

HUNTBROTHER

by Michelle West

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Hunter's Oath

Hunter's Death

The Sun Sword

The Broken Crown

The Uncrowned King

The Shining Court

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The Riven Shield

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The House War

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*Forthcoming in 2012 and 2013

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Introduction

This is another story written for Alexander Potter, for an anthology about dogs—albeit dogs in a fantasy or science fiction setting, since it was a DAW anthology. When he asked if I had a Hunter story I could write for him, I leapt at the chance—because there was a story that I wanted to write.

When I finished *Hunter's Death*, I didn't exactly end it where the novel now ends. I was completely caught up in the characters and the world—enough so that my first thought, upon seeing the cover for the novel, was "Where's Stephen??" I wrote pages after the final scene that ends the novel, seeking some sort of peaceful resolution for poor Cynthia of Maubreche—and in the end, it was my editor, Sheila Gilbert, and my husband, Thomas, who gently pointed out that the book *had* to end where it ended. They were completely right, and I saw that—but I still found it very hard to let go. It's a danger that one always confronts when one becomes so emotionally involved in the reality of one's character's lives. It doesn't happen with every book; sometimes I know the end, and it *is* the end. But it's happened at least twice that I can think of.

(The inverse is also true. There are times when I think: This is where the novel ends, and the ending as conceived is too abrupt. I would have ended *Sun Sword* in a different place had it been any other book but the last one, for instance. I'm trying to be careful to elide possible spoilers for anyone who hasn't read that book yet, because the spoilers will also pretty much spoil the whole thing.)

I went on to write the six *Sun Sword* novels, because the *Sacred Hunt* was the prologue in a longer series of novel arcs. I've always known that Cynthia's son plays a very important role in the world of the Empire of Essalieyan. He hasn't appeared on the pages beyond this story and a single (unnamed) instant at the end of *Sea of Sorrows*. But he's important to the final arc of the world as a whole.

I couldn't write Cynthia's story, or any part of it, in the context of the later novels. I had considered trying to write it as a prologue, but structurally, it didn't work (and, at twenty thousand words, it's a very, very long prologue). I wrote it, instead, in this novella.

Readers of the previous books will find the beginning of Stephen of Maubreche's story in this one—but I hope that they'll also find some closure for Cynthia of Maubreche as well.

* * *

Huntbrother

AN OLD STORY: Girl who must marry for duty falls in love with boy who cannot fulfill that duty. The boy goes away to war, and war takes him; he never returns.

But this history was slightly different. The boy was given leave to return, in the casement of his god's flesh, and the girl, leave to spend one night with him. The night was glorious.

The morning was terrible.

And after?

* * *

The mirrors were covered in cloth; dust nestled in the folds made of tarpaulin's fall. The chandelier, likewise covered, hung above the great table and the fine, old chairs, casting shadows; it had offered no light in the outer chambers of these rooms for months.

Nor should it. Cynthia had refused all guests, and all visitors; had adorned herself in the colors of mourning, the deep black, with edges of green, brown, and gray. She wore a veil when it suited her, and it suited her this day. Too old to be sent to her room, she had nonetheless chosen to retreat there, for Lady Maubreche, her mother, was in a mood that was just shy of fury. Her proper, brittle voice had fallen into ice, and the space between each of her evenly pronounced words was an attempt to maintain the facade of a civility she certainly felt her daughter did not deserve.

As Cynthia had made her way up the grand staircase, its finery almost too ostentatious for the nobility of Breodanir, she had met her father, Lord Maubreche. His hair had grayed only over the last half year; his beard had turned white. The hunting injuries he had sustained during the Sacred Hunt would never leave him; he had neither the youth nor the vigor to fight their slow decay.

He had had very little to say. His daughter's condition, the doom that had been placed upon her slender shoulders, had robbed him of wrath. Of hope.

But not of affection.

It was the affection that was hardest to accept, for it was couched—and offered—in a hesitance born of pain. He expected her to reject him. She wanted to.

But she knew that death waited, and soon, for this man who had once been the pride of the Master of the Game, the King as Hunter. He had been offered the rank of Huntsman of the Chamber, and he had taken his dogs into the Sacred Woods by the King's own side.

He would never do so again.

And the certainty of that made her want to rage against the resignation she saw in a face that had once defined strength. This man had taught her to handle his dogs, although she would never love them so dearly as he; this man had brought her the books that she craved, and given her the horses that even his stableboys had difficulty taming. He had given her every freedom that a daughter could be granted, and some unwisely, as her mother had often told him.

But he could not give her more. What was left her was duty, and he *could not* ask her to fulfill it. Except in this way, eyes rounded and narrowed, hand upon the banister.

“Lady Eralee will come at the end of the twoweek with her son.”

She nodded; she did not trust herself to speak.

“Your mother bids me remind you.”

And you are to run Mother's errands now? But she did not say it. Instead, stiff, she nodded and mounted the stairs that led to her only privacy.

* * *

She rocked a while on the bed, her arms crossed against her chest, her head bowed. The tears that she had shed at the death of Lord Stephen of Elseth were gone; gone because she willed them gone. As he was. She had seen his corpse, and even the ceremonial dressing that bound him together, that made him whole, could not disguise how terribly his body had been mauled.

By the Hunter. By the Hunter God.

Aie, but it was not the savagery of the death she hated, for it was a death that every Hunter Lord, every huntbrother feared—and faced—within the Kingdom. Only by death was the Hunter God assuaged; only by such a death were the lands made fertile, and its people fed.

It was simply the death itself. Stephen had left her on the evening of her debut; Stephen had promised to return. And in some sense he had; the God himself had brought what remained;

spirit, soul, ghost.

She had taken what he offered, desperate, pathetically grateful for the moments, the hours, that were hers. But in the end, Stephen of Elseth had no way to return to the mortal land; he would travel to the Halls of Mandaros, there to be judged for his life, and his life's deeds.

And she, Cynthia of Maubreche, returned home.

Returned home.

* * *

Lady Eralee was not a predatory woman, and it was for this reason that Cynthia found her presence a comfort.

She greeted Cynthia in the chambers reserved for the most important of dignitaries; the servants nicknamed it the King's room, although it had another, older one.

The older woman was dressed simply. She wore high collars and a gown that fell from shoulder to floor. This was not the current fashion, but Lady Eralee was old enough that elegance counted for much. "Lady Cynthia."

She noticed the dark colors of mourning Cynthia chose to wear; she was no fool. But she did not respond to them, did not offer anything but the silence of sympathy.

"Lady Eralee." Cynthia's curtsy was perfect.

"I trust you remember my younger son. Corwin, please, Lord Maubreche has promised you inspection of the kennels and the runs. Attend us now before he arrives."

Lord Corwin of Eralee was, by Hunter standards, a handsome man. His hair was dark and thick, and his eyes bright and wide; his lips were full, and were often turned up at the corner in a smile. His nose had been broken at least once, but it didn't mar the line of his face.

He turned from the windows and bowed.

Cynthia was impressed in spite of herself; the bow was perfect. She wondered what dire threats Lady Eralee had made to ensure such perfection and decided she didn't want to know.

"And my son's huntbrother, Lord Arlin."

She curtsied again, but when she rose, she met Lord Arlin's eyes. They were nothing at all like Stephen's. Lord Arlin was not as dark as Lord Corwin; his hair was a brown that would pale in sun and darken in winter, and his eyes were an odd shade of green. His skin was dark with sun, and the creases around his eyes would deepen with time. He wore a beard, where Stephen had worn none.

Nothing about him reminded her of the dead.

And yet, there was something about him that spoke to her in a way that no one but the dead had.

She had met no less than six Ladies who had made the offer to Maubreche on behalf of their Hunter sons. And of the six, Lord Corwin had the two strongest advantages: His mother, with her obvious affection for him, and his huntbrother.

“I must apologize, Lady Eralee, for my conduct during the Sacred Hunt.”

“No, Lady Cynthia, you must not.” Her eyes were kind. “It is I who must apologize. I understand that mourning must take its course. Believe that time heals all but the fatal wounds. Believe that, in time, the memories will be gentle.

“And forgive me, for I do understand this truth at my age, but in spite of this understanding, I am here, with my son. Corwin,” she said, her voice taking on some of the steel that *must* be hidden beneath the kindness of her words. “Attend us.”

He came.

Arlin had never left.

“My son is a Hunter.”

Cynthia offered a conspirator’s smile. “I’ve lived with a Hunter Lord all my life.”

“With a Hunter of the Chamber, Lady Cynthia.”

“Honor or no, he would rather be with the alaunts and the lymers than within the confines of the manse.” She smiled.

Corwin smiled as well. His smile was a Hunter’s smile, but it was not shorn of kindness.

“I would not hold him,” Lady Cynthia said. “And I hear my father’s heavy tread upon the stair. He will join us soon, and he is *most* excited to have a visitor who will appreciate the value of the Maubreche kennels. We have had many, many Ladies visit over the last six weeks and only two have troubled themselves to bring the sons they hope to marry.”

“My thanks, Lady Cynthia, for your understanding,” Lord Corwin said. Almost before the door to the hall was open, he was through it. He paused, one foot on either side of the doorframe. “Arlin, are you coming?”

“I would prefer to sit; I have not yet recovered from last week’s hunt.”

Corwin’s brows drew down in a single thick line. But the retort he might have made was killed in its entirety by the fixed smile on his mother’s face. He left.

“I have never envied the life of a huntbrother,” Cynthia said softly.

“And I,” Arlin replied, “have never envied the life of a woman who will sit in judgment upon the seat of her lands.”

It was not what she expected to hear, and she rewarded the words with a hesitant smile. “It makes us hard,” she said. A warning.

“It makes you human, I think; I am aware that there is a difference between a mask that is worn and the face beneath it.”

“And mine, Lord Arlin?”

“Yours?”

“Do I wear a mask now, or do I expose the face beneath it?”

He laughed. “It is true, what is said of you.”

“Arlin,” Lady Eralee said.

“No, Lady Eralee, I am not so easily offended. Gossip—where it is checked and informed by affection—is a simple fact of the life of *any* house. I am aware of what is said of me in *this* house—but I admit that I am less aware of what is said beyond these walls.

“What part of what is said is true, Lord Arlin?”

“That you are as bold and direct as a Hunter, Lady Cynthia.”

“But hopefully not as...distracted.”

He laughed.

She was surprised that she could like the sound of his laugh, although she could not quite bring herself to join it.

“Lady Cynthia,” he said, rising, “I have taken the liberty of bringing something of value to me. It is not a gift, for you have not accepted our suit, and I would never burden you with an obligation. It is a...loan.”

She was curious.

He reached into the folds of his jacket, and drew from the pocket a small book. Bound in leather, she saw that it was much read; the leather itself had cracked and chipped in places.

A book. She took it in hands that shook. Opened it gently. There was an inscription so faded that she could not read it, but above it, the title of the book. It was called, simply, *A Life*.

“I haven’t read this,” she told him.

“Very few have. It was written by a young man who once apprenticed to Omaran the Maker.

It says much about Makers, but more about art, and although it has little in common with my life in Breodanir, I have found that it speaks to me.”

A book. “I thank you, Lord Arlin, for lending me something you so obviously value.” Thinking, as she said it, of all of the days she had met Stephen while she hid from the young ladies of the court in the quiet stacks of the royal library. Another life.

“Lady Eralee, I am honored to have seen you again. You are always such a joy. I find your youngest son the epitome of a Hunter Lord, and I believe that—should my parents approve—he would make a fine Lord Maubreche.”

Cynthia rose then, the ghost of Stephen of Elseth painful in his sudden presence. “I am called away, but Lady Maubreche will join you shortly.” She turned her head to one side.

Arlin rose as she rose, and he stepped toward her; she shied away when he raised his hand. “I apologize, Lady, if my gesture has caused offense—”

“No,” she said, meeting his eyes although her own were heavy with water, “no offense at all, Lord Arlin.”

* * *

Six months passed in peace. After Lady Eralee’s visit, Lady Maubreche entertained the noblewomen who had come, aware that no formal engagement had yet been announced; she had not, however, required her daughter to be in attendance for such meetings. In her severe fashion, Margaret, Lady Maubreche, could be kind.

But after six months had passed, that kindness had changed to something harsher: fear. With fear came anger, for the Lady Maubreche had no easy way of containing the things that were beyond her control, and she could see—anyone who thought to look could now see—that Lady Cynthia was with child.

* * *

If her mother was surprised—and outraged—her father was not. And perhaps that was why he dwindled.

But when Lady Maubreche chose to confront her wayward daughter, he intervened. He often intervened in the affairs of his Ladies, especially when those affairs were tainted by raw fury. He had always been a brave man.

“Cerle,” his wife had said, offering him a rare warning.

But he had simply shaken his head, forcing his shoulders to stretch to an almost forgotten

height. “Margaret. Come. I have something to show you.”

“What can you have to show me that cannot wait? Your daughter is in disgrace. All that we have done—all that we have arranged—will be undone, and publicly; Lady Eralee will see this as a betrayal of her trust. And it is.”

“Our daughter is not the only woman whose heart has overruled her head; she is young, Margaret. You were young once, and I have always been aware that I...would not have been the husband of your choice.”

