track of time for a moment, found himself blinking back to consciousness on the expensive rug. He didn't want to get up, he thought dully. He only wanted to sleep.

Somehow, he forced himself to his feet. He scented no other humans in the outer chambers, nor heard them, but it was impossible to be certain. Moving with what stealth he could manage in his present condition, he set about searching the room.

* * * *

Dinner in the great hall was yet another grim affair. The guards who stood watch along the walls looked preoccupied, as did the servants bringing out the meal. Thane Ormond had taken Auglar's chair at the head of the table, Tyassar and Fremont flanking him. There was an unpleasant glitter of satisfaction in Ormond's eyes as he surveyed the gathering.

Once the servants had finished their duties, the thane rose to his feet. Silence fell immediately, even before one of his personal servants rang the gong, which stood nearby for such occasions. An icy hand gripped Suchen's belly, and she exchanged worried glances with the Sworn. At her right hand, Staafon looked oddly resigned, as if he knew what Ormond would say.

He wouldn't answer my questions about Yozerfâ€™oh godsâ€™

"I have news this night which is both grim and joyous," Ormond said in a voice that suggested he found it mostly the latter. "We have found the assassin who attacked Lord Auglar."

An uneasy murmur went through the crowd. Suchen reached for her sword hilt but found Staafon's hand suddenly on hers, fouling her grip. His blandly handsome face wore a look of pity like an ill-fitting garment.

"The Aclyte called Yozerf Jonaglirâ€™sometimes known under the alias Yozerf Trihychylâ€™has made a full confession of his misdeeds. We also have reason to believe that he did not act alone, but in concert with others of his race, and with Lady Sifya."

Jonaglir?

Gasps of horror rang through the room. Suchen wanted to leap to her feet, scream it wasn't true, and demand to know what had been done to Yozerf. But instead she sat frozen, as if all her limbs had turned

to wood and taken root.

Ormond nodded gravely in response to the murmurs. "Judgment has not been passed on the Lady Sifya as of yet—I alone do not have the sanction to do so—but the traitorous Aclyte has been condemned to death by hanging. The execution will take place tomorrow at dawn. Sadly, all our means were unable to pry the secret of Lord Auglar's bewitchment from the criminal. I pray only that the betrayer's death frees our lord from the spell."

Ormond made as if to sit down once again. Staafon rose quickly to his feet, a slight frown pursing his lips. "My lord, if I may." Ormond nodded, and Staafon gave a small bow in his direction. "I wish to add that, in the Aclyte's confession, it is clearly stated that neither the Sworn nor Steward Keblava realized that they were harboring a traitor in their midst. They are all completely innocent."

Ormond looked vaguely irritated, but nodded his agreement. With a quick smile, Staafon seated himself. Instantly, the loud buzz of conversation descended on the room.

"This is terrible!" exclaimed Trethya. Her handmaid and protector, Elfwyn, looked none too happy about it either, and Suchen recalled that the woman was Sifya's cousin.

Buudi stared blankly down at the meat congealing untouched on his plate. "That it is, my lady," he whispered, horrified by the turn events had taken.

Trethya hesitated, then got up and came around to stand close to Suchen. "Steward, I ... I want to come with you tonight. I won't stand by and watch them kill Yozerf."

Suchen looked into her delicate face, startled by the determination she found there. "Lady Trethya, I thank you, but—you have to be protected," she murmured in a low voice which carried no further than Buudi and Staafon. "If you're killed, then none of this means anything—we'll have no one to stand against the Council and bear witness to what they've done to Queen Rozah."

Trethya's small hands balled into fists. "I won't stand by! I won't let others pay for my life with theirs—not when there's a choice!"

"Trethya, I—" Suchen began.

"Suchen isn't going anyway," Staafon said at the same time.

Shocked, Suchen twisted about to stare up at his face. He frowned, clearly puzzled by her reaction. "You aren't, are you? How could you even think it? Suchen, the man is a condemned traitor. I was there for his confession myself! He tried to kill Lord Auglar—surely you aren't considering setting him free to try again!"

Suchen shook her head, pulling back from him. "I can't believe Yozerf would do such a thing."

"Why not? I'm sorry you judged him wrongly, Suchen, truly I am. But the man *is* a criminal, and he *will* be executed." Staafon laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "Suchen, please, I'm begging you—think of yourself for a moment. I made certain that your name and Peddock's were both cleared. I did everything I could to preserve our future. Now I'm asking you to do the same."

A dreadful suspicion whispered in her mind. "What future do you mean?"

A slight smile crossed his lips. "Suchen, this ... this isn't exactly the most appropriate setting, but, well, it's hardly a surprise either, is it? I mean, we've always assumed that we would wed—and, after my last trip south and my triumphs there, there's nothing to stop us." His hands enfolded hers tenderly.

Suchen ripped her fingers violently from his grasp and jerked to her feet so quickly that she slammed a knee into the bench. "We've always assumed?" she demanded. "Assumed?™ This isn't the sort of thing one ~assumes,™ Staafon, not when there's been no arrangements made beforehand."

The murmur of talk died down all around the table as curious eyes turned to the confrontation. Staafon glanced about nervously, then attempted a weak chuckle. "Of course not" "forgive me, dearest. I shouldn't forget that these things are important to a woman. So, then" "Suchen Keblava, will you be my wife?"

"No!"

Shock drained all the color from his face, and he gaped at her like a man who, believing he has won it all, suddenly finds his victory snatched away. "N" "no?" he echoed incredulously. "But" "but why not?"

Her lips thinned into a grim line. Staafon could have chosen a more private setting for this" "but it had, after all, been his choice.

"I can't marry you, Staafon ... because I'm in love with someone else."

The great doors of the hall slammed back, striking the walls with a loud crash. Eyes were torn from the confrontation between Suchen and Staafon, and the sound of talk died away into silence as everyone strained to see who entered.

The measured tread of boots sounded clear in the silence. Torchlight set fire to crimson hair, outlined a white sliver of face, and reflected eerily in a single eye. Like an actor passing from darkness onto the lit stage, Yozerf strode into the room.

Suchen nearly cried out at the sight of him. There was no questioning what methods Ormond" and Staafon" had used to extract his confession. Black bruises ringed both eyes, sealing one nearly shut. His lips were split and swollen, crusted with dried blood. More bruises, livid against his pale skin, showed on cheekbones and throat, and the way that he moved suggested cracked or broken ribs.

His shirt was gone, revealing skin gone black and purple from bruises. His back was nothing but a mat of clotted blood and hair. A few strips of skin yet hung loose, but otherwise had been completely flayed off.

Yozerf stumbled slightly and came to a swaying halt, midway to the bottom two tables. One white hand rose and pointed directly at Staafon. "You," he hissed in a voice like something from the grave.

Staafon recoiled slightly. "G-guards!" he exclaimed, grasping at composure. "The traitor has escaped! Arrest him!"

"No!" protested Suchen, reaching for her sword.

Yozerf laughed. It was a hoarse sound, from a throat scraped raw from screaming, and it held no trace of sanity. His gray eyes gleamed maniacally as he fixed them on Staafon. "Haven't you heard, Staafon?" he cried. "It's the witching hour! Time for the masks to come off!"

The guards ground to a halt, looking distinctly nervous at the idea of approaching a madman. Yozerf grinned insanely and made a sweeping gesture towards the door. From the other side came the sound of two sets of footsteps.

Auglar stepped into the light. He was still dressed in his sweat-stiff nightshirt, and his skin was pale from illness. Even so, he wore a sword girded about his waist, and his blue eyes were grim.

He shot a withering glance at the guards. "Stop right there," he ordered, his voice a ghost of its former self. "Unless you intend on committing treason against me to my face." Although the words were aimed at the guards, he turned his gaze on Ormond.

Ormond looked nearly as pale as his lord. "Why" this is wonderful! he exclaimed, standing quickly and stepping away from the high seat. "How did you recover?"

Jiara emerged from where she had stood close behind Auglar in the shadow of the doorway. The healer mage folded her arms across her chest and shot Staafon a baleful glare. "Your condemned traitor™ managed to escape the assassin you sent to kill him in his cell. Instead of turning tail and running like a sensible person, he went to the quarters of one Staafon Iglan, where he found a doll made from Auglar's hair and clothing. He brought the effigy to me, and it was a simple matter to break the enchantment which linked it to Lord Auglar, thus freeing him from its influence."

Staafon, a traitor? Suchen shook her head, unable to believe. He was insensitive and boring, and she didn't love him, but at the same time she had never seen any true malevolence in him before now.

Staafon pointed frantically at Yozerf. "No! Don't you see? He planned this all along to discredit me! He wouldn't tell us where he hid the spell doll so he could go back later and claim to have found it in my quarters!"

Auglar arched a black brow. "And endured such torture as you see here just to do so? He refused Jiara's healing so that all could see your cruelty, Staafon. I don't think that anyone can seriously doubt Yozerf's story."

"Someone else, then. You can't really think that I'm the traitor" I can account for my whereabouts during the time Lord Auglar fell ill. He twisted about on the bench, eyes pleading. "Tell them, Suchen."

She hesitated, and then nodded once, sharply. "It's true. He was with me."

Yozerf looked away, as if she had stabbed him in the heart.

"It doesn't matter, Staafon," Jiara said, voice twisted with anger and hate. "I'm not so incompetent as you seem to think me. Once I had the spell doll in hand, I could learn all about its magic. The body itself had been spelled already by a magician when you brought it here" it only needed the addition of hair and clothing from the victim to be activated. But, once the spell *was* begun, it was deliberately cast to wait a while before taking hold. Undoubtedly to give you the chance to find an alibi."

Suchen remembered how insistent he had been that night, how determined to get into her bed despite her protests of weariness. At the time, she had thought it mere lust, natural after a long separation.

"You left during dinner that night," she whispered. "You said your horse was sick" but you really went to cast the spell."

Auglar made a disgusted motion. "Guards, arrest Staafon."

Staafon's face warped with desperation and despair. With a wild cry, he twisted out of his seat and lunged across the bench. One hand locked about Trethya's thin arm, while the other snatched the dagger from his belt.

"Staafon, no" Buudi shouted.

"Stop!" The dagger's point pricked the base of Trethya's throat. "Come any closer, and she dies!"

Suchen froze, her sword half-cleared from its sheath. The Sworn sat as if turned to stone at the table, and the guards who had been drawing close hesitated and looked to Auglar. His face a mask of rage, the young lord made an angry gesture for them to be still.

Trethya's brown eyes were wide with terror, and her pulse fluttered visibly at the base of her throat. "Don't be a fool, Staafon," she said, voice trembling with fear. "The Council doesn't want me dead. If you kill me now, they'll destroy you. You *know* that."

Suchen watched Staafon's face, searching it for all the nuances she had once known. What she saw made her spirits sink. "He's already failed them," she murmured. "They'll kill him anyway. It doesn't matter what he does."

"Be silent, both of you," Staafon snarled, jerking roughly at Trethya's arm. His chin motioned sharply in Auglar's direction. "You know this maze better than anyone. Take us out of here by the quickest route, or I'll slit her throat."

Auglar nodded tautly. Staafon started forwards, Trethya clutched tight to his side. Light glittered off the blade at her throat, and she winced. The crowd parted before them in silence, then closed behind.

Staafon and his hostage led the way out of the great hall, Auglar following. At some signal Suchen did not see, the guards dispersed as if by magic—probably going to stand watch over all the exits from the keep. The Sworn drew into a tight knot about Auglar. Yozerf trailed them all like a wounded shadow.

They came to a junction of halls. "Right, left, or straight?" Staafon demanded, pressing the knife closer to Trethya's throat.

Auglar's lips thinned. "Straight."

"Down the staircase, or along the hall?"

"Down."

"Left or right?"

"Right."

Gradually, Suchen began to realize that Auglar was not guiding them to an exit. Staafon did not know the byways of the keep well. Although they were moving in the general direction of the main courtyard and headed slowly downward, the hill sloped sharply enough that they would not emerge on the ground floor.

Nor was she wrong. Staafon pushed open a door at the end of the corridor, revealing a curtain of drenching rain. Dragging Trethya after him, he moved out onto the rough flagstones—then stopped with a cry of fury. Visible only a few feet beyond him was the sudden edge of a tower roof, a full three stories above the courtyard.

Auglar and the Sworn stepped out into the rain. Staafon spun to face them, his face twisted with rage. "Damn you! If you think this trick will work, you're wrong! I'll kill her now!"

He pressed the knife against Trethya's throat, and a thin rivulet of blood trickled down her bodice, mixing with the rain. She let out a gasp of pain and closed her eyes.

"No, you won't," Auglar replied reasonably. "Because if you do, we'll kill you. If you let her go now, I promise to simply imprison you."

Staaфон laughed, an ugly sound that held a note of frantic desperation to it. "I'm no fool, Auglar. I'm going free from here, or else she and I both die. Those are your only choices."

"Then we have a stalemate."

Suchen drew a deep breath, hoping that perhaps she could reason with Staaфон, could say something to remind him of the love and friendship that had once existed between them. After her rejection of him in the great hall, she wasn't certain any words of hers could do anything save worsen the situation, but there seemed no alternative.

But, before she could speak, something dark brushed by her. Startled, she turned, only to see Yozerf limp past the Sworn, past Auglar, and head directly for Staaфон and Trethya. Buudi made a faint noise of protest, which Yozerf utterly ignored. There was an odd determination to his bearing, as if nothing anyone could say or do would change whatever decision he had made in silence.

Staaфон tilted the knife warningly. "Stop there, Aclyte. Not even you are insane enough to risk her life."

Yozerf halted. The rain had soaked his thick hair, turning it the color of dried blood. His pale skin gleamed faintly in the light streaming from the many windows of the keep above and below them. A slow, vulpine grin twisted his split and swollen lips. "Insane?" he queried in a fearfully calm voice. His hands lifted, palms out, and Suchen saw that the flesh between wrist and elbow on either arm was covered with dozens of vicious, red scars. "Sanity and I are barely on speaking terms. Try again."

Staaфон's look of conviction faltered. Yozerf took another step forwards, like a predator sensing that his prey tires. Staaфон jerked roughly at Trethya, crushing her to his sodden doublet. "Stop! I said no closer!"

Yozerf smiled mockingly. "What?" afraid of me, Staaфон? Now that you don't have ten guards standing ready to slit my throat at your command? He spread his arms to either side dramatically. "I'm unarmed" your lackeys confiscated all my weapons. Or are you afraid I have a dagger hidden in my boot?"

So saying, he bent and swiftly unbuckled both boots, flinging them aside. Suchen watched in confusion, unable to fathom what gambit Yozerf had in mind. *If he has anything in his mind at all. That look in his eye* "I've heard it said that men sometimes go mad from torture, and, gods, but I don't think he was too stable to begin with.

Staaфон's face had gone nearly as pale as Yozerf's. "I said stop!" he shouted. "Damn you, you are insane!"

Yozerf chuckled softly. His head bowed slightly, so that shadows closed over his features, hiding them from sight. "You seem rather fond of that accusation. Very well then" look upon the face of madness."

And he lifted his head back into the light.

Golden wolf-eyes glittered, made horrid by their juxtaposition with his smooth, white skin, his beautiful features. Long, ivory fangs protruded from lengthened jaws, forcing his lips back into a hideous snarl. His hands twisted, nails shortening into stubby, black claws. A low growl issued from his throat, erupting suddenly into a full-fledged wolf howl.

Staaфон screamed in terror. Panicked beyond reason, he shoved Trethya roughly from him, sending her

sprawling across the flagstones. His hand shook wildly as he lifted his dagger in a feeble attempt to ward off the horror coming for him.

Yozerf sprang. Crimson hair shortened, dissolved into gray fur. Limbs altered their proportions, kicking free of the black breeks with a practiced move. His features shifted smoothly into a long muzzle, ears sliding up to the top of his head.

Yozerf sprangâ€”but it was the enormous, gray wolf that came down.

Staaфон shrieked again and struck wildly with his dagger as the wolf leapt for his throat. Luck was with Staaфон. The blade slashed down past the ferocious teeth and buried itself in the wolf's shoulder.

The creature let out an animal wail of pain, which fluctuated suddenly, escalating into an all-too-human cry. Even as Suchen watched in frozen horror, Yozerf's shape wavered wildly, as if control over it was shattered by the agony inflicted by the knife. First golden eyes stared pain-stricken into Staaфон's face, then gray. Paws lengthened into fingers, then back to paws. Silver fur faded, revealing scarred white skin.

Shock suffused Staaфон's features, that his blind strike had been true. Then, slowly, it gave way to a look of maddened triumph. With a victorious yell, he wrenched the blood-drenched knife from Yozerf's shoulderâ€”and buried it hilt-deep in the shape-changer's chest.

Yozerf froze, his wild shifting finished, as if the knife had pinned him in Aclytese form. A look of terrible resignation passed over his features, cutting even through pain. For a moment he met Staaфон's expression of lunatic victory with one of wistful sorrow.

With the last of his life, Yozerf hurled his weight forwards. Caught off-balance, Staaфон took a single step backâ€”and his foot came down just past the edge of the parapet.

He screamed, arms wind-milling madly for a single second that seared itself in Suchen's sight. Then, Staaфон's final shriek of terror trailing after, both combatants plunged over the edge of the tower.

"No!â€” Broken from the paralysis of fear, shock, and horror, Suchen hurled herself to the edge of the parapet. Far below, two broken figures lay sprawled unmoving in the rain. Guards raced across the courtyard towards them, shouting in surprise.

Buudi came up beside her. His lined face had gone pale, and a sort of numbness filled his earth-colored eyes. Still, he reached out a comforting hand to her shoulder. â€œDon't look, Suchen,â€” he murmured hoarsely. â€œDon't look."

"Noâ€”it isn't true, isn't possible,â€” she whispered. Wrenching herself from his grasp, she ran for the door leading back into Kellsjard.

Her frantic dash through the keep's mazelike hallways blurred in her mind. The next thing she knew, she burst out a door into the icy rain pelting the courtyard. Staaфон's body lay nearby; ignoring it, she rushed past to where Jiara crouched over Yozerf.

She knew he was dead the moment she drew close enough to see his eyes. They were open, staring blankly up at the sky. The rain filled them up and spilled over down his cheeks like tears. Someoneâ€”Jiara probablyâ€”had wrenched the dagger from the ugly wound in his chest. His legs and back bent at odd angles, the bones shattered by the fall.

Devastation struck her, like a sudden blow to her belly that robbed her of breath. Her hands pressed numbly against her lips, as if to hold in a scream which, once loosed, would never end. Her knees buckled, and she dropped to the ground by his head. Cobblestones ripped through her breeks and

gashed the flesh beneath, but she never even felt it. Bending over Yozerf's inert body, she sobbed helplessly, as if the most precious thing she had ever possessed had been taken away forever.

* * * *

He was falling and falling and falling through rushing wind and darkness and silence. There was a scent of mountains, of snow, of night, and he tried to unfurl his wings, but they were broken, and the winds ripped past without heed.

And then a woman was there, somehow, watching him in the darkness. Her brown hair was a storm about her head, half-obscuring exquisite elfin features. She wore clothes like nothing he'd ever seen before, a style and cut that no Jenelese would ever don. And her eyes ... her eyes were gray.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She smiled and held out her hand. "Sorrow."

"Your eyes ... you're Jonaglir. I thought there were only two of us left in the world. Who are you?"

