

Dragon's Son

Lord of Wind and Fire Book 3

Elaine Corvidae

Prologue

Caden

300 years ago.

Telmonra stood atop the Dragon Stone, her heart clenched with a mixture of grief and pride and desperate hope. The mountain wind whipped her long hair into a storm, held back from her eyes only by the gold circlet of her rank. Below, in the city, there would be wailing and tears this night, but here were only the wind, the monotonous words of the ritual, and the cries of dragons.

The cries of her kin.

It had been a long time since all of the clan had gathered together in one place. Madness ran in their line, it was said, and mingled with that were the petty quarrels and rivalries found in any family. Jonaglirs had murdered one another in the past, spilling the blood that bound them.

Spilling the blood that was the key to their power.

"Our need has never been so desperate," she had told the swarm of cousins, uncles, aunts, nieces, and nephews. They had stood in the great throne room, which lay open to the mountain weather, all of them watching her with eyes as gray as her own. In that moment, she had almost hated them, because none of them could take this burden from her. She was the last surviving child of King Osha; all the rest had been carried away by the same plague that had claimed their parents.

Whether the plague was natural or wizard-made ... that was a question that haunted her sleepless nights more and more often these days.

"Jenel has broken our ancient alliance," she had gone on, even though they knew it already. "Maak and Shalai have broken it further by refusing to aid us. Jenel has the aid of a powerful wizard, and their armies have already taken the southern passes. How long they have planned this, I cannot say, but they have struck hard and fast. Our need grows great, so I have called you here.

"The dragons are our most powerful defenders, but as of now they are too few. Those under the age of sixteen must remain behind, and those women who are pregnant. The rest of you ... make your farewells."

And so it came to this. One by one, they walked to the Dragon Stone, exchanged the ritual words with her ... and cut their own throats. One by one, her kin gave up their lives in exchange for Caden's protection.

One by one, new-made dragons rose into the air.

Let it be enough, she prayed, watching them. Jonaglir was decimated by this act, and it would be many generations before the clan recovered in number.

If they lived to recover at all.

* * * *

Jenel

Present day.

"I am not pleased, wizard."

Ax glanced up from a crystal basin on a pedestal. Power rippled and danced like sunlight on the water within the basin, showing flashes and glimpses of far-off images. Most of them were half-obscured by smoke or dyed red with blood.

Fellrant, King of Jenel, stood before the only window in a high tower, looking out over his domain. A flowering vine had climbed the outside of the tower to form a curtain that hung over half the opening, perfuming the room with its purple flowers. The slow drone of bees came from without, accompanied by the singing of birds. If not for the ring of the smiths' hammers and the cries of practicing warriors, the scene outside would have seemed nothing more than a sleepy spring day.

Ax's sharp blue eyes narrowed slightly, but he hid his irritation well enough. "And why is that, Your Majesty?"

Fellrant cast an annoyed glance over his shoulder. He was a small man, but he nevertheless radiated a regal air that confirmed Ax's choice to boost him to the throne. Impatience snapped in his blue-violet eyes, but years spent as a northern lord, plotting first for survival and later for power, had taught him to curb his temper.

"Why indeed, wizard? Let us think. Over the last year, both my winter and summer palaces have been destroyed, so that I must make do with the leavings of a dead lord. Segg, my capital, is nothing more than a burned ruin. Argannon is attacking from the north, apparently having struck an alliance with Jenel's so-called ally Maak that allowed Jahcgroth to simply march armies through the kingdom without a fight. Shalai will send us no aid, and Undah is too distant to care. Is there anything else?" Fellrant pretended to think, his youthful features twisting into a frown. "Oh, yes, that's right. My only rival for the kingship has gone missing."

"If Lord Auglar survived the fall of Segg, then he is most likely dead by now," Ax pointed out testily. He disliked being reminded of Auglar, whom he had backed before learning that the lord had betrayed Jenel by marrying a Wolfkin. Only humans had the right to Jenel's throne—for a potential king to breed with a half-beast was nothing short of treason.

Fellrant's eyes narrowed. "I will remind you that he is no longer a lord. I stripped him of all titles and lands. He is nothing more than a vagabond, at best."

"And therefore nothing for you to worry about," Ax pointed out soothingly.

"And the Aclyte? Yozerf?"

"Dead."

"Are you certain? He had power."

Ax snorted. "None worth mentioning, Your Highness. He was nothing more than the bastard heir of blood long spent. His minor tricks were not enough to save him. All the portents say that he was killed in the destruction of Nava Nar."

And good riddance. Yozerf had once been a useful tool, but those days were long over.

Footsteps rang on the stair outside, and a moment later a man appeared in the doorway, heavily armed and dressed in mail. Crossing the room, he dropped to one knee before his king.

"Lord Tybalt," Fellrant said, acknowledging the soldier. Until a few weeks ago, Tybalt had only been a

minor thane. But with the deaths of most of the Jenelese lords, Tybalt had found himself not only a lord, but also commander of the King's armies.

"Your Majesty," Tybalt said, with the worshipful air of a man who had no doubts as to the origins of his good fortune. He was a big, burly man, his hair cut short to fit under a helm, and he made an interesting contrast to the small, beautiful Fellrant. "The armies are gathering. Your lords have brought every trained soldier they could spare from the defense of their own keeps."

Fellrant nodded. "And the conscripts?"

"Every able-bodied male peasant found is being brought in as well. They will make useful foot soldiers, if nothing else."

"Excellent." Fellrant folded his hands together and smiled. "Take your forces north, then, Lord Tybalt. That is where the main threat of Argannon comes from, despite their trickery in Segg. Supply yourselves as you may—the army is the most important consideration now, do you understand? If any village refuses you food, take it by force. And if any village is found to be housing Argannon sympathizers ... burn it to the ground."

"Understood, Your Highness."

Fellrant dismissed Tybalt and went back to stare out his window. Ax returned his attention to the bowl in front of him. Jenel was wracked by war, and refugees were already beginning to stream across the Kellsmarch from their burning villages. It was a desperate time, and it called for a strong king like Fellrant, who would not hesitate to do whatever was needful to turn back the invaders. Ax had made a good choice indeed.

Chapter One

The sound of feet on the detritus of the forest floor pulled the wolf from an uneasy rest. It had been some time since he had truly relaxed. At first, his battered, broken body had been so injured that he could do nothing except sleep, but as time passed and he began to heal, the agony intruded even on his dreams. A sharp pain stabbed his side with every breath, bright light made his left eye water, his skin was raw and red where patches of fur had burned away, and the rest of him ached with bruises that went to the bone.

An unbelievably filthy girl appeared at the opening to the little hole under a half-fallen tree where they denned together. Her hair might have been the sort of coppery color that humans called red, but it was hard to tell under the mix of dirt and decayed leaves that matted it together. The original color of her tattered clothing was equally indeterminate, covered as it was in mud and the wolf's blood. A pair of bright blue eyes peeked out of her grimy face; from what he could see of her features, he guessed that she was no more than eight years old.

Despite her incredible state of filth, the wolf thumped his tail weakly at the sight and smell of her.

Cub. Pack mate.

A pouch and a pottery jug hung from her shoulder; she took them off and poured a little water from the jug into a wooden bowl. "Here you go, Smoky," she said soothingly, holding it out to him. The wolf gratefully lapped up the water. "Good boy," she whispered. "You want some more?"

When he had drunk his fill, she opened her pouch and sorted through it. Unfortunately, both of their diets were limited to what she could find or catch with her bare hands. An assortment of mushrooms, roots, lizards, frogs, and two pathetically small crayfish came out of the pouch. She gave him the lizards, frogs, and crayfish, and ate the roots and mushrooms raw and dirty. Her collarbones stood out in sharp points, and the skin drew tight over her skull.

After their makeshift dinner, she crawled down into the den with the wolf, curling up against his flank. He licked her hair once or twice, without making it noticeably cleaner.

"It's going to be all right, Smoky," the girl said quietly as the sun went down on yet another day in the forest. "You're getting better. Maybe when you're well, you can hunt for us. You're so big—I bet you could take down any deer in Jenel! And then we'll eat and eat and eat." She sniffled and wiped at her face, streaking the dirt on her hand. "Everything's going to be all right."

Her voice broke, and her little body began to shake. Despite his own pain and exhaustion, the wolf felt concern. He knew, somehow, that this was not right—she should not be making these noises. Maybe she was hurt, too?

Not knowing what else to do, he licked the salty water from around her eyes. That made her giggle—a good sound. It also cleaned a little of the dirt off, so that two circles of paler skin ringed her eyes. In the semi-dark, it reminded him of an owl's face.

You're a little owl, he thought, and it seemed to him that he should be able to communicate this to her in some way. But how?

She sighed, snuggled deeper into his thick fur, and relaxed into a sleep characterized by fretful twitching and soft whimpers. As he lay beside her, unable to sleep himself, the wolf for the first time began to wonder about the black void in his mind. It was as if he had sprung to life in the forest, as if there were nothing *to* know before then. But somehow he knew that was not right. There had been other things

before the forest. He had been...

Something. Something that was now gone beyond his reach.

Letting out his breath in a soft *whuff* that ruffled Little Owl's hair, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

* * * *

"It's the end of the world, I tell you," muttered a surly man, as he took a wooden cup of ale from the innkeeper.

Yes, Suchen thought bleakly, it is indeed.

She sat at a low table with her companions, taking only sparing sips of her ale and trying not to look around at the little inn. They were in the village of Hyytr, which had grown only more squalid and desperate in the time since she had last been there. Then, she had been with the Sworn of Lord Auglar, the young noblewoman Trethya ... and Yozerf.

Her heart flinched away from the memory, as if it had been pressed against a hot poker. Only a few weeks had passed since they escaped from Segg and joined the flood of refugees pouring north, away from the riots and chaos that had all but destroyed the city. Only a few weeks, since the night they left Yozerf to hold back the monstrous Red Guard and human soldiers so that they might escape.

Since we left him to die.

Other refugees wandered around the inn, drawing hard looks from the locals. A man armed with a scythe stood at the door; apparently, there had been attempts to loot and rob the place sometime before Suchen and her companions arrived. Auglar had been forced to show the door-guard money before they were allowed inside.

Money that they could ill afford to spend, actually. But Auglar had suggested that they go to the inn in an attempt to gather information, to find out what Fellrant—*King Fellrant*—was doing, where the Argannese forces had attacked last, and what were the conditions on the Great Trade Route that crossed the vast plains of the Kellsmarch.

Buudi and Brenwulf had naturally followed their lord—they were his Sworn, after all. The only Sworn left to him, unless one counted Gless, who was safely back at Kellsjard waiting for them. All the rest had died or betrayed him.

Peddock.

The memory of her brother, who had abandoned them to follow the woman he loved, even knowing that she was a Red Guard, a shape-shifter and a minion of their enemy, was another thing too painful to touch.

Londah ... Suchen did not know why Yozerf's mother had stayed with them. She sat to Suchen's right, a hood drawn up to shadow her beautiful features from prying eyes. She wore a baggy tunic and trousers, like a male peasant, but openly displayed the sword strapped to her side. As always, she sat alert, ready for any disaster, and her presence seemed to comfort everyone else. It would take a great deal of men and luck to kill her, or to kill anyone she protected.

As for Suchen ... she came because she had nothing else to do. Nothing mattered anymore; she simply drifted through the days, going where she was led, because to do otherwise would require an act of will.

Setting her cup aside, she bowed her head, resting it against her hands. The short ends of her hair tickled

her face, making her skin itch. Yozerf had always loved her hair, despite the fact that it was too fine to be put into anything resembling a fashionable style. It was soft, he had insisted, as if that were the only quality that could possibly matter. So one day after he died—she wasn't sure exactly which day—she had cut it all off with a knife and flung it into the fire. When her companions asked her why she had done it, she said that it was so she could pass as a boy, something safer to be in these times than a woman. With her figure and men's clothing, such a deception wouldn't be hard. Whether they had believed the explanation or not, she did not know.

"Are you all right, daughter?" Londah asked in a low voice, touching Suchen's shoulder.

"Yes," Suchen lied, because it took less effort than telling the truth. How could she possibly be all right ever again? Somehow, she managed to force herself to appear interested, to raise her head and turn to Auglar, as if he could say anything that would make any difference to her. "What's the news?"

Auglar looked as though he had aged a decade since their flight from Segg. The stubble of a beard darkened his pale skin, his long, black hair was lank from dirt, and shadows ringed his blue eyes. No onlooker would ever have guessed, not only that he had been one of the most powerful men in Jenel, but that he had almost been their king.

"News, rumor, wild speculation," he said tiredly. "I've talked to a dozen different groups, and none of them have given me the same story twice. Fellrant is going to surrender Jenel to Argannon. Fellrant is fielding an army. A village was destroyed when Jenelese soldiers stole all their food. Or maybe it was Argannese soldiers." He shook his head. "The gods alone know what the truth is."

"The truth is that people are desperate," Londah said, taking a judicious sip of her ale. For an instant, Suchen caught a glimpse of her cold, gray eyes beneath the hood. "And that things are going to get far worse as the war continues. Segg was only the first city to fall. Soon Jenel will be full of homeless, hungry people who will do anything to survive."

"Then we have no choice but to get back to Kellsjard as quickly as possible," Buudi said grimly. His once-black hair had gone almost entirely gray, and lines scored deep creases around his eyes and mouth.

Brenwulf nodded. He was the brother of Sifya, Auglar's wife. Like her, he was Wolfkin, although none of them had known it until those terrible last days in Segg. "We'll be safe there."

Kellsjard. Homesickness stabbed through Suchen, making all the miles they still had to travel seem like an impassable barrier. But at the same time, she wondered if the feeling were not simply an illusion. Kellsjard was where she and Yozerf had become lovers, where they had been happy, if only for a little while. Did she somehow think that returning to Kellsjard would undo everything that had happened since they had left?

"Safe? For a while. Until Fellrant comes looking for you," Londah said mildly, as if she commented on nothing more serious than the weather. "That is the first place he will search. Will you endanger all those within by going home?"

Auglar hesitated, but then shook his head. "I don't see any other choice. If I believed that my absence would save anyone ... then I would stay away. But do you truly think that Fellrant will simply leave my wife and my heir alone, just because I am gone?"

"Perhaps. But I fail to see how your presence will make them any more safe."

Auglar's expression tightened, but he did not dispute her words. "I can't abandon them."

"At the least, we have to warn them," Buudi added, giving Londah a harsh look. "These are our friends, our family. We can't just disappear without trying to do anything for them."

Londah said nothing for a moment, her face expressionless, like that of a marble statue, cold and remote. "As you will," she answered at last, but Suchen had the feeling that she thought them all fools.

Auglar sighed and rose to his feet. "Come on," he said wearily. "We need to find a place to sleep tonight."

* * * *

As the days passed, the wolf continued to grow stronger. Although his side did not get any less painful, some of the other aches started to fade, and the sight began to return to his left eye, as the swelling around it went down. One morning, he even managed to crawl out of the den and stand erect for a few minutes, before weakness overwhelmed him and he had to lie down again.

Owl stayed close by, except when she had to go out and forage for food. She frequently played with sticks, apparently using them as a substitute for dolls. When the wolf was strong enough, he lay outside the den, on a bed of ferns that sprouted at the base of a tree and watched her play.

"La la la, look at all the people," she sang tunelessly, waving her sticks in the air.

People. Yes, there were other people in the world; he remembered that. There were humans, like the girl, and others.

Owl was a human cub. And cubs belonged with their packs, not alone in the woods. Was she lost? Where should she be instead? He tried to recall, tried to push back past that black void in his mind. For a moment, an image formed in his mind's eye: city streets, cobblestones, garbage, filth, tears, blood. An intense feeling of shame, fear, and helpless anger surged through him, making his pelt stand on end and a growl creep out of his throat.

But why? Where were these images and feelings coming from? As the raw intensity faded, the wolf shook himself slightly, resettling his fur. A quick check on Owl showed that she was oblivious to his momentary fear, which was good. He did not want to frighten her, especially when he didn't understand it himself.

"Look, Smoky!" Owl exclaimed, distracting him. She had used a vine to tie some of the sticks together in an odd design. "It's you! See—there's your legs, and there's your tail, and there's your ears."

The wolf did not see how a collection of sticks and vines resembled him in any way, but he sniffed at it politely when she held it out for him to see. Soon three other collections of sticks had joined it. "Look—here's me," she said, displaying the smallest of the three. The other two she stuck upright in the ground. "And this is a man and a woman." She took the wolf figure and the Owl figure and hopped them along the ground, as if they were walking. "Why look, Smoky, there is a man and a woman! Will you be our Mama and Papa?"

The wolf's ears perked up slightly. *Mama?*

Images of swords, of daggers, of black wings and a shadow on the stars.

Owl grabbed the tallest stick and bent it over the first two. "Greetings, little girl," she said in a deeper voice. "We will be your Mama and Papa. But what about the wolf? We are afraid of him."

She switched to the Owl figure. "Don't be scared. Smoky won't hurt anyone. He is my friend."

Back to the man figure. "Then he can live with us, too, and we will always be nice to you."

She fell silent, staring at the stick dolls for a while. Then she smiled. "That's what it's going to be like, Smoky," she said, absently petting him. "As soon as you're better. We'll find a Mama and a Papa, and they'll never, ever be mean to us, and we'll always have plenty to eat, and they'll keep us safe from the bad men." Her lower lip trembled a bit, and she wiped at her eyes. "Won't that be wonderful?"

Chapter Two

As they traveled north, Suchen and her companions began to hear more and more rumors of war. Going was slow for them; they had little in the way of either money or provisions, and any villages that might have been inclined to help them in better times were now suspicious of the flood of refugees pouring out of Segg.

A large number of wanderers had stopped for the night near a stream, which quickly became polluted from so many hands and feet in its slow waters. For the most part, the group seemed to be composed of families, so Auglar judged it safe to stop and share news with them. Indeed, Suchen noted wryly, it was they who got the hard looks and suspicious glares, although no one openly attempted to drive them away.

Many of the families had fled Segg when it became a battleground. But, as it happened, not all of them had come from there.

"It was the King's soldiers who put us on the road," one man complained. His skin was weathered from long exposure to sun and wind, and he had the hard, callused hands of a peasant farmer. His young wife and their tiny children huddled behind him, all of them dressed in torn and filthy clothes. Suchen thought that the woman's belly had the slight swell of early pregnancy.

"They come into our village, said they needed provisioning if they was going to fight the Argannese." The farmer spat into the fire, although which army he meant to condemn was uncertain. "Took everything we had, then started in on the some of the young girls. We told 'em we wouldn't stand for that. That's when they started burning." He shook his head sadly. "Everything's gone now. The houses, the fields. We figured we'd head north to the Kellsmarsh and get away from the fighting."

After a time, Suchen and her companions drifted away from the fire. When they were out of earshot, Auglar shook his head grimly. "I can't believe it. Fellrant is attacking his own people now?"

"It is said that an army travels on its belly," Londah remarked. She stood a little apart from them, staring out into the darkness of the forested night. Crickets chirped and frogs sang from the trees, oblivious to the troubles of either human or Aclyte. "Fellrant must provision them somehow. I imagine that, if the men of the village had not resisted, it would not have been destroyed."

"What they did was wrong!" Auglar objected.

"Did I say that it was not? It was merely expedient." Londah shrugged, a graceful ripple of shadow. "So everyone flees north. But Argannon must come south. I fear what will happen should we be caught in the middle."

"All the more reason to get to Kellsjard as quickly as we may," Buudi said, running a tired hand through his shaggy hair. "Gods, I wish we had horses. Right now, I'd take the most broken-down nags in the world and be glad for them."

"We have a stable full of fine horses," Auglar pointed out morosely. "Unfortunately, they're at the opposite end of our journey."

I wonder what happened to the ones we had to leave in Segg, Suchen thought. Unbidden, an image sprang to her mind of one horse in particular: Windshade, the huge black warhorse that had been Yozerf's only possession of any value.

Suchen stood up and wandered away from her friends, her arms wrapped around herself. Alone, she lingered in the dark by the stream, staring at the reflection of the moon through the trees.

Yozerf. All thoughts led back to him, it seemed. She closed her eyes and took a breath through a throat so constricted with grief that it seemed she must strangle. Gods, she had not thought that it would be possible to miss anyone so much. If Jahcgroth and Ax had cut out her living heart, she would not have mourned its loss as greatly.

There was nothing that did not evoke some memory of him, from the road they traveled, to the words of her friends. Most of the memories were good ones, she thought, but at times darker ones would come unbidden.

Such as the way in which they had parted.

Suchen bit her lip hard. Yozerf had always been so desperately in need of her love, of her approval, it seemed almost unbearable to contemplate that the last words she had spoken to him had been in anger. Afraid of her rejection, he had kept secret the fact that a ghost had been in his head since the previous fall. She had not realized that they had never been truly alone together; there had always been someone else watching, listening, and waiting. And when she finally found out, her sense of betrayal had been keen.

"Get out." That had been the last thing she ever said to him. *"Get out."*

"Why?" she whispered softly to no one. "Why did it have to be that way? Damn you, Yozerf! Why did you have to leave me?"

But of course there was no answer.

* * * *

The wolf hauled himself out of the den, stopped to shake dirt from his fur, and took a few steps across the leaf-thick ground. He had regained strength over the last few days, enough that he could at least walk a short distance before having to rest. The pain in his side was not as sharp as it had been, but it still stabbed cruelly at him with almost every step he took. His other injuries had died away to dull aches—constantly there, but no longer a handicap.

Owl had left their den, probably to find food. It occurred to the wolf that he should try hunting as well. A creek ran nearby; perhaps he could find some of the small things that haunted its banks. Feeling pleased with his decision, he wandered over to the brook, put down his head, and lapped up some of the cold, clear water. There were other footprints all along the sandy banks, and the scents of muskrat, raccoon, and deer were strong.

The sound of boots crunching on fallen leaves intruded over the gentle burble of the creek. The wolf lifted his head in alarm—the tread was too heavy to belong to Owl, and besides that, there were more than one set of feet making the noise. A moment later, the wind changed direction, and he smelled sweat, steel, and maleness.

His hackles rose, and he bared his teeth instinctively. Tucking in his tail, he slunk away, seeking somewhere deep amidst the reeds and bracken where he could watch without being seen. A mix of fear and anger raced through him—who were these humans, and why were they intruding on his territory?

As he watched from his hiding place, the wolf saw two men emerge from the wood. They were both dirty and bearded, their faces shielded by lank hair. Their clothing was mismatched, and some of it stank of old blood. One of the men carried a rusty knife in his hand, while the other had a small hatchet hanging

from his belt. In concert, they made their way towards the stream, and the wolf flattened down against the ground, not daring to move lest they glimpse him.

Then, just as they reached the water, Owl stepped out into the clearing near the stream. She had been fumbling with her pouch, oblivious to the fact that intruders had come to the glade, and although she froze as soon as she saw them, it was far too late.

One of the men smiled. "Well, well," he said, "what do we have here?"

The stink of terror came off Owl in waves. Her blue eyes went wide, and all the color drained from her face beneath its mask of dirt. She took an uncertain step back, then stopped again.

The man with the knife started towards her. "Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you." Behind him, his companion guffawed, giving the lie to the words.

Owl dropped her pouch and ran. But she was small and weak from hunger, while the men were strong and long legged. The knife-man snatched her off her feet and then howled furiously when she sank her teeth into his hand. Swearing, he flung her to the ground with stunning force. "Stupid little bitch!" he shouted, bending over her with the knife raised.

No!

The wolf exploded out of the bracken, ears flat against his head and a snarl erupting from his throat.

Pack mate! Cub!

Protect!

Before either man had the opportunity to turn around, the wolf's jaws closed hard on the wrist of the knife wielder. The man screamed, letting go of the knife so that it fell harmlessly to the ground. His arm tore free from the wolf's jaws.

The taste of blood was in the wolf's mouth, and rage pounded through his veins with every beat of his heart. Gathering himself, the wolf leapt, knocking the bleeding man to the ground. His jaws closed again, this time around the man's throat, and he felt the windpipe give beneath the pressure.

Loud screams made him let go and spin around, snarling. The second man stood behind him—no doubt he had been getting ready to bury his hatchet in the wolf's skull. But now he was clutching frantically at his leg, trying to hold in the blood that spurted out across the leaves. The knife that his friend had dropped stuck out of his thigh, buried to the hilt.

The wolf took him down fast. Within moments, silence had descended once again upon the forest.

The wolf raised his head from the second man's body and met Owl's gaze. She was sitting huddled on the ground, a look of terror still in her eyes, and it occurred to him that she had saved his life a second time, when she stabbed the hatchet-man.

A wave of dizziness passed over him, and he staggered. The pain in his side grew to blinding fire. Not certain what he was doing, the wolf turned away and stumbled over to the creek. Perhaps some water to wash the taste of human blood from his mouth and ease the agony in his side.

The shallow creek reflected his face back to him. But no ... something was not quite right ... this was not what he was used to seeing in mirrors.

...Mirrors...

He only had to...

The image in the water shimmered and changed. A man's face stared back at him out of large, canted gray eyes. Cheekbones flared prominently beneath skin that might have been bone-white beneath its layer of grime, and the whole tapered gracefully to a delicate, pointy chin. Blood-red hair, so unbelievably filthy and tangled that its color was almost lost altogether, hung down his back.

Yozerf blinked, then slowly turned his head and looked at Owl. She sat paralyzed, staring at him with huge eyes. He started to say something, to apologize ... but then dizziness and exhaustion swept over him and carried him down into darkness.

* * * *

"Please don't die ... please don't die ... please don't die ... please don't die..."

The first thing Yozerf became aware of was a soft whisper, which had the monotonous sound of words repeated so often that they have lost their meaning and become only a chant against the inevitable. The second was that he was lying on wet, uncomfortable ground that did nothing to ease any of the many pains in his body. And the third was that it had all come back to him.

He remembered again who he was, recalled the pathetic, useless story of his life. He had been in Segg again, after a long absence. There had been lords trying to kill his pack. And Suchen...

Suchen had discovered that he had lied to her, that he had not told her of the ghost in his head or the powers that it had awoken. She had sent him away from her.

She did not love him anymore.

The grief still felt fresh and raw, but he tried to struggle past it. Suchen, Auglar, and the Sworn had been captured, and Yozerf and Londah had gone to save them. They had almost escaped the palace, when Yozerf realized that they were being followed and that he was the only one with enough power to stop their pursuers while everyone else fled. So he had remained behind, walked back into the burning building, and...

Nothing. Memory ended there and did not resume until he found himself in the forest. Clearly he had been hurt badly in the ensuing fight. Somehow, he had cheated death, taken on wolf form, and gotten away from the city. How he had managed that ... what had become of his clothes and sword ... he did not know and probably never would.

What was equally clear was that Owl had saved his life; if not for their chance meeting and her pity on a dying animal, he would never have survived. But she had thought that she was rescuing a hurt wolf, not an Aclytese-Wolfkin half-breed. Not a shape changer, whom most people would consider little better than a demon.

Yozerf opened his eyes cautiously. The light had not changed much, so he could not have been unconscious for long. Something warm was tucked securely around him, and he realized that Owl must have covered him with one of the dead men's cloaks. The girl sat next to him, her arms wrapped around herself, rocking rhythmically back and forth, back and forth. Tears made lighter streaks through the grime on her young face, and she whispered to herself, over and over again: "Please don't die ... please don't die ... please don't die..."

No—she whispered to him.

Moving very slowly, so as not to frighten her, Yozerf pushed himself up on his elbows. The sharp pain in his side flared again, and he guessed that he had at least one broken rib that had not quite mended.

Seeing his movement, Owl spun—and flung her arms around his neck, almost knocking him down. “You’re alive!” she shrieked in his ear. “You’re alive, you’re alive!”

Surprised, he patted her awkwardly on her back. Gods, but she was thin; he could feel her shoulder blades sticking through the threadbare fabric of her dress. Maybe she was so desperate for an adult to take care of her that she didn’t even care if he was Wolfkin and an Aclyte.

“So it would seem,” he agreed. His voice was so rusty from disuse that the words came out as a croak.

She pulled back and wiped at the tears on her face, smearing dirt everywhere. “I thought you were dead. I thought those men had killed you.”

“No. Thanks to you,” he added.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you could turn into a man?” she asked accusingly, and he saw a flash of fire in her blue eyes that made him smile. So that’s what he was to her, then—a wolf that could turn into a man, not the other way around. Perhaps that was even true.

“I didn’t remember,” he said truthfully. “I was very sick. Thank you for making me well.”

She shrugged, and then glanced up shyly. “What’s your name?”

“What, Smoky isn’t good enough anymore?”

She giggled. “It doesn’t really fit you.”

“Oh. A shame. In that case, my name is Yozerf Jonaglir.” After a moment’s thought, he realized that “little owl” was obviously not her actual name. “And yours?”

To his surprise, she made a face. “Brunillia,” she muttered. “I hate it.”

He started to chuckle, then stopped when his mending ribs reminded him forcefully that laughing wasn’t a very good idea at the moment. “Well, then, what do you want to be called?”

She blinked at him out of huge eyes. “You mean ... I don’t have to go by Brunillia?”

“Not if you hate it. Pick something else.”

She frowned and absently scratched at a scab on her bare feet. “I don’t know. What do you think?”

“Well, I rather thought that you looked like an owl. Do you like that?”

Her face brightened and she nodded so eagerly that he thought she really must have detested “Brunillia.”

“Owl it is, then.” He hesitated, torn between asking what had to be painful questions and the desire not to upset her. “Owl ... what are you doing out here in the woods?”

Owl looked away from him. “Bad men came,” she said in a low voice. “They killed everybody. I ran away.”

He winced. Hopefully, she was wrong about everyone being dead. “Is your village near here?”

She nodded. “I guess.”

"Is there anywhere we can find shelter and food?"

Without speaking, she pointed at their den.

Yozerf sighed. "Anywhere else? Is there anything left in your village? A woodcutter's house? Anything?"

Owl hesitated, eyes darkening in fear. "There was a witch who lived outside the village," she whispered, as if just speaking about the witch would draw her near. "But we can't go there. She'll curse us, or kill us!"

"We may not have any choice." At her look of dismay, Yozerf put a hand to her thin shoulder. "Don't be afraid, Owl. I'll protect you from the witch."

Owl seemed dubious but willing to go with him. While she went to pick up her pouch and water skin, and collect her stick dolls from the den, Yozerf stripped everything useful he could find from the dead men. They had a little food—mostly hard, moldy bread and dried venison—a tinderbox, and their weapons. Both bandits had soiled their pants as they died, but their tunics were useable, if dirty, so Yozerf put one on. The cloak he knotted around his waist like a kilt; it would have to do until later. One pair of boots was far too small for him, but the other fit well enough, so he took them as well.

Owl was reluctant to leave the den, and he had to coax her to follow him away from it. To Yozerf's dismay, he was still weak and dizzy, and they had to stop often. He used the hatchet to cut down a small sapling, which he used as a staff to lean on. It helped a little, but still their progress was painfully slow. By the time they reached the little hut in the woods, the sun was already setting in a blood-red sky.

Owl stopped well away from the hut, staring at it in terror. Yozerf took a deep breath, sifting through the scents that came from it. Something large was rotting in the bushes nearby, and he had the uneasy suspicion that it was the so-called witch herself. Judging by how the stench of decay had started to fade, though, the scavengers and elements had already had time to work on the body.

"Stay here," he ordered. Owl crouched down by the nearest tree, staring fearfully at him, then at the hut, then back at him. "I'll be fine," he said, hoping that it was the truth, then started towards the darkened structure.

The hut had once probably been a sturdy building, but years and elements had begun the slow decline into shambles. The roof looked sound from the outside, despite its heavy covering of moss, but the wattle-and-daub walls were in bad need of patching. He approached slowly, using his nose and his ears to search for any sign that someone was currently inhabiting the house. Branches creaked in the wind, and the smell of rot momentarily grew stronger, but there was no indication that the hut was anything but abandoned.

Inside, it became clear that someone had looted the place. The crude wooden furniture had been smashed to bits, and the ashes of the hearth had been strewn everywhere. Sacks of grain lay ripped and torn, most of the food already carried off by mice. A few strands of drying herbs still hung from the ceiling, but even most of those had been torn down by whoever had despoiled the little hut. Yozerf pictured the old woman who had lived here—most likely not a witch, despite the tales of the local children—and the men who had destroyed her house and murdered her. A surge of rage went through him, and he closed his eyes against it.

By all the gods, what is happening? Who had destroyed this hut and Owl's village? Argannese soldiers? Jenelese? Or had they simply been bandits made bold by the chaos war had unleashed?

Is this the sign of things to come? An isolated event? Or, gods, something happening all over

Jenel?

And if the latter ... what has become of Suchen?

Yozerf bit his lip against a sudden stab of pain and fear. *Please let her be safe. Even though I'll never see her again ... just let her be safe.*

Owl did not want to come into the hut at first, and it took some time to convince her that the witch wasn't hiding in the shadows, waiting to jump out. They slowly cleared away some of the worst wreckage, under which they found a storage pit in the floor. The straw pallet, flung from the bed, had covered it and saved it from looting. Inside was a collection of dried fruits and vegetables, along with a smoked deer leg. Saying a silent thanks to the old woman, Yozerf distributed portions to Owl and himself and put the rest in Owl's pouch. After lighting a fire in the hearth with the tinderbox—he didn't want to scare Owl with his magic, especially not in a witch's hut—Yozerf excused himself and went to look for the body.

She was not far from her house. Fortunately, there was not enough left of her to tell exactly what her murderers had done to her. Yozerf dragged her remains out of the bracken to a clear spot and piled dry leaves and twigs all around her. Reaching deep into his mind, he called forth fire and set it to the makeshift pyre. Within minutes, the flames had all but consumed the pitiful remains.

Once that was done, Yozerf went back to the hut and began the laborious task of sorting through all that remained. One good finding was a stack of old clothes, needle and thread, and scissors. After telling Owl to hold still so he could measure her, Yozerf began to cut the fabric.

Silence settled over the little hut. The fire crackled merrily in its pit, the herb-scented smoke drifting up to the hole in the roof. Owl sat and watched him sew for a while, her eyes bright in her grimy face. The first thing for tomorrow, Yozerf decided, was for them both to bathe thoroughly. Between the two of them, they were probably carrying around half the forest on their skin and in their hair. *Not to mention the fleas.*

"Yozerf?" Owl asked uncertainly.

"Yes?" he glanced up from threading the needle and saw that she had turned away and was picking at the scab on her foot again.

"Are you an Aclyte?"

He grinned at the question. "Yes, little one, I am."

"Do you have any children?"

"No. I can't."

"Oh. Are you married?"

"No. Jenelese law says that Aclytes can't get married." He hesitated, wondering how much he should say. "There was someone I cared for very much, but I lost her."

"Oh." Owl licked her lips. "So ... you're alone, too?"

The grief of it was still almost too much to bear. He'd had everything he had ever wanted—a mate, a pack, a place to belong. He had thrown it all away. "That's right," he said softly. "But what about you, Owl? Your mother and father?"

"I didn't know my papa," Owl said matter-of-factly. She looked tiny and lost sitting there by the fire, and his heart ached for her. "Mama died two years ago. She got sick in the winter. Auntie took me in, but she already had five children. I don't think she liked me."

Yozerf winced. It was far from the worst tale he'd ever heard, but even so, he wished that she had not suffered. "I'm sorry, little Owl. I never knew my father, either."

"Oh." She wiped at her face with the back of her wrist. "Since we're both alone ... can I stay with you?"

The question was so tentative that it hurt to hear. Did she expect him to just leave her alone in the forest? But then, perhaps she did. She had been through so much loss in her few years that maybe she had come to expect it.

"Of course you may," he said gently. "Come here." He held his arm out, and she came and snuggled down in the crook. Before long, she fell asleep.

Looking down at her, Yozerf felt a sudden, great sadness. She had been clever and brave to survive the destruction of her home. He hoped, very badly, that she was wrong, and that her entire village had not been razed. She deserved to find someone still alive there, someone who would take care of her.

And if she isn't wrong? he asked himself. That she would have to come with him was obvious, at least until he could find a human family to take her in. But where would they go?

Kellsjard. It was the only answer he could think of. They might not welcome him back, not if Suchen and the rest told everyone the truth about his lies and deceptions. But they would not turn away an orphaned child, that much at least he knew. She would be safe there.

Getting there, though, would be another problem. He could hunt for them a little, but they would both be better off if they could find provisioning elsewhere. Not that they were likely to, given that they had no money at all, and Yozerf would have been wary of approaching human settlements, even with a pocket full of gold. An Aclyte with a human child in tow ... that was inviting disaster down on both their heads. He could easily imagine those who would kill him for the offense, then leave Owl alone to starve.

Before meeting Suchen and the Sworn, Yozerf had never been responsible for anyone but himself. Even Ginny, the friend of his youth, had for the most part taken care of him, not the other way around. But at least his former pack had all been adults and able to look after themselves; despite the resiliency she had shown in the forest, Owl was only a child and would depend almost totally on him for her needs.

And I can barely take care of myself, he thought ruefully. The task before him was daunting indeed.

Owl moaned softly and stirred in her sleep, haunted by what sort of nightmares, only the gods knew. Setting aside his sewing, Yozerf carried her to the mattress and settled her on it, drawing up the best blanket about her shoulders. She sighed a little and settled into quieter sleep. Deciding to leave his worries about the future until the morning, Yozerf made a nest for himself next to the fire and slid into his own troubled dreams.

Chapter Three

The next day, Yozerf and Owl made their way to her village. What its name was, Owl was unable to tell him; perhaps it had none.

Before leaving the hut, Yozerf had finished his task of making somewhat more-presentable clothing for them both. A black skirt provided material for breeks for himself, and the torn scraps of other clothing and blankets went to a pair of breeks and a rather badly made top for Owl. When he handed the breeks to her, she gave him an odd look.

"These are boy's clothes," she said disapprovingly.

He shrugged, chagrined. "It seemed easier and more practical, if we have to travel. Besides, my mother and my mate ... I mean my *friend*, wore breeks most of the time."

Before dressing, he made her go bathe in the nearby stream. The old woman had a supply of lavender soap that whoever had ransacked the hut had not deemed worth taking, and he gave it to Owl with strict orders not to come back with any dirt left on her. Although she complained bitterly of the cold water, she did as he told her.

As soon as she was done, he hid her in a dense stand of bushes and went down to the water himself. His hair was the worst of it; only after numerous applications of the soap did the mats and tangles finally start to come loose. The pain of his broken ribs did nothing to make scrubbing easier. Fading bruises covered much of his skin, and there was a half-healed gash on his right leg that he was lucky hadn't become gangrenous.

He had to make do with combing out his long hair with his fingers, and his clothing stuck uncomfortably to his damp skin. *But at least no one who might still be alive in the village will mistake us for wood sprites or wild men.*

Owl's footsteps grew slower and more reluctant as they approached the village, and she took his hand and clung to it tightly. The smell of old burning grew stronger on the air, accompanied once again by the stink of death. Yozerf's throat tightened, and he swallowed hard, realizing that he didn't particularly want to see what had happened in this place.

"Perhaps you should wait here," he suggested.

Owl's grip on his hand tightened hard. "No! I want to come with you!" she cried, looking up worriedly, as though afraid he would abandon her if given half the chance.

"Very well," he said, not liking the decision, but worried that leaving her behind, if only temporarily, might do even more harm.

The village had been tiny, consisting of perhaps six houses, a few communal animal pens, and some small fields. Now the houses were little more than blackened ruins, the pens were broken down and the animals gone, and weeds had started up in the fields. Yozerf's nose told him that there was at least one body in the fields, and probably more beneath the collapsed structures. So far as he could tell, no one living had been here since its destruction.

Damn it to Hel's embrace. Not that there had been much hope to begin with.

"Stay here," he told Owl, and went to one of the houses that still had two walls standing. As she watched from a distance, he sorted through the wreckage, pulling out anything he thought was salvageable. Once

he was done, he went to the rest of the ruins, repeating the process. More than once he discovered burned bodies under the wreckage, but he left them alone except to make certain they did not have anything on them that might prove vital to Owl and his survival. After hosting Telmonra in his head for so long, he had no fear of ghosts.

The pile of belongings he accumulated was pitifully small: a few pieces of clothing, much of it stained by soot; some dried grain and meat that had survived the burning and remained unspoiled; a wooden comb; and a mass of melted copper that might once have been a handful of coins. They would need more to survive, he thought uneasily, although where they would get it, he did not know.

"That was Auntie's house," whispered Owl, when he came back to her with his findings. She sat on the torn grass of what had been the village square, her arms wrapped about her thin body. He followed her gaze to what looked to have been the largest house. Only a wall and a few lone posts remained now.

"Is there anything you want me to look for?" he asked uncertainly. "A doll, perhaps?"

She shook her head and gave him a desperate look. "I didn't want her to die."

Sensing her disturbance, he sat down by her, lowering himself carefully so as not to aggravate the pain of his broken ribs. After hours of climbing about in the sooty, treacherous ruins, all the aches of his body had returned with a vengeance, and he thought that he could have lain down and slept for the next three days. "I know you didn't."

"But I thought it," she whispered, and tears suddenly filled her eyes. "She was mean to me, and I wished she would die, but I didn't mean it! I didn't!"

Startled, he put his arm around her. She buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing as if she would never stop. "This wasn't your fault," he whispered fiercely. "Do you hear me, Owl? This was *not* your fault!"

After a while, her sobs slowed. He sat and rocked her back and forth, stroking her tangled hair. When she finally eased away, she looked a mess. Soot from the ruins had blackened his tunic and was now liberally swirled across her face. With a mental sigh for the futility of trying to keep either of them clean, Yozerf wiped her nose with a scrap of cloth. "We have to leave," he said, wondering how best to tell her. "There's nothing left for anyone here."

"Will we go back to the forest?" she asked in a small voice.

"No. There's a place I know—a wonderful castle far to the north of here. It's called Kellsjard. We'll go there."

Owl brightened a little at the prospect of going somewhere with other people. Yozerf quickly sorted through his meager findings until he had separated them out into two bundles, a smaller one for Owl and a larger for himself. Then, taking Owl's hand, he led her away from the only life she had ever known.

* * * *

"How long have we been on the road?" Brenwulf asked as they trudged along the hot track. Spring was fading fast into early summer, and as the sun gained strength, they all found themselves sweating beneath their heavy layers of clothes.

The road before them led to Rhiacht, the last large city before they reached the vast open plains of the Kellsmarch. Evidence that other refugees had come this way before them was plentiful. Discarded pieces of clothing, a child's toy, human waste, and scraps of food cluttered the track. The air stank of unwashed bodies and other filth.

"I don't know. A few weeks," Auglar said. They had all lost track of the days, Suchen realized. Not that it mattered much; they were moving as quickly as they could, given their circumstances, and knowing the day would not change anything.

But even so, spring must be far along, she thought. She looked around at the road, deserted except for themselves and others made homeless by war. Oddly, she felt as if she were noticing their surroundings for the first time, as if she had been walking through a fog ever since they left Segg. "There should be caravans passing by," she said. "It's well into the season, but I haven't seen any merchants on the road, unless you count the tinkers and a few small peddlers."

"Maybe they know to stay home," Buudi suggested.

"Or all their wares have been 'requisitioned' by the army," Londah added grimly. She shaded her eyes with one long, pale hand. "Is that Rhiaht?"

Over the next few miles, the gray smudge on the horizon did indeed resolve itself into a city—but not the city that Suchen recalled from her previous travels. She remembered Rhiaht as an orderly place where the fields and orchards flourished right up to the gates. Now, however, a huge shantytown had sprung up outside the city walls, covering the fertile land with acres of shacks and lean-tos. The orchards had been chopped down for firewood, and a pall of smoke hung over everything. The scents of cooking food, burning wood, waste, and raw earth could be smelled long before they reached the first few straggling huts.

The land to either side of the road was clotted with humanity. Women cooked over open fires, beggars implored alms of everyone passing by, and children chased one another or sat in the mud and cried. A few enterprising individuals had set up rough stands and were trying to sell everything from food to patchwork clothing. One or two guards in Rhiaht's livery wandered throughout, but it was clear that any real attempts at keeping order in the shantytown had been abandoned.

Brenwulf stopped in his tracks, his face paling. "We can't stay here."

Auglar sighed, and Suchen knew that he was disappointed in what they had found. No doubt he had hoped to find shelter for them within the city itself, but even from a distance, they could see the contingent of guards keeping out all the homeless wanderers who had collected there. "It's too late to go farther," he pointed out wearily. "At least here we can find food and possibly shelter."

Brenwulf's nostrils flared, and Suchen saw a tremor go through him. Wolfkin instincts making themselves known, no doubt. She didn't blame him—she would have preferred to put as much distance between them and the shantytown as possible. But she followed Auglar deeper into the maze of shacks and cook fires, unable to summon the will to argue.

They bought bread from an old man, who directed them to a woman who rented sleeping space in her collection of tents for one jentarii a night. That wasn't the only thing she rented, Suchen soon learned—in addition to being a hostel, the handful of shabby tents also acted as the largest brothel in the camp. Thin women in faded and patched dresses streamed in and out of the tents, accompanied by hard-bitten men who had been on the road too long to care how pretty or clean their companions were.

After buying a few scraps of wood, which was perhaps the most precious commodity in the camp at the moment, they started a small fire in front of their designated tent. The sun slipped gently below the horizon, but the din of human voices did not die away. People laughed, screamed, argued, and wept in a constant cacophony that put Suchen's nerves on edge. Then someone nearby began to sing a love song, and she wished that the rest of the voices were loud enough to drown out the melody.

Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf left briefly, hoping once again to hear whatever news they could. Suchen and Londah sat before the fire, watching the precious wood burn down to ash. After a while, Londah reached out and stirred the coals with a twig. Sparks flew up, briefly illuminating her beautiful, alien face beneath the shadowing hood.

"You have become a ghost, haunting your own life," she said unexpectedly.

Suchen glanced up, then away, unable to stare into those piercing gray eyes. "Maybe I am a ghost," she replied softly. "I think I died there in Segg. It's just that my corpse hasn't realized it quite yet."

Londah bowed her head so that the shadows closed over her face. "I miss him as well, daughter," she said at last, and only the catch in her voice betrayed her tears. "There is nothing in this world harder than the death of one's child."

Suchen closed her eyes, not certain that she could bear Londah's grief as well as her own. "I understand that. But ... Yozerf was a part of me, too. I just ... I can't..." She trailed off and shook her head. "Some days it doesn't seem like I can go on. The next moment is too hard to live through. But I do. And the one after that. And the one after that. And I hate every last one of them."

Londah nodded. "I ask myself if I was foolish to tell him that you were captured by the lords. But then I realize that he would have found out anyway, would have gone to rescue you, and it would have ended the same."

Suchen considered the fact that Londah would have sacrificed them all for Yozerf, but could not find the energy to resent it. That was Londah's nature, after all. She did not care that Auglar was a lord, nor that he might have been king. Hel, she probably wished that she had let them all be slaughtered in the coup led by the southern lords.

"You must live," Londah went on, looking up and trying to catch Suchen's gaze. "Yozerf would not have wanted this living death for you. Grieve for him, yes, but come back to the rest of us. No matter what it feels like, you are still alive."