That silenced his wife a moment, and it surprised Cynthia, for Margaret, Lady Maubreche, was the epitome of Breodanir nobility. “Come,” he said again quietly. “If Andrew were here, he might have shown you what you must see. He is not, and I must accept that duty.”

Andrew, huntbrother to Lord Maubreche, and been taken, these many years past, by the Hunter God in the Sacred Hunt. But his name still had power.

For that reason, it was seldom invoked.

Lady Maubreche hesitated a moment before she took the arm her husband had offered her.

“Cynthia,” her father said. “If you would accompany us?”

What her mother accepted, she could not refuse. She nodded, although no like arm was offered to sustain or guide her, and she trailed after her parents as she had not done since she was considered a child in Maubreche.

They wandered, of course, into the the gardens. There was not a room in the manse that did not have the ears of the servants, and some dramas were best played out on a private stage. But the gardens were not their destination; what lay beyond them, in the heart of the Maubreche responsibility, was. The maze, the hedges of the Master Gardener.

On a day like this one, the sun half-veiled by passing clouds, the maze cast scant shadow; what drew the eye was the life of the hedge. Not the greenery, although there was no finer hedge in the whole of Breodanir, but rather the details contained in the clipped command of shears. There was, about the hedge, a mystery and a grandeur that had silenced even the most voluble of Maubreche’s many guests.

Perhaps it was because the maze grew. It changed. It seemed a thing of life in a way that even the living were not. Among its hedges, one could see the hesitant face of a doe, her child, leaves carved and cut in a way that suggested wide eyes and delicate face, beneath her forelegs. One could see the flight of birds, suggested by the rustle of branches that did not, in fact, rustle;

could see the little signs of captive life.

But beyond them, beyond these living miracles, these growing statues that changes as the days changed, lay something that was hidden from the eye of the casual visitor: the hedge-wall.

It was to the wall that Lord Maubreche now went.

Lady Maubreche was still silent, but the quality of that silence had changed. Cynthia knew it well; it was kin to her own, and contained an unspoken dread that was not—quite—fear.

The history of Maubreche could be seen here, and unlike the outer hedges, there was no sense of life's urgency in the living carvings. Year after year Cynthia had seen the men and women who had earned a place upon this hedge, and they did not move, did not seek to break free of the confines of the branches and roots that told their story.

She could see the eyes of Hardann the Black as he stood upon the cliff's edge, gazing out upon the vast hills and forests of his domain; could see the savagery of the expression of one of the earliest of the Maubreche Hunters. She could see dogs—Aswine, the finest that Maubreche had ever produced—holding a crazed bear at bay; could see the sundered horn at his feet, the wounds—green, but gaping—in his side.

More. More, and she knew it all.

But her father did not seek to offer her a lesson from the history of the oldest of the Breodani families; the time for that had passed, with childhood. It was the first time he had truly acknowledged that her childhood was over. The distant past gave way to the near past.

It was almost over.

As if he could hear what she did not say, her father turned; the line of his shoulders had fallen again, and he walked with a pronounced limp, gifted him for his valor at the King's side in the Sacred Hunt.

“No, Cynthia,” he told her gently, “it has only just begun.” He lifted an arm, and Cynthia could see her mother's hands rise, although she could not see her mother's expression; Lady Maubreche's back was turned toward her daughter in the stiffness of what had, a moment ago, been fury.

Cynthia walked around her father and came to stand by his side.

To see, upon what had once been the unshorn, unsculpted branches of the last stretch of the wall itself, the image that had caused her mother to raise hands to mouth.

She saw herself.

Saw herself, in formless robes that she had never worn, and by decree, would *never* wear: they were Priest's robes. Their color was green, as the hedge was, but their form and shape was unmistakable.

Is that what I look like? She approached this woman, this other Cynthia, and found that they were of a height; the maze was tall. But this woman's expression was one that Cynthia had never seen upon her own face. Not peaceful, not exactly, but free of the misery and the pain of loss that had guided the last half year.

Yet it was not this that stopped her mother, nor the fact that beneath even the trailing robes of a Priest, her pregnancy was so advanced it could not be hidden, could not be denied.

It was the hands upon her shoulders, the head above her head.

Her eyes rose slowly.

Above her image, carved as the statue in the maze's heart was carved, was Breodan, Hunter God.

She had seen him. She had heard his voice. She knew that the statue no more captured his essence or his truth than this clipped and tucked artistry.

But she knew, also that that statue was now. That the face it wore was the face that the Hunter God presented to his people in effigy. She turned away then.

She had not seen this. She had not come here since she had left, six months ago.

She swore that she would never come again, but she swore it in silence, for words spoken aloud had power and exacted a price, and she was not willing to expose herself to the wrath of Breodan.

"Cynthia!"

Her mother's voice. She ignored it for another ten steps, but when it came again, she turned like a beast brought to harbor.

The fury was gone from her mother's face, and with it, the color.

"Why did you not tell us?"

She had nothing to say. For just a moment, nothing. And then cheeks burning, she met her mother's eyes defiantly. "He came to me," she said, voice soft because there was no other way to force the words out. "He came to me as Stephen. Stephen of Elseth.

"For one evening. Just one."

Her mother looked stricken.

“And in return, he asked of me one thing. He did not command it. He did not compel it. But he *asked* it, and who of us have ever refused what the *Hunter God* has asked?”

“We—we—must call the Priests.”

“*No.*” Her voice was louder now.

“Cynthia, the Priests *must* know. If you bear the son of the Hunter—”

“I bear Stephen’s *son*,” she said, the words raw, the lie rawer.

But that was not what the god had promised. He had offered her no lie. He had offered her no comfort. *The child will be mine; I contain the spirit of Stephen, but the flesh is gone.* It hadn’t mattered.

Her mother released her father’s arms and crossed the perfect grass. “Cynthia,” she said, her voice a voice that had not been heard in Maubreche since Cynthia was a girl.

“Don’t pity me. I don’t want your pity.” Cupped hands caught the sides of her face. Warm hands. Her mother said nothing at all.

* * *

Not that day. But later, when the awe and the compassion had once again taken its place in the depths of Lady Maubreche’s shuttered heart, words came.

“Cynthia.”

Cold words. “Lady Maubreche.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I am dressing,” Cynthia said coldly, “to meet Lady Eralee and her sons.”

“You are not a child,” her mother replied. “That dress will *not* be acceptable. Look at you.”

“I chose this dress for a reason.”

“You look as if you might bear a child at any minute, and you’ve months before your time.”

“I will bear a child,” Cynthia said, with a calm that fooled neither. “Am I to dress as if this child is the product of grief and histrionics? Am I to hide him?”

“Lady Eralee is not, as you well know, apprised of your...situation.” It had been a bitter point of contention between the elder and the younger Ladies. “I should have overruled you. Your recklessness—”

“I am *not* reckless!”

“You are.” Her mother’s hand rose, palm exposed, as if it were weapon, or worse, as if it were all of her rage. Rage, Cynthia accepted with a bitter grace, but what lay beneath that rage,

and that urgency, she could not force herself to closely examine.

But her mother did not strike. The hand fell, and with it, the line of her mother's shoulder. Lady Maubreche looked *old*.

"The healers are not certain that your father will survive to see the birth of your child." Just that.

Her mother's face was a wall now.

Cynthia stood, but the blood left her face, and her knees bent toward carpet and hard floor. She did not accuse her mother of lying. Could not. "But—but he—"

"The infection that came of the wound weakened his heart. I confess I am not a healer; I do not understand the whole of the details, and I have heard them time and again. Your father," she added bitterly, "will listen to no one."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"Because I am old and foolish," Lady Maubreche replied. "And because I raised no fool; I had hoped you might notice it yourself."

Cynthia's words slipped away from her, water through cupped hand. She stared at the lines around her mother's thinned lips.

"Yes," her mother said, sparing her nothing. "We have no time to wait, and none to waste. When Lord Maubreche at last succumbs to his stubborn—" she turned her head a moment, lifting a hand in warning. "When that happens, there must be a Lord Maubreche to take his place.

"Think, daughter. Think of what you choose to do. I cannot turn Lady Eralee away; two weeks of travel separate our territories, and the winter is already approaching. If she does not come now, we will have to wait until the spring."

"Margaret, are you shouting at the poor girl?"

Lady Maubreche turned as the door creaked open upon the face of her Hunter Lord.

"I am discussing the duties of the afternoon with the woman who will one day continue the work that I now do," she told him, the chill in her voice more of a threat than the winter.

* * *

The argument might have continued; in truth, it might have had no end.

But that day, the dogs had come in from the runs, leaving their kennels like a stream of muscled flesh and glistening coat. They were silent, the alaunts; silent and determined. But they came.

Through the runs, over the fences that served to mark their territory, out of the huts and houses that were tended with such care. Black bodies, brown bodies, white and gray; sable, with patches of lighter colors. They had run up the path to the main house, and they had thrown themselves against the doors with deafening thuds until Sartay had chosen to open them.

The dogs had run *into* the hall, nudging the door wide to allow themselves free passage. They had run unerringly up the stairs, Hasufel at their head, and Onma, the best of the lymers, a leap behind. They had come to Cynthia—herself no great champion of theirs—and laid themselves, almost on top of one another, at her feet.

“Hasufel! Onma!” Lord Maubreche said, the command in the words undeniable.

Hasufel, the pack leader, raised his muzzle. He uttered the first sound the dogs had made since they had gained entrance into Cynthia’s chamber. He whined.

And then he rose. Rose and placed his great forepaws gently against the swell of pale blue cloth, beneath which lay flesh and child. His paws were not perfectly clean; they left a mark against the fall of fabric; a dog’s footprint. A signature.

Lord Maubreche met Hasufel’s eyes; the whining grew in pitch. Cynthia saw the peculiar expression that spoke of Hunter’s trance cross her father’s face. More than that was lost; she could not take her eyes off his alaunts. There were reasons that they were not kept in the house, and not all of them had to do with the strict demeanor of the keeper of the keys.

Perhaps because the dogs drew her attention, she missed the subtle shift of her father’s expression; what was left, when she turned to face him, was something akin to surprise. He walked across the room, closing the distance between them, and then, as Hasufel before him, he lifted a hand and placed it gently against the crest of her belly.

To his wife, he said, his intonation low, his words a growl, “Let her be.”

Just that. And Lady Maubreche bowed her head, wordless.

In the face of Hunter business, the greatest of Ladies could not be judged weak for leaving the arena.

* * *

Thus dressed, thus marked, Lady Cynthia of Maubreche met the mother of her future husband for the seventh time.

That Lady had taken the trouble to arrange her skirts upon the settee in the King’s room. She looked up as Sartay opened the doors to announce the presence of Lord and Lady Maubreche;

her smile was pleasant, the expression that Cynthia remembered.

She wished, for just a moment, that she had taken her mother's bitter advice. For the smile froze on Lady Eralee's face so completely Cynthia wondered if it would ever return.

"Lady Eralee." Cynthia executed a curtsy that would have made her mother proud in any other circumstance.

"Lady Cynthia." The elder woman's smile was pinched and forced. "You look well."

"Lady Eralee," Lady Maubreche said quietly. "Lord Corwin. Lord Arlin." She offered them a full curtsy. "You honor us with your presence. I assume that Lord Corwin would like to inspect the kennels?"

But for once Lord Corwin's attention did not seem to be upon the kennels, the alaunts, the Hunt. Where his mother's face was pale and hard, his was unschooled; his mouth was open in what seemed a wordless parody of shock.

"Forgive us," Lady Eralee said coolly, "if we came at an awkward time." Beneath the surface of her chilly words, her meaning was plain. She desired an explanation. Now.

Cynthia could have let her mother speak. It was Lady Maubreche's right, and responsibility, in such an uncomfortable situation. But instead, she lifted a gentle hand.

"Lady Eralee," she said, with a calm she did not feel, "Please accept my apologies."

"What I accept, Lady Cynthia, has yet to be decided." Her frown was now pronounced. Cynthia could not recall a time when she had seen Lady Eralee so furious that her anger could not be contained behind a civil facade.

"I bear a child," Cynthia continued. "And I *will* bear the child to term."

"That much, Lady Cynthia, I can see. We were not informed of this...development. And I can be certain that the child is *not* my son's."

"No." Cynthia replied gravely.

"Had you no desire to accept my son's suit, you might have chosen to be more forthcoming and less insulting. May I ask whose child you carry?" It was not a polite question.

Cynthia was silent. She looked to Lady Eralee, straightening the line of her shoulders. And then, she looked to Lady Eralee's son. To Lord Corwin. To Lord Arlin beside him. She studied their faces, and if what she saw there did not bring hope, it did not destroy it. Hope was a bitter thing.

Lord Corwin met Cynthia's eyes. Held them. "Lady Cynthia," he said, drawing toward her.

“How long have you known that you carry a child?”

“I knew,” she told him, “the night of his conception.”

“Why did you see fit to hide it from me?”

Not from you, she wanted to say. But she was of Maubreche; she chose her words with care.

“I deemed it too great a risk.”

“A risk?”

Was tired of choosing them with care. “Yes, Lord Corwin.” She knew she should speak with Lady Eralee, for in the end, the decision would be hers. But Lord Corwin now stood close enough that she could see no one else.

“And that?”