"Pain."

"Who are you?"

"Terror."

"Who are you?"

"Vengeance."

He took her hand. And stopped falling.

* * * *

Jiara poured her healer's power into Yozerf's abused body. Skin knitted together, bones shifted and sealed, and the dagger wound piercing his heart closed. Buudi appeared out of the rain, the other Sworn close behind him, and dropped down by the healer. "Will he be all right?" he asked anxiously.

She ground her teeth together in frustration. "Damn it! I've got his body healed, but his spirit has fled. I can feel it ... not gone fully into death, but somewhere else." A puzzled line appeared between her brows, and she pressed her hands tighter against his cooling body. "And there's something—a link, leading back here..."

Abruptly, she let go of Yozerf and closed her hand on Suchen's wrist. "You! It leads back to you!"

Suchen stared blankly as confusion battled its way through overwhelming grief. "What? I don't understand what you're—"

"There isn't much time left," Jiara interrupted harshly. "If you can just touch him, I can reach through you and bring him back. But hurry!" Her hands came up, closed on either side of Suchen's face, and she leaned forwards so that their foreheads pressed together.

"What?" Suchen began—and then magic surged through Jiara's touch, and Kellsjard dissolved from around her.

* * * *

Suchen stood in the midst of a great valley. Even though it was night, everything seemed to be bathed in a sourceless, silver radiance that allowed her to see perfectly. Huge mountains such as she had never

imagined loomed up against the stars, their silhouettes like jagged daggers. Thick, dark forests covered their sides up to the snow line, breathing out the scent of evergreens. Cold wind funneled down between the mountains'™ titan bulks, but strangely failed to touch Suchen's hair or clothing.

The valley she stood in was largely filled up by glacial ice. Although she thought a thick layer of snow should have covered it, for some reason it lay scoured clean so that she could look into its depths. Peering down into the ice beneath her feet, and ahead to where it sloped up towards the mountainous end of the valley, she became aware of huge shadows deep within. There were creatures frozen inside the glacier, she realized, trapped suddenly so that their bodies were preserved. She could make out triangular heads crowned by two sets of backswept horns. Long necks stretched sinuously down to lean bodies. Talon-tipped paws, the front set looking eerily like human hands, raised as if to break free of the frozen prison. Long tails curled about in positions of agony. And enormous, bat-like wings unfurled from muscular shoulders, straining out as if the creatures had sought to fly free too late.

They were dragons, Suchen realized'™there was no other thing they could be. Legend told that Jahcgroth had used his magic to trap them in a lake of ice. This must be the site of that final defeat.

A faint sound reached her ears, like the far-off roaring of some tremendous beast. Looking up, she let out a soft gasp. Perched on the peaks surrounding the valley were ephemeral shapes, as if the dragons in the glacier had somehow cast their shadows onto the mountaintops. She drew back, startled and a little afraid.

"Don't be frightened'™they're only ghosts," said a familiar voice.

She turned, saw Yozerf walking slowly across the ice towards her. His black clothing hung about him in tatters, fluttering in the breeze. His boots were gone, and his feet left a trail of bloody prints stretching out behind. Long, crimson hair blew wildly about his face, framing a pair of golden wolf-eyes. From his shoulders rose the dragon wings of her dream, save that now they were shattered. The leathery, black skin of the wing sails hung loose in blood-soaked strips, and bits of white bone protruded here and there from the twisted ruin.

There was an Aclytese woman behind him, walking right on his heels, so that Suchen only glimpsed her face from over his shoulder. She was beautiful, Suchen thought, but madness glittered hard and bright in the depths of her gray eyes.

Yozerf stopped a few feet away from Suchen, giving no sign that he even knew the woman was there. Instead he looked sadly at the shapes in the ice. "They are my ancestors," he murmured. "They've been calling me to this place for a long time now." He turned to Suchen curiously. "But what are you doing here?"

She held out her hands and took a step towards him. "I've come to take you back."

He shook his head, moving quickly away. "No! No."

"Revenge," the woman behind him said, as if reminding him of something.

He shook his head. "No. Not even for that."

Fear and grief squeezed a tight fist about Suchen's heart. "Please, Yozerf'™there isn't much time. Come back with me. Jiara's healed your body. Come back."

An expression of anguished sorrow transformed his face. "Come back to what?" he cried, spreading his arms to either side. "To more sorrow, more pain?" He closed his eyes wearily.

"I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of grief. Let me go."

She wanted to go to him, hold him, offer whatever comfort she could. More than anything, she wanted to hear him say that it wasn't true—that there was at least one thing, one person, worth returning for.

"Is there no joy as well?" she asked in a small voice.

A sad smile curved his lips. "Only bittersweet." The woman behind him nodded agreement. "Why do you ask these things of me?"

"Because I don't want to lose you," Suchen whispered, blinking back a film of tears. "Because if you don't return with me ... then I don't know what could ever possibly fill the void in my life that you'd leave behind."

He stared at her, looking both surprised and confused. Then his eyes closed, as if in pain, and he took a deep breath. "Damn you, Suchen Keblava," he said gently. "You would offer me the one thing I've never been able to resist, even knowing better."

"What is that?"

"Hope."

He reached out towards her, like a drowning man. She flung her arms about him, pulling him tight against her, while his battered wings thundered in the air about them.

* * * *

Suchen gasped wildly, lungs heaving as if she had not breathed in minutes. Beside her, Jiara yelled triumphantly, body stiffening as she clasped her hands to either side of Yozerf's head. Something loosed a single cry, like the scream of a stooping hawk, followed an instant later by what sounded eerily like a woman's laughter. A golden aura surrounded Jiara's touch for a moment, and then seemed to sink into Yozerf's flesh, leaving no trace behind.

Yozerf's chest lifted, sucking in life-giving breath. His gray eyes blinked wildly to clear the rain away. Suchen grabbed his hand, pressing it over her heart, and for a moment he focused only on her.

Jiara reached out and pressed a single finger to his forehead. His eyes closed, all the tension abruptly going out of his body. Suchen gasped, clutching tighter to his cold fingers.

"I've sent him to sleep," Jiara explained wearily. "Healing depletes the body's reserves, and right now rest is the only thing that can replenish them." She stood creakily, like an old woman, and gratefully accepted a guard's offer of an arm. "Take him to his room and get him warm—this rain is nearly ice. I'm going to go collapse."

She started away, still leaning on the solicitous guard, then suddenly stopped. Her weary eyes sought out Suchen's gaze. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "But it's too late for Staafon. I had to make a choice. Even if you don't understand right now, I suspect that someday you'll be glad that I chose as I did."

Suchen looked down at Yozerf's face. The bruises were gone, the skin smooth and whole once more. Very tenderly, she laid the back of her hand along one cold cheek. "I'm glad now."

A makeshift stretcher of cloaks and spears was quickly put together, and Yozerf was lifted onto it. Suchen rose to her feet, following the litter inside. As she prepared to trail the cursing bearers up the steep, narrow stair leading to Yozerf's quarters, Peddock put a restraining hand to her shoulder. She

turned with a distracted frown, saw the rest of the Sworn watching her with concern.

"Maybe you should go to bed yourself, Suchen," Peddock suggested gently. His broad face was filled with love and worry. "This hasn't been easy for any of us, especially you. I can hardly even comprehend what's happened right now." "I'm certain that you must feel the same."

She shook her head, glancing worriedly after the disappearing litter. "No. I'm going with him."

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Suchen, I don't think that's a good idea. You need rest, need time to think. What happened with Staafo?"

"Has nothing to do with this," she snapped, nerves fraying. "Weren't you even listening to me in the great hall?"

Peddock's face paled, freckles standing out stark. "By the gods, Suchen," he's a Wolfkin!" he hissed, too low for anyone other than the Sworn to hear.

Suchen pressed her lips into a tight line and pulled away from Peddock's grasp. "I haven't forgotten. I just don't care."

"I failed Yozerf once already, Peddock. We all did. We left him alone in the hands of his enemies, and he nearly died for that. I'll be damned if I'll leave his side now, until I'm absolutely certain he's all right."

She turned away from them all and headed up the stair. Once she reached Yozerf's quarters, she discovered Jiara's two assistants—neither of them mages, but both skilled enough physicians—tucking Yozerf into bed. They had washed the blood from his skin, mouth, and hair. The fire had been built up high, and warmth was beginning to fight through the chill that pervaded the room.

After Suchen refused their offer of a sleeping draught, they left her alone to sit watch over Yozerf. She stood for a long time beside the bed, peering at him through the drawn-back curtains. The Aclyte's skin was so pale that it looked nearly translucent, and his delicate features seemed oddly fragile. She tried to tell herself that he had to be strong to have survived thus far. That Jiara had done her work well, and he would not die suddenly in the night. But his near pass with death earlier had shaken her deeply, and it was impossible to see him so still and not be afraid.

Eventually, she gently drew the curtains closed, leaving only a crack to look through. The heavy chair she dragged in from the outer room scraped loudly on the floor but did not wake him. Propping her feet up on a hassock, she wrapped her arms about herself for warmth.

The lone candle beside the bed burned down slowly, creating fanciful wax stalactites down the sides of the iron holder. The keep settled down to sleep, and only the occasional cries of the watch disturbed the silence. The rain turned to snow sometime after midnight, white flakes falling past the windows like ghosts. Lulled by the stillness and the even sound of Yozerf's breathing, Suchen closed her eyes and fell asleep.

* * * *

Suchen drifted slowly up from a deep ocean of dreams. Something soft and warm enfolded her body, and she snuggled deeply into its folds. It smelled pleasantly of wool, candle smoke, leather, and horse, and she breathed in with a contented sigh. Gradually, as sleep lost its hold, she became aware of the diffuse light of a wintry day against her eyelids.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. She was still sitting in the chair by Yozerf's bed, but someone had taken his voluminous black cloak and tucked it snugly about her neck and arms. She drew it closer

against the chill of the room, grateful that its warmth had comforted her as she slept. Wondering who had given it to her, she sat up straighter in the chair and saw that the bed was empty.

He was in the outer room, dressed as if for travel, his pack leaning limply against his feet. He stood by the window, head resting against the icy-cold panes, as if he'd had to pause a moment to rest.

"W-where are you going?" she asked, bewildered by the pack.

He turned towards her, his face drawn with a mixture of grief and aching weariness. "I don't know. Somewhere away from here." His mouth tightened and he picked up the pack, slinging it over his shoulder. "I should have been away before this."

Her heart speeded up in fear. "But why? Why are you leaving? Is it ... because you think we all betrayed you?"

She saw him reach for the coldness that he had always used to keep everyone at arm's length. "I am no fool, steward. That Auglar will at least let me keep my life, I have no doubt. But best I leave now, before I am driven out."

"Because of what you are?"

Bitterness flooded his eyes. "I am Wolfkin. You, Trethya, and the Sworn all saw it. I suppose I should count myself lucky that I had just saved a lord's life; otherwise, I'm sure we would have heard voices clamoring to see me burned at the stake by now. As it is, I prefer not to press my luck."

He started for the door. For an instant, Suchen simply stood and stared, unable to believe this was happening. Then she found her composure. "You don't fool me, Yozerf," she called after him.

He stopped at the challenge in her voice. "I don't know what you mean." They might have been strangers for all the warmth in his words.

"You aren't afraid of being killed for what you are. Not here and now, at any rate. You're afraid of staying long enough to see us reject you for it."

He held himself very still, not looking at her. "There is no point to this conversation."

"Then if you must go, at least wait long enough for me to get my things."

That got his attention. "What?"

Taking a deep breath, she crossed the room to him and laid her hand gently on his sleeve. The muscles beneath her fingers felt taut as wires. "I don't want you to go," she said quietly, meeting his silvery gaze. "But if you do ... then I don't want to spend all the nights of my life looking out the window, wondering where you are and what has happened to you. So if you will not stay with me, then I must come with you."

Surprise and uncertainly colored his gaze. "What?" "what do you want of me?"

"Whatever you're able to give me," she replied, not knowing how deep the damage might run. She shrugged and smiled ruefully. "I love you, even if you are insane, and an Aclyte, and, gods help me, a Wolfkin to boot."

For a long moment, he only stared at her, perhaps doubting her sanity as well. Then he touched her hesitantly, fingers trailing across her jaw, the line of her cheek. She closed her eyes, felt the faint brush of

his breath across her skin a moment before he kissed her.

His lips were gentle and hesitant on hers. Passion rose in her, stronger than any need she had ever known, and she returned the kiss eagerly. Her fingers tangled in his hair as she wrapped her arms tight about him.

"Stay with me," she whispered.

He buried his face in her hair, and then kissed her again. "I will. Always."

Chapter 16

The light of late afternoon filtered in through the window, touching everything with a soft radiance. Snowflakes, oddly dark against the pale sky, drifted past silent as owls. The sight of their icy beauty made the warmth of banked coals and down coverlets seem all that much more comforting. Yozerf propped himself up on his elbow, studying the woman beside him in silence. She felt very small against him, almost fragile despite the wiry toughness that years of sword training and bitter Northern winters had lent her. An ugly scar cut across her side, just below one breast; she had been lucky that the long-ago blow hadn't killed her.

Weariness ached in his bones, cajoling him to put his head back down and seek the healing sleep his body so desperately craved. But black dreams, of falling and howling wolves, had chased him every time he started to doze, and watching her seemed infinitely preferable to that. Perhaps a part of him even feared that, should he truly sleep now, he would wake to find her gone, her presence but an ephemeral dream.

My love, he thought drowsily. *My mate*. He had the odd sense of having walked through a door that he had never even known existed until it shut behind him, cutting him off from a past he was only too glad to leave behind.

She stirred a little, eyes fluttering open. A languid smile crossed her face when she saw him watching her. "What are you looking at?"

"Beauty," he answered truthfully.

She grinned and thumped him lightly on the shoulder. "You're a lovely liar." Depthless blue eyes studied him thoughtfully. "You look awful."

"Not exactly the compliment I was hoping for."

"That isn't what I meant!" She made a mock-frown at him. "Back when we first met, I seem to recall telling Buudi that you were far too beautiful."

"How nice to know I inspired such trust in you."

"Right now, though," she went on, ignoring his comment, "you look rather more than half-starved. Is there a mirror in here?"

He nodded and reluctantly slid out from beneath the warm covers to open the wardrobe door. The polished bronze mirror on the inside revealed the wavy image of a rather pathetic scarecrow. In the space of two days, he had gone from skinny to pitifully thin. His face was gaunt, the sharp hollows of starvation showing from underneath skeletal cheekbones. His white skin stretched tight over bone, fat and muscle both burned away. When he had dressed earlier, he'd had to punch a new hole in his belt just to keep his breeks on.

"The healing," he acknowledged ruefully. Healing always did this, to a lesser or greater extent. Although the impetus for the magic came from the mage, the actual fuel for the process was drawn from the patient. It was as if the work of months of healing was accomplished in only a few moments, and, without enough food in the patient's belly to support such a feat, the body devoured itself. As if in acknowledgement, his stomach cramped with hunger.

She nodded, patting the blankets beside her invitingly. "Yes. But I've never seen it so extreme before."

Of course, I've never seen anyone brought back from the dead before, either." Her voice trembled a little on those last words.

"Nor I." He slid under the covers by her, thoughtfully turning his arms wrist-up. "And I've been healed before."

"What happened? You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

He shrugged uncomfortably. "It was a long time ago. Before I left Segg. I ... I don't know. For a while it seemed as though the world might be better off without me. I'd brought great harm on someone I loved very much. It didn't work" someone found me. I don't know how they stopped the bleeding in time, but they did. But I'd cut through muscle and tendon so that my hands were useless afterwards.

"A week later, Ax turned up. He'd saved my life before, as I've told you, and came by every once in a while to see how his property was doing. He said that healermages could only work with a wound before it began to close on its own; after a certain point, the body has to be left to its own devices. He said there was still time for me, but only if the scar tissue that had already formed was cut away first. He made me do it myself."

Suchen sucked in her breath, and Yozerf wondered if perhaps he had gone into a little too much detail. "At any rate, it worked. But he made damn sure that he left scars behind. A reminder, he said. I felt like I was starving afterwards, but we didn't have enough food to go around. The hunger stayed with me for a long time."

"Oh."

"It was, as I said, a long time ago."

She nodded, didn't speak for a long moment. "Yozerf ... about what happened last night ... I'm sorry. I blame myself for everything."

"How can you say that?"

She shook her head, unbound golden hair falling to hide her face from him. "If I had just told Staaфон to go to Hel the first night we got back here, a lot of this might not have happened."

"You had no way of knowing he was a traitor," Yozerf pointed out reasonably. "Everyone was fooled."

"I know. That isn't what I meant." She reached up, laid her fingertips lightly on the center of her chest. "Here, in my heart, I knew that Staaфон wasn't for me. That I had never really been in love with him and that I wasn't even interested in his physical companionship anymore." She smiled a little. "The truth is that, from the first moment I saw you coming through the flames at that inn in Diicus, there was no chance I would ever marry Staaфон.

"But in my head, I managed to convince myself not to be honest and leave him right away. I was afraid, I suppose. Afraid that someone as beautiful and dynamic as you could never be interested in a plain woman like me. Afraid that if I left Staaфон, no one else would ever want me. Which was stupid, since even when I was with him I was filled with such longing for something else..." Her voice trailed off, eyes momentarily unfocused, as if she peered at some far-off vision.

"It's all right, my love," he said quickly, slipping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her gently against him. A faint smile tugged at his lips. "He was here first, and I, an interloper. Even had I known how you felt, how could I have expected you to have simply come to my bed without ending things with

him first? Although I have to admit I was very jealous, I never blamed you for anything."

She refused to lean against him. "No, it isn't all right! If I had acted the way I should, none of the rest of this would have happened! Staafoon wouldn't have come out to the Hallows Night celebration to get me, and he wouldn't have framed you for his crimes." She covered her face with her hands, body shuddering. "Y-You wouldn't have suffered. Wouldn't have nearly d-died."

He pulled her close. For a moment she resisted, then collapsed against him. He leaned his cheek against her hair, rocked her quietly in his arms like a small child. "You don't know that. If you had spurned him and come to me, I doubt it would have made Staafoon's thoughts towards me any kinder. If anything had changed, it most likely would have been for the worse, not the better."

She was silent for a while, thinking. "Then you forgive me?" she finally asked in a small voice.

At the moment, he thought wryly, he would probably forgive her for destroying the entire kingdom. "Of course."

At that moment, a knock sounded on the outer door. "It's Jira!"

Yozerf's heart contracted. *Damn it no, not now, not so soon!*

"A moment!" called Suchen, unaware of his distress. She made as if to rise, then stopped. Her blue eyes were serious as they fixed on him.

"Gless, Uzco, Trethya, and I were coming for you," she said softly. "We had to wait" there was no way we could hope to rescue you before the keep settled down for the night. But we *were* coming. You weren't abandoned."

A surge of love and gratitude caught him unexpectedly. He reached out, caught her hand, and pulled it close to his heart. *That explains the assassin, then. Staafoon obviously knew what they were planning and wanted to make certain the only thing left for them to rescue was a corpse.* "Of course," he said, as if there could never have been any doubt.