Suchen shook her head, feeling numb. "I can't."

Londah made no verbal reply, only reached over and laid one hand on Suchen's arm. They sat together in silence, like two statues made of ice, lost in their own bleak thoughts until the men came back.

* * * *

The sound of furtive movement woke Suchen in the depths of the night. She lifted her head groggily, but the interior of the tent was utterly lightless, and she couldn't even make out the shapes of her companions lying crammed up against her. Just as she began to think that nothing more than an unremembered dream had woken her, the sound of fingers on the tent lacings came again, and she realized that someone was trying to get inside.

Very slowly, a sliver of faint light appeared at the front of the tent. It grew bigger and bigger, until Suchen got a brief glimpse of a man-shaped shadow on the other side.

There came a soft *thunk*. The man jerked back, hands going for his throat ... then toppled over on his side.

"Murth?" a worried male voice whispered. "You all ri—"

Something brushed past Suchen's face, and Auglar let out a loud oath. The light coming in was momentarily blocked—then a second body fell to join the first, one of Londah's throwing daggers in his

eye.

A third man let out a yell of fright and anger. Suchen shoved her way over and around her companions, burst out of the tent, and drew her sword. A confusion of staggering bodies and swirling cloaks met her gaze. A dagger caught a faint gleam of light from the moon, and Suchen struck out blindly, her sword meeting flesh with a satisfying thud. Then the men emerged from the tent, and the night was filled with screams and shouts.

How many assailants there originally were, Suchen did not know. Most likely no more than four, petty thieves all, who would slit the throats of the unwary and steal their coin. But everyone in the makeshift settlement was on edge, and within a few moments it seemed that half the camp was involved in the brawl, while the other half fled screaming. The night was filled with running bodies and struggling men. Shocked by the sudden outburst of violence, Suchen fell back with her friends, stabbing at anyone who came at her with a weapon.

Tents collapsed around them as looters snatched whatever they could. Fire rushed up in a sudden burst as someone set a torch to one of the rickety shacks. A woman screamed, but the sound died off into a wet gurgle. Madness and panic seemed to have gripped everyone in the settlement.

The guards we saw earlier—they'll put a stop to this. But no guards appeared.

"Come." Londah grabbed Suchen's wrist and pulled her away from the fighting, towards the periphery of the camp. Their companions hurried after, doing their best not to be caught up in a fight, although at times it was impossible. They made their way through chaos, Londah's sword cutting a path through for them without regard to who stood in their way. Just as it seemed that they would never find the end of the camp, they emerged from the last rank of ramshackle shanties.

As soon as they were clear, Londah broke into a run, and the rest followed. They kept going until their strength ran out, and eventually collapsed in the lee of a small hill that had once been covered with trees, but now bore only stumps. The smell of sap and fresh-split wood was heavy in the night air. In the distance, fire flared, illuminating the walls of Rhiaht.

"The gods save us," Brenwulf whispered, staring back at the destruction. "What happened?"

"Too many people, too little food, too little space," Londah replied. She rose to her feet and scanned the horizon briefly.

"I feel as though we should have done something to stop it," Auglar said unhappily. His blue eyes were fixed on the leaping flames and the silhouettes that ran about in front of them. "What, I don't know. But something."

"Tend to your own skin, first," Londah advised.

No one was able to sleep after that. They sat and watched the destruction until the sun began to rise. At that point, it seemed that the burghers of Rhiaht had endured enough. The gates swung open, and a flood of guards issued forth. A few minutes later, people began to flee again. Whether the guards were making arrests, enforcing order, or simply killing everyone they found, Suchen didn't know and couldn't guess.

"Jenel is dying," Auglar said softly.

Suchen looked at him in surprise. The sunrise touched his face with gold, gleaming off the tears that silently tracked his worn cheeks.

Buudi put a sturdy hand to Auglar's shoulder. "It isn't dead yet, my lord."

"What am I going to do? How am I to put a stop to this?"

"Worry about staying alive, first," Londah said, coming down off the hill crest where she had been scouting the land around them. "Parts of the Kellsmarch were lawless even in the best of times, if I recall correctly. It will not be easy crossing it now."

Auglar looked up, half hopefully. "You know the Kellsmarch, then?"

But Londah shook her head. "No. I was born there, yes, in a little village so small that it didn't even have a name. I left when I was eighteen and have not been back since."

"There are a few packs of Wolfkin on the plains," Brenwulf said uncertainly. "Perhaps they will help us."

"If they can."

There was no point in further discussion. They gathered up their meager belongings and set out. Once past Rhiaht, the hilly land ended abruptly in the flat expanse of the Kellsmarch. League upon league of windswept grass unfolded about them as far as the eye could see. Small mammals scurried through the grass, and hawks hunted overhead. The last of the spring wildflowers still decorated the grasslands, but they were slowly fading and dying away as summer came on.

Somewhere on the other side of this vast expanse lay Kellsjard and safety. But as they set out, on foot and with little in the way of food or money, Suchen wondered whether any of them would ever know safety again.

Chapter Four

Yozerf and Owl made only slow progress. Yozerf's side pained him frequently, and his long recuperation had left him weak, so he was forced to lean on the rough staff he had shaped in order to walk any distance. They did most of their traveling at night, so as to avoid the eyes of any others who might be wandering the woods. By day, they holed up anywhere that offered them concealment: in the depths of thorn brakes, underneath thick bushes, in unoccupied animal dens. Owl's eyes were not as good as his in the dark, so much of the time he led her by the hand. Twilight and dawn, when the sunlight was strong enough for her to see, they spent foraging for food. Fortunately, they both had a good idea of what could be safely eaten, and were able to ease their hunger considerably.

Thank the gods it is summer, Yozerf thought more than once. Had it been winter or even very early spring, they both would have died in the den. The state of the flowers and berries let him guess that the season was still young, but the truth was that he did not know how long he had lain drifting between a half-aware fog and total unconsciousness.

I wonder if Suchen and the rest have made it back to Kellsjard yet? It is a long way to walk, but perhaps they found horses. Either way, at the rate Owl and I are going, they will make the keep long before we do. I hope that Suchen will not be too unhappy to see me.

Gods, but he missed her. During the day, when Owl was asleep and there was nothing else to distract his tired thoughts, he lay awake and asked himself over and over how he could have been so foolish as to throw away Suchen's love. Deep in his heart, he had never believed that he deserved to be loved, and so he had hidden things from her. He realized now that he had been afraid, not so much that she would learn the truth about Telmonra, as that she would learn the truth about *him*. That he was unworthy, unlovable.

He should have trusted her. He had betrayed her by not believing in her strength, in her love. So he had lost her, and the pain in him sometimes seemed so great that he wanted to lie down and give up. He had no mate, no pack, and the wolf in him howled his grief to the moon.

Ultimately, it was Owl that kept him going. Although his responsibility for her frightened him, still, she was the one unexpected bright light that had come from the ruin of his life.

Owl didn't mind their slow pace, or perhaps didn't notice it. Although still weak from her own deprivations, she spent much of the time running and playing, at least when there was enough moonlight for her to do so. She invented games to pass the time, wherein one of them would pick an object from the landscape and the other would try to guess what it was. They found pictures in the stars, examined odd stones, and made up stories. She was a smart, rambunctious, and altogether exhausting child.

During this time, Yozerf kept them well away from the roads and any settlements. His natural distrust of humans would have caused him to do this anyway, but coupled with that was the fear that he would not be able to protect Owl in his current weakened state. Nevertheless, at one point the rough terrain forced them far closer to the road than he liked.

As they walked through the light forest, their feet making little sound on the leaves, Yozerf caught the whiff of a cook fire. He stopped immediately, and Owl froze as well, like a fawn that knows to keep still when its parent pauses. Tilting his head back, Yozerf sifted through the scents that came on the strengthening breeze: roasting meat, unwashed bodies, and burning wood.

"There is a camp nearby," he said softly.

Owl looked at him uncertainly. "Should we see who they are?"

He hesitated, and then nodded. Although unlikely, he couldn't simply pass up the chance that there might be help for them in the camp. A human family, perhaps, who would look kindly on Owl. The travelers might even be Aclytes. "But we go very slowly, and quietly as rabbits."

She nodded and followed, walking in his footsteps as best she could. Yozerf moved slowly, all his senses alert for any sign of danger, in case the group ahead of them had posted guards in the surrounding area. But as it was, they saw no one until they were almost atop the camp itself.

The small cluster of humans was in a low dell out of the wind. A thicket on one side provided the opportunity to slide in close and observe them unseen, so Yozerf and Owl both lay down and wiggled on their bellies until they could peer over the lip of the dell. The light of a flickering fire showed them six men and one woman, along with two horses. The woman was busy turning a rabbit on a spit above the flames. Her clothing was filthy and ragged, and one eye was swollen shut from a bruise. The men were equally tattered, their features hidden under beards. They had a hard-bitten look about them, and all of them were armed.

Unease prickled in Yozerf's belly. *Bandits*, he thought. Previously, the lords had kept these woods clean of such outlaws—as Yozerf well knew, having been chased by bandit catchers himself in the past. But apparently something had happened to change things.

Perhaps things are even worse in Jenel than I suspected.

For a moment, he considered making an attempt to steal the horses. But a quick glance at Owl told him that the risk was too great. Signaling to her, he began backing out of their hiding place again. As soon as they were both free of the thicket, they headed away as quickly and quietly as they could.

"They were bad men?" Owl asked once they were well clear of the bandit camp. Her blue eyes were large in her face, and he could see the fear in them.

"Yes."

She nodded. "Can I have a horse?"

This complete change of topic startled him, although he should have been used to her sudden conversational shifts by now. "A horse?"

"Uh huh. Like the horses back there. Can I have one?"

"Why, yes, Owl, I've been carrying one in my pocket for just such an occasion."

"No, silly! But if we do find one. Or maybe when we get to Kellsjard?" She looked at him hopefully, as if he had the power to grant such wishes.

"We'll see." When her lower lip stuck out, he reached over and ruffled her coppery hair. "I used to have a horse. His name was Windshade."

"Really?" Her eyes practically glowed at the wonder of it. "What happened to him?"

"I lost him."

"Oh. Do you miss him?"

"Very much," Yozerf replied honestly. His memories of what had happened at the palace, when he turned back to face Jahcgroth and let his friends escape, had not returned. So he had no idea if he had

made an attempt to get the horse and failed or had been so hurt that it had not even occurred to him to do anything but flee on his own feet. He could only hope that whoever had Windshade now was a good master.

After a few minutes, Owl skipped ahead so that she could hide in a bush and throw a pinecone at him as he passed. He threw one back at her, and after a few minutes of pelting one another she was laughing and running as if she hadn't a care in the world. But Yozerf's eyes followed her, and he considered what might have happened if they had come across the bandits unaware.

As dawn broke, they made their own camp inside a huge hollow log, which was all that remained of what must have been a truly giant tree. Owl stripped away some of the bark and was delighted to find a number of bugs underneath that curled into balls at her touch. She showed them to Yozerf every time she uncovered a new one. Apparently, the fact that they all looked exactly the same did nothing to dim her wonder.

Supper consisted largely of roots and berries, and Yozerf began to consider taking wolf form to hunt. His side had been healing rapidly over the last few days, going from acutely painful to a dull ache accompanied by abominable itching. The other injuries he had suffered had mostly healed as well, so he should be able to move fairly freely, at least enough to catch some small things for them to eat.

After they were done, Yozerf took out the wooden comb that they had scavenged from Owl's village and set about straightening her hair out with it. Working out the leaves, small twigs, and tangles that accumulated throughout the night's walk had become a soothing ritual for them both.

"I would like to teach you something," Yozerf said, as he finished braiding her hair in a futile attempt to impose some kind of order on it. "I want to show you how to defend yourself, in case we meet up with another group like we saw today."

She turned to face him, her expression uncommonly serious. "All right."

"I'll do my best to protect you, you know that. But if a fight starts, I want you to run, understand me? Run as fast and as far as you can."

"But what about you?"

"I can look after myself."

"If I had run off when those two men attacked us at the den, that one would have chopped your head off!"

Because he couldn't argue with that, Yozerf settled for frowning sternly. "Listen to me, Owl. We were both very lucky that day—that's all. Understand me?"

He could tell that she didn't want to believe him, but she nodded.

"So if I tell you to run, then you will run. I will not have any arguments from you on this. Yes?"

"Yes," she mumbled resentfully.

Yozerf sighed. Gods save him, he had found another female who wanted to fight. Londah would adore her.

If, he reminded himself sharply, he intended to keep Owl with him. But of course he didn't.

"But if—and *only if*—you can't get away, I want you to know what to do to protect yourself." He slid the knife that he had taken from the dead man out of his belt. "You used this once before, and fortune was with you. Do you want to learn how to use it with intent?"

She nodded eagerly, and a bright smile bloomed on her face. "Are you going to teach me to be a great fighter like you?"

He blinked at her in astonishment. "What makes you think that I'm a great fighter?"

She rolled her eyes, apparently annoyed by his obtuseness. "Because you're big and strong, and you killed those men and saved me."

Slender criteria indeed. "Well, you're too young for that. Perhaps in a few years. What I am going to show you is a last-ditch effort."

Although Owl seemed to accept his pronouncement, he had the feeling that they would be reliving the argument soon. They crawled out of the log to take advantage of the early light, and Yozerf showed her how to hold the knife properly. Then, after arming her with a stick to practice with, he demonstrated where to strike. Because of her small height, most of what he showed her consisted only of simple up-thrusts to the belly or groin. She took to them gleefully, and he thought wryly that maybe she *would* become a great warrior some day.

Although, if she did, it would be under someone else's tutelage, he reminded himself. Would anyone at Kellsjard respect her desire to learn such things? If she had been a boy, perhaps they might have. But as it was, if the servants raised her, then all she could look forward to was becoming a chambermaid, or a cook, or perhaps marrying some peasant farmer. But a warrior's life would never be hers.

Suchen will help her, he told himself, refusing to consider that Suchen might not have made it out of Segg alive. Suchen was strong and resourceful; she would have survived. And she would do what she could for Owl, even if it were Yozerf making the request. She was too honorable to let her anger towards him hurt an innocent.

But even so, he worried as they settled to sleep that morning. Owl's nightmares had gradually begun to subside as they traveled, and today she slept peacefully, curled into a little ball at his side. Yozerf watched over her, his sharp eyes picking out her form easily in the dimness of the hollow log. She was so small, so vulnerable; he wanted desperately to protect her from all the evil things in the world.

What sort of future lay in store for her? Her intelligence would be wasted in a menial position, but there was no mistaking the peasant drawl when she spoke, and that alone limited her possibilities. Of course, Sifya, Auglar's wife, had risen from peasant status to marry a lord. But in that case, it was her husband's position that gained her the respect of others, not any of her own merit. He didn't want that for Owl.

It isn't my decision. Whoever adopted Owl would be responsible for her, not he. Anyway, what did he know about raising a child? His own childhood had been irreparably shattered by the abuse and degradation that he had survived on the streets, and he had long ago accepted his sterility and put aside all thoughts of children. No doubt someone else would know what was best for Owl, far more than he could. He wasn't even human, for the gods' sakes—who was he to contemplate the future of one of them?

But, despite all the arguments to the contrary, his concern did not leave him.

* * * *

Suchen trudged wearily up the wide, paved roadbed of the Great Trade Route. The sun beat on her head

mercilessly, but at least her short-shorn hair was off her neck, giving the incessant wind that scoured the plains access to her sweaty skin. Londah walked beside her, giving no sign of fatigue or discomfort, and for a moment Suchen felt a sharp stab of envy.

Once past Rhiaht, they had joined an informal convoy of refugees making their way north. For the most part, these were people with families, although solitary widows, youths, and maidens were also present. At first the others had been wary of them, but when they did nothing threatening, hostility gradually relaxed into grudging acceptance. Even so, they kept to themselves.

Everyone's spirits had risen once they were out on the plains. Even though they still had far to go, the landscape had become one that spoke of home. Auglar smiled and talked more often, and a gleam of hope returned to his eyes.

"Sifya will have had the baby by now," he said. His face looked eager beneath its growth of beard. "I can't wait to hold it! I wonder if it's a boy or a girl?"

"Sifya will be glad to see you," Buudi said with a smile.

Auglar's face fell a little. "Do you think she has any idea what happened? That the southern lords tried to kill us? Surely Fellrant would have sent a messenger to all the demesnes declaring himself king ... wouldn't he? Do you think she might believe me ... dead?"

"She wouldn't believe it, not unless they brought your corpse with them," Brenwulf said fiercely. His restless eyes scanned the Kellsmarch around them, as if looking for prey. Although he had ranged out from the group under the cover of night, he had not yet found any sign of other Wolfkin.

A little of the worry disappeared from Auglar's eyes at that. "Yes. You're right, of course. Still, she must be concerned. I hope it hasn't affected the baby."

Buudi put one rough hand to Auglar's shoulder. "I'm sure that everything is fine."

Out of the corner of her eye, Suchen saw Londah grimace slightly. As soon as she had the opportunity to do so without notice, Suchen indicated that she wanted to talk, and the two women moved slightly ahead of the men. "You're not so certain that everything is all right," Suchen said.

Londah's exquisite mouth tightened slightly. She still wore her hood up, using it now to shade her pale skin against the sun, but her gray eyes gleamed like ice chips beneath it. "Such assumptions are seldom founded in reality."

"There's more to it than that."

"Perhaps. I cannot help but think what I would do, if I were Jahcgroth." Londah smiled grimly. "He is, after all, my kinsman. The only one I have left."

A little chill went through Suchen. She didn't believe that Londah would ever betray them ... would she?

I didn't think Dara-Don would betray us, either. Or Peddock.

"At any rate," Londah went on, "I would take advantage of the confusion now set loose in Jenel. There is some fighting in the south, yes, around Segg. But I would also bring my forces down from the north. Fellrant is away, leaving Vorslava without a lord, and Auglar is here, leaving Kellsjard also without its lord. In Kellsjard, at least, there will be confusion as to Auglar's fate. And from what Yozerf told me, I would not put it past Auglar's thanes to take advantage of that, further splitting the demesne. To Jahcgroth, the Kellsmarch must look like an apple, ripe for the eating."

Suchen considered Londah's words carefully. "But there is still the matter of Maak and Shalai. Jahcgroth showed us his power to move soldiers by magic in Segg ... but I can't believe that even he could simply transport his entire army wherever he wanted them to go. He would still have to come through the rest of the Circle Kingdoms to reach Jenel."

"Assuming, of course, that the circle is unbroken. But it was broken long ago, when Jenel betrayed Caden, was it not? Will Shalai and Maak stand fast? Or will they give away Jenel to save their own lands? Jahcgroth is a master of manipulation, as we have seen from his dealings with the council and with Lord Jehnav." Londah shook her head, her long hair rustling inside her cloak hood. "No, I do not believe that 'everything is fine.'"

"Do you think we should mention this to Auglar?"

"To what end? We cannot do anything to influence events at the moment, only..." Londah trailed off, her gaze lost on the horizon and a frown marring her beautiful, inhuman face. "Riders."

Startled, Suchen looked as well and saw a dust cloud on the horizon. It rapidly approached, growing larger and larger, until she could make out about a dozen men on horseback. All of them wore heavy armor, as well as tabards in the purple-and-black of King Fellrant.

Suchen's empty stomach tightened, and she dropped back near Auglar. As the soldiers rode slowly up to the line of refugees, she desperately scanned for familiar faces, praying that there was no one who might recognize Auglar. If they were discovered by Fellrant's men, she had no doubt that things would not go well for them. A quick death would be the best they could hope for.

The soldiers quickly outpaced the column of walkers, then reined in their horses to block the road in a loose, almost casual array. The refugees at the head of the line came to a halt, and the rest straggled up behind them, until the entire group was in a bunch. Silence fell, broken only by the sound of a woman calling for her children, who had raced each other out of her sight.

The captain of the contingent of soldiers shifted slightly in his saddle. "Now, listen up!" he called, his booming voice easily carrying over the motley crowd. "By order of King Fellrant, all able-bodied men of age are to be conscripted into the army. We've come to bring you in. Do as you're told, and there won't be any trouble."

"And if we don't?" asked a young man near the head of the column. He stood with one arm protectively around his equally young wife, while their children huddled close to his legs. Suchen wondered if he was brave or merely a fool.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "The only reason anyone could have for not joining the army is because he is a traitor," he proclaimed, "and all traitors must die by order of the king."

Shock robbed everyone of speech. The soldier nodded, mistaking silence for agreement, and motioned sharply with one gloved hand. At the gesture, his subordinates moved forward, pulling the nearest men from the crowd with the efficiency of dogs cutting sheep from a herd.

"Damn it," Buudi whispered, his hand sliding to the hilt of his sword.

"No!" shouted the young man who had first spoken up. He wrenched his arm from the grasp of a soldier. "My wife and children need me! Who will protect them if I'm not here? Where will they go? How will they get food? You can't make me leave them!"

The captain cast an appraising eye on the family from where he waited on horseback. "Take the woman,

as well. We need more women to keep the soldiers happy. Leave the brats."

The wife's screams joined her husband's imprecations, accompanied by the terrified wails of children as the soldiers tried to separate them from their parents. Within moments, the panic had spread throughout the crowd. People were screaming, running, or even fighting back against the soldiers, as overwhelming as the odds seemed.

Auglar drew his sword, his face grim, and looked as if he would have started into the melee himself. But Buudi grabbed the young lord's wrist, forcing it down. "We can't fight them. We have to take this chance and run!"

"No! I'm sick of running," Auglar snarled, and Suchen could see all the long weeks of pain and fear in his eyes. "We can't let these people be treated like this!"

Londah materialized beside him like a gigantic black raven. "We cannot help them," she said calmly, as if they discussed nothing more pressing than the weather. "Your first is right—we must flee while we still may."

Auglar hesitated, and Suchen half hoped that he wouldn't listen. Her own sword was heavy in her hand, although she couldn't remember drawing it, and she suddenly realized how good it would feel to fight back. To draw blood. To make someone—anyone—pay for everything that had happened over the last few weeks.

Auglar swore furiously and slammed his blade back into its sheath. Buudi clapped him on the arm and then began to force a way free of the struggling, terrified crowd.

The little group of refugees had disintegrated into a maelstrom of terror and blood. Suchen caught a glimpse of a young woman being hauled away by a soldier; her elderly father lay on the ground, blood oozing from his mouth and nose. A shrieking toddler fell beneath the iron-shod hooves of a warhorse. A small cart that had held its owner's only possessions was overturned, its contents torn apart and scattered. A goat was hefted up and carried off for the soldiers' cook pots. A peasant man beat ineffectively at a warrior with his walking stick, until the soldier finally tired of the sport and killed him.

As soon as they were beyond the main body of the fray, Londah broke into a loping run, forcing the rest to follow. Others were fleeing also, mostly young women and children. Uneven tussocks of grass and the unexpected holes of burrowing animals made the ground treacherous away from the road, and Buudi tripped and almost fell. Suchen grabbed his arm, hauling him after her until he regained his footing, and he flashed her a grim smile in thanks.

The sound of hooves drumming against the ground grew loud, and Suchen chanced a look back over her shoulder. One of the mounted soldiers raced behind them, his charger making nothing of the distance they had covered. She swore, dove aside as he drew abreast, and brought her sword around in an arc. The blade bit into flesh, jarred satisfyingly against bone, and was almost torn from her hands by the rider's momentum. The soldier screamed, clutching wildly at the huge wound in his thigh. Blood pumped out between his fingers, and Suchen knew that he would bleed to death in a matter of minutes. If she could just grab the reins of his horse...

But luck was not with her this time. Somehow, the dying soldier managed to jerk the charger's head around, sending them both back towards the struggle on the road. Suchen swore furiously, and for a moment had the mad idea of chasing after him. But Londah's hand closed over her arm, her slender fingers as hard and strong as iron.

"Good work, daughter," Londah said mildly, even as she pulled Suchen after her. After a few paces,

Suchen reluctantly picked up speed, and Londah released her.

No one else came after them, for which Suchen was profoundly grateful. No doubt the soldiers had enough helpless refugees to occupy them for the nonce. Unmolested, the little group ran until the breath burned in their lungs and their legs felt on fire. At last, worn out by too little food and too much exertion, they collapsed in the lee of a clump of gnarled, wind-stunted trees. As the sun began to set, their breathing returned to normal, and Suchen's heart no longer dinned in her ears. The constant wind grew stronger, moaning through the trees like a lost lover.

"I hate this," Auglar said at last. He lay on his back, his blue eyes staring blankly at the sky as the first stars came out. "I feel like a coward. We shouldn't have run. We should have been able to do something. We should have been able to stop what happened."

"Five of us against a contingent of soldiers?" Londah asked. She was the least winded of them all and sat crouched atop a low, flat stone that bore the traces of ancient campfires. Her cloak lifted in the rising breeze, spreading out behind her like black wings.

"We couldn't have won—I know that. In my head, at least." Auglar sighed. "But my heart tells me that just running away was the wrong thing to do."

"Do you think they truly meant to leave the children abandoned?" Brenwulf asked uneasily. His head swung up and his nostrils flared; then, apparently reassured by the story the wind told him, he relaxed again.

"Yes," Auglar replied flatly.

Silence fell after that, and Suchen found herself wondering what the final outcome of the little battle had been. That the soldiers would have triumphed seemed beyond dispute. But would they have left any men behind to help with the convoy of refugees? Or would they have simply taken all the healthy young men and attractive women, and left behind a group of children and elders to fend for themselves? They had not been above stealing what little the refugees had—even if the soldiers had shown some mercy and let families stay together, what would they eat?

"If only there were something we could do," she said quietly, later that night. She and Londah took the first watch, while the others lay down to cold ground and empty stomachs. "I don't like this feeling of being helpless, of watching others suffer. I wish I could do something to change things." She laughed sadly. "Yozerf would no doubt tell me that I am being a fool. He used to call us idealists, and he didn't mean it as a compliment."

Londah sat unmoving for so long that Suchen didn't think the other woman would respond. But at last she shifted slightly, so that the light of the rising moon found its way under the edge of her hood to illuminate her beautiful, pale features. "Yozerf might have said that you were a fool," she said slowly, as if choosing every word with the care of a jeweler searching for the most flawless gemstones. "But the remark would no doubt have been aimed at himself as well. Yozerf would have cared very deeply about what happened today. He hated injustice of any kind, but particularly when the strong, the powerful, abused those weaker than themselves."

"Yes. He did." Suchen sighed and wrapped her arms around her knees, as if to keep the void inside from growing. "I'd give anything to have him with us now. Anything."

Londah made no reply to that. Perhaps, given the impossibility of Suchen's wish, there was no reply to give.

Chapter Five

The wolf pounced, both forefeet coming down hard on the ground just outside the tiny burrow he had been watching for the last while. A little squeak came from under his paws, and he felt a small body squirming frantically against his thick pads. Tongue lolling triumphantly, he snatched the creature up in his jaws, crunched once or twice, then swallowed it down.

"You got it!" Owl burst out of the underbrush and ran over to him. "Can you teach me to do that?"

Silly cub, he thought, and licked her face. She squealed and shoved him away. "Ugh! Mouse breath!"

A moment later she was running off, their packs flapping on her back and her hair glinting in the first rays of sunlight streaming between the trees. The wolf snorted and followed at a more leisurely pace. It was a good thing he'd already caught them a rabbit for supper, given that Owl was probably scaring away every animal for leagues with her racket.

Birds sang from the trees, waking their neighbors to the new day. The air was filled with the smell of herbs, new leaves, and earth damp with dew. They had both steadily regained their strength over the last week, and the wolf felt keenly the movement of his muscles and skin as he trotted after her. Although he was starting to doubt that he would ever completely lose the pain in his side, it had dulled to a faint ache that he noticed only occasionally. As for the rest of his wounds, they were no more than a few extra scars and a memory.

Feeling suddenly happy, the wolf stretched into an easy run that devoured the distance between him and Owl in moments. They ran together until she tired, then lay drowsing in the sunlight as the grass dried around them.

When it was time to make camp, the wolf picked up his clothes in his jaws and went a short distance away to take back his man-shape in private. Yozerf stretched, blinking as his color vision returned, then dressed and returned to camp. They had found an ancient oak that had fallen a few years before; a dense stand of new saplings had sprung up from the cracked stump, making an excellent hiding spot for them to sleep in. Owl had built a cook fire just outside the copse, and the smell of the rabbit made his stomach rumble. Even so, it was plain fare, and he spared a wistful thought for the fine dishes Kellsjard's kitchens had served.

Had he seen some thyme earlier? He thought he recalled catching its scent on the wind, at least. Some wild mushrooms would also be a welcome addition to their meal. Cooking wasn't precisely his skill—he didn't know how to make anything fancy—but he had kept them both fed, and the child hadn't complained yet. Perhaps he could try his hand at something a little different today, though.

"Keep the fire going and heat some water," he instructed. "I'll find us some herbs to go with the rabbit."

He left Owl at their camp and set out. Engrossed in his search for something to make their meal a bit more interesting, Yozerf did not notice how high the sun had risen until he felt sweat trickle down the back of his neck. The handful of herbs he had found would be plenty for the two of them, he decided, turning back towards the camp. He didn't want to leave Owl by herself any longer.

At that moment, the wind swung around, and the scent of human sweat came to him over the nose-blinding herbs he was holding. Freezing instinctively, he dropped the herbs, focusing all his senses on sifting the breeze for information. The scent intensified, and he heard a male voice speaking, muffled by distance.

Then Owl screamed.

Terrified, he broke into a run, giving no thought to caution. His long legs carried him fast, sharp eyes picking out any obstacle that might trip him up. Leaping over fallen trees, ducking under leaning branches, he tore through the wood without heed. *Owl, no, please no...*

The brilliant sunlight showed him three men and a woman in the instant before he burst full on them. The woman looked as if she were beaten frequently, and he could smell old blood and terror on her, even over the sweat of her companions. While she cowered back, one of the men was rummaging through the packs, flinging their meager contents heedlessly out into the dust. The other two men were closing on Owl. She stood with her back against a tree, her eyes wide with fear and her knife in her hand.

Yozerf jerked the hatchet from his belt and flung it with all the strength in him. The iron head buried itself deep in the skull of the man closest to Owl, and he collapsed without a whimper. Yozerf didn't pause; even as the second man's face registered his companion's death, Yozerf sprang at him. One foot snapped out and up, connecting hard with the man's leg, and Yozerf felt it give under his boot. The man screamed and fell sideways, clutching at his knee.

The third bandit came at Yozerf from behind, yelling incoherently. Yozerf spun, ducked a blow from a knife, and punched a fist into the man's groin with all his weight behind it. The man cried out but didn't drop the knife. Swearing, Yozerf jumped back and then flung his hand out desperately. Fire bloomed in his assailant's face, scorching hair and flesh. The bandit screamed, and the knife fell from his fingers as he beat wildly at the flames. Not sparing an instant for sympathy, Yozerf snatched up the blade and buried it in his opponent's throat.

The familiar hiss of a sword coming free of its sheath was all the warning Yozerf had that the man with the wounded leg had regained his feet. Instead of leaping back, as his attacker no doubt expected him to do, Yozerf lunged forwards, inside the other man's guard. He grabbed the wrist of the man's sword hand in both of his own, forcing the blade away from him. The bandit swore and struck him hard in the side of the face, making his ears ring, but Yozerf only tightened his grip, pressing against the little bones of the wrist until the pain forced the bandit to drop the sword. Swearing and snarling, they wrestled one another on the ground, until Yozerf finally managed to wrap both arms around the other man's head and twist. There was a sickening pop as his neck snapped.

Gasping for breath, Yozerf let go of the bandit's corpse and rocked back on his heels. Before he could even assess his surroundings, a small body crashed into his, almost knocking him down. Thin arms wrapped around his chest like a vice, and the wetness of tears soaked into his tunic.

"I thought you'd left me!" Owl sobbed, half-incoherent. Her tiny body shook like a leaf in a storm. "Don't leave me! Please don't leave me, Papa, please don't leave me!"

Startled, he put one arm automatically around the weeping girl, bracing the other against the ground so that they didn't both topple over. "Shh. It's all right. I'm here."

She said something else, but he could no longer understand her through her tears. Lifting her with one arm, he managed to regain his balance and stand up. A quick look around the clearing revealed that they were alone except for the three dead bandits. The woman had fled, no doubt taking the first chance she saw to get away from her captors. The air stank of blood and voided bowels, and Yozerf knew that he had to get Owl away from there as quickly as possible. He awkwardly kicked out the fire, gathered their food as best he could one-handed, then carried the sobbing girl into the woods.

When they were far enough away that he could no longer smell death on the air, he sank down under a tree and cradled Owl against him, murmuring softly to her in an attempt to calm her. At length she cried

herself out and fell asleep on his shoulder.

Gods, Yozerf thought, leaning wearily back against the tree. Guilt closed around his gut like an iron fist—he should have been more cautious. The bandits should never have been able to sneak up the way they had. His foolish preoccupation with dinner had almost cost Owl her life.

She believed I had abandoned her, he thought, remorse cutting deep as a knife. On some level, that had frightened her far more than the men and the violence. And why shouldn't it? She had lost everyone—first her father, then her mother, then the horrid aunt who took her in. No wonder the fear of being deserted loomed so huge in her mind. Gods, why hadn't he realized that earlier?

"Please don't leave me, Papa, please don't leave me!"

He had a decision to make, he realized. Ever since taking up with Owl, he had planned to stay with her only until he could find a suitable human family to hand her over to. A nice family, one that would never show her anything but total love. It was the best thing he could do for her; he knew that.

He had nothing to give a child. Hel, he didn't even have a place in society that she could benefit from, not even that of a serf. It was not something that had ever bothered him before, because he had long ago accepted the fact of his sterility. It was mad to let it bother him now. It was insane to even contemplate keeping Owl with him.

But did Owl know that? Had she even thought of it? He protected her, took care of her as best he could, played with her and taught her—in short, without realizing it, he had taken on the role of a parent. Did she comprehend that he had meant to do so only temporarily? If he tried to explain things to her, would she understand?

Or would she know only that yet one more adult was abandoning her?

And what damage would that cause her young soul?

He couldn't see the face pressed against his neck, but he could feel her little heart, beating with all the speed of a bird's against his chest. The thought of hurting her was unbearable, and for the first time it occurred to him that somehow this intelligent, energetic, and very human child had worked her way deeply into his heart. When he had realized that she was in trouble, he had responded without any thought for his own safety. He would gladly have traded his own life for hers.

He sat awake and watchful through the day, torn between logic and instinct. His arm fell asleep from supporting Owl's weight, and other muscles developed aches from sitting so long in one position, but he made no move that might wake her. The day faded, and blue sky gave way to bands of red and gold across the western sky, as the sun set and the evening star showed her face. Owl stirred and rubbed her eyes.

"We need to go back to camp and retrieve anything that we can," Yozerf told her. Truthfully, he would rather leave her somewhere safe than bring her near the bodies, but in her present state, he wasn't sure that it wouldn't do more harm in the long run. "I'll make us breakfast, all right?"

She brightened at that. They went back to the ruined campsite, although Yozerf cautioned her to remain just behind a line of bushes that would shield her from the worst sights. She didn't like being left even that long after her fright of the day before, so he kept up a running commentary, saying anything that came into his head so that the sound of his voice could reassure her that she hadn't been abandoned again.

As he had feared, animals had gotten into everything, and one of their packs was missing altogether, no

doubt dragged away by inquisitive raccoons. Most of the belongings that he had not been able to carry earlier were still there, however.

He stripped the bandits' corpses with ruthless efficiency, taking anything that might conceivably be of use. Hefting the sword that had belonged to one, Yozerf felt a faint smile touch his lips. It would be good to be well armed again, he thought. His own blade, which had been passed down through the generations of his family, was lost forever in the ruins of the palace in Segg, and he missed it keenly.

Once he had taken everything that could be of use, he returned to Owl, and they made their way back through the wood to a point near where they had spent the day. A little fire was soon going, and Yozerf set about making flat cakes from some flour he had scavenged from the bandits.

"I'm sorry I frightened you yesterday," he said at last.

Owl sat on the other side of the fire, watching him work. Her coppery hair was tangled, and her eyes looked faintly bruised from crying. Children could be incredibly resilient, Yozerf thought ruefully, but even Owl had her limits.

"I thought you went away," she said quietly. One hand absently picked at a scab on her ankle.

"I know. I'm sorry. I assumed you knew that I wouldn't just leave you, and I was wrong to do that." He poked at the fire with a stick, sending up a shower of sparks. "I've thought of something you might like. You could become part of my clan, if you wish it. Among my people, members of the same clan always look out for one another, no matter what, and they never abandon each other."

It was something of a lie, of course, Aclytese nature being no better than human on so many points. Certainly Telmonra and Jahcgroth had not hesitated to misuse or betray their kin. But to many, the old ties were still terribly, vitally important.

Owl's eyes grew large. "Really?"

"Really. I could bring you into my clan as my kinswoman. As my ... as my daughter, if you would like that. But I want you to think very carefully before you say yes or no, understand? Whatever your answer, I will protect you and care for you as best I can, and I won't be angry if you say no." He paused, trying to think how best to put things so that she might understand. "There are a lot of people who won't like you traveling with me either way," he began.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm an Aclyte and you're a human."

"Oh." She frowned at him, a little puzzled. "I forgot."

She forgot? he asked himself, tempted to look at his hair and see if it had miraculously changed color. But of course she forgot. She was Owl, who didn't even care whether he went on two legs or four.

"Unfortunately, no one else is likely to forget," he said wryly. "So that is one thing to consider. Another is that I don't have much—no money, no property, nothing like that. I'll try to give you a stable home if I can, but I can't promise it. You might be better off if we found a human family for you to live with."

Her blue eyes blazed fiercely, like a wolf cub battling over a stick. "I want to stay with you!"

Her answer made him smile. "All right, then. We'll perform the ceremony."

"What do we do?"

Yozerf had spent part of his long watch thinking on that very subject. While there was a formal ceremony that had been honored among Aclytes for thousands of years for adopting new members into clans, he knew only the vaguest details about what it entailed. Still, he felt that a ritual of some sort would be important to Owl, would help to reassure her, so all he could do was to take what little he knew and try to come up with something that would not be overly ridiculous.

One of the bandits had carried a wooden cup, so Yozerf carefully washed it in the nearby stream and filled it with cold, clear water. One thing he did know for certain was that wine was normally used in the ritual, but as it seemed highly unlikely that they would stumble over a wine cellar in the middle of the woods, water would have to do. After clearing a space on the ground, Yozerf instructed Owl to sit across from him, and placed the cup in between them.

"I am Yozerf: son of Londah, daughter of Elnaith; of the clan Jonaglir," he said solemnly. "We were once the clan of kings and queens, the clan of dragons, the rulers of Caden. We were poets and madmen and sorcerers."

"Is that how you made the fire yesterday?" Owl asked breathlessly, her eyes huge with wonder.

"It is. My abilities are small, I fear, and not to be spoken of to others. Now, are you ready?"

She nodded. Very carefully, Yozerf took up a long knife and made a small, shallow cut on his thumb. Three drops of blood went into the cup of water. Then he took Owl's hand and, wincing as he did it, made a similar tiny cut and let three drops of her blood fall to mingle with his. She did not flinch, and her face was alight with excitement.

He swirled the cup a little to mix the blood, then drank down half of it. The coppery taste was faint in his mouth, diluted by the water. Once he had swallowed his share, he passed the cup to Owl, and she finished it off. "Now our blood is mixed," he said. An odd little tingle started in the back of his mind, and he felt the faint stirring of power in him. "We are kin forever. You are my own child, as surely as if you were born from my seed. I name you Owl: daughter of Yozerf, son of Londah; of the clan Jonaglir; and any who would sever our bond will feel the breath of the dragon upon them."

Power surged, and for an instant Yozerf tasted blood in his mouth again. Light flared, blinding him, although whether it was from outside or from within his own head, he didn't know. Then it was over, and Owl was looking at him curiously, apparently having noticed nothing.

Even so ... something had changed.

The Jonaglirs had been sorcerers who relied on the magic of their blood for thousands of years. Yozerf cursed himself mentally for not realizing that the kinship ritual, which was merely symbolic for most Aclytes, could well be far more literal for him.

Whatever had happened seemed to have caused Owl no harm, at least. "Is that it?" she asked uncertainly.

Yozerf nodded. "Yes."

She broke into a wide grin. "Can I call you 'papa' now?"

"That is your right."

"Can I have a horse?"

Yozerf burst out laughing at the absurdity of it. "What? Owl, do you think I've been hiding one in my cloak?"

She gave him another grin and shrugged, then climbed to her feet and bounded off to the stream, singing tunelessly. Reflecting that her energy made him feel rather old, Yozerf stood up far more slowly and followed his new daughter.

Chapter Six

As Suchen and her companions traveled farther north, signs of war became increasingly frequent. After their narrow escape from Fellrant's forces, they decided not to risk travel on the Trade Route and instead set out crosscountry, over the plains. Adopting the strategy that Yozerf had once used, they slept by day and walked by night, careful to avoid contact with any of the small settlements, despite their desire for news.

The long miles of unending grass quickly blurred together in Suchen's mind. The plains offered wonderful fodder for sheep and horses, but little for humans who had no means to hunt. Hunger became a constant companion, and their steps grew slower as deprivation began to take its toll. Day and night, the wind howled over the almost treeless expanse, rattling the grass and moaning over hills, until Suchen thought she might go mad from the unceasing noise.

For the most part, they saw nothing more sinister than a flock of vultures or a hunting hawk. But one afternoon, when they were only a few days out from Kellsjard, a plume of smoke rising towards the sun caught their attention. After night had fallen, they cautiously crept closer to the source of the fire, only to discover the ruins of a burned village. Corpses were all that remained to greet them; any survivors had either fled or been taken. Nothing remained to indicate the identity of the attackers, and Suchen wondered if Fellrant's men or an unusually large and well-armed contingent of bandits had caused the damage. Bandits, she hoped—gods, but she hated the thought that Jenel's own army might be pillaging the landscape. There was still the chance that the incident they had witnessed on the road had been an isolated event, after all.

Would Fellrant condone the destruction of entire villages? The days spent cooped up in a narrow tenement room with him came back to her forcefully. His youthful face, sensual mouth, and beautiful eyes had concealed a cold, calculating mind. So long as his own safety had lain in the same direction as theirs, he had been an ally. But the moment he saw the opportunity to abandon them and betray their secrets, he had taken it without qualm.

No, he would not care about a few villages, not if razing them to the ground served some purpose that benefited him. Certainly he had done similar things, if on a smaller scale, as Lord of Vorslava. Why should that change just because he was now King of Jenel?

At last, as days of walking became weeks, their plodding steps brought them close to Kellsjard. After stumbling through yet another endless night, Londah called a halt. But instead of setting about making camp as usual, she beckoned them all over to her.

"We should be within sight of Kellsjard tomorrow, yes?" she asked, her gray eyes canting towards Buudi in a question.

He nodded, running a hand through his shaggy hair. "Yes. It's less than a day's walk from here, now. We could continue on—"

"No." Londah glanced north, as if she could sense the presence of the keep. "It is too dangerous to simply walk into Kellsjard. We do not know what awaits us there, or what spies might be set about it to note Auglar's return. You are all too well known to risk going through the gates."

"Then what?" asked Auglar impatiently. So close to their goal, it was a bitter thing for them all to be told to wait.

"I will go alone and discover what the situation is. I will speak with the servants, if I must, learn who has

been to the keep and what your wife's status is. I will return here after and let you know what I discover."

Impatience surged through Suchen. She didn't want to do the sensible thing—she wanted to go home, to her friends and her own bed. She was sick of walking, sick of camping, sick of grief. It occurred to her that some small part of her thought that, if she could just return to Kellsjard, it would somehow undo everything that had happened since they left.

Foolish, that. And, after food and sleep had eased the numbing fatigue that lay over her heart, the familiar sights and smells of Kellsjard might very well only make her feel her loss anew. But at the moment, she could barely think of that, barely think of anything, save her desire to get to shelter and comfort.

For a moment, Londah's cool, unflustered beauty, so untouched by their hardships, sent a wave of anger and envy through her. Damn the woman for making them wait.

Then logic reasserted itself. "Londah is right," Suchen admitted reluctantly. "There's no sense in walking all this way, just so we can get captured by Fellrant's spies."

"I will go quickly," Londah said, as if she sensed their annoyance at the delay. She rose to her feet in a single, smooth motion, and drew her hood over her face. "And return as soon as I may."

She disappeared into the dawn like a shadow, her dark clothing blending with the landscape, so that they lost sight of her almost instantly. Feeling tired and out-of-sorts, the rest set about making camp.

The day seemed one of the longest they had known. Suchen did her best to sleep when it was not her turn at watch, but the tantalizing promise of food and safety so near at hand disrupted her thoughts and made her body restless. At last she rose and joined Buudi on watch; neither of them spoke, but by a wordless understanding, they did not wake Auglar when his turn came, nor Brenwulf later.

The sun climbed high into the sky, then slowly began to sink again. When Londah had not reappeared by nightfall, Suchen began to feel real fear in her gut. *It would take some time to gain admittance to the keep, to speak to the servants, and to survey the area outside for any spies,* Suchen told herself uneasily. *There's no reason to think Londah will be back any time before midnight, possibly later. It doesn't mean that anything bad has happened.*

Despite the fact that Suchen's every nerve seemed to strain for any sign of Londah's approach, when she finally did return, the Aclytese woman startled them all badly. One moment the night seemed empty; the next, a tall, dark-cloaked figure stepped into their midst. Brenwulf swore violently, but Londah ignored him.

"Well," Auglar demanded as they all crowded close, "is it safe? Can we go home?"

Londah said nothing, but the look in her cold eyes made Suchen's blood turn to ice. "What is it?" she asked, grabbing Londah's wrist as if she could wring the words from her. "Something is wrong, isn't it?"

Auglar paled. "Oh, gods. Is it Sifya? Has something happened to her? The baby?"

Londah shook her head slowly. "I do not know what has become of your wife and child," she said, so quietly that her voice was nearly lost in the eternal moan of the wind. "I wish that I could bring you certain news of them. I am sorry."

Apprehension gripped Suchen's throat in an iron fist. "What is it? Tell us!"

Londah met her gaze squarely, but there was regret in her eyes. "Kellsjard has fallen. The keep has been razed. There is nothing left for you."

* * * *

The wind ruffled the long grass of the plains like the hair of some vast head. The sky was mercilessly blue, unmarred by clouds and dominated by a sun that had just begun its work of drying the morning dew from the grass and wildflowers. Vultures rode the wind, wheeling and turning, their small eyes searching the ground below.

Yozerf drew in a deep breath, sifting through the scents of small animals and growing things. Their emergence from the last of the forests cloaking southern Jenel both relieved and worried him. On the one hand, it was a clear sign of their progress. Although they still had weeks of walking before them, the Kellsmarch was now all that lay between them and Kellsjard. On the other hand, at least the light forests had provided them with reliable cover. The blank emptiness of the plains, broken only by scrubby, wind-stunted trees and a few shallow undulations that couldn't even be called hills, meant that eyes could see them from far away. He did not know if it was instinct or experience, or a blend of both, but the idea of being so exposed made the hair on his neck stand on end and a growl rumble in his throat.