“Of the six men who have made the offer to my mother, you are the only one I wished to accept. I am aware that my situation is tenuous; I am aware that I *must* marry. I am aware that for the sons of lesser families than Eralee, or of greater ambition, my condition—no matter what its apparent cause—would be no obstacle. If you choose to withdraw, we will begin again with one of the others. But—”

He reached out slowly, as if she were an injured alaunt, and placed his palm against the curve of her belly. His hand was warm; beneath the multiple layers of cloth, she could feel the heat.

“My apologies,” he said, his unblinking eyes the peculiar windows of a Hunter Lord’s face. He bowed head. “I did not mean to interrupt.”

“I had hoped—I had hoped that you might forgive me.”

“But you did not speak.”

“No.” She closed her eyes a moment.

“Why?”

“We—” She could not speak of her father’s death. Could not.

“So...if I accept your hand in marriage, I am to be the keeper of another man’s child.” His face was shuttered now.

She looked for condemnation in it; found nothing at all to hold on to. Was surprised at the pain this caused.

“I know what you must think of me—”

“No, Lady Cynthia, you do not. Arlin?”

Arlin rose from his place beside Lady Eralee on the settee. He bowed to Lady Cynthia, his face concealing more than Lord Corwin's. She closed her eyes. Heard his words in the darkness.

"I told you," he said softly, "that she was wounded."

"And this?"

"What do you think, Corwin?" Impatience, in the words. Sharp impatience. "When the alaunts are wounded by boar or bear, they do not lightly suffer anyone's touch. Look," he added, "at your left hand, if you require proof. You bear the scars. But the alaunts serve you, and you alone."

She could end it. She could tell them the truth. But...but there was something she *had* to know. And because of it, she bore the humiliation of their assumptions

"And you would accept her, after this?"

"You know my answer. But it is not, in the end, my decision. She is not like many of the other Ladies we have met."

"No, indeed. Not one of the others would risk her future and her fortune in such a fashion."

"Yes. Because they are careful; because they are calculating. Were she different there would *be no child*. She will also be a good deal more powerful than the others you have met."

"Speak plainly, Arlin. You seem to love words."

"She has too much heart, and she has too much will; what she feels, she feels strongly. Yet I believe that if we accept this, she will give you what few of the others *could* give."

"And that?"

"In time? Love." He looked at Cynthia then, and she met his dark eyes; saw a compassion in them that she wanted, desperately, for her own. "And a son."

"True. Maubreche is not know for fecundity; perhaps this can be seen as proof that *my* line will be established here."

"Lord Corwin—"

But Lord Corwin turned to Cynthia's father, "Lord Maubreche," he said quietly.

"Lord Corwin."

"It would honor me greatly if you would allow me inspection of the kennels that will one day be mine." His smile was sharp.

Her father's brow's rose; for just a minute, Cynthia thought he would growl. Instead, he laughed. "The alaunts are in the runs, but they have been forbidden the forest stretch for the day,

for it seems they thought it acceptable to charge *into* the manse.”

“Into the manse? Why? Was there some danger to you?”

“To me? No.” The old Lord Maubreche turned the most gentle of gazes upon his only child. But he did not speak of what had happened. Instead, he said, “If you care to view a pack of hostile, unhappy running hounds, the honor would be mine.”

“As I said, old man,” Corwin said, with a wolf’s sharp grin, “I desire to see what will be mine.”

Her throat was tight. She felt tears at the edge of her eyes, her open eyes; felt breath desert her. She closed them, and again, in darkness, heard words. This time they were her own.

“Lord Corwin?”

“Lady Cynthia.”

“The child I bear is Breodan’s.”

* * *

Later, when the engagement had been announced and the agreement written, signed, sealed by wax and the crests of the two families, Lord Corwin looked up from the table. His Hunter eyes were bright and keen; he was on the hunt, even surrounded by furniture, carpets, long curtains, and thick windows.

“Why did you not just tell us the truth? It would have spared you much.”

Lady Eralee placed a thin hand over her son’s; the contrast in color was the difference between their responsibilities. “If you do not understand, ask Arlin.”

“Arlin doesn’t understand it either.”

“Ah, well. Arlin *is* a man, even if he is the finest of huntbrothers.”

Corwin looked annoyed. It was an expression that only the Lady Eralee could easily provoke.

“Forgive them, Cynthia,” she added, using the family name. “I am proud of them both; for a Hunter, Corwin is a fine person.”

“Truly there is nothing to forgive, Lady Eralee.”

“Call me Amanda.”

“Amanda, then. There is nothing to forgive. Lord Corwin’s question is a reasonable one.”

“Very well. Since you are so keen to be charitable to the man who will be your husband, I must assume that your kindness is an act of loyalty, and such loyalty is always a balm to a

mother's heart, even if it is in this case misplaced.”

“You tell us, then,” Corwin snapped.

“Is that the neatest signature you can make?” His mother said with a sniff, greatly enjoying herself. “Very well, I will take it upon myself to answer your question. There are very few among us who do not desire to be loved. Or to be trusted.

“If she could appear thus before you, with no word and no explanation, and you could offer acceptance, could believe that some extenuating circumstance drove her to this situation, you would prove—to her—that some trust exists. You accepted her for *herself*.”

“Well, who else would I accept her for? She's no one else.” He was annoyed.

“Lady Eralee—”

“Amanda, dear,”

“Amanda—really, I think Lord Corwin is correct. I was foolish.”

“Besides, it proves no such thing,” Corwin continued. “I could have accepted it if I wanted a house of my own, lands I could claim and rule. My acceptance might have been a matter of practicality. And greed.”

His mother sighed. “Did she not say, of the six, she chose you for a reason?”

He rolled his eyes. “Do not,” he said to his wife-to-be, “spend too much time with my mother. I would not have her infest you with her wordplay.”

* * *

One month later, they were married. The ceremony was not small, but Cynthia allowed her mother to choose the dress, the veil, and the accoutrements in which she would be seen. She no longer cared if her pregnancy—which was well advanced—was hidden to the best of the dressmaker's capabilities. All that she wanted, she had achieved.

She was nervous.

Corwin was not. But Arlin made up for his composure.

Breodani weddings, were not a simple matter of two people; they were a binding of three. The bride and the groom might stand together, but in the procession, it was the huntbrother who led the way, and when they arrived before the Priest, it was the huntbrother who gave over the symbols of the joining of their houses: the chalice, the rings, and the key.

Lady Eralee had obliquely threatened poor Arlin with six different torments if he dropped anything, stepped on Cynthia's train, or worse—much worse—allowed the dogs to disturb the

ceremony.

For the dogs had their role. They were as much part of a Hunter's flesh as wife would be. Perhaps more.

But Corwin's dogs were silent throughout. They stood in the room at the top of the nave, waiting; they watched, heads raised, ears peaked, as the Priest began his incantations. Cynthia was certain they were thinking of food, but one glance at her husband's face said otherwise; he was deep in trance. She hoped the Priest would not be too offended.

Iverssen had performed many Hunter marriages; if he noticed this breach, he spoke above it.

But when the joining was done, when the chalice had been filled, first with wine and then with the blood of the three supplicants—Hunter, huntbrother, and wife—the dogs rose as one, as if called. They walked quietly, and with a processional air about their movements, until they stood before Lady Cynthia. Then, as one, they lifted heads, elongating throats; they bayed. Even she, born to Hunter but not to Hunt, understood what they offered, and she was moved by it.

Corwin, however, was not, and they were kennelled for the two week after the ceremony was concluded.

* * *

When Cynthia's child was born, he was born in silence, and his wide, golden eyes, crouched in the red wrinkles of a newborn's face, looked out on the world with curiosity. Corwin and Arlin haunted the room that the midwives had grudgingly allowed them to enter, and it was Corwin—not Arlin—who had taken the babe from the arms of the midwife; Corwin and not Arlin, who had lifted the child with an awe and an open expression of wonder that Cynthia would never forget.

He had taken the long, soft squares of swaddling cloth, and with shaking hands—huge hands, in comparison with the babe's—he had swaddled him tight. Then, before the midwives could stop him, he bent and placed lips upon that wizened brow.

“This child,” he said softly to Cynthia, although he could not take his eyes from the babe, “is your son. But allow it, Cynthia, and he will be mine; I will raise him, and I will teach him the ways of the Hunt.”

She wept, then, because he was Hunter Lord, and almost incapable of lying. She said, for the first time, the pain and exhaustion of hours of labor loosening her tongue, “I love you, Corwin of Maubreche.”

And his eyes had widened further, his sun-darkened skin still capable of reddening.
Arlin had come to sit by her; had taken her shaking hands in his. His smile was gentle.
She had been happy, then. In truth, she would have remained happy.
But from the moment her son could walk, he had been drawn to the maze.

* * *

Although she was tired after the baby's birth, as the midwives had warned she would be, she was calm; she felt graced by the absence of pain and the absence of burden. The babe slept—the midwives also assured her that this would not continue—and she herself passed from waking to sleeping with ease. But on the third day, her father woke her at twilight. He entered the room with a swinging lamp in hand, and held it aloft, pressing one finger firmly against lip. It was both a request and a command, and Cynthia, for the first time since the baby was born, rose from the birthing bed. In the darkness, she dressed, and then she joined him.

He walked slowly, and he paused several times. She heard the rise and fall of his chest as he labored for breath, but she did not injure his dignity by offering him aid.

They walked, together, toward the heart of the Maubreche maze, and there, in the darkness, they paused before the statue of the Hunter God. The moon did not cast his shadow, but it lit him softly; he looked less forbidding in the evening than he did during the height of sun's light.

“There is something you must know,” he told her quietly. “About Maubreche. About the Hunter.”

She nodded, understanding fully what he meant by this; his time was almost past.

“The first of our line was, like your first son, born of the God. I do not know how; I have not had the ability to ask him. You, I fear, have spoken with the Hunter far more often than even his Priests; there is little that I can teach you that you do not already know.

“But this place is the heart of his worship. This is what I was told by my father before his death, and what my father was told by his; it has passed in an unbroken line to all of the Maubreche blood.

“The hedge-wall,” he added quietly, “is almost complete.”

She nodded.

“You have seen yourself in its leaves and the cuttings of the Master Gardener. What you do not know is this: when the last of the hedge is complete, the task of the Gardener is at an end.”

Her brows rose.

“The Gardener is older than the Kingdom,” he told her quietly. “And he swore his oath to the Hunter when Maubreche was a man and not a great family. He has labored for centuries upon this work.”

“What is his work?”

“The history,” he said quietly, “of Maubreche; the history of the first—and the last—of the Hunter’s chosen family.” He bowed his head. “I did not understand it, Cynthia, when I was told. It was not clear to me. My father was taken by the Hunt, but he *knew*, before that Sacred Hunt, that he would not return to these estates. I asked him how he knew, and he told me he couldn’t say. I realize now that this wasn’t a matter of choice.

“Because I know, and I don’t know how, or why. It doesn’t matter. When I...found you here, on the hedge I understood. The Hunter has waited centuries for another child; birth was the beginning of our line, and birth, in some fashion, is closure to that tale.

“Your son will fight an enemy so terrible that he is not named. But it is in preparation for that fight that Maubreche has stood, these centuries; it is for that fight that the Hunters have waited, that their oaths have been given and taken.”

“My son is—”

“Yes,” her father said, his face grave with pity and horror. “He is a babe. I’ve held him, even though my arms are so weak they can barely keep a lamp aloft. I know how slight he is, how vulnerable.

“But he is Breodan’s Hope,” he closed his eyes. “In this garden, in the Heart of this maze, he is safe. But if he stays within its confines, he will have failed not only Breodan, but all of Maubreche and its ancient history.

“We’ve waited for your son, Cynthia.” He bowed his head.

She stared at him, sorrow and anger blending until they were inseparable, a weave she would wear for the rest of her life.

“But waiting or no, we have had no way of discerning his worthiness. He must take a huntbrother,” he added.

“Of course! He’s Breodani, Hunter-born.”

“Yes. And he must learn what Hunters often fail to learn: the value of the people he must protect. Without that knowledge, without that guidance, he will fail us all.”

She swallowed. “Let me do it,” she whispered.

He frowned, but it was gentle. “So has every parent said since child was born, and not only within Maubreche. But we cannot protect our young in any way save this: We can teach them the value of love, of trust and trustworthiness. Not more, and not less.”

He bowed. “Your son’s road will be strange and difficult. He is of the Hunter God; we cannot forget this. But he is *also* mortal; he is still a child. What a child needs, he needs.” He walked to where she stood, and leaning down, kissed her upturned brow.

“I am proud of you, daughter,” he said quietly.

* * *

Two weeks after the birth of his first grandchild, Lord Maubreche passed away.

Lord Corwin became in name, Corwin, Lord Maubreche, and Lady Cynthia, Cynthia, Lady Maubreche, heir to its vast responsibilities. Her mother had promised her that she would grow to meet the needs and demands of Maubreche, and as often was the case her mother had been correct.

When Stephen was well into his seventh year, the arguments began.

“He needs a huntbrother, Cynthia. He is our oldest son. He will be eight in six months; he will be expected to take the green and the gray of the page; he will be expected to make his vows. Iverssen is waiting.”

“I know.”

“Then give me leave to find a suitable boy. The streets of the King’s City are full of them. Let me hunt there.”

“Not yet,” she answered softly. The answer would become less soft with time.