She smiled at his display of confidence. Slithering quickly into her clothes, she went to open the outer door. The soft murmur of women's voices came to him: Jira asking how he was doing, then more pointedly how Suchen was doing. From the tone of her voice, Yozerf guessed that Suchen must have been in less than ideal shape the last time Jira had seen her, and it touched him deeply.

Jira stuck her head in the inner door, green eyes bright. Her brown curls had been drawn back from her face and knotted at the nape of her neck, and she wore the purple robe of her profession. "Good afternoon. Still alive, I see."

Dread filled Yozerf's heart. He nodded slightly, unconsciously tugging the covers a bit higher. The gesture didn't escape the healer, and her eyes twinkled. "I seem to recall that you were equally naked when I worked on you last night. Although I didn't exactly have the opportunity to admire the view, I don't remember noticing anything I haven't seen before."

Suchen grinned. Jira cast her a thoughtful look. "And *you* can stop looking so smug, Suchen Keblava. I read auras well enough to know what's been going on here." She waved a negating hand at Suchen's stifled protest. "Don't worry about me scolding you. It helps the healing process, believe it or not. The emotions affect the body, you know."

Suchen looked vaguely embarrassed. Under other circumstances, Yozerf imagined he would have found it amusing. Right now, however, his nerves were wound too taut. "Suchen, if you could excuse us for

a moment,â€• he said quietly.

"Of course.â€• She gestured vaguely in the direction of the hallway. â€œI need to go down to my quarters and change clothes anyway. Then maybe get some food."

He watched her leave with an ache in his heart. Then he straightened, pushing any thoughts of tenderness out of his mind. The look he gave Jiara was hard and piercing. â€œSo you've come. Very wellâ€•no half-veiled references to the truth. What is your price?"

She looked at him in puzzlement. â€œPrice? I don't understand. I came to see how you were doing."

His mouth thinned into a straight, harsh line. Was she toying with him? â€œI am familiar with healers, Mage Jiara. I know their ways. Ax once saved my life, and for that my life belonged to him, to do with as he would. I barely begin to free myself from his grasp, and ill fortune places me in yours.â€• He squared his shoulders, refusing to look away, refusing to plead with her. â€œYou own me. So tell meâ€•what is your price?"

Her face hardened suddenly, brows drawing together in anger. â€œI find it difficult to believe that a healer as great as Ax would abuse his power in such a way,â€• she said coldly, daring him to contradict her. â€œYou are obviously mistaken. We mages use our talents for the good of all, not for petty personal gain. I am in service to Lord Auglarâ€•in return for my help, he gives me food, shelter, and protection from those who don't see mages in quite so enlightened a fashion. There is no price beyond that."

The cold knot inside him loosened, though he fought to stay wary, telling himself it might all be a trick. Could Jiara really be so naive as to think Ax and others like him didn't prey upon their patients?

If so, it was only to his advantage. Bowing his head to hide a mocking smile, he said, â€œForgive me, Jiara. I misunderstood."

She hesitated, and then nodded sharply. â€œOf course.â€• Her voice relaxed into its normal rhythms. â€œNow, I came here to see how you're doing.â€• She moved over by him, motioned for him to sit forwards. Her hands came to rest flat against his back; old calluses covered her fingers, and he guessed that she had spent her childhood working hard in the fields. A faint feeling of warmth radiated out from her palms.

"You're in desperate need of food,â€• she said. â€œAlthough I'm sure your body is telling you that itself. And you need sleep almost as much.â€• Her hands dropped away, and she regarded him matter-of-factly. â€œOther than that, you're in good health, at least so far as I can tell. I've never seen an Aclyte-Wolfkin mix before, but you don't â€~feelâ€™ much different from a normal Aclyte.â€• She hesitated briefly. â€œAlthough the blood doesn't seem to take any better than ordinary human blood."

He shrugged. It was something he had lived with almost his entire life, since he was old enough to understand. â€œI know."

"Well, at least Suchen won't have to be bothering with that damned herbal mix every morning.â€• Jiara made a face. â€œDisgusting stuff, but necessary if you don't want to be dropping a baby. Is there anything else bothering you? Dizzy spells? Strange dreams? Hallucinations?"

There was an odd tone in her voice that made him look at her carefully. Although she was trying hard to appear casual, her scent betrayed her worry. â€œBad dreams, yes. But nothing else. Why? What are you worried about?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. â€œI don't really know myself. There was something odd about your

healing. I think. I've never brought back someone so far gone into death, so maybe anything would have felt strange."

"Strange how?"

"It may have something to do with the fact that you're a half-breed. I don't know. But for a moment, as I was pulling you back, it almost felt as though there were two of you."

He frowned. "Two of me?"

"Yes ... I don't know. It's nothing, I'm sure. Just let me know if you start having any unusual symptoms, all right?"

"Very well," he said. But he sat and thought for a long time once she was gone.

* * * *

After changing into fresh clothes, Suchen went in search of lunch. When she reached the great hall, she found it unexpectedly packed with people. The chatter of excited voices flitted up to the rafters, accompanied by the dull clanking of mugs lifted in toast. A trio of musicians played a cheerful song, and several members of the crowd danced boisterously in between the tables.

Makes sense, she thought. Lord Auglar has been restored to us, the assassin brought to justice—no wonder they're ready to celebrate. She grinned. *I feel rather like celebrating myself.*

She paused, scanning the room for familiar faces. As she did so, however, a change seemed to come over those nearest her. Several people shot her hard looks, and conversation died. One of the guards turned aside quickly, hurrying away as if anxious to leave before she could speak to him.

You're paranoid, Suchen, she thought uneasily.

All the Sworn not on duty were seated in a small group at the end of one of the lower tables. Relieved, she hurried through the press of bodies to join them. Gless, resplendent in his mismatched clothes, spotted her first. With a glad cry, he hefted a tankard in her direction. "Look! It's our fearless steward! This calls for more mead!"

Peddock shot him a doubtful look. "I think you've already had more than your share."

"An impossibility," Gless scooted over to clear a space, gesturing for Suchen to take it. As she did so, a serving woman came up. For a moment, the servant hesitated, and Suchen thought she might leave without so much as asking if she wanted anything to drink.

"Mead," Suchen said quickly. "And whatever is left over from lunch, please."

The woman hesitated, then dropped a curtsy and hurried off.

Suchen frowned but was distracted from the incident by Gless reaching out and tapping her affectionately on the nose. "You look like the cat which has just devoured the prize rooster without the farmer being any the wiser."

She grinned and tapped his nose in return. "And I suppose you'd know that look from having seen it on your own face so many times."

"Hardly. From seeing it on the face of my women."

"Please."

Buudi leaned forwards, brown eyes concerned. "How is Yozerf?" he asked, perhaps trying to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

Before Suchen could answer, Gless clasped his hands together, batting his eyes. "Wonderful," he breathed in what was undoubtedly supposed to be an imitation of her voice.

"Gless?"

Peddock shoved Gless roughly, sending him nearly off the bench. "Shut up! Leave her alone! She's got enough to worry about without your idiocy adding to things!"

Gless barely caught himself on the edge of the table. "It's not like she's moping around like a widow, damn it!"

"It's also not like she isn't sitting right here beside you," Suchen cut in, all mirth dying. An uncomfortable silence fell around the table at her words.

"Would you like me to leave so you can get back to your conversation?" she demanded icily. "It's fairly obvious that I was the subject of it."

"It isn't *that*, Suchen," Gless said quietly. "There are ... rumors. Some people are saying that the scene between you and Staafon last night was just an act. That you never would have had a public fight like that unless it was meant to draw suspicion away from you, in case things went wrong. They think you were in league with Staafon the whole time. Others say that isn't true—that the scene was real, simply because you saw that things were going against him and decided to switch sides."

Suchen stared at him, feeling as if she had just taken a hard blow to the gut. "What?"

Gless shrugged, refusing to meet her gaze. "We know it isn't true. And so do all our friends here. But at the same time, there are some who feel differently."

The way everyone got quiet when I came in ... the servant not really wanting to bring me anything, but not daring to be openly rude either ... it all makes sense.

Damn it to Hel.

Her shoulders slumped. "I suppose I can't blame them."

"It wasn't your fault," Gless's hands wrapped gently about her own, and she looked up into spring-sky eyes overcast by concern. "Put it behind you, at least for a little while. I think that for right now, we all have too much to be happy about to let a few fools ruin it."

"That's right," Buudi agreed quickly. "Yozerf's the hero of the hour, you know."

Peddock's mouth twisted bitterly. "No one knows but us."

Suchen didn't have to ask to what he referred. The scene on the tower replayed itself in her mind: beast eyes, predator fangs, flesh melting and reforming like wax over a flame. She felt vaguely as if she should have been horrified or frightened. But there had been too much shock over other events for her to feel much of anything at the time. And now, she knew only a sense of wonder, of curiosity.

"There isn't any reason to be afraid," Her voice was pitched low; gods, but a crowded room wasn't the place for such a discussion.

Peddock made no reply. There was no need for him to—he had voiced his opinion of Yozerf often

enough, and the fact that half Yozerf's blood came from a Wolfkin father confirmed all his worst suspicions ten times over

Suchen's hands curled into fists. "Don't think of saying anything to anyone about it, Peddock. Don't even *think* it. Because if Yozerf has to run for his life, by the gods, I'm going with him."

"But you're—you're Kellsjard's steward! You wouldn't give that up for some half-bred monstrosity! You couldn't!"

"I *love* him."

He went deathly pale. "You don't. You're just upset about Staafon."

"Give up, Peddock," Gless said wearily. "It's not as if it wasn't obvious. By the time we got back to Kellsjard, I was actually starting to feel sorry for Staafon—the poor bastard never had a chance."

Peddock glared venom at Gless, who refused to return the stare. Suchen sighed and stood up. "Don't you dare make me choose between you, Peddock. Don't. Because you won't like the result."

* * * *

Suchen stepped out onto the roof that Yozerf had been slain on.

When she had returned to his chambers after the sour lunch with the Sworn, it had been to find him gone. A few questions to servants told her that he had slipped down to the kitchens, where he had bolted a huge quantity of food. From there, however, he had apparently vanished. Intuition brought her to this place.

And it seemed that intuition had been correct. The wind howled over the parapet, scouring snow from the slick tower roof. The gray sky hung low overhead, intermittently spitting out fat, white flakes. Against the monochromatic backdrop of stone and cloud, Yozerf's crimson hair stood out like a wound.

As she watched in silence from the doorway, he slowly made his way towards the tower's edge. Each step was clearly forced, and even from a distance she could see his hands shaking. As he approached the parapet, he stopped suddenly, turning his face sharply away from the sight of the drop beyond. His whole body stiffened, torn between the urge to flee and the fierce will that impelled it onwards. Several minutes passed. Finally, he took a faltering step forwards, then another. When he reached the edge, he looked first out across the landscape, then down towards the courtyard. A violent shudder went through him, but he did not back away.

It both awed and frightened her to see. But it seemed that those two emotions applied to a great many things concerning Yozerf. She'd watched him long after he'd fallen asleep this morning, her eyes tracing two sets of scars that scared her badly. They were old scars gone pale with time, but the outline of human teeth was still visible on the back of his neck and on his upper thighs. And she had wondered about the kind of courage it took for him to make love with her with such complete openness and trust. Probably the same kind that now let him approach the drop that had killed him once before.

She stepped out from the shelter of the door, treading carefully on the icy roof. Yozerf glanced over his shoulder at her long before he could have heard her approach over the howl of the wind. Had he scented her? How preternaturally sharp were his shape-changer's senses? It bothered her that she didn't know.

"That was probably one of the bravest things I've ever seen anyone do," she said, stopping well away from the edge.

Surprise flickered across his face at that, and he shook his head. "No. There's nothing of bravery in

me, Suchen. Only sheer terror."

He stepped away from the edge himself, came to stand before her. For a moment, he stared down at her silently, the look in his gray eyes impossible for her to interpret. Then, suddenly, he drew her convulsively into a tight embrace. Startled, she returned it, hugging him back hard. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

He hesitated, and then she felt him shake his head. "No. Nothing. I'm just glad to have you here with me."

Suchen shivered in the biting wind. "I understand that you want to conquer your fear"but why now? You aren't recovered yet, not fully."

He sighed, his breath stirring her hair. "Was there a choice? A long time ago, in Segg, I learned to move around on rooftops. The roofs there are not so steep, and the buildings are crowded right up against one another, so it wasn't difficult. Most people never bother to look up, so it was easy to come and go without being seen.

"If I had never learned to do that, we wouldn't be standing here together now. If I'd been forced to go through the corridors last night, I would never have made it to Staafon's room, let alone past any guards he had at the door." His shoulders slumped slightly. "That fall from here ... haunts me, Suchen. I could feel it again and again in my dreams today.

"I had to come here"to test myself"now. I might have waited ... but what if something were to happen? What if I have to flee or hide? If I waited, I might have found that I simply couldn't force myself to face a height, not even in a time of need. No, it would have been far more dangerous to put the moment off." He smiled ruefully. "Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall try climbing about a bit. Right now, however, I'm still too weak to do so in anything resembling safety. And I don't think I'm ready to die again so soon." He touched her lips gently with cold fingers, and she wondered whether he owned any gloves.

She kissed his fingers softly. "Then let's go inside out of the weather."

He put one arm about her, wrapping them both in his voluminous cloak. They had hardly started up the stair leading to the keep's next level, however, when Gless appeared at its head.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "I've been combing this entire keep for you two. I'd be delighted to hear all the scandalous details of what you've been up to, but for the moment Trethya's called a meeting in Auglar's study. The rest of the Sworn are already there."

"Trethya?" Suchen asked blankly. "Why?"

Yozerf smiled a grim smile with no humor in it. "Because she sees the trap she's in," he replied enigmatically.

* * * *

When they opened the door to Auglar's study, the young lord rose from his seat behind the desk, an eager smile on his generous mouth. His eyes flicked briefly to Suchen, and he nodded a quick acknowledgement before turning all his attention to the man at her side. "Welcome, Yozerf. I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you on your feet again."

Sifya's skirts swished slightly as she made her way around the desk. Dark circles still showed beneath her eyes, but otherwise her captivity had left no obvious mark on her. Strong, callused hands gripped

Yozerf's warmly. "Thank you," she said simply. "For everything."

"Looks pretty good for someone who died last night," Gless chimed in.

Trethya rose in a slither of scarlet skirts. Her fragile face was grave within the cloud of her dark hair, and a short line of scabs showed on her ivory throat where Staafon's knife had pricked the skin.

"I would like to thank you as well." Her young voice was earnestly serious, and yet there was something almost shy in the way she averted her gaze. "For the other night ... and for keeping me alive in the forest when I first left Segg."

Silence took the room. Yozerf cocked his head to one side, studied her for a long moment. Then, going from repose to movement with an animal suddenness, he glided across the room to stand before her. Trethya had to crane her head back to look up into his silvery-gray eyes.

"When I first met you as a man, I was afraid of you," she murmured, as if they were alone in the room. "Afraid of your strength, because I knew that the strong always prey upon the weak. But you aren't like that at all, are you? Your strength doesn't come from beating others down—it comes from simply being *you*, wholly and completely." A faint smile touched her lips, and she shook her head a little. "I'm sorry—that doesn't make much sense, does it?"

To Suchen's surprise, Yozerf smiled back at Trethya—a real, honest smile, such as she had seen aimed at none but herself. "It does to me. But you are strong as well, Trethya—stronger than anyone ever guessed."

"I'm learning that."

The ruby light of sunset spilled through the window, laying a bloody sheen over Yozerf's black-clad shoulders and Trethya's raven hair. It limned her delicate face, turned up, and his alien features, turned down. And for a moment, it seemed to Suchen that they were more alike than anyone else in the room. They both lived their lives in a dark world where people who seemed perfectly normal suddenly transformed into hideous monsters. Where friends became beasts of fur and fang. Where the mask of caring hid the traitor's face. Unlike the Sworn who, whatever they had endured as soldiers, expected a certain consistency from the world, these two lived in a nebulous universe of shifting ground and concealing shadows.

Trethya tilted her head fractionally, as if searching for something in his expression. "I have to ask you—was it true, what Ormond said? That you are a Jonaglir?"

A sad smile twisted one corner of his mouth. "What could it possibly matter? You know the charges he leveled against me were untrue. I may have little love for Jenel, but I bear no ill-will towards those who were born three centuries too late to have had anything to do with Caden's fall."

He sighed, and his look became rueful. "You must judge my loyalty as you see fit. But I wish to give you something to think upon.

"People like Ax are loyal to nations—to large things, to the great scheme they believe they see rising above all our daily concerns. They are willing to sacrifice anyone and anything in the name of patriotism."

One hand gestured vaguely at the others in the room. "Then there are people like Auglar and the Sworn here before you, who are loyal to causes. They are willing to immolate themselves on the altar of justice, or right, or whatever it is that they believe in. To become martyrs."

He sighed and looked away, staring at something far beyond the window. "But these things are too

large for me. My mind understands them, but my heart can't hold onto something so huge and so vague as "Jenel" or "right." So I give my loyalty to individuals. One person's "one life" that is something I can understand, something I can love. Something I can fight and die for.

"You thanked me for what I did last night. Yet I never acted in the name of some greater cause, or for the good of this kingdom. I went to almost certain death because those individuals that I am loyal to, that I love, were in danger."

Gray eyes moved back to Trethya, and his mouth quirked slightly. "Although I've made it no secret that Ax forced me to this, I haven't followed and protected you for that reason alone, my lady. You have my respect for *yourself*. Not for your blood, or your station, or even because Ax thinks that keeping you alive is a good idea." He shrugged. "I fear you'll have to be content with that. It is all I have to give."

Trethya stared at Yozerf, a startled expression slowly transforming her doll-like features. "You know, don't you?" she whispered, voice so soft as to be little more than a gasp.

A feral grin touched Yozerf's lips. "I do now. And, I admit, I suspected it from the beginning. I am not quite the fool that Ax takes me for."

Trethya laughed and shook her head in open amazement. Auglar leaned forwards, black brows drawing together. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Trethya's shoulders slumped. Her dark eyes fixed on the floor, like a schoolgirl caught in a lie. "I suppose that I do owe you an explanation, Lord Auglar," she said wistfully. "I ... My name isn't really Trethya Selista. I'm not really a thane's daughter who ran away because she didn't want to see her Queen imprisoned any longer.

"My true name is Rozah Rejana. I *am* the queen."

Chapter 17

Suchen curtsied gracefully, her head bowed in respect. Yozerf fought to hold back a snarl at the sight.

He knew, intellectually, that Rozah was the humans'™ queen, and that they wanted to show her respect by swearing fealty. And he knew that she was a good person who would certainly make a wonderful ruler if she ever got the chance.

But, damn them all, he did *not* like to see Suchen bow to anyone. In his mind, she was too fierce, too proud, too free, and watching her humble herself before Rozah bordered on abominable. Perhaps his intense dislike of the scene came from having to grovel and scrape too many times himself, though the gods knew he had done far, far worse than that.

Whatever the cause of his sentiments, he doubted that Suchen would be pleased if he made them known. Smoothing his face into an impassive mask, he settled back in his chair, and studied the rest of his human pack.

Buudi stood tall and straight by Rozah's seat, brown eyes bright with fierce pride. He had once been an aristocrat himself, and perhaps being called to serve his queen was still the greatest honor he could imagine' particularly after being disgraced by his so-called peers. Gless looked as if he considered calling for a good, stiff drink. Peddock was stunned, but happy, as was Uzco. Unaccountably, Dara-Don's broad face was white with ugly shock, as if he had inadvertently swallowed a live fish. One hand clutched frantically at the good-luck charm dangling about his neck.