Owl, however, seemed to enjoy the openness, for she immediately began to run, even though the sun was up and by rights they should rest. She looked, Yozerf thought ruefully, like a wild thing, with leaves in her hair and dirt on her shabby clothes, her legs flashing like those of a fawn. Just before leaving the woods, she had found an old piece of wood that her imagination insisted looked like a woman, and she now clutched the makeshift doll in one hand as she ran.

Letting her play for the moment, Yozerf kept his eyes on the horizon, determined that he should see any threat long before it saw them. *We need to find somewhere concealed to sleep out the day. Or as concealed as can be, here on the open plains.* As nothing offered itself immediately, they kept walking, even as the sun climbed the sky.

When she tired of running, Owl came back and trudged along beside him, tapping her doll against his wooden staff to listen to the sound it made. "Will you tell me more about Caden, Papa?" she asked.

Caden was Owl's new favorite subject. Whether this was because she liked the stories of dragons and magic and battles, or because she liked to imagine that she was a princess, Yozerf didn't know. After making her adoption formal with the ceremony, he had decided to tell her about their clan, so that she would have a better understanding of her place in the world. He had not expected to be able to tell her much—in the three hundred years after Caden's fall, most of their lore had been lost, and Londah had been able to give him only a few disconnected tales, histories so faded that they might as well have been legends. But as he began to talk, as he began to think about it, he made the disconcerting discovery that he knew more. Much more.

Telmonra.

Perhaps he should not have been surprised after spending months with a ghost residing in his head. Her memories had come to him on more than one occasion, but after he had banished her back to the shores of death from whence she had come, he had not had the opportunity to ponder them. Now it seemed that other memories had seeped into him, ones that he had never even been conscious of absorbing.

In truth, it frightened him more than a little. For if Telmonra had left him memories of the history of their people, what else of her might have become a part of him without his knowing? Although many of her actions in life had been the desperation of the monarch of a dying land, he knew firsthand that a streak of cruelty had run deep in her. Certainly he did not want to think he had imbibed of *that*.

Yozerf was halfway through the story of Vitara the Mad, who had ruled briefly during the second millennium after Caden's founding, when he noticed two things. The first was a clump of scrubby trees in

the lee of the nearest low hill that would be perfect for a hiding spot. The second was movement on the horizon.

He fell silent immediately, his entire body going still. Owl instantly mimicked him, and he felt a momentary flash of pride. "There is someone coming," he said, knowing from experience that his vision was better than any human's. "I cannot tell if he is moving towards us yet. Take to the trees—they will hide us."

Quick and quiet as rabbits, they burrowed into the tangled grove, ignoring scratches and oozing sap, until they were well hidden from view. When he was certain that Owl was concealed and not going anywhere, Yozerf eased carefully out from the center of the grove, until he found a break in the net of branches that allowed him to peer out. The movement was closer now, and he could easily make out a lone traveler, probably male. The man walked with a pronounced limp, and leaned on a staff that seemed to be topped with an iron globe.

Yozerf stiffened slightly at the sight. The staff with its mace head was strikingly familiar, but it was impossible for it to be the one he knew. After all, the man who bore it should have been on the other side of the Kellsmarch, ensconced safely within Kellsjard's high walls.

Impossible.

But as the walker drew nearer, he grew more familiar, not less. Blonde hair hung in filthy ringlets around a haggard face that still showed the lines made by laughter. Troubled blue eyes scanned the horizon warily, although the man's ragged clothing marked him a poor target for bandits. The wind was wrong to bring the tale of scent to Yozerf's nose, but ultimately there was no mistaking what his eyes told him.

"Gless!" Yozerf shouted, bursting out of his hiding place.

Gless froze, his staff coming about warily. Then, as Yozerf ran towards him, his eyes widened in disbelief and a smile lit his face, removing what looked like years of care from it. "Yozerf? Dearest gods, is it really you?"

Laughing wildly, Gless dropped his staff and flung his arms around the tall Aclyte. Rather to his own surprise, Yozerf returned the embrace. So close, Gless smelled of hunger and hardship, and dread cut through Yozerf's unexpected pleasure at seeing the human again.

"Gods, it's good to see you!" Gless exclaimed, stepping back a little. "Where's Auglar?" His blue eyes darted about eagerly, as if he expected his lord to simply appear out of thin air.

Yozerf dropped his arms, his sense of unease growing stronger. "I don't know," he said. "We were separated when Segg fell."

Gless's face paled underneath the dirt. "No. Oh, gods. But ... he's still alive?"

"As far as I know. I thought he and the rest would be on their way to Kellsjard. Where you should be."

Slowly, Gless's blue eyes lifted to rest on Yozerf's face. "I have bad news," he said in a deceptively calm voice. "Kellsjard has fallen."

* * * *

This isn't how it was supposed to be, Suchen thought blankly. They had reached Kellsjard. They were supposed to be safe. This was meant to be the end of their purgatory of ceaseless walking.

They were supposed to be coming home.

"No!" Brenwulf said suddenly, taking a step towards Londah. His dark brows drew into a scowl, and his hands clenched. "You're lying! It isn't true!"

Londah's face remained impassive. "And why would I lie?"

"Because—because you hate us! You blame us for Yozerf's death! You're a minion of Jahcgroth—you've been with him from the start!"

Londah snorted in contempt. "If that were so, I would have killed you at the beginning and saved myself the trouble of your company."

Brenwulf lunged at her with a strangled cry. There was a dark blur; then he was lying facedown in the dirt. Londah stood a few feet away, untouched and with a faint look of curiosity, as if puzzled by the ways of humans and Wolfkin alike.

"Stay away from him," Auglar shouted and started forward.

Buudi grabbed his lord's arm. "No! Londah is right. We have to think about this."

"She can't be right—Kellsjard couldn't have fallen—"

"We must stand together—"

"You aren't listening to me!"

No. This is wrong.

Without speaking, Suchen turned and ran from the quarrel. The ground was uneven, and she risked breaking an ankle, but all thought had deserted her. She had to get away from the anger and pain of her friends, had to escape ... had to get to Kellsjard. Somehow, if she could just run fast enough, the keep would be there after all. Londah had made a mistake somehow, that was it. A mistake.

Suchen ran until she could go no farther, until agony blazed in her side with every breath. Gasping and panting, she dropped into a stumbling walk. Behind her, she could hear her friends coming, calling out to her, but she ignored them, keeping her eyes determinedly fixed on the horizon where Kellsjard should be.

The sun rose further, revealing the familiar hill that the keep had stood upon, although distance rendered it nothing but a blue smudge. Suchen stared at it as she walked, until her eyes burned and watered. But, no matter how hard she looked for some hopeful sign, the keep failed to appear. Instead, all she saw was the hill ... and a few jagged-looking outlines that might have once been walls.

Little remained of the village that had once nestled at the bottom of the hill. A few broken foundations and charred timbers marked where it had stood, but all its inhabitants were gone, along with anything that might have survived the destruction. The stink of burning was still strong, but it looked as if the fires that had taken the place had been set weeks ago.

We were too late—we were always too late. This happened before we even set foot on the plains.

Oh gods, this isn't fair.

She wandered through the village like someone in a dream, only half hearing the cries of her friends behind her. *There* was what remained of the tavern where she had so often shared a mug of ale with her friends, and *there* was where the potter's shed had stood, and *there* lay the shattered remains of the village church. A wave of horror and grief rushed over her, and for a moment she stood

uncomprehending, as if she no longer knew where she was or what had happened. Then she began to run once again, desperate to see what remained of the keep that had once been her home.

Little was left of the architect's nightmare that had been Kellsjard, a fortress that had never fallen to an enemy since its founding. The curtain wall was smashed in a dozen places, as if some huge hand had slammed it down. Flames had burned the stones black and cracked them with heat. Suchen trailed her hand blindly along the broken stones as she stepped through what had once been the gate tunnel, now open to the sky.

Within, the destruction was even more thorough. A single wall stood to mark the great hall, and a shattered tower still desolately guarded the northern approaches, but all else was nothing more than a jumble of fallen masonry and charred timbers. Suchen staggered through the destruction blindly, heedless of her own safety. Ashes rose about her like a cloud, and her foot kicked aside a blue tile that she thought she recognized as being from a tower roof. The tile skittered a few feet and fetched up against the sooty end of a bone protruding from the rubble. For a moment she was unable to comprehend what it meant; then understanding came, and she felt tears well up in her eyes.

Auglar collapsed in the midst of the ruin, his head bowed and his shoulders slumped, sobbing unashamedly. Then he flung his head back and let loose a keening wail, a shriek that might have been a challenge or a question for the gods. Buudi, who stood solidly beside him, put a hand to his shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

But what comfort is there for any of us?

A dark shadow appeared at Suchen's side, and for an insane moment she thought it was Yozerf. Then she saw Londah's raven hair unraveling in the wind, her icy gray eyes taking in the magnitude of the devastation.

"This can't be happening," Suchen whispered. She breathed in, a great, gulping sob. "It can't be."

"I am sorry, daughter," Londah said, and there might even have been pity in her cool voice.

"You don't understand. This wasn't ... it can't ... it shouldn't be this way. This is my home. This is where Peddock and I finally found acceptance and a real life. I was going to spend the rest of my life here with Yozerf, and we were going to grow old together, and..."

The tears finally caught up with her, and she fell to her knees, sobbing desperately. Londah put a hand briefly to her shoulder, then left her alone with her grief. Suchen curled up on herself and wept for her home and for the dead: Gless, Sifya, Jiara the healmage, the baby Auglar had never even met, Yozerf ... She cried until she had no more tears left in her, and then lay quietly in the ashes, staring bleakly at the blue tile and the bone that had once belonged to someone she had known.

The sun began to set, and the remains of the curtain wall cast long shadows over the ruin. At last, Suchen climbed to her feet, feeling empty and without purpose. Buudi and Brenwulf had persuaded Auglar to sit on a large stone at the edge of the destruction; the eyes of all three men were red from tears. Londah flitted through the growing shadows, like a ghost come to haunt them.

Not knowing what else to do, Suchen walked slowly over to her companions and sat down by them. "What now?" she asked dully.

Auglar shook his head. He looked like a man who had taken a mortal wound. "What is left?" he asked in a voice gone hoarse from crying. "Kellsjard is gone. Sifya is dead. The baby..."

"We don't know that," Brenwulf said fiercely. Startled, Suchen looked up at him and saw rage in his dark eyes. "If anyone escaped this, it would have been Sifya. She is fleet of foot. She and the child might have fled to the forests in the north. They could be with the rest of our kinfolk even now."

"Perhaps," Auglar said, but it did not sound as if he had much hope.

"We cannot give up."

"What else is left for us to do?" Auglar demanded, grief turning to anger. "Kellsjard is gone. If there were any survivors, what chance do we have of finding them? Who is to say they weren't taken prisoner and killed? There's nothing left for us to do, nowhere left for us to go."

"So we just sit here and die?" Brenwulf challenged.

Auglar's mouth tightened; then he looked away. "You can do whatever you wish, Brenwulf. I am no longer the lord of anything—not even of a rebel demesne. Fellrant has won."

"Fellrant did not do this," Londah said quietly.

Suchen started—she hadn't heard the Aclyte approach, nor seen her in the growing dusk. "What do you mean?" she asked tiredly, wondering even as she did so what it could possibly matter.

Londah's white hands flashed in the gloaming as she unfolded what appeared to be a square of charred, bloodied, and soot-streaked cloth. In the last light, Suchen could tell that it had once been a standard.

"Crimson and gold ... those aren't Fellrant's colors," Brenwulf said uncertainly.

"No." Londah flung the cloth down contemptuously. "They belong to Argannon."

A faint spark of life stirred in Auglar's eyes. "Jahcgroth did this?"

"Of course. No doubt the entire time he was keeping Fellrant occupied in southern Jenel, he was also bringing a second, larger army down from the north. We are most fortunate that we didn't walk straight into them."

Auglar stared at the banner for a long moment. Then, with a sudden oath, he leapt to his feet and began to stamp upon it, swearing and shouting like a madman. Buudi made a move to intercept him, but Londah came between them. "Leave him," she said. Buudi hesitated visibly, then nodded and stepped back.

Eventually, Auglar's frenzy ran its course, and he lapsed into silence. The humans huddled together in their grief, not speaking or moving, until at last Londah sighed and set about making a fire. What few rations they had were handed out with a look that said no disobedience would be tolerated. Suchen numbly obeyed and chewed on a strip of meat dried to the consistency of leather, but it tasted like ashes in her mouth. When the meal was done, they sat and stared at each other like lost souls in Hel's domain, asking for comfort that none of them could give.

"So what do we do?" Brenwulf asked again.

Auglar only shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know."

Chapter Seven

Yozerf fetched Owl from her hiding place among the trees and introduced her to Gless. Gless raised an eyebrow but forewent any immediate comment. Together, the three of them laid a fire and pooled their meager resources for dinner. They ate as the sun passed noon, setting aside their questions for the moment. Gless admired Owl's doll, then took out his knife and offered to whittle a face on it for her. The soft scrape of the knife on wood was rhythmic and oddly soothing. Listening to it, Yozerf leaned back and stared up at the clouds, knowing that he could not put Gless's questions off any longer.

"We have much to talk about," he said—an understatement if there had ever been one. "I will begin with my tale, if you wish it."

Gless nodded, seeming relieved. Feeling somewhat like a man on trial, Yozerf told everything that had happened from the time that he left Kellsjard in Auglar's retinue. Conscious of Owl's listening ears, he veiled his references to some of what had occurred in Segg—he was not about to say openly that he had used his body as currency, after all; but he thought that Gless could read between the lines well enough. He made no attempt to spare himself otherwise, instead relating honestly the secret of his powers, the things he had done, and the final schism between himself and his friends that left him outcast once again. By the time he reached the fight in Nava Nar, where he and Londah rescued the captive humans, there were tears in Gless's eyes.

"Gods," Gless whispered when Yozerf paused. "What happened then?"

"I ... don't know." Yozerf shrugged helplessly. "That time is a blackness to me. The next thing I remember is being in a forest outside of Segg, in wolf form. I was badly hurt and would surely have died, if Owl had not found me." He ruffled her hair affectionately. "But I did not know myself for a while, could not remember anything about my life. I didn't even realize that I was anything but a wolf. After I recovered somewhat, I tried to take Owl back to her village, but it had been destroyed—by which army, I do not know. So we decided to make for Kellsjard in the hopes of finding refuge there. But now you tell me that it is gone."

Gless's face grew grim, and a shadow fell over his blue eyes. "Yes. We hadn't had any news out of the south, so we didn't know to be worried. Everything seemed to be going well. Sifya gave birth—to a healthy boy, by the way. We had no warning—no messages from Shalai or Maak, nothing. Then, suddenly, there was an army at the gates. They used sorcery. They had to—I mean, where by Hel are you going to hide an army on the Kellsmarch?"

"So they didn't come from within, as they did in Segg?"

"No. I guess that means we didn't have any traitors inside with us, at least." Gless shook his head and looked down at his carving. "About the only good thing I can say, I suppose. Anyway, they came upon us unawares—a huge army. The emperor wasn't there, as far as I know—too tied up with you lot down in Segg, I imagine. Anyway, there was some sort of commander who came up to the gates under a parlay flag and offered to let us surrender. He said that we would be spared if we swore an oath of allegiance to Jahcgroth and if our soldiers joined his army. I don't know if he realized that Kellsjard's lord was in line to become King of Jenel or not.

"Of course Sifya refused the offer. That's when the attacks began. It was ... massive. Overwhelming. Nothing like the siege Fellrant laid to Kellsjard a decade ago. They were determined to wipe Kellsjard off the face of the earth, and to do it in as short a time as possible. They had siege engines with them and used sappers to undermine the walls.

"After they were inside ... it was chaos. I tried to get to Sifya, but I couldn't find her. I don't know ... maybe she escaped. We were fighting in the corridors, and then the entire keep was on fire. I managed to get out, but it was a near thing. The only thing I could think to do was grab a horse and head south as fast as I could, to get word to Auglar."

Owl raised her head sharply, from where it had been lying sleepily against Yozerf's knee. "A horse?"

"Owl has a peculiar madness when it comes to horses," Yozerf explained.

"Oh." Gless managed a faint smile. "I rode out of the keep and somehow managed to get through the lines in the confusion. When I last turned back to look, the entire citadel was ablaze. Nothing that was inside then could have expected to get out alive. So I turned south and rode as hard as I could."

"What happened to your horse?" Owl demanded.

"I'm afraid that some bandits caught up with me." Gless sighed. "It was a week ago. I was sleeping soundly, and the next thing I knew, the horse was whinnying and somebody was riding off on its back like Hel herself was on his heels. I didn't have the opportunity to do anything but wave my arms and yell curses."

"Oh," said Owl, clearly wondering how anyone could be so stupid as to misplace a horse.

They lapsed into silence. Eventually, Owl fell asleep, her head pillowed on Yozerf's knee. Gless's hands stilled their carving, and he looked curiously at the child's sleeping face. "Well, that's a development I never expected," he said, keeping his voice low so as not to wake her. "Did she really save your life?"

"Oh yes." Yozerf glanced up at Gless. "So what will you do now?"

"I don't know. As long as I thought Auglar was in Segg, I had a goal to aim for. But now ... it seems pointless to try to track him down in all the vastness of Jenel. What about you?"

Yozerf shook his head. "I do not know. I had hoped that we might find safety in Kellsjard ... that we would be given shelter for Owl's sake, if not for mine."

"You saved everyone's lives, Yozerf. I can't believe Auglar would have turned you away. Certainly Suchen wouldn't have."

"You don't know." Yozerf pressed his lips together, telling himself to be strong. Confessing his tale to Gless had made all the wounds seem fresh once again, and he felt as if he bled somewhere deep inside. "You don't understand what it was like, there in Segg. I betrayed them with my distrust, with my silence. And Suchen ... she does not love me anymore. I cannot say that I blame her."

"I suppose it's a moot point now, anyway," Gless said dejectedly. "So where will you go?"

"I don't know. You said that you heard nothing of hardship in Shalai—perhaps they are not under attack, at least not yet. There are Aclytes in that kingdom, although not so many as in Jenel—perhaps they will agree to give us shelter."

"There's one thing you might not realize. I just came down across the Kellsmarch, and I saw what's happening. There are people—refugees—everywhere. Between the army in the north and the fighting in the south, I think half of Jenel must be on the move, looking for someplace safe to go. People are desperate, and some of them are willing to do things that they might not have even considered before, when they were safe and well fed. A trip across the Kellsmarch might not be easy."

Yozerf spread his hands helplessly. "What else is there? We cannot go back—there is no shelter in the south for us. We cannot afford a passage on a ship, even if there are any ships still putting into port at Segg. Undah? They have slavery there, and I do not know how to survive in the desert. I suppose we could hide in the great forests to the east and live off the land. But I don't like the idea of trying to raise Owl alone in the forest, without any other companions. It would be hard and unfair for her, even if I could do it. What other choice does that leave?"

Gless nodded. "Shalai it is, then. Mind if I come with you?"

Yozerf smiled, suddenly realizing that he was glad to have another adult to share the burdens of responsibility with him. "Of course you are welcome."

"Good." Gless leaned over and tucked the doll in Owl's arms. It was still nothing more than an oddly-shaped piece of wood, but at least it had a crude face now. "I'm not much good as a fighter anymore, I guess, but I'll do what I can."

Yozerf frowned. Ever since Gless had taken the wound that left one leg partially lame, he had seemed to give up the idea of himself as a warrior. It was one of the reasons he had stayed behind at Kellsjard when the rest of the Sworn accompanied Auglar south. Gless had not believed that he could protect his lord anymore. And perhaps Auglar had agreed with him.

"Foolishness," Yozerf muttered, feeling a sudden surge of annoyance.

Gless looked up in surprise. "What's that?"

"I said that your words are foolishness." Yozerf stared deliberately at Gless's lame leg, forcing the other man to follow his gaze. "You may not be able to chase down bandits on foot anymore, but what of it? You can still stand and fight, can you not?"

Gless looked uncomfortable. "I ... I don't know."

"You do not know because you fear to find out. But you will find out. Tonight."

Gless started to object, took a closer look at Yozerf's face, and subsided. "All right," he said, but he did not look happy about it.

* * * *

To Owl's utter delight, the two men faced off immediately after breakfast. The last light of the sun barely touched the western sky, turning the clouds in that direction into a patchwork of red and gold. At Yozerf's insistence, Gless put aside his staff and drew his sword, although he looked doubtful as to the wisdom of them hacking at one another with steel.

Yozerf started without warning, seeing no reason to keep to niceties that had never made much sense to him anyway. Gless managed to block his attack with a grunt, but Yozerf could tell that he had not kept up with sword practice for some time.

It didn't take long to decide how to best exploit Gless's weakness. As Owl cheered him on, Yozerf launched into a flurry of moves that forced the human to shift his weight, until suddenly most of it was on his bad leg. With a startled cry, Gless fell to the ground as the weakened muscles gave out.

Yozerf let the point of his sword drop. A light sheen of sweat covered his skin, but he could see that Gless's hair was soaked with perspiration. The human propped himself up on his elbows, a look of grief and disappointment in his blue eyes.

"Do you see what I did?" Yozerf asked.

Gless nodded, his mouth twisting with self-disgust. "Yes."

"Then do you see how to avoid it?"

Gless looked surprised for a moment, but then a thoughtful frown settled over his face. "I ... I think I might."

"Then show me."

They worked for a little while longer, till Yozerf could see that Gless was beginning to consider ways to compensate for his injury. *And about time*, he thought darkly. *Gless behaved as though his life did not depend on being stronger and faster and better than an enemy, and the rest of the humans let him. No wonder Segg ate them alive. No wonder Kellsjard was lost.*

When Yozerf finally called a halt, he gave Gless no opportunity to rest, but instead started them all back on their long walk. The human had to lean heavily on his staff now, and his face was flushed with exertion.

"You're a heartless bastard," he said, but a grin softened the words.

"When I must be," Yozerf agreed mildly. "I should have spoken up sooner, before any of us ever left Kellsjard."

"You did. I just wasn't inclined to listen."

"Then I should have forced you to do so."

Gless shrugged uncomfortably. "Maybe. But it wasn't your responsibility."

"No. It was Auglar's."

"Auglar couldn't have—"

"Auglar wasted a good warrior," Yozerf cut in sharply. Black anger flared in him, surprising him with its intensity. "Auglar should not have tolerated your sitting back and giving up. But instead, he not only overlooked it, he abetted it by leaving you behind in Kellsjard."

"But—"

"Auglar has been a fool with his Sworn. Even Buudi was angry with him in Segg. Dara-Don chose comfort over his lord, and Peddock chose love. But would they have done so, had there not already been strain and deception in the mix? I don't know, but I do wonder."

Gless shook his head. "I still can't believe what Peddock did. After all the times he and Suchen fought over you, first for being an Aclyte and then for being a Wolfkin, I can't believe that he ran off with a ... a monster."

"That is because he knew that, whatever Cybelen was, she was not a monster. She just wasn't human. By the time he found that out ... maybe it didn't matter anymore." He shrugged uncomfortably.

"Wherever Peddock is now, though, I doubt his decision rests easily with him."

"Does any decision ever?" Gless asked wryly.

* * * * *

It was an unseasonably cold day on the northern reaches of the Kellsmarch when Suchen and her companions left behind the ruins of their home. A bitter wind had come up, and gray clouds hung low and menacing. Brenwulf shivered and sniffed at the air.

"Something's wrong," he said. "It shouldn't be this cool so far into the summer."

"Ax said that the weather was changing," Suchen reminded him. "That's why Jahcgroth is trying to take over Jenel in the first place."

No one made any reply. They walked away down the hill, and then stopped. Londah surveyed the land around them with icy eyes. "Where do we go?"

Auglar only shook his head. "I don't know. There is nowhere left for us."

An annoyed frown crossed Londah's sculpted lips, and Suchen remembered how little pity she had for indecision or weakness.

"We shouldn't stay here. The army that attacked Kellsjard was only the forerunner," Suchen said, hoping to head off an argument. "It's my guess that if anyone did survive the assault, they would have fled south, away from Argannon."

The thought of heading back out onto the Kellsmarch was a depressing one, but it offered the most hope of being reunited with any who had escaped the destruction. After a long moment, Auglar nodded and made a vague gesture towards the plains. "Very well. Lead on."

Suchen fell into step beside Londah, the men trailing behind them. A cold rain began to fall, and Suchen pulled up her hood. Unable to bear the thought of looking again on the ruin, she left the place that had once been her home without so much as a backward glance.

Chapter Eight

It was three days before Yozerf, Gless, and Owl encountered any other travelers. Yozerf insisted on sword practice every morning and evening, which slowed their pace even more than Gless's limp. They also took every opportunity to forage for food, and Yozerf, in wolf form, filled his belly regularly with mice, voles, lizards and other small things, leaving more of their stores for the other two to share.

So they had not penetrated very far into the Kellsmarch on the morning when they saw the knot of struggling figures ahead of them. Because the plains offered less cover than the forest did, they often had to walk until well after the sun was up before finding a place to settle for the day. Owl and Yozerf were playing a game that consisted of tossing a stone back and forth as they walked, while at the same time moving farther and farther apart, so Gless was actually the first to spot the trouble. He drew to a sudden halt, his staff clutched in one hand and his eyes shaded with the other.

"Ahead," he called grimly.

Yozerf caught the stone and held it as he peered in the direction Gless indicated. A slight fold of the land had hidden the other group, and he saw with some dread that they were not very far off. His eyes picked out a donkey hitched to a small cart, a few meager possessions packed into the open bed. Several children were trying to hide behind the cart, while in front of it a man and a woman struggled with four large, scruffy-looking men.

"Bandits," he said grimly.

Gless's face paled, but his mouth hardened with determination. "Let's go."

Startled, Yozerf glanced at him, about to ask if he were going to be so foolhardy as to suggest they get involved. But then his eyes were drawn reluctantly back to the scene: the frightened faces of the children, the man being shoved to the ground by his attackers, the woman trying to bite the dirty hands covering her mouth.

Damn it to Hel.

"Hide," he snapped at Owl, then broke into a run. Gless came after him, moving as quickly as he could.

The bandits looked up at the sound of their approach, and Yozerf again cursed the openness of the plains. With a yell of fury, he pulled his sword from its sheath, praying that the display would cause at least some of the bandits to rethink their attack.

Unfortunately, they were confident, stupid, or desperate. Two of them left off beating the man and closed with Yozerf, who quickly found himself fighting for his life. A moment later, Gless's staff connected solidly with the head of one, the iron globe on the end crunching into bone with terrible force. The brutal death distracted the other bandit, and Yozerf dispatched him with a quick blow to the throat.

Taking advantage of the sudden reduction in the number of bandits, the beaten man had surged to his feet and managed to get in a solid blow with his fist, sending his attacker reeling. The last bandit let go of the woman and started to run to his friend's aid. The woman reached into the cart, came up with an iron skillet, and hurled it after him with surprising accuracy. He staggered, went down ... and did not come back up.

The last remaining bandit scrambled to his feet and ran. Yozerf let him go, deciding that it was not worth the energy to give chase. Turning away, he found himself facing the little group they had just rescued.

The children flocked around their mother's skirts, alternately crying with fear and jabbering with excitement. Although young, the woman had a look of fury and determination on her face that Yozerf privately thought would be enough to quail many a warrior. She draped her arms around her children, but her eyes didn't leave the faces of her rescuers, and Yozerf realized that she had to be wondering if her family had just traded one set of bandits for another.

The man looked the worse for wear; one eye was swelling shut, and blood dribbled down from a nasty cut on his chin. Like the woman, he was painfully young. Light brown hair blew around his shoulders, and the one eye that Yozerf could see was also brown. Moving stiffly, he came to stand before them, not incidentally placing himself between them and his family.

"Thank you," he said warily.

At that moment, Yozerf heard the sound of feet on the grass behind them. Owl rushed up, out of breath and with her eyes shining. "Papa! That was great! You're the best fighter ever!"

Both the man and woman relaxed at the sight of Owl, as if her presence somehow proved that Yozerf and Gless were trustworthy. But when she dashed up to Yozerf instead of Gless and locked her arms around his waist, all the while gleefully recounting the battle as if they might have somehow missed it, their looks turned to curiosity.

"My name is Yozerf. This is my daughter, Owl, and my friend Gless," Yozerf said, wondering as he did so just how hostile their reaction would be.

"Oh." The man scratched his head, looking vaguely puzzled. "Name's Tan. That's my wife, Morwen, and Davyyd, Nest, and Brinya."

Morwen approached, the children clustering behind her as she walked. "Thank you both," she said sincerely. "If you hadn't come along, I don't know what we would have done."

Gless smiled charmingly. "Think nothing of it," he said airily, as if they did nothing but go about rescuing people all day.

"There must be some way we can repay you," Tan said awkwardly.

Yozerf looked pointedly at the donkey and cart. "You need all that you have, I am sure. As Gless said, think no more on it."

Gathering up Owl, he started off.

"Wait a minute!" Tan called after them. They stopped, and he hurried up, casting frequent glances back at his wife. "That is, where are you going?"

"Shalai," Yozerf replied guardedly, wondering what the man could want.

Tan bobbed his head nervously. "Well, ah, we don't really have anywhere to go. We used to have a farm, you know, just a small thing, until it was seized by the king."

Gless's face paled. "Seized by the king?" he echoed, outraged. "Whatever for?"

Tan's mouth flattened into a harsh line. "Food for the soldiers, they said. We told them we would give them whatever they wanted, just leave us the farm, but they wouldn't listen. Morwen managed to convince them to let us take the donkey, the cart, and a few other things, but that was it. Everything else ... the farm I got from my father ... all gone in less than a day."

The smoldering anger within Tan would be a terrible thing if it ever burst into full flame, Yozerf thought. "The new king's rule has not been easy on any of us," he said.

"What I mean is that we have nowhere to go. Shalai sounds like a good destination, though. If we travel together, we have a better chance against bandits." Although he seemed reluctant to admit that he couldn't protect his family by himself, the pleading in Tan's eyes was unmistakable.

Yozerf glanced at Gless, wondering what the human would say. But Gless just held up his hands, as if pushing Yozerf's query away. "Don't look at me—you're the leader of this little expedition."

I am? Startled, Yozerf hesitated a moment before answering. "Very well, then. We will travel together for our mutual protection." *If Tan and Morwen can stomach being led by an Aclyte, that is.*

Tan's broad face broke into a smile of relief. "Just give me a moment to make sure the children are all right and get our things together."

* * * *

So it was a much larger group that started out this time. Because there was no way to conceal the cart, Yozerf abandoned the idea of sleeping during the day and traveling at night. As they walked, the adults shared their mutual stories, or at least parts of them. Yozerf of course said nothing about his Wolfkin nature, only that he had been one of Auglar's retainers who had been separated from the lord during the fall of Segg, and that he had found Owl living alone in the wood, all of her kin dead.

"That was good of you," Tan said unexpectedly, bobbing his head, as he was wont to do. "You know, since she isn't your own kind or anything."

Yozerf's mouth flattened in annoyance, but he swallowed the biting replies that came to mind. At least Tan was on his side. Morwen didn't seem quite as sure, but she said nothing aloud.

As for Owl, she had taken to the other children immediately. They were all younger than she, and she quickly became their leader in both games and chores. Yozerf desperately hoped that she would remember not to say anything about either his Wolfkin nature or the powers he had inherited from his Jonaglir ancestors. He had tried to impress on her from the first that she was never to tell anyone he was a shape changer, but he wasn't sure how reliable a child her age would be at keeping secrets.

But at least if something happens to me now, she has others who would take care of her, he thought. Tan and Morwen both seemed devoted to their children, and when they stopped for the night, Morwen went so far as to sew up a tiny dress for Owl's doll from some rags.

Although Yozerf remained somewhat reserved with the human couple, oddly enough, it seemed only to confirm his status as the leader of the little group. The feeling was both strange and familiar, although it took him almost two days to realize why. The strangeness came from the fact that no one in his life had ever looked to him in such a way. The familiarity was because, for Telmonra, it had been the ordinary course of things.

Whatever else can be said of her, she was a leader, a ruler, he reflected, as they walked over the endless miles of the Kellsmarch. *Perhaps something of that came into me as well?*

The thought was so outside his normal habit of thinking that it seemed insane. He was many things, but a leader of men was not one of them.

Was it?

* * * *

"Are you glad to have other children to play with, little Owl?" Yozerf asked one morning. He had taken the last watch of the night, and Owl had joined him as the sun began to rise. The sky was crossed with swaths of pink and gold, fading to deep blue in the west. A few birds started to sing from the stunted patch of trees that provided a windbreak for the sleeping humans.

Owl yawned hugely and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Dirt streaked the freckles on her nose, and her coppery hair was in dire need of combing. "I suppose. But sometimes I miss the den."

Yozerf smiled. "So do I," he confided. "Now, why don't we—"

He stopped as Owl turned to him. The sunrise illuminated her face, and for a moment he thought it must be a trick of the light. But as he leaned closer, he realized that what he was seeing was truly there.

Owl's eyes, large in her thin face, were mostly the same sky blue that they had always been. But thin tendrils of silver gray had begun to invade the blue, radiating out from the pupils. The streaks were so slight they were barely noticeable ... but they were undeniably there.

Gray. Her eyes are turning gray.

The Jonaglirs were the only Aclytes with gray eyes, but were always born with them, just as they were always born with the magic.

The adoption ceremony. Oh dear gods, what have I done?

Swallowing back the sudden terror in his gut, Yozerf forced the smile back onto his face. "You have mud on your nose," he said by way of explanation. Reaching out, he carefully wiped it off. And wished that he could as easily undo whatever he had done to her.

I'm so sorry. Please, please don't let her come to harm because of this.

"I'm hungry," Owl complained, oblivious to his worry.

"As am I." He stood up, holding one hand out to her. "Come, let us wake the others."

But his fear did not leave him, and he watched her even more carefully after that.

* * * *

Three days after joining up with the human family, they were making their slow way across a portion of the plains west of the Great Trade Route. The land around them looked as if it had once been grazed, but there was no trace of any livestock now, save for the occasional old heap of dry dung. Yozerf began by walking slightly apart, as was his custom, although Owl would frequently spend long stretches of the day at his side, when she was not talking or playing with the other children.

About midmorning, however, Yozerf caught the scent of a human woman on the air and heard the swish of quick footsteps behind him. "Morwen," he said, without bothering to turn around.

She fell in beside him without commenting on his ability to identify her by something other than sight. The day was already getting hot, and a light sheen of sweat plastered her black hair to her forehead. She had tucked up the skirts of her blue dress to keep it from dragging continually through the high grass, and the legs that showed beneath were brown from the sun.

"You're good with her," Morwen said in her blunt way.

"Owl?"

"Yes." She frowned at the horizon, as if it held some secret for her. "I wasn't certain about that at first. I thought that maybe ... you know ... it would be better for both of you to stay with your own kind. But you're good with her."

"I'm glad you approve." *Although you might not, if you knew ... what?*

That I did something to her with my magic? That her eyes are turning as gray as a full-blooded Jonaglir's?

"What were your parents like?" Morwen asked.

He shrugged, not happy with the turn the conversation was taking. "I never knew my father. My mother was ... unorthodox. But she did as well by me as she could, given the circumstances."

"You don't sound like you had a happy childhood."

"No. But, as I said, circumstances are sometimes beyond one's control." He hesitated, then shrugged again. "I understand my mother a little better now, perhaps, having Owl with me. I cannot imagine what I would feel if something happened to her." His mouth tightened into a grim line. "I will see that it does not."

She nodded. "I know. And Tan and I—"

"Stop," Yozerf ordered sharply, coming to a halt himself. Even as they talked, he had been keeping his customary watch on the horizon. There, in the distance, movement caught his eye.

Everyone froze on his command. "Stay here," he said warily, then beckoned to Gless, who had been entertaining the children with a juggling trick.

The two men made their way closer to the shapes Yozerf had seen, although there was no real way of hiding their own presence on the flat land. They stopped as soon as they were close enough to see better, but by that time they also had been seen, for several of the figures that had been sitting down were now on their feet.

"Looks like another family," Gless said. Yozerf grunted agreement, then turned and waved to the rest of their own little band to catch up.

As they drew closer to the other group, sight confirmed what Yozerf's nose had already told him—these were Aclytes, not humans. There were perhaps ten of them altogether, most likely all members of the same clan, and they ranged in age from a baby that looked to be only a few days old to an elder so twisted with arthritis that he could no longer stand up straight. All were dressed in clothing that could have belonged to peasants anywhere, but hardship had left it dirty and tattered. Like Tan and Morwen, they had a cart, but this one was much larger. Unfortunately, they had no animal to pull it, and Yozerf guessed that the younger and stronger travelers must have taken turns between the traces.

As they approached, two young men and a woman came forward, their stances radiating suspicion. All carried makeshift weapons, from a pitchfork to a pruning hook held like a spear in the woman's hand. Dirt darkened their pale skin and made their long hair lank, but their eyes were clear and sharp and unafraid of a fight.

"Well met," Yozerf called when they were within easy distance.

The woman started to say something—then her eyes narrowed sharply and a puzzled frown creased her face. "Yozerf Jonaglir?"

Surprised murmurs broke out among the Aclytes behind her. Startled himself, Yozerf eyed the young woman warily. "Aye. I do not know you, though."

She tossed her head proudly, sending brown hair tumbling back over her shoulders. Her large, canted eyes were violet, a color common among Aclytes, but the fire in them was something he had seen in the gaze of few others. "I am Ji'seth Sharneth," she proclaimed in Aclytese.

"Sharneth?" Yozerf scanned the faces of those behind her again, but did not see the one he looked for. "You are related to Kelayna Sharneth, then?"

"My older sister."

"She is not here?"

Ji'seth's face hardened. "No. She and Sevarin left Lord Auglar's demesne during the winter, hoping to build a new life elsewhere. I do not know what became of her. But she spoke often of you before she left, and I saw you once, at the Hallows Night festival."

"Ah." He considered Gless's tale briefly. "Did the army from Argannon drive you from your homes?"

"What else?" she asked bitterly. "When the mighty fight, do they care that their battlefield is being used to grow someone else's food? Do they care that their horses' hooves tear up the wheat? Do they care that when one side retreats into a village, there are others already living there who don't appreciate having the place burned to the ground to get them out?"

"No, they do not," he agreed sadly.

"But what of you?" Ji'seth's gaze went past him to the cluster of humans behind him, none of whom could understand a word that had been spoken. "Why are you traveling with this human filth? Leave them—you will be welcome among us."

The surge of anger that awoke in him at Ji'seth's offhand dismissal of the humans surprised Yozerf. At one time, after all, he would have agreed with her wholeheartedly. "One of them is my daughter, adopted into my clan," he replied sharply. "As for the rest, one is an old friend, and the others are victims of this war like yourselves."

Ji'seth's eyes narrowed in contempt. "Since when have humans ever been the victims of anything?"

Morwen stepped forward. "I don't know what this bitch is saying, but it's clear enough by her tone that she doesn't much like us," she snapped, glaring balefully at Ji'seth. "I say we move on now and not waste anymore time on the likes of her."

Ji'seth's eyes blazed. "Human scum!" she shouted, switching to the Keld. "It's your kind who have done this to us!"

"Stop this!" Yozerf shouted, shoving himself in between the two women before they could come to blows. He glared at them both, first at Ji'seth, who seemed the most prone to violence, and then at Morwen. "How Fellrant and Jahcgroth would both laugh to see this! *They* steal your homes, *their* war ravages your lands, and yet you can do nothing but attack each other!"

He stepped back, letting contempt and anger show in his voice and face. "We *could* help one another. Seventeen people will be safer together than seven and ten apart. But instead of being sensible, we will savage each other like dogs. Fellrant and Jahcgroth don't even need to do anything more—they can just sit back, and we'll destroy one another for them."

He threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust and stalked off. Morwen called out to him before he had gone more than six paces. "I'm sorry, Yozerf."

He stopped, then slowly turned around and met Ji'seth's gaze. She dropped her eyes first.

"Your words make sense," she admitted reluctantly. "I too am sorry if I spoke hastily. But we've had a hard road."

"Where were you going?" Yozerf asked.

"South. We thought to flee the war in the north."

"Then you are going the wrong way. There are armies in the south as well."

Despair showed in Ji'seth's eyes, and several of her kinfolk cried out. "Then what will we do?"

"We are going to find refuge in Shalai. You can join us—if you can work together and keep a civil tongue in your head." He glanced at Morwen when he spoke the last, and she nodded.

The Aclytes drew apart to make their decision. After all, they had just come down from Kellsjard, and Yozerf was asking them to turn around and make the trip back all over again. It would not be an easy thing to do, he recognized. But, in the end, they had no choice.

"Very well," Ji'seth said, clutching her pruning hook in one hand as if it could lend her strength somehow. "We will do as you ask."

Chapter Nine

The long weeks after they left Kellsjard were filled with despair and darkness for Suchen and her companions. Bereft of any certain destination, they joined the multitudes of other refugees set loose in Jenel, struggling only to live and to stay out of the way of either army. There was some brief talk of joining the ranks of the Jenelese army, if only to try and push out the invaders, but the risk of being recognized seemed too great.

The change in the weather that had come as they stood on Kellsjard's high hill persisted. It began to rain continuously, until plains that would normally have been dust-dry that time of year transformed into vast morasses of mud and standing water. Crops drowned, their roots rotting in the muddy puddles. The temperature dropped until it seemed more like fall than summer, and Suchen felt anxiety touch her heart.

They avoided others, although they occasionally drew near humans when their need was great. They tried to approach a few undisturbed settlements, offering work in exchange for food, but times had made people suspicious of strangers, and more often than not they went hungry. Brenwulf hunted for them as best he could, but alone, he could not bring down any large animals. Twice they were reduced to stealing a pig or a calf from some unlucky farmer in the dead of night.

Auglar became a pale shadow of himself, and eventually his depression seemed to draw Buudi down after him. Brenwulf was angry most of the time, although at what, Suchen didn't know. But Londah settled into a kind of stillness, as if their journey and the despair of the others had no power to touch her.

"I am waiting," she said, when Suchen mentioned it to her.

Suchen frowned, not understanding. They were sheltering in the ruins of an abandoned shepherd's hut, far out on the plains. Outside, the wind screamed and the rain fell in sheets. The little building stank of mold from the continual damp. Hunger gnawed at Suchen's belly, and her hair hung lank and dirty about her face. "Waiting for what?"

Londah leaned forward, balancing on the balls of her feet, her hands resting lightly on her knees. In the dim light, her gray eyes gleamed like chips of diamond. "I don't know. That is part of what it is to wait—not to anticipate the future, only to exist in the moment." She paused, as if considering her words carefully. "This is a moment of transition, daughter. The instant between heartbeats, when we are not reaching for anything. So I practice with the sword and my other weapons, I search for food, I seek shelter ... and I wait."

"But what if there is nothing to wait for?"

A faint smile flickered across Londah's face. "There is always something, daughter. Change is inevitable, whether we wish it or no. So we will not wait forever. But we do not know what form change will take when it comes upon us. We cannot prepare for it. We can only wait for it to be revealed."

Silence fell between them for a long time. Outside, the continual splash of rain formed a wall of sound that they had become accustomed to days ago. At last, Suchen stirred.

"Then I will wait with you," she said.

In the gloom, Londah smiled.

* * * *

Rain dripped off Yozerf's hood, forming a continuous waterfall in front of his face, and he cursed the

weather for what seemed like the thousandth time. Taking a moment to shake some of the rain from his cloak, he glanced back at the column strung out behind him, a gesture that had become automatic over the last few days.

It had probably been inevitable that a large group like theirs would attract others to it. Aclytes and humans both had met them on the road and joined with them. Family groups, for the most part, looking for protection and reassured by the presence of other women and children among them. Their stories were often the same: driven off their lands by invading armies, their villages burned for suspicion of housing traitors, their fields seized to feed the ravenous soldiers. But just when Yozerf had thought there was nothing left to shock him, they came upon a group of refugees from Vorslava, the keep that was Fellrant's seat of power before he became king.

Traditionally, a keep existed not only to house the lord of a demesne and his troops, but also to shelter the peasantry during times of war. Thinking that they would be safe within the high walls of Vorslava, many people had gone to the keep to demand their due. But instead, the warriors within had turned them away, saying that there was not enough food for so many. Many servants had also been turned out—Vorslava now stood manned only by her lord's soldiers.

The injustice of it burned Yozerf's heart. For what else had the peasants labored year after year, sending a good portion of their own harvest to supply the keep, if not for protection in just such a time as this? Instead Vorslava hoarded the keep's granaries like a jealous miser, condemning the hands that had wrested the grain from the soil to death and starvation on the road.

Should I have expected otherwise? he asked himself bitterly. *Since when has it ever been different? The powerful grow strong however they can, and the weak suffer for it.*

A couple of children splashed past him, breaking into a run at the sound of a high, strident voice that boomed out over the column like that of a battlefield commander. Yozerf followed the children with his gaze until they reached Grilka's side, where they stood with eyes downcast while she interrogated them about the matter of a missing doll.

Praise the gods for Grilka, he thought wryly. They had come upon her perhaps a week ago. She was without doubt the largest woman he had ever seen in his life—not fat, but with bones that would have been better suited to a bull. She had initially greeted Yozerf by stepping in front of a gaggle of about twenty children and swinging a woodsman's axe in one meaty hand, as though it were a twig. None of the children were hers, Yozerf gathered, but were all orphans that she had taken under her wing. Some of them were scarred and maimed; others had a darkness in their eyes that he recognized only too well. Grilka was fiercely protective of each and every one of them, and it had taken some time to convince her of his good intentions.

Once she had become a part of the group, Grilka had gathered other orphans to her. She also kept a watchful eye on the young ones claimed by families, apparently having decided that it was her lot in life to protect anyone under the age of sixteen. Yozerf watched her carefully the first few days, looking for any signs of abuse, but although she was firm when needful, Grilka had no cruelty in her. He made a point to speak to her after that, giving her a few suggestions on how to deal with the most damaged of her charges, and after that she had given him her unquestioning support.

Yozerf sighed and turned back to the vast expanse of plains ahead of him. That he even needed her support seemed so bizarre that he could scarcely credit it. Even he was not entirely certain how he had become the acknowledged leader of a group of more than a hundred Aclytes and humans. But, now that he had, he took the responsibility seriously. For the most part, he had only to point them all in the right direction, break up fights, and identify and quell any troublemakers. As was to be expected, there were

some who tried to take advantage of the group, stealing food or trying to bully others into giving over their possessions. These Yozerf exiled immediately and without qualm, although they seldom went quietly. The first few times he had actually been reduced to fighting them himself; but he soon found himself backed up by enough men and women willing to do battle themselves that the troublemakers left without an exchange of anything more violent than words.

The quiet would not last; he knew that. One disadvantage of a group their size was that it would inevitably attract the attention of bandits or, gods forbid, one of the armies. Bandits he thought they could handle. But a contingent of armed soldiers on horseback would be the end of them.