“You cannot coddle him!”

“He is not like other Hunters. He has the eyes of the God.”

“He has the eyes of the God, yes. But he *also* has the duties of the Breodani! Would you deny him the heritage of his people?”

“No! Nor would I force him to take vows that he is not yet capable of making.”

“The Hunter’s Law—”

“The Hunter’s Law guides Hunters,” she said, and it pained her. “But our son—”

“You mean *your* son, is that it?”

His anger was sharp; the words were harsh. What he had promised, from birth, he had lived up to. He loved Stephen. Had always loved him. Because of it, she knew that he could not let it

rest; he was Hunter, after all. But She said, “It is not yet time, Corwin. Be content.”

“Content?”

“Breodan has bid us wait.”

Her husband fell into a grim silence. He would break it, again and again, as the years passed, for he felt her refusal as a wall between himself and the child of his heart. And it was.

* * *

If Stephen had not been so adept with the dogs, perhaps the argument would have—like so many of their arguments—been left to wither, growing the cold edges and hidden barbs of all such unresolved pain.

But the dogs adored Stephen. At least it seemed so to Cynthia; to Corwin it was much, much deeper. When an alaunt appeared, sidling out of the runs, to sit by Stephen’s feet, it seemed natural to her; to Corwin, it was not. Because the dogs, in all things, had their hierarchy, and the dog that was also first to abase himself in the joyful abandon of an anxious pup was no pup. It was Hasufel.

With the death of Cynthia’s father, he had—with initial reluctance—become Corwin’s dog. But he was Stephen’s liege.

He would take his portion from the hands of the master of the game, but he would often take it *to* Stephen, and Stephen would quarter it for him, feeding him from hand as if Hasufel were an imperial falcon and not the finest of the running hounds Maubreche boasted.

The truth of this allegiance could not be denied. The awe it caused, among the Hunters, even less so.

Corwin’s anger simmered, boiled, simmered, and boiled. In the end, they could barely speak of Stephen. Only Arlin stood between them, and it caused him some bitter pain.

Aie, they waited. Stephen passed his eighth birthday, and his ninth. On his tenth, Corwin’s anger knew no bounds, and he left—without Arlin—to hunt the dogs made wild by the temper he could not contain.

When he returned, he was subdued but the anger and the helplessness of the situation did not leave him. His son, his oldest son, was not yet allowed entrée into the world of Hunter Lords.

It would have been natural for him to turn his attention to Robart, his youngest. And he did, for Robart was now seven, and fast approaching the first of the many ages of majority within Breodanir. But his success with Robart, and the introduction of Mark—a scarred young boy with

an unruly tongue and a rough sense of loyalty—as the first huntbrother of the Maubreche kin, had not calmed his anger.

Because the anger was based in fear. Fear for Stephen of the golden eyes.

She hated his fear, but she loved him for it. She accepted his rage as if it were weather, a storm that she could predict but could not deflect. Was it not her own?

* * *

But the day finally came. It was a day much like any other, but it was punctuated by the presence of guests—guests who were as much kin as people could be who did not bear Maubreche blood. Gilliam, Lord Elseth, and his unearthly, wild wife Espere. They had come on a social visit, or so Gilliam said—but there was about him a tenseness, an anger, that she had not seen since they had first met, and Stephen of Elseth had stood between them, loved by both.

Her Stephen, her own son, was called to the house from the runs. But he failed to arrive. And after an hour had passed, Lord Corwin had looked up, bleakly, at his wife.

She closed her eyes. “Yes,” she told her husband, her voice subdued and quiet but without any hint of gentleness, “I will go and fetch him.”

* * *

Lady Cynthia lifted her skirts and began to walk, with purpose, toward the maze. Purpose was required. She knew that today the maze would give way to the land that the Hunter God opened on occasion for those of his blood. Knew that grass and hedge and flower bed would become gray and insubstantial; they were mortal, things not meant for the odd landscape of the world between the realm of the gods and realms of man. She turned the corner, following the line of the wall by the shadow it cast upon tended grass. When that shadow changed, lengthening into something slender, she looked up.

Met the silver-gray eyes of the Master Gardener.

She bowed at once. In no other garden was a gardener afforded such a genuine gesture of respect.

He returned that bow gravely. “Lady Cynthia.”

“Master Gardener.”

She did not speak his name because she did not know it. Had never known it. When she had been younger, she had asked it of him, as she might ask it of the other children she met. His answer was a stiff, cold silence—an indication that she had breached social protocol. She had not

asked again.

“I—I come looking for my son.”

“He is at the Heart of the maze,” the gardener answered. He raised his hands; they were empty. He carried no shears, none of the tools of his life’s work.

She did not ask him why. But he stood before her, immobile, as if he were a gate, locked and barred against her passage. “Am I to be forbidden the maze now?” Her voice was cool.

“No, Lady. But it would be prudent if you chose to return to your guests.”

“My guests wait upon my son,” she told him quietly.

“He will come,” the gardener replied. “But he speaks, now, with his father.”

She felt the cold, then; the sun could not pierce it. Gathering her shawl about her shoulders, she stepped forward.

“I was never terribly prudent,” she said quickly. But her voice shook. At a decade, memory slept. But it had never died.

“Then I will not stop you,” he replied. But his eyes were cold.

* * *

The mists rose at last above her face, obscuring the maze, with its intricate, secret hedges, its indictment and its promise.

She bowed her head; felt the sweet air of the Between in her lungs. This was the Heart of Maubreche. She had come to understand it in a way that none of her predecessors had.

She could not see Stephen.

But in the shadows that no sunlight cast, she saw the Hunter God.

As always, she turned away from the sight of him, steadying herself. The God was not a man, although he bore form similar to one; he was not a beast, although the great tines of antlers rose from the perfect smoothness of his forehead. He was not a giant, although he was tall; he was not simply beautiful in the way men can be.

But he suggested all of these things, as if mortality were a dim and tarnished echo of his glory, and when he turned his eyes upon her, they were of gold and fire.

“Lady Cynthia.”

“Lord.” She bowed. She bowed deeply.

“You have waited,” he said gently. “And by the reckoning of my people, you have waited long.”

For what? But she did not ask.

“For the time when your son is able to hear my voice without the crutch of Maubreche and its hallowed ground; for the time when your son is able to make himself heard across the wilds of the mortal plane. He has my gift,” the God continued. “The oldest and the greatest of my gifts: His is the power of the oathbinder.”

Oathbinder.

“Honor,” the God continued, his voice the multitude, the crowded murmur of young and old, of man and woman, of sorrow and joy, anger and peace, birth and death: a song; a God’s song. “What is given, as oath, to my son, will be binding. Only death will end it.”

What does that have to do with the Hunt?

“He will take his place among his people,” the God said, speaking as gently as a gale could. “I have watched our son. I have spoken with him. I have judged him where judgment is possible. What he is, he is. What he will be...

“It is time.”

“And his huntbrother?”

For just a moment an expression solidified upon the God’s face. Compassion. Or pity. “You have defied convention before.”

She closed her eyes. “When?” she asked, without opening them.

“Today. Today, Cynthia, and believe that had we any other choice, we would make it.”

“We?”

“The enemies,” he answered, after so long a pause she thought he might not offer words, “of the Lord of the Hells.”

She was Lady Maubreche now. In her youth, she had been another girl—but the Between was a funny place; it existed outside of time.

And outside of time, in her heart, she was Cynthia. The Hunter’s gaze moved her to a bitter fury.

“Have I not given enough?” she whispered, through clenched teeth. “This boy, *this* Stephen, is mine; he is all the remains to me of—of—” Her hands were fists; they shook.

“You have given,” the Hunter God said quietly, the multitude fading, “what only Maubreche can give.”

“Then do not ask more of me!”

“It is not of you, in the end, that all will be asked.” Pity.

She hated pity.

“You will find your son,” he said quietly. “And he will be with you some little while yet.”

* * *

Stephen was golden-haired. Golden-eyed. His skin was the pale white of a Northern clime, unusual among those born to the heat and the sun of the Hunt. His face was slender, his chin pronounced; his cheeks were high, and if color was to be found in his face, it was there. He was tall, or seemed tall, for his age, but that was simple illusion; he wore his height well because of his slender build. Only his eyes spoke of his parentage, and no craft on her part could dispel their truth.

Those eyes were round now, and unblinking; they had been touched by the God, and they burned brightly. Even when they narrowed in confusion, as they did now.

“Mother?”

“Lady Maubreche,” she said, correcting him automatically.

He grimaced. “We have guests?”

“Yes. We still have guests.”

“How long was I gone?”

“Not...not long,” she told him quietly.

“I’m sorry.” They were probably his first spoken words; they were certainly his most common ones.

His wince brought her no pleasure; no sense of the superiority of experience or knowledge that separated them. His eyes lost a hint of their brilliance, and none of their color, as his vision turned inward.

“Why did you leave, Stephen?”

“I heard the Hunter,” he answered quietly.

Answer enough. “Are you finished, then?”

He nodded quietly. Offered her his arm, as if he were already past childhood. She accepted it with gravity.

“Mako is angry,” he told her.

“Mako is always angry.” Although Stephen had not taken the first of the Hunter’s Oaths, and was therefore not legally allowed his pack, his pack had nonetheless formed. It was one of

the few facts of Stephen's life that made Corwin happy, and Cynthia accepted it gratefully.

Of Stephen's aunts, Mako was the wildest. She had no fondness for him, nor he for her; everything was his rival for Stephen's affection. She smiled briefly. "I can't imagine what he's going to be like when you finally take a huntbrother."

His arm tightened. "Mother?"

This time, she offered no correction. "Yes?"

"Are you ready?"

It was an odd question. An honest one. "I don't know." She didn't. This son, this Stephen, was far more like a huntbrother than a Hunter in temperament, and if something would slowly transform him into a Hunter, she wasn't sure she wanted to see it. Although the dogs were indisputably his, they had never robbed her of his company or his attention; they were not his obsession, not the signal truth by which he might claim, in the end, his title and the fullness of his power. She was afraid to lose him.

Afraid to see Corwin or Gilliam when she gazed upon her son's face; afraid to lose the very little she could see of the man she had once loved, and at such cost.

Afraid, because in the end, if he was Hunter Lord, she would surrender him to the Sacred Hunt that might claim his life.

"No," she told him, pensive now. "I'm not. But I'm not certain I will *ever* be ready."

* * *

When they reached the lawns, Cynthia stopped. She reached for Stephen's shoulder, gripping it tightly enough that his breath came out in a hiss.

Lord Gilliam stood, and by his side, bristling, stood Espere, his truly wild wife. Her lips had come up over teeth, and those teeth, long and white, were bared. He had taken her as wife over his mother's muted objections, and she had never been given the full duties of a Lady of Breodanir. Instead, his mother, Elsabet, continued to fulfill the Elseth duties.

At Gilliam's side, Corwel, the third of his dogs to be so named, crouched, belly low to ground, throat vibrating with growl. He was not cowed; he was tensed to leap.

And only his Hunter Lord's command restrained him; Cynthia knew it, although she had not been witness to the command. She might have picked up her pace then, for it was one of a Lady's many duties to ease tension and hostility; the Hunters could often be like their dogs when matters of implied territory broke the thin veneer of civility.

But there were no other Hunters present.

There was a Priest, or perhaps a mage, someone of medium height who hid behind the folds of a voluminous robe. The robe itself was strangely dyed; its cloth was of a deep blue that suggested midnight rather than darkness. The cowl of that robe obscured the stranger's face.

But Gilliam's expression made Cynthia wary.

"Oh, no," Stephen muttered. "Mother, let's hurry."

"Do you—do you know this man?"

"She's not a man. And I know of her, but I've never met her before. I'm sure she's met me."

"Stephen—" He placed a hand upon the hand that restrained him, and gently pried himself free. But instead of hastening to the distant tableau, he turned to his mother, offering her the expression that reminded her of his namesake. "You don't have to like her," he said softly, "but for my sake, don't judge her. You've paid all the price the Hunter demands, but nothing that you—or I—will ever pay will be as harsh as the burden she carries."

"Who is she, Stephen?"

"She is the Wyrd of Mystery," he answered, his eyes glowing softly, as if he were looking at something that she would never be able to see. "And she carries a God's burden. But she's not a God, Mother, no matter how powerful, or how distant, she seems. Remember that, if you can." He hesitated a moment, and then said, "And remind me, when I forget."

Not if, but when. Cynthia nodded.

"Come," she said hearing the Hunter's voice. "Let us greet this unexpected guest."

* * *

The woman—and she was a woman—turned before they reached her. Her face was as pale as Stephen's, but where his hair was golden, hers was the color of pitch, with a hint of snow's frost about its edge; where his eyes were golden, hers were the color of winter violets, housed and grown in glass.

"Lady Maubreche," she said, inclining her head.

"Don't speak to her, Cynthia," Gilliam snapped. Anger there. Tension in the line of his jaw.

Lady Maubreche replied. "She is a guest, Lord Elseth; I can hardly fail to tender her the hospitality due a traveler."

He snarled. Like an alaunt, as tense as Corwel beneath his feet.

"It was because of *her* that Stephen died."

Cynthia froze. Stephen of Elseth. Stephen.

Gilliam was Hunter; Gilliam did not lie. Had he learned that trait, she would still have heard truth in his words; they were raw with pain and the loss of more than a decade. That loss, more than any other thing, bound them.