Suchen came and sat down by Yozerf. The look she gave him was half-filled with awe, and half-angry. "You could have mentioned this, you know," she muttered at him, too low for anyone else to hear.

He winced inside, suddenly frightened by the horrible prospect of angering her to the point where she no longer wished to keep his company. "Forgive me," he whispered, dropping his eyes in the wolf's gesture of submission. "I didn't think it mattered. And I wasn't certain" not until she asked me about being Jonaglir."

After a moment, she reached out and took his hand. Gratiſied, he squeezed her fingers tightly. Except for where sword calluses ridged them, they felt smooth against his rough pads.

Buudi watched Rozah thoughtfully. "If I may ask, Your Highness" why the secrecy? Why didn't you tell us your identity to begin with?"

Yozerf glanced up from beneath lowered lashes. "She was too wise to trust you," he answered when the young queen merely looked flustered. Suchen turned a hurt look on him at that remark, and he hastened to correct himself. "Until she knew for certain, of course."

Rozah cast him a grateful smile. "Yozerf is right. How could I trust you? If you knew whom" what" you had in your power, what might you do? All of my experience told me that you would try to use me as a pawn, the way the Council did. By pretending to be someone else, I could remove myself from that danger and find out where your loyalties lie." She glanced at Auglar with a faint smile. "After all, Lord Auglar and I are cousins, if distantly related ones. If I were dead, he would have a good claim to the throne. I had to be sure he wouldn't take advantage of that."

Auglar bowed his head gravely, long black hair trailing over his shoulders. "I'm glad you found me worthy, Your Highness."

"So this was why you called us all together," Suchen guessed.

Rozah's heart-shaped face grew troubled. "Well ... no. Not exactly." She seemed to shrink in on herself, hands clasped tightly in the folds of her skirt. "I asked you to come here because ... because we have to do something."

She sighed and rose to her feet. Auglar bolted out of his chair, swiftly followed by everyone but Yozerf. Rozah started wildly, eyes widening in panic.

"Sit down," Yozerf ordered sharply from his chair. "I don't think she's interested in formality right now, when there are far more important things to think about."

Rozah turned away from them all, staring out the window, a slim silhouette before the falling snow. One small hand reached up, pressed flat against the glass, as if it were the bars of a prison.

"Let me start at the beginning," she said quietly. "As I told you" "as you already knew" "the Regency Council has been the real power in Jenel ever since my father died. I spent my entire life in one of the towers of Nava Nar, brought down only when it was necessary to pacify the few lords not so lost in their own squabbling that they had no attention left for their monarch. They ... they did not treat me badly, I suppose. I had beautiful clothes, good food, and books to read. Sometimes, they would punish me if I was rebellious, but never very harshly. I was too valuable for them to do otherwise.

"For most of my life, I never guessed that things were meant to be different. Oh, the stories I read in books sometimes made me think, but the tales were always about men, and I wasn't so naive that I didn't realize that things are different for women. So I believed what they told me, because I didn't know any better.

"Sometimes, the Council let me spend time with their children, or the children of other nobles they knew they could trust. One of them" "her name was Trethya" "became my true friend. After a time, she began to tell me things" "that I wasn't supposed to be locked up. That I should be learning statecraft, and going on progresses, and looking for a husband. I don't know if the Council began to suspect her, but one day she didn't come to visit when she was supposed to. I ... I never saw her again. I don't know if she's dead, or if she was married off without warning, or if her family simply sent her away from Segg to live with relatives.

"I think it was the coronation which confirmed everything she'd told me. I took oaths to protect and lead Jenel, and I saw the way the lords who had come to the festival looked at me. The Regency Council was now the Advisory Council and no longer ruled Jenel for me. Things were going to be different.

"Of course, the next day, I was back in the tower.

"It was shortly after the coronation that the Red Guard began to appear in Nava Nar. Two of them were set to watch my door, night and day. I tried to think of a way to escape, to take control of my own life, but there seemed no way out. Then I was told that I would soon be wed" "to Emperor Jahcgroth of Argannon, who was seeking a trade alliance with Jenel. I would be forced to declare the Council rulers of Jenel in my absence, and then be taken away to Argannon forever. One prison to another.

"After that ... I became truly desperate. Despair was my constant companion. I had given up all hope by the time Ax came to me."

She tilted back her head, stared off into the falling snow. "It was evening" "during the dinner hour, I believe. I heard a strange sound outside. Then the door opened, and he was standing there, both Red Guard dead on the floor behind him.

"He told me who he was and why he had come. There wasn't much time for him to explain things" he said that the Red Guard could feel magic, and were probably already hunting him. And the Council would be calling to Jahcgroth through some sort of sorcerous portal, through which he would be able to use his dark magic to find and attack Ax.

"There was only one chance for escape. I would have to go ahead alone, while he distracted both Jahcgroth and the Red Guard. He gave me instructions to find the cottage in the wood, where I was to wait, and he described Suchen to me. Then he ... he transformed me into a bat."

She shuddered. "I could feel his sorcery touching me everywhere. My ... my gown melted into my skin...."

Yozerf's lip curled back in a lupine snarl, and the small hairs on the back of his neck bristled. Wolfkin magic was carried in their blood and changed only what was native to them: skin, hair, bone, muscle. "Unnatural," he muttered. Sifya nodded her agreement.

Rozah swallowed, arms wrapped tightly about herself. "He smashed the glass of the window, and I flew out between the iron bars. I ... I can't describe to you what it was like, but ... I still dream about it sometimes. I wish that I could fly again.

"There was only a certain amount of time before the spell failed. I flew as fast as I could, trying to get out of Segg. Fortunately, I managed to find the road in the wood and land before I changed back. After that, I ran until my strength gave out." She shrugged. "The rest you know."

Suchen frowned thoughtfully. "But ... that would have been the same day that Ax came to me here, near Kellsjard. How could that be possible? How could a man travel all the way across Jenel and back in a few hours?"

The question disturbed Yozerf. Ax's powers were as mysterious as his machinations, and he wouldn't put it past the wizard to have the ability to magic himself across the kingdom, yet force all of them to travel on foot. "Who knows? Perhaps he has some sort of sorcery. Or perhaps you never really saw him at all."

Suchen glanced at him at that, as if the latter thought were even more troubling.

Rozah looked down at her hands. "I came here, thinking that I would be safe. I came here, thinking that Ax would follow, would come and help me find some way to be free. But that hasn't happened. I don't even know if he escaped Nava Nar with his life. And that's why I called this council. Because if Ax isn't coming back, we have to do something ourselves."

Yozerf nodded gravely. It was nothing more than he had expected. "You're right. And we don't have much time to decide what. There has already been at least one Red Guard nosing about here. Doubtless more will follow."

The Sworn all sat up straighter, obviously shocked. "What do you mean?" Suchen demanded.

He pretended to find something of great interest on the backs of his hands. "A Red Guard disguised as a tinker tried to come to Kellsjard only a few nights ago. The creature was dealt with. But if a force of them come at once, I fear that things might go very differently."

"How was this creature dealt with?" demanded Peddock suspiciously. "Are you claiming you killed it?"

Yozerf shook his head in annoyance, red hair sighing against his cloak. "Suffice it to say that there is

more than one wolf in the wood, and ask no more. His eyes stung painfully as he changed them from gray to gold; it was difficult to hold a partial shift. But it was effective. Peddock shrank back, making a hasty sign against evil.

Rozah didn't seem unduly disturbed, and Yozerf's estimation of her went up even higher. "I should have guessed as much," she murmured, clearly referring to the Red Guard rather than the Wolfkin. "That only makes things the more urgent, then."

Auglar leaned forwards to prop his elbows on his desk. Pale blue eyes regarded Rozah steadily from the frame of his night-black hair. "What do you have in mind, Your Highness?"

She sighed. "Little enough, I'm afraid. That's why I wanted advice from all of you."

Buudi tilted back his head and stared at the soot-darkened rafters above. "Then let's think logically about this," he suggested. "To start with, you have two choices: stay here or leave."

Suchen frowned thoughtfully. "The Council knows where you are, Your Majesty. They'll keep trying to get you back, either through treachery or force."

Rozah nodded. "So I'll leave."

"Now what are the choices?" Buudi asked.

"Hide," Yozerf stated. His eyes gleamed viridescent in the light. "There are places even a queen might disappear, where no one would ever find her." Teeth showed white in a harsh grin. "We Jonaglirs know that very well indeed. The experience wouldn't be a pleasant one for the lady. But it would keep her alive."

Rozah shook her head emphatically. "No. I won't simply hide and let Jenel be handed over to Jahcgroth."

"Then your only other alternative is to fight back."

"Yes!" Suchen glanced at him excitedly, then turned to Rozah. "I don't believe that the lords of Jenel are loyal to the Council, Your Majesty. Not for the most part, at least. If they knew that you had escaped—if you could tell them about the Council's duplicity—then they would follow you. The Council has no real power without you—with enough lords behind us, it will be easy to depose them and put you in your rightful place."

Yozerf cleared his throat softly, catching her attention. "There's only one problem. Even granted that most of the lords don't know the truth about the Council—something I am less than convinced of—none of us knows which ones we can trust for certain. If Queen Rozah were to choose the wrong one to begin with, her rebellion would be over before it started. She would be returned to her tower, doubtless with no chance of escaping again, and we would all most likely be hung as traitors. Except for the nobility present, of course—they would merely be beheaded."

Buudi frowned at the macabre statement.

"But we *do* know of one other lord we can trust," Auglar interjected. "Lord Wren. It was he who warned me about the Council in the first place. And he might have an idea as to whom among the southern lords are trustworthy."

Rozah's eyes lit up. "Then—I could go to him, show myself. From there I could travel on to others, gathering support."

Auglar nodded, hope flashing in his own face. "It might work, Your Majesty. The fact that winter is coming on will both help and hinder us. Now that the snows have begun, it won't be possible for the Council to mobilize any real force of arms until spring. And, although your travel would be slow, a small group might be able to journey to the south and alert the lords in the meantime. Once spring came, it would be a race to see who could raise the most troops first."

"Then that is what we shall do."

Stupidity! Yozerf held up a long, white-fingered hand, as if he could somehow forestall their excitement. Gods, but what were these humans thinking? "Your plan *might* work. But there is one particular I'd argue against. To risk the Queen of Jenel in this would be nothing short of purest insanity. Let me and, if necessary, one or two others take her into hiding for a time, while someone else musters the lords. That way, should things go awry, she'll still be safe."

Rozah shook her head emphatically. "No."

"Yozerf's right," Suchen said gently. "We can't risk you."

Dark eyes touched Yozerf's, and then moved on to his mate. "No, Suchen," Rozah answered, soft but firm. "I've spent my life locked in a tower. Shall I spend the rest of it hiding in a rabbit hole while others die for me?"

"That's what being a ruler is about."

"No. I have to go. If the lords don't see me themselves, do you think they'll believe? The Council certainly hasn't told anyone that I'm not still safe and secure in Nava Narâ" why would the lords risk being condemned as traitors without more proof? If I don't go, it won't work." She sighed, then smiled faintly. "Believe me, I wish I saw some other way."

Auglar arose, and then dropped to one knee before her in an elegant rustle of cloak. "Then, if you must go, Your Majesty, I offer my Sworn to go with you. A few warriors will have a better chance of traveling unnoticed" particularly if Yozerf agrees to lead them, as he did before."

"My lord, you've already had one assassin come after you!" Buudi exclaimed in protest.

"True. And may I remind you that it was *after* you'd already come back? The same reasons I sent you south in the first place still hold true. We can't risk letting anyone else know about this. If we do, I'm likely to have my thanes at my throat."

"Perhaps I should go, too," Suchen said quietly. "For the same reasons as before. And ... because people don't trust me anymore, not after what Staafon did."

Auglar winced. "Suchen, Iâ"'"

"Make Garal your steward, my lord. He'll wear a path to your door, afraid to make any decisions on his own, but at least he won't be shunned by the rest of the household."

Auglar looked grim. "I won't do that. Go with Queen Rozah to chaperone her" it will give things here a chance to blow over. But the stewardship will still be yours when you get back. Garal doesn't have half the head for numbers that you do."

"I'll be honored to have you all," Rozah said with a grateful smile. Then she turned to Yozerf. "And you?"

Yozerf sighed heavily. *Wondrous. I'm not surprised at Auglar's rushing to gallantly offer his services—he has a reputation for that sort of thing. Surely the madness must be growing strong in me, to make such ridiculous, idealistic humans my pack. A more complicated and roundabout form of suicide would be harder to find.*

This is folly. This is wrong. Rozah should not be doing this. She should let me take her from here, hide her until it's safe. We could disappear into one of the Aclytese villages that dot the Kellsmarch; we could go to Iddi or another large city and vanish into its slums. I could even take her to the eastern forest, where no human ever goes. It would be so easy...

He understood why she didn't want to do that—he understood, a little, how she must feel after being trapped for so long. But life often forced one to make unpalatable choices. He had learned that as a child of eight, starving homeless on the street with nothing but his body to offer for food and coin. He had always done what was necessary and accepted waking up from black dreams every night of his life as the price for survival.

And it was such a little thing he was asking of her! By all the human gods, why wouldn't she see and understand?

For that matter, if she insisted on being so foolhardy, why should he involve himself in this at all? He wasn't one of the Sworn, and he didn't acknowledge either Rozah or Auglar as having any authority over him. It would be simple to refuse. It would be the intelligent thing to do. Ax could punish his disobedience as he liked—the wizard would at least give him a quicker death than what would befall him should Rozah's plan go wrong.

Knowing why he wouldn't refuse, despite every argument to the contrary, Yozerf turned ruefully to the woman at his side. Her beautiful, sapphire eyes were filled with a mix of emotions: hope that he would agree to go with them, and fear that if he did something terrible would happen to him. He ached to touch her, to reach out and brush the errant strands of golden hair from her strong face. Hungered to gather her close and show her how much he loved her in whatever way would please her most.

The instincts of mate and pack had never been awakened in him before. But, now that they had, they gripped him to the very depths of his soul. More—they fed the hungers of a lifetime of loneliness. He couldn't turn away from them—it was simply impossible for him to even seriously consider it. Such was the price of being Wolfkin.

Yozerf closed his eyes and rubbed wearily at the space between them, feeling the beginnings of a savage headache. “I still believe that it's foolishness for you to go,” he said finally. “But no words of mine will dissuade any of you, so there's no point in arguing. At least if I go, perhaps I can keep some of you alive.”

Suchen took his hand and kissed the backs of his fingers.

“It will take one or two days to get supplied,” Buudi said. “The longer we wait, the worse the weather will get, so I suggest we start immediately. Suchen, draw up a list of everything we'll need. Gless, Peddock, Uzco, check the horses just to be certain they're in good health. By your leave, my lord, I'll pick out some pack animals and a steed for Queen Rozah. Everyone, be ready to help gather supplies once Suchen has that list ready.”

As they began to rise, Yozerf held up his hand. “One last thing, if you please.” He turned to Auglar, who had paused in the act of helping his wife up. “I have something to ask of you.”

The lord nodded. “Of course. After what you have done for Sifya and myself, anything I have is

yours. You've but to name it."

Yozerf smiled thinly. "Do not be so hasty, my lord. Tell me" what has become of Thane Ormond?"

An uneasy silence fell over the room. Auglar rubbed wearily at his eyes, as if wishing Yozerf had asked any other question. "We have him under arrest, locked in his quarters and guarded all hours of the day and night. His men are in the dungeon. At least, we think they are" it's hard to say just who betrayed us."

Yozerf's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Rage stirred in him, the purity of his hatred for Ormond cleansing his mind of the uncertainties that came with his decision to accompany the Sworn south. "What are you going to do with him?"

"I haven't yet decided. He claims that he wasn't in league with Staafon or the Council. That he truly believed that what he was doing was right."

Yozerf waved a dismissive hand. Ormond's innocence or guilt when it came to treachery didn't interest him. The thane's actions against Kelayna had already earned him death under Aclytese law.

And, more importantly, under Yozerf's own personal set of rules.

He turned to Sifya, meeting her blue eyes with his own intent gaze. The scent of aggression, of fury, wafted out from his body. It was hard to communicate with posture in this form, but he did the best he could.

Give him to me.

The humans were too sense-dead to even be aware of his message. But she understood.

Sifya nodded once. Yozerf smiled and left the room in a swirl of cloak.

* * * *

The wolf crouched in a hollow sculpted by wind and snow. Chill breezes brushed against his thick pelt, bearing with them the scents of winter and ice. The sharp spoor of a rabbit searching for food grew momentarily strong, drawing his head about involuntarily. Then he shook it off, wet nose flaring to search for even the tiniest taint of human on the wind.

The blank gaze of the gibbous moon shone down unclouded, painting the Kellsmarch in its frosty light. In the distance, a hill bulked up against the star-filled sky, the human fortress like a misshapen growth atop it. The snow nearby was unbroken by the track of either human or horse; only the triangles of bird prints and the marks of small mammals broke its icy perfection.

Soon.

The wind swung around slightly, bringing the smell of horse, leather, and frightened human. The wolf's ears pricked forwards eagerly, and it was hard not to simply burst out of hiding and run to the kill. Instead, he forced himself to stay still, shaggy belly crusted with ice from the snow beneath him.

The crunch of hooves through snow sounded clear, and moments later he caught a monochromatic glimpse of steed and rider. The man clutched the reins, reeking of fear.

Good. The human guard had done his work well, telling the prey that he was on his side, letting him free, and giving him a horse. Offering knowledge of a certain escape route that would bring the prey straight into the wolf's teeth.

The horse cantered quickly across the plain, angling between a clump of stunted trees and the snowdrifts that the careless wind had piled about them. The wolf tensed, muzzle wrinkling to expose wicked teeth. *Now.*

The horse was familiar, not as an individual, but as part of a species the wolf had touched many times before. The things that would soothe it were simple, came easy as instinct. There was food here, sweet green grass hidden just beneath the snow. No predators lurked—the scent of not-wolf was nothing to be concerned with.

The horse stopped abruptly, only a few feet from the wolf's hiding place. Snuffling curiously, it bent its head to inspect the patch of snow before it.

"Damn you, stupid beast!" its rider shouted, fear thinning his voice. The moonlight gleamed off his balding head as he jerked angrily at the reins. "Move! There's no time for this!"

The horse protested the rough treatment, prancing a few steps.

Grass. More savory than any ever tasted before. Safety. Peaceful grazing enough to content the heart of any herbivore.

With a mollified snort, the horse lowered its head once again.

The wolf rose, certain that the beast would remain as it was for several minutes more, at least until it realized that there was no grass to be found. Aggression sparked in his golden eyes, and a low growl erupted from his throat as he padded across the snow.

His movement caught the prey's attention. With a sharp gasp, the man looked up, reins sliding from hands gone suddenly slack. "Gods!" His heels kicked frantically at the horse's flanks, but it remained unresponsive, too caught up in the wolf's sending to notice.

Now two more shapes detached themselves from the shadows on the other side of the prey, moving to flank him. One was the she-wolf with the saddle of lighter fur across her shoulders, the other the black male. Teeth gleamed in the moonlight, and their low growling excited the gray wolf's senses, sent him into a fury of snarls.