Food was a constant worry. They foraged off the countryside, rooting through the occasional burned and destroyed settlements they came upon. But there were many hungry mouths to feed, and he knew that such meager rations would not hold out forever. What he would do when things became desperate ... he did not know.

You could hunt. You could have the others hunt.

Reluctantly, he cast another glance over his shoulder. Behind him and to the right, a small family group struggled valiantly along in a close knot. Their leader was a grizzled old veteran by the name of Wulfgar, who claimed to have lost his left arm to a wound taken while fighting raiders with Lord Auglar. Yozerf, however, suspected that the injury was due to a trap rather than a sword, for Wolfkin seldom served in armies.

He had not had much contact with Wulfgar's family. Wulfgar was old, and his daughter and her husband were the king and queen wolves of their little pack. The husband had bristled and postured quite a bit, disliking the idea of submitting to another Wolfkin male, but his wife had put her foot down and insisted on the safety of numbers. Yozerf gathered that they had encountered Red Guard in the northern woods, and had fled south in an attempt to get away from those other shape changers. Now they were here, surrounded by those who would kill them in a moment if their true natures were to become known.

Gods, what a disaster this is.

Some days, Yozerf thought he must be fooling himself to imagine that he could hold all of these people together long enough to reach Shalai. Their progress would have been slow even under good circumstances, but with the constant rain, it had dwindled to a crawl that made him despair of crossing the border before winter set in. How could he possibly keep them fed and safe that long? Why had he ever undertaken such a mad course in the first place? If he had half a mind, he would take Owl and Gless, set off on his own, and leave the rest of them to fare as best as they could. He owed them nothing, after all. Many of the humans would probably have spit on him had they met under other circumstances. Why put himself through even a moment's pain and worry for their sakes?

He had no good answer, except that leaving them would likely mean their deaths. Perhaps he was simply a fool. Either way, he was unable to turn his back on their obvious suffering. He looked at Grilka's scarred orphans and wondered what would have been different, had even one person taken pity on him during the long months when he had lived on the streets and sold his body for food and the most meager shelter. He saw the hope in Ji'seth's eyes, the same hope that her sister had once had, as if his dead lineage were a symbol and a reminder of everything their race had once been. He watched while Tan and Morwen played with their children by the fire at night, aware of their gratitude for this moment that would not have come, had Yozerf and Gless left them to the mercies of the bandits. And he smiled when Owl proudly pointed him out to the new children and proclaimed, "That's my papa!"

So he stayed.

* * * *

The question of food was becoming dire when the Red Guard finally came.

Most of the supplies that people had brought with them had run out; only what they had scavenged from ruined settlements and the land around them had kept starvation at bay. This food was collected and rationed equally to all, and any attempts to get more than one's proper share were punished swiftly. Even so, Yozerf could hear the grumbles and mutterings build as people wondered what they would eat. He expected it and could not hold it against them, even when some began to blame it on his leadership. He was not even certain they were wrong; perhaps, if he had been a born leader, he would already have found a solution. In fact, it surprised him that the Wolfkin remained—surely they would be better off on their own, at least in terms of hunting food.

Then they came upon what seemed at first glance to be a boon—a deserted village, surrounded by fields hosting an army of weeds and a few straggly vegetables. Whether the trap had been set for anyone who came by, or more specifically for outriders of Jenel's army who might take the opportunity to loot, Yozerf never knew.

At the sight of the gardens and what looked to be an undisturbed granary, a grateful cry went up all along the column. Several people began to rush forward, most of them youths, all yelling eagerly. Annoyance surged through Yozerf, and he broke into a lope himself, shouting at them to slow down and wait for everyone else. Some stopped obediently, but others rushed towards the granary, grabbing the heavy doors and flinging them open to the sunlight.

Something stirred within the darkness inside the windowless building. Yozerf caught a brief glimpse of leathery wings unfolding, of the feral gleam of blood-red eyes. The scent of mice, grain, and something alien, acidic and dry as dust, washed over him. Instinct awoke, and he felt a snarl of rage building in his chest.

The youths who had opened the door stumbled back, and one made a futile attempt at hurling it shut. The heavy oak slammed back open, catching him in the chest and sending him flying back to lie motionless. A fanged, gargoyle-like head emerged into the sunlight, followed by a huge, muscular body wide a hide the color of blood. Then another appeared, and a third.

Screams broke out on all sides as people beheld the horror they had released. The Red Guard grinned at the terror they inspired, lips writhing back to reveal rows of razor-sharp fangs. With a deep roar, the first of them leapt forward, wings unfurling, and came down on one of the youths, sinking claws deep into his belly and chest.

Chaos erupted among the refugees. Some fled, heedless of their fellows, while others stood as if turned to stone. Grilka's loud voice rang out, calling the children to her, and Yozerf spared a moment to look for Owl, his heart in his mouth. Then gray shapes hurtled past him, their snarls splitting the air, and the Wolfkin fought back.

A howling, growling whirlwind, they fell on the first Red Guard. It bellowed its rage, striking at the lean, gray shapes harrying it, but they clung stubbornly. Yozerf felt the wolf rise in him, the instinct to join the battle almost overwhelming his good sense, as it had overwhelmed that of the others. But he forced it back, swallowed a growl, and drew his sword instead. Turning a howl into a battle cry, he sprang forward, slashing brutally at the second Red Guard before it had a chance to come to the aid of its fellow.

His charge broke the paralysis that had fallen over the rest. Gless came after him, swinging his heavy staff like a mace. Ji'seth followed, wielding her pruning hook, and an army of farmers-turned-warriors ran on

her heels. Within moments, two of the Red Guard found themselves beset by swords, axes, pitchforks, and anything else that came to hand.

One of them knew when to run. With a startled yelp, it leapt skyward, its wings battering its assailants. For the other two, it was too late. The Wolfkin brought down their quarry, and the third Guard, its wings rent by Ji'seth's hook, died beneath the combined blows of humans and Aclytes. The lifeless alien bodies wavered, dissolving into red mist that sank slowly into the earth.

Silence fell over the battlefield. The Wolfkin drew into a tight knot. Some of them took back their human forms, their eyes staring desperately at those around them, while the rest snarled soft warnings. Wulfgar's daughter reached out a hand, and her young child ran to her, clinging desperately to her breast, perhaps sensing the wall of animosity building around them.

Tan stared at them. Red Guard blood decorated his forehead, and he scrubbed at its acid sting, even as he kept his eyes fixed on the small clan. "Wolfkin," he said, his voice flat and emotionless.

"Aye." Another man lifted an axe and took a threatening step forward. "Demons. There are demons among us!"

"No!" Yozerf stepped in between them, blocking the Wolfkin from harm with his own body. His heart pounded in his chest, and fear squeezed tight around his throat. Even as he spoke, he saw distrust bloom in the eyes before him, and knew that his decision was likely to cost him all he had gained.

Tan's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why not? Yozerf, they're Wolfkin! Monsters!"

Yozerf took a deep, calming breath. "They are not monsters," he said, forcing his voice to remain reasonable.

"You can't mean to defend them!"

"And why not? *Think*, damn you! How long have they been with us? Weeks? Who have they harmed in that time? Anyone?" He raised his eyes and gestured at the crowd. "Come now! Any who had a complaint against them more than an hour ago step forward! What are you waiting for?"

Silence fell. A few people shuffled uneasily, but at least they were listening. It was all he could ask for.

"Whose babies have they eaten? Who have they bitten and turned into wolves? No one. Yet they have not changed from who—from what—they were. If they are Wolfkin now, they were Wolfkin last week and the week before that. I see no evidence that they are evil, or monsters, or anything of the sort. Do you?"

Again, silence. Then Tan shuffled uncertainly and gave Yozerf a pleading look. "But what if they were just pretending? How can you know that they won't hurt us?"

Because I'm one of them. But he could not make himself say it. "The same way that I know you won't, Tan. Or you, or you, or you." He pointed randomly at the crowd. "By using my judgment and my sense, such as it is. Could I be wrong? I suppose. Tan could pick up an axe and murder me in my sleep this very night."

The idea of the mild-mannered Tan becoming a deranged killer brought a smattering of laughter from the crowd. Encouraged, Yozerf continued. "I'm saying we should not be so quick to judge. Wulfgar and his family have done nothing wrong—indeed, they defended us against the Red Guard, at the risk of their own lives! Forget the rumors you've heard, the superstitions you've been given, and go with your own knowledge instead."

For a moment no one said anything. Then Gless spoke up. "Can they hunt?"

The gods bless you, Gless. Yozerf cast a look back at Wulfgar, who cleared his throat and nodded. "Aye. There are deer, rabbits, other things we might be able to bring down."

"Then do it. Today." He didn't have to tell them what depended on their ability to find game fast.

Most of them went, while Wulfgar remained behind with the younger members of the pack. Hoping against hope that he could pull this off, Yozerf turned back to the crowd.

"If anyone wants to leave, wait until we have gathered what we can from this village, take your share, and go," he said levelly. "I will not force anyone to stay if they truly cannot abide this."

No one answered him, although he saw them talking amongst themselves as they spread out to scour the abandoned village for anything useful. Yozerf wondered what had happened to the inhabitants. Had Argannese troops forced them out? Killed them? There were no bodies, but the Red Guard stationed here would not have left carrion within range of their keen noses, so that proved nothing. There were no obvious signs of violence, either, but again that proved nothing—no matter what their ultimate fate, he did not believe that an entire village would willingly abandon their homes.

As he watched the gatherers with careful eyes, Owl came up to him and leaned against his side. Yozerf put an arm around her thin shoulders, hugging her tight. "Those monsters were scary," she said.

"I know. They're called Red Guard. Jahcgroth commands them." He paused. "Did you run and hide with Grilka like I told you?"

She nodded, and that alone told him how much the Red Guard had frightened her. "Do you think they'll come back?"

"No. We drove them off." He squeezed her shoulders gently. "No matter how fearsome they look, they are only mortal, little Owl. They can be killed. They can change their shape to look human, but they have no other magic that I've ever seen."

It wasn't much, but he hoped it might at least ease her fears. She thought about it awhile, then turned to another topic. "Why is everyone so scared of the Wolfkin?"

Yozerf glanced around automatically, making certain that no one else was in earshot. Owl had been surprisingly good about keeping his secrets, and he suspected that he knew why. "You can answer that yourself, Owl. Didn't your mother tell you tales of fearsome Wolfkin, waiting to devour anyone who strayed within their grasp?"

"I guess." She looked up at him, and her blue eyes were troubled. "I was a little scared when I saw you in the woods," she confessed, dropping her voice to a whisper. "But you looked so sick and helpless that I felt sorry for you."

Yozerf smiled slightly. "I was that," he agreed. "Give it time. Play with the young cubs, if you like them, and perhaps others will come to see that they mean no more harm than anyone else."

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "I hope so. I love you, Papa."

He grinned and ruffled her hair, heart lightened despite everything. "I love you, too, Owl."

* * * *

The Wolfkin brought a deer back with them, neatly dressed and ready to be cooked and eaten. It was

not much, but it might serve to turn some hearts towards them, at least for a while. Adversity made strange friends, Yozerf knew—the last year of his life had been proof enough of that.

As he had predicted, a number of people left the group, muttering of demons and unwilling to stay near what they viewed as remorseless killers, no matter the evidence otherwise. But in truth, Yozerf was surprised at how many remained. Some no doubt made the decision out of desperation, and he knew that he would have to spend the next few days on guard, waiting for the flare of repressed hostilities. But the Wolfkin were not totally isolated afterwards; a few humans even went so far as to approach and thank them for the venison.

For a moment, Yozerf let himself believe that this venture was not utterly hopeless after all; perhaps they would make the Shalai border before winter, before they all starved, before they turned on one another. But then he remembered all the odds against them, and he knew that hope was slim indeed.

Chapter Ten

For the next month, Yozerf's little army of refugees toiled across the face of the Kellsmarch. The weather turned, growing colder, even as the rain continued with a relentlessness he had never before experienced. Progress slowed to a crawl as they foraged and the Wolfkin hunted; even so, faces grew thinner and tempers shortened. As before, others joined them; but now they were told up front with whom—and with what—they would be traveling. At that, some chose to go their own way, but others stayed for the promise of food and the dubious safety of numbers. By the time Yozerf first smelled autumn on the breeze, their ranks had grown to well over a hundred.

That morning dawned cool and crisp, and for once, blessedly free of rain, though the overcast sky warned of more to come before nightfall. Yozerf rose and went to stand on a low hillock, scanning the horizon warily. As he stood there, a few of those who had become friends of a sort joined him. Gless, of course, and Ji'seth, Wulfgar, and Tan. They were all levelheaded, and he trusted their judgment, though he did not in truth know what to make of them.

Not that he had ever known what to make of those who seemed inclined to call him friend, he reflected bleakly. That was, after all, the very shortcoming that had cost him everything in Segg.

"Autumn is coming," Yozerf said, knowing that only Wulfgar could smell it as well as he. "We still have a long way to go."

"How far?" Tan asked, and Yozerf caught the edge of nervousness in his voice. None of them, at least, were under any illusions as to what would happen if winter caught them on the Kellsmarch.

"We've been going almost due north," Yozerf said slowly, trying to picture a map of Jenel in his mind. He had wandered it for so long, outcast that he had been, that his feet knew where they stood with an almost unerring instinct. "We are probably halfway between Vorslava and the Great Trade Route. To reach Shalai, we need to turn east soon."

"But that will mean crossing the Route," Wulfgar pointed out. He scratched at the stump of his arm thoughtfully.

"I hardly see how we can avoid it."

"The armies—either one or both—will be on it. It's the easiest way to move a large force fast."

Ji'seth narrowed her eyes. "Then if we must fight our way through, so be it! I am not afraid."

Yozerf sighed mentally. Having had a taste of combat, Ji'seth's solution to everything now was to kill it. "If we were all warriors, we could do so," he said. "However, as you may have noticed, most of these people are anything but."

"We could keep going north to Maak," Gless suggested.

But Yozerf shook his head. "No. Everything we've heard suggests that Jahcgroth brought his troops south through Maak. Which makes sense—it is the only way into Jenel that doesn't involve going over mountains. I don't know what agreements the emperor made with Maak's king, but I doubt that Maak will fare any better than Jenel in the long run—if it hasn't fallen already. Shalai is our only hope."

Wulfgar shrugged philosophically. "Then we don't have a choice. East to the Route it is."

Yozerf nodded. But as he turned to survey the camp and the many lives that depended on his decision,

he knew in his heart that they would not make it in time. Winter would catch them before they crossed the border, would catch them without shelter or food stores.

But what else is there? he wondered in despair. If Kellsjard had stood, he would have taken them there, but the keep was gone. If only there was somewhere else he could take them, somewhere with walls and granaries. *But there isn't. And there is no use wishing for what you cannot have.*

* * * *

A few days after the decision was made to turn east, they came across a battlefield.

It was hard to tell how long ago the battle had been fought, but Yozerf thought uneasily that the bloated, rain-soaked corpses were not as old as he would have liked. The stench of unburied bodies had come to them at some distance, and so he ordered the main part of their number to stay behind, while he and some of the more able fighters went on ahead. When they came upon the field, he was glad that he had left Owl in Grilka's care.

The skirmish had been relatively small, he supposed, a few hundred warriors altogether. Why no one had remained to bury the dead he could not guess. They lay rotting in the rain, a depressing jumble of men and horses. Carrion eaters had been at work on them already, and their pallid, swollen features had been marked by the sharp beaks of birds. Flies hummed and buzzed in an evil cloud, and the stink of maggots was almost overwhelming.

Tan went pale and looked as if he might vomit. "Oh gods," was all he could say. Even the experienced fighters among them looked grim.

"Should we bury them?" Gless asked uneasily.

Yozerf shook his head. "There are too many. But we should see if there is anything among them that we can use."

Tan went even whiter, if that were possible. "You want to steal from the dead?"

Wulfgar clapped his only hand on Tan's shoulder. "They don't need it anymore, lad," he said gently. "So long as we are respectful in our search, I don't see as they'll mind."

A few others muttered uneasily nonetheless. Still, when Yozerf started down the hill, they followed slowly. The task was too much for some, and they stumbled away vomiting before they even reached the bodies. Yozerf tried to hold his breath and ignore the writhing of maggots, but his own stomach rolled over queasily.

The dead were dressed in the colors of both Argannon and Jenel. There had been Aclytes among the Argannese forces, Yozerf noted, as he scouted about for any packs or possessions that hadn't been fouled by the decaying bodies. He left any food he found, uncertain about what effect the pervasive miasma of rot might have had on it, but tents, spare clothing, and weapons he took in plenty.

When they had gathered everything that might be of value, they went back to the main party and left the area, taking a wide detour around the battlefield as they did so. But the things he had seen haunted Yozerf for the rest of the day, and that evening he found himself sitting by his fire with Owl while she ate, unable to take a bite for himself.

Gless appeared at the edge of the firelight, the flames picking out the gold in his hair. The rest of the camp stretched out behind him, nothing more than a few spots of fire in the great darkness. Tonight, some of the tents they had taken from the dead soldiers rose up against the stars, mostly housing families with

young children. Grilka's deep laugh bellowed out, startling the night birds into silence.

"We need to talk," Gless said quietly.

Yozerf gestured to the ground on the other side of the fire, and Gless sat down. Owl yawned sleepily, and Yozerf found her comb and set about untangling her hair for the night. In some other world it might have been a peaceful family scene, he thought ruefully. "About the battlefield?" he asked at length.

"Did you see any dead bodies?" Owl asked with the morbid enthusiasm of a child.

Yozerf sighed. "Yes, Owl. More than we wanted."

"Why couldn't I go?"

"You wouldn't have liked it. Now hush for a moment, please."

Gless looked unusually grim, all of his good humor gone. "That was just a skirmish we came across, but where there are a few troops there are usually more. We could be in trouble."

"I know. But I don't know what else to do."

"Damn. I was hoping you had some brilliant solution that you weren't sharing with me."

"I don't." Yozerf's hands paused on Owl's hair as all the unspoken fears that haunted his nights bloomed in him. "I don't have any solutions, Gless. I don't know how we're going to get to Shalai before winter, I don't know how we're going to avoid the armies while we cross Jenel, I don't know how we're all going to find food."

Owl tilted her head back. "You'll think of something, Papa," she said confidently.

If only her confidence were justified. She spoke as if he could move mountains, or perform miracles. Gods, he hated the thought that he would not measure up to her expectations.

"We need to be careful," Yozerf said at last. "I want scouts out on all sides. The last thing we need is to walk into a confrontation without any warning. I know there are plenty of restless young men and women we can use—Hendel's oldest son, for one."

Gless nodded. "I'll see that it gets done, then. Ji'seth will help, even if she doesn't volunteer herself."

"Thank you, Gless."

Gless stood up, leaning heavily on his staff. A crooked smile lit his face briefly. "At your command, my lord," he said, and disappeared back into the night.

* * * *

As Yozerf had predicted, there was no shortage of youths eager to volunteer as scouts. It got them away from their families for the day and allowed them to feel important at the same time. Yozerf also decided to rearrange the group into something resembling order. Before, people had walked where they would, spending time with friends or avoiding enemies. But with a sense that danger was too near for comfort, Yozerf ordered them into formation: all noncombatants in the middle with their supplies, surrounded by a ring of those who thought they could fight. For the most part, all the "warriors" in the protective ring were nothing but farmers who had never killed anyone in their lives. Still, they were all the defense to be had.

Yozerf had expected some grumbling at the change, but everyone seemed to take it instead as a signal that they were in peril, and an air of watchfulness fell over the column. So they traveled for three days,

drawing ever closer to the Great Trade Route. The scouts saw no one except other refugees, and there were no further signs of battle. In the end, Yozerf relaxed slightly and allowed himself the thought that they might cross the Route without incident after all.

Of course he was wrong.

On the morning of the fourth day, the faint line of the Route came into view, a dusty tan ribbon lying across the face of the plains, disappearing into the distance. Owl was walking with Yozerf at the moment, telling him a rather garbled story about wizards and dragons, which apparently she was making up on the spot. When she paused for breath, he pointed. "See? There's the road."

Owl shaded her eyes with one small hand. "There's no one on it," she said, not particularly impressed.

"No. Things are different now. There was a time when it would have been teeming with caravans during this season. Merchants once traveled it constantly, taking furs and timber from Shalai, and fish and herbs from Maak, and bearing spices and rare perfumes back with them from Undah. Bandits would lie in wait for them, hoping that a small or poorly guarded caravan would pass so that they could make their fortunes." He did not add that he had engaged in banditry himself once or twice, when he'd seen some rich *n'ykar* who looked like he deserved having his purse lightened.

"Have you ever been to Undah?" Owl asked, pulling him out of his dark thoughts.

"No. But they are said to raise the finest horses in the world there."

Owl's eyes lit up, as he had expected. "Oh! Can we go there? And get a horse?"

"Perhaps someday."

"When?"

Yozerf opened his mouth to tell her that it would likely be some time, when a faint shout came to him. Startled, he turned and saw one of the scouts running hard from the south. He couldn't make out the youth's expression at a distance, but everything about his body radiated fear.

"Riders!" the boy screamed. "Riders!"

Even as the scout cried out his warning, a dark mass of horsemen crested the horizon. They were on the youth in a moment, and he fell, disappearing beneath the iron-shod hooves of warhorses. The purple-and-black colors of King Fellrant's house showed on tabards and streamed proudly from a banner, and for a wild instant Yozerf thought that they might be spared, that the riders might simply take what they wanted from their stores and leave the refugees alone. Then he saw the foremost riders lower their spears, and he knew that all hope was lost.

"Form up! Children to the center!" Yozerf shouted. He grabbed Owl's arms, his heart wrenching at the fear on her face. "Go to Grilka!"

"But you—"

"Now!" he roared, half-mad with the terror that she would be hurt. Owl flinched at his shout, but then turned and ran, her short legs making for the slight protection that Grilka offered in the center of the column.

Ji'seth, Wulfgar, Tan, and Gless all materialized at Yozerf's side as if by magic. The rest of the fighters fell into a desperate line, putting themselves between the riders and the noncombatants. Some of them held

swords and spears scavenged from the dead soldiers days before, but many were armed with nothing more than pitchforks and rusty scythes.

The riders thundered down on them, and the heavy hooves of their horses shook the very earth. Yozerf caught a glimpse of pitiless eyes and gleaming swords, of blowing manes and foam-flecked hides. Then the line was on them.

The Wolfkin howled, and gray shapes darted past Yozerf. The horses went mad, spurred by shape-shifter magic, and the ordered cavalry charge turned into chaos. Soldiers were flung to the ground and trampled, while panicked steeds, suddenly become unmanageable, carried others off. A ragged cheer burst from the refugees, and for a moment Yozerf thought that they might have some hope after all.

A horn blew, regrouping the soldiers on foot, and they charged grimly towards the ragtag refugees who had dared to defy them, even if only for a moment. Bracing himself, Yozerf raised his stolen sword and caught the first blow.

The world narrowed in, consisting only of himself and those who fought directly to either side. Gless staved in a skull with his mace; blood and brains splattered his face like gruesome war paint. To Yozerf's other side, Ji'seth began to howl something that some part of his mind identified as an ancient Cadean war song. She stabbed and hacked with a poleax that had replaced her pruning hook, her eyes narrowed with grim determination.

The air filled with the stink of blood and entrails, with the screams of the wounded and dying. It seemed to go on forever and for mere moments, fear and desperation playing tricks with time until Yozerf no longer knew anything beyond the fact that his arms ached and his mouth tasted of blood. A momentary pause came in the fighting directly around him, and Yozerf belatedly became aware of what was happening elsewhere.

The line had been breached, experienced soldiers cutting down untried farmers like wheat before the scythe. They were among the carts now, overturning what they could, killing the donkeys and mules in their traces, bearing struggling women to the ground. Grilka let out a mighty roar and took off the head of one soldier with a single blow from her axe. Children cowered behind her, beneath one of the carts, but there were more soldiers coming from the other side now, and Grilka could not defend against them all.

Time seemed to slow. A horrible realization swept over Yozerf: they were dying. These people who had—mistakenly it seemed—looked to him for leadership were dying. *His* people, damn it all, and so every drop of their spilled blood was on *his* hands, because he had failed to protect them.

One of Telmonra's memories rose up unexpectedly in his mind, like a clear bubble bursting atop a stream. Very small and far off, he could see the mountains of Caden, could see the dragons on the wind. The dragons had once been Aclytes—had, in fact, been Jonaglir like him. They had given up everything, allowed their bodies and minds to be unalterably transformed, in order to protect their homeland. Their people.

For once, the wolf in him agreed, the instincts of pack meshing surprisingly well with the heritage of blood sorcerers who had ruled a kingdom for almost three thousand years. The screams of his people sounded in his ears, burned in his blood, and in a moment of perfect clarity and desperation, he knew what he had to do.

The magic rose in him, far more sluggish than it had been when Telmonra had shared his mind, but there nonetheless. Peripherally, he was aware of a group of soldiers charging him, of Ji'seth shrieking a warning, but it all seemed distant and unimportant compared to the fire and the wind filling his brain, drumming in his ears, clawing at his throat.

He let go of it, felt the fire change from a thing of the mind to something real. The closing soldiers ignited, their hair going up in an instant, their clothes charring to ash under their armor. They screamed and flailed, and the smell of roasting flesh joined the other stench of the battlefield.

And, having breached the dam with that, Yozerf let the rest of it go as well. The wind flattened the soldiers, flung them from their feet, left them vulnerable to their would-be victims. Fire leapt and darted, finding hair and flesh and cloth. They began to run, to panic, but there were still so *many* of them.

Magic poured from him like blood from a wound, taking vitality with it just as surely. Wind hollowed his bones, and fire heated his scream of rage and pain. His blood seemed to boil, to turn to liquid gold, to flame, until there was nothing left of him at all, just a glass shell shaped by the wind and filled with fire.

Then his strength gave out. The flames died, the wind fell back, and he found himself suddenly in a body made of lead, too heavy to support. Dazed, he dropped to his knees as the world spun crazily around him. With an effort greater than any he had ever known, he forced himself to look around, to see that the king's forces were scattered or dead. Gray shapes formed a loose circle around him, some drawing closer hesitantly, and he could taste their fear on the wind. Then the weight of his body became too great, and he collapsed into darkness.

Chapter Eleven

Yozerf opened eyes that felt filled with sand. Canvas stretched above him, flapping in the wind, and he stared at it without comprehension. Weakness seemed to have settled over him, and his throat burned with thirst. For a moment, his mind was unable to piece together sight and sensation, and he wondered if he had been ill, and if so, who would have troubled themselves to take care of him. Then he remembered the battle and what he had done, and he sat up with a short oath.

The abrupt movement was almost too much; dizziness swept over him in a wave. A small form jumped up from beside his makeshift bed of dirty blankets and furs, and a moment later light streamed into the tent. He heard Owl's high voice lifted in a squeal: "He's awake! He's awake!"

Yozerf looked around blearily. He was lying in one of the tents they had taken from the battlefield, he decided. A second pallet took up the space not used by his bed, and his sword lay atop his neatly folded cloak. Other than that, the tent was depressingly bare.

The tent flap was flung back again, and Gless entered, followed by Owl. Although she had a shallow scratch on one cheek, Yozerf saw that she was unharmed, and the overwhelming relief that followed nearly sent him back down. Face beaming, she scrambled onto his lap, locking her arms around him in a tight hug. He hugged her back, wondering what it all meant.

"What's happened?" he managed to ask, despite the fact that his mouth felt parched.

Gless unhooked his water flask from his belt and passed it to Yozerf, who drank greedily. "Not much," he said. "Which is good, since you've been napping like a sluggard for the last two days."

Two days? Yozerf thought, horrified. He wondered suddenly if the magic might have killed him if he had kept it up much longer. "What happened? The soldiers?"

"All gone, and we've seen nothing more of them," Gless confirmed. He grinned, the expression taking years off his face. "Thanks to you, of course. I must say, you don't do anything by half-measure, do you?"

A faint smile touched Yozerf's mouth, despite everything. "No. So everyone knows?"

"That you're a sorcerer? Yes. It was rather difficult not to notice."

Yozerf sighed and wearily raked a hand back through his tangled hair. Oddly enough, the thought came to him that he truly and deeply wished for a bath. "What's the mood in the camp? Or are we all that's left?"

Gless hesitated, then shrugged. "Some left. I know that won't surprise you. Bad enough wandering around the countryside with Wolfkin, but to be led by an Aclytese sorcerer ... Well, you can imagine what they said."

"Well enough," Yozerf agreed wryly. Because Owl was there, he did not speak his initial thought: that he was surprised to have ever waked at all. If he had been able to consider it beforehand, he would have expected them to cut his throat while he lay helpless.

"But I think you'll be surprised at the number who remained," Gless went on, suddenly serious. "Those soldiers meant to kill us all, Yozerf. The gods alone know why—what harm could a bunch of refugees do them? But for whatever reason, they decided that we deserved death, and we would have gotten it if you hadn't acted. Even those who left couldn't deny that."

Yozerf sighed, feeling suddenly old and tired. "I had no choice. It was an act of desperation, not something they should be grateful for."

"You're wrong."

Gless's blue eyes fixed on Yozerf's face with an expression the Aclyte could not quite name. The weight of Owl's gaze also rested on him, and for a moment he felt like a wolf in a trap. So he ruffled Owl's hair and kissed her forehead to break the moment. "I suppose I should see how bad it is, then," he said lightly.

That proved to be easier said than done. Just getting to his feet left Yozerf feeling perilously weary, and the tent spun wildly around him. Cursing his exhausted body, he forced himself to stand straight and not show any sign of weakness. Gless might be optimistic about the reception Yozerf was sure to face, but the years had taught him better, and he knew there was a good chance that things would turn ugly. Steeling himself against rejection, Yozerf took a deep breath and stepped out of the tent.

They were waiting for him. The entire camp had turned out to greet him, and his first thought was that Gless had been right. Two-thirds of their number remained, a solid wall of humans, Aclytes, and Wolfkin, and an unexpected pride touched him to see them there.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Ji'seth took a quick step forward. She held her poleax in her hand, and her violet eyes shone with a fervent light. Then she dropped to one knee and bowed her head.

"I swear my life and my honor to your service, my lord," she said, her voice carrying clear over the silent gathering.

Shock went through him like cold water, clearing the last of the fog from his mind. "No, Ji'seth," he said, trying to keep back the old bitterness. "Caden has been dead for three hundred years. Let it go."

She did not raise her head. "And I say to you that you are my true lord. I will follow you to the ends of the earth. I pledge my life to yours. My service is yours, whether in war or in peace, in brightest day or darkest night, in youth or age, plague or health. Command me, lord, and I will do."

There was a long pause, while Yozerf tried to think what to say. Before he could gather any words, Tan stepped forward to stand by Ji'seth—then he, too, dropped to one knee. "My lord," he said.

Wulfgar followed suit. And then, one by one, Aclyte, human, and Wolfkin, the crowd knelt. The murmur of their voices swearing allegiance was like the wind over the plains, and it pierced Yozerf like a knife. For a long moment, he could say nothing for the tightness of his throat.

"You saw what I am capable of," he managed at last. Emotions warred in him: pride, fear, affection, and dread. "And the cost that it exacts from me. But I swear that whatever power I may have, I will never use it to harm anyone under my protection. Rather, it is yours, as I am yours. I will do whatever is necessary to protect you all, even if it means my own life."

His words ran out, leaving him wondering if he had even made sense. Gless rose to his feet with a grunt, then reached out and pulled Yozerf into an embrace. "Good job," he whispered.

"I must be out of my mind," Yozerf murmured back.

"You are. I thought we'd established that some time ago."

"Very well, then—you must all be out of your minds."

Gless grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. "Maybe we are, at that. But we're alive."

* * * *

Yozerf sat in his tent and brooded. The day had been so outside of anything he had ever expected or experienced that it seemed at times to have bordered on madness.

The first priority had been to get them away from the road. So they had retreated, going back over ground they had already covered. Yozerf couldn't guess whether any surviving soldiers would have made it back to the main army to report yet, or if their commanders would consider retribution justified, or if the threat of Argannon would keep them occupied instead. But his greatest fear was that his group would find themselves hunted by Jenel's own army—an army determined to stamp them out, not only for their defiance, but because the sorcerer at their head just might be dangerous enough to worry about.

Truth was, he didn't know why the soldiers had so ruthlessly attacked in the first place. Was the army getting desperate for food? Were they under orders to kill any large groups of people they came across, using the logic that any crowd might be some kind of threat, no matter how unlikely? Had months of having their own way with the peasants and regular folk of the kingdom convinced them that they could do anything, have anything, without fear?

He didn't know. It probably didn't matter, at least not in any practical sense. The Jenelese army was their enemy, as much as the Arganese—that was all that mattered. Motive was unimportant.

So how are you going to defend all these people from even one army, let alone two? he asked himself bitterly. They had looked to him before, yes, but their new oath of loyalty pressed down on him like iron weights. He was truly responsible for them now, and he didn't have any idea what to do to save them.

Gless's voice came from the other side of the tent flap. "Yozerf? You awake?"

Yozerf sighed. Owl had gone off to sleep with some of her friends among Grilka's charges, leaving him alone for the first time in a long while. The tent added to the illusion of privacy. He had not wanted it, had tried to give it away to some family more needy than himself, but no one would take it. Apparently, they had decided that their lord—a lord without land and certainly without sanction from any government—must sleep in a tent as a sign of his status. The thought made his head hurt.

"Come in," he called. The tent flap opened, and Gless entered—followed by Tan, Wulfgar, and Ji'seth.

He arched a brow at them. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Ji'seth looked offended at the mere suggestion. Wulfgar saw her expression and grinned. "Nay, laddie," he said amiably as he settled himself on the floor. "'Tis our job to be here."

"And why would that be?" Yozerf asked, suspecting that he wouldn't like the answer.

"Because we're your Sworn, of course."

Yozerf stared at him, thinking that perhaps he had misheard. "My what?"

"Your Sworn," Tan offered helpfully.

This ... was too much. "You are not my Sworn. I don't have any Sworn. I'm not a noble, for the gods' sakes!"

Ji'seth was unperturbed by his outburst. "Nevertheless, we are your Sworn."

"This is ridiculous." Yozerf gestured at Tan. "You're a farmer, Tan, not a warrior. You have a wife and children to think of."

"A wife and children who would have been dead or worse months ago, if we hadn't run into you," Tan pointed out.

Yozerf decided to ignore the argument for the sake of his sanity. "And you, Gless—you're already Sworn to Auglar, remember?"

Gless's flexible mouth narrowed. "You need me more. Even supposing he's still alive, that is."

"He's still alive." *He has to be—Suchen's with him, and I can't let myself think that anything has befallen her.*

And what would she say if she could see me now? He couldn't even imagine. For an instant the longing that he had kept buried under day-to-day concerns rose in him, so strong he could barely breathe. Gods, he would give anything to have her with him now. To have her advice, her support, and her love.

But only he was to blame for her absence. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. "Listen to me, all of you. I have some powers, yes. But I'm not a lord. I don't know what I'm doing. You don't want to bind yourselves to me."

"Clearly, we disagree on all counts," Gless said with irritating cheerfulness. "So here we are."

"If, that is, you don't object to having an old, one-armed soldier," Wulfgar added, as if that might have been the source of Yozerf's concern.

"Or a farmer," Tan added.

"Or a half-lame wastrel," Gless said.

Ji'seth said nothing—her confidence in herself was clearly absolute.

"So if you're wanting to replace some of us..." Wulfgar trailed off suggestively.

Yozerf pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers, willing away the beginnings of a headache. "You know that isn't it. All right. You win. If you want to be my Sworn, then who am I to dissuade you?"

"Glad you've come to your senses," Gless said brightly. "Now, what are you planning?"

"I suppose you are now my advisers as well?" Yozerf asked dryly.

"Of course. You need people of sense and intelligence around you, after all."

"Then why did *you* come, Gless?"

Gless grinned. "I'm wounded to the core. But I'm still curious—what are you planning?"

Yozerf sighed and slumped, feeling any good spirits drain away. "Nothing at the moment. I don't know what to do next. If Fellrant decides to send troops after us, we'll never make it to Shalai ahead of them. But there is nowhere behind us to go, either."

Ji'seth frowned. The light of the single candle that illuminated the little tent touched her Aclytese features, making her face into something sharp and fierce, as much shadow as light. He wondered if Londah would like her for her courage or scorn her for her impetuosity. "If only we could get walls around us."

Wulfgar smiled ruefully. "Indeed, lass. And while we're wishing, why not wish for somewhere with a roof for our heads and storerooms full of food?"

At Wulfgar's words, something clicked in Yozerf's mind, and he held up a hand for silence while he chased the thought.

No.

It was madness. It was impossible.

"We need somewhere like Vorslava," he said.

Gless burst out laughing. "Aye! Do you think all the soldiers in there will give it to us if we ask nicely?"

"Remember, they would not allow their own people within," Ji'seth said gravely.

"I know." Yozerf frowned. "But perhaps ... what they would not give ... we can take."

"Of course we can," Gless said. "With an army and some siege engines, that is. I don't suppose you happen to know where we can find those?"

They were right, of course. But still, the thought would not leave him. Vorslava would be the perfect haven. Fellrant's soldiers had completely taken it over, would not allow even their own people inside, so he felt no qualms about taking it from its current owners. It would give them shelter, a defensible position, food, clothes, and more.

I might as well wish for a fortress on the moon. "Did any of the refugees from Vorslava remain with us?"

Gless gave him a doubtful look. "You're serious."

"Did they?"

"Yes."

"Bring them to me, then. Tonight."

It was obvious that Gless thought he had just sworn himself to a madman, but he did as Yozerf asked. Tan went back to Morwen and their children for the night, and Ji'seth and Wulfgar took up guard positions outside the tent. For the rest of the night, Yozerf talked to the refugees from Vorslava. Most of them knew nothing of the keep. A few, who had been servants there, were able to give him guesses as to how many soldiers might be inside and offered to draw maps of the interior if he needed them. He demurred for the moment—if they could not get inside to begin with, all the maps in the world would not help.

Towards dawn he began to despair. Hours of listening and asking questions, and all he had to show for it was a sleepless night. *What was I thinking? The idea was mad from the start.*

His final interview was with the oldest human Yozerf had ever seen. How such an elder kept up with the group, Yozerf couldn't guess, for he moved no faster than a hobble. No teeth showed when he grinned, and most of his hair had long ago deserted him, save for a few wisps that floated about his head in a distracting manner. A white film lay over his eyes, and his great-grandson had to guide him into the tent.

"You are familiar with Vorslava?" Yozerf asked, once the elder had been settled.

"The keep? Nay. Never been inside," the old man said, bobbing his head.

Yozerf sighed inwardly. "Then I am sorry to have troubled you."

"Never been inside, as anyone knows about."

Telling himself to be patient, Yozerf suppressed a frown. "What do you mean?"

The old man leaned forward, his milky eyes reflecting the candlelight like twin moons. "Grew up in a village near the keep, I did," he confided. "Old Lord Getherig ruled then. Vicious bastard, he was. They say his ghost still rides the coast on moonless nights.

"I was just a mite then, too young to have any sense. Most days we worked, mending nets and cleaning fish, but everyone took the Godsmass as a day of rest. My cousin and me went looking for them glass floats as sometimes washes up on shore. Don't know where from—across the sea, maybe.

"You know that coast by Vorslava? All cliffs, straight up, and the beach, just a little strip. Like I said, we was young and stupid. We didn't watch the tides. When the sea come in, we couldn't get off the beach. We run south, towards Vorslava, scared to drown. The waves was up around our thighs when we finally come to a cave. Now, there's lots of caves along there, all eaten out by the sea, but most of 'em is filled up at high tide. This one looked deep enough, maybe we could get above the water. It was dead under the keep.

"Well, we go inside. But the tide keeps coming, so we keep going further and further back. And just as we think we was to drown or smash up on the rocks, we find stairs."

Yozerf sat up straighter, trying to keep down his sudden surge of hope. "Stairs?"

"Aye. Well, we was finally out of reach of the tide, but we was curious. Started climbing, up and up, till our legs was like to drop off. And at the blessed end, turned out t'were boarded up."

Yozerf slumped. *Damn it.* "Then it is no use."

The elder shook his head, as if admiring Yozerf's stupidity. "Them boards could be prised off easy. We was scared to—old Getherig would've killed us certain. But there was a door behind. Must've let into the keep. Nowhere else it could go. Don't know what part it opened out to, but there it was."

Yozerf frowned, wondering whether the tale could possibly be true. "Why would there be a secret passage like that, just waiting for an enemy to use it to get inside?"

"How should I know? Maybe the lord had truck with smugglers. Maybe for escape, though I don't see as how you could get many people through it. Anyway, it must've been forgot a long time—didn't see a sign as anyone knew about it. Wouldn't have found it ourselves but for the tide chasing us in."

Yozerf thanked the old man and dismissed him. Once he was alone again, he put out the candle and lay down in the darkness, thinking hard. Was the old man's story true? Accurate? Had age muddled his mind, or was there really a secret entrance into Vorslava?

Only one way to find out.

Chapter Twelve

The assault on Vorslava was staged on a night black as Hel's heart. Yozerf led the refugees as far away from the Route and as close to the keep as he deemed safe. Leaving them encamped, he took with him almost everyone capable of wielding a weapon. The thought of leaving the rest unprotected sat uneasily with him, but unless the assault of Vorslava succeeded, chances were they were all doomed anyway.

They made their way slowly along the cliffs that lined the coast, approaching the keep from the north. Cold rain slashed down on them, and the occasional crack of lightning illuminated the sky. Far below, the sea roared its fury, smashing against the rocks and sea stacks that dotted the coastline and made it a graveyard for ships of every stripe. The tang of salt and seaweed hung heavy on the air, and the taste of sea spray was on Yozerf's lips when he licked them.

According to those who had once served in Vorslava, there was a narrow trail down to the beach not too far from the keep. In order to reach it, they had to draw dangerously close to the castle itself, but Yozerf hoped that the storm and the darkness would conceal them from any sentries. As they drew closer, the storm grew in strength, and lightning flashed in rapid succession, revealing Vorslava to him for the first time.

The keep stood on a narrow spit of land that jutted out from the surrounding cliffs, making it accessible from only one side. High basalt walls encircled a brooding castle of dark stone. Spires stabbed at the sky like obsidian knives, thousands of gargoyles leering from their flanks. No lights showed from the towers, and Yozerf guessed that the small force of guards left within stayed mostly inside the barracks. At least, that was his hope.

According to the little information he had been able to glean, most of the soldiery of Vorslava had been called away to Jenel's main army, leaving only a token force of defenders. Apparently, the Argannese were far enough away that Fellrant didn't feel Vorslava to be in any immediate danger, although he no doubt was holding it and its stores in reserve. This fact was one of the few things that gave Yozerf hope that they might actually have a chance of taking the keep.

"Here," someone whispered. A flash of light illuminated the old man who had led them here; he stood perilously near the crumbling edge of the cliff. Yozerf reluctantly tore his eyes from the looming specter of Vorslava and went to join him. By the meager light given out by the shuttered lamp the man carried, Yozerf saw that a path did indeed wend its way down into the darkness below. Unfortunately, it looked as if its narrow, uneven, and very steep length would have been treacherous even in daylight and fair weather.

"Is this the only way down?" Gless asked nervously. The rain had plastered his blonde hair to his head and dripped off the tip of his nose.

"This is it," the old man confirmed. "Not much reason to go down there, after all. No fishing boats can put out from here—too many sea stacks, too many rocks. Sometimes we'd go down and pick barnacles off the rocks for the kitchen, and the children like to play in the tidal pools, but there's no need for a better path."

"Then this is the way we go," Yozerf said, trying not to think of what a long fall it would be down into the ocean, nor of the sharp rocks no doubt waiting below. "Are we certain that the tide is out?"

"At its lowest ebb, my lord," confirmed a man who had been a fisher before the war. "But the storm will have the sea up."

Yozerf nodded and started off down the path, using his sharp night vision and good sense of balance to test it out, warning others of any unexpected dangers. Some places, they could barely squeeze through, their faces to the cliff and their heels hanging out over nothingness; other spots, the battered rock had all but crumbled away, forcing them to pick their footing with utmost caution. Yozerf's heart was in his mouth throughout the climb, his muscles tense as wires, while he waited for the scream that would indicate a fall. But luck was with them this night, and they all reached the bottom without anything more serious than scraped fingers.

Yozerf's boots sank slightly in the wet sand. The trunks of great trees, bleached white by salt and sun and worn to smoothness by the sea, lay washed up all along the narrow strip of beach. Whipped to a frenzy by the storm winds, the ocean roared and thrashed close by, and spray and foam soon soaked through any clothing that the rain had not already reached.

"We have to look for the cave!" Yozerf shouted over the howl of the storm and the sea. "It should be almost directly below the keep itself. It will be deeper than any of the others."

If it even exists, he thought grimly to himself. If that old codger remembered things aright. Gods, it must have been eighty years ago if it was a day—what are the chances?

The small force of invaders spread out, clinging close to the cliffs and investigating every crack and crevice with the small, shuttered lamps they carried. At his first glimpse of the cliff face, however, Yozerf realized how the hidden entrance had gone undiscovered for so long. The worn stone was pock-marked with shallow caves, holes, and crevices by the hundreds. Even though they had a vague idea of where to look, without knowing precisely which cave they wanted, dawn might find them before success.

Damn it. "Spread out!" he shouted over the scream of the wind. "Don't cluster, and don't go over ground someone else has already searched!"

Calling flame into his hand, he began to look himself. But the going was slow. Although the shallowest holes in the cliff could be eliminated immediately, too many were both large enough and deep enough to need further investigation. Precious time slipped away, and he could feel what little hope he'd had going with it. *This was foolish. We'll never find the cave in time, before dawn or the tide forces us to leave. I should never have pinned all our hopes on such a mad scheme...*

"I think I found it!" shouted Ji'seth over the wind.

The cave she had discovered was situated almost directly beneath Vorslava, although it was difficult to make out the dark bulk of the keep from that angle. It disappeared back into darkness, much deeper than any of the other holes that riddled these cliffs. Moving cautiously, Yozerf went inside, Ji'seth and the other Sworn on his heels. About thirty feet back, however, he came to what looked at first like a solid wall. As he was about to curse and turn away, a faint breeze touched his cheek like the lips of a lover. Startled, he held the flame in his hand closer to the wall and saw that what he had thought to be a shadow was in fact a narrow crevice.

"I'll check it," Ji'seth offered eagerly. At Yozerf's nod, she slipped through the crevice and disappeared, taking her lamp with her. For a few moments, they could see the light shining intermittently from the other side; then everything became dark.

Nervousness made it hard to measure time, but she seemed to be gone half of forever, and Yozerf found himself straining for any sound or scent. The boom of the sea was muffled behind them, and every shift of weight or rustle of cloth seemed unnaturally loud.

Then a faint glow appeared once again on the other side of the crevice. Ji'seth emerged, a feral grin on

her face. "I found the stairs. This is it, my lord."

"Good, Ji'seth. Tan, you and Wulfgar go and gather everyone else and lead them here."