Before she could ask, the stranger said, "It is true. It is because of me that Stephen of Elseth traveled to Essalieyan. Because of me that he met the Hunter God on the day of the Sacred Hunt."

Cynthia struggled to remember the words her son had just spoken, but they passed through her mind like water through cupped hands. She had no words to offer.

"It was because of his oath," Stephen of Maubreche said into the terrible silence. "If you helped him, if you guided him, the truth of his oath was offered by Stephen of Elseth alone, and he chose, in the end, to abide by it. You accept much, Evayne a'Nolan. But I am Breodan's kin, and I will not allow you to dishonor Stephen of Elseth's memory. He chose."

Violet eyes widened. Beneath the slender point of stiff chin, the glinting silver of metal caught light; she wore a pendant, shaped like a small flower. It seemed odd to see it there; Cynthia had expected a medallion, some emblem of office or rank.

"Fair words," she said at last, and her voice was all of midnight. "But tell the whole of the truth, if you use truth, Stephen of Maubreche."

"I have."

"No, You have not. Stephen of Elseth was *oathbound*, yes. But he swore his oath when he was barely eight; he offered a child's promise. He did not understand the price he was expected to pay—either to carry out the oath, and have peace, or to reject it. Can a man truly be said to have made a choice when he is doomed by words that he does not have the experience to understand?"

"Yes."

"You are your father's son," she said bitterly.

"Both of my fathers. And he understood his oath before the end."

"Would you have killed him, had he failed?"

"No. I am not the God."

She closed her eyes. Closed them, and it came to Cynthia that this stranger, this Evayne, had known Stephen of Elseth. And had loved him, in her fashion.

She felt a pang, something akin to pain or jealousy. But she was Lady Maubreche. “Evayne a’Nolan,” she said quietly, “you have come today for a reason.”

“Yes, and it was not to be corrected by a boy.” But she smiled as she said it.

The smile was heavy. “You look like Stephen of Elseth,” she told the young Maubreche Lord. “And you have some of him within you. I...had not expected that.”

Stephen approached her, passing Gilliam and Espere, passing Corwel. He stopped a foot from her, well within the sphere of personal space that was never breached in polite society.

“I’m sorry if it makes things harder for you.” He meant it.

The stranger’s eyes widened again, and then they narrowed. “I am not so young a girl as I was then. I will never again be that girl.”

“I haven’t had your experience. If the gods are kind, I will never have it. But...my mother is your age, and she still remembers what she was, and what wounded her. Some wounds never become scars,” he added, “because they never heal.”

“You are, indeed, of the god-born,” the stranger said. “Or I know little of boys.”

“He has always been quick to speak and subtle,” Cynthia said at last, with quiet, uneasy pride.

“My apologies, Lady Maubreche. Time is of the essence, and I am needed elsewhere.”

“But you came upon some urgent business?”

“Indeed.” And she lifted the folds of her cloak, opening them wide. Cynthia caught a brief glimpse of what lay within, and she blanched, although later she could not say why. “Come,” the stranger said quietly. “Come Nenyane.”

From out of the swirl of midnight, a young girl emerged.

She made Stephen look ruddy; her skin was the color of snow. Her hair was so pale it was silver, and a silver that was unkind; it was not the pale of blonde, but rather the color of platinum, of age, cold and harsh. Her eyes were wide in the white of her face, gray as storm.

Cynthia went forward immediately, hand outstretched as if the girl was in danger of breaking. She could not know what experience had scarred the girl, but the color of her hair could not be natural. Had she thought Stephen was slender? Not compared to this child. She was knife thin, all bones and angles.

“Nenyane,” Evayne said, “this is Lady Maubreche. And this is her son, Stephen of Breodan, Stephen of Maubreche, what have you heard of Nenyane?”

Stephen barely heard the question. His eyes were golden, round, clarity to storm. He lifted a hand, palm out. The girl stepped out of the lee of the storm of robes, and the folds of cloth fell at once. She had eyes only for Stephen, and when she lifted a hand, it was the mirror image of Stephen's shaky gesture. Their fingers touched.

In the bright clarity of daylight, shorn of the mystery of night and the shadows of twilight, Cynthia thought she saw a light flare where their fingers made contact. It was brief; she could not be certain that she had seen it.

Or would not be.

"Nothing," he said at last. "Except that I'm her Hunter. And she—she's the huntbrother I've been waiting for."

"Yes," the stranger said quietly. She turned, took a step toward the gardens, and disappeared, but the girl she had brought forth remained.

* * *

What she expected from her husband, not even Cynthia could say, and she knew because she tried to give it voice. Throughout the speech of the stranger in her fell robes, throughout the speech of the son that was not his son, he had waited in silence.

Nor had he spoken when the girl had come forth from robes that should not have hidden her, no matter how thin and gangly she was. But when Stephen spoke the single word *huntbrother*, Lord Maubreche had risen, the silence a shield and a cloud. He meant to storm off, but before he reached the edge of the green, he turned.

Cynthia met his gaze; saw in it an equal measure of shock, and a terrible bleak anger, before he continued on his way to the kennels. She would have followed him; she started across the green to do just that.

But two hands touched her. Arlin's.

And Stephen's.

She let him go.

* * *

Gilliam of Elseth was silent. Brooding. It was a state with which Cynthia of Maubreche was acutely familiar. She had seen him thus for the better part of a year after his return from the far East; had seen him thus at every Sacred Hunt thereafter. Only when he was soothing the temper of his wild and inexplicable wife did that darkness leave him, and for that reason, if no other,

Cynthia placed some value upon Espere of Elseth.

For Lady Maubreche and Lord Elseth had come, over time, to an unspoken understanding. Of the bereaved, they were the two who felt the loss most keenly. Stephen of Elseth was gone, and only in memory was anything of him retained. That was their responsibility, Cynthia and Gilliam: the memories.

Cynthia had given Stephen a son. Had insisted upon naming the boy after the dead. The name was a compulsion, for Gilliam of Elseth, and he had undertaken some responsibility for his huntbrother's namesake, even when he knew that in form, in truth, the boy was son to the creature that had killed him.

But this, this was difficult.

"Lord Elseth," Cynthia said quietly.

He turned his glance briefly upon her face. "It can't be done," he told her. "You know that."

"Is there law against it?"

"Hunter law," Gilliam answered. "I know that his eyes mark him, Cynthia." No formal title offered in return for the use of his; he desired no distance. Probably didn't understand why she would. "I know it. But Breodan's law is Breodan's law."

"He is as close to Breodan as any Priest who has ever undertaken to follow the Hunter God," she replied, with a calm she did not feel.

"She's a girl."

"I had noticed that."

"There is a reason they aren't called huntsisters."

"She is not a Hunter Lord," Cynthia replied. "She will never lay claim to that title. Not for her are the dogs, or the trance; not for her the claim of lands, and the responsibility that goes with it. She will be what Stephen was—a child that is forgotten. A child in need of a home. Would you have me deny her that?"

"A home? No. Give her a home, by all means. But what you desire, you cannot give her. She is *not* Breodani. She is not—"

"No huntbrother has ever been blessed with the gift of the God," she continued, offering reason, logic, the persuasion of a woman who sat upon the seat of judgment. "A huntbrother has always been the human face of the pairing; a huntbrother, trained to the peak of his abilities, has at his disposal only ingenuity, loyalty, and affection. Does it matter, in the end, whether she is a

boy or a girl? She does not have to *be* a Hunter. She only has to offer the Hunter her support and oath.”

“And will she swear the oath?” he snapped. Espere turned, although she stood some fifty yards distant. He cursed, but quietly, and forced himself to be quiet.

“She is to be huntbrother. She will swear the oath.”

He closed his eyes. “Lady Maubreche,” he said, finding the formality and the distance that had, moments before, eluded him. “He *is* Stephen’s son, to me. I don’t care about the color of his eyes. I don’t care about the Priests. I don’t care about the Hunter. I heard what he said and I know what I heard.

“If not the girl, then no one. He will never be a Hunter.”

She had him, then, but it brought her no sense of triumph, for what he heard, she had heard.

* * *

“He knows, Cynthia,” Arlin said. The lamplight shone at her back, reflected in twin circles on the curve of the high ceiling above her. Before her, curtains drawn and sheers hooked aside, the widest and longest of the windows reflected some of that light; she moved closer, losing reflection. The night was clear.

“I know,” she said bitterly. She pressed her head against the cool glass. It would get colder still before winter’s end. “I know it.” She bit her lip. “Arlin—”

“He has to deal with it in his own way.”

And what of me? She wanted to cry. She said nothing. He came to stand behind her, his hands upon her shoulders, light as a feather, as a bird’s wing. “You’ve waited,” he said at last, acknowledging the bitterness she could not put into words.

But such acknowledgment was often the key to what lay locked in silence. She closed her eyes. “Yes,” she said at last. “I’ve waited. I’ve waited through all the arguments, all the anger, all the pain. I’ve waited for the moment when Stephen would finally find a huntbrother and make his vows. I want—”

“I know.” Arlin was more generous with words than she. Not really like Stephen at all. “Peace,” he said. “An end to the fighting.”

“I wish Corwin could speak to the Hunter.”

“There is only one way that he will ever have that chance. Do not wish for it, Cynthia.”

She bit her lip again. A girl’s gesture. She hated it. “I do love him,” she said at last. “I still

love him.”

“And he loves you.”

“As he can.”

“And he loves his son. Both of them.”

“Yes. But it shouldn’t be like this, Arlin. It shouldn’t. All that love, turned inward like a weapon, turned outward in anger—all that love, a growing divide. It shouldn’t be.”

She lifted her hands. Caught his gently and disengaged them, turning to face him. “And you, between us, trying to heal the rift.”

“I love you,” he said quietly. “Both of you.”

“And Stephen?”

It was Arlin’s turn to stare beyond the panes of glass. “Yes,” he said at last. “But, Cynthia, Nenyane is not...”

“Not?”

He shook his head quietly. “I don’t know,” he said at last, with a marked hesitation. “But I think it best for Maubreche that Robart not be neglected.”

She felt the cold then; winter coming early.

* * *

Mark, Robart’s huntbrother, was not kind to the newcomer. He himself, newly arrived, was not yet comfortable in his position—as if the rank of huntbrother could somehow be snatched from him, and his life be returned to the streets of the city from which he had come. He knew that, among any pack of children, there must be a victim, and he did his best—in subtle and not so subtle ways—to make sure that it wasn’t him.

She found it hard to forgive him this, although she understood it; it had not been long enough since he had been the hunted, in his own way.

Robart did not go out of his way to welcome the girl either, and this too, Cynthia understood, although she accepted it less readily. Robart was his father’s son, and his father’s most vocal supporter and he knew that Corwin was not pleased with her presence.

She also knew, although it pained her more, that Robart stood both in awe and in envy of Stephen’s strange position within Maubreche: Stephen was the Hunter’s son. His golden eyes marked him, as did the loyalty, slavish and inexplicable, of the alaunts and the lymers. Stephen was not allowed near Robart’s hounds; Stephen was not allowed near Corwin’s pack. They were

brothers, and although it happened in some families that brothers held little affection for one another, she hated to see it happen in hers.

If Stephen felt pained by this enforced separation, he was careful not to show it—but although he was marked in all ways by his birth and his blood, Cynthia knew that he was a boy, with a boy's sensitivities. In that, he was like his namesake.

The girl herself was more of a difficulty.

She spoke rarely, as if words and their use were foreign and achieved only with struggle and a deliberate attempt to remember their use. When she was willing to speak with Cynthia—and that was seldom—she became instantly mute when any questions were asked about her past. Cynthia had encountered some of the same resistance from Mark, but she found Mark's silence less threatening; he had not arrived in the dark clouds beneath the folds of an enchanted robe.

Nenyane ate little, slept little, and often disappeared for hours at a time; Cynthia could find her only when she asked Stephen for his aid.

And Stephen himself?

He was entranced by the girl. He deferred to her in too many things. He called her out to see the dogs, and he tried to teach her what he himself had not, in theory, been taught. He protected her.

And that was not, in the end, the role of the Hunter.

* * *

Three weeks after Nenyane's arrival, the first of the snows fell.

The letter that Lady Maubreche sent to the Queen herself had made it to the roads before the snows; the reply would not be tendered—without the use of the mages the Order of Knowledge granted—before spring.

She could not honestly say what the reply would be, for it asked permission to break the most ancient of the laws of the Breodani. Winter was therefore cold and unpleasant in the Maubreche house.

But Nenyane had found a use for the time.

* * *

“Cynthia.”

Cynthia looked up from the desk at which much of her work, for the winter, would be done. She looked up a little too quickly, and perhaps a little too eagerly, for Corwin seldom entered her

study. Or her bedroom, these days.

But the hope died when she met his gaze, and she composed herself as only a Hunter Lady could. She rose stiffly, setting quill aside. “Lord Maubreche.”

“I want you to see something.”

“Is something wrong with the alaunts?”

“No.” He held out a hand—or started to. But the gesture was aborted; the hand fell to his side. “Come.”

The tone of his voice brooked no refusal.

She walked with him, leaving the large room in which she worked, leaving the halls that led to their separate chambers, leaving the towering heights of the second story.