The prey's head whipped around, and his body froze for a moment in panic. The scent of terror poured like soured wine from his body. Then, with a frantic cry, he flung himself from the horse and ran.

They gave chase. The wolf felt his long legs stretch, large paws keeping him from sinking too far into the snow. Wind whistled in his ears, past his nose, bringing knowledge of the prey's terror and despair. It would have been simple to catch the man, and for a moment the wolf's instincts screamed at him to do just that.

Instead, he forced himself to slow, to herd rather than attack. The man fled, staggering and stumbling, kept on course by the flanking wolves. His breath gasped loudly in the otherwise-quiet night, and a steady stream of frightened curses and prayers babbled from his lips. Within a few minutes, a structure loomed up in the night—a half-ruined storehouse, its timbers showing like ribs against the moonlit sky. With a sob of thankfulness, the man raced towards its perceived sanctuary.

The she-wolf and the black slowed, and then came to a halt. For a moment, two pairs of golden eyes peered solemnly at the gray wolf. He adopted a deferential posture, tail down slightly, and tried to communicate gratitude. Then they turned away and were gone.

The gray moved into the empty doorway. The faint musk of Aclytese sweat still clung to the structure,

along with the odor of spilled cider and smoke. Memories of heat, dancing, and lust shivered just under the wolf's consciousness, and he shook his head once, sharply. Keen senses focused on the reek of the prey's terror, blotting out all else.

He glided inside. The man he hunted crouched at the opposite end, near the blackened remains of the huge bonfire. His breathing was shallow, coming in harsh pants. His hands, empty of any weapon, were held out before him as if they could somehow ward off the stalking wolf.

Hatred seared through the wolf's mind, intense and out-of-place with the instincts that informed his thinking. Muscles flexed, stretched in a single, fluid move that took bone, tendon, and hair along with it...

Yozerf blinked as the bright colors of Ormond's finery bloomed in his sight. The icy floor burned his bare feet, but he didn't care. With a snarl of rage, he reached blindly for the top of the door lintel, where he had earlier hidden a dagger. Its smooth hilt, chilled by the freezing night, fit easily into his palm. "Ormond," he hissed.

The thane dropped his hands, blinking in confusion. A puzzled frown distorted his face. "You!" he exclaimed, distaste and scorn both evident in his voice. "How" what's happening here? I thought

Yozerf gave him no more opportunity to speak. With a howl of pure rage, he flung himself across the room at the noble. Fangs erupted from his mouth as he slammed Ormond back against the cold stone floor. Pain flowered throughout his face—it was agony to hold a partial change for long, and there would be bruising at the interface, where wolf and Aclytese configurations failed to mesh properly.

But it was worth it to see the look of absolute terror that swallowed Ormond's features.

One hand pinned Ormond's wrists to the ground, while the weight of his own body trapped the thane beneath. "Thiss iss howw," he snarled, the words coming from the fanged mouth slurred and nearly unintelligible.

"No!" The odor of mindless fear filled the air, accompanied by the reek of urine. "No, please, I'm sorry, I didn't want to hurt you, it was all Staafon's idea"

Yozerf slammed the hilt of the knife into Ormond's jaw, snapping the man's head back. "Be silent. The thane's terror was sickening, and a part of him wanted to scream at Ormond: *Be defiant! Unrepentant! Revel in your vileness, remind me how helpless and afraid Kelayna and I were in your hands! Make it so I remember why I'm doing this*" make it so I can take some pleasure tearing down your bravado and turning it to terror!

The dagger pressed lightly against Ormond's throat. "This has nothing to do with what you did to me. This is for Kelayna."

Incomprehension showed through the blind horror clouding Ormond's eyes. "Who?"

Rage roared through Yozerf. It burned through the revulsion Ormond's fear had engendered, leaving behind only clean, pure wrath. "Gods damn you!" he screamed. "You rape a woman for information, and you don't even know her *name*?"

He jerked back the knife, intending to plunge it into Ormond's flesh. And then *she was standing in a wide, bowl-shaped valley, the crystalline dome of a winter sky above. Her body shook with the strain of funneling too much power in too few days. But it had been worth it. Gods, it had been worth it.*

The traitorous humans lay dead, all of them, the stink of blood and waste tainting the cold mountain air. She bent down, chopped blindly at the chest of the nearest with an axe, until the ribs pulled free and exposed the organs. Another rough chop or two, no finesse at all, and the still-warm heart was in her hand. She had to drop the axe to keep hold of its blood-slippery bulk. Holding it above her head, she turned slowly to face her troops. They cheered hoarsely at the sight, stabbing their fists into the sky: "Jonaglir! Jonaglir! Jonaglir!"

She bit into the heart, tasted its salty tang. Revenge.

Yozerf found himself sitting on the cold floor, heart pounding and limbs shaking. For a moment his mind whited out in confusion—what had happened to the sky, to the mountains?

Then he remembered Ormond and snapped to his feet, bringing the knife up in case the thane had taken advantage of his momentary confusion. Ormond lay where he had fallen earlier, half-propped against the wall. But now his body was nothing more than a blackened lump of charred flesh, the gold chain around his neck slag against the sooty ends of bones. The stones behind him were scorched and cracked, as if they had been exposed to a terrible and prolonged fire.

Yozerf took a shaky step back. There was no explanation for what he was seeing. He looked around quickly, wondering if Ax had finally decided to make an appearance, but the abandoned building was deserted except for him.

Like a dream, he remembered falling, dying, and the woman who had held out her hand to him on the other side of life. She'd had the gray eyes of a Jonaglir, the eyes of a sorcerer-queen. Somehow, without understanding why, he felt that she was the same woman as the one who had been in the vision he'd just had.

"Dear gods," he whispered, staring at the melted remains of Ormond's body. "What's happening to me?"

* * * *

Yozerf buried the body under the flagstones in one corner, hoping that anyone who noticed the scorched stones would put them down to a Hallow Night bonfire. He left the building and started walking blindly, naked and cold and more than a little afraid.

"Did you finish with him?"

Yozerf glanced back over his shoulder, saw Sifya standing behind him. Moonlight gleamed off her pale skin, and her eyes glittered fiercely. No wonder she chose to brave the cold in woman's flesh—the anger she still felt towards Ormond was too human a thing.

"What will you tell Auglar?"

"The truth—that Ormond is dead." She shrugged. "We'll put about that the thane escaped, that he was found slain on the Kellsmarch, and that his body was left for the beasts. No one else will know anything more."

"Good." Yozerf wondered what she would think if she had seen the body. Wondered what Suchen and the Sworn would think. Gods, but he couldn't risk telling them, not until he had some idea himself as to what had happened.

Shaking off his thoughts as best he could, he dropped to all fours, felt the piercing cold of the night recede behind the barrier of fur and thick pads. Sifya followed suit, trotting off towards Kellsjard. Her

brother joined her, a black shadow against the white snow.

The gray wolf tilted his head back and howled, as if to signal his human pack that he returned. Then he loped off across the snow, following the other wolves back to Kellsjard and his waiting mate.

Chapter 18

They left at sundown a week later.

Although normally the Sworn would have begun the journey at dawn, they were once again following Yozerf's policy of traveling during the night hours and hiding throughout the day. Also, Auglar thought it no bad thing that their departure be as stealthy as possible. Although they would be missed soon, a day or two might be enough to throw off any spies still in Kellsjard. Sifya had arranged for one of her handmaidens to take Rozah's quarters, hoping to further confuse anyone reporting to the Council.

The night air was frigid as the Sworn led their mounts out of the stable. Suchen's horse blew out a cloud of steam and tossed its head restlessly. "I agree completely," she muttered, huddled between the animals and profoundly glad for the warmth of their huge bodies.

Yozerf cast a glance back over his shoulder at her, and she thought she saw the faintest edge of a smile touch the corner of his mouth. Like the rest of them, he was dressed in heavy winter clothing courtesy of Auglar: thick leggings, shirt, and long tunic, with a wool-lined leather jacket over all. His old cloak hung over the newer things, though whether because he thought it warmer than anything Kellsjard could provide, or simply for its familiarity, she was unsure. Ignoring the tailor's objections, he had insisted that his clothes all be dyed solid black. They blended into Windshade's dark bulk and made his white face and hands seem to float disembodied.

Auglar, Sifya, and Hilwa stood waiting to see them off. One by one, the Sworn made their farewells to the Lord of Kellsjard and his wife. Hilwa sniffled unhappily, oddly subdued as she stared up at her tall husband. Normally, when the Sworn had to leave Kellsjard for any reason, she pestered Dara-Don relentlessly with questions about when he would be back. Tonight, however, it was as if some grim spirit had taken her tongue away.

"Don't worry," Dara-Don said with a hollow attempt at cheer. "We'll be back soon enough. And we'll take good care of Her Majesty."

Hilwa glanced mutely to where Rozah sat upon the graceful mare that had been Auglar's gift. A thick cloak shrouded the queen's slight body, and her white face peeped out from the ring of black fur lining the hood. Rozah smiled hopefully at the peasant woman, as if there was no great difference in their stations. Hilwa bobbed a polite curtsy, turned, and hurried back inside. Dara-Don's brown eyes followed her with an expression of mingled longing and sorrow.

They mounted up with the jingle of tack. Auglar saluted them briskly. "The gods speed you on your journey," he said formally.

"Aye." Sifya nodded to them all, one at a time. It seemed that her gaze lingered longest on Yozerf, though, and the Aclyte inclined his head delicately, as if in acknowledgement of some message everyone else had missed.

Odd, Suchen thought. She considered asking for an explanation, and then dismissed the thought. Surely it had been nothing.

I'm just seeing mysteries where there are none. By the gods, who could blame me, after all that's happened?

And on that thought, they spurred their mounts forward and left Kellsjard behind.

* * * *

It took them the better part of a month to travel to Lord Wren's demesne.

By night, Suchen rode beside Yozerf, sometimes talking quietly and sometimes in companionable silence. On clear evenings, he told her the Aclytese names of some of the constellations. Other times, he pointed out the vast flocks of migrating birds that stretched from horizon to horizon, like dark rivers across the dawn sky. Deer searched for food amidst barren whiteness. Little burrowing owls called out to one another in eerie voices.

Occasionally, however, the lonely howl of a wolf would break the stillness, echoing out of the blank Kellsmarsh night. Yozerf would immediately halt in the middle of a sentence, or wave any other speakers to silence, his attention so focused on the sound that Suchen expected to see his ears prick forwards. Most of the time, no more howls would come, and he would relax back into the saddle and pick up any conversation as if it had never been interrupted. Once in a while, he would howl back a reply. Hearing the wolf's song coming from her lover's throat was a bit disturbing, although Suchen tried her best to accept that part of his nature.

Rarely, the howls would continue, and Yozerf would slip wordlessly from the saddle and disappear into the night. When he returned, there was dirt crusted under his fingernails, as if he had been running on all fours. Despite questions, he was never forthcoming about what he did on such forays, simply saying that all was well and not to worry about things that didn't concern them.

No one cared for his brusque behavior at such times. But Suchen thought that Dara-Don, Uzco, and Peddock looked far more worried than everyone else, and she wondered if they weren't reconsidering some of the old stories about Wolfkin nature.

Through it all, they saw no one, and there were no signs of any agents of the Council. The ruse had worked, and they had finally managed to evade the soldiers and spies who had so persistently dogged their steps.

* * * *

The morning before they reached Wren's keep, only a few miles from Rozah's own ancestral home of Nava Yek, they pitched camp as usual. Sleep would be short today, however; at noon, they would continue on, so as to arrive before nightfall.

Yozerf, for one, was glad that rest would be short. His sleep had persistently been plagued by dreams that somehow felt as though they were not his own. People and places totally unfamiliar to him wandered through his dreams, although on waking he remembered them only vaguely. It filled him with a sense of unease that haunted his waking hours and made him dread closing his eyes.

He also dreaded spending the night in Lord Wren's keep. He half-hoped the lord would make him sleep in the stables, away from any mirrors and reflective surfaces. The morning they had been packing to leave Kellsjard, he had caught a glimpse of himself in the wardrobe mirror out of the tail of his eye. But the reflection in the polished bronze had been that of a witch-faced woman with a tumbled mass of brown hair and dragon-gray eyes.

He'd spun around, heart galloping in his chest. But full on the mirror had shown him only himself.

He tried not to think about it later. But as they'd traveled, he'd found himself avoiding leaning too far over streams where he might accidentally glimpse something he didn't want to see.

Now he settled down by Suchen for their morning reading lesson, hoping that it would distract him from his nebulous fears. But they had barely begun when he caught Rozah's scent strengthening on the breeze. A moment later, she appeared by them, an odd look on her delicate face.

"I'm sorry" "I didn't mean to disturb you," she said. She glanced down, then up again. "I ... Yozerf, will you walk with me for a moment?"

Wondering what she could want with him, he gave Suchen a farewell kiss, then lithely rose to join her. Like much of southern Jenel, the area they were camped in was covered by light forest. Snow lay only thinly on the ground, allowing the carpet of decaying leaves to peek through in some places. Birds twittered excitedly at the coming of day. The rich scent of damp earth and trees filled the air, cut through with the sharp musk of a deer, which had passed that way recently. Their steps crunched softly on fallen leaves, and some of the birds fled their approach.

Rozah said nothing, just walked idly. At last, they came to a small clearing with a large rock near its center. Rozah went to stand by the stone, staring off into the distance, as if she could peer through the forest and see all the way to Wren's castle. Her young features were deeply troubled, and he guessed that, with their goal so near, she was having second thoughts.

"Are you ever afraid?" she asked suddenly. Dark eyes moved to study his face, and there was desperation in the look.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Sometimes I feel as if I've spent my entire life terrified."

It clearly wasn't the answer she had expected. "What do you mean? You're so brave. You've done so many courageous things since we met. And you never look frightened. Or uncertain."

An ironic smile tugged the corner of Yozerf's mouth at that. "And so you assume I'm not. I know" "I mean for it to be that way. If I can't be brave in truth, at least my enemies don't have to know about it."

He hesitated before speaking any further. What to tell her? She had seen much that was evil in her life and had endured treachery and betrayal. And yet, he knew that she was innocent of the kind of monsters that haunted his memories. She had never wandered the streets of the city they had both been born in, had never left its shining boulevards for the narrow streets and dark alleys that made up its black heart.

If she succeeded in her mad quest, if she became monarch in truth, then perhaps he would show her. He suspected that she would come with him if he asked, and he hoped that seeing the realities some of her subjects dealt with every day would make her a better ruler.

But for now ... let her keep whatever innocence she had managed to retain.

He tilted his head back, watched the wind move the branches above him. "I'm afraid of the past, frightened of dreams that are more like memories. And I'm afraid of the future as well, terrified of the things that love and hope and friendship might bring." He smiled bitterly at her look of surprise. "Did you never think of them as things to fear? They are the greatest gateways into despair and anguish, for they give one something to lose. Without them, life may be empty and painful, but at least there's a certain amount of safety in it."

After a moment, she nodded. "I understand."

He had thought that she would. "And what do you fear, Rozah Rejana? What whispers wake you from your dreams?"

She turned away suddenly, arms wrapped about herself. "What if I've made a mistake? What if Wren betrays me? Or what if he doesn't" "but I fail anyway? What if the lords simply don't want me?"

Yozerf had no answer to give her. *I wonder the same things, young one* "except that I didn't wait until we were only a few miles from our goal to consider them. I've been scared."

What I said to her was true, about love and friendship and hope. Before, when there was just Windshade and myself to worry about ... it didn't matter. I have fought more battles than most warriors dream of in a lifetime, been threatened by death so often that I can't remember the faces of even half the men who would have given it to me. But now ... I am sick of the fighting. I want to find a way out. I want to be happy.

I don't want to die.

Or even more terrifying: *I don't want any of the others to die, either.*

He wanted his human pack to be safe, not embroiled in what could erupt into a full-fledged civil war. Most of all, he wanted Suchen safe. The very thought that something might happen to her was horrible beyond comprehension. There hadn't been enough time for them.

There never would be.

"I wish that I could tell you not to be afraid," he said finally. "But I can't. I can only tell you to do what you must."

She frowned. "Do what I must? What about doing what's right?"

A part of him wanted to scream in frustration. "What is right?" he demanded, throwing up his hands. "You humans bandy words like 'right' and 'good' about, as if they were founded on some absolute law. Ormond committed the most abominable crime I know of, and yet I feel certain that he thought he was doing the 'right' thing. And Staafon—he no doubt believed that his actions were anything *but* evil. Ax would do anything, destroy anyone, to achieve his goals for Jenel, and yet he probably considers himself a hero. Certainly all of you seem to believe that he acts for what you call good."

She shook her head. "You mean to say that there are no such things as good and evil, right and wrong. But you can't really think that. I know that you believed Ormond had done something unforgivably evil."

It was hard to keep back a snarl at the very thought of Ormond. "He brought harm on someone under my protection. Someone I *failed* to protect."

"So if it had been some woman you didn't know, you wouldn't have lifted a finger to see him punished? Wouldn't have cared if things had worked out as they did?"

Now Yozerf did snarl, flashing his fangs even as he turned away. *Damn her.* "I would have believed him deserving of death even then. Because in my heart, as you said, I believed that he had done wrong." He sighed, trapped by his own inner conflicts. "Let me say this, then. I may make such judgments, and I may act on them. But I understand that I act on my own personal set of rules, not on some abstract morality that everyone else agrees with—or should agree with. I don't fool myself into thinking that the way I see the world is the only way."

"You say these things—and yet you kill based on your beliefs. You value that 'personal set of rules' above the lives of others. You give yourself the right to judge—the right to execute."

He smiled thinly. "True. I am a killer, my lady. I don't know if that was something I was born to be, or simply something I was made. But it is what I am."

"But there is more to all this than that. I may have created definitions of right and wrong for myself, yet I've also done things that I believed to be wrong. Done them because I had to, because I couldn't afford

the luxury of morals or a conscience.

"So if I tell you to do what you must, instead of instructing you to cling to rightness or goodness, it is in part because I don't feel that I have the right to tell anyone that. And it is in part a warning. You are the Queen of Jenel, and you *must* survive this, else all we've done has been for naught. You may not always have the luxury of a conscience, either."

She was silent for a long moment. Then she stepped across the clearing and laid a small hand on his arm. Her dark eyes met his, and for a moment it seemed that he saw regret in their depths. "I don't understand everything that you've said," she murmured, her gaze never wavering. "But I thank you for your advice. You name yourself a killer. Yet, in your own way, you're a good man, Yozerf Jonaglr. And the parts of you that are in darkness ... I value those, as well. I'm glad that you'll be riding into Wren's fortress with me today."

She dropped her hand and hurried away, back along the path they had come. He watched her go, cloak wrapped protectively about herself. When she was out of earshot, he sighed, and spoke to the scent his nose had picked out of the wind some minutes ago. "I pity her."

Suchen stepped out from where she had been concealed among the trees. Her golden hair blew in the cool wind, strands whipping across her face. Sapphire eyes glanced briefly in the direction Rozah had disappeared. "So do I," she replied, coming to take his hands in her own. "Even if she succeeds in regaining the throne, she'll never really be free. She'll have to choose a husband almost right away, so that her children can secure her hold on the monarchy. But I don't think she'll ever quite forget."