It was not long before the small force had gathered in the cave. Their breathing was loud in the confined space, and their eyes gleamed in the reflected light of the lamps. One by one, they passed through the narrow crevice. It was a tight fit for most of them. Yozerf held his breath as he squeezed through, and only his cloak tangled on the rock. Several of the more heavily built men, including Wulfgar, left skin behind on the water-worn edge of the crevice.

There was a larger chamber on the other side. This one looked to have been deliberately hewn from the rock rather than shaped by nature. Although the air had a slightly musty smell, the cool flow continued, and Yozerf guessed that cracks in the rock reached all the way to the cliff face outside. At the rear of the chamber, a narrow stair cut back through the rock, vanishing into the darkness above.

Yozerf paused and glanced at the group behind them. The flickering lamplight made shadows jump across their faces, but what he could see of their expressions reflected grim determination. They gripped swords, pitchforks, scythes, and spears, some causally, others with a nervousness that turned their knuckles white. Some of them would not live to see the dawn, of that he was certain. Perhaps none of them would.

"This is our only chance," he reminded them. His voice resonated oddly in the cave, giving it new undertones. "We are facing a greater force, but we have the advantage of surprise on our side. Strike hard and quickly. If we can catch them sleeping, our odds will be better."

"But to attack a sleeping man..." someone said faintly.

"Wait for them to wake up and get their weapons, and they will kill you," Yozerf replied sharply. "This is not for honor, or glory, or anything other than survival. They die, or we die; it is as simple as that. If anyone would prefer to leave, you are welcome to do so."

No one spoke. With a quick nod, Yozerf turned and started up the steps.

The climb was long and arduous. The passageway twisted and turned, and the stair was narrow and steep. By the time they reached the top, most of them were gasping for breath, and those who had the strength left to do so were cursing the climb.

At the top, the stair ended abruptly, without so much as a landing. The wall in front of them was dark wood paneling, rather than stone. Dust and cobwebs blanketed the door and the boards nailed over it. Clearly, the secret passage had been forgotten long ago, probably well before the time of Fellrant's grandfather. Yozerf wondered briefly why it had been nailed shut from this side, as if someone had meant to keep the inhabitants of Vorslava in.

At his signal, Tan and another man came forward and began to pry the boards off, wedging flat-bladed spears between the boards and the wall. Rusted nails tore free with hellish shrieks, and Yozerf winced, praying that no one was within earshot. It took some time, for the boards had been solidly mounted, but at last they pulled free. Hoping that he was not about to step out into the barracks, Yozerf took a deep breath and opened the door.

A lone man stood on the other side, dressed in a nightshirt and holding a candle. His mouth gaped in surprise, and for a moment he and Yozerf stared at one another in mutual shock. Then, with a strangled cry, the man turned and ran.

Ji'seth sprang forward, swinging her poleax down in a vicious arc. Metal impacted with flesh in a dull thud, and the man collapsed, his candle falling to the carpeted floor. Swearing, Gless ran forward and scooped it up before it could start a fire, while Ji'seth wrestled her weapon free of the man's spine.

Yozerf glided out of the passage, his forces following him slowly. They were in a library, he realized with a start. The faint light of their lamps illuminated darkly paneled walls, shelves of scrolls, and the worn spines of ancient books. The smell of dust, ink, and parchment filled the air, and he guessed that no one had been in the room in many months. At least, not until Ji'seth's hapless victim had come to investigate the strange noises coming from behind what looked to be a simple bookcase.

Yozerf moved quickly to the open door across the room and listened, but heard nothing. It seemed that the man had been alone. Who he was and why he was alone in this part of the keep, Yozerf neither knew nor cared. A captain, perhaps, who had commandeered a finer bedroom for himself than the barracks had to offer? Whoever he had been, it did not matter now.

When everyone had filed out of the narrow stair into the library, Yozerf turned back to the door. He met Gless's eyes for a moment. The human looked grim in the dim light, his face pale and his mouth set in a hard line. But he nodded once, in either encouragement or approval.

"Let's go," Yozerf said.

* * * *

It felt like an eternity, not the meager hour between dead of night and dawn. Bone tired, Yozerf leaned against the battlements, staring out over the Kellsmarch as the sun came up. The rain had stopped sometime in the night, and the rising wind brought him the smell of grass and dew, as if offering a fresh promise of life. Below, two men mounted on horses taken from Vorslava's stables rode out, carrying news and a summons to the rest of the refugees. They were homeless no longer.

Gods, he was weary, weighted with an exhaustion that went all the way to the bone. The stickiness of blood clung to his face and hands, its rusty smell clogging his nostrils. His left arm ached where a sword had sliced the flesh deep enough to need stitches. The wound had been taken during the most vicious fighting in the barracks. Wulfgar had taken down Yozerf's assailant in a swift, brutal reprisal, but the Sworn had nonetheless all looked guilty after, as if his wound were a poor reflection on their abilities. Yozerf had refused the offer of a strong drink before Gless set the stitches and bound it. He didn't want to cloud his ability to think, not now; but gods it hurt.

Footsteps approached across the stone, and Gless's scent came to him on the wind. "We did it," the human said with a tired smile as he came to a halt by Yozerf. Dark circles showed under his eyes, and his limp was more pronounced than usual. "You know, when you suggested this, I didn't think we had a hope in Hel of pulling it off."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I certainly didn't hear any better alternatives to starving on the Kellsmarch this winter. And I thought that if anyone could make something like this work, it would be you. You have a habit of doing the impossible."

Yozerf sighed and shook his head. "Merely the desperate." He turned reluctantly from the vista to face the courtyard. Men and women milled about, tending the wounded and disposing of bodies. As he had expected, they had lost almost a third of their number, including the fisherman who had advised him about the tides and the old man who had found the path. He hoped desperately that their sacrifice would not be in vain.

"We need to take an inventory of what is here—how much food, how many horses, what weapons are in the armory," he said, feeling as though he faced an impossible task. "We need to get dug in as quickly as possible. And one other thing—I want every mirror in this keep destroyed."

Gless shot him a quizzical look. "The mirrors? You didn't take a blow to your head, as well as to your arm, did you?"

"No. Perhaps I am simply being overly cautious ... but Jahcgroth has used mirrors in the past to work his magic. He used Dara-Don's shaving mirror to track Rozah when she was in our keeping, and he used one of the mirrors in Nava Nar to make a portal to invade Segg. If a traitor lived inside Vorslava before we came ... if even a chance exists that something has been ensorcelled here by Jahcgroth ... it would be folly to leave it intact for his use."

"True. So you don't think Jahcgroth and Fellrant will keep each other busy enough not to worry about us?"

"If it had been any keep other than Vorslava ... perhaps. But Fellrant can't afford to let some Aclytese upstart come in and steal this fortress. It was once Fellrant's keep, after all, and he may have looked to it again. So no, I don't think he'll simply leave us alone." Yozerf gave Gless a rueful look. "If Jenel triumphs in this ... then I am a dead man for certain. Fellrant will see me hanged for this."

Gless's expression grew grim. "And if Argannon wins?"

"Jahcgroth will not kill me, not unless I do something to provoke him. He swears that he did not help Jenel bring down Caden, although Telmonra had no doubt that he was guilty. But whatever the case, I will not give him my loyalty. He wanted to force Queen Rozah into marriage with him, he would have slaughtered my friends in Segg, he has helped to destroy the lives of countless innocents who just happened to live in the land he wants to take ... No, I will not give him my allegiance—and in that case, the best I can hope for is to be led away in chains."

"Then why did you do this?" Gless asked. "No matter who wins, by taking Vorslava you've doomed yourself. Why throw away your life like this?"

Yozerf shook his head. "I didn't have a choice," he said softly. His eyes moved over the men and women below them. "There was a time when I might have pretended not to care about what happened to these people. Maybe it would even have been true. But after Ax sent me to guard Rozah ... things began to change. Interacting with people again ... having human friends ... falling in love with Suchen ... being part of a pack, I suppose. I wanted more. And then in Segg, when I finally realized that hiding myself, that pretending to be intimate at the same time I avoided truly opening myself to others, had destroyed all the love and friendship I had ... that affected me, too. Of course, Owl changed my life profoundly, and some of my outlook along with it." He stopped and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "I'm rambling."

"Yes, but I think I see what you're getting at. You wanted to help the people you saw hurt by this war. And in the end, you decided that your responsibility for the group was greater than your responsibility to yourself." Gless shook his head. "When I first saw you that night in Diicus, I would never have guessed that you had it in you to do something like this."

Yozerf chuckled. "Neither would I. I had a ... a dream, of sorts, when I was in Segg. I don't know if it was more than that or not. An old friend, who has been dead for many years, spoke with me. She said that I was more than I thought. That I was meant to be something more than I had been."

Gless clapped him briefly on his uninjured shoulder. "It looks like she was right. Let's go down and see about those mirrors."

* * * *

"Horses, Papa! Horses!"

Yozerf looked up as Owl raced into the great hall, her gray-streaked eyes alight. The last of his people had arrived in Vorslava only a few hours before, almost two days after the keep had been taken. Now the great hall was filled with people going to and fro: women cleaning the dust from the tables, men pulling down the many flags displaying Fellrant's colors, and children gathering up the old rushes from the floor and putting down fresh ones. Like the rest of Vorslava, the hall was built of dark stone and heavy wood. An arched ceiling disappeared into shadow far above, and ancient tapestries hung half-glimpsed in the darkness. A great fire pit ran down the center of the room, surrounded on three sides by enormous oaken tables, whose legs were carved in the likenesses of griffins. The chatter of excited voices echoed around the room, and the pleasure and relief on the faces of everyone was clear to see.

Yozerf caught up Owl as she launched herself at him. "Horses!" she yelled again, practically in his ear.

"Yes, I know," he said with a smile.

"Can I have one?"

"No. We need them for defense of the keep."

Owl's lower lip jutted out stubbornly. "I can help."

"Absolutely not."

"But why?"

"You're too young."

Owl looked only slightly crestfallen, so he knew that she hadn't given up entirely. Hoping to avoid a further argument, he said, "But if you want, you can help take care of them. I've put Neldir in charge of the stables, because he used to be the head groom for one of Auglar's thanes. If you promise to do what he says and stay out of the way, you can help feed them, clean the stalls, and groom them."

Far from being disappointed at the prospect of chores, Owl's face lit up. "Thank you, Papa!" she shouted, flinging her arms around his neck.

Yozerf smiled wistfully. He really ought to get her a pony, he thought, if the chance ever presented itself. Remembering how unlikely that was, his heart sank again.

Ji'seth strode across the room towards him, distracting him from his gloomy thoughts. She moved with a purposeful air, and people cleared out of her path as if by magic. As usual, her expression was gravely serious, revealing nothing. When she drew close enough, he caught the smell of dust and parchment in her hair.

"You've been in the library?"

She looked briefly surprised, but didn't comment. "Yes. There's something you need to see."

Wondering what there could be that would require his attention, he shifted Owl onto his back, hooking her legs through his arms. Her hands clung to his hair, making him wince as she leaned backward.

They followed Ji'seth from the great hall, through the orderly corridors to the library. Daylight streamed through the tall windows, revealing shelves that reached to the ceiling almost two stories over their heads.

A single massive desk rested in the center of the room, its surface littered with pens. A guard stood on each side of the secret door, while others waited on the stair outside and in the cave below. Yozerf had no intention of falling for the same trick that he had used.

"Here," said Ji'seth, leading him to the darkest, dingiest corner in the room. Stacks of books lay piled on the floor where she had left them, accompanied by scrolls and single sheets of parchment. Many of them looked extremely old, as if they might crumble into dust at a touch.

"What is it?" Yozerf asked, puzzled. Owl slid off his back and looked around the room curiously, and it occurred to him that she probably could not read. That would have to be rectified as quickly as possible. He had only learned the letters of the Keld himself a year ago and had no intention of letting his daughter go so long.

Ji'seth extended a hand toward the stacks, then pulled it back, as if afraid to touch them. "These ... I have barely looked at them, but they are all written in Aclytese. They look like records from Caden. More than that—some of them are personal journals—of the clan Jonaglir."

Yozerf froze. "What would such things be doing here?"

"I don't know. Perhaps one of Fellrant's ancestors stole them from Cade Kwii when Jenel invaded." She shrugged. "In any case, I thought you should see them. They belong to you now, after all."

Yozerf picked up the first book, feeling the cracks in the ancient leather that formed its cover. To hold a book that had belonged to one of his ancestors was nothing he had ever expected, and he felt an odd pain as he gently opened it to the first page. Although Suchen had taught him the human alphabet, he had no idea what Aclytese characters even looked like. He would never be able to casually pore over these himself, but instead would have to ask someone like Ji'seth to read them aloud to him. If only—

He stopped, staring incredulously at the text. Alerted by his sudden stillness, Ji'seth gave him a puzzled look. "My lord? Is something wrong?"

"No," he managed to say. "Nothing."

But there was.

He could read.

It was impossible, but nonetheless the ancient words, inscribed in faded ink, were as clear to him as if they had been written in the Keld. More so, for he had still been in the process of learning the human way of writing when they left for Segg.

Telmonra, he thought. He knew that she had left things with him—memories, dreams. But the ability to read the Aclytese language ... that was more than a simple memory.

What else did she leave me? he wondered with a shiver of dread. *And will I find out before it is too late?*

* * * *

Yozerf stretched out on his bed, silently reveling in the feel of linen against his skin, in the softness of the mattress beneath him. He had taken advantage of his status by commandeering the big copper tub they had found in one of the storage rooms, along with some lavender soap and a kettle for heating water. The luxurious bath had stripped away the accumulated grime of months on the road and left him drowsy and content.

Now he lay in the massive bed that had once belonged to Fellrant. Yozerf had not particularly wanted the lavish quarters for himself, but the Sworn had argued vehemently against his sleeping anywhere else. Not only would it be easier to protect him there, but mere possession of a suite explicitly set aside for the Lord of Vor斯拉va would reinforce his authority in the minds of the people. Unable to argue, Yozerf had given in. The three unmarried Sworn would all sleep in the outer room, between him and the only way in. As the windows all looked out over a sheer drop to the ocean below, it seemed the safest arrangement possible.

A fresh breeze came through the tall, narrow windows, and Yozerf left the elaborately embroidered bed hangings tied back. The enormous room was dark, except for the faint light of the rising moon reflected off the waves. All around, the keep settled down into silence, as the refugees found their beds under a roof for the first time in many months. All that remained were the faint creak of settling timber and the moan of the wind around cornices.

The soft groan of the door hinges jerked Yozerf up from the doze he had fallen into. Instantly alert, he sat up and reached for the sword propped beside the bed, until his nose put an identity to the shadowy form that had let itself in.

"Ji'seth?" he asked, puzzled. "Is something wrong?"

She made no immediate reply, but instead drew closer. The faint light from the window touched her form, and he saw with a shock that she was naked. Her violet eyes were fixed on his face and burned from within with an odd intensity as she reached for the bedcovers.

Yozerf jerked back with a snarl and a flash of fangs. Startled, Ji'seth froze, half in and half out of the bed.

A blind fury rose in him, drumming in his veins, and for an ugly moment he recalled the feel of Cleistus's meaty hands and the taste of Fellrant's lips. Fire ignited in his blood as the magic rose in him, responding to rage and shame. Realizing what was happening, he struggled against it, forcing himself to *think* and not simply react. Even so, his voice shook slightly when he asked, "What is this?"

"My lord," Ji'seth said, her voice soft and shockingly vulnerable. "I ... I merely thought—"

"Thought what? That we are humans, to not care whom we mate with so long as it eases our bodies?"

"No—"

"Or perhaps Gless told you something about my past, and you wanted to discover for yourself if the whore was any good?"

"No!"

She began to pull away. He shot out one hand without thinking, closed his long fingers around her wrist, hard enough to feel the bone shift under his grasp. She flinched, just a little, and he realized that he was hurting her. Ashamed, he let go and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"I am sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Ji'seth's voice trembled. "I did not mean to hurt you, either, my lord. I didn't know. I only thought ... that I have admired you. We are both alone, and there are no others here that I would mate with. I'm sorry."

He sighed, reminding himself that she was young and no doubt innocent in ways that he could barely even begin to comprehend. The place in his heart where Suchen had once been ached from hollowness, and he briefly wished that he could at least fool himself into thinking that Ji'seth might fill that empty space. But

that would be cruel to them both.

"I had a mate, once," he heard himself say. "Gless will tell you of her, if you ask him. She was my best friend, the love of my life. But I betrayed her and drove her away."

"I am sure that it was not your fault."

He laughed bitterly. "You are wrong, Ji'seth, although I appreciate the attempt. I lost her love and then lost her when we were separated during the fall of Segg. I am certain that she would be happy never to lay eyes upon me again, in this or any other life. At any rate, although I am flattered by your attention, I fear that it is wasted on me."

She was silent for a while, thinking about his words. Then she rose to her feet. "I'm sorry," she said yet again, and he heard the shame in her voice. "I'll leave."

"Ji'seth." He caught her wrist again, more gently this time. "Don't apologize. And don't feel bad. You are a beautiful woman, and your offer was a generous one. The fault is in me, not you."

He let his hand drop. She paused for just a moment, and it occurred to him that his words had been true—she was beautiful. But she wasn't Suchen.

"Goodnight, my lord," she said, but there was affection in the words. Then she let herself out and shut the door behind her, leaving him alone.

Chapter Thirteen

Rain drummed on Yozerf's hood, a steady tapping just hard enough to make him think that it would eventually drive him mad. *Or madder, at any rate.*

With his Sworn following nervously, he stalked through the muddy streets of what had once been a village in front of Vorslava. No one had lived here for some time, it seemed, and the soldiers who had held the keep had already taken most things of obvious value. Holes showed in the thatch roofs of the abandoned houses, and rodents nested in beds and cupboards. But the scents of those who had lived here still lingered like unquiet ghosts, and Yozerf wondered what had become of them.

"We could make these livable again, my lord," suggested Hendel. The human had once been a carpenter for one of the southern lords and would oversee much of the repairs and extra construction needed to make Vorslava habitable and defensible both.

"So that someone's army can burn the whole place down, come spring?" Yozerf asked. There was the edge of a snarl in his voice, brought on by the mixture of foul weather and his own impatience. Cold water trickled into his boots, and the fitful wind drove rain into his face no matter how far he pulled his hood down.

Not that anyone else had it any better. The mixed group of humans, Aclytes, and Wolfkin around him looked united in their misery. They were probably united in annoyance with him, as well—after all, it was he who had insisted they slog their way out here today.

"We can't afford to waste our strength fixing something that will most likely not make it through another year," Yozerf went on, trying to sound a bit more civil. "All of our effort must be focused on the keep itself."

"But my lord, we may need the shelter these houses provide," Hendel objected. "Not to mention the kiln in the potter's shed, or—"

"Bring it all inside." Yozerf turned his steps back towards Vorslava, deciding that this conversation could continue just as well under a roof.

Startled by the sudden turn, Hendel had to jog to catch up with him. "My lord?"

"Take the village apart. Bring as many men as you need from the keep, and move as much as can be moved inside the walls. Tools, supplies, anything left behind that we can possibly use. Once that's done, tear down the buildings. We can use some of the wood to build new structures inside Vorslava. The rest we can burn come winter. Let nothing go to waste."

"Yes, lord," Hendel said. Yozerf wondered if the man thought he was mad, or simply odd.

Does it matter? he wondered as they approached the keep's great gates. *His* keep, and if that wasn't madness, he couldn't imagine what was.

The gates stood open, although they were constantly under guard. So many people must go in and out: foraging parties gathering food for the winter to come, scouts keeping a close watch for any approaching threats, and an intermittent stream of refugees looking for hope and a roof over their heads.

Not all of the latter stayed, especially when they discovered who—or, from their perspective, *what*—gave the orders. The gods knew, there were days, when he'd heard that jarring "my lord" a few too many times, when he wondered if they weren't right.

"My lord!" someone shouted, even as he walked through the gates, and it was all he could do not to grind his teeth in frustration. *Gods, this had better be damned important, or I swear I'll have them all on midnight guard duty on the walls.*

A knot of people crowded around the stables, and for a moment he thought that something had happened to one or more of the horses. Then the crowd shifted, and he saw a group of women clustered around a sobbing girl. They had wrapped cloaks around her, but he caught a glimpse of bruises on her face, smelled blood and something else that made the hackles on his neck stand up. A group of men stood nearby, three of them loosely surrounded by a ring of others, their looks surly.

Morwen was with the women, but when she caught sight of Yozerf she hurried over to him, her skirts gathered about her knees. She cast Tan a quick, troubled look, then curtsied to Yozerf. "My lord," she said, her voice low, as if she hoped somehow to keep the scene private, despite all the onlookers. "It's Naelen. She's been raped."

* * * *

I hate this, Yozerf thought, although he didn't let any of it show on his face. Couldn't, because in truth, this was as much his own trial as that of the three accused men.

He might have done this away from view, but instinct said that would have been a mistake. He had no authority, no claim to power, other than that his followers gave him. Better they see his actions for themselves, than speculate on what might have gone on behind closed doors. So he sat in a chair on the dais in Vorslava's great hall, his Sworn a solid wall behind him, and had everyone involved brought before him one at a time. People lined the hall to either side, forming an aisle down the center, and all of them watched as he listened silently to everything said.

He hadn't thrown open the doors to all. He allowed no children to be present, perhaps out of a selfish desire to keep Owl as far as possible from such darkness. No one was excused from any urgent duty, either, whether that be guarding the walls or keeping an eye on the children. But a good portion of the keep's population was there to watch. To judge *him*.

Thank the gods it was not a complicated case; there was that much, at least. The men had been caught in the act, by witnesses who swore there was no mistaking what they had seen for anything consensual. The keep's healer testified as to Naelen's injuries. As for the men themselves...

The same tired excuses, Yozerf thought. *She liked to flirt. She wore her bodice too low. She was asking for it.*

He kept his face calm throughout, an expressionless white mask that gave away nothing, and all the while, he struggled to impose that same calm within. Memories clamored in the back of his mind, trying to drag him down into torment, blurring the lines between *now* and *then*.

The silence was absolute when the final witness finished speaking. *Waiting for me*, Yozerf thought, and gods, he couldn't afford to lose control now. Couldn't afford to scream in rage and frustration. Couldn't afford so much as a quaver of voice or a slight shake of his hand.

For a moment, he watched the three men who looked so surly, so annoyed that they had been dragged before him, as if they had some right to do what they had done. He imagined leaping out of his chair and running them through, one at a time, with his sword.

But that isn't a lord's way of doing things, is it?

"Hang them."

The silence persisted a few moments after he spoke. Then the three began to shout: charges of unfairness, abuse of his species, accusations that everyone else lied. Yozerf rose to his feet, barely listening to any of it.

"Unless I am mistaken," he said, "certain rules were explained to every person in this keep when they first entered its protection. The consequences of various actions were laid out. If those consequences were not to your liking, then you should not have done this thing. Your choice was made by no one save for yourselves, and if it proved to be the last choice you will ever make ... well, you can hardly say that it was made in ignorance, can you?"

He shifted his gaze to the guards standing around the prisoners. *This is it. This is the test. They either will do as I tell them, or they won't. I'll either be lord tomorrow, or I won't.* "This sentence is to be carried out immediately," he said, as if reminding them.

One of the guards bowed his head quickly. "Yes, my lord!" he said crisply, and pulled roughly on the arm of the one of the prisoners. As if he had been the small stone that began the avalanche, the rest of the guards quickly fell in behind him.

Yozerf watched them go, knowing that he had passed this test. Knowing that he should have felt relief.

But the only thing he felt was cold.

* * * *

Yozerf splashed wine into his goblet with hands that shook so badly, he ended up slopping half of it onto his shirt. He had held himself in control all day, through the executions, through dinner that night, and through an evening playing with Owl. No one saw anything but confidence—not the Sworn, not his daughter, not any of the people in Vorslava who depended on him to somehow find the strength to lead them.

But now the door was closed, and he was by himself. The night pressed against the glass of his high, narrow window, like a heavy blanket that would smother him if he let it inside. He went to the window and leaned his head against the rippled panes, feeling the cold leach through into his skin and hearing the eternal roar of the sea from far below. The wine went down quickly, followed by another goblet, but it did nothing to warm the hollow place deep within him.

Gods, but he wished Suchen could be with him. He wanted to talk about the day, to hear her say that what he had done was just. To have her hands soothe away his fears. Her presence alone had been enough to hold back all the dark things that prowled through his memories, and he felt as if he had never needed that quite so much as he needed it tonight.

And whose fault is it that she isn't here? You're so good at telling others to accept the consequences of their actions. Time for a dose of your own medicine.

Gods, I couldn't get my own life right, even when everything I ever wanted was all but given to me. What makes me think I'll be more successful when it comes to ordering the lives of an entire keep full of people? How can I pretend to know what is best, after all my mistakes?

Someone knocked softly. Yozerf closed his eyes and considered flinging the wine bottle at the door. Or hiding under the bed—whichever would make the rest of the world leave him alone the fastest.

Instead he set the goblet down and straightened his posture. "Yes?"

Wulfgar cracked open the door. "Afwyn is here to see you, my lord."

The name meant nothing to him. But that didn't matter, he reminded himself—he'd said from the first day that any inhabitant of the keep, no matter who they were, had the right to a personal audience with him whenever they wished. Most didn't take him up on that, whether out of respect or fear, the gods alone knew.

"Let her in," he said, even though he didn't want to.

A slender human woman dressed in rough homespun entered at Wulfgar's call. As she turned towards him, Yozerf realized that, although he hadn't recognized her name, her face was familiar. Indeed, there were few who would ever forget it.

The left side was plain and unremarkable. But the right was a mass of scar tissue, distorting her expression and denying her the ability to smile. When she had first come to the keep, the wounds had already healed, but the scars were still pink and fresh-looking.

That something bad had happened to her was obvious. Something bad had happened to a lot of the keep's people; it was simply that Afwyn's scars stood out for all to see, instead of hiding away inside.

She kept her head down as she curtsied, either too afraid or too shy to look straight at him. When it became obvious that she wasn't going to break the silence, Yozerf stifled a sigh and said, "Is there something I can help you with?"

"N-No, my l-lord," she stammered. A blush spread across her unmarred cheek. "I ... it's nothing important. I shouldn't have disturbed you."

"At least do me the courtesy of telling me why you came," he said, and she flinched at the harsh edge to his voice.

"It's only that we support you, lord," she said in a breathless rush. "That's what I wanted to say. The women—at least those of us as don't have a man to protect us—we appreciate that you look out for us. There's plenty of lords and thanes as don't care about anyone who doesn't have gold or can't fight for them, who see us as a drain on their stores and all."

Yozerf resisted the urge to pour some more wine. "You are no less my responsibility than anyone else in the keep," he said at last, not certain what else he could say to her.

"I know. Thank you." She backed quickly towards the door, her ears red, she blushed so hard.

Once she was gone, he shook his head bemusedly. The wine goblet waited on the table; he picked it up ... then set it back down. Feeling a bit more light of heart, he blew out the candles and went to bed.

Chapter Fourteen

Suchen trudged through the ankle-deep snow, her chapped hands buried beneath her cloak. Her breath crystallized in the air before her, and the wind bit fiercely at the tip of her nose. Hunger gnawed at her belly, but it had become such a constant that she hardly even noticed the discomfort anymore.

Winter held the Kellsmarch in an implacable grip. To all appearances, it had halted the war that had continued to rage through the autumn. Everywhere, refugees desperately sought food and shelter, but Auglar's band had already come across more than one victim of cold and starvation. To Suchen, it seemed increasingly likely that their own corpses would soon add to the number.

She walked into camp and set down the wood she had collected from the pathetic stand of scrub trees nearby. Her companions barely looked up; instead, their attention was on the family they had come across two days before. The woman had been heavily pregnant, and in fact she had delivered only last night.

Had her husband felt more confidence in his abilities, no doubt he would have steered far clear of us, Suchen thought grimly. Certainly their appearance was not one to inspire trust. The men had grown thick beards against the cold, and all of them were dressed in a motley of whatever they had been able to put together: the old clothing that they had carried on their backs from Segg, uncured deerskins and rabbit furs from Brenwulf's kills, and scraps scavenged from the refuse of convoys.

As Suchen sank down by the small fire, she rationed a twig into it to feed the flames. Londah's ice-colored eyes, looking huge in her hunger-thin face, glanced at her briefly and then returned to the small family.

"It's the only place to go," the man was arguing. "I heard that they're taking in anyone who comes to the gates."

"Where?" Suchen asked, even though she already knew the answer. Perhaps some part of her hoped that this time it would be different.

But it wasn't. "Vor斯拉va," the man said. "We're on our way there now. You should come with us."

"We'll think about it," Auglar said neutrally.

The man climbed to his feet and shook his head. His wife was already bundled in their small cart, clutching her new baby to her breast. The mule hitched to the cart stood with its head down, its ribs protruding beneath its skin, and Suchen privately doubted that it would make it as far as Fellrant's old keep. "I'd hoped you might join us," the man said, clearly doubting their sanity for staying behind. "Perhaps I'll see you there, if you change your minds."

"Perhaps."

When the family was gone at last, Londah shifted her weight slightly and trained her focus on Auglar. "Perhaps we should consider Vor斯拉va."

The erstwhile lord's mouth tightened in displeasure. "I don't think that would be a good idea. I don't want to put us all at the mercy of some—some bandit king who has managed to take a castle through luck or savagery. Or both."

Suchen bent her head and gave another twig to the flames. They'd first heard the rumors last fall. People claimed that someone had stolen Vor斯拉va from the guard force that Fellrant had left there. *Who* had

done it changed with every telling, however: an Aclyte, a sorcerer, even a shape-shifter. Most likely, the truth was just as Auglar had said: a bandit or a mercenary had managed to gather enough force to take what looked to be a ripe prize for himself and his thugs.

Although none of the rumors have said that, she thought uneasily. Most seemed to believe that Voroslava had become the only place of refuge where the common people uprooted by the war could go for help. But then, people are desperate enough to believe anything at this point. Probably a few were taken in to act as servants or slaves, but surely that's all.

Londah refused to simply acquiesce. "What harm would it do to find out for certain?" she asked, her gray eyes fixed on Auglar's face. "We can be cautious in our approach. I'm certain that I can find out the truth without handing us all over to some 'bandit king,' as you say."

Auglar frowned impatiently. "We don't have the strength to waste on a trek to Voroslava."

"So we sit here and starve, then?"

Silence fell. Suchen looked up and froze at the expression on Auglar's face. He looked old, worn, and a mixture of grief and despair gleamed in his eyes. His lips pressed tightly together, as if he struggled to contain some words that, once spoken, could never be taken back. Then he abruptly turned and trudged out through the snow.

Buudi and Brenwulf wearily began to stand, but Suchen waved them down. Wrapping her tattered cloak as tightly about herself as she could, she followed the clear trail of Auglar's footsteps in the snow. He had not gone far, but instead stood alone, staring off across the plains. The sun glimmered off the great waste of snow, as if a thousand diamonds had been spread across the ground. The eternal wind scoured the top layers, and blowing snow stung any patch of exposed skin like needles.

Auglar turned when he heard her steps, and for a moment Suchen remembered how Yozerf always knew who was coming without having to look. A sharp pain pierced her heart, as if she bore in a deep wound the broken tip of a dagger, which shifted sometimes when she least expected it. Eight months since he had died, she thought—almost as long as she had known him, now. They had not even had a year together, and yet the loss of him would cast a shadow over the rest of her life.

Which at this moment did not look to be all that long.

"What will we do?" she asked.

Auglar shook his head. "I don't know."

"There are days when I want to lie down and die," she said quietly, "when nothing seems worth living for. I know that you feel it, too."

Auglar swallowed convulsively, and for a moment they stood in silence, united in their pain. Suchen wondered if it were better to be Auglar, who did not know for certain whether or not Sifya was really dead, or to be herself, who at least had certainty. Would hope be a boon, or would it simply keep the wounds open longer?

As if you think you'll ever heal.

"You're right," he said at last. "I'm lost. We're all lost. We need direction. Perhaps Londah is correct. Perhaps we should make for Voroslava, just to give us a goal. Better to die acting than sitting still."

"We'll follow you wherever you decide to go, you know that."

"Even if I am leading you to your deaths?"

Suchen smiled faintly. "Especially."

"Don't say that."

"I'm sorry." She sighed, and her breath plumed in the freezing air. "I think that you're right, and the lord of Vorslava is nothing more than a jumped-up bandit. But maybe, if we can get close enough, we can stop him from exploiting the refugees who go there looking for hope."

Auglar laughed dryly. "An assassination attempt? Londah would love that."

"No doubt. We may not be able to stop either Fellrant or Jahcgroth, but perhaps a lone bandit lord won't be too much for us. There might be something we can do to help the unfortunates he's trapped in Vorslava"

Auglar considered the idea, and a little of the hopelessness drained from his eyes. "You might be right, Suchen. In fact, I think you are. Yes." A faint smile showed through his beard. "Maybe there is something we can do, after all. Let us go to Vorslava."

* * * *

The great hall of Vorslava was brightly lit, and the smell of good food, ale, and smoke hung heavy in the air. Although dinner was as strictly rationed as any other meal, there were more smiles than not, and most of the people rising from the benches looked to be in fair health. Men and women moved among the crowds, clearing dishes from the tables. As usual, there was no uneaten food—everyone knew that even a scrap of bread was far too valuable to waste.

Yozerf sighed and stretched out his legs. The warmth from the fire pit touched his skin, and he lingered near it, avoiding his quarters and his study, both of which were no doubt freezing cold. Wood was too precious to squander, and that included for his own personal use. The fact that his quarters were frequently unheated never failed to surprise anyone, new to the keep, who happened to come in to clean. It had enhanced his reputation as an oddity.

Not that it needed the enhancement.

Owl came over and scrambled up into his lap, clutching her comb in one hand and a toy horse in the other. The horse, a gift from one of the seamstresses, was made from spare scraps of cloth and stuffed with straw.

"*Oof*—you're growing," Yozerf said, shifting her weight on his knees.

Owl's eyes gleamed with anticipation. The gray streaks in them seemed more pronounced as time went on, but there were no other signs of whatever change he had inadvertently wrought in her. "Am I big enough to have a real horse now?"

Gless's laugh heralded his arrival. Taking the seat next to Yozerf, he eased himself into it, absently rubbing at the ache the cold left in his injured leg. "You should have known better than to give her an opening like that," he said with a grin.

The change in Gless since their arrival in Vorslava was profound, Yozerf thought, and had probably surprised those who hadn't known him before. Gone were the somber colors and untended hair. The wardrobes that they had raided after taking the castle had contributed their finery to Gless's new attire: an extremely well-made purple shirt that might have belonged to Fellrant himself, covered by a brilliant red doublet with slashed sleeves that showed off the shirt beneath. His leggings were a hideous shade of

yellow, which clashed terribly with the low, green-dyed leather boots he wore. Golden ringlets had been carefully curled and fixed to hang fetchingly around Gless's boyish face. The flirtatious banter that had once been his trademark had returned, and Yozerf had little doubt that a stream of very willing young ladies frequently occupied his bed.

This was the Gless that Yozerf had first met, who had largely vanished after the wound that left him useless in his own eyes and Auglar's. Yozerf was surprised at how much the return of this personality gladdened him.

"You're right," Yozerf agreed, taking up Owl's comb and setting it to her hair. "Owl, I've told you before—you're too young."

"Oh." She waited a moment. "Am I old enough now?"

"No."

"How about now?"

"No."

"How about ... now?"

Yozerf tugged on her hair with a growl of frustration. "Owl Jonaglir, are you trying to drive me mad?"

She tilted her head back, a grin on her face and her eyes sparkling. "Yes."

Gless burst out laughing. "Well, at least she's honest!"

Yozerf scowled at them both and went back to combing Owl's coppery hair. "What did I do to make the gods send me such a fractious child? And I'm not even going to ponder my crimes to be saddled with *you*, Gless."

"Probably just as well." A rather buxom maiden brought Gless a tankard of ale, giving him a smile and a wink along with it. He watched her bottom as she sashayed away, then returned his attention to Yozerf. "I just spoke with some of the scouts," he said.

"And?"

"They saw signs that strangers have been in the area. Bandits, from the looks of things."

"Damn." Yozerf frowned as he tugged a knot out of Owl's hair. The keep naturally served to attract people of all sorts. Like the founders, many of them were desperate refugees, who were allowed to remain so long as they followed the rules set out before them and were willing to tolerate the presence of Aclytes and Wolfkin. But many of them were bandits, scavengers, and outlaws of the worst type, who saw Vorskava merely as an opportunity to prey upon others. During the fall, Yozerf had been careful to see that every party that went outside to work the nearby fields or to gather fodder from the surrounding countryside was accompanied by heavily armed guards. That policy had prevented much grief, as it turned out. With the onset of winter, attacks and harassment from outlaws had declined as they either fell victim to the cold or looked for easier prey. But now it seemed that at least one band had decided to try their luck.

"We could ride out and look for them," Gless suggested. "Now that winter's come, there isn't as much work that needs to be done outside the walls, so it isn't as if we would be taking men from somewhere else."

"A good suggestion," Yozerf agreed. "Choose a small party from those you think are anxious to get outside but cautious enough not to get themselves killed through stupidity. Let me know when you have them, and we'll go sometime in the next few days."

"Can I go, Papa?" Owl asked hopefully.

"No. You're—"

"Too young," she finished glumly. "But I want to fight with you."

"And I want you to stay here where it's safe." He kissed her forehead. "Besides, while I'm gone, you can try to find out where I hid your Midwinter present."

Owl gasped in delight. "You got me a *present*?"

"Of course. You are my daughter, after all."

"Wait until I tell Asen!" she exclaimed, and a moment later was halfway across the room, her hair flying and the stuffed horse flapping in her hand.

"You realize that your quarters will be completely taken apart by the time you get back, now," Gless observed.

"It will be worth it."

The idea of a Midwinter celebration had not been his, but it had not taken him long to see its benefits. Several others, including Tan and Grilka, had approached him with the suggestion of having a feast and holiday at some point during the long winter months. It would give people something to look forward to, and hopefully it would serve to counteract some of the tensions that would inevitably build by then. Although it meant adjusting rations to take a feast into account, Yozerf had agreed to the idea. The celebration would take place on the longest night of the year, which was held sacred by humans, Aclytes, and Wolfkin alike.

If only Suchen were here, she could help with the rationing and ensure that our food will last until spring, he thought regretfully. Now that he was faced with the problems of running a keep, he realized that he had not appreciated her talent as a steward nearly as much as he should have. Being a warrior seemed comparatively easy.

After Gless left to look into gathering a small force to hunt down the bandits, a steady parade of others took up Yozerf's attention. He had tried to make himself accessible to everyone in the keep, and although he doubted most of them felt exactly comfortable with him, no one seemed to hesitate to bring a problem or complaint to his attention. Grilka, who had become the unofficial spokeswoman for the unmarried women of the keep, as well as for the children, wanted his judgment on a minor dispute between two of the kitchen girls. The smith reported the current state of weapons and armor in the keep. Hendel wanted permission to begin a building project that would last throughout the winter and reinforce their defenses, should they be attacked in the spring. And so on, and so on.

After he had dealt with the mundane matters of the keep, Yozerf went to Owl's room to read to her before she fell asleep. The hour was late by the time he was free to seek his bed at last. Ji'seth and Wulfgar accompanied him back to his room. Tan and Gless were both off duty for the night, Tan no doubt with his family and Gless with the serving maid who had winked at him earlier. For the most part, the Sworn had not been called on to act as bodyguards, but there had been one or two attempts on Yozerf's life. They had come before winter set in, masterminded by unscrupulous men who saw

themselves as the next lords of the keep. The would-be assassins had died quickly, and their bodies, gone over the cliff to the rocks below.

The two Sworn checked the bedroom for assassins, then left Yozerf alone with a cheerful: "Good night, my lord!" The bedroom was cold; frost showed on the windowpanes, making a lacy pattern in the moonlight. Wrapping himself deep in his blankets, Yozerf burrowed down into the big bed, his mind already on what must be done the next day.

He was never certain what alerted him. Perhaps the stir of slightly colder air through the open window, or perhaps the change of moonlight against his closed eyelids as a shadow blocked it out. All he knew was that he was suddenly, completely awake and staring at a figure as it slipped in through the window.

He let out a yell of surprise and warning, even as he rolled out of the bed. The sword that rested by him was in his hand before his feet hit the floor. There was a faint whistle of displaced air and a soft thud, and he caught a flash of starlight on steel as a razor-sharp dagger buried itself in the bed where he had been only moments before. He brought up his sword desperately, but nothing was there; it was only instinct that made him drop to the floor as a dagger slashed through the air from *behind* him.

Then the door was flung open, Ji'seth and Wulfgar tumbling through, weapons in hand. A flood of torchlight came with them, revealing pale skin, raven-black hair, and eyes gray as dragons. Shock slammed through Yozerf, so sudden that he nearly dropped his sword.

"Mother!" he shouted indignantly. "What in the name of Hel are you doing?"

Londah froze, metal gleaming in her hands, and he realized that she had been just about to drop one or both of his Sworn with well-placed daggers. Her eyes went almost perfectly round as she stared at him. One of her weapons slipped from a nerveless grasp to hit the carpeted floor with a dull clank.

"Y-Yozerf?" she stammered.

Her surprise made him uneasy. He would never have imagined Londah doing anything so careless as dropping a weapon. Signaling his Sworn to stand down, he took the torch from Ji'seth and thrust it into the pile of kindling in his fireplace.

"Yes," he said as the meager light spread. "I know that it has been several months, but surely not so long that you don't recognize your own son. Now, if you don't mind explaining what you were doing climbing in my window at such an hour—"

With a sob that sounded torn from the depths of her being, Londah crossed the room and flung her arms around him. Ji'seth drew her sword in alarm, but Yozerf waved her off. Londah never showed any weakness that he had ever seen, but she held him hard now, and her voice quivered when she spoke. "I thought you were dead."

Dead? "I see." He patted her hair awkwardly, uncertain what to do with vulnerability from her. But after a moment she drew away, and he saw that her composure was returning. She looked thin, he realized with concern, and with a sudden surge of both hope and fear he wondered if she knew what had become of Suchen. "Wulfgar, would you mind finding some wine and perhaps a bit of food for my mother? It seems that we have a lot to talk about."

* * * *

As Londah ate and drank, she gave Yozerf a brief synopsis of all that had happened to her since the fall of Segg. "I left the others in a small wooded area a league or so from here, and came on alone to discover the truth about Vorslava," she finished, her eyes locked on Yozerf's face, as if she still

questioned whether or not he was real.

"To discover the truth—or to kill me?" Yozerf asked dryly.

Londah shrugged, apparently not even slightly ashamed of her actions. "It would have been the simplest way to get control of the keep."

"This is outrageous!" Ji'seth exclaimed, unable to hold in her fury any longer. She stood on guard near the outer door, her poleax clutched in her hands as if she longed to use it on someone. "You—and Lord Auglar—decided to take it upon yourselves to pass judgment on Lord Yozerf, without knowing the truth of the situation!"

Londah raised an eyebrow but remained calm as always. "You must admit, the truth did seem unlikely."

"What I 'admit' is that Auglar cannot believe that anyone who wasn't born to the aristocracy could possibly rule a keep or could be anything more than a common bandit!"

Wulfgar had seated himself near the fire and had so far kept his opinion to himself. "Didn't he marry a common lass?" he asked now, brow furrowing as he thought.

"Mayhap—but then, he wasn't turning over Kellsjard to her governance, was he?" Ji'seth argued, unwilling to give an inch. "And he chose her himself, so she had the blessing of the nobility. As if they are some great bastion of morality and good sense!"

Londah took a sip from her goblet. "You do not have to convince me, child," she said, making Ji'seth bristle. "I came because it was something to do. And because I have not used my skills for a time."

"You climb up sheer cliffs and impregnable walls often, do you?" Wulfgar asked curiously.

"You were saying that you left the others nearby," Yozerf interrupted, not wanting to get into a discussion of Londah's long career as the Crow Queen. "I know the area you speak of. We can ride out and get them tonight."

Tonight. I'll see Suchen again. I'll...

Be reminded all over again that she hates me for what I did.

It would hurt to see her; he knew that already. How much better it would have been for both of them if she had found refuge somewhere else. *Will she even agree to come to Vorslava, knowing I am lord here?*

"What about the bandits, my lord?" Ji'seth reminded him.

Yozerf swore. In all the excitement, he had not given any thought to his earlier conversation with Gless. At Londah's curious look, he said, "There is a band of outlaws in the area, just waiting for someone to prey upon. Suchen—and the rest, of course—could be in danger."

He rose swiftly to his feet. "Get Tan and Gless," he ordered. "We're heading out now, as soon as we can get the horses saddled. Wulfgar, round up all the Wolfkin you can find. They'll be better than an entire army of noisy soldiers if this turns into a night fight."

Londah rose as well. "I should go," she said, despite the rings of weariness that surrounded her eyes. "I was supposed to meet them an hour ago as it is—they will be worried."

"No. Stay here and rest." Yozerf touched her lightly on the shoulder. "You've been through a great deal,

while we've been sitting here in safety and comfort."

"Very well. Be careful, my son."

He gave her a rueful smile. "Now, that *would* be a change, wouldn't it?"

Chapter Fifteen

The night air was bitterly cold, and Suchen shivered, hugging her cloak closer to herself. They had not dared risk lighting a fire so close to Vorslava—indeed, the small, scrubby wood they had chosen to conceal themselves in showed far too much evidence of recent visits for firewood for them to be comfortable. Londah had left at sundown, promising to return with a report before midnight.

But midnight had passed by hours ago.

Brenwulf and Buudi lay in depressions hollowed out of the snow, snatching a few moments of sleep. Auglar stood tensely at the edge of their camp, staring out at nothing, but Suchen knew that he had marked the passing of midnight as closely as she. Although she struggled not to worry, dread and despair crept slowly into her heart like the fall of new snow. At last, unable to remain still any longer, she stood up and walked a little way from the campsite, to a small clearing where she could see the stars.

Footsteps crunched in the snow behind her. “Don't give up yet,” Auglar said.

With a sigh, Suchen turned to face him. Snow crusted his beard, and his blue eyes were full of grief and despair, despite his brave words. “She isn't coming back,” Suchen said. “They caught her.”

“Not Londah. If anyone could walk into Vorslava and back out without being seen, it would be she.”

“Maybe that's just it—maybe no one can.”

Auglar sighed and put his hands on her shoulders. “I know things seem bleak at the moment, Suchen, but don't give up just yet. I'm counting on you. I need you.”

Something broke inside her at his words, like rotted ice cracking over deep, black water. “*Seem* bleak?” she demanded incredulously. “They *are* bleak, Auglar! Yozerf is dead. Kellsjard is destroyed, and Sifya and the baby are probably gone as well. Jenel is being torn apart—people are starving, are dying. And now Londah—”

Her voice broke, and she cursed herself for being weak. Auglar studied her with concern, and for the first time in a long while she saw the man who had been lord of Kellsjard once again. He reached up one hand, gently stroking her short-cropped hair from her eyes.