The descent led her to the great hall, and the great hall passed by, mirrors and tapestries unheeded; her husband’s stride was wide, and she had to step quickly to match the pace he set.

She wondered where Arlin was.

Stopped wondering as she heard, in the distance, the sound of metal against metal.

Her eyes rounded, her brows rose and fell. This much she could not keep from her face, and Corwin noted it in silence. Too much silence, these days.

The sound grew louder; much louder.

She knew where it came from: the training rooms that were, at the moment, empty. Robart was eight; not until he was nine would work with swords begin in earnest. And Stephen was not a Hunter—not a page, nor a varlet; the room was closed to him.

He *knew* this.

But it was Stephen’s voice she heard, Stephen’s sudden curse, from beyond the closed doors.

Without another glance at her husband’s face, she placed hands firmly on the doors and pulled them wide in a single motion. They did not move silently, but the noise they did make was lost to the louder crash of blow and parry: Stephen was upon the floor, and at his side, gray eyes flashing, Nenyane.

She looked, to Cynthia’s eyes, like a dancing blade—all angles, all lean, cold steel. Her white hair was bound tight, pulled from her face and her eyes. Stephen’s, shorter, fell across his forehead in a sweaty, damp patch.

The blades, to her measured but inexperienced eye, were not sharpened; they had the weight

of true swords, but not the edge.

Still, weight of that kind, carelessly handled, could cause death or injury less cleanly than edge, and she drew a single sharp breath. “What is going on here?”

Not even the din of this practice battle could dampen the force of her words. Nenyane froze at once, and Stephen jumped back, lithe and quick, from the reach of her still blade.

“Mother!”

“And Father,” she said coldly. “Stephen, what are you doing?”

“Sweating,” he replied. “And bruising a lot.”

Her lips thinned. “There is no weaponmaster in this room.”

He snorted. It was not the reply she expected.

“Stephen?”

“You haven’t seen her fight,” he said darkly. “She’s—she’s—”

“Nenyane.” The girl turned her narrowed eyes upon the Lady of Maubreche. She bowed.

“Are you teaching my son swordplay?”

The girl nodded. There was no hesitance in the motion; none of the reticence that Cynthia had come, with experience, to expect.

“And you are qualified to be his teacher?”

Stephen knew better than to answer his mother’s question. He knew her mood well.

But he answered anyway. “She is,” he said. His voice was subdued. “She’s better with the sword than—than she looks like she should be.” The words had the force of wet paper. But he spoke steadily, and without cringing.

“You know that this room is forbidden you,” Cynthia said. She felt her husband’s shadow presence at her side. Did not turn to him for support.

“Yes.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“It’s the only room that’s big enough, and empty enough. We could have used the ballroom, but—”

Her brows rose. “Stephen!”

He bowed his golden head, closing eyes that were nearly the same color as his hair.

Corwin stepped past Cynthia. It was not what she expected, and it was *not* what she desired.

“Girl,” he said, for he called her nothing else.

Nenyane looked up. Her pale face was smooth and dry; her eyes were startling. She put up her blade, but she did not drop it or lay it at her feet, as Stephen had done.

“My son is not a boy who has seen much swordplay. His opinion is therefore suspect. Mine is not.” He walked to Stephen’s side, but he did not so much as meet his son’s eyes. Instead, he bent and retrieved the blade the boy had set aside. “I would spar with you.”

It was not a request.

“Corwin—”

“Now.”

“I am not here to teach you, Lord Maubreche,” Nenyane replied, but she began to move carefully in what was an obvious circle around the Hunter Lord.

“You are not here to teach *anyone*,” he snapped back. “But if you will do so, you will first convince me that what you have to teach will not be harmful—or incompetent.”

At that, the girl’s eyes widened.

In the pale, gaunt lines of her face, the expression was sharp and bright.

“Nenyane—” Stephen began.

But his father waved him to silence, the motion so abrupt, it too, was a command.

Stephen was well enough trained that he obeyed. But he came to stand by his mother’s side, and his right hand tugged a moment at her elbow. A child’s gesture. Her child’s.

She looked down. But in truth, it was not far down; gone were the days when she bent just to place her ears close enough to his mouth that she missed none of his words.

What she saw in his face gave her pause.

“I’m not good enough with a sword,” he said, the words hushed enough they were clearly meant to carry only to his mother. “And I’m old, she says, to start training.”

“Old?”

“If it were up to her,” he said with a grimace, “I’d have started when I could walk.”

“It is not up to her.”

He winced. “Mother—”

She looked across the floor at her husband’s face. “Only Arlin,” she said quietly, “could stop him now.”

“If I call *Hasufel*—”

“Do not call *Hasufel*.”

Stephen swallowed. And then, in a bitter voice that was years beyond his age, he said, "He's never going to accept her, is he?"

And she heard what lay behind those words. *He's never going to accept me.*

She placed one hand upon his shoulder; the gesture was not gentle, but the ferocity behind it was born of her desire to protect.

"He has always done what he feels is best for you," she said, punctuating the words with a shake. "But he is a Hunter Lord, and the only thing he understands is what he *is*. He loves not the title, but the life. And he cannot conceive of a crime worse than this: depriving you of your place in that life." She paused, and then added, "and depriving you of Arlin, of a huntbrother, is the greatest measure of that life."

"Then the Queen—"

"It is not in the Queen's hands." Cynthia replied coolly, "as you well know. If she chooses to grace us with her support, she may make her pleas on our behalf. That is all."

Stephen swallowed. Then, just before the first of the clashes of steel robbed them of words, he said, "I'm sorry."

But steel had the whole of her attention.

* * *

Corwin was not an indifferent swordsman. He had had years with which to hone this skill, and if it was not Hunter's trance, if it was not the use of spear, it was still an important part of his early training.

But Cynthia could see, from his stance, from the first strike that came out of that peculiar stillness, that he intended to take Stephen at his word; his eyes were light, his movements quick, his breath quicker. He had called Hunter's trance, and he resided within its preternatural speed.

Nenyane did not seem to notice. She bent into her knees, and when Corwin charged, she snapped to the side, dodging the strike by the simple expedient of being above the crescent it traced in air. Her limbs, like the limbs of a bird, remained hovering for just long enough. When they touched down, she was in motion. Her blade was in motion.

Corwin parried, but the parry was clumsy; the strike had come at his back, and he had only enough time to deflect it, no more. He was forced back three steps. His eyes widened. His lips thinned.

He growled.

Stephen, by Cynthia's side, flinched and covered his face.

Corwin struck again. Nenyane was gone before the motion started. She did not press him; she was simply not there when he chose to strike. But by allowing him the attack, she chose not to end the evaluation. There was no fear in her.

Corwin gathered speed. The shape of his shoulders changed; he bent into his knees, approaching with caution, but still approaching. He had passed beyond testing; the Hunter's trance informed the whole of his vision. She was his game.

Cynthia was grateful for the absence of the alaunts. She watched, because she could not—as her son had—look away.

And she saw Nenyane in flight. Saw the girl's sword respond to her arms as if it were an extension more natural than limbs or hands. She parried every blow, but the blows were heavier. If Corwin had remembered that she was a child at the start of their bout, he forgot it.

“Stephen—”

Her son peeled fingers from eyes and met his mother's gaze.

And while she looked at the golden flash of her son's eyes, she heard the crash of steel against steel in the background; it was followed by silence.

She looked up.

Corwin held the jagged remnant of the practice blade in his right hand. His left was empty.

Nenyane waited.

“Corwin!” Cynthia shouted, as her Hunter began to circle the girl again. “Enough!”

He shook himself then. Struggled with the hunt, with the Hunter's imperative. Slowly, too slowly, he looked at what he held.

He stepped back.

Nenyane remained where she was.

The Hunter Lord bent slowly and placed the ruin of blade against floor. He rose, stiffly, and bowed.

“Your son,” Nenyane said quietly. “May I teach him?”

His only answer was silence, and he did not stay long to offer it. He swept past wife, past son, past training room.

Cynthia watching his retreating back. “Yes,” she said softly. “Yes, Nenyane, you may continue to teach him.”

* * *

That day marked a turning point, although it was subtle, and only in retrospect did Cynthia note it.

Corwin was no friendlier than he had been—but he was suddenly present, a shadowy grim figure, taller than either his son or his son's chosen huntbrother. He often watched while the two practiced in the training room, and after a week—only a week—he began to offer Stephen his own observations. Nenyane herself did not seem to notice this intrusion; she spoke only when she thought Corwin in error, and thankfully, that was seldom.

“She's too damn skinny,” Corwin said at dinner two weeks later, winter piled against the windows in faces of snow. He still did not choose to speak the girl's name, but Nenyane looked up anyway.

“Am I?”

“You've no weight behind you,” he replied. “You can lift a sword—Hunter alone knows how—but you can't lift a simple chair without straining.”

“I have no need to lift chairs.”

His brow rose. Cynthia's surprise was more easily masked; Nenyane had spoken more at this meal than she had at any other.

“You don't know what you'll need to lift,” he snapped back. “Can you lift a boar, when it falls? Can you help Stephen to lift it? Can you help him to drag a deer to its resting place? In your duties—in the duties you think you will earn—you will need *strength*.”

She raised a white brow.

Stephen, hearing the question she didn't ask, nodded.

“How am I to gain this strength?”

“Eat,” he said. “Eat more.”

She looked at the food on her plate with a vague air of suspicion.

Again, Stephen nodded.

“But Lady Maubreche eats and surely she is no stronger than I?”

Arlin was taken by a sudden coughing fit. Robart snickered. Mark was sullen. But Cynthia herself smiled. “I am not allowed upon the Hunt,” she said quietly. “And I can, indeed, move chairs when the necessity arises.” Nenyane shrugged.

But she began to eat, and throughout the winter, the gaunt contours of cheek, the sight of

skin over bone with little flesh to cushion it, began to recede into memory. With weight came color; a blush to the cheek, a pink to the tone of skin. Her hair was white, and would remain a winter color, but her eyes lost some of their silver light, their edge of hungry intensity.

* * *

The only chore that winter required of those who had not yet taken their title was the cutting of wood. The wood itself, dead, had dried over the course of the summer and the autumn, and required only the gentle urging of an ax blow to split.

When Corwin was not called away by the duties of the winter hunt, his voice was often raised in the woodshed.

“How is it,” he snapped, “that you can handle a sword with such ease? You’ve almost chopped your feet off *twice* in the last half hour!”

“An ax,” Nenyane snapped back, “is not a weapon. And these,” she added, nudging the logs with what looked suspiciously like an ill-humored kick, “are hardly *foes*.”

“The cold is a foe,” Corwin countered, taking the ax in hand. “It is always a foe. Fire prevents it from claiming lives, and without wood, we have no fire. Come, Nenyane.”

Cynthia forgot to wrap her shawl more tightly around her shoulders; for a moment, the only sound that entered the shed was the howl of wind outside the crack in the door that had granted her entry.

She could see Nenyane’s unusual hesitance.

“And foe or not, your enemies won’t care where you took your wounds. If you have no feet, you can’t run. If you cannot run, you will *never* be given leave to take the ceremony and swear the oath.”

Nenyane glared at Corwin. It was...a young girl’s glare. Corwin came to stand behind her. “Your feet,” he said sharply. He would always speak sharply, but the fact that he spoke at all was precious. “Do what I do. Plant them apart like this. And here,” he added, his arms above hers. “You must hold the ax with your hand here, and here. Do you have it?”

She nodded.

“Good. Stephen? The log.”

Stephen shuffled a log on the stump upon which it would be split. It teetered a moment, and he righted it.

“Try again.”

* * *

In the winter, the hay in the lofts of the alaunts had to be changed with care, for the dogs were often restless. They wore winter coats, of course, and their kennels boasted the warmth of fireplaces. The pages were to tend to those fires, and although Mark and Robart had attained that rank and Stephen and Nenyane had not, Corwin suddenly decided to order them to see to the comfort of the alaunts that served Stephen.

Here, too, her husband was often an unwelcome presence—to Nenyane. To Cynthia he was something entirely different, although it was not her duty, and would never be, to tend the hounds.

She had a mother's visceral fear, a mother's joy and it was balanced between these two that she made her way to the kennels. Villagers often crept into the kennels in the late winter to sleep with the hounds, and the hounds, accustomed to this intrusion from the time they were puppies, bore it with arrogant grace.

But the winter had not yet grown so cold and the wood supplies not yet squandered, that these villagers were witnesses to Corwin's harsh lessons. "Nenyane attend!"

Like an insolent hound, she drifted to stand by his side, her gaze touching Stephen's first, as if for reassurance. He nodded. Words seldom passed between them, although the Hunter's bond had not yet been established. Their language was a language of gesture and expression that would serve them as well as the bond the God blessed.

Nenyane was taught to turn the hay, and was taught to tend the fire. The last always fascinated her, and Corwin came close to blows in his frustration, for she failed to hear him when she was given to the spark and sputter of cracked black wood.

But he had grown cunning; he refused to allow Stephen to stay by her side. She had to learn to listen to The Hunter Lord, and if the lesson was slow to take, it came with time.

* * *

"Corwin, what are you doing?" Arlin's voice. Cynthia, shivering, turned.

Her husband held the chains and leather bindings used to couple the lymers. "What," he said, through clenched teeth, "does it *look* like I'm doing?"