Yozerf cocked his head curiously. "Forget what?"

But Suchen only smiled a little and shook her head. "It's of no matter." Her arms twined about his neck, pulling his head down for a kiss. He held her tightly, enjoying her sensuality.

"We'd better get back and take the watch," she murmured huskily, her breath stirring the small hairs about his ears. He shivered in reaction. "Tonight, though, when we're in Wren's keep, with a room to ourselves..." She let the sentence trail off, and he laughed softly. For a moment, a simple feeling of joy surged through him, just to be with this bright, fierce woman who had done him the honor of becoming his mate. Then he nodded and, taking her hand, headed back toward the camp.

* * * *

They arose in late afternoon and prepared to cross the last few miles to Wren's keep. Dara-Don crouched in front of his fragment of mirror, carefully shaving the stubble from his face. At his suggestion, each of the human males followed suit, Yozerf having no need, as Aclytes were unable to grow beards.

A formal dress, though not so fine as the Queen of Jenel should wear even on a day-to-day basis, had been hidden deep in one of their packs. Although it wasn't possible to get all of the wrinkles out, Rozah put it on anyway, to better Wren's first impression of her. Yozerf brushed her hair out for her and, after several moments of careful consideration, affixed it in a modest crown of braids about her head. He also helped her with the small pots of face paint Sifya had sent with them. Once they were done, Dara-Don obligingly held up his mirror for Rozah to admire herself in.

They rode quickly, planning to arrive shortly before sundown. When the low, gray spires of Wren's keep at last hove into view through the trees, Suchen felt relief wash through her. *Thanks to the gods*, she thought fervently. *We've made it.*

Throughout their journey south, she had expected to be attacked at any moment: by soldiers, by Red Guard, or by something even worse. But luck had smiled on them, and they had arrived safely. The

concept of the divine right of kings had fallen somewhat out of popularity since the church's power had been broken two centuries ago. Yet she couldn't help but wonder if perhaps the gods wished to see the rightful queen restored to her place, and had taken a small hand in seeing them through.

Yozerf, undoubtedly, would have nothing but contempt for the idea—he was the most thoroughly atheistic person she had ever met. And perhaps he was right. Better to rely on the luck one made for oneself than on any divine favors.

Dismissing such thoughts from her mind, she concentrated on what lay ahead of them. The keep's curtain wall appeared on the other side of a wide defensive lawn. Soldiers stood stiffly on the walls, pikes in hand. Still, the guards made no move to challenge the travelers until they had drawn within comfortable shouting distance.

"Hail and well met!" one of the guards exclaimed. He was dressed in the purple and brown livery of Wren's house. "We don't see many sojourners here."

Buudi stood in his stirrups so they could get a good look at him. "We've come from Lord Auglar of Kellsjard with a message for Wren, his fellow Lord of Jenel," he announced, voice ringing with authority. It was a speaking style he had first learned as a thane, which had served him just as well on the battlefield. "Lord Auglar wishes to make known the impending birth of his first child and heir."

The soldier grinned. "Good news, then! Lord Wren will want to hear it personally, I'm sure." He motioned for his fellows to open the gates wide.

Within, there was no further sign of guards, as if the sentries at the gate were all that Wren felt necessary. Suchen looked around curiously at the stone keep before her. Unlike Kellsjard, it was small and blocky, built in a style that had been popular several centuries before. A squawking murder of crows flapped away from a smelly midden.

Before they could start towards the stables, a group of about twenty men emerged through the weathered oaken door fronting the keep. Most of them were arranged about a single man, whose cloak hood was pulled far down his face against the cold. *Lord Wren*, Suchen guessed.

Buudi apparently had the same idea. He began to dismount. "Lord Wren," he called, "we have come on urgent business from Lord Auglar!"

The wind shifted about, blowing into their faces. Beside her, Yozerf stiffened suddenly, nostrils flaring. For a moment, he stared urgently at the group of men. Then a look of terrible certainty transformed his face.

"No!" he shouted. "Red Guard! It's a trap!"

At that same instant, a storm of howling broke out in the wood beyond.

The men had been strolling across the courtyard. Now, all save for the hooded one broke into a run. Even as Suchen watched in numb horror, their bodies rippled, deforming into the hideous gargoyle-creatures that still figured prominently in her nightmares.

The horses went mad. Suchen barely managed to cling to her steed's back as it reared wildly, hooves striking in blind terror at the air. The animals all about her plunged and screamed—"Buudi was instantly thrown, and Uzco hurled himself from his mount before he could be flung from it. Only Windshade didn't panic, but stood stiff-legged, eyes showing white as he was caught between shape-changer magics.

Cursing desperately, Suchen forced her steed under control long enough to slither from its back. Her

sword ripped free, the feel of it in her palm reinforcing years of discipline.

Uzco dropped to one knee, nocking an arrow so swiftly that his hands were a mere blur. One of the Red Guard leapt, wings driving up a cloud of snow, and Uzco loosed the string. A feathered shaft buried itself in the monster's eye. It died without having the chance to scream, its body hurtling to the cobblestones.

Even as it fell, another went aloft, then another. Uzco's bow twanged as he shot a second arrow, but this time it went wide of its target. With an enraged howl, the creature fell upon him, its hind talons ripping into his belly as it bore him to the ground. The archer screamed, then screamed again as it grabbed him in one powerful hand and flung him in a bleeding arc into the wall. His head impacted with a sickening crunch, cries cut off as he fell into a boneless heap on the snow.

Then Suchen had no more time to watch, for the Red Guard were upon them.

She fought fiercely, using every ounce of her skill. Her sword flashed brightly as she struck deep into scarlet flesh. Claws slashed at her face, and she severed oddly-jointed fingers in a frantic attempt at defense. One of the Red Guard brought its wings about, using them like clubs to stun and entangle her. The edge of her sword tore through a wing sail, sending it staggering back. But even as she lunged to finish the attack, a tail wrapped about her ankles, jerking her off her feet. She fell heavily to the ground, rolled, and brought up her sword again just in time to ward off a debilitating blow.

There were too many Red Guard and too few Sworn. Even as Suchen fought, she was aware of her friends being dragged down one at a time, overwhelmed by sheer numbers. As they fell, they were pulled away from the fray, to be held tightly between two Red Guard. Even though she knew that there was no hope in the situation, she hurled herself savagely into her attack on the creatures.

Hands grabbed her arms from behind, talons sinking into her shoulders. Tails tangled her legs, wings blinded her, and she felt her sword ripped from her fingers. With a shriek of fury, she struck out with her bare hands, knowing that it was futile and that she was as good as taken.

And then Yozerf was there. Eyes glowing like gold coins, lips parted to display lupine fangs, he launched himself into the Red Guard with berserk fury. Snarls and growls erupted from his throat, and his white sword slashed deep into the belly of one of Suchen's attackers. Fighting with an animal's utter concentration and abandon, he managed to drive some of them back a step, then another. Free, Suchen stooped and scooped up her sword, prepared to fight by his side.

He spun, grabbed her arm, and jerked her wildly in the direction of the gate. "Go!" he shouted at her.

Startled, she looked back and saw that, although the sentries were frantically trying to close the gates behind them, they had not been quite fast enough.

Snarling madly, Yozerf beat back another Red Guard. His face warped, twisted into a look of utter, demonic frenzy. "Run! Go, now, before it's too late!"

Suchen ran.

The guards began to winch the gate closed faster, and from behind she heard the snap of leathery wings as Red Guard launched themselves in pursuit. Breath burning in her lungs, she hurled herself sideways at the thin crack which was all that was left.

Wood scraped across skin, tore the buckle from her belt but failed to crush her. Stumbling, she twisted about, risked one last look behind. Through the sliver between the heavy doors she saw Yozerf,

his sword gone and his teeth red with the blood of his enemies, borne to the ground by five Red Guard.

Then she ran for the safety of the forest.

* * * *

Fearful silence fell over the courtyard. Yozerf lay pinned beneath the heavy weight of the Red Guard. The thin scrim of snow covering the cobblestones had numbed the cheek pressed against it, but he didn't dare move lest his captors find it an excuse to tear out his throat. Their unnatural stink clotted in his nostrils and made him want to gag. The taste of acidic blood filled his mouth, and a fierce surge of battle-rage went through him. They might have brought him down, but not without cost.

The three Red Guard who had gone after Suchen circled back, and he realized that they had lost sight of her as soon as she entered the forest. *At least she's safe*, he thought, closing his eyes in sheer relief. For a moment, he had been terrified that she wouldn't listen to him, that she would choose to stay and be captured with the rest. Even so, it had been a near thing.

The hooded man frowned at the gate guards in annoyance. "Idiots!" he snapped. "You should have been more prepared."

The sentries looked worried. "But, my lord," one of them began hesitantly. "You weren't supposed to be found out so quickly."

"So you allowed yourselves to be lazy?" He turned away. "Still, it is of no matter. One warrior and a woman at that" won't change anything."

Yozerf wanted to laugh aloud. *One warrior and a woman but still the last human left standing against your Red Guard. You should take warning from that, human man, when she comes someday to avenge us.*

Content to let the man wallow in his stupidity, Yozerf turned his attention to his fellow captives. Rozah stood between two Red Guard, an expression of horror and despair stamped over her young features. Gless hunched over an ugly wound in his upper thigh, moaning softly. A black bruise showed on Buudi's forehead, and Peddock's pale face was masked in blood.

Uzco lay unmoving. Yozerf saw the entrails that had been dragged half from his body, the blood and hair plastering the wall where his head had impacted. The smell of death blew on the breeze.

Which left only one other.

Dara-Don stood near the gate, away from the Red Guard. His sword was still in its sheath, and his arms were folded across his chest. The look on his face was utterly wretched, and his fingers locked about the fragile good-luck charm, crushing it.

Dread filled Yozerf's belly at the sight, confirmed when the hooded man strolled across the courtyard towards the tall, brown Sworn.

"Good work," the man said. "Don't look so unhappy" the Council rewards its servants very well indeed."

Dara-Don shuddered and looked away.

Suchen, Buudi, all of them had trusted and with good reason. Unlike Staafon, Dara-Don had been a friend and companion for many years. He was *Sworn*, by the gods, a man his lord was supposed to be able to trust even above his own kin.

"Traitor!" Yozerf snarled from beneath the mass of Red Guard holding him. "Human filth! I'll see that your death is a slow and painful one!"

One of the Red Guard hissed and raked its talons down his side. Yozerf let out a small cry of pain, then sank his teeth into his lip so fiercely that blood dribbled down his chin. Defiant, he locked gray eyes on Dara-Don's face, staring so balefully that the man blanched.

The hooded man only laughed at Dara-Don's obvious fear. "Don't let that half-breed abomination worry you. We protect our own."

Rozah straightened, fists clenched at her sides. She didn't look at Dara-Don, but instead focused on the other man. "Teylan Uirek," she said, quiet but clear. "Chief of the Advisory Council."

He tossed back his hood, revealing a surprisingly ordinary face and balding head. "It's good to have you back, Rozah," he said with a mocking little bow.

She ignored his words. "Teylan Uirek, we demand that you release us at once. Furthermore, we demand that you free our friends, and tell us what you have done with our loyal servant Lord Wren."

Teylan let out a hearty laugh. "You startle me, Rozah! Since when did our little rabbit have such backbone? I must confess, none of us could believe it when you escaped."

"Where is Wren?" she snapped, disdaining the taunts.

Teylan's face took on a hard look. "Dead," he said simply. "When we knew you were coming here, we could hardly leave him to warn you, could we? He, his wife, his children, his guards, and every servant in this keep died two weeks ago. The Red Guard saw to that."

As if summoned by his words, there came the leathery crack of beating wings, and one of the creatures glided over the curtain wall to land in the snow at his feet. Teylan arched a single brow in question, and the monster ducked its head. "Kk'atel was right, my lord," it was Wolfkin he scented, "it said through a mouth full of vicious teeth. The wind was with us, and three of them were killed immediately. As for the rest, we are hunting them now. It won't be long."

Rozah frowned, but avoided the obvious questions "a display of ignorance could only worsen things. What are you going to do?" she asked instead.

Teylan tucked his hands into his sleeves for warmth. "We thought that you might enjoy seeing your winter home, my queen. We're taking you and your friends to Nava Yek for a while. Now that Wren and his household have been tragically wiped out by a mysterious plague, you will claim his lands for your own, and retire to Nava Yek for your remaining time in Jenel, before you leave for Argannon to join your new husband. After officially decreeing that the Council shall rule during your absence, of course."

Rozah shuddered. "I couldn't understand why you wanted to marry me to Jahcgroth. But now I do. As long as I stay in Jenel, there's always the chance that I might escape, or have some sort of contact with the lords. If I'm half a world away, though, you won't have to worry about that. But what of our children, eh? Or do you believe Jahcgroth hasn't thought of that?"

Teylan smiled, like a parent listening to a child's naive prattling. "My dear, I assure you we've thought of that. But there is no reason for us to worry about it, as you'll see soon enough. Your line will die out, and, as Chief of the Council, I will be in an excellent position to see that my heirs are made the next monarchs of Jenel."

They don't know, Yozerf thought disgustedly. They have no idea that Jahcgroth wants to move his

people's government, social structure, and all into Jenel before Argannon is devastated by the coming cold. Fools. And I highly doubt that they would believe any of us even if we told them.

No expression showed on Rozah's face. "So you say. But you haven't mentioned what you intend to do with my friends."

"I'd tell you not to worry your pretty head, but I think it better that you do." Teylan glanced casually at the Sworn, and Yozerf felt sudden fear trickle like icy water down his back. "We need to learn exactly what each of them knows, about us, about Argannon and, most importantly, about what Auglar plans to do. Who else he might have told. How many we'll have to kill or convert to put an end to it."

"Fortunately, we have a friend who can do exactly that for us. It won't even be painful for your little cohorts. Unpleasant, but not painful. And after that they'll be killed, of course. Remember their example, Rozah. Remember that anyone you talk into championing you will find death their only reward."

Chapter 19

The Sworn, Yozerf, and Rozah were all packed into a small farm cart, so that their knees bumped together each time it jostled over a rut. The warriors had their hands bound behind them with heavy manacles, their weapons confiscated by greedy soldiers. Two of the warhorses were put to pulling the cart, and Yozerf briefly considered causing them to bolt. But Red Guard walked close by, and their magics were too strong for one lone Wolfkin to overcome.

As they trundled out of the keep and down a rutted lane overgrown from years of disuse, Yozerf peered keenly into the wood. But no flicker of brindled hide, no flash of golden eyes, came to him through the gathering gloom. Damn whatever ill luck had led to the discovery of the Wolfkin by the Red Guard. He hoped that some of them had escaped to return to Kellsjard and warn Auglar. Perhaps they might even stumble across Suchen, although whether they would endanger their own lives by revealing themselves was something of which he couldn't be certain.

He tried to turn his thoughts from Suchen, knowing that worry would do him no good. He had done what he could. At least he had not failed her, left her with no chance against monsters larger and stronger than she was.

In worry's stead, he reached for a more familiar emotion. Hate flared in his gray eyes, and he glared back over the tailgate, silently damning the man who rode directly after them. Dara-Don looked extremely uncomfortable, and Yozerf suspected that it had been sheer malice that led Teylan to order him to keep an eye on his erstwhile comrades. Dara-Don rode slumped in his saddle, brown eyes locked on the pommel, long hair hiding his expression. The ruins of his good-luck charm were clenched tight in his left hand.

Buudi watched his former subordinate with cold eyes. "Care to try and explain yourself, Dara?" he asked in a voice that could have frozen stone.

Dara-Don shrank back at the words, eyes darting about wildly. Neither Teylan nor any of the soldiers volunteered any help, and the Red Guard's crimson eyes were unreadable. "I'm sorry," he stammered at length as the silence grew unbearable. "I didn't know what I was doing was wrong! I didn't realize that Trethya was Rozah!" He glanced hopefully at the young queen, who returned a chill stare. "I didn't think it mattered! They came to me before we left Kellsjard in the fall, at the tavern in the village. They said that they needed help getting a runaway girl back home. When Ro—" when she said that she was the daughter of one of the thanes on the Council, then returning her to her worried father didn't seem like such a bad thing! And they promised none of us would be hurt." He closed his eyes, near to weeping. "They did something to my shaving mirror—" made it so they could look out through it."

"That's how they always seemed able to find us on the way to Kellsjard," Buudi guessed.

Dara-Don nodded. "Yes. When—" when we left Rhiaht, it seemed too dangerous to contact them anymore, so I didn't take the mirror out. And after we got there... He shook his head, expression full of pleading. "I didn't know they meant to kill Auglar! I swear! But by that time, it ... it was too late." Puppy-like eyes turned beseechingly to Rozah. "If I'd known that you were the queen, I never would have done any of it!"

Yozerf's eyes narrowed. It didn't matter, not really. And yet, he wanted to know. "What was the price of your soul, human man? What did they promise you?"

Dara-Don flinched, and his fear sent cruel pleasure through the Aclyte. "It's Hilwa, you see,"

he mumbled. "She was never happy with me being a warrior. They—they said they'd give me a farm, somewhere really nice, where I could take Hilwa and raise some babies. Somewhere she'd be happy."

Yozerf didn't know whether to laugh or to scream in fury. *At least he wasn't after grandiose dreams of luxury and power, like Staafon. But still ... a farm?*

The smallness of it angered him. True, his own soul, body included, had been worth a great deal less than a farm at times. But he had never betrayed anyone other than himself.

"If you're looking for absolution, I can't give it to you," Rozah said. "The truth is, you've betrayed not only your queen, but also your lord and the friends who trusted you. You're going to have to learn to live with that on your own."

After that, no one spoke. Yozerf spent his time concentrating on finding some way to escape. None presented itself, but at least it distracted him from what waited at the end of their journey.

At least Suchen escaped, he told himself fiercely.

She would live. If none of the Council's agents caught up with her first. If she could survive crossing the Kellsmarsh by herself in the dead of winter.

* * * *

Suchen stumbled through the dark forest, branches whipping into eyes blinded by deepening twilight. Sap and blood stuck to her hands as she fended off briars and rough bark alike. Twigs snagged in her long hair, making her look like some frenzied forest sprite. The sound of her footsteps crashed and dinned in her ears.

The Red Guard had not followed her far, and she put her escape down to her own lack of importance in the eyes of her enemies, rather than to any skill on her part. The memory of the fanged monsters filled her mind, along with her last glimpse of Yozerf's face, demonic features imprinted with fear and desperation. He had given up any chance of his own to escape so that she might find freedom, and his sacrifice lay like an icy knife beside her heart.

Gods, what am I to do? Never before had she felt so utterly helpless. Even when she ran from Iddi she'd had Peddock at her side to help her. And later there were companions to turn to for help or support. There was always *someone* on her side, ready to lend aid or advice.

But not this time. The nearest hope of help lay a month away at Kellsjard. Her companions had been taken and were held under guard by soldiers and monsters alike. There was no way that she could fight her way through so many to free them. No way that she could devise a plan that relied only on herself and on her non-existent knowledge of the prison they were being held in. And although she doubted that they were dead, else the Red Guard would not have bothered to overpower rather than kill, there was no way of knowing how long the stay of execution would last.

I have to do something! she raged, striking a branch from her path. *Damn it all, there has to be some way to save them!*

But there wasn't. Not that she could see.