“But we are alive,” he reminded her. His lips parted slightly, and for an insane moment she thought that he might even kiss her. Whether her response would be to kiss him back or to beat him to within an inch of his life seemed equally possible, as the things inside her screamed for release, any release at all, whether through violence or sex or some combination of both, it didn't matter.

But before he could make any move, a faint sound came to her—the soft, almost inaudible sigh of snow shifting within the forest. Startled, she turned away, her eyes searching the darkness, as she became aware of how very exposed they were in the clearing beneath the moon. “Did you hear something?” she asked in a hoarse whisper, even as she drew her sword.

For a moment, she thought that she had been mistaken. Then something moved in the shadows beneath the trees, and a thread of moonlight gleamed bright on a metallic edge. With a yell to waken their sleeping companions, she and Auglar fell back-to-back, swords poised and ready.

Men surged out of the trees like shadows come to life, their fur-wrapped feet silent in the deep snow. The moonlight showed her little more than tangled hair, matted beards, and badly cured hides with the fur turned in. How many there were, she didn't know—too many; that was certain. With a yell of fury and

despair, she met the first rush with her blade, hacking furiously at a thin, toothless face. The smell of decaying hides, unwashed bodies, and blood smote her, fueling her anger.

Damn it ... they must have found Londah. They must have forced her to tell them where we were hiding.

Curse them all to Hel, and their bandit lord with them!

There were too many to hold off for long. Even as she beat one back, another ducked beneath her guard and slashed her calf in a clumsy attempt to hamstring her. Although he missed the tendon, the pain and the force of the blow sent her leg out from under her, and she fell to one knee. One of her attackers cried out in triumph and raised a huge axe high over his head, preparing for a blow that would surely split her skull in two. Suchen snarled at him like a wild animal, lifting her sword in a last, futile gesture, determined only that she would not die without at least making the attempt to fight back.

Somewhere in the wood, very nearby, a wolf howled.

Everyone froze into a momentary stillness, and Suchen saw sudden terror in the eyes of the man with the axe. Her own muscles locked, and she could feel the icy air scraping in her throat and chest, the slow trickle of hot blood into her boot, and for an instant she wondered if someone had cast a spell over them all.

Then the shadows came to life.

Suchen never even heard the sound of paws on the snow; one moment, the man with the axe was standing poised; the next, a dark wolf shape hurtled into his chest, knocking him to the ground. Screams of terror erupted all around, and Suchen heard Brenwulf yelling, perhaps begging the pack not to kill them along with their attackers.

Either he communicated well, or the wolves had their quarry clear to begin with. Shadow shapes flowed past on long legs, utterly ignoring Auglar and Suchen, their golden eyes fixed on the roughly dressed bandits. Several had fallen during the first moments of the attack, but others had tried to run, tripping and staggering in their panic.

At the sight of her enemies fleeing, something snapped in Suchen. With a wild shriek, she surged to her feet, no longer feeling the pain of her wound. Shouting furiously, incoherently, she charged after the running men, her bloodstained sword waving madly over her head. Wolves ran with her, a silent tide of flickering gray shapes that appeared and disappeared as they passed through the shadows of the trees. She felt abandon rise up in her, and for a moment the effects of starvation and exhaustion fell away, replaced by insane euphoria.

The bandits cursed and screamed as they ran from the wolves and the madwoman. They stumbled and staggered in the dark wood, their feet ensnared by fallen branches and hidden holes, and those who fell did not get up again. Crazy laughter bubbled up out of Suchen's throat, and she focused on one man, the fleetest and most surefooted. She would kill him; she would rend him to pieces; she would make him pay for all the death and despair that she had ever felt.

The wood came to an abrupt end, and the grasslands leapt out before them, running straight to the moonlit sea. At the very edge of the wood was a great, round rock that humped up like the severed head of a giant. A figure stood atop the stone, a tall, slender silhouette that held itself with an easy, unconscious grace. The freezing wind off the sea blew back its cloak and unraveled its long hair like a tattered banner frosted by starlight.

The man Suchen had been chasing staggered to a halt, falling against the rock. The figure on the stone lifted its hand ... and fire bloomed.

The golden firelight lent color to the bone-white skin, drew out the flame of his blood-red hair, and reflected from large, canted eyes, turning them into emotionless green coals. For a moment, Suchen truly believed that her heart had stopped. Her legs went out from under her, and she fell to the snow, scraping her palms. No breath entered her lungs, and her mind yelled that this was impossible, that she had finally succumbed to madness, that she was dreaming, that she was dead.

Yozerf moved so fast that his arm was nothing but a blur. A sword flashed in starlight, and then the headless body of the man Suchen had chased crumpled slowly to the ground, its hot blood melting the snow.

Yozerf dismissed the fire from his hand, but she could still make out his face in the moonlight. Their eyes met, and Suchen prayed silently that, if this were a dream, she might never wake again. For a moment he stared at her, intense longing on his face.

Then he turned away. "*Naf rath fleyn!*" he shouted sharply, and a moment later a woman ran to his side. She was Aclytese and beautiful, with flowing brown hair and wide violet eyes. Blood clung to the sharp edge of the poleax in her hand.

Suchen broke free of her paralysis, flinging out one hand, as if to stop him. "Yozerf!"

The Aclytese woman grabbed her arm, hauling her roughly to her feet. "Shut up, you little fool," she snarled. "Do you want the entire countryside to know we're here?"

Confused beyond words, Suchen tried to struggle free. Yozerf had vanished, swallowed up by the night, and a part of her wondered if he had been nothing but an apparition or a dream. "No! Let go of me! I have to go to him!"

"He doesn't seem to think so," the other woman said sharply. "Now come with me before you bleed to death, or else I'll leave your body for the crows."

Numb, Suchen staggered along after the woman. Light flickered through the trees ahead of them, and before long they came upon a small group of horses and several other figures. One of them was holding a torch, and when he turned his head at their approach, Suchen's breath again caught in her throat. "Gless?"

Gless's face broke into a broad smile, and he limped forward, leaning on a staff topped with an iron globe. "By the gods, you are a welcome sight!" he exclaimed.

Even as she started to ask him if he had seen the others, another group emerged from the wood. A one-armed man led Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf into the torchlight, and Suchen felt a flood of relief that they were safe.

"Gless?" gasped Buudi, echoing Suchen.

"Where is Sifya?" Auglar demanded wildly, grabbing Gless's arms and peering into his face, as if he could pull the answer from the other man's mind. "Is she here?"

"I don't know where she is." Gless's look of sorrow deepened as Auglar's hands slipped away. "I'm sorry. We were separated in the fall of Kellsjard. I escaped alone, so I don't know what became of anyone else."

"There is no time for this," said that midnight voice that Suchen would have known anywhere. As they all stared, he emerged from the wood, now mounted on a big gray warhorse with white mane, tail, and socks. "There may be more bandits about, and Suchen is hurt. We brought enough horses for everyone on two legs, so choose one and mount up quickly."

"Yozerf?" she whispered. But he didn't act as if he had heard her.

"But ... how is it that you're alive?" Auglar asked.

A grim, bitter smile flashed over Yozerf's sculpted lips. "I discovered that heroic sacrifice ill-becomes me. The tale is too long to tell here. Suffice it to say that I survived, and leave it at that."

"We thought you were dead," Suchen managed. She felt as if she were in some dream made up of equal parts joy and pain. Yozerf, her Yozerf, was alive against all odds ... but he was cold and remote as the moon. As if they were strangers.

"So I gathered." He frowned and gestured impatiently at the other horses. "Mount up, or risk being left behind."

"Where are we going?" Auglar asked as he scrambled awkwardly up into a saddle.

"Vorslava, of course."

Suchen felt her heart constrict. She would never have believed Yozerf would ally himself with some bandit king.

He's changed. There was something different in him, in the way he carried himself, in the way the others from the keep seemed to be looking to him to lead them. *Changed. Reborn. What else did I expect of someone returned from the dead?*

Auglar looked as worried as she felt. "Before we go to Vorslava, you have to know something. Londah was with us—she went ahead to discover what sort of man this bandit lord is."

Yozerf smiled again, although this time, at least, it was the familiar half-smile Suchen had always known. "I know. How do you think we knew you were in the wood?"

"So she revealed herself?"

"Not exactly."

Auglar waited for the Aclyte to elaborate, but received nothing further. Finally, he sighed and said, "Before we ride into Vorslava, I have to know what sort of reception I can expect."

Yozerf met Auglar's gaze. Gray eyes burned into blue, and after a moment Auglar looked away. "As a human lord—a lord who inherited his keep rather than taking it by force—you could do much to legitimize the Lord of Vorslava in the eyes of those who, as you say, see nothing more than a bandit."

Auglar stiffened. "I will not be used as a pawn for some jumped-up peasant with pretensions of grandeur."

The Aclytese woman reined her mount sharply towards Auglar's, reaching for a dagger as she did so. "You will take that back, or I will hand you your insolent tongue!"

Yozerf said something sharp in Aclytese. She stared at him rebelliously for a moment, but slipped her dagger back into its sheath, muttering to herself. Apparently satisfied that there would be no bloodshed,

Yozerf returned his gaze to Auglar. "You are so eager to judge, aren't you?" he asked, and there was a bitter, mocking edge in his voice. "Very well—I will tell you exactly what the lord will expect from you, Auglar. He will expect you to keep the peace he has established. If you find it in yourself to support him, then fine. If you find that you cannot—then do not think to foment rebellion. There may very well be factions who approach you, wanting to wrest the keep from the lord and put it in your hands instead, for the simple reason of who you are. If this happens, you will go to the lord immediately and tell him."

"And if I don't?"

"You should know the answer without having to ask. Did you do otherwise when Kellsjard was under siege? Did you tolerate treason in your own walls? No wonder Dara-Don and Peddock ended up as they did."

Auglar's face went white. "You know that's different."

"Yes, it is. It is different because Vorslava is under siege *now*—by cold and hunger and sickness. If something goes wrong, then everyone inside those walls will die, Auglar. And the lord will not allow that to happen."

Silence fell for a brief moment, broken only by the sound of the horses' hooves on the snow. "Do you think that this lord truly cares about his people?" Auglar asked at last.

"No question," Gless answered before Yozerf could respond. "I wouldn't have Sworn myself to him otherwise."

Suchen tore her eyes from Yozerf and stared at Gless in shock. Her old friend looked calm, peaceful almost, but there was a sadness in the smile he gave Auglar.

"Oath-breaker," Brenwulf snarled.

"Maybe I am," Gless said with a shrug. "But the truth is, you had no more use for me, Auglar. You left me behind at Kellsjard because you were convinced that I wasn't worth much as a warrior anymore. I don't blame you—I was convinced of it, too."

"And what changed your mind?" Auglar managed to ask.

"The lord, of course. You may not have dismissed me from your service in so many words, but the sentiment was there, wasn't it? Don't look so glum—I don't hold it against you. I truly don't. I'm somewhere I'm needed now, somewhere I'm appreciated. If that makes me an oath-breaker, then so be it."

No one could seem to think of an answer to that. Yozerf reined his mount around and set its head out of the wood, and the rest followed. Wolves swarmed out like shadows, forming ranks around Yozerf, and before long he and the wolves were far ahead of everyone else. Suchen watched him go until she could no longer make him out against the vast, snowy night.

Chapter Sixteen

Suchen floated slowly up from a deep, restful sleep. The first thing she became aware of was that she was lying on a soft mattress that gave off a faint smell of soap and herbs. A warm blanket covered her, and a pillow cradled her head. For a moment, she simply drifted, not caring to recall where she was or what had happened. Then she remembered that Yozerf was alive, and bittersweet joy flooded her heart.

Alive—not in love with her anymore—but, gods, alive.

There was a gentle hand on her shoulder. Suchen opened her eyes and found herself looking up at a young human woman whose otherwise pleasant face was marred by hideous scarring that ran from beneath one eye all the way to her chin. It distorted her expression into a grimace on one side, but the other, unmaimed, portion wore a genuine smile.

"I'm sorry to wake you," she said sincerely. "But it will be time for dinner soon, and I thought you might want to wash first."

Surprised, Suchen sat up and looked about. Her bed was in a small, neat room occupied by three others, and she vaguely remembered someone telling her that this section of Vorslava was set aside for the use of unmarried women and orphaned children. Two tall, narrow windows opened onto the room, and she could see only the last dregs of sunlight through them. She had slept the short day away, it seemed, and felt much the better for it.

"Thank you," she said, glancing down at herself. What had become of her clothes, she didn't know—there had been a clean white shift waiting for her in the room, and she had barely put it on before falling into the bed. Now, though, her own filthy state came to her, and she felt ashamed for sullyng the shift and the sheets.

"My name is Afwyn," the woman said. "I'll help you find your way around, get your bearings, if you would like."

Suchen found herself smiling at the mutilated woman. "I'd like that. I'm Suchen Keblava. Thanks for helping me."

"Oh, well, I haven't been here that long myself, so I remember what it was like to feel like an outsider." Afwyn stood up and held out her hand to Suchen. "Come on—I'll show you where you can bathe. We've got clothes from the storerooms, and that we've scavenged here and there—I'm sure something will fit you."

Suchen followed gratefully, pausing only long enough to pick up her sword from where she had left it propped by the bed. Afwyn gave her a curious glance, but made no comment, instead simply leading the way through the corridors to a small bathing room. It consisted of a fireplace for heating the water, a large copper tub, and a drain in the floor for the dirty water. Someone had already filled the tub, and Afwyn tipped a pot of heated water into it, so that steam rose into the air.

Suchen slipped into her bath with a feeling of utter gratitude. As she scrubbed soap into her short hair, though, she found herself considering what she had seen so far of Vorslava. That Yozerf and Gless were both here serving the mysterious lord argued that rumors might not be so far off the truth as she and Auglar had assumed. No matter how much he had changed, she could not imagine Yozerf offering allegiance to anyone who would abuse his power.

Although she had not seen many inhabitants of the keep on her way in before dawn, save for a few

guards, Suchen thought that Afwyn at least seemed happy with her lot. At any rate, she lacked the scared, beaten look that Suchen had seen on the faces of more than one female servant in her life.

As Suchen washed, a steady stream of women came into the room. Many of them were bringing clothes for her to try on, but most seemed merely to be curious about the newcomer. The fact that Suchen was armed naturally made her more exotic, although the female Aclyte from the night before had clearly been a warrior. As Suchen emerged from the bath, gratefully taking a towel from one of the women, the crowd around the door parted. Suchen looked up to discover the biggest woman she had ever seen bearing down on her.

"I'm Grilka," the woman said in a booming voice. "Welcome to Vorslava."

"Uh, thanks," Suchen replied, craning her head back to look up into the woman's homely face.

Grilka took the towel with the ease of someone to whom authority came naturally and set to drying Suchen's hair rather vigorously. "Now, now, back away, you lot," Grilka said to the other women. "She's just come in from the road, can't you see? My, you are a skinny thing! Well, the feast tonight will take care of that."

"Feast?" Suchen asked meekly.

Grilka tossed the towel away and began sorting through clothing with a practiced eye. "Oh, aye. Well, maybe not a feast, but a bit more of a formal sit-down than we normally have. The lord isn't one for a lot of bowing and scraping, that's for sure, so it's usually come-as-you-are and sit-whenever-you-like. But he's wanting to do a little something special for Lord Auglar, I'm guessing. Show him that we're not a bunch of barbarians. Here, try this on, now."

Suchen obediently pulled a tunic over her head. It smelled of cedar, as if it had just been brought out of a storage closet, and the sleeves hung far past Suchen's wrists. Grilka frowned, motioned for her to take it off, and selected another. "This lord of yours," Suchen said hesitantly. "What is he like?"

Grilka paused, and Suchen saw that the big woman was giving her question some real thought. "Good," Grilka finally said. "A bit odd, yes, and there are some who'd have a problem with him. Now, we women here, we look out for one another, understand? But the lord looks out for us, too. There's some who have come here who've been through some bad times, and no one will ask you about what happened before you came to the keep, if you don't want to talk about it. But if any man threatens you, or starts pressuring you to exchange your favors for some extra food from him, or anything like that, don't be scared to go to the lord right away and tell him, understand?"

Suchen tried on yet another tunic. This one seemed to fit well enough, so Grilka began searching through skirts. "I'm not sure that I do."

"The lord has strong feelings about some things," Grilka said grimly, holding up a skirt to compare its length to Suchen's short height. "Rape is one of them. Doesn't stand for anyone trying to harm or abuse anyone else here, really."

"That's so," said another woman, "but I think he just likes women."

Afwyn smiled with the half of her mouth that could. "Not that you'd know it—he's not sleeping with anyone that I've heard."

"I didn't mean that way," the other woman objected. "But of course you would know, wouldn't you?"

Afwyn blushed. "I think he's handsome," she said, a bit more defensively than Suchen thought the

situation warranted.

"I thought you said 'beautiful' last week."

The conversation dissolved into teasing Afwyn and comparing the merits of various guardsmen. As soon as Suchen was dressed in a plain but serviceable tunic and skirt, Afwyn led her back to their quarters to rest for the short time left before the bell was rung to summon the keep's inhabitants to dinner. But when they opened the door, Suchen was surprised to find a young girl sitting on her bed, idly swinging her legs over the side. She was perhaps eight years old, with hair that gleamed like copper and a dusting of freckles across her upturned nose. Her mischievous eyes were striking, blue heavily streaked with gray. She was clad in a tunic of good make and, of all things, a pair of boy's trousers and boots.

"What are you doing here, Owl?" Afwyn asked, her eyes narrowing slightly in exasperation. "I thought I told you stay out."

Owl was staring at Suchen in obvious fascination. "But she's awake now!" she pointed out, in a thick peasant's drawl.

Afwyn sighed and looked at Suchen apologetically. "Owl kept coming in while you were asleep. I was afraid she would wake you, and from the looks of things, you needed the rest."

Suchen sat down by the girl. "Owl, is it? That's an odd name."

"Papa gave it to me," the girl declared proudly. Then her eyes went to Suchen's sword. "You're a fighter, aren't you? Will you teach me?"

Suchen blinked, surprised. "That would be up to your parents," she said uncertainly, even as she reflected that, had it been up to *her* parents, she would have been married off years ago without ever having seen a sword.

"And the lord may have other plans for you," said a voice with a heavy Aclytese accent.

Startled, Suchen looked up and saw the woman from the night before, leaning in the doorway. In better light, she looked even more beautiful than she had then. She dressed in tall fur-lined boots, trousers, tunic, and cloak. Her thick brown hair was swept up to the crown of her head, where it was tied so that it fell down her back in a sort of crest. Although her posture was relaxed, Suchen noted that she kept a ready grip on the poleax she carried.

"Ji'seth," Afwyn said by way of greeting. "What brings you here?" Apparently, the beautiful Aclytese woman did not normally stay with the unattached females of the keep.

Because she's staying elsewhere? Could that be the reason for Yozerf's behavior last night? Could he be in love with someone else?

"I've been looking for Owl," Ji'seth said, giving the girl a stern glare. "Your father finally realized that you were missing. He would have noticed earlier, but he was running about like a madman shouting something about needing a hair clip."

Afwyn looked shocked. "*The lord?*"

Ji'seth's violet eyes glowered at Suchen. "He is quite anxious to impress these new guests," she said, as if she would just as soon toss them all back out the gates.

Owl made a face. "He wants me to wear a *dress*," she confided, as if nothing could possibly be more

abhorrent.

Suchen gave her a sympathetic wince. "How awful."

"I don't think I should have to, do you?"

Remembering her own upbringing, how her parents had tried to force her into a mold for which she was desperately unsuited, Suchen said, "Not if you don't wish it."

"He is your father and you should obey him," Ji'seth snapped, but her scowl was all for Suchen. "You will come back with me now."

Owl sighed, hopped up, and started for the door. But before she reached it, she stopped and looked back. "Can I come back and visit you?" she asked Suchen.

"Anytime."

The girl smiled, and Suchen found herself smiling back. When she was gone, Afwyn laughed and shook her head. "Don't let Owl fool you," she said. "The lord indulges her horribly."

"Must be nice," Suchen said wistfully.

* * * *

Torches and tallow candles spread as much light as possible through Vorslava's great hall, although the basalt walls and brooding architecture ensured that the room maintained an air of gloom. While Kellsjard, with its long legacy of building sprees, had seemed the nightmare of a demented architect, Vorslava was unified in its effort to produce a dark, vaguely ominous atmosphere.

Everywhere Suchen looked, carved faces stared back at her: from the ceiling beams, from the spandrels, even from the window mullions. Some faces were human, while others were monstrous creations of the artist's imagination. The gloomy keep seemed the perfect haunt for ghosts, and she was willing to bet that the castle's children entertained themselves with many tales of strange noises, cold spots, and unquiet spirits.

At least the hall was well ventilated, she thought, smoothing her skirts nervously as she made her way to where Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf sat together, at one of the side tables. Smoke from the enormous fire pit in the center of the hall vanished into the darkness above and, presumably, out through some network of holes and flues hidden in the far-off ceiling. A group of children chased each other through the crowds; a moment later, Grilka's loud voice called them to heel. Cats curled near the warmth of the fire, undisturbed by the comings and goings of the humans around them. The smells of wood smoke and ale filled the hall, giving it a sort of somber cheer.

A look of relief crossed Auglar's face when he saw her. "Are you rested?" he asked, indicating a seat beside him on the bench. She slid in, careful to keep her sword from jabbing her in the ribs.

"Yes. Have you spoken to the mysterious lord yet?"

Auglar shook his head, his expression growing grim. "No. We were brought in and given a little food and a bed. Later they let us bathe and gave us clothes, as I see they did you. Gless came in briefly and talked to us, but wouldn't elaborate on anything we didn't already know. We haven't seen Londah, either."

"Nor have I." Suchen shivered a little, worry for the Aclytese woman creeping into her belly. "Do you think we should have insisted?"

"I don't think Yozerf would have been so calm last night if he had been worried about anything happening to her," Buudi pointed out reasonably. He hesitated. "I noticed that there seems to be some ... tension ... between the two of you."

Suchen shrugged and looked away. "People change, I suppose. I'd rather not talk about it."

At that moment, a faint murmur rose from the crowd. Suchen looked up and saw Londah enter. For the first time since Suchen had met her, the Aclytese woman was wearing a dress. And not just any dress, but a gown of sumptuous red velvet that set off her gray eyes and pale skin to perfection. Not to mention her body, although truthfully, anything short of a sack would be unable to do otherwise. Her waist-length black hair was twisted up on her head, bound in place by red ribbons.

All eyes followed her as she made her way across the room. But instead of coming to sit with Suchen and the rest, she went straight to the head table and seated herself there, to the right of the lord's empty chair.

"I wonder what that means," Auglar said, bewildered.

"I don't know," Suchen murmured. She noticed that Owl was there as well, in the chair to the lord's left, her short legs swinging idly. Although her clothing was neater than she had worn earlier, the girl still had on trousers. When she saw Suchen looking at her, she waved brightly and held up a stuffed horse, which had been sitting on the table by her plate.

"Who is that?" Buudi asked.

"The lord's daughter, apparently. Her name is Owl, of all things."

"And where is this lord?" Brenwulf muttered darkly. "He doesn't seem to mind holding up dinner, it would appear, nor being rude to his guests by not meeting with them beforehand."

"One of the women said that dinner isn't usually this formal," Suchen recalled. "And that Aclyte from last night—Ji'seth—said that he wanted to make an impression on us."

The sound of shuffling benches started at the far end of the hall, and Suchen realized that the people at the lower tables were rising to their feet. No doubt the tardy lord was finally making an appearance. For an instant Suchen frowned—it was not customary for everyone at dinner to rise for a lord, and it annoyed her that this unknown man would flaunt his power so. But then she remembered Grilka's words and realized that she had seen no signal to rise. This display was spontaneous.

Who is this man, that he can command such respect?

The lord's entourage swept into view. Gless was there, naturally, and Ji'seth, along with two other men Suchen didn't know ... and Yozerf.

For a moment, it shocked her—Yozerf had refused to become Sworn to Auglar, and yet he had taken oath to some jumped-up bandit? Then the implication of their order, with Yozerf in the center, dawned on her. If she had not already been seated, she would surely have collapsed.

"By the gods," Brenwulf whispered.

Yozerf looked utterly beautiful as he passed by, moving in an easy stride that bespoke confidence and power. Although dressed in his customary black, the clothes looked to be of good quality rather than the patched and worn things he had always had before. His cloak swirled around him, flaring out like dragon's wings. He held his head high, and his long red hair was actually brushed and tamed by a gold

clip at the nape of his neck. Around his throat was a simple gold chain set with a single ruby, the only mark of authority that he wore.

The Sworn escorted him all the way to the high table and then broke formation, with Gless and Ji'seth taking up station a few paces behind his chair. Yozerf gave them a slightly exasperated look, but took his seat without argument. Scrapes and clatters filled the hall as the castle's inhabitants sat again. Servants bearing platters of food emerged from the side doors, and soon the loud murmur of conversation had risen up all around the tiny island of quiet that enclosed Suchen and her companions.

Suchen was unable to look away from Yozerf, even when someone put a bowl of vegetable stew in front of her. Perhaps feeling her gaze, he glanced up, and their eyes met. Suchen's breath caught in her throat, as if some physical connection bound them together, tugging urgently at her heart. Yozerf's gray eyes were steady, cold, and gave nothing away of his own thoughts ... and yet, he did nothing to sever the connection between them, until a small hand reached up and patted him on the arm. Jumping slightly at the touch, he glanced down at Owl, who was holding up her stuffed horse. Even at a distance, Suchen saw Yozerf's lips curve into a smile, and he held up a chunk of bread to the horse's stitched mouth, as if it might eat it.

What by Hel?

"This doesn't make any sense," Buudi said. Dragging her eyes away from Yozerf, Suchen discovered Buudi frowning at her. With the growth of beard shaved away, Suchen saw that the lines on his face were more deeply graven than before, as if he had aged years in the last few months. No doubt she looked the same.

"I don't understand, either," Suchen said unhappily.

Auglar took a bite out of a hunk of bread, chewing it as though it had personally offended him. "Nor do I," he said darkly, once he had swallowed. "But I will."

They ate in silence after that. The fare was simple, but filling, and for the first time in months Suchen knew that she would be going to bed without the constant ache of hunger in her belly. The ale was dark and rich, but, like the food, it was carefully portioned out, the rest being held in reserve against the long winter still to come.

All around them, the hall was filled with talk and laughter. Suchen watched the crowd carefully, noting the different people who made it up. Perhaps half of them were Aclytes, which made a certain amount of sense. They mingled freely with the humans, and children of both races ran here and there, playing and being reprimanded by their parents. Afwyn caught her eye from across the hall and offered her an encouraging smile.

Once dinner was over, a crowd gathered around the newcomers. Some were no doubt curious to see the human lord, while others wanted to welcome them to the keep and see if there was anything they needed. Their generosity surprised Suchen, especially given that many of these people had lost everything to the war. She had hoped that Yozerf would join them, but as she craned her neck to see around the wall of people gathered about them, she realized that he had already left.

Although he struggled to be polite with the curious people around him, Auglar was clearly put out by Yozerf's disappearance. He answered one question far more brusquely than necessary, and some of those nearest him drew back, their faces showing surprise.

"Now, now," a rough voice said into the moment of silence that followed, "they've had a long journey and don't feel like answering a bunch of silly questions. Stand back and give them some air; there you

go."

The man who pushed his way through the crowd had long hair that had gone entirely gray, but his body was still fit and strong. An easy-going smile lit his weathered face, and he looked as if he should have been at home bouncing grandchildren on his knee. But a sword hung from his hip, and he was dressed as a soldier. When he turned, Suchen saw that his left arm ended abruptly only a few inches below his shoulder.

Brenwulf came to his feet, meeting the older man's eyes, and there was something in his posture that communicated tension and uncertainty. The man continued to smile, however. "It's all right, lad," he said warmly. "Yes, I'm Wolfkin, but I'm not a challenge to you."

Suchen froze at his words. Brenwulf's eyes grew wide, and he looked around frantically, for the gray-haired man had made no effort to lower his voice. Seeing their shock, he chuckled. "It still seems odd to have it out in the open, but everyone here knows what my family and I are. And we aren't the only ones. The Red Guard drove us out of our homes when Argannon invaded, and many of us ended up here. We hunt for the keep and protect it, and the lord looks out for us. I'm Wulfgar, by the way."

"You're one of Yozerf's Sworn," Buudi observed guardedly.

"Aye, that I am. He sent me to bring you to him, as it happens. There was some business he had to take care of after dinner, but he wanted to talk to you before it grew too late, seeing as you've all had a hard time of things and would probably like your beds."

Auglar's face hardened. "We want to speak with him, also."

Wulfgar gave him a sharp look but made no comment. They followed the grizzled old Wolfkin out of the dining hall and through a series of torch-lit corridors. As she studied the brooding architecture of the keep, Suchen found herself thinking wryly that Yozerf could not have found a place that better reflected his temperament if he had tried.

I can't believe this is happening. He can't be the lord we've heard so much about ... can he?

How did he take Vorslava? To Hel with that—how did he survive the fight in Segg? Where does this girl, this Owl, come into it?

The study that Wulfgar took them to was a large, comfortable room. Thick carpets covered most of the floor, and the walls were lined with books. A huge desk of some black wood hulked at one end. Yozerf sat at it, his head bent over what looked to be a parchment scroll. The light from the well-stoked fire touched his long hair, which he had taken down from the clip, bringing out gold highlights amidst the red. Owl was sprawled on the carpet directly in front of the fire, an open book in front of her and a frown of intense concentration on her face. Ji'seth stood near the door, poleax still in hand, and Londah sat in a chair nearby, sipping something from a goblet, with a faintly amused expression on her face.

Yozerf glanced up as they entered, and Suchen caught a flash of nervousness before the mask closed down over his features again. "Auglar," he said, his deep voice calm, measured. "Suchen, Buudi, Brenwulf. I trust that you have all been treated well? Fed? Had your needs taken care of?"

"Yes," Auglar said impatiently, waving his hand. "Except the need for information."

Yozerf leaned back in his ornately carved chair, and a rueful smile curved his mouth. "I apologize for the drama. I suppose that, given our previous ... association, I wanted to make a favorable impression."

"Yozerf." Suchen took a hesitant step forward. Her heart quickened slightly when he turned his attention

on her, and she swallowed and looked down. "How did you escape from Segg? We—we thought that you were dead."

I'm not going to cry, damn it. I'm not.

Yozerf sighed, looking suddenly weary. "I'm not entirely certain how I escaped," he admitted. "I remember being fairly sure that I was going to my death. But then ... nothing. The memories are lost to me. Next I knew, I was in a forest in wolf form, badly hurt. Dying, I suppose."

"Then how did you survive?" Buudi asked.

"Owl." At the sound of her name, the girl looked up, and Yozerf beckoned her over. She went to him, and he picked her up and settled her in his lap. "Owl found me. She saved my life."

Owl grinned, obviously pleased by the praise. "We were in the forest, and there were bandits, and Papa killed them, only I thought he was Smoky, and then we went to my village, but it was gone, but first there was the witch's house, and I was afraid to go in, and—"

"Owl," Yozerf interrupted, "I don't think we have time for your version just now."

Auglar was looking slightly vexed. "But surely that isn't the child's real name," he said. "And where are her parents?"

"It is too my name!" Owl shouted, her lower lip jutting out angrily. "Owl Jonaglir!"

Yozerf gave Auglar a baleful look, but only said, "Owl, why don't you go up to your room for now. We're going to be talking about boring things for a while. Perhaps your grandmother would like to see your toys. I'll come up later and read to you, all right?"

Londah rose gracefully and extended her hand to the girl. "Come, child. Have you any weapons in your room?"

"*Mother,*" Yozerf said sharply.

Londah's eyes were all innocence. "Yes?"

"I would appreciate it if you could find something to do with Owl that doesn't involve killing anyone."

"If you insist."

As soon as they were gone, Yozerf rose and crossed the room. He towered over Auglar like a black shadow, and the human lord took a half-step back. "You were rude and needlessly cruel to my daughter, and I will not have it," Yozerf said softly, but there was a hint of the wolf's growl in his voice. His gray eyes reflected the firelight, turning into unreadable green coals.

Auglar was the first to look away. "I'm sorry. It has been ... a long year."

"For us all." Yozerf turned away, cloak flaring with his movements. "You need rest and food, all of you. And I will give them to you, but we must speak first. Ji'seth, Wulfgar—leave us, please."

Ji'seth bristled visibly, and her knuckles went white as she tightened her grip on the poleax. "I do not trust them, my lord."

Yozerf glanced down at his desk, as if thinking, then back up. "But I do trust them," he said gently.

If Suchen had needed any more evidence as to how greatly he had changed, then this was it, she thought in amazement. A simple statement, and not one that seemed like much ... unless you knew him.

"To trust is to die," he had told her once, shortly after they first met. Other people might trust, but not Yozerf, scarred child of the streets that he was. He claimed that trust was a fool's trap, a devil's promise, and he would have none of it.

She had flung it in his face during their final argument, after she learned that he had been sharing his mind with the ghost of the last Queen of Caden. Yozerf had not trusted her ... but it had been he who had, in the end, betrayed *her*.

And now ... now he stood in front of them and said that he trusted—said it wryly, perhaps, but truthfully nonetheless.

Oh my love. What happened to you?

The two Sworn left, although Ji'seth shot many a backward glance over her shoulder, as if warning them all of the retribution they would face if they went collectively mad and decided to kill Yozerf. When they were gone, Yozerf shook his head and sighed, and Suchen realized that he felt the burden of their loyalty keenly. "Now we can speak freely, as old companions," he said.

Auglar studied Yozerf's face with a thoughtful air. "Good. Then tell me with whom I am speaking. Yozerf? Or Telmonra?"

Yozerf went to stand before the fire, staring into its depths, as if the flames held some secret they would impart if only he looked long enough. "You have the right to ask that, I suppose," he said at last. "I told you in Segg that I had cast her out, but I cannot say that I blame you for doubting me."

"I'm glad to hear that. Because, to be honest, I find it difficult to believe that Yozerf could have accomplished all of this."

Yozerf's smile was sad, wistful, and pulled hard at Suchen's heart. "That, too, I understand. But it is nonetheless true, no matter how absurd it seems. I will not lie to you, Auglar—I have some of Telmonra's memories in me. I did take some things from her, and perhaps her understanding of the ways of command remained with me. But she is no more. The ghost in me was nothing but a shadow, a memory of someone who had once lived, and now even that is gone. You will have to be satisfied with that. And of course, you are welcome to leave Vorslava if that is your wish—I will not hinder you."

"We would be fools to leave," Auglar said reluctantly. "Whether we like it or not, Vorslava is our only real hope of living through the winter."

"Good. I was afraid that your dislike of me, justified as it is, would be enough of a goad to make you do something foolish." Yozerf turned and put his back to the fire, folding his arms over his chest. "There are some rules you must follow if you remain, however."

Wariness showed in Auglar's eyes. "And what are they?"

"First, everyone works in Vorslava. That includes me. There are no useless nobles here, sitting about, waited on by servants. Everyone contributes to the wellbeing of the keep in whatever way they are best suited, either by talent or inclination. Some cook, some clean the floors, some muck out the stables, some watch the children, some stand guard. I think I could use you best as guardsmen, but if you would prefer to be stable hands or carpenters, we need those also.

"I don't think I need to warn you about not harming or taking advantage of others, or go into details, such

as that any adult caught stealing food will be immediately exiled.” Yozerf smiled faintly. “None of you seem apt to suddenly become criminals. However,” and his smile faded, “you will recall our conversation of last night, Auglar.”

Yozerf glided gracefully forward, circling Auglar in a slow, predatory stalk. Firelight and shadow streaked his inhuman face and his cold, gray eyes. He seemed for a moment a thing of darkness and air, dangerous as a wild animal. “I am the Lord of Vorslava,” he said softly, but there was a deadly edge of warning to the words, “and you will obey me in all things. If you seek to divide the people of this keep by making yourself a rival to me, I will put you back out into the snow without a second thought. Do we understand each other?”

Auglar's lips tightened, going white at the edges. “Yes.”

“Good.” Yozerf relaxed suddenly, and some of the dark menace slipped away from him. “It does not give me joy to say such things to you, but your position here must be clear to everyone. Vorslava will not survive to see the spring if we are not united in purpose, and no man can follow two lords.” He ran his hand back through his loose hair in a gesture of weariness. “I did not seek this.”

“You didn't?”

“Of course not. I am no fool—I would not have believed it possible. Ask Gless if you don't believe me.”

Auglar was silent for a moment; then he nodded once, sharply. “Very well. I agree to your terms. We are prepared to be guards, if that is what is needed.”

“Thank you.” Yozerf leaned against the mantelpiece, staring once more into the fire. “And from time to time I will want your advice, Auglar. You have experience and knowledge that I don't, and I am not so proud that I won't take advantage of that. As I said, I am no fool.” He hesitated for a moment, then added, “I have need of you as well, Suchen.”

Although the words were carefully impersonal, she thought she heard a slight roughness in his voice. “What do you need?” she asked, striving to match his tone.

“Two things, actually.” A rueful smile flashed over his face and was gone. “I hope that you will consider them on their own merits, rather than judge them by the source of the request. I would like you to teach Owl the sword.”

Suchen blinked, surprised. “Me? What about you? Or Londah?”

“If it is left up to me, Owl's education will be very haphazard indeed,” he said wryly. “I make time for her, that is true, even if it means going without sleep. But I'm not always certain when that will be, and midnight is hardly the best time for sword practice. For one thing, it tends to annoy everyone whose windows face the courtyard.”

“And Londah?”

“Londah will turn Owl into a little assassin within two weeks. I would prefer that at least some of her training came from someone with a slightly less bloodthirsty outlook. If you and Londah work with her together, perhaps she will learn something about balance and restraint without sacrificing technique.”

Suchen thought about it, then nodded. “I would be honored, then.”

“Thank you,” he said, and she could tell that he meant it. “There is one other thing, though. I would like for you to be my steward, at least for a little while.”

She went still, heart pounding. Consenting would mean spending more time with him, and, gods, she wanted that. But at the same time, it would be torment to be close to him and know that she had somehow lost his love, that she couldn't touch him or kiss him or make any of the casual little gestures that lovers had.

"The truth is that I do not have the experience nor mind-set to be good at that sort of thing, and neither does any other here," Yozerf went on, apparently oblivious to her turmoil. "I know I am asking a great deal, but it is for the good of the keep."

"Of course," Suchen said, amazed that her voice didn't shake. "I would be happy to."

"Good. I'll have someone show you the records we have made tomorrow." He straightened abruptly. "But it grows late, and I'm certain you're all tired."

Ji'seth and Wulfgar were both waiting to lead them back to their quarters. The corridor outside was cold, and Suchen followed it back to her lonely bed, feeling as though the icy air had eaten into her core and would never leave again.

* * * *

I can't do this.

Yozerf closed his eyes as the door shut behind those who had once been his friends. It had been good to see them all, alive and in reasonable health.

As if he'd had eyes for anyone but Suchen.

Gods, she looked terrible—thin and pale from deprivation, her beautiful hair cut short. But nothing could make her appear like anything less than an angel to him, and his whole body ached with the need to go to her, fold her into his arms, and never let her go.

And it's my own fault that I can't.

He would have to stay away from her, he thought bleakly. She would be a competent steward, and he hoped that meant she wouldn't need much input from him. If he could keep their contact to a minimum, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad.

Liar.

Chapter Seventeen

Suchen spent the next morning lost in the minutia of running a keep. Yozerf sent everything he had compiled concerning Vorslava's food stores and population. Although his handwriting was terrible and his math worse, he had done surprisingly well for someone whose only education had taken place on the streets and who hadn't even learned to read until last year. In addition, the people he had assigned, either formally or informally, to oversee various aspects of the keep met with her and put their knowledge at her disposal.

After long hours of staring at lists or composing new ones, she stretched wearily and rubbed her eyes. Her first impression was that Vorslava would make it to the spring given the food stores it currently had, so long as they didn't take in too many new mouths to feed. It would be tight, but they would make it.

Of course, spring would bring with it a whole new set of problems—such as the fact that the armies would be back on the move.

"Are you ready to feel the sunlight, or do you intend to stay here until you become rooted to that chair?" asked Londah.

Suchen jumped, then swore. Londah was leaning casually against the wall, her arms folded across her chest. The dress from the night before was gone, replaced by form-fitting gray breeks and tunic, along with the high black boots she had worn from Segg. The afternoon light streaming through the window caught on the skull-shaped silver buckles on the boots, on the heavy silver earrings—also skulls—in her ears.

Suchen stood up and closed the book she had been staring at. "More than ready," she said ruefully.

"Good. We will begin Owl's training this afternoon." A faint smile flashed over Londah's face. "And see what you have learned, as well."

In anticipation of the afternoon, Suchen had dressed that morning in breeks and boots rather than a skirt, earning disapproving looks from many of the other women. Their looks had not bothered her ... much. After so long, she should be used to them. At least Afwyn and Grilka had not seemed to care.

The two women left Vorslava's gloomy interior for the courtyard outside. Although fog often dominated the coast, today at least it was clear and sunny. Their breath steamed in the biting cold air, and Londah handed Suchen a pair of gloves that she had scrounged from somewhere. The wind moaned eerily around the gargoyle-infested cornices, like the souls of the damned.

The yard where the guards practiced was nearly deserted. Snow had been trodden into the earth by many heavy boots, resulting in a treacherous morass of half-frozen mud. The stables were nearby, and the smell of horses mixed with that of wet mud and the salty tang of the sea.

Owl was waiting for them, wearing protective padding that had probably once belonged to some young noble—possibly even Fellrant when he was a child. A matching, child-sized wooden practice sword was clutched possessively in one small hand. Her face flushed a bright pink from a mixture of cold and excitement.

Londah fetched two more practice swords from a storage shed, then leaned back against it, arms folded. "You can handle the basics," she told Suchen.

Uncertain whether to be flattered or insulted, Suchen only nodded. "Very well," she said to Owl. "First

you have to know how to hold your weapon..."

* * * *

Yozerf leaned his elbows on the parapet of one of the watchtowers, gazing at the small figures far below. The cold wind bit through cloak and gloves, seeming to cut straight through skin and muscle to his very bones. It brought him the scents of many humans, of cooking food, of middens, of horses, and of the sea.

In the yard below, Owl struck her wooden sword against a dummy made from straw and rusted armor. She looked happy, and he felt proud of her determination, even as he prayed she would never be faced with a real enemy in her life. Suchen's voice, calling encouragement, came to him faintly on the wind, although he could not make out her words.

His heart contracted sharply as he looked at her. Her short hair blew wildly around her face, half hiding her smile. Her every movement was filled with confidence as she demonstrated something to Owl, and he found himself remembering the first time he had seen her, how her strength had impressed him. Perhaps that strength was one of the reasons it didn't surprise him that she was better able to go on without him than he was, without her.

She took your death hard, Londah had told him that morning over breakfast. *Do not be so quick to believe you know her heart.*

But he had only shaken his head, remembering how they had parted. Londah hadn't seen what had happened between them. Hadn't watched Yozerf almost murder Peddock and Suchen, both. Hadn't heard the pain in Suchen's voice when she realized that Yozerf's betrayal went far beyond that.

Londah had only shrugged then, and he knew that he would hear no more of it from her. No doubt he was just confirming her belief that love was a fool's game.

"You look troubled, my lord," Wulfgar said, breaking into his thoughts.

Yozerf sighed and turned away from the parapet. The grizzled Wolfkin stood only a few paces away, a curious expression on his face. "It's nothing," Yozerf lied. "Nothing at all."

* * * *

Suchen saw little of Yozerf over the next few weeks. The business of running the keep kept them both busy, but him most of all, and there was never a time when he was not surrounded by a crowd of people. Even at dinner, he usually had a petitioner at one ear and a guardsman at the other, demanding opinions or solutions or judgments. After dinner, he spent the evening working in his study and spending time with Owl. So Suchen was never quite certain whether or not he was truly trying to avoid her, or if he simply no longer had even a moment for himself, let alone a former lover.

The keep needs him more than I do, she realized glumly. *For that matter, so does Owl.* Everything had changed, and there no longer seemed to be a place for her at his side.

So she did the only thing she could—the job he had asked of her. Acting as his steward took at least some of the burden from him, and so she spent long hours at the books and in the storerooms. When she wasn't doing that, she talked with the kitchen workers, with those who foraged the beach and the countryside for food, and with the Wolfkin who hunted for meat. When she heard of Yozerf's proposal for a Midwinter feast, she threw herself into the task of devising ways to stretch their foodstuffs even further, so as not to disappoint him.

The one thing that helped most was that the keep's population was no longer increasing rapidly, as it had done in the fall. Winter had closed an iron fist around the Kellsmarch, and Auglar's small band was the

last to make it through the gates. Any others either gave up and turned back before reaching Vorslava or died of cold and hardship somewhere out on the vast plains. Come spring, perhaps some herder would find their clean-picked bones.

Spring was not something that she wanted to think about, though, because it meant that once again the warring armies would be on the move. Winter was an implacable enemy, but at least it was without malice.

Access to food and shelter began to repair the damage that months of wandering had inflicted on Suchen and her companions. Faces began to lose their emaciated look, and some of the haunted darkness left their eyes. Buudi, Brenwulf, and Auglar all took over guard positions, standing watch on the walls and sleeping in the barracks. Suchen found that she had little time to speak to them, although she tried to eat dinner with at least one of them every night. They did not all work the same watch, she noted, and she wondered if it was something that Yozerf had done deliberately—an attempt to break apart a lord and his retainers, who would naturally form a unit unto themselves, apart from the other guards.

Auglar seemed to have adapted to his new status well enough, behaving like the rest of the low-born guards. If nothing else, it was a far cry better to be a well-fed guard than a starving wanderer. But there were times when Suchen thought she saw wistfulness in his eyes, and his gaze strayed to the high seat that Yozerf occupied.

Her one direct connection to Yozerf during those days was Owl. As she had promised, she set out to teach the young girl how to fight. The child proved to be a quick study. Owl was bright and gregarious, and before long, Suchen found herself looking forward to their sessions simply for the girl's sake.

And what will happen to her if the keep falls in the spring? she wondered one day, watching while Owl hacked at a wooden dummy to build her strength and accuracy. *Everyone knows that Yozerf adopted her. If his claim to lordship were at all legitimate, she would be his heir.*

But it isn't, and she's not. Maybe that will be enough to save her.

Gods, please don't let Vorslava fall.

* * * *

"I can't believe that Midwinter is here already," Afwyn said when they rose one morning.

Suchen brushed her short-cut hair. Although it was starting to grow out from the brutal chopping she'd given it last spring, months of deprivation had made it brittle and slow growing. *At this rate, I'll never have to worry about a braid again,* she thought wryly.

"Really?" she said with a faint smile. "I feel like this has been the longest year of my life." She gestured at their mirror—really the remains of a broken shield, burnished to a shine and hung on the wall. "I'm surprised I don't see an old woman staring back at me."

"That's foolish talk," Afwyn said briskly. She was busy with her own hair, although to Suchen it looked as if she were trying to decide what style worked best to hide the ugly scar that distorted one side of her face. "You aren't that old. I'm sure there will be plenty of young men at the feast who'll be happy to prove it to you."