"It *looks* like you're trying to teach Nenyane how to couple the lymers."

Nenyane glanced up. "He is."

"Thank you, Nenyane."

“Is he doing something wrong?”

“You will find, with experience, that Hunters are almost *always* doing something wrong. It will be your duty, as huntbrother, to ensure that they do not suffer for that wrongdoing. Or that they aren’t caught.”

Her frown was a child’s frown. It came easily to her face, and often stayed for hours.

Stephen laughed, and his laughter caused her eyes to narrow. “She’s afraid of the dogs,” he told Arlin casually.

“I am *not* afraid of the dogs!” she snapped, heated now. So many words from a girl who had initially offered none. Cynthia might have hoped she could learn less of Corwin’s intonation, but she was simply grateful to hear them at all.

Corwin snorted. “You are,” he said. “And they know it. They’re not as skittish as horses but they’re a good deal more devious. You have to learn to hide your fear.”

“I’ve nothing to hide!”

He smiled. For just a moment, the chains idling in his hands, his expression was warm.

“Then come, and try again. Leave Mako; take Cebran and Rain, and bind them.”

Stephen started forward, and his father said, without looking up, “If you do that again, I’ll throw you out. This will be her duty. She *must* be able to handle the dogs.”

“Mark didn’t have to go *near* the dogs until after the ceremony.”

“Mark is a boy,” his father replied, the smile quenched. “He has nothing to prove.”

* * *

When Corwin came that night to her chambers, Cynthia was surprised. But his expression was grim and shuttered as she set quill and paper aside.

“You work late,” he said.

“There is work.”

“You waste light.”

She smiled. “You sound like my mother.”

His brows rose for a fraction of a second, and then his face thawed. “Or mine,” he said, almost rueful. He stared at her for a long moment, and then he stood and crossed the distance—all of the distances—that lay between them and took her in his arms; his clothing and skin were cold with winter.

He did not apologize in any other way. She didn’t expect it. But she found the hollow

beneath his shoulders that best fit the curve of her cheek and stood there until the bit of winter had vanished.

“She is difficult,” he said, speaking into her hair. “I thought she was slow or addled. But she is no fool. She is *not* a hunter.”

She said nothing.

“But there is already a bond between them that I do not think can be broken. I know,” he added, with grim amusement. “I’ve tried.”

“Corwin—”

His arms tightened. “He’s my son,” he said quietly. “What man wants less for his son than he himself enjoys? Cynthia—this girl can stay by his side. She has to. I understand that now.”

For just a moment, Cynthia thought she could see a glimmer of the peace that had eluded them both for so many years.

“But let me find him a *legal* huntbrother. A true huntbrother will understand what they have and accept it—”

She pulled herself free from his arms and turned away.

* * *

“He’s not what I expected.”

Cynthia nearly dropped the books she was carrying when she heard the words; they were Nenyane’s. She looked around quickly; there was no one else in the study. No Corwin, no Arlin, and most significant of all, no Stephen.

With care, she righted the books by their spines. With Nenyane, it was best to appear to give no more than half one’s attention.

“I’m not sure that you’re what he expected either.”

At that, Nenyane offered a smile. It was slight, but it was there. “You love him,” she said, after a pause.

“He *is* my son,” Cynthia replied.

Nenyane nodded. Her gaze was distant, but it was not sharp, and the harshness of the early days had left it entirely. “Corwin loves him, too.”

“He is Corwin’s son,” Cynthia said. She set the books upon her desk and turned, leaning against the wood lip.

“But he’s not.”

“He is in any way that matters.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes.”

Nenyane frowned. “He is Breodan’s son.”

“Is that why you came?”

For just a moment, Nenyane lapsed into a familiar silence. Cynthia expected her to leave, but after a while, the girl nodded.

“We can’t afford to make any mistakes,” she said quietly. “We have so little time.”

“We?”

Nenyane shook her head, and Cynthia let the question drop.

“But he’s young, younger than I thought he would be.”

“You’re not that old, Nenyane.”

“Aren’t I?”

On impulse, Cynthia took the girl by the hand and led her to her dressing room. There, she paused in front of the mirror, hands on either of Nenyane’s shoulders. “Look,” she said quietly.

Nenyane did. Her eyes widened as she stared at herself. She shook her head a moment, and white hair spilled out of her loose braid.

But she did not say anything else. After a while, Cynthia left her there, staring as if everything about her image was foreign to her.

* * *

It came to Cynthia, as the snows melted, that Nenyane was afraid.

They were *all* afraid. The roads would be open within days if they were not already open from the capital. And the road would carry the Queen’s message. Although the Queen did not make Hunter law, her advice would carry its weight; in such a way, warning could be given to noble families without the legal censure the King’s words would, by nature, carry.

But such a fear was not Nenyane’s.

She came to visit Cynthia while Cynthia busied herself with seedlings that would eventually find their way to the garden. It was not real work; the Master Gardener would, no doubt, dispose of most of the results of such labor. Still, it kept her hands busy, and she required that busyness. The silence was difficult.

She became aware of the girl after some time had passed, and rose, hands wet with dirt.

Nenyane's eyes were wide and almost haunted. "Lady Maubreche," she said.

"Nenyane?"

"You must come. You must gather your—your family. *Now*."

"My Family?"

"Everyone. Everyone in the House."

Cynthia rose, wiped her hands on her skirts, and *ran*.

* * *

She found Stephen in the kitchen arguing with the cook and his assistants. Her presence stilled the harsh flow of incredulous words.

"Ellias," she said bowing. "You are *ordered* to leave the kitchen. Take what you need for warmth."

Her son shook his head.

"But come *now*."

"Come? But where? What has happened? Is there a fire?"

"Worse," she said softly, seeing the color—or lack of it—in Stephen's face. "Go at once to the maze. Wait for me there; I will lead you to its heart."

He paled, then, and he bowed instantly, obedient for the master where he had been truculent with the son.

* * *

She met Corwin and Arlin as she raced up the stairs.

Corwin's face was grim, his lips set. His eyes were already the peculiar color they took when he had summoned a light trance. "The dogs," he began.

She shook her head. "It's not just the dogs. Empty the household, Lord Maubreche. Send everyone to the maze, and do it *now*."

He did not question her, but he glanced at the face of their son.

"Where are Robart and Mark?"

"In the kennels," he said.

"Good. Tell the alaunts to get them to the maze."

"The alaunts will—"

"Corwin," she said, her voice rising.

He nodded again. She loved him then.

* * *

She had no time to take a head count; no time to take a tally. But she thought—and prayed—that she had not missed anyone. They gathered, some shivering in the cool of early spring, and they waited upon her word.

Nenyane and Stephen stood beside her.

Robart and Mark stood with Corwin, and she could see from Robart's excited bounce that he knew something *big* was happening.

"Forgive me," she said, raising her voice so that it carried. "But we are in some danger, and we must harken now to the Hunter in the maze. Follow me, and if you get lost, follow Stephen; we know the way, and if we lead you, you *will* arrive in safety. Do *not* touch the hedges. Do *not* disturb the gardens."

They nodded. She was proud of this obedience, and grateful for it. She turned, skirts still dark with new dirt, and began to walk as quickly as she could without breaking into a panicked run.

Corwin's voice rose and fell at her back; she did not turn to see why; she trusted him.

The maze opened before her, and she followed its twists and turns, its broken walls, as if they were the halls of her childhood. They were. She felt safety in their presence, although she was exposed to sky and the brisk bite of wind.

But she stopped, once, at the hedge-wall. People bumped into her, driving her forward a step; her hands brushed branches that were only beginning to bud.

She did not come here in winter. She expected to see only bare branches, the skeleton of bush. But even in this exposed state, she could see what the Master Gardener had carved. Could see where her place upon the hedge was. Could see, clearly, that something else had begun to take shape and form in the wall.

It wasn't human. It wasn't even close.

No, she thought. This is old. This is part of my other life.

But she *knew*.

She picked up her skirts and she began to run. At her back, her servants now followed in utter silence, for they had eyes, and brains besides; they had seen exactly what she had seen.

They did not name it. They did not pray. Instead, they sought the shelter that only Maubreche could provide.

She broke into the Heart of the maze, her eyes raised to meet the eyes of the stone Hunter God.

Something spoke.

“Well, well,” he said, turning, his long leather wings unfurling in an expanse that seemed to go on and on, “you took your time. We were beginning to think that we would have to hunt you.”

In the heart of the maze, three creatures stood. She had seen their like only once in her life, at the side of the long dead Stephen of Elseth. And she knew how kind her memory had been, because this reality was so much worse.

* * *

She found voice before she found weapon, although she reached for both at the same time. “*Sanctuary!*” she cried.

The creature laughed. “It only works if we’re on the *outside*,” he said.

But she felt some distant answer to the single word.

“Your God has ascended,” the creature continued. “He has left you here, to the mercy of *our* God. And our God has chosen to make this realm his home. There are always a few... difficulties...in such an arrangement, and we have been sent to smooth them out.”

He lifted a taloned hand, a slender arm; they were the color of night. At a distance, he might have been beautiful, in the way predators are. But there was no distance here.

Fire flew from the tips of his fingers.

At her back, the household staff began to scream.

* * *

But the fire did not reach them. It lapped against the old, wet grass that had been blanketed by snow for months. The grass burned anyway, tracing the edge of a circle that began at Cynthia’s feet.

The creature frowned.

With a confidence she did not feel, she said, “You are in the Hunter’s domain. Go, now, and you will be spared.”

His eyes widened. He turned to his companions. “Kill them,” he said. “Kill them all. If the boy does not fight, spare only him. Do you understand what you are being offered, boy?”

She knew who that boy was, but she did not turn to look at him; instead she drew knives, one in either hand.

But the boy—her son—replied. “Yes,” he said quietly, his words drawing her glance where the demon’s could not, “I do. My first test.”

He was ten. Almost eleven. He was a child.

But he stepped out from behind the broad girth of the cook, shaking himself free of that man’s large hands. In his own, he carried a sword.

She had not seen it when she had summoned him. Had not seen it in the kitchen, nor at the edge of the maze. But it was there, and it was not the only sword drawn.

By his side, her eyes a pale silver to Stephen’s gold, stood Nenyane. She too, held a sword.

The creature laughed but the laughter was short and sharp, and it died quickly. Where he was oddly compelling, his laughter was simply ugly.

“Kill them all,” the creature said, and pushed off the ground, seeking the vantage of height in which to do battle.

Cynthia turned to face Ellias, the man who had tried to protect her son. “No matter what it says,” she told him, “no matter what it *does*, do not try to leave the Heart of the maze. If it is not safe here, it is far, far less safe anywhere else in Maubreche.”

Ellias nodded grimly, and said, “All right. But we’re going to have a discussion about my salary after this is over.”

The faintest of smiles tugged at her lips and was gone.

* * *

Nenyane leaped to the the right as the creature dove; Stephen stayed his ground, the tip of his sword tracing flat, brown grass.

The creature did not, however, attack them; instead he focused the whole of his attention upon Cynthia.

She threw her knives. It was a skill, and one that she had been taught in lieu of sword. One dagger skirted the underside of the leathery wings; the other sank into flesh.

The creature snarled.

But he was one; there were three.

Stephen’s sword came up as the second creature took to the air; there was a clang, as of steel against steel, and talons came away without leaving a mark. Stephen was driven back by the impact; the cook caught him, righted him.

He almost paid for the interference with his life, but the winds in the maze’s Heart rose

sudden and terrible, and the creatures, airborne, were driven back.

“This is the work of a lifetime,” a familiar voice said. “I will not have you carelessly damage it.”

She turned at the sound of the voice, and then looked up. *Standing* upon the thin branches of bushes that should never have supported his weight was the Master Gardener of Maubreche.

In his hand was a blade that seemed to be made of blue fire. Gone were clippers, shears, trowels; gone was the nondescript clothing in which he worked, day by day and year by year. He wore something that must have been armor, but it conformed so perfectly to his slender frame, Cynthia thought she must be mistaken.

“Lady Maubreche,” the Master Gardener said, “you once asked my name, against all convention, and I did not choose to answer you. I am sorry to answer you now, and perhaps you will better understand why I chose silence when you have my answer.

“I am Caralonne.” He lifted his left arm, and a shield suddenly graced it; it was of the same metal as the sword, burning brightly in the daylight.

The creature upon the winds shrieked in fury. “*Caralonne?*” it spat. “But you are dead!”

“I see that you are as observant as you always were,” the Master Gardener replied coldly. “But you are *not* in your element here. Choose the air, and it will devour you.”

Wind swept across the clearing of the maze’s Heart. It forced the creatures back, and they dove to earth, finding purchase against the unnatural howl.

But the gale did not touch Cynthia or her people.

Instead, a different howl did.

The alaunts were coming.

* * *

Stephen and Nenyane *moved*. Before Cynthia could stop them—and she would have, and knew it was wrong—they crossed the flat ground, blades flashing in the sunlight. No blue burned those edges, but the glint there told her that these were not practice blades. Her son was wielding a man’s weapon, and at his side, his huntbrother wielded one, too.

First blood: Stephen’s. It fell when talons raked his arm, splitting the thick winter fabric as if it offered no resistance. His blade replied, and the creature snarled; it had extended its arm too far in an attempt to deal a fatal blow.