Suchen staggered to a halt. It wasn't in her nature to give in to despair, but now she felt its tenebrous fingers gripping the edges of her thoughts. With a faint moan, she leaned against the nearest tree.

Something dark moved in her peripheral vision.

Startled, she jerked away from the tree, sword out of its sheath before her conscious mind even thought of drawing it. There, not ten paces from her, stood a black wolf. Its golden eyes fixed on her, as if reading the despair on her face, in her scent.

What in Hel's nameâ€”

No ordinary wolf would draw so near a human, certainly not with monsters like the Red Guard nearby. She remembered the way Yozerf would sometimes slip away in the night without explanation, remembered the storm of lupine howls outside Wren's keep when the Red Guard attacked.

Ingrained fear warred with the newborn understanding Yozerf had given her. â€œWolfkin?â€• she asked softly, grateful that her voice didn't shake too much.

For a moment, the black wolf simply watched her. Then, it suddenly shuddered, its body racked by waves of agony. Its head dropped, shaking with pain, then lifted to look at her once again.

"They aren't dead yet,â€• it growled, voice guttural and distorted.

She blinked, amazed. Some sort of partial shape-change, she wondered, that allowed it to speak without becoming human? But why botherâ€”why not just shift all the way?

Because it doesn't want to be recognized?

"Who are you?â€• she demanded.

It shook its head once, hard. â€œNno. C-Camme wwith yyou. T-ten of uss. Ffive dead, mmissingg."

"The Red Guard attacked you."

"Yyess.â€• It tossed its head, indicating a direction. â€œC-Comme. Nnot overr yyet."

Two months ago, I wouldn't have even considered following a Wolfkin through the woods with night coming on. Hel, even in the middle of the day.

Suchen resolutely thrust her sword back into its scabbard. *Times change.*

* * * *

The tall towers of Nava Yek appeared just before sunset. Despite Rozah's captivity in Nava Nar, the winter palace had been kept up, and Yozerf guessed that the Council had not been above using Nava Yek's amenities for themselves. Three spires jutted against the sky, accompanied by a host of smaller towers set about the curtain wall. Crows called hoarsely to one another in the last light. The stink of middens blew only faintly on the windâ€”most likely, the place was left with only a skeleton staff of servants and guards when no Council members were in residence.

When the cart pulled up before the wide, shallow steps leading into the castle, two human soldiers dropped the tailgate. Teylan bowed slightly, a mocking smile on his lips. â€œWelcome to your winter palace, Your Majesty."

Rozah made no reply. The guards pulled her from the cart, and then dragged the prisoners roughly out. Yozerf growled and snapped at them when they touched him, then grinned in satisfaction as they pulled back nervously.

Teylan frowned in annoyance. â€œStop being difficult, Aclyte, before I decide that one captive more or less won't make that much of a difference."

Yozerf exposed all his teeth and laughed softly. The human guards did their best to hold him at arm's length.

Teylan chose to ignore the display. Instead, he directed his attention to the soldiers. "It's nearly midnight. We won't need any of them until dawn. Lock them in the dungeon and have at least three men standing watch at all times." He glanced briefly at Rozah. "As for Her Highness, I think it best that she be kept away from them." One hand closed about her upper arm, hauling her after.

The captives were hustled unceremoniously into the castle. Brilliant tapestries shrouded the walls like grave clothes. Darkly-stained furniture, its lines simple and elegant, filled the rooms. Beeswax candles in gold candelabra burned gently against the night.

They were taken through a maze of corridors, then down a steep flight of stairs. Torchlight flickered off dust-dry walls of finely-mortared stone. A guardroom lay at the bottom of the steps, three long corridors stretching off from it. The soldiers led the helpless Sworn to the first of these, prodding them through a heavy door into the small cell beyond.

Memories of Kellsjard's dungeon of whips and pain and terror erupted like shrieking demons from the depths of Yozerf's mind. With an animal howl of fear, he struggled furiously against the guards' hold. The back of his skull cracked one a sharp blow across the face, breaking the man's nose, before they managed to shove him inside. Then the door slammed shut, cutting off the light of the torches and throwing all into darkness.

Chapter 20

Yozerf lay on his side, cheek pressed against the cold stone floor. Although there were no windows in the cell, he guessed that the sun had risen over the world outside their wretched prison. Teylan had claimed that the Council waited only for the dawn to begin their questioning. It would not be long before the guards came to take the captives first to whatever horror the Council had planned for them and then to death.

Yozerf's wrists ached. Driven by instinct, he had fought hopelessly to be free, and there was blood caked about the edges of the iron manacles. He had kept his struggles quiet, face turned away from the Sworn where they sat in dejected silence. Gless had slipped into a daze brought on by blood loss and the pain of an untended wound. He moaned occasionally, tousled blonde head tossing in a restless half-sleep. Buudi and Peddock lay propped against the wall, unable to offer their injured friend either assistance or reassurance.

Bitter irony raked Yozerf with sharp claws. Not so very long ago, he would have looked upon the fate awaiting him with cold indifference. Although always a savage killer, he held his own life in nearly the same contempt as those he took. At one time, he would have embraced death as an end to the grief, rage, and despair that haunted his soul.

But now ... he didn't want to die.

And he saw absolutely no way to avoid it.

The tread of heavy boots sounded in the corridor. Yozerf's head jerked up, his senses alert. The door swung open, torchlight blinding his dark-accustomed eyes. It did nothing to dull his other senses, however. The varied sweat of the guards came to him, along with the faint scent of Teylan's perfume. Weapon oil underlay all, and he was not surprised when his eyes changed enough to afford him a glimpse of several crossbows leveled at the prisoners. Clearly, Teylan was taking no chances.

"We'll take them one at a time," the counselor instructed briskly. "Bring the Aclyte first" the Emperor might be interested in him, if the tales Dara-Don brought us are true."

Two guards entered, reaching for Yozerf's bound arms. He snarled and snapped at them with wolf's teeth, heedless of the crossbows'™ threat. After all, if they planned to kill him anyway, what difference did it make?

His efforts were futile. Gripping his arms tightly, the guards hustled him out of the cell and back through the deserted corridors of the ancient castle. Sunlight streamed in through windows paned in precious glass, giving him a last, warped glimpse of the world outside.

They took him to the topmost level of the fortress. At the end of a short corridor stood a heavy door, its surface engraved with the fish symbol of the royal house. A soldier outside it snapped to attention and flung the portal open smartly. Teylan swept by, as if he were king already, and the rest followed after.

The chamber was vast, stretching the full length of the castle. Twin rows of columns marched down its center, creating an aisle through empty space. A dais rose at the end of the aisle; at one time, a throne must have perched upon it. Enormous tapestries, too faded to make out the scenes they depicted, hung from brass polls on three of the walls. But it was the fourth wall that captivated Yozerf's attention.

A huge, stained-glass window swallowed most of the wall. It faced east, and the light of the rising sun struck through the enormous panes, causing the glass to burn with an inner fire, flinging great squares of

color across the room. The window depicted a battle between a giant blonde man and a powerful serpent. The man held a great spear aloft, as if he meant to plunge it into the serpent's maw. Waves tossed about them, whipped by the same wind that blew the man's hair back from his chiseled features. Although his knowledge of human religion was less than complete, Yozerf recognized the tale of the struggle between the god Jen and the great serpent, which lived beneath the sea and gnawed at the roots anchoring the land.

At another time, he might have stared entranced at the beauty of the masterwork for hours, marveling in the skill and craftsmanship that revealed a new facet with each change of the light. Now, however, danger swept all such considerations from his mind, dragging his eyes away from the window's glory.

A group of four men stood nearby, the bright colors of their rich clothes competing with the window's brilliance. Gems glittered on fingers and at throats, and ermine lined velvet cloaks. The scents of perfume and soap wafted from them, masking more natural musk.

Several Red Guard lurked along the walls, crimson eyes alert in their bestial heads. The blaze of color from the window painted their scarlet hides in sickly hues. More human soldiers ringed the walls, many of them eyeing the Red Guard with some trepidation. Dara-Don was not among them, and Yozerf wondered dully if the traitor had already been dismissed to collect his reward.

Rozah stood in the midst of this host of enemies. Her dress was torn, and fatigue circled her eyes in purple shadows, but otherwise she appeared unharmed. She kept her back straight, brown eyes staring ahead in a mixture of defiance and pride. They would not have such an easy time keeping her now, Yozerf thought.

The guards halted, jerking their captive to a stop. Teylan continued on, joining his fellows near the window. They murmured together in low voices for a brief time; then the head of the Council turned to Rozah.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," he said, the pleasantries a mockery. "I trust you rested well. A maiden should look refreshed when it comes time to meet her husband."

Rozah stiffened, color draining from her face. But her voice did not tremble. "So, you mean to hand me over to the Emperor, is that it? Afraid that I might escape again to cause more trouble in Jenel?" She glanced around contemptuously. "I don't see anyone here I might call Emperor of Argannon. Unless you've changed your minds and plan on wedding me to one of those beasts instead."

The Red Guard exchanged disgusted glances, as if they found the idea even more abominable than she did.

Teylan only smiled, as if at some secret joke. "You forget" your future husband is a powerful sorcerer. Your tongue has grown sharp during your time away from us; best that you learn to curb it before he arrives."

He turned away and walked swiftly to stand before the stained-glass window. It dwarfed him, making him look like an insignificant black spot against its brilliance. Undaunted, Teylan flung back his arms, as if greeting man and serpent. "Lord Jahcgroth!" he cried, his voice echoing loudly in the cavernous room. "Hear me! Your ally calls to you, in need of your skill! Open the gate and enter!"

For a long moment, nothing happened, and Yozerf dared wonder if Teylan was insane. Then a dash of movement caught his eye, as if a speck of the flying foam in the window's picture had come to life.

An illusion" sunlight sparkling in the corner of my vision.

Then the wave he was looking at moved.

The scene surged into motion. For a moment, the ocean heaved, the coils of the serpent thrashed, and the god's mouth twisted into a triumphant grimace. Then the picture disintegrated, the lead shifting in a geometric dance. Color ran and blended, pooling in new positions. Within the space of a few moments, the image had altered completely.

No longer did it portray a passage from Jenelese scripture. Instead, it depicted a room. The walls were made of gray stone, heavily carved with bas-reliefs. Sconces jutted out from the walls, an elegant pennant of crimson and gold hanging from each. In the center of the room stood a chair on a low dais. And in the chair was a man.

Even as Yozerf watched in wonder, the man rose and started towards the throne room. Leading bent and colors flowed in time to his passage, his image growing larger and larger in perspective. When he reached the edge of the window, he paused a moment.

Then he simply stepped through.

The surface of the stained glass rippled, like water from a dropped stone. The man emerged from the ripples, not as some strange construct of glass and lead, but as flesh and blood. Life revealed the details that the image in the glass had not.

He was an Aclyte. A mane of hair the buttery gold of sunlight swept back from a beautiful face. His lips were generous and looked as if they smiled and laughed often. His height seemed prodigious at first glance—easily seven feet—but Yozerf knew that it was natural for their race, and that poor nourishment had stunted Jenelese Aclytes such as himself.

The man was dressed in a style unfamiliar to Yozerf's eyes, his tunic cut so that it hung skirt-like in back, but only waist-length in the front. A kilt of crimson and gold fell to the tops of fur-lined boots, although Yozerf thought he caught a glimpse of warm leggings beneath. His only weapon appeared to be a simple dagger sheathed at his side, unadorned by jewels or gilding.

But it was not the oddly cut clothes, nor the stranger's height, which captured Yozerf's attention and held it transfixed. Rather, it was the man's eyes. Large and slightly canted like all those of his kind, their silvery-gray color was freakish in Aclytes, confined only to single bloodline.

The man was Jonaglir.

Teylan took a respectful step back, bowing deeply from his waist. The other counselors followed suit, and Yozerf's guards forced him to his knees on the cold stone floor. Even the Red Guard tilted their heads in acknowledgement of the stranger's authority.

"Welcome, Emperor Jahcgroth," Teylan said warmly.

Jahcgroth? Yozerf's mind froze, seizing on the name in horror and confusion. *Impossible. His eyes—he must be Jonaglir! But Jahcgroth destroyed our clan, killed the dragons, and left Telmonra and her people defenseless.*

It was an irreconcilable paradox. Either the man was of Jonaglir blood, or he was Jahcgroth. He could not be both.

Teylan must be mistaken...

Jahcgroth nodded politely towards the Council, but a look of distaste flashed in his eyes, quickly

concealed. Instead of greeting Teylan in return, he turned towards the one person in the room not humbling herself before him. Rozah glared at him, as if her gaze could act as a knife and plunge into his heart. She flinched slightly at his approach but did not back away.

"My Queen." Jahcgroth's voice was deep and soft, draped in an accent similar to Yozerf's own. A smile of pleasure bent his lips, and he bowed. "It is an honor to meet you."

Rozah stared at him, uncertain how to react to a friendly greeting. "I wish I could say the same."

Jahcgroth straightened, his smile replaced by a look of regret. "I understand."

Teylan frowned, apparently having expected Jahcgroth to treat Rozah with the same condescending attitude as the Council. "I trust your journey was not unpleasant?" he asked, trying to draw the Emperor's attention back to him.

Jahcgroth glanced briefly at the stained-glass window, which now showed only an empty room. "It was not. A beautiful piece of work. I've never used such a window as a portal before" "certainly the experience from this end must have been unique."

Teylan nodded briskly, obviously not interested in discussing either art or magic. "Your bride is here, Emperor, as promised. And I believe that you made a vow of your own...?"

"I did." Again, Yozerf thought he detected the faintest touch of displeasure in the words, as if the Emperor would far rather deal with someone other than the Council. "You said that you had taken some captives along with Queen Rozah" "men who might be dangerous to your cause. I will read their minds and tell you who else might be plotting against you."

"Do you need to rest first?" Teylan asked, glancing towards the window. Surely, Yozerf thought, the magic that had shaped the portal was mighty enough to drain even the greatest sorcerer.

But Jahcgroth shook his head, butter-gold hair slithering softly over his crimson-clad shoulders. "No. Bring the first one, and let's get this over with."

The guards jerked Yozerf roughly to his feet, dragging him into the stream of sunlight coming through the window. As they approached, he dared glance up, saw Jahcgroth staring at him. To his shock, a mixture of surprise and hope flared in the gray eyes so like his own.

"You" "who are you?" Jahcgroth demanded, taking a quick step forwards. He glanced over at the guards, made a dismissive gesture. Exchanging wary looks, they stepped back, hands hovering near swords lest Yozerf somehow manage to break his manacles.

Yozerf threw his head back, sending his blood-red hair tumbling over his shoulders in a wild cascade. The idea of being enemy to another Aclyte was abhorrent to him, and a part of his mind still insisted that this man could not possibly be Jonaglir. Still, no matter his heritage, no matter his race, he was allied to the Council. He planned to force Rozah away from her own kingdom, to coerce her into becoming his bride. And Yozerf was unable to imagine a more un-Aclytese crime than that.

He glared up at Jahcgroth, gray eyes matching gray. "You're supposed to be able to read my mind. Find out for yourself."

Jahcgroth paused, lips thinning. "I can't break my promise to the Council," he murmured, too low for anyone else to hear. "But I apologize for what I am about to do."

So saying, he reached out and laid his fingertips on Yozerf's forehead. And his presence entered Yozerf's

mind.

The feeling of Jahcgroth's mental touch was indescribable, save as an overwhelming sense of violation. Yozerf tried to struggle against the intruder, but in a place where hands and teeth meant nothing, he had no knowledge of how to even begin to fight. Jahcgroth brushed aside his efforts, probes reaching in and down, unstoppable. For a moment, it flashed through Yozerf's frantic thoughts that, as a child starving in the gutters of Segg, he had believed that he had sold his soul along with his body. But now he knew for a certainty that he had been wrong, because that was what Jahcgroth was taking from him now.

Magic found Yozerf's memories, forced them open like unfolding roses, to be dissected and examined. At first, the sorcerer confined himself to those memories that had some meaning to the Council: *meeting with Auglar, talking to Rozah, listening to the Sworn discuss plans for restoring their young charge to the throne*. But then something changed. The nature of the memories Jahcgroth examined altered. Gone were the meetings and strategies, replaced by scenes of a more personal nature.

Sitting and talking by the fire. Watching birds fly. Smiling secretly at some joke of Gless's. Reading aloud with Suchen.

Falling. Falling. And then the woman, holding out her hand.

An emotion rose up, and for a moment Yozerf could not identify it. Then he realized that the sensation came not from him, but from the mind invading his own. A feeling of guarded hope, of cobweb-fragile joy, of...

...Recognition?

Suddenly, Yozerf felt his mind jerked to one side, all consciousness of the world around him severed as Jahcgroth dragged him into deeper memories. Realization sparked briefly, that the Emperor was frantically searching for something specific. Then all thought was buried beneath the wild torrent of memory.

Arguing with Rozah. Running with the Wolfkin. Suchen above him, her face contorted with passion. The parapet of a tower growing small as he fell away from it. His first glimpse of Suchen in the inn in Diicus.

Deeper.

Slaying his enemies in the midst of a frenzied battle. Wandering across the wind-swept plains of the Kellsmarch, his soul bleak as the cold breeze. Panicking the horse of the nobleman who had shot at him for his wolf's hide.

And deeper.

Sitting hunched on the floor of a tenement, barely able to keep a grip on the knife as he slashed his left arm open, blood already pouring from the right. Sweet Gin's tears. Trading desperately for the drug that was his only solace. Leading his latest customer back into an alley.

And deep, deep, deep into darkness...

Yozerf screamed. Distantly he was aware of his body jack-knifing, every muscle convulsing violently. Jahcgroth yelled and lunged to grab him but was too late. The floor rushed up, but oblivion came faster.

* * * *

She leaned against a low wall, absently staring out at the view. A steep mountainside fell away

before her, the single track that led up it hidden behind stands of thick conifers. Beyond the mountain lay a valley, a prosperous-looking village spilling out of it like too much food in a bowl. The white fluff of sheep showed on the hillside beyond, barely visible.

Although it was spring, the wind was still cold as it caressed her cheek. But the rough stone of the wall held in the sun's heat, pleasantly warm beneath her elbows. Flowers in the terrace garden below blazed their defiant colors, petals like fire in the sunlight.

Footsteps approached, their maker hidden behind the boxwoods that lined the garden paths. She turned alertly, her movement filled with the grace of a born dancer.

Jahcgroth emerged from behind the boxwood screen. The breeze tousled his lovely hair. The easy smile she had grown used to during her stay flashed brightly on his lips. "Ah, Telmonra. The servants said you had come here."

She nodded. "It's one of my favorite places to think." She didn't add that she had been thinking about her father, her older brothers, her sister, and all the other familiar things of her home. "It reminds me of Caden, I think. Although we have nothing so lovely as this garden at Cade Kwii."

He nodded gravely. "It's one of my favorite places as well. I planted it with the hopes that I could give it to my mate someday, as my first-night gift. When I find a woman to love, that is." A troubled look creased his brow for a moment, then disappeared. "But until that time, you are welcome to enjoy it."

She smiled, touched by his reasons behind creating the garden. It was something that she might have done herself, in his place. She laid a hand on his sleeve, felt the hardness of the muscle beneath. He started at the touch and turned a searching gaze on her.