"I'm not sure I'm going."

"What?" Afwyn left off her hair and turned to stare uncomprehendingly at Suchen. "Why not?"

Suchen hesitated, not certain what to say. *So that Yozerf and I can continue to avoid one another. So*

I don't have to watch him dance with anyone else. So I don't have to watch everyone else have a good time and remember everything that I've lost ... and feel like a selfish idiot for thinking that way.

"I have so much to do," she began lamely.

"Tut! Surely the keep won't fall apart if you take a single night for yourself, will it? You deserve an evening to relax, to enjoy yourself. There'll be music, and dancing, and cider, and food, and guardsmen..."

"You haven't got your eye on one of those guardsmen, have you?" Suchen asked, trying to distract Afwyn from questions that cut too close to the bone.

To her surprise, Afwyn flushed and lowered her head. "Nay. He'd not ... he'd not notice the likes of me, that's for certain."

Suchen remembered their conversation the first day she had been at the keep, and dread touched her heart. "You mean Yozerf, don't you?"

But Afwyn shook her head. "Oh, nay! Not that he'd be looking my way either. He's beautiful enough, it's true, but I'm for a man who laughs a bit more often, if you know what I mean. A merry heart can make many things seem better."

"I wouldn't know."

Afwyn gave her a piercing look. "Suchen ... it's not my place to ask, with you being the steward and all ... but you speak so familiarly of the lord. They say you knew him before Vorslava ... Was there something between you?"

"It was another life," Suchen said quietly.

Perhaps it truly was, at that. Certainly the bitter, angry man she had fallen in love with had changed into something else entirely.

Now if only I didn't love the man he's become even more.

"Well ... you should go," Afwyn said uncertainly. "We'll find you a dress from the stores tonight, all right?"

"Really, there's no need."

"Owl will be devastated if you don't go. She adores you."

Suchen scowled at the other woman. "That's a low trick."

"So you'll come, then?"

She sighed. "All right. If it will make you happy."

Afwyn smiled in delight. "I only want to see my friends enjoy themselves."

Friends, Suchen thought darkly after she had finished dressing and left the room for the day. Afwyn was a likeable young woman, it was true. Although Suchen didn't know what had happened to give her such a disfiguring scar, the fact that she had been able to overcome it spoke of Afwyn's resilience. A year ago, she would have been proud to call the young woman friend.

And what happened to the last person I called friend? She turned out to be a monster. A Red Guard. A liar and a traitor.

So much for my ability to choose my friends well.

What would Cybelen and Peddock be doing for Midwinter? Would they be celebrating together? Did her brother find much cause for celebration these days? Was he happier now, having severed his ties with his old life in favor of his love?

She and Peddock had been companions all their lives, and Suchen thought that she probably knew her brother as well as she had ever known anyone. Even so, she hadn't predicted his final desertion. *Maybe that means you never really know anyone. Or maybe just that I'm terribly bad at guessing what other people are thinking and doing.*

I can't believe that it's sat well with him, though. I can't believe that he's at peace, even though I'd like to.

Oh, Peddock, where are you? Are you even still alive? And do you ever think about me at all?

Chapter Eighteen

Everyone took most of the day of the feast as a time of rest, except for the unlucky guardsmen on duty and the kitchen staff. Indeed, those in the kitchen worked doubly hard, although none of them complained. It had become a point of pride for them to make strict rations into presentable meals, and with the extra allotment for the feast, they were determined to outdo themselves.

Suchen spent most of the short day practicing the sword with Owl and Londah. But when the shadows began to grow long, Ji'seth appeared in search of the girl. "You must bathe and put on your dress for the feast," she reminded Owl.

Owl, who was thoroughly grubby from hours in the practice yard, made a face at the Sworn. "I don't want to. Why can't I wear my armor?"

"Because you will embarrass your father."

"No I won't!"

Suchen privately thought Owl was right. But she put a hand on Owl's shoulder. "We all have to do things we don't like," she said gravely. "And you're the lady of the keep, after all. It's up to you to set a standard."

Owl was only slightly mollified. "You don't have to get dressed up."

Suchen remembered the gown Afwyn had been so insistent on finding for her. "I do. And I have to wash up, as well."

"Oh, all right." Owl followed Ji'seth reluctantly back to the keep, her shoulders slumped. Watching her go, Suchen thought wryly that between herself, Londah, and Ji'seth, Owl was distinctly lacking in feminine role models. No wonder she was so disgusted by the thought of dressing up.

There were too many people in the women's quarters for everyone to get a bath, so Suchen contented herself with a quick wash from a basin of cold water. Afterwards, she and Afwyn helped one another get ready. The outfit Afwyn had picked for her consisted of a simple blue gown with long sleeves. Complaining all the while that Suchen was too thin, Afwyn laced up the back so that the torso clung flatteringly to her form. The full skirts belled out softly, swirling around Suchen's legs when she moved. They also hid the fact that she had to wear boots rather than dainty slippers underneath.

"If only we could do more with your hair," Afwyn said.

Suchen smiled wistfully as she looked at her wavy reflection in the shield that hung on their wall. Her short hair clung to her neck and feathered out wildly around her jaw, making her look like an urchin. Privation had hollowed her face, making the bones even more prominent. The blue of the gown brought out her sapphire eyes. The bodice was cut so that it made the best of her near-absent breasts, and the swirl of the skirt gave the illusion of feminine hips underneath.

"The guardsmen will be climbing over one another to get to you," Afwyn promised with a smile.

Suchen laughed, but even as she did so, she found herself wondering. Yozerf had stayed away from her as much as possible since she had arrived, but tonight he could hardly avoid her. Perhaps, if she found the courage to approach him, she could get the opportunity just to talk privately.

The last time they had done that had been when he had confessed to her all the things he had lied about.

When she had told him to leave.

But maybe we can just ... just talk. Not about anything important. Surely the painful things can wait until later. But ... just talking, just learning how to be friends again ... surely we can manage that, can't we?

It was a fragile hope, but it was the best she could muster. Gathering up her skirts, she followed the chattering Afwyn out of their room and to the great hall.

* * * *

Yozerf felt a distinct stirring of pride as he walked into the great hall. The smell of good food greeted him: barnacles swimming in butter, venison pastries, sweet breads, and even tarts made from preserved fruit. Smoke from the fire pit mingled with the scent of burning candlewicks, human and Aclytese sweat, and the occasional splash of perfume. The room looked like a spilled jewelry box, the guttering candles and torches illuminating the brightest clothing everyone could lay claim to. A quintet of musicians played a lively tune, while the laughter of children and adults alike echoed amongst the somber roof beams.

"You aren't required to shadow my every move," Yozerf said to Wulfgar and Ji'seth, who had appointed themselves his guardians this night. "At the least, trade off with Gless and Tan. You deserve to celebrate as well."

"Let the young have this night," Wulfgar said, unperturbed.

"I will not leave you, my lord," Ji'seth added in a faintly haughty tone.

Yozerf suppressed a sigh. He had rather hoped that Ji'seth might try to find a young man for herself, but her constant attention to duty left no time for a personal life of any kind. *But if it pleases her to live this way, what's the harm?*

The harm is that no one can be on duty day and night for months on end and not feel the effects. Her temper was reckless to start with.

Gless passed by in a flash of brilliant color; he had truly outdone himself this night. A moment later, an Aclytese woman, whose name Yozerf couldn't remember, was pressing a goblet of mead into his hand. He smiled his thanks, and she winked at him as she disappeared back into the crowd.

Gods.

"You might think of joining the dancing yourself, lad," Wulfgar said, with a knowing smile and a nod after the departing woman.

Yozerf snorted and took a sip from the goblet. The sweet alcohol went down far too easily, and he reminded himself to watch how much he drank. "I think not."

"Begging your pardon, my lord, but this is a celebration, not a funeral, for all that you're dressed like it's one." Wulfgar cast a vaguely aggrieved look at Yozerf's black attire.

Yozerf smiled slightly. "Nothing else matches my hair."

"Even so, my lord, there are many eligible young ladies here. You might think of enjoying yourself a bit, this night of all nights."

"Leave it." Yozerf took another, larger, swallow of mead to cover his sudden irritation. "This is nothing but an illusion, Wulfgar: this night, this feast, this celebration. We pretend that the spring will never come,

that things will go on forever as they have. But I can't afford to do that. I can't afford to forget, even for a moment, that we'll all be lucky to see another summer."

Wulfgar dropped his eyes, a wolf's gesture of submission. "Aye, my lord. But I think you've missed the point. Doesn't what we're going to face later on make it that much more important to celebrate now, while we still can?"

"Then leave me and get to it, as I've offered already. But I—"

The words died in Yozerf's throat. The only thing he could see—the only thing he could think about—was the woman he suddenly beheld coming towards him from across the room.

He hadn't seen Suchen enter the hall, but the goblet in her hand suggested that she had been there at least a few minutes already. She looked beautiful, utterly stunning, in a way that made his heart lurch in his chest and his mouth go dry. The candlelight gleamed on her golden hair—her pretty hair, that she had cut so cruelly short—and cast shadows over her strong-boned face. The skirt of her gown swirled around her legs, hinting at the form beneath.

I can't do this, he thought, on the edge of panic. What would he do if she danced with someone else? Intellectually, he knew that he had lost all claim to her, that she was free to do whatever she pleased with whomever she liked. But his heart didn't understand that at all.

She wasn't going to anyone else, though—she was making her way straight for him, and he half wished that he could flee the scene before she got there. It was hard enough knowing that she was under the same roof, without being able to touch her or kiss her; and he had done his best to avoid any temptation. But right now ... he could already feel all the careful separation he had imposed on them coming undone, and she hadn't so much as spoken a word to him yet.

"Wulfgar, Ji'seth," she said when she came up. There was a smile on her lips, but he could read nervousness in her eyes and her scent. "My lord."

The formality hurt, but he made himself smile back. "Suchen. I hope you're enjoying yourself? Have you eaten?"

"Not yet." She drank from her goblet, then looked up at him. Her eyes were dark, wells of midnight, into which he might fall and be lost forever. "I thought I might like to dance first."

"The music is quite good," he said, trying not to sound pained. Perhaps there was some excuse he could find to leave before she and whatever partner she chose reached the area set aside for dancing.

"I agree." She hesitated, and it occurred to him that she seemed to expect some response that he wasn't giving. Then she shrugged and smiled wryly. "Will you dance with me, then?"

His heart beat even faster, and tightness closed around his throat and chest. He *couldn't* do this, couldn't be so close to her and not want her. There had been too much between them to go back to simple friendship and nothing more.

And what if she wants more? What if...

What if she's forgiven me?

He made himself smile through his confusion, although he suspected the expression wasn't as happy as it should have been. He set his goblet aside, took hers and set it down as well, and offered her his arm. "It would be my honor," he said softly, struggling to convey the truth of it.

Some of the tension went out of her, and he wondered at that, because he felt more nervous than ever. Her hand was warm through the fabric of his sleeve as he led her through the crowd, and he spared a thought to wonder where Wulfgar and Ji'seth had gone. Then they were amongst the other dancers, and he took her hand carefully in his, feeling the calluses the sword had left on her strong, small fingers.

Both Aclytese and human music had been played throughout the evening; the current reel was a simple peasant tune meant for couples to dance to. They moved together, linked by one hand, as they wove in and out of the other pairs. Strands of Suchen's short hair fell into her eyes, and she flicked them back with a toss of her head, even as she *smiled* at him. Gods, so many things he had done to make her desperately unhappy; he had frankly thought that no action of his could ever make her smile again. It made him feel as if there were more than a fool's hope for them yet.

Then she looked beyond him, and he saw the smile flicker and die. Her eyes went wide, and she broke the pattern of the dance, shoving him hard. Something else hit him from behind, and there was a sudden confusion of bodies. The smell of fear and anger rose up all around him; candlelight gleamed on a knife whose edge was stained with blood.

Then everything unraveled into chaos. Some people were screaming, while others fought, and still others ran. Suchen had gone to the floor, and he saw blood on her arm through a slash in the sleeve of her gown.

Fury hit him, riding the salt-and-rust smell of her blood. Yozerf spun with a snarl, one foot lashing out to catch the knife-wielder in the gut. He had been in the act of lifting his knife again, aimed towards Yozerf's chest, and in the moment before the man dropped, Yozerf caught sight of a look of hatred and fear.

Assassins.

A second man crumpled to the floor with a sickly gurgle, and Yozerf glimpsed one of Londah's throwing knives protruding from his neck. Then his Sworn were there, Ji'seth howling and laying about with her poleax, until Gless jerked her back to keep her from killing the cowering man at her feet. Londah appeared, a black figure with grim eyes, dressed for shadow-walking rather than celebrating. She held a blade in each hand; the gods knew how many more she had tucked away elsewhere.

Silence fell. Three men lay dead on the floor, while four others were being restrained. The Sworn had closed in tight to form a protective ring around Yozerf ... and Suchen, who sat on the floor still, her right hand pressed tight to the deep gash in her left arm.

"Merdwyn!" he shouted; she was the closest thing the keep had to a healer. And, his heart lurching in additional fear: "Owl! Where is she?"

"She's fine, my lord," someone said, and a moment later the ring of Sworn parted to let her through. Owl flung herself on him, clinging to his leg, her whole body shaking in fear. When she caught a glimpse of Suchen, she let out a frantic cry that wrung his heart.

"Help Suchen," he said, not knowing what else to do.

And Suchen, the gods look on her, managed a smile for Owl. "I'm fine, little one," she said shakily. "Just a scratch. Come help me bind it."

The Sworn shifted suddenly, a nervous gesture that instantly caught Yozerf's attention. Tearing his eyes away from his love and his daughter, he saw that Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf had tried to approach.

And been stopped cold. His Sworn weren't about to trust them in reach of Yozerf right now—his Sworn,

including Gless, who had an uncharacteristically grim look on his face.

Auglar's eyes widened slightly, as if he had been slapped. "By the gods, let us through! Is she all right?"

"I'm fine," Suchen said again. Merdwyn had arrived at some point and was now on her knees by Suchen, carefully cleaning the wound, while Owl held an herb pouch for her.

Yozerf wanted to be a part of that tableau. More, he wanted to pick up Suchen and take her away from this hall, from this madness. But he had never been able to keep her safe, not even when things were good between them; and of anyone there, save perhaps the prisoners, he had the least choice about staying or going.

"What shall we do with the prisoners, my lord?" asked one of the guards who held them.

"Assassins," said Ji'seth with a snarl that would have made a Wolfkin proud. She gripped her poleax so hard that her knuckles had gone white, and the look in her violet eyes promised death.

Yozerf took a deep breath of air that stank of blood and terror. He did not relish what had to come next. Looking down at the prisoners, he asked, "Why have you done this thing? What did you possibly hope to gain?"

The man who had cut Suchen in his attempt to get to Yozerf glared back defiantly. "Only an abomination like you would have to ask," he said. Murmurs broke out around the hall, both horrified and speculative. "I did this for Lord Auglar."

Silence. Yozerf thought that he could have heard the rush of blood through his veins, so quiet was the hall.

"I knew nothing of this," Auglar said calmly, but with just the slightest quaver in his voice.

Yozerf didn't take his eyes from the prisoner. "So," he said to the assassin, "you thought to murder me and set Auglar up as Lord of Vorslava, is that it?"

"Aye! You have no right to lord it over humans, you damned scum! Auglar is the only true lord here! He'll make things right! He'll stop sharing our food with monsters and Aclytes! Put them in their places where they belong! Vorslava belongs to him, not you!"

"Unfortunately for you, you are quite mistaken about the last." Yozerf turned away and met Auglar's eyes through the hedge of Sworn. Although the former lord was obviously doing everything he could to remain calm, there was fear in his blue eyes. *He has to be wondering what I'm going to do with him now. One word, and he would be executed, and he knows it.*

How did we ever come to such a pass, that someone who was once my friend could think such a thing?

"I believe you," he said, and read relief in the sudden slump of Auglar's shoulders. "You may be many things, but you do not have a traitor's heart."

Auglar bowed his head. "Thank you, Lord Yozerf. I would never countenance treachery done in my name. If there are any here who doubt how I feel, let them hear me now: you are the Lord of Vorslava, and while I am here, I will follow you."

Yozerf nodded gravely in acknowledgment, even though the entire situation felt impossibly odd. Auglar might have been King of Jenel, had things not gone so utterly awry in Segg. Now he was taking orders

from a penniless half-breed who had once turned down the chance to be Sworn to him.

"You have wisdom, Auglar, and good advice for me. I'm not unaware of that." *Do you know what I'm going to ask of you? What I must ask of you?* "What shall I do with these prisoners?"

Auglar's face was pale. He kept his gaze trained on Yozerf, without so much as a glance at the men who would have seen him Lord of Vorslava. "As they are assassins and traitors, I advise you to execute them and any who follow them."

"No! My lord!" screamed the prisoner who had spoken before. All the rest began to babble and plead, but he stared at Auglar as if he had been betrayed. "My lord, we did this for you! For us all! Don't forsake us!"

Auglar swallowed hard, but the look in his eyes was cold. "You are nothing of mine," he said shortly, and turned and walked away. Buudi and Brenwulf trailed after him, silent and confused.

Yozerf didn't believe that Buudi would wish things had gone differently. *But Brenwulf? We never did get along well. How glad would he have been to see Auglar take my place?*

Gods.

"Take them to the dungeons," he said aloud. "Question them—I want to know if any others were involved." Gods, he hated this, and it put him in a foul temper that he didn't try to hide. "Hang them just before dawn—I don't want them to see another sunrise."

He started to turn and leave, then belatedly recalled the feast. "Everyone else—back to your revels, if you wish it. The cooks and the musicians have put forth a great effort, and it would be shameful to have it spoiled by fools."

Suchen had gotten to her feet, and Merdwyn was leading her out the door, no doubt to a smaller, more private setting where she could recuperate. *Damn it. Things were going so well. I should go downstairs and cut off their heads myself.* Owl, sensing that he was done with business, came and leaned against him. He fluffed her hair lightly.

"I'm sorry, little Owl. Would you like something to eat?"

She shook her head; he had expected as much. She tended to cling to him after a scare—no wonder, considering how much she had lost in her life. But then she surprised him by asking, "Can I go with Suchen? I want to help."

"Of course. Tell her..." He stopped, unsure suddenly what he could say. "Tell her I'll be in as soon as I may."

She nodded and ran off, her copper hair bright, even against the rainbow clothing of the crowd. Yozerf sighed and wondered if the message he sent through her would be welcome or not.

"My lord," Ji'seth said. When he glanced at her, it was to see her eyes downcast. "Please, forgive me. I failed in my duty to you. The assassins should never have gotten so close. I will accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate."

The other three Sworn looked equally wretched. Even Gless's pampered hair seemed to droop. "Same here," he said, then gave Yozerf a faint smile. "Unless, you know, the punishment involves cutting off my head or making me wear bad clothes."

Yozerf snorted. "I fear it's too late for the latter. I don't hold any of you responsible. It was a near thing, yes, but that is the chance I must take."

"You shouldn't take any chances," Ji'seth objected.

Londah drifted in like a ghost. "Life is chance," she said, but there was cold anger in her silvery eyes. "But Ji'seth is right—you were foolish to go into the crowd like that."

He bit off a dozen angry retorts. There was no profit in an argument, not in front of so many. "Thank you for your help," he said instead.

She shrugged, and he saw that most of her attention was still for the crowd. How many other potential assassins lurked there, hidden amongst their fellows like chameleons among stones? "I will do what I can to see you survive. You know this."

Yozerf sighed and wished for ... he didn't know what. A quiet life, maybe. *And what would that be like? A normal life, with a normal family; I can't imagine it.*

Mostly what he wanted at the moment was to leave, to make certain that Suchen was all right, and maybe to continue their interrupted conversation. But that was impossible, no matter how bad his mood—it was too important that the people see him alive, unharmed, and most of all, unafraid. So he walked the bounds of the hall three times, the Sworn hovering around him like four hens around a chick. He exchanged greetings with everyone he recognized, accepted spontaneous declarations of loyalty, and thanked those who had helped subdue the assassins. The musicians began to play once more, but no one seemed to be in the mood for dancing any longer. Yozerf cursed the assassins yet again, that they had managed to disrupt what should have been a night of revelry. The gods knew there were few enough bright spots in the lives of the keep's inhabitants, and to have this one ruined rankled badly.

Before leaving, he paused to load food onto a plate, ignoring the protests of his Sworn that they could do it for him. "My damned arms aren't broken," he finally snarled at Ji'seth, who took a quick step back.

Merdwyn entered the hall just as he was prepared to leave. She was a short, homely woman who had some skill with herbs, as well as the ability to suture or cauterize a wound if need be. Catching sight of him, she crossed the hall quickly and dropped into a curtsy.

"I thought you'd like to hear how the steward is doing, my lord," she said. "The cut was a minor one, and I've tended it. She'll take no lasting damage. I left her in the study to rest a bit."

Relief hit him, as at least one worry evaporated. He hurried past the healer with a muttered "thanks," the Sworn trotting to keep up with his long strides. Away from the great hall, the keep was bitter cold, and his breath steamed in the air. Only a few widely separated torches lit the halls and stairs, and he heard Gless stumble behind him with a muttered curse. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to shorten his stride, not wanting to humiliate Gless by his inability to keep up. But the slow pace grated on nerves wound too taut.

The door to the study was closed; Wulfgar knocked politely and received a muffled "come in." Within, the banked fire had been stoked a bit, driftwood crackling and popping in the flames. Owl sat on the hearthrug, heedless of her dress and the ashes, recounting the battle in the great hall with relish and a great deal of exaggeration. Suchen sat in the chair behind the desk, looking pale and drawn. The sleeve of her gown had been cut away altogether, so that the injury on her upper arm could be bound, and there were bloodstains on the blue fabric of the bodice. The scent of the herbal poultice Merdwyn had used still drifted on the air.

"I brought you some dinner, as I didn't think you'd feel much like coming back to the hall," Yozerf said. He crossed the room and set the plate and goblet on the desk in front of Suchen, then stepped back, not wanting to crowd her.

"Thank you. That was thoughtful." The dim light reduced her eyes to cobalt rings around a black center, but he found himself unable to read their expression.

Damn this. He picked Owl up from the floor, absently wiping ashes off her nose as he did so. "What have you been doing, rolling around on the rug?"

"I was showing Suchen how you fought off twelve of the bad men all by yourself."

"I don't recall that. Perhaps I have been wrong—you might make a better bard than a warrior." Yozerf hitched her higher in his arms and carried her across the room to Tan. "Tan will take you back to the feast. *Don't* go anywhere without one of the Sworn or your grandmother." *Wherever she is. Scaling the walls, probably.*

Owl's lower lip started to jut. "I don't want to go back to the feast. I want to stay here."

"If you stay here, you can't tell your friends about the fight, can you?"

She didn't seem too certain of his reasoning, but she must have decided that this was one of the times that an argument wouldn't sway him. As Tan led her away, Gless quietly herded the other two Sworn out the door, ignoring Ji'seth's angry protests.

Yozerf stared at the door as it closed on his self-appointed protectors. "Gods," he said, half wanting to laugh at the absurdity of it all. "This is madness. I wake up every morning and think to myself what an odd dream I just had. Only it never is a dream."

Suchen's fork scraped against her plate as she set it down. "You've done amazing things here."

Yozerf shook his head and then risked a glance at her. Her gaze on him was steady; he felt as if her eyes stripped him down to the bone, exposing everything: all his faults, all his weaknesses, all his foolish hopes and fears. "So amazing that I was almost murdered tonight. So amazing that you were hurt, while I stood by like an idiot."

"It wasn't your fault. I'm a warrior, as well as a steward, Yozerf. I knew the risk I was taking." She pushed the remains of her dinner aside and folded her hands in her skirt. Her scarred fingers looked almost awkward without a sword hilt to rest on. "Nothing truly worth doing is ever easy."

He laughed, but it had a bitter edge. "Then at least my life has been worthwhile."

Suchen sighed and looked away, staring at the hearth as if the flames had a message for her. "I'm not just saying these things. What you've done here ... I don't think you see the reach of it. You have Wolfkin, Aclytes, and humans all living under one roof without killing each other. Of course something like that will draw opposition—that isn't surprising. What's surprising is that it happened at all."

"All three races lived together at Kellsjard. I'm doing nothing Auglar hasn't already done, and probably better, considering that he had far fewer attempts on his life."

Suchen shot him a sudden glare. "Damn it, you aren't *listening* to me. Yes, they all lived together at Kellsjard. Only the Aclytes were all servants, and no one knew about the Wolfkin. This is completely different." She flung up her arms, then winced as the wound pulled. "Even if only humans were here, getting these people together and keeping them alive long enough to take Vorslava was a great feat. This

... it's a damned miracle." She laughed a little at that, but her eyes seemed over-bright, as if she held back tears. "I'm so proud of you."

Shock robbed him of words. That someone would take pride in his accomplishments seemed insane, ludicrous. His throat constricted sharply, and he turned towards the fire, busying himself with stoking it in an attempt to get the space to collect his thoughts.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be," he said finally. The burning driftwood in the hearth collapsed in on itself, sending up a flurry of sparks. Its soft light painted everything near-at-hand gold and draped the corners of the room in shadow, making it seem as if they were caught inside a gilded bubble. "I never planned for this to happen. I had no great ambition to save anyone. Anything I've done has been done out of desperation, Suchen. That's all."

"You're a liar, Yozerf," she said gently. He turned, startled by the accusation, and saw that she was smiling even as she spoke. "You always claimed that was the sum of things with you, that you acted because you were desperate, because you wanted to survive. But that never explained half of what you did. From the day I met you, you've been trying to save us all—even if it sometimes meant saving us from ourselves."

He shook his head, denying the words. "If you recall, Ax sent me to you at the first. I did it to repay my debt to him."

But the smile on her face didn't falter. "I haven't forgotten. But it went past that, from the very beginning. How many times could you have stood by and let us all die? And later on, when even Ax couldn't have claimed that Rozah was still your responsibility, you risked everything to keep her safe."

"And I failed. She died for my sake, instead." *As you might have done tonight.*

"That was her choice. You couldn't have made it for her. Hel, you tried to warn us all that we were crazy, that we should have been more cautious. None of us wanted to hear that, though, least of all Rozah. But you came with us anyway. You always did what you could. And, whether or not you want to admit it, that's why you're here today."

"I don't know." He hesitated, loath to speak words he knew in his heart he had to say. Of all the conversations he could have chosen to have tonight, this next was the very last he would have wanted. But he couldn't let it lie, not when silence had already wrought so much damage between them. "There's always the chance, too, that it has nothing to do with me. Telmonra ... left ... things with me."

Yozerf propped his arm against the carved mantelpiece and leaned his head against his wrist, studying the fire so that he didn't have to look at her. The flames blurred in his sight, and the smell of smoke filled his nose. Wood cracked, popped, and hissed as the last moisture was burned from it.

"What things?" she asked. Quietly, levelly, but he heard that slight edge of pain and worry in the words.

If only he had a comforting answer to give her. "I don't know. I can read Aclytese now—I found some old records from Caden here, not that I've had time to look at them closely. Whatever else she may have been, Telmonra was a queen, was someone who knew how to lead her people. Perhaps she left some of that with me as well."

"Perhaps. But I think you were already on this road long before." He heard the rustle of her skirts as she shifted in her chair. "Yozerf ... I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Being able to read Aclytese isn't exactly a small thing. Are you all right? Is she truly gone?"

"Yes." He closed his eyes briefly. *I know why you're worried, love. Gods, I don't blame you.* "She is gone." A deep breath, to buy a moment's space and brace himself. "Suchen, I'm sorry. More sorry than I can possibly say. I should have told you the instant I knew that something was wrong. If nothing else, the moment my powers started to manifest, I should have gone to you for help. I didn't, because I was afraid. Terribly afraid. I think that, in the back of my mind, I always believed that some day you would come to your senses. That you would see me for who and what I really am, and I would lose you. So I tried to put that day off by lying to you. That would have been wrong even under ordinary circumstances, but with things as they were, it was even worse. I won't ... I don't have the right to ask you to forgive me. Just ... believe that I am sorry. If I could go back and undo everything, I swear to the gods I would. But of course I can't, so perhaps none of this counts for anything after all."

Silence. As the moment drew out and she made no reply, he waited to hear her footsteps leaving. When that didn't come, he finally lifted his head and looked at her. She was sitting very straight in her chair, her hands wound tightly together, and there was the gleam of tears in her sapphire eyes. Even as he watched, they spilled over, tracing silent tracks down her cheeks.

The desire to go to her, to comfort her, was almost overwhelming, but he forced himself to be still and remember that it wasn't his right anymore. "Suchen?" he asked, a bit tentatively.

"You have no idea what I've endured," she said, and her voice broke. She swallowed hard, then scrubbed the tears from her face, as if impatient with them. "I thought you were *dead*. I thought I would never see you again, never be able to talk to you again. I thought the last words I'd ever speak to you would be the ones I said in anger. Every morning I would wake up and remember that I was still in the world and you weren't, and the idea of just living through the day seemed too awful a burden. I felt like my insides had been ripped out, like there was nothing left but a shell. Londah said I was a ghost haunting my own life, and she was right. There was nothing I wanted. I had no goals, no desires, nothing at all but grief."

Yozerf felt frozen, his mind spinning and his heart hammering, so loud he could hear it. It was terrible to think that he had inadvertently caused her so much pain. And yet...

She still cares about me.

"What are you saying?" he asked at last. It was a stupid question, but he felt as if he could hardly form a coherent thought, let alone say anything eloquent.

She sniffled, wiped away a few last tears, and gave him a rueful smile. The firelight gleamed off the wetness on her cheeks, off her short golden hair, and he thought that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"I don't know what I'm saying. I'm just ... I only wanted to tell you, that's all. I'm not asking for pity, or for anything else." Wistfulness filled her eyes when she looked at him, a gentle sorrow for things lost. "Things have changed so much since we last parted. I know that you have incredible responsibilities now. You have people who count on you. But even more than that, you have people who love you. You have a family, you have your friends, and you have your followers. Everything has changed for you, and I understand that. I do. I just want to help, and to be your friend if you'll let me. That's all."

He felt as if his heart was on the verge of either breaking or bursting. "There is one thing that hasn't changed," he managed to say past the sudden obstruction in his throat.

"What?"

He gave her back a rueful smile of his own. "I still love you."

Her beautiful eyes widened. She rose to her feet, crossed the slight distance between them, and lifted a hand that trembled. The tips of her fingers brushed his face, so lightly he barely felt the calluses on them. Never looking away from her eyes, he reached up and caught her hand with his own, keeping it there so she couldn't draw away.

"And I love you," she whispered. "I always will."

Yozerf wasn't certain who moved first, only that she was in his arms and her mouth was turned up, searching. Her lips were soft and tasted of tears—hers, his, he didn't know. The feel of her body against his was both achingly familiar and painfully different, the bones so much more pronounced than he remembered.

"Gods," he whispered, when he could speak again. He gathered her close, burying his face in her hair, feeling her arms lock around him with a fierce strength. "I missed you so much."

"M-missed you, too."

Sanity tried to intrude, a reminder of all the things he couldn't put aside no matter how badly he wanted to. "I can't make you any promises. I don't know what will happen when the armies come in the spring. Hel, I don't even know what will happen tomorrow."

She drew back from him a little, tenderly brushed a strand of hair from his face. "No one ever does," she said with a crooked smile. Then her look sobered again. "I know. I understand. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't change anything. I want to be your steward and your friend. And your lover, too, if you'll have me."

He smiled, his heart feeling too full for his body to contain. "Do you even have to ask?"

She grinned. "No." She kissed him again. "I don't suppose I do."

Chapter Nineteen

Suchen sat in bed, her arms around her knees, and stared out the window at the sea. The sun was just rising in the east, and the ocean was still dark, except for foam on the breakers, which made eerie white shapes against the black water. The constant roar of the waves against the rocks below had become part of the background noise of the keep, but this morning it seemed incredibly loud in the stillness. An early gull skimmed the sea, like the pale ghost of a drowned sailor, and then vanished into the distance.

The rest of the keep lay in silence, and she could almost deceive herself into believing that all others still slept. Even after the feast of the night before, the kitchen help would have been up for hours already, stoking the great fires and baking bread. Of course, the guard would have been busy hanging the assassins from the night before, as well as keeping a watch on the walls.

Her arm ached where the knife had sliced her, but the wound was minor, and she did her best to ignore it. There were better things to think about, to savor in the quiet dawn. The man sleeping beside her, for one.

Even in the dim light, she could see his pale, pale skin, stark against the brown furs and dark coverlets. Newer scars marred his flesh, she had discovered, and for the first time, she truly realized how narrow his escape from Nava Nar had been. Only luck, or some whim of the gods, had kept infection from taking him later; and if not for Owl, surely he would have died from hunger, or exposure, or some predator, before he'd had a chance to heal.

So close. She ran her fingers through a lock of his hair, letting it fall slowly back against his skin, like tiny rivulets of blood.

Yozerf stirred at her touch and opened eyes chatoyant in the dimness. "Mmm. Good morning."

"Good morning." She lay back down, and he looped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer. She remembered that his Sworn, or at least some of them, slept just on the other side of the door. Yozerf had not offered them any explanations last night, simply walked out of the study holding her hand, led her here, and shut the door. And she ... had been thinking of other things than the opinions of his warriors.

"Afwyn is probably wondering what happened to me," she said.

Yozerf thought for a moment. "She is your roommate?"

"Yes. She thinks you're quite beautiful, by the way."

He laughed at that, and it made her smile to hear it. He *had* changed, but she thought it was for the better. He seemed happier, or at least less bitter. The old anger that he'd carried like a shield had eased. Perhaps he had finally realized that a shield could keep away friends, as well as enemies.

It affected things between them, she could tell that already, although it wasn't possible to say yet how much. Everything between them was different ... but in some ways, very much the same. *Better, though, I think. I truly do.*

"You have quite a following in the women's quarters," she went on, playing with a strand of his hair. "I'm sure they'll all want to know my secret for catching your eye."

It was obvious that he thought she was teasing him. "That's what I really need the Sworn for, you know: to keep back the women. Or at least make them line up in an orderly fashion while they wait their turns."

"But I'll bet none of them know how to do this," she said, finding his ticklish spot.

It was a while before they finally got out of the bed. "Petitioners are probably lined up twelve deep in the hallway," Yozerf said ruefully, as he rummaged in his wardrobe for something to put on that wasn't stained with blood.

"Surely the Lord of Vorslava is entitled to lie abed late for one day."

"The Lord of Vorslava is the last person entitled to lie abed on any day," he answered, casting her a wistful look as she slid from beneath the covers and stretched. "There are things that must be done, decisions to be made, and I fear everyone here looks to me to make them. Perhaps in peace it would be different, but now..."

"I know. I understand. You aren't just mine anymore." She shook out her dress, wincing at the bloodstains and the ruined sleeve. "Damn it, I'll look like a madwoman wandering the halls in this."

A faint smile flitted across his sculpted lips. "Ah—there are some privileges to being the lord." Absently pulling the last of his clothing into place, he went to the door and opened it a crack. "Please go to the women's quarters and bring my lady something to wear," he said to whoever was on the other side.

"There isn't much—they can bring all of it, if they'd like."

It was an oblique way of telling him she'd made her decision, but she saw the flash of gratitude in his eyes before he turned away to relay her request.

With any luck, it will add to the appearance of unity between Yozerf and Auglar. A lot of people know that I used to be Auglar's steward, and those who don't certainly know that I came here in Auglar's retinue.

There would probably be more than a few who would think she was sleeping with Yozerf only to stab him in the back later and clear a path for Auglar. But with luck, those suspicions would die with time. Disapproval over her relationship with Yozerf was certainly nothing she hadn't faced before.

* * * *

"I'm glad you finally got some sense," Gless said.

Suchen glanced up at him, but left her elbows leaning against the battlements. Even though it was early afternoon, and the sun was as high as it would get, the air was cold as Hel's heart. The eternal wind screamed off the churning sea, flinging a constant dust of fine-grained snow into the air when it met the land. Sea birds drifted overhead, occasionally plunging into the frigid ocean, to emerge with fish wriggling in their beaks. Everyone who had any excuse to be behind walls was inside, leaving only the guards and a few unfortunates working in the courtyard.

And Suchen, of course.

"Glad you approve," she said, not bothering to ask what he meant. Gless had been one of the few people who had never so much as batted an eyelash over her relationship with Yozerf.

He planted his elbows on the wall beside her and leaned against it, staring down into the courtyard. Although his clothing today wasn't nearly as flamboyant as what he had worn to the feast, it still was brilliant against the dark stone. The wind discovered a rose ribbon tied loosely around one arm and unraveled the ends, so that they whipped wildly about. "Love makes people do strange things. I couldn't believe it when Yozerf told me about Peddock."

Suchen frowned—she hadn't wanted anything to spoil her good mood, but Gless seemed determined to have this conversation. “You didn't know her—Cybelen. Kktara. Whatever her name was. She was caring and kind and easy to like.”

"Of course." His smile was wry. “So was Dara-Don. Who also, as I recall, betrayed us for love. Because his wife wanted things he couldn't give her otherwise.”

"Maybe." Suchen cast him a curious glance. “Is there any particular reason you're bringing this up? Do you see something I don't? Some way for my love for Yozerf to destroy things?”

"No! No, that isn't what I meant." Gless sighed, and his blue eyes were unusually contemplative. “I don't know what I meant. I've just ... been thinking about love lately. I've been thinking about everything that's gone wrong, and about everything that could still go wrong. A part of me keeps asking, ‘who will it be this time?’ We've been betrayed from within twice now—who will bring us down for the third time?”

Suchen shook her head grimly. “Gods, I hope you're wrong. Because if it does happen, it's the very last time. There aren't any more chances after this.”

"I know." Gless shook his head. The constant wind had wreaked havoc on his dandy's curls, and he absently brushed a golden tangle out of his eyes. “I think about all the people who have come into this keep, how most of them are probably harmless peasants, people just trying to live through this war. But at the same time, any one of them could be a spy or an assassin.”

Suchen frowned, trying to puzzle out what had brought on such a melancholy mood. “Is this because of the attempt against Yozerf last night, then?”

"Maybe in part. If you hadn't acted quickly..."

She refused to think about that. “I did, though.”

"You shouldn't have had to. That's my job, not yours. I failed. What if I fail again? What if I make some stupid mistake, or get distracted, and it costs us everything?”

"We all have doubts, Gless. The gods know you aren't the only person in this keep with the same worries. You just have to do the best you can and hope it's enough.”

"And if it isn't?"

She pushed herself off the wall and turned to face him. “Then we're all dead,” she said quietly, “and if the gods have any kindness, it will be quick.”

* * * *

The next day, the weather turned for the worse.

Even though they had passed through the longest night of the year, they seldom saw the sun. Instead, dark clouds covered the sky from one horizon to the next. The winds grew stronger, bringing with them sleet and snow that covered the keep in a hard shell of ice. Walkways and steps became treacherous, and a guard fell to his death when he took an unwary step on a battlement late one night. The plains disappeared altogether beneath a heavy blanket of white, and the Wolfkin found little on their hunts. Any game had gone south, searching desperately for better forage, or else lay sleeping deep under the snow, waiting for winter's end.

Within the keep, the fire in the great hall became a popular place, and as many people as could sleep near it, did so. The stones and timbers groaned and creaked as the bitter cold shifted them, and frost

clung to every window. A group of young fools, seeking to ward off the chill, stole more than their allotment of ale and went to a secluded space outside to drink, where they froze to death before morning. Some of the elderly died as well; Yozerf burned their bodies himself on the cliffs, because the ground was frozen too hard for grave digging.

The food held out, although faces grew thinner on limited rations. Suchen worried silently about the threat of sickness, but that potential disaster passed them by.

Suchen spent her days quietly doing her duty as the steward of the keep, taking a few hours each morning to spend with Owl and Londah. She ate dinner with Yozerf and Owl at the high table and sat with them after darkness fell, in the few hours when they would burn precious candles and finish the business of the day. After a while, people began to refer to her as “my lady,” which sounded strange to her ears.

As for Owl ... Owl had been odd, the first few days after the winter celebration. Cautious, and more quiet than her normally boisterous self. It didn't take Suchen long to realize that the girl was worried about her own status, afraid that Yozerf wouldn't have time for her anymore, now that he had Suchen to occupy him. Afraid, mostly, that she would be abandoned again.

So one day, Suchen quietly asked Londah to give her and Owl some time alone after their morning practice. When Londah left early, Owl shot Suchen a quick, nervous glance, as if suspecting that something was going on. The cold made her cheeks, nose, and ears bright red, contrasting harshly with her copper-colored hair.

Suchen wasn't certain how to approach the subject, so she simply tackled it head-on. “I don't think I ever thanked you properly,” she said as they put away their gear.

Confusion flared in Owl's gray-streaked eyes. “For what?”

“You saved Yozerf's life in the woods, didn't you?”

Owl shrugged. “I guess. He was all burned and hurt and bleeding, and I came back and found him in the den, and I let him stay and gave him some food and water. And then the men came, and he got rid of them and said I could stay with him.”

Suchen dropped into a crouch so they were on eyelevel. “So he tells me. I realize that I owe you a great deal for that. If there's anything I can do to repay you, I will, I swear it.”

Owl stared at her uncertainly. “Papa said one time that there was somebody he cared about, but he lost her. That was you, wasn't it?”

Suchen winced mentally. Gods, but that was too much of a mess even to try to explain to a child. “Yes. But we found each other again.”

“I know.”

Suchen's heart ached. Maybe Owl had seen that as something that tied her to Yozerf—that they had both lost everything in their pasts. “We're friends, aren't we?”

“I guess.”

“That doesn't change. I am your friend, and I want you to come to me if you need anything, or even if you just want some company. I have duties to this keep, and I can't always get out of them, but I promise that I won't ever just ignore you or forget about you.” Suchen brushed a dirty strand of hair out of the girl's

face. "Whatever happens between Yozerf and me, it doesn't change the fact that you're his daughter—or that we both love you and want you to be happy."

Owl didn't seem entirely certain what to make of that. But she did relax a little, and that night she asked Suchen to help her read during the quiet time in front of the fire, before she went to bed. Somehow that slowly turned into a time for the three of them to spend together. After a while, it occurred to Suchen that perhaps they had become a family—a very strange family, to be sure, but a family nonetheless.

Then spring came.

Chapter Twenty

The air was changing; Yozerf could taste it in the breeze, feel it in his blood.

Winter had been ... too short, almost, though there had been solitary days that seemed to take up half of eternity. But though snow still fell on cold days, more and more often the clouds parted and let the pallid sunlight bathe Vorslava. Great flocks of birds streamed north once again, returning from whatever mysterious place they went beyond the horizon. Even those that lived year-round at the keep began to sing and squabble for territory. And beneath it all, Yozerf could smell the life quickening in the ground under his feet, the earth slowly waking to itself once again.

It won't be long now.

* * * *

"My lord! My lord!"

Swallowing back a feeling of dread, Yozerf turned towards the great gates. Accompanied by the stonemasons and carpenters who had spent the winter shoring up the keep's defenses, he had been making a tour of the walls, listening patiently while they excitedly pointed out all the repairs and improvements they had made. The day was comparatively warm, and snowmelt splashed under the feet of children as they ran through the muddy yard. Beyond them, most of the off-duty men and women of the guard shouted insults and advice as they battered one another with wooden practice swords.

The man—Wolfkin, rather—who had called out stopped a few feet away, gasping for breath. He had gone out with one of the foraging parties this morning, and surely only bad news would have brought him running back so quickly.

"Catch your breath, lad, and tell us what's the matter," Wulfgar said with an edge of impatience.

The younger male wilted slightly under Wulfgar's stare. "My lord," he said, glancing at Yozerf and bowing. "Soldiers. Mounted soldiers are coming towards the keep."

Yozerf had spent the winter dreading this moment, but somehow it still felt as if the runner had thrown ice melt into his face. "How far?"

"If they do not hurry, half a day. Less if they press the horses. There are fifty of them, perhaps, my lord. We ranged out as far and as fast as we could, thinking to catch rabbits on the plains. When we saw them, they were coming this way, but at a cautious pace, as if they were uncertain of themselves. They wear King Fellrant's colors, my lord."

Yozerf swore softly. The runner bowed his head again. "I came to warn the keep. The rest stayed behind to watch the soldiers—they will come fast if there is any news."

"Very good. Rest and get some water," Yozerf said absently, his mind already leaping ahead. He had planned for this, but actually facing the moment was somehow different than he had imagined. "Get everyone back inside the keep now," he said to the nearest guards, "and ring the alarm bells. It doesn't sound like a full-scale attack, but I don't want anyone caught outside the walls."

Men ran to carry out his orders. Yozerf strode across the yard towards the keep, his great, black cloak billowing out behind him, followed closely by his Sworn. Even as he went, the activity around him shifted: the guards abandoned their practice and hurried to arm themselves and report to their commanders, the children were gathered and herded back towards the keep, noncombatants dropped what they were

doing and went to their assigned tasks. There was water to be drawn in case of attack by fire arrows; there were horses to be saddled and bridled; there were warriors to arm. High above, in one of the towers, the deep-throated bell began to toll, calling Vorslava's inhabitants back inside the safety of the walls.

He kept an ear out for panic, while he sifted the scents that the wind brought to his nose. The smell of fear came to him, which was to be expected, but he detected no signs of hysteria yet. It was too much to hope that the entire population of the keep would remember what they were supposed to do and do it flawlessly, but at least things seemed to be in hand for the moment.

The Sworn were silent and tense as they climbed the stair to their quarters. All of them, even Tan, had stowed their gear in the outer chamber, and they set to readying themselves as soon as they were in the door. Yozerf continued alone to the inner chamber, quickly trading his normal clothing for the soft, black shirt and pants that would lie beneath his armor. Almost as soon as he was done, the door opened and Owl came in, her face pale.

"Ah, my squire," he said with a smile, trying to pretend that he wasn't worried. She nodded and went to the stand on which his armor hung, taking the pieces down without fumble or hesitation, just as they had practiced.

The chain-mail hauberk and chausses went on first, rings jingling softly together. Although the chain by necessity was unadorned, everything that went over it—schynbalds, poleyns, couters, vambraces, and breastplate—was decorated with black enamel and edged in silver. *Ridiculous*, he'd thought when the smith presented it to him, but the man was so eager and so pleased with his work that Yozerf hadn't the heart to object.

And it will certainly make me stand out on the field.

While Owl hurried to strap the plates over the chain mail, a sudden swell of noise from the other side of the door announced the arrival of others. Yozerf winced. He would have preferred a few quiet moments to collect his thoughts; but it was not to be.

Suchen entered first, and her eyes widened slightly at the sight of him. Londah came on her heels, already dressed for battle, although the gods alone knew how she had gotten ready so quickly. Knowing Londah, Yozerf suspected she slept in her mail. Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf added themselves to the crowding of the room, and Yozerf wondered how many more people had been turned away at the outer door.

Perhaps it was just as well, though. Some things must be said to all of them, save for Londah. She already knew what her responsibilities were; that, he never doubted.