Nenyane’s blade bit to bone; second blood was a good deal more dear than first had been.

The creature sprang up; the wind battered it and it came down at once.

Cynthia turned to look at the Master Gardener. He was watching, his gaze intent, his sword readied. But he did not leap down from the hedge-wall; he did not choose to join her son.

As if he could hear her, he said, "Stephen is correct. This is his test." But it was not a child's test; to fail was simply to die.

"You have your responsibility, Lady Maubreche. Do not desert it."

He's a child, she wanted to scream. *I'm his mother!* But she was silent. Her weapons were gone; her responsibility remained. But she could not turn away.

The dogs came through the maze, snapping at the servants who stood in their way.

At their head, horn in hand, was Corwin; at his side, spear readied, Arlin. They were like, and unlike, Stephen and Nenyane, but they moved with a single purpose.

Cynthia could not interfere with Stephen. She could not—had no desire—to call Corwin back. But she *did* reach out to grab Robart and Mark by their collars; enough was enough.

Robart snarled, but Mark went limp instantly. He was terrified; he had come this far because his duty and his loyalty lay with his Hunter. She loved him for both his loyalty and his fear, and she drew them both close.

"If you do not still *this instant*, I will hand you to Ellis," she said, into Robart's ear.

"But Stephen's there, and he's not even a page!"

"Stephen is Breodan's son. This *is* his place." Driving the wedge between her sons more deeply into place and regretting it, she spoke.

"Mother—"

"I would have stopped him," she said, mouth by her youngest's ears. "But I can't. You're *eight*. He's *eleven*."

"He's *ten!*"

"Enough. I need you here. If they fail, there will be no one to protect us. Do you understand?" She shook him to punctuate the words.

But they had their desired effect.

* * *

The battle raged. Everyone moved so damned quickly it was hard to take it all in, but Cynthia bore witness. She bit back a cry when Arlin fell, and did cry out when he rose, bloodied, his hand upon the haft of his spear. The dogs leaped past him, snapping at the demons, and she

knew that they would lose at least one of the hounds.

But she was unprepared for that hound to be Hasufel. He was the link between father and husband, between husband and son, and he was older now, too old to be pack leader. But not too old to be Hunter's hound; not too old to give his life in the defense of his many masters.

He did not even cry out when talons sliced through his windpipe, felling him in a single blow; his jaws still gripped tight about the leg of the demon, and Arlin and Corwin used this momentary pause to time their attacks. The Maubreche spear pierced the creature's chest, lifting him an inch off the ground.

Nenyane and Stephen were besieged by the two remaining demons; if there had been any question who their target was—and there hadn't, but there had been hope—it was dispelled.

Stephen was cut again, and this wound was deeper, but he did not lose his footing; instead he leaped clear of the strike that would have ended his life, and returned it, taking the wing at pinion. The wings of these creatures were as much a threat as their talons; he had crippled it for the moment.

Nenyane removed its head and turned, shouting Stephen's name.

He flattened; something passed over his head. Something red and bright. A sword. One of the demons had drawn sword in the maze.

Nenyane screamed at the demon in a language that Cynthia did not understand. The demon froze an instant and then turned to stare at her, incredulous. It was a costly mistake, for she did not pause, and in her wake, her Hunter was also moving.

But Nenyane took the first of her wounds in that meeting; Stephen escaped unscathed. The creature did not.

The dogs gathered around Stephen were his own. Rain and Cebran snarled, but they did not leap, and it took Cynthia only a moment to realize why: He had given them orders. Hunter orders, in the silence of a trance that she knew he had not yet learned.

They traced a circle around the creature, snapping and growling, but they bounded out of his way when he brought his sword to bear.

And then the creature was attacked from behind; Arlin had managed to remove his spear from the chest of the demon, and he had found an opening in the space between the great wings.

It was not over in that instant, but Cynthia drew breath, for it *was* over.

* * *

The Master Gardener stepped lightly down from the hedge. He landed just beyond Stephen, gaining his feet with a nimble grace that did not suit a gardener.

“Breodan-kin,” he said, and he bowed. “You pass.”

Stephen, bleeding and breathing heavily, looked up at the face of the Master Gardener as if he did not understand his words.

“It was a simple test,” the Master Gardener continued.

Stephen glanced at the bleeding body of Hasufel and said nothing.

“You will lose much, much more than Hasufel before this is over,” the Master Gardener said, but his words were oddly gentle. “Do you understand what the test was?”

Stephen frowned. “We killed them,” he said at last.

Nenyane, by his side, and bleeding just as profusely, rolled her eyes. “He’s not really stupid,” she said to the Master Gardener. “But this is his first real fight.”

Stephen turned on her. “If you’re so smart, you tell me.”

“He offered you your life,” she said, “if you left.”

Stephen’s frown spoke clearly.

Nenyane laughed. “You don’t remember?”

“Of course I remember. But—”

“But?”

“Not much of a test,” he said. He set his sword down then, and walked over to Hasufel. He lifted the alaunt with as much care as a slender boy could; Hasufel’s blood darkened his shirt, mingling with his own until they were one and the same.

“No,” Nenyane said. “But I never said demons were *smart*.”

But Stephen didn’t hear her. He was crying.

* * *

In the somber silence of the Maubreche spring grounds, they buried Hasufel. The standing stones that existed upon any Hunter Lord’s domain still bore the trace of ice from winter’s passage, and the ground was barely thawed; Stephen and Nenyane had to *work* to dig the grave in the lee of the ceremonial stones.

The healers, accustomed to Hunters, kept their outraged complaints to a bare minimum; Stephen’s wounds were not healed, and he was in no way whole enough to undertake such an arduous task.

But he did the work. Nenyane's months of eating and training had indeed given her the muscle necessary to move chairs—and earth. She did not complain about wielding a shovel to fight with dirt.

Instead she glanced at Stephen as she worked; he did not meet her gaze.

Cynthia watched in silence. Her hands were balled fists at her sides; she had attempted to offer Stephen comfort, but she knew that he would take none. Time would give him what he required, or nothing would; he had never lost a hound before.

Corwin and Arlin bore witness as well. They offered their help, but only obliquely, and neither man seemed surprised when Stephen curtly—even rudely—refused them. They *had* suffered the loss that Stephen now suffered, and they accorded Hasufel the respect of their open sorrow.

It was the only thing they could offer Stephen.

* * *

Three days later, the Queen's letter arrived, carried by a man who wore the livery of the Master of the Game. Hunter Green, the darkest of colors. Cynthia recognized him immediately.

She took the Queen's letter and retired at once to her chambers, followed by Corwin and Arlin.

They waited in a hushed silence as she broke its wax seal. The silence grew as she read; she did not speak the words aloud. But these two, they knew her. They knew the subtle nuances of her expressions well. What had been written was there in the stiff lines of her face.

She looked up; met first Corwin's and then Arlin's eyes before handing them the news.

Corwin did not read the letter. Instead, he cursed roundly. "I'd better go," he said quietly. "Arlin?"

Arlin looked up from the Queen's response, his expression bleak. "Where?"

"To the King," Corwin snapped. "Where else?"

"The King has spoken," Arlin replied, lifting the letter. "Through his Queen, he has made his decision. Will you challenge the Master of the Game?"

"And his Priests?"

"Even if the only forum we're given is the Sacred Hunt, then *yes*, damn you. They didn't see what we saw," he added. "They weren't there for the fight in the maze. If they *know* about it, they'll change their minds."

His huntbrother offered him the loyalty of silence.

“You saw her,” Corwin continued, speaking to his brother. “Without oath, without ceremony, without any bloody *training*, they are what they are. And I’ll be damned if my son is denied his life because of a set of stupid laws.”

Cynthia’s eyes widened. “They’re the Hunter’s law,” she said, muted.

“No,” he said quietly. “I thought that. But I know what I saw, Cynthia. I know what I felt. Will Lord Elseth stand as witness to a ceremony that does not have the King’s blessing?”

She was almost shocked. But she gathered herself quickly, “I believe,” she said, choosing her words with care, “that Lord Elseth would die before he would fail Stephen of Maubreche.”

“Good. Write to Lord Elseth. I will write to my mother and my brother. Stephen doesn’t know the horn calls; he didn’t sound the hunt. But he *hunted*. He’s earned his title.

“And we’ll give it to him. If we have to break the Priest’s laws, we’ll break them. He’s *Breodan’s* son. What the Hunter God accepts I’ll shove down the throats of everyone else.”

She reached up and placed her hand against his mouth, stemming the flow of his words with regret. It was seldom that he spoke this freely. “He is *our* son,” she said, with a quiet pride.

“Cynthia—”

She shook her head. Walked into the circle of his arms, although he had not—yet—lifted them. She was careful to touch him gently, and after a moment, he bent his head and kissed the top of her hair.

“Yes,” he said at last. “He is. Our son. And if I come to an understanding of things less quickly than you, Lady Maubreche, I *am* a Hunter Lord. I will fight for what is mine.”

THE END

Short Stories by Michelle West and Michelle Sagara

The first six stories released are connected to the Essalieyan Universe of the novels I write for DAW as Michelle West. Since those are my most asked-for short stories, those are the stories I wanted to make available first. The rest of the stories will be released in chronological order from the date of their first appearance, which are listed in brackets beside the titles, along with the anthology in which they first appeared. All of the stories have new introductions (which will probably come through in the samples if you've already read the stories but want to read those.)

In the Essalieyan universe:

1. Echoes (2001, *Assassin Fantastic*)
2. **Huntbrother (2004, *Sirius, the Dog Star*)**
3. The Black Ospreys (2005, *Women of War*)
4. The Weapon (2005, *Shadow of Evil*)
5. Warlord (1998, *Battle Magic*)
6. The Memory of Stone (2002, *30th Anniversary DAW Fantasy*)
- * * *
7. Birthnight (1992, *Christmas Bestiary*)
8. Gifted (1992, *Aladdin, Master of the Lamp*)
9. Shadow of a Change (1993, *Dinosaur Fantastic*)
10. For Love of God (1993, *Alternate Warriors*)
11. Hunger (1993, *Christmas Ghosts*)
12. Four Attempts at a Letter (1994, *By Any Other Fame*)
13. Winter (1994, *Deals with the Devil*)
14. What She Won't Remember (1994, *Alternate Outlaws*)
15. The Hidden Grove (1995, *Witch Fantastic*)
16. Ghostwood (1995, *Enchanted Forests*)
17. When a Child Cries (1996, *Phantoms of the Night*)
18. The Sword in the Stone (1997, *Alternate Tyrants*)
19. Turn of the Card (1997, *Tarot Fantastic*)

20. The Law of Man (1997, *Elf Fantastic*)
21. Flight (1997, *Return of the Dinosaurs*)
22. The Vision of Men (1997, *The Fortune Teller*)
23. By the Work, One Knows (1997, *Zodiac Fantastic*)
24. Under the Skin (1997, *Elf Magic*)
25. The Dead that Sow (1997, *Wizard Fantastic*)
26. Kin (1998, *Olympus*)
27. Step on the Crack (1998, *Black Cats and Broken Mirrors*)
28. Diamonds (1998, *Alien Pets*)
29. Sunrise (1999, *A Dangerous Magic*)
30. Elegy (1999, *Moon Shots*)
31. Return of the King (1999, *Merlin*)
32. Work in Progress (1999, *Alien Abductions*)
33. Water Baby (1999, *Earth, Air, Fire and Water*)
34. Faces Made of Clay (2000, *Mardi Gras Madness*)
35. Sacrifice (2000, *Spell Fantastic*)
36. Shelter (2000, *Perchance to Dream*)
37. Pas de Deux (2000, *Guardian Angels*)
38. Déjà Vu (2001, *Single White Vampire Seeks Same*)
39. To Speak With Angels (2001, *Villains Victorious*)
40. Lady of the Lake (2001, *Out of Avalon*)
41. Truth (2001, *The Mutant Files*)
42. The Last Flight (2001, *Creature Fantastic*)
43. The Knight of the Hydan Athe (2002, *Knight Fantastic*)
44. Legacy (2002, *Familiars*)
45. The Nightingale (2002, *Once Upon a Galaxy*)
46. A Quiet Justice (2002, *Vengeance Fantastic*)
47. The Augustine Painters (2002, *Apprentice Fantastic*)
48. How to Kill an Immortal (2002, *The Bakka Anthology*)
49. Fat Girl (2002, Oceans of the Mind VI, ezine)
50. Diary (2003, *The Sorcerer's Academy*)

51. Dime Store Rings (2004, *The Magic Shop*)
52. To The Gods Their Due (2004, *Conqueror Fantastic*)
53. The Stolen Child (2004, *Faerie Tales*)
54. The Rose Garden (2004, *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*)
55. The Colors of Augustine (2004, *Summoned to Destiny*)
56. Unicorn Hunt (2005, *Maiden, Mother Crone*)
57. The Snow Queen* (2005, *Magic Tails*; with Debbie Ohi)
58. Shahira (2006, *Children of Magic*)
59. Choice* (1997, *Sword of Ice: Friends of Valdemar*)
60. Childhood's End (1998, *Tad William's Mirror World*)
61. Winter Death* (2003, *The Sun in Glory: Friends of Valdemar*)

*Set in Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar, as the anthology titles suggest

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