"I don't think I've ever met someone so like myself," she said sincerely. "We could be twins rather than distant cousins."

He smiled warmly, covering her hand with his own. "I feel the same way, Telmonra."

* * * *

"Telmonra!"

Yozerf moaned softly, disoriented by pain and muddled thoughts. "Betrayer," the woman said, a last hate-filled echo in his mind.

"What by Hel?" he's a sorcerer! someone shouted.

Yozerf forced his eyes open and found himself staring dumbly at the hall around him. The enormous tapestries had been torn into shreds, the brass bars they had hung from ripped from the walls and bent nearly in two. He had fallen to the ground. Rozah had apparently slipped away from her guards during the ruckus and now crouched over him like a she-wolf guarding her cub.

The taste of blood filled Yozerf's mouth. "What?" "what happened?"

Jahcgroth stared as if he had never seen anything like him before. He stretched out a hesitant hand, his brow creased in confusion. "T-Telmonra?"

"Get away from him, monster!" shouted Rozah furiously. "What have you done to him?"

"It ... I ... I don't know," Jahcgroth said finally. "There's something ... someone..." He trailed off as if he had no words to explain his thoughts.

Terror slowly pooled in Yozerf's belly. Whatever had happened, it had been exactly like the night that he had confronted Thane Ormond on the Kellsmarch. Somehow it was tied to the woman he had seen in that space beyond life and death, who had haunted him ever since.

Haunted him.

What had Jiara said? *"There was something odd about your healing ... as I was pulling you back, it almost felt as though there were two of you."*

"Who are you?"

"Vengeance."

Jahcgroth glanced briefly at Rozah's angry face, then back to Yozerf. "I don't understand what's happening here." Troubled gray eyes met Yozerf's own. "But I will find out, and I will help you if I can. I promise."

He rose lithely, turning to the Council. "He knows nothing that your spy hasn't already told you."

Teylan nodded and gestured to a guard. "Good. Kill him."

"No." Authority radiated from Jahcgroth's voice, stilling the guard instantly. "He is a kinsman of mine. I am going to take him back to Argannon along with my bride."

* * * *

Suchen crouched amidst the trees outside Nava Yek, peering in through the half-open gates. "I count a dozen soldiers," she murmured softly, voice low enough to nearly blend into the wind. *"Thank the gods this isn't truly a living, working keep, or else we'd have no chance of attacking. Fortunately, it looks like no one was in residence when they found out we were coming. There's only a skeleton force of guards" if they'd brought any more from Nava Nar, they would have been delayed too long to remove Wren before we arrived.* "No Red Guard that I can see, although they might simply be in human form."

The black wolf shivered with the sharp anguish of another partial shift. "Nnone of themm arre Unnatural Onnes."

"All right, then. Any ideas?"

He nodded. Apparently some signal too subtle for Suchen was passed among the Wolfkin, for one of the she-wolves quickly shifted into human shape. There was something familiar about her strong features, Suchen thought, although she knew that she had never seen this particular woman before. Shivering with cold, the naked woman boldly stepped out of the concealing trees and headed towards the gates.

Naturally, the attention of the guards was drawn towards her and held. Most of them stared in confusion and disbelief. One or two elbowed each other and pointed out her charms.

"Thank the gods!" she exclaimed, running towards the nearest guard. He blinked, shocked, as she flung her arms about him. "Bandits! Bandits attacked me! They took everything, even my clothes!"

Uncertain what to do about an armful of hysterical woman, he looked for help from his fellows. Two approached quickly, one openly eyeing her bare bottom. "Um ... don't worry, miss," the first guard said awkwardly. "We'll help you."

She pulled her face away from where it had been hidden in his jerkin, exposing a mouthful of fangs.

“Thankss, dearrie,” she hissed and sank her teeth deep into his throat.

The other Wolfkin burst out of hiding, charging the shocked guards. Whipping her sword from its sheath, Suchen followed.

The battle was unlike any other she had ever fought. Although her part in it was the same, she was amazed at how demoralized the guards were by the Wolfkin. Some flung down their weapons and fled outright, screaming in terror at the monsters come upon them. Others fought with a frenzied clumsiness brought on by fear. Although she knew intellectually that many who would gladly face a large, strong man in battle would be terrified before an animal's attack, she had never seen the truth of it displayed so effectively before.

Blood and gore splattered Suchen's face, its stench clogging her nostrils. Pausing only long enough to wipe it from her forehead before it could blind her, she waved towards the castle door. “Inside! We have to find the Sworn!”

Charging to the door, she wrenched it open only to find Dara-Don's wide face staring out at her from the other side. “Dara!” she exclaimed, both happy and puzzled. “You've escaped! Where are the others?”

He stared at her, a mixture of shame and terror transfiguring his gentle features into something unrecognizable. Then, suddenly, he dashed past her, running towards the open gates.

“Let him go!” she shouted to the Wolfkin, confused by her friend's reaction. *What's happening here?*

She had no more time to contemplate Dara-Don, however. One of the Wolfkin surged past her, nose to the floor. Suchen raced after it, the other wolves falling in around and behind her. Tracking by scent, they made their way through the keep to the dungeons. There were few guards, and most of these were stationed at the entrance to the prison itself.

The wolves made quick work of them. Suchen searched the bodies, ignoring the gore that slicked her fingers. Finding a likely set of keys, she followed the wolves to where they milled about excitedly in front of the first cell door. Unlocking it and flinging it open, she saw the remainder of the Sworn huddled on the floor, staring up expectantly.

“Buudi” she began, then stopped. “Yozerf. Where is he?”

“Hhurry!” the black wolf exclaimed.

As the Sworn stared in shock at the animal, Suchen quickly bent and began unlocking their manacles. Buudi rubbed his wrists gratefully, but avoided looking directly at her. “They took Yozerf about an hour ago. For questioning.” He swallowed harshly. “I believe they intended to kill him once they finished.”

“No” she began. And then a sound like deep thunder shook the castle walls, and the world fell in on them.

* * * *

Jahcgroth held out his hand to Rozah. “I am sorry, my lady,” he said quietly. “But I must touch your mind as well. I gave my word to the Council and cannot go back on it.”

She shrank away, and then stopped, obviously reluctant to abandon Yozerf. “Don't touch me,” she commanded.

Yozerf fought through the confusion clouding his thoughts. He had managed to stagger to his feet with Jahcgroth's help, but his hands were still chained behind his back, and the guards still leveled weapons at him. His lips peeled back, exposing lupine fangs, and his eyes burned with agony as they changed to gold. The wolf's instincts rose in him, and he growled, challenging the intruder, the threat to his pack.

Jahcgroth ignored the display. Quick as a cat, he reached out and caught Rozah's wrist, drawing her slender form closer. "I must," he said simply. One hand came up, touched her forehead.

She stiffened sharply but did not cry out. Jahcgroth closed his eyes, bent his head close to hers as he rummaged through her memories like a thief in a counting house.

Yozerf took a deep, shuddery breath and tried to concentrate. Jahcgroth's touch had done something to him, had dragged alien memories up from the dark places they had lurked. He could *feel* them, like black water beneath a thin crust of ice. It would be simple to smash through and drink of them again.

But to what end? So that he could harmlessly fling a few tapestries around? Or, worse, char Rozah or even himself to ash?

She would know. Her eyes said Jonaglir, and her memories said queen. Telmonra had been a younger daughter brought to power through the untimely deaths of her father and brothers. Like every other ruler of Caden, she'd spent nine nights bound to the Dragon Stone, letting the land drink her blood in return for power. Power that apparently had followed her even into death.

She knew how to use that power, whether through instinct or training. There had to be some way to tap into her knowledge so that he could have some control over the magic.

Now if only he could learn to do so before it was too late for either Rozah or himself.

Jahcgroth released Rozah, carefully steadying her with his hand. She shivered and turned hate-filled eyes on him. "Well? You have what you wanted."

He nodded. "There is no great conspiracy. Lord Auglar and Lord Wren were the only two."

Teylan smiled like a lizard. "Excellent. I'm glad to see that our stray sheep did not do any more damage. Auglar will be dealt with easily enough once spring renders the roads passable. I'm certain that Lord Fellrant will be glad for the opportunity to expand his holdings."

Rozah's eyes narrowed in anger. "So what will you do now? Kill me?"

Jahcgroth gave her a pained look. "Of course not."

"Why not? Isn't that what you intend? Or do you have something else in mind, Emperor? Do you instead plan to take me away from Jenel, wed me, and then bring me back when your armies conquer the kingdom, using me to legitimize your tyranny? Then, when you have no more use of me, to have me die conveniently, mourned by all?"

Teylan frowned uneasily. "Don't be silly. The Emperor has his own kingdom. He has no interest in anything but trade with Jenel."

Jahcgroth ignored the statement. Instead, he reached out and gently took Rozah's hands in his own, staring into her large, dark eyes. "No," he said quietly. "That was never my intention, Rozah. Ax and these fools may think that I want to kill or imprison you, for traitors and tyrants see themselves reflected in all others. I had hoped to speak to you privately of this, but I see it cannot wait. Argannon *is* going to die, crushed beneath the weight of the ice creeping down from the North. And I *do* intend to

bring my people here, to Jenel, where they can live in safety and peace.

"I did contact the Council in order to achieve this, yes. But I have no love for traitors, Rozah. When I learned of your imprisonment, of the unjust way they treated you, I wanted to take you from Jenel. Not only to further my own goals of saving Argannon, but also to free you from their cruelty."

She stared at him, clearly not believing a word. "Free me?"

He nodded gravely. "I don't want you as a slave, Rozah. You will be Queen of Jenel, as is your right. Together we will bring my people here, to live among your own. We will rule as joint monarchs throughout your life. Someday, I think that you will realize that you could leave Jenel in no better hands once you die."

"Immortal Jahcgroth," she murmured, half to herself. Then her dark eyes snapped back to his face. "You're lying."

He smiled faintly, as if he hadn't expected her to believe him. "Time will show you that my words are truth. I'm not the monster Ax would have you believe."

"Traitor!" Teylan screamed suddenly, eyes wild. "You said you wanted a trade agreement with Jenel! You said that you would take her off our hands, that protecting our power was in your own best interest!" He gestured frantically to the guards. "Kill him! Kill all of them!"

Red Guard and human guards moved at the same moment. The monsters formed up around their master, but the captives of the Council gained no such consideration. One of the guards lunged at Yozerf.

"No!" shouted Rozah, and flung herself forward, as if she would strike the blow aside.

The guard's blade buried itself in her chest, sliding between her ribs and out her back. He stared at her for a moment in horror, and then frantically jerked the blade back out the path it had made. She screamed, then, her legs giving way so that she stumbled into Yozerf. He struggled to catch her, but there was little he could do with manacles about his wrists.

Her tiny hands caught at the front of his tunic, supporting her weight against him. For an instant, she looked up at him in puzzlement. Blood poured suddenly out of her mouth, soaking hot and wet through his clothing. "I didn't..." she started. Then her eyes went glassy, and she crumpled to the ground.

Yozerf stood very still, feeling as if the world had stopped in its turning. He stared down at Rozah's shattered body, but the only thought that would come to him was that it was all hideously unfair. She had never even had a real life, locked away in a tower as she had been. And now ... now she was dead, killed in a stupid, misguided attempt to save his life, an act of loyalty that no ruler was supposed to show one of her own.

But he had been of her pack, and in the end that had been enough for her.

Rage turned his blood to acid. Limbs shaking, he looked up, and saw the shocked expression on Teylan's face turn into one of fear.

"Do it!" he screamed, and smashed through that thin layer of ice that held back Telmonra's ghost.

This was the court of Jenel, the court of her enemies; that was all either of them knew. And Jahcgroth, the great traitor, was among them.

Memories raged through him like a storm: the smell of burning, the screams of dying children, the sobs of

raped women. Men in the livery of Jenel ran through the streets, setting fire to the houses and slaughtering everything in their path. They would come to the citadel soon, and once they were there they would not hesitate to spill the blood of Jonaglir until there was nothing left.

It had all ended in fire.

Yozerf shrieked out the words of a woman dead more than three centuries. The manacles binding his wrists shattered, and he flung out his arms. All the hate and rage in them both turned to flame, searing the air so that lungs roasted. The Council members screamed, their hair and clothing igniting in an instant. Red Guard howled, bones showing as their flesh baked away. The stained-glass wall rippled momentarily as Jahcgroth sought to flee, then exploded outward from the killing heat.

The holocaust that was Rozah's funeral pyre spread outward, turning stone to slag. Yozerf felt as though his soul stretched out, farther and farther, and for a moment he no longer knew any reality save for death and destruction and hate.

Then the world imploded.

Epilogue

Yozerf sat near the edge of one of Kellsjard's high towers, staring out over the snow-covered landscape. Although trepidation at being so close to a fifty-foot drop gnawed at the corners of his mind, he did his best to ignore the vestigial fear of heights that seemed as though it would always be with him. The frigid wind of deep winter snatched at his hair, flinging it wildly over one shoulder. His black cloak flared out like wings, the breeze sneaking beneath to pry at flesh and bone. He shivered and drew the cloak closer.

It had been nearly two weeks since they had returned to Kellsjard, bearing the news that the Council was dead and Rozah along with them. Everyone believed that a spell of Jahcgroth's had killed them, and that only Yozerf had miraculously escaped the general destruction that had annihilated everyone else in the throne room.

Sometimes, he thought about telling everyone the truth. Or at least telling Suchen, whom he could surely trust more than any other. But at first the memory had been too bitter. And now, so many weeks after, they would wonder why he had not spoken earlier.

Though deeply shaken by Rozah's death, Auglar had sent out messages to every Lord in the kingdom, telling them the details of the Council's treachery and informing them that Jenel was now leaderless on the eve of war. The fact that Auglar had retained his composure and seized the initiative, doing what must be done in the face of an empty throne, boded well for his chances of being named the next king of Jenel.

While their noble charge pondered the fate of his kingdom, the Sworn spent their days licking their wounds. There was a hole in their company that could not be refilled. Uzco's death on a normal battlefield would have been cause for sorrow, but an expected sorrow. His death during an ambush set up by one of their own was devastating.

Yozerf's eyes automatically went to the spot in the courtyard where the gallows had been erected for Hilwa's execution. Shocked by their return and Rozah's untimely death, she had not even attempted to deny her knowledge of her husband's treachery, nor her willing compliance with it.

Those were not the only injuries. Gless would walk with a severe limp the rest of his life, his wound too far healed by the time they got back to Kellsjard for Jiara to do anything about it. It wouldn't affect his skill at fighting from horseback, but he would never battle on foot again.

The trapdoor behind Yozerf creaked as it opened, and he turned expectantly. Suchen's golden-haired head appeared from the hole, and she quickly scrambled onto the icy roof. "I thought I'd find you here," she said with a glad smile.

Yozerf forced himself to return the smile. They had both survived and were together—surely that alone merited his gratitude. He took her hands in his as she drew near, pulling her close for a welcoming kiss. "What did Auglar say?" he asked once their lips parted again.

She frowned at him a little. "You should have come. Everyone else in Kellsjard was there for the proclamation."

"I'm sorry. I needed to think."

"You've been doing a great deal of thinking lately." Her face softened. "Would you ... would you like to talk about it? I know that Rozah's death hurt you. It hurt me, too. I'll listen to whatever you have to say. I ... I already know that she loved you."

He blinked in shock. "You must be wrong." But she had put herself between him and the blade that would have taken his life. "Perhaps later," he added, before Suchen could continue on a topic he'd as soon not discuss with anyone. "But what about Auglar?"

"He's made his decision. Lord Auglar was Rozah's cousin, even though they were linked through the female line. He has decided to put forth a claim to the throne. As soon as the weather breaks, he and the other lords will meet to ratify his right to rule."

Yozerf nodded. Auglar would make a good king. *And the next monarch of Jenel after him will be a Wolfkin.* The irony was delightful. "I'm glad he made the decision."

"As am I," said a calm, wise voice from behind them.

Startled, Yozerf spun snarling, and Suchen's sword half-cleared its sheath before a gentle chuckle brought them up short. Ax stood on the other side of the roof, his pristine robes blending in with the thick snow. Blue eyes watched them with a look of benediction.

Rage slammed through Yozerf, but he fought to control it lest the wizard decide to give him another lesson in who was the stronger.

"Damn you, Ax," he growled. "Damn you for all that you've done."

"Done?" the wizard asked mildly.

"You know what I mean! The urge to rend the wizard limb from limb was nearly overwhelming. Rozah *trusted* you! She believed that you would help her, but instead you *abandoned* her to her fate! If you had come, had guided her, had done *something*, she would still be alive today!"

A scowl disrupted the composure of Ax's face. "I did not force Rozah's actions" she was the one who chose her course, not me. I will not take responsibility for the choices of a girl with no more sense than to walk straight back into her enemies' arms."

"You blame Rozah for her own death?"

Ax frowned in annoyance. "She died for the good of Jenel" there can be no greater purpose than that. Then the frown cleared. "And, as there is one to take her place, I see no lasting damage from her death. Indeed, Auglar has battle experience that she lacked" he will be an even better ruler during this time of trial."

Yozerf turned away, sickened. He wished he could strike Ax down for his callous words, but knew that the wizard was far too powerful.

For now, whispered a soft voice in his head.

"Why have you come here?" Yozerf asked aloud. "Since I failed to protect Rozah, do you consider my debt to you unfulfilled? Have you come to drag me away from my pack and my mate, to send me on some other fool's errand, again and again until I die?"

"Don't be so melodramatic. No, I am not going to set any more tasks for you. You may consider your debt repaid." He shrugged. "You were always a flawed weapon."

With a mocking bow, the wizard stepped back and vanished. Yozerf stared at the place where Ax had stood, hate writhing within him.

Suchen swallowed nervously. "That ... he seemed different than the last time I met him."

"Perhaps he feels your poor taste in men condemns you."

She failed to rise to the attempted joke. "I should tell Lord Auglar about this."

"Very well. I'll meet you inside in a few moments."

She nodded and hurried off. Yozerf watched her go, and then sighed. Somehow he did not truly believe that Ax had finished with him. Their association had been lifelong, and Ax was loath to give up any tool that might be of some advantage to him. It would not surprise Yozerf in the least if the wizard found some new way to trick him into service.

Yozerf leaned back and reached deep inside himself, as though he reached through a shattered mirror. Something reached back. The wind sprang up suddenly, sending snow flying and obscuring the prints of Ax's feet.

Yozerf smiled a dangerous smile. Let Ax return and try his patience. He was not so helpless now as he had once been.

Wrapping his cloak about him, he rose to his feet and followed his mate inside.

About The Author

When Elaine Corvidae was eight years old, she came home from school one day and declared that she was going to be a writer. Elaine is not certain what prompted that declaration, but unlike so many other decisions in life, it stuck from that day on.

Elaine has worked as an office assistant, archaeologist, and raptor rehabilitator. She is currently earning her Masters degree in Biology at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. She lives near Charlotte, NC, with her husband and their three cats, who are just like children, except they never ask to borrow the car.

Elaine is a vegan (strict vegetarian) and interested in animal rights. She enjoys backpacking, wasting time on the computer, good beer, and loud music.

Her first published novel, *Winter's Orphans*, was the recipient of the 2001 Dream Realm Award and the 2002 Eppie Award.

To learn more about Elaine Corvidae visit her official website at www.onecrow.net.