"Do you expect fighting?" Suchen asked, and rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. Her sapphire eyes were clear, and she looked ready to battle an entire army if need be.

"Most likely. I'd rather not ride out the gates, but I suspect that if they come so close to the keep, they'll wish to parlay." He cut her a sharp glance. "You will remain inside the walls no matter what happens."

A scowl crossed her face, and she lifted her strong chin defiantly. "I'm going with you. I won't let you go without me, even if you're riding straight to Hel's domain."

He'd expected the argument, but he'd let it lie until the last possible moment. Suchen was a warrior, a fighter, not someone to watch passively from the walls. It was one of the things he loved about her. Unfortunately, at the moment, it was also a liability.

"You will remain here," he said calmly, as he pulled on gauntlets that matched the rest of his armor.

"I can fight!"

"Do you think I doubt it?" he asked, surprised. Owl took the last piece of armor from the stand, the heavy helm that the smith swore was his masterpiece. A crouching dragon clung to the crest, its wings forming the cheek-plates and its head the nosepiece. Yozerf signaled that Owl should keep it for the moment. "You are the steward of this keep, Suchen Keblava. If I should fall, then Lord Auglar will need both your knowledge and your support."

Auglar glanced up sharply, and Yozerf gave him a grim smile. "If I die, then Vorslava is yours. May the gods have mercy on you."

Auglar nodded—then took a sudden step forward and clasped Yozerf by the arm. "Try to stay alive, then."

"I have no intention of doing otherwise," he said dryly.

The expression on Suchen's face was closed, unreadable, and he felt it like a prick to the heart. It was obvious that she hated his command, that she wanted to stand by him in battle. But it was obvious also that she couldn't argue with his logic.

I'm sorry, he wanted to say. But there was no time for intimacy.

Yozerf pulled his cloak over his armor, turned, and strode out the door. The Sworn immediately closed around him, and he could feel their uncertainty. Probably Gless was recalling what had happened the last time a keep he was in had come under attack.

"More of the Wolfkin have come in, my lord," Ji'seth reported, her voice calm and cold, even though her scent betrayed both fear and excitement. She had painted blue geometric shapes on her face in preparation for battle, and they made her look even fiercer than usual. "They confirm that there are only about fifty men in the group, all mounted. They also confirm that the soldiers have put on speed. They will be here soon."

They went down the stair and into the yard, a grim mass, silent except for the jingle and clank of armor. As they emerged into the sunlight, Yozerf saw that a large group of women had gathered and seemed to be waiting on him.

Good gods, what now?

Afwyn stood at their head, her eyes downcast in her scarred face. "M-my lord," she said, and cleared her throat. "We have something for you. We spent the winter making them—they may not be to your liking, though." She trailed off, then gestured for some of her fellows to come forth. "We made this one for the keep," she said, as two of them carefully unfolded an enormous square of cloth.

It was a flag, Yozerf saw to his surprise. The great standard was made from black cloth, and on it were three devices. The foremost was a rampant dragon in gray, and he knew that an Aclytese maiden must have been behind this ancient symbol of Caden. But it was flanked by two other figures: a yellow wolf and a blood-red sword.

"A-and we made this one for you," Afwyn concluded in a rush, as if frightened of his reaction. Two more women unfurled a smaller banner, such as might be carried to the field. This one was far simpler, nothing but a gray dragon on black: a personal device for the lord of the keep.

"I..." For a moment, words failed him altogether. Emotion choked him, and he had the sudden, odd sensation that the scene was strange and yet familiar at the same time. It was as though he had watched the dragon standard unfurl before, in some other life.

Telmonra.

"I am honored," he said, and meant it. He gestured to one of the boys that waited in the yard to fetch and carry for the soldiers. "Fly the one from the highest tower. The other, I will keep beside me."

One of the guards seized the honor of being the standard-bearer, quickly fitting the banner to a pole and raising it to the wind. As the great standard of the keep unfurled high above, Yozerf climbed the steps that led to the top of the wall, where he could see the approaching riders.

As the Wolfkin had reported, it was a large company of mounted men. Even from a distance, he could see that they bore Fellrant's colors. In an odd way, it was almost a relief that the king had sent them rather than Jahcgroth, who was, after all, Yozerf's distant cousin. Although Fellrant might be treacherous, at least Yozerf could be certain of his motives.

As the men approached, Yozerf took careful note of their condition. Their horses seemed thinner than was preferable, although they weren't to the point of starvation. It was hard to tell about the men themselves, beneath their helms and armor, but he noted that their gear was worn and patched, and rust showed here and there on a helm or hauberk that should have shone.

So they're feeling the effects of the last winter. I wonder where they waited out the weather. If they were at all exposed, they may have had a far worse time of it than we did.

It was a slim advantage and offered little enough hope in the long run, but Yozerf would take what he could get.

A scrap of white cloth fluttered from a spear carried by one of the lead riders. The entire group came to what little was left of the village, then passed it. When he judged they had come just within the range of the longbows, Yozerf nodded to Gless.

"Hold and identify yourselves!" Gless shouted, his voice sounding unnaturally loud in the stillness.

The contingent came to a halt. Moving cautiously, the lead rider and a few others rode a little ahead of the rest of their fellows. "We come under a flag of parlay!" he shouted, pointing at the white banner. "We bear a message from King Fellrant for your lord!"

One corner of Yozerf's mouth twisted into a smile. "I wonder what he wants to say," he remarked dryly.

"Somehow I doubt it's 'keep the castle, you've earned it,'" Gless murmured back. Then he raised his voice again. "Deliver your message, then!"

But the man shook his head. "I can deliver it only to the one who commands here."

"It's a trick, my lord," Ji'seth said—unnecessarily, in Yozerf's opinion.

Gless scowled at the riders. "And who are you? The lord doesn't come out to talk to just any brigand who wanders past!"

Since when? Yozerf wondered. But he understood what Gless meant—respect was something you took by force from men such as these, not something you earned.

The man pulled off his helmet, revealing blond hair shorn close to his head. Yozerf's sharp gaze picked out hollows around his eyes, as well as gauntness that made shadows on his face. This man had been short of food, and if an officer such as he had suffered, it was a given that any foot soldiers were starving. "I am Balton, Lord of Nevh," he declared.

Yozerf frowned. Nevh was a small southern demesne; like so many others, its lord had died at Nava Nar last spring. This man was either of the former lord's line or—more likely, given the treachery of that individual—someone given the demesne in exchange for loyalty to Fellrant. Whatever the origin of his claim, it was likely far more legitimate than Yozerf's.

"Well, then, I suppose I must speak to him," he said grimly.

"My lord, it's a trap," Ji'seth repeated, as if he were a fool.

"I am quite aware of that." Yozerf glanced briefly at the nearest guard commander. "Keep the archers ready. If they see *any* movement in that line, don't hesitate to fire."

Grooms held the horses at ready in the yard below, and Yozerf went to the big gray he favored. Owl waited by the animal and held up the dragon helm as he approached. "Be careful," she said, and he knew she was trying to be brave.

He took the helm from her; the dragon glared briefly up at him before he turned it around and settled it over his head. "Go to Suchen and Londah, and don't get in anyone's way. I'll see you at dinner."

Gods, I hope.

What am I doing? Riding out to parlay with some bootlicking sycophant of Fellrant.

I'm the only one who can. I have to. Fellrant will probably want us all dead ... but there's always that one chance he's desperate enough by now to offer us a way out. Not much of a chance, but I have to know for certain.

Damn it all to Hel.

Yozerf mounted and reined the horse around towards the gates. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone dart forward. Afwyn ran to Gless's horse, holding out a green scarf that she had taken from her own hair. She pressed it into his hand, and for a moment their eyes met, desperate and wild. Then she turned and dashed back to the keep. Looking both pleased and frightened, Gless paused a moment to tie the scarf around his arm, where the ends fluttered valiantly in the breeze.

The great gates swung slowly open to let them out. "Keep your wits about you and your noses to the wind," Yozerf warned as they passed under the curtain wall.

As they rode, the wind came up, unfurling the dragon banner for all to see. Knowing that he had well and truly committed himself beyond all hope of pardon, Yozerf rode slowly towards the small party awaiting him. *Let them look. Let them see. And maybe, let them fear, if any of them have wit to know what they are looking at.*

Caden's banner flies again, humans. For the first time in three hundred years.

He reined in, within comfortable shouting distance, and the Sworn and his guards formed up behind and beside him. The breeze brought him Lord Balton's scent: sweat mixed with the sour odor of hunger. He had been right; the winter had not gone well for King Fellrant's troops.

"You have words for me. Speak them," Yozerf said, blunt and cold.

Balton's eyes searched the shadows of Yozerf's helm, looking for some hint. This close, it was probably obvious, even beneath the partial concealment of the helm, that Yozerf was not human. "Who are you?" Balton demanded.

All the cold hauteur that had served him as a shield and a weapon for so many years came back in a rush, and he gave Balton a smile that had a knife's edge. "The lord of this keep. Now make your demands or leave. I don't have time to waste on you."

Balton flushed, but his eyes narrowed in anger. "Very well. King Fellrant has heard of your unlawful seizure of this keep. You will immediately turn over its control to me, as his representative. Vorslava's grain stores were meant to feed the army of Jenel, and you will turn over any not already devoured by this ... rabble." His lip curled in obvious distaste. "You will lay down your arms and accompany me to be judged forthwith by the King."

No way out, then. Men like Balton understood only straightforward force. Yozerf wondered if that were part of the price Fellrant had to pay for the loyalty of such lords. Perhaps the words were not even truly Fellrant's; it was hard to imagine that the man had lost all subtlety in the course of a year.

"Ah, yes, I rather expect that Fellrant would like to see me again," Yozerf said, cold as the winter wind. He remembered that dark night almost a year ago, when he had stood in a warehouse with every intention of selling his body in exchange for passage out of Segg. It had been Fellrant who had intervened ... Fellrant, with his indigo eyes and soft mouth, seeming so calm, but unable to hide the flash of lust underneath. Yozerf could barely remember the taste of Fellrant's lips, but then, his memory of the entire night felt unreal, like something observed, rather than lived. It was how one survived, shutting down the mental connections and pretending that it was all happening to someone else.

With an effort, he pulled himself back to the present. *Concentrate, fool*. Balton's expression said he didn't know what Yozerf meant, whether he could possibly be serious or not. Surely, he must be thinking, this jumped-up bandit lord could not possibly know the king.

"But if Fellrant wishes to see me, he'll simply have to come here himself."

Balton frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that my answer is no. No, I will not lay down my arms and come with you. I will not open the keep for you to do as you wish, and I will not give you grain so that my people can starve." Yozerf arched a brow. "Does that answer your question?"

Balton's small eyes grew hard with anger, and Yozerf had to force himself to hide a smile of pleasure. *Yes. Let your anger guide your thinking, human.*

"By order of the king—" he began.

Yozerf cut in. "Haven't you realized that I don't care what you have to say? If Fellrant wishes to parlay, let him come here himself and leave his lapdogs at home, where they belong. Or is he too busy despoiling the countryside to feed the likes of you? You have less right to Vorslava's granaries than the rats of the field, for at least they are honest about their intentions!"

Balton's face turned purple, and one of his men let out a strangled cry. There came the hiss of steel being drawn, and Yozerf felt an odd moment of relief that they were finally done with foolish words.

"Treachery!" screamed Ji'seth. The battle was joined.

The clang of steel on steel dinned in Yozerf's sensitive ears, joined by the whinny of angry horses, the shrieks of wounded men. The deadly hiss of arrows slashed the air overhead, and he prayed silently that the archers hit the right mass of men. The rest of Balton's company was coming up, staggering beneath the punishing hail of arrows without completely faltering. At his back, the great gates groaned, and the pounding of hooves sounded as reserves poured out of Vor斯拉va, evening the odds.

Yozerf rode into the middle of the mayhem, his sword running red as he slashed and stabbed. Something bounced off his helm, setting his ears to ringing; a moment later, Ji'seth skewered his attacker. Balton's men fought back desperately. Even though they had begun the battle in disarray, it was obvious that they were trained soldiers who had fought together before.

"Hem them in!" Yozerf shouted. "Don't let them escape!"

Then, in the chaos of the battle, he caught sight of a familiar figure. For a moment, he thought that he must be mistaken, that scent would tell a different story, if only he could get close enough to smell over the stink of blood. But he could see too many details that fit, and he knew in his heart he was right.

"Windshade!" he shouted.

The huge black warhorse swung its head around, ears pricked forward. Its rider swore, jerking hard on the reins, and Yozerf felt a sudden, dark anger pass through him. Taking a deep breath, he invoked shape-shifter magic, trusting the Sworn to watch his back for the few seconds of inattention it would take.

Throw him.

The warhorse bucked violently, lunging as if it had gone mad. The hapless rider tried desperately to cling to Windshade's broad back, but the horse behaved as if it were an unbroken yearling; there was no hope for it. Within moments, the man lay helpless on the ground, and iron-shod hooves put an end to him.

The noise of battle died away. Reining in, Yozerf cast a look about and saw that Balton and all his fifty soldiers lay dead. "Tend to the wounded," he ordered, even as he dismounted, "and throw Balton and his lot into the sea."

Windshade approached, nickering softly. Almost laughing with delight, Yozerf ran his hands over the horse's hide, checking for any wounds. Although Windshade was thinner than he would have liked, the horse seemed to have taken no permanent harm from his year-long sojourn in Jenel's army.

"My lord?" Ji'seth asked from behind him, obviously confused.

Yozerf smiled and leaned his head against Windshade's warm neck. "Just greeting an old friend," he said.

* * * *

Suchen watched as those of Vor斯拉va's defenders still able to ride returned to the keep. The rest were brought back on litters, and Merdwyn and her helpers were busy tending them in the yard below. *If only we had Jiara*, she thought wistfully. But the healermage had been lost in the fall of Kellsjard, along with so many others.

Yozerf returned at the head of the column. He had taken off his helm, and his blood-red hair blew back in the breeze, spreading out over his black enameled armor. His cloak flapped behind him like raven's wings. She thought he looked dangerous and fey and altogether beautiful.

A cheer went up from the walls as the riders returned, and Yozerf nodded his head in acknowledgment. Suchen ran down the stair, but she stopped as the jostle of riders and horses became a snarl. They had

captured as many of the enemy's warhorses as they could, and for a moment there was a great shoving of many-colored hides and a snapping of teeth. As the grooms began to sort them out, she saw that Yozerf had tied a lead to his own saddle. The midnight horse on the end of it was startlingly familiar.

"Papa! Papa!" Owl shouted as she ran through the crowd, ducking around horses and soldiers with a child's quick grace.

Yozerf slid down from his saddle, catching the girl as she launched herself at him. Kissing her brow, he carried her over to Windshade. "Look, Owl," he said. "I've brought you a horse."

Chapter Twenty-One

Yozerf collapsed into the chair in front of the fireplace. Suchen paused in the act of polishing her sword and watched him quietly for a while. His eyes were closed, black lashes folded against his pale cheeks, like raven wings on snow. A little line of worry showed between the delicate arcs of his crimson brows, as if his thoughts troubled him. His hands hung limp to either side of the chair, the long fingers still.

It had been a long day, and she knew that he had driven himself relentlessly, insisting on personally speaking to the wounded and to the guardsmen who had manned the walls. That was one of the reasons she had indulged in a fire tonight, so that he would have at least a warm room waiting for him.

"Have you had dinner?" she asked, carefully wiping away the last of the oil and sliding her sword back into its sheath.

"A slice of bread wrapped around cold venison, while standing. If that counts," he said, without bothering to open his eyes.

Suchen went to the other chair near the fire, dragged it closer, and sat down. The warmth felt unspeakably good on her chapped hands, and she held them out to the flames. "Were you serious about giving Windshade to Owl?"

A smile crossed his sculpted lips. "He needs rest and to regain some weight. Owl would sell me into slavery for the chance to take care of him for a while, and if he needs it, I see no harm in it. I did make it clear that she *won't* be riding him into battle and that I do intend to borrow him."

"She wants to fight. And she isn't lazy about her sword practice." Suchen glanced briefly at him. "Someday, when she's grown, she'll be a fine warrior."

"I don't doubt it." But the worry line deepened on his forehead.

Not worried for her, though; at least, not like that. Gods, he doesn't think he'll live to see it.

He's probably right. No matter who wins this war, Yozerf will be held a rebel.

She swallowed hard and pushed the thought away. They might all die in the next assault; there was no use in worrying about a future that might never come. Yozerf had made his choices, and they all had to live with them. Some things couldn't be changed.

But, gods, that's a bitter draught to swallow.

The firelight gilded the harsh planes of his face, softening them a little. He looked like a resting angel, or a beautiful demon, or perhaps some bastard offspring of the two. Some of the lines and the years vanished from his face, and for a moment she could almost believe it the face of an innocent, had she not known otherwise.

"You meant for Lord Balton and his men to die, didn't you?" she asked. "Even before the first sword was drawn."

Gray eyes finally opened, dispelling any façade of innocence. "At last, the conversation comes to the question you've been wanting to ask. If the world were going to end in an hour, humans would spend three-quarters of it asking after the weather before they told you."

She scowled at him, miffed. Seeing her look, he held up his hands for peace.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Old habits die hard sometimes, and the gods know Aclytes have been guilty of the same. I didn't mean offense, my love."

"Now who's too busy talking to get to the point?"

He smiled a little. "Forgive me. To answer you: I had scant hope that Fellrant would be reasonable about my seizure of Vorslava, but I did want to be absolutely certain. But yes, of course. They were dead men as soon as the Wolfkin spotted them."

She nodded. "I thought you were trying to provoke Lord Balton into attacking first. That, or just being your usual charming self."

Yozerf chuckled. "I will admit that diplomacy may not be my forte." He sat forward, and all mirth faded from his features. Uncertainty shadowed the silvery eyes that stared at her so intently. "Think about it, Suchen. King Fellrant sends a mission to Vorslava, no doubt hoping to determine how well defended it is. Will it be easy to take? What sort of person is lord here? A mere bandit, easily outwitted, or something more? That sort of information is valuable to him, and I couldn't allow Balton to take it back." A brief smile quirked his lips. "Although I was tempted. Imagine the look on Fellrant's face when he learned it was me."

Indeed. Fellrant had freely admitted that he wanted Yozerf. If Yozerf had been willing to betray Auglar and throw his support to Fellrant, she suspected that he would have done very well indeed.

But that was not in his nature. The wolf in him didn't understand betrayal of the pack. He could not have taken such an offer, even if he had wanted to.

"So what are you hoping to gain?"

"Time. Perhaps." Yozerf sighed and linked his fingers loosely together, staring into the firelight. His eyes reflected it eerily, turning into burning green coals that defied her ability to read. "When his men fail to return, Fellrant will have nothing but uncertainty. Did they die here at Vorslava? Did they run afoul of Jahcgroth's armies on the way? Did something else altogether happen to them? Without knowing the answer, his course of action won't be clear, and with any luck it will buy us at least a little time. That was why it was so important that no one survive to return to him."

"And if Balton had not allowed himself to be provoked? If he had simply ridden away, still under the flag of parlay?"

Yozerf smiled thinly. "I didn't think that much of a risk. Humans are easy to—no, forgive me. I have long experience provoking people; perhaps that is a better way of putting it. I'm quite good at it. And Balton was a new-made lord, uneasy of his own position—of course he would see me as a threat that must be crushed. All the better if he did it himself, then ran back to Fellrant with my head on his pommel—such a gift would have secured his position even further, would it not? So I provoked him into violating his own parlay, so that I could make sure no one lived to tell the tale. To have done otherwise would have put this keep and the people in it in even more danger than they are already. I make no excuses."

Although his words were defiant, she could hear the wistful sadness in his tone. "I understand," she said, and meant it. Yozerf's decisions had always been harsh, desperate, and ruthlessly practical; that they remained so was hardly a surprise. *Truthfully ... perhaps that's even why he's here now and Auglar is sleeping in the barracks ... why Rozah isn't still alive and queen of Jenel.*

But even as she thought it, she knew it was wrong. It wasn't mere practicality that ruled Yozerf's actions, after all. *It's the wolf. Protect the pack, no matter what the cost.* Yozerf would do anything that

ensured the survival of whoever was in his pack; anything else was secondary. He had taken huge risks to save Rozah, herself, and the Sworn. He had been willing to prostitute himself in Segg to find a way for them to escape.

He had even walked into almost certain death because it bought them the chance to escape—even though, at the time, he believed that he had lost all their friendship and their love.

Having lost his old pack, he found a new one. And the gods have mercy on anyone who threatened it, because it was damned certain that Yozerf wouldn't.

* * * *

The next day, Yozerf summoned a number of the keep's inhabitants to his study. Auglar was there, along with Buudi and Brenwulf. Suchen attended as his steward, along with various guard commanders, the Wolfkin leader, those in charge of different foraging parties, Londah, and Grilka.

He waited by the window as they entered one by one, a dark figure like a perching crow. Clouds scudded by quickly, carried on the wind, while gulls soared and swooped above the ocean. The first sprouts of green grass had appeared on the plain outside and were spreading quickly, which was good news for the horses and other livestock that had been turned out to graze. For a moment, he felt an overwhelming sense of longing; he wanted to go outside, to run free in the sunlight, to drink in like wine the sweet smell of growing things. Instead, he was trapped within stone walls, enclosed by the musty stink of dust and sweat.

Shaking off the feeling of oppression, he turned and saw all the faces looking back at him, waiting for him to speak. Chairs had been dragged in from other rooms; he didn't abide by the practice of forcing anyone else to stand just because he was doing so.

"The battle yesterday was nothing but an opening skirmish," he said without preamble. "You all know what is coming, so I won't waste words or time telling you. I don't know how long we'll have until someone shows up at the gates ready to lay a siege, so we're going to move now. Any type of food that can be dried or otherwise preserved, bring in. Plant crops as planned, but be ready to torch the fields if we have to. I want *anything* that's edible, within five leagues of this keep, inside with us, not outside with our enemies. So long as we have food and water and the walls of Vorslava stand strong, we can outwait anyone."

"Can we?" Grilka asked, clearly worried. "Surely they'll have supply lines of their own."

"No doubt. But you know as well as I do that most of Jenel spent last summer in chaos. What sort of harvest could there have been? If men serve in the king's army, they aren't at home planting crops or tending herds, yet their need for food does not diminish just because there are no hands growing it. The weather was bad, as well—surely we all recall the weeks of rain and cold, even in high summer—so anything that did get planted likely didn't do very well. Their stores going into winter couldn't have been good; now, they must be perilously low for both armies."

"Which makes Vorslava an even more attractive target," Auglar pointed out.

Yozerf nodded. "True. But time is on our side, not theirs. If the soldiers outside begin to starve, they'll desert. We only have to last longer than they do. In addition, Fellrant and Jahcgroth have to worry about fighting each other. An army sitting around Vorslava will be in an exposed position, should their enemies come up at their backs."

"Unless they decide that they hate us more than they hate each other," Tan said.

Yozerf smiled grimly. "Knowing both Fellrant and Jahcgroth, I doubt that will happen." He glanced sharply at Auglar. "You have been besieged before—is there any more that can be done at this point?"

Auglar shook his head. "Not now, not that I've seen. We've weapons and strong walls, and if we stock as much food as we can, then there's little left to do now, other than wait."

Gless cleared his throat, and Yozerf cast a questioning glance at him. The Sworn's blue eyes were unusually sober, and the darkness of memories moved behind them. "What if Jahcgroth brings his sorcery to bear. Can you ... can you fight him?"

It was not a question Yozerf particularly wanted to contemplate. He ran a hand back through the tangled mass of his hair, buying a moment to think. "I don't know," he said finally, the only answer he could honestly give. "If I remembered what happened at Nava Nar, after I went back inside ... perhaps I could tell you. I don't know if I faced Jahcgroth or Ax then, or if the roof fell in first. I *hope* my injuries were from the collapse of the palace, because otherwise it means I didn't fare very well in a fight.

"There are some documents here in Vorslava ... old journals from Caden, mostly. Some of them might give me an idea of how the Jonaglirs used their magic in battle, and perhaps that will help. But I don't know."

Gless gestured towards Londah. "What about you, Londah? Can you ... do any magic?"

But she shook her head, black hair shimmering faintly at the movement. "No."

"I think it has to be awakened somehow," Yozerf said. "In Caden, the new king or queen endured a long and brutal ritual, at the end of which they would be able to use the power of their blood. I didn't go through that ... but I did die, which may have had the same effect. Of course, I was possessed by the ghost of a woman who *did* endure the ritual, which may have been the deciding factor. I don't know that, either."

"It seems to me that there's a lot you don't know," Brenwulf snarled, from where he sat sullenly by Auglar.

Yozerf felt himself bristle at the challenge. Brenwulf had made no attempt to integrate himself into the Wolfkin community in Vorslava, instead keeping to Auglar's side, as if he had no other ally. Perhaps his motive was simply to conceal the fact that he was Wolfkin from most of the keep's population, given the implications that revelation would have about his sister—Auglar's wife.

But she's dead, Brenwulf, and none of it matters at all.

"I don't hear you offering anything better," Ji'seth snapped, before Yozerf could think of a reply.

Brenwulf shifted his glare to her. "I'm just a soldier. It's the leaders who need to know things, and by the gods, I don't see that he does."

"Peace," Auglar said sharply, cutting off Brenwulf's tirade. "Or will we fight amongst ourselves while Fellrant laughs, just as we did in Segg?"

Brenwulf subsided, a dark look on his face. Although he didn't particularly want to consider the events that had taken place a year ago in Segg, Yozerf knew that ignoring the past would only lead to the same outcome. "Auglar is right. We have been brought down by divisions from within, time and time again. Have we learned nothing?" He paused, letting his words sink in, then turned back to Brenwulf. "As for my lack of knowledge ... I wish that I had answers for you. But I don't, and neither does anyone else here. We can only do the best we can with the knowledge we have."

Brenwulf's dark eyes still showed defiance. "And if that isn't good enough?"

"Then it isn't. But there's nothing else we can do."

* * * *

The gathering broke up shortly after that, there being little else to say. As his retainers went to carry out their various tasks, Yozerf let himself sag against the windowsill. A headache was starting behind his eyes, and he wondered dully how deep Brenwulf's discontent ran. *Auglar will rein him in, though. Perhaps.*

At least a knife in the back was not Brenwulf's way. Like Peddock, Brenwulf never bothered to hide his emotions, including his antipathy. Yozerf had always feared the hidden enemy far more than the one hostile to his face.

"May I have a private word?" Gless asked, breaking into Yozerf's thoughts.

Yozerf nodded, and the other Sworn left quietly, shutting the door behind them. At least one—probably Ji'seth—would stay on guard outside the door. Perhaps, given Brenwulf's behavior, they all would.

Gless went to the massive desk that dominated the room and idly picked up a water-worn rock that served as a paperweight. He turned it over and over in his hands, and Yozerf could smell the nervousness coming from him. Wondering what was wrong, he asked, "Is there something you wish to tell me?"

Gless shook his head, bright dandy's curls bouncing. "It's ... more of a request, really," he said at last, setting the paperweight down. Gripping the staff that accompanied him everywhere, he limped over to the window and leaned against the sill beside Yozerf. "As the lord of this keep, it's your privilege to perform weddings, isn't it?"

Yozerf blinked. Of all the things he had expected Gless to say, this was certainly not among them. "I suppose, although I doubt Fellrant would recognize my authority." Bitter irony touched him, and he laughed. "Of course, Jenelese law forbids marriage among Aclytes."

Gless winced. "I'm sorry—I hadn't thought that this might be a sore subject. Never mind."

Yozerf waved his hand. "It's hardly your fault. So who do you know that would want to be wed by a renegade bandit-lord?"

"Me, actually."

Yozerf opened his mouth, found no words, and shut it again. He looked at Gless, half expecting his Sworn to have undergone some miraculous change. But the man in front of him wore the same flamboyant clothing, the same carefully curled hair, the same charming smile that had gotten him access to many a bed, wherever he went.

Gless had never held back from flirting with every woman he came across, although he'd never pretended that he was interested in anything but a pleasurable night. His conquests among the women of Kellsjard, and now of Vorslava, were the stuff of gossip from one end of the keep to another. Yozerf had even wondered privately if Suchen had ever been one of Gless's lovers, although he had never asked. It was probably better not to know.

"You?" he said finally.

Gless's mobile mouth twitched into a wry smile. "Me."

"I suppose you have a bride in mind? Or perhaps you were hoping to begin a harem?"

"Just one. Afwyn."

"And she seemed so sensible."

"Yes, well, everyone has their moments of madness," Gless said, ducking his head slightly, as if embarrassed. "We started to talk at the Midwinter celebration—at least, before all the knifing began. Things just ... grew from there, I suppose."

Yozerf could only shake his head in amazement. "I expect that now rain will fall up and fish, fly."

"So you'll do it?"

"Of course."

* * * *

The entire keep seized on the wedding as a final chance to celebrate before the grim reality of a siege set in. Streamers and chains of flowers hung from every sconce and chandelier and fluttered from the hands of maids and children. The kitchen made a small feast from food that could not easily be preserved. Fresh rushes were put down in the great hall, mixed with herbs that released their spicy scents when walked upon.

Everyone who was not on guard duty packed into the great hall at midmorning on the appointed day. As the bells rang out the noon hour, Gless and Afwyn came into the hall and walked hand-in-hand through the crowd to where Yozerf stood on the top step of the dais. Gless had truly outdone himself in dressing; he wore so many layers of clashing colors that Yozerf half feared for his sight. Afwyn wore what was clearly her best dress, the same that she had donned the night of the Midwinter celebration. A happy smile lit up half her face, although the hideous scars marring the other half prevented anything more than a small grin on that side.

Two of Afwyn's friends held one side of the symbolic veil—a canopy, really—over the heads of the couple, while Wulfgar and Tan held up the other side. Feeling oddly self-conscious, Yozerf bound their right hands together with a silk cord, waited while they recited the vows they had chosen, and then declared them wed.

Glad that his mercifully brief part was over, Yozerf slipped away to the side, while everyone else crowded around Gless and Afwyn to offer their congratulations. Suchen appeared, weaving her way through the crowd to stand beside him. Like everyone else, she was dressed in her brightest clothing; the soft blue of her tunic made her eyes shine like jewels.

"Do you own anything that isn't black?" she asked, glancing at his funereal attire.

"No." One of the keep maids passed by, pausing to offer them each one of the goblets she bore. He took one and sipped from it; the wine was cool and tart in his mouth.

"Long life and many children!" Wulfgar shouted from the mass surrounding Gless and Afwyn, and most of the hall broke into a cheer. Yozerf shook his head.

"The gods alone know how many Gless has already left across Jenel," he muttered.

Suchen gave him a sharp look. "You certainly are in a foul mood today."

He started to object, then stopped. It was true, and for a moment he wasn't certain why he wasn't

happier for the couple. Then something clicked into place, and he realized that the problem was envy.

I'm jealous—of Gless, for the gods' sakes. How much more ridiculous can one get?

Ridiculous or not, it was true. *He* wanted to be the one standing in front of a crowd, with Suchen at his side, declaring their love for one another.

"Forgive me," he said with a faint smile. "I'm being selfish again."

Suchen gave him a thoughtful look, and he wondered what she saw in his eyes. Then she reached out and took his hand in hers. "Come on. For this one day, no one will notice if we slip away for a few hours."

It lightened his heart ... and reminded him of just how foolish he was being. The bond between them went beyond any ceremony, save perhaps the ones they made themselves, without words. He tightened his grip on her fingers gently, before raising her hand to his mouth and brushing his lips across the back. "As my lady commands," he whispered, and saw her smile.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The muted *thwack* of Owl's wooden practice sword against a straw dummy sent echoes fleeing through the courtyard. Sweat trickled down Suchen's neck as she watched the girl determinedly go through the exercises designed to strengthen her growing muscles. Spring had come in earnest, and the hot sun glared down, even though the strong breeze could still raise a chill. The smell of growing things mingled with the omnipresent scent of the sea. Much of the space between the curtain wall and the keep had been given over to gardens, and green shoots lifted to the sky within the rows of freshly turned earth.

"Rider approaching!" one of the sentries shouted from his post over the gates. "One of ours, and he's coming fast!"

Suchen turned away from Owl to watch the gate. As the sound of hoofbeats grew louder, then turned into a clatter echoing in the gate tunnel, Yozerf materialized soundlessly beside her. The look on his face was grim.

The rider burst into the courtyard, casting about for Yozerf even as he did so. His horse was one of the lighter-built animals bred more for speed than for battle; its flanks were lathered from its run, and its sides heaved. The rider was a young Aclytese man whose name Suchen could not remember; his dyed hair had grown out from the roots, leaving him with a bizarre admixture of peacock green and raven black.

"My lord!" he shouted, sliding down off the horse and taking a step towards them. He staggered a little, and Wulfgar grabbed his arm to steady him. "Helaria and I were posted at the crags. We saw outriders yesterday evening, my lord—and there are more behind them. I think—I think it might be an army. I came as quickly as I could to warn you, but Helaria wanted to stay and keep watch longer."

Silence seized the courtyard; the distant clang of the forges seemed preternaturally loud in the quiet. For a moment, Suchen thought she saw what might have been despair flicker through Yozerf's eyes; then it was gone, and she couldn't be certain.

"What colors did they wear?" he asked, calm and cold as if they discussed the weather.

The rider gratefully accepted the water flask that one of the guards thrust at him. "Crimson and gold," he said between swallows.

"Argannon," Gless said, his voice flat and tight.

"So it begins," Yozerf said. "You all know what to do. Bring in all the scouts and watchers, the hunters and foragers. Torch anything we can't drag inside with us."

The courtyard went from still to a maelstrom of activity in moments. As men and women scurried about, barking orders or carrying them out, Suchen moved closer to Yozerf. "Do you think it will do any good?" she asked, too quietly for anyone else to hear.

"I don't know." Yozerf bowed his head briefly, his blood-colored hair falling to hide his expression. "But what else can we do?"

* * * *

They had the grace of several days while the Argannese army drew nearer. Within a day, the yard outside the keep was packed with milling livestock, kept out of the gardens by fences and by children given herd duty. The smokehouse worked day and night to preserve the last wild meat brought in by the Wolfkin and by those few fishermen willing to risk the rocks to haul in a catch. Other daring souls scaled

the rocky cliffs to filch eggs from the sea birds that nested there.

Underneath all the activity was a vein of tension that Yozerf could feel like a wire under his hand. He could smell it in the air, see it in the faces of those he passed in the corridors, as all of his displaced followers asked themselves what would happen if their final refuge fell.

If I fail them.

Yozerf stood on the battlements and watched quietly as the army came into sight. It was a cold day for spring, and the shrieking wind tangled his hair. Scouts had already brought back word that the Argannese numbers were in the thousands, compared with the hundreds within Vorslava, most of whom were women and children.

We don't have to fight a head-to-head battle, though. We have only to wait them out.

Unless Jahcgroth simply takes down the walls with sorcery. Damn him.

The battlements were lined with archers, many of whom were women who had learned over the winter to shoot a bow in order to free up more men for any hand-to-hand fighting. There were fire arrows to take down any siege engines that might be brought to bear, as well as cauldrons of molten lead and boiling water that could be dumped down on the attackers' heads, if it came to that.

The sharp tap of boots on stone came to him over the wind, along with a familiar scent. He glanced to one side, to see Londah making her way along the battlements. She was dressed all in gray, and her waist-length hair hung behind her in a tight braid. Although her face was impassive as a marble statue, a feral gleam lurked in her dragon-gray eyes, as if she ached for the battle to come.

She stopped beside him, giving the approaching army only a cursory glance, as if she thought it no threat at all. "You have done well, my son," she said.

"Perhaps." He surveyed the defenses around him, the humans, Aclytes, and Wolfkin standing shoulder-to-shoulder because they had no other choice but to die. "We're as ready as we can be, at any rate. But we won't fight today."

"You think not?"

"Not unless Jahcgroth has changed greatly over the last year. He is far too canny to use force when words will do the work for him."

Londah frowned slightly and looked out towards the army, as if she could see their cousin over the distance. "And what do you think he will offer you, my son?"

Yozerf shook his head. "Nothing I can afford."

They stood together and watched the oncoming enemy in silence, and Yozerf wondered if Londah could ever have guessed that her only child would come to this end. As the Argannese forces grew closer, he could make out the cavalry in the front ranks, see the red-and-gold banners snapping in the breeze. Dark shapes circled high overhead, and he felt his blood run cold.

"Watch the skies, archers," he called, and the nearest commanders echoed his order down the line. "The Red Guard will attack from above. Bring them down if you can. If they come to earth inside the walls, let the Wolfkin see to them."

By midday, the forces of Argannon came to a halt, well outside of bow range. As Yozerf watched,

unable to do anything to prevent it, rank upon rank of soldiers spread out, closing the keep in a half circle that ended at the edge of the cliffs. With any luck, a few unwary men would fall over the crumbling edges and onto the rocks below. He had no doubt that Jahcgroth would send soldiers to find the paths down to the beach, in hope of discovering some way of attacking Vorslava from there. The beaches were too narrow, even at low tide, to march many men along them, however, and were completely submerged at high tide, so any expedition would be forced to march strung out. That would make them easy targets for the archers hidden in the caves that riddled the cliff face.

Once the encirclement was as complete as it could be, the soldiers set about making camp, sending a clear signal that they intended to remain for as long as needed. Even from a distance, Yozerf could see a single tent that dwarfed all others; this, no doubt, served as Jahcgroth's home and headquarters, both. Most of the creatures flying overhead came to earth, but a few stayed aloft, circling like great vultures anticipating a feast.

In the midst of all the activity, two Red Guard appeared, walking on foot towards Vorslava. Their gait was loping and ungainly. Their clawed talons dug up the dirt, and their great wings, folded against their scarlet bodies, looked overlarge. One of them clutched a staff with a white flag tied to it, and Yozerf almost wished that he had been wrong and that Jahcgroth had simply gone ahead and attacked without warning.

"Don't shoot," he ordered sharply, worried that some archer might forget the white flag out of fear of the creatures before them. "Jahcgroth wants only to frighten us by this display. He thinks we are children, afraid of monsters under the bed."

A few of the archers around him hastened to hide expressions of fear and disgust, straightening their backs and struggling to look stoic instead of terrified.

The two Red Guard stopped a few feet from the gate. "We would have words with the lord of this keep," one said through a mouth filled with fangs.

The wind brought their bitter, acid scent to Yozerf, and he felt the hair on his nape rise and a growl struggle to escape his throat. Swallowing his instincts, he asked, "Kktara?"

The two exchanged surprised looks, before their crimson eyes fixed on him. "No," said the same one that had spoken before. "Who are you, who knows the name of one of us?"

Yozerf threw his head back, drawing about him like a cloak all the hauteur and arrogance he could command. "I am Yozerf Jonaglir, son of Londah, descendant of Telmonra, and Lord of Vorslava. You will take my words back to your emperor and tell him to leave me in peace."

The Red Guard looked at each other again, and he felt a bitter rush of triumph. For once, he had managed to turn the tables and surprise Jahcgroth. He heard them exchange a few short sentences in their own language, full of clicks and hisses.

"We will do as you say, Lord Yozerf," one said then.

Both bowed low, their fanged muzzles almost touching the earth, before turning and hastening back to their own ranks.

That gesture unnerved him, and for a moment he considered ordering the archers to shoot them in the back, just to keep the message from reaching Jahcgroth. *But that would be foolish. I can't hide forever. I don't want to hide—it could be a bargaining point...*

Jahcgroth killed the dragons, his own kinsmen, and betrayed Telmonra to her death. Surely he won't hesitate to do the same to me if I stand between him and his goals.

But he said in Segg that he didn't kill the dragons, that it was always Ax, bringing down Caden in an attempt to get advantage for Jenel ... Gods, but that's credible. More than credible.

It doesn't matter. Maybe it once did, but not now.

Whatever the case, Jahcgroth didn't waste time pondering his response. Instead, the two Red Guard returned in haste, followed by a small cadre of Aclytes and humans—or Red Guard in human form—who carried what seemed to be a tent and camp furniture.

One Red Guard—Yozerf couldn't tell if it was the same one he had spoken to before or not—bowed obsequiously. “Lord Yozerf, the emperor invites you speak with him. If you allow it, we will provide a comfortable place where you, might parlay, here on neutral ground before your own gates and under the sight of your own archers.”

Ji'seth stiffened and took a step closer to Yozerf. “Don't, my lord. He seeks to deceive you,” she cautioned.

“No. No, I don't think so,” Yozerf murmured back. He raised his voice to be heard over the wind. “Tell your emperor that I will agree to this parlay. My Sworn of course will accompany me.”

The Red Guard spread its hands. “I am instructed to say you may bring any that you wish. An hour from now, if it please you.”

Yozerf swallowed hard and wondered if he was about to do something foolish to the point of madness. “One hour, then.”

* * * *

“Be careful,” Suchen said. She stood beside Windshade, one hand on a stirrup, looking up at Yozerf. Her blue eyes were hard, but she had said nothing when he announced that he was going to walk into Jahcgroth's clutches. “He'll lie to you to get your cooperation. Remember that he meant to use us as bait in Segg, and then kill us once he had you in reach.”

Yozerf nodded. “I remember.”

The Sworn, Londah, and a few other soldiers were gathered around him, all mounted and waiting. The hour Jahcgroth had requested had passed in a blur, and he tried to think of something else to say to Suchen. But everything had already been said, and she knew what he wanted from her if he were killed today. So he turned his attention away and flicked the reins, guiding Windshade towards the ponderous gates that swung slowly open before him.

As he rode slowly away from Vorslava, he saw that this was to be no shouted parlay, with each party beyond easy striking distance. Knowing what he did of Jahcgroth, the emperor would probably have considered such a thing barbaric. Instead, a spacious tent waited them, the wind rippling its gold-and-crimson sides. A small pennant snapped cheerily from the tent pole, and his heart clenched when he saw that it showed a golden dragon on a field of blood. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the young guard who was his own standard-bearer clutch his burden more tightly, as if he would use it to strike down the enemy banner.

Red Guard waited for them, along with soldiers both human and Aclytese. The acid stink of the shape-shifters filled Yozerf's nose and made him feel vaguely ill; beside him, Wulfgar growled low in his

throat. Ji'seth looked as if she might lash out if anyone got too close, and Londah was all coiled violence waiting to be unleashed. Only Gless seemed calm, but his pale blue eyes betrayed nervousness as they rode into what he no doubt thought a trap.

They reined in at the tent, and Argannese soldiers moved forward to act as grooms. Yozerf gave the one who took Windshade's reins a forbidding glare, his cold eyes promising death if the horse so much as shied. To his immense satisfaction, the soldier paled sharply.

A Red Guard held the tent flap open for them. "Mother, Gless, Ji'seth, you're with me," Yozerf said to his retinue. "The rest of you stay here." Then, taking a deep breath for courage, he walked inside.

The furnishings were simple, although elaborate if one considered the temporary nature of the tent. Piles of carpets and furs made a floor, and it seemed almost a shame to walk on them with his heavy boots. A fine wooden table stood in the precise center of the tent, with two chairs on one side and a single chair on the other. From the support poles overhead hung a small lantern, and Yozerf wondered how they had managed to bring the delicate glass sphere all the way from Argannon without breaking it. Sorcery, he supposed.

Incense burned in the shadowy corners, masking the scent of Red Guard and human alike, and making him want to sneeze. Trying to suppress the reaction, Yozerf lifted his chin proudly and stared directly at the man seated in the lone chair on the opposite side of the table.

Jahcgroth's appearance came almost as a shock. Much was still the same: the pale skin, the gray eyes, the butter-gold hair. But now lines carved deep furrows in the flesh around Jahcgroth's mouth, and dark circles ringed his eyes. He looked haggard, bruised, as if he had been fighting the war personally, without any help from his army.

One of the memories that Telmonra had left within Yozerf floated to the surface: Jahcgroth, standing by the window in his mountain fastness, the sunlight bright on his youthful skin. She had thought him so beautiful...

If she could have seen him now, she would no doubt have laughed aloud in bitter triumph.

As if a veil had been lifted from his eyes, Yozerf suddenly realized how tired the Argannese soldiers looked, how stained and torn and patched their clothing was. The smell of persistent hunger clung to their flesh beneath the obscuring incense, and he knew exactly why they had come to Vorslava in the first place.

Jahcgroth rose slowly from his seat, a faint smile on his face. "Yozerf. It is good to see you well," he said in Aclytese. "All this time, I have worried that you failed to escape Nava Nar alive, and when I find you at last, it is sitting behind the walls of a keep of your own command. I am impressed."

A torrent of memories pressed against the back of his eyes, but Yozerf forced them away. "I'm hard to kill," he said neutrally, and then inclined his head to Jahcgroth. "But then, so are you."

Jahcgroth smiled. "Indeed. And is this, then, my other cousin? Londah, is it not?"

Londah nodded, but said nothing. What thoughts passed on the other side of her gray eyes were impossible for anyone to guess.

"I am sorry that this reunion had to take place under such circumstances," Jahcgroth said, and took his seat once again, even as he motioned for them to do the same. After a moment's hesitation, Yozerf took one of the remaining chairs. Londah dropped into the last one like a deadly shadow. "But perhaps it is

just as well. I came here fearing that I would find only outlaws behind Vorslava's walls, men immune to reason. Instead, I discover my own kin."

A servant brought three goblets of wine and set them on the table. Jahcgroth drank from his immediately. Yozerf lifted his carefully, feeling the moisture gather on the goblet from the cool wine inside. It smelled of oak and berries, but he could detect no poison and so chanced a small sip. Londah made no move to touch hers at all.

"I am the Lord of Vorslava, and my duty is to the keep and the people within," Yozerf said. He risked meeting Jahcgroth's eyes and saw a flash of understanding there. "That comes before all else."

"Of course." Jahcgroth took another swallow of wine, then set the goblet down carefully. "I had no doubt you would feel thus. We will discuss this more fully. But first, I am not the only one who has been separated from his kin. Would you answer the questions of an old friend hoping for news?"

The tent flap opened again, and this time two figures stepped through. Both of them were terribly familiar, and he heard Gless's soft curse. The first appeared to be a beautiful young human woman, clad in a simple dress, her honey-colored hair bound neatly back from her doll-like face. But the scent that came from her betrayed that lie for what it was.

The second was the man that he had half feared seeing all along, that he had prayed would stay far away from this place, if only for Suchen's sake. But as always, the gods had laughed at his prayers and done as they would.

Peddock Keblav looked far the worse for wear, as if his year spent in Jahcgroth's service was a year spent serving Hel herself. His brown hair, once kept meticulously short, straggled raggedly about his collar. Lines bracketed his mouth, and his brown eyes remained fixed on the carpets, as if he could not bring himself to look directly at the visitors. His expression was that of a man who has lost everything and knows that he is beyond redemption.

Yozerf felt his lip curl into a snarl. *All the months he raged at me. All the times when Peddock accused me of being a traitor. Of being a monster. He broke Suchen's heart, trying to force her to choose between us.*

Gless stood behind Yozerf's chair, and Yozerf could all but feel his Sworn's body trembling in rage. *Not now*, he thought desperately. *Stay still, Gless. This isn't the time for temper.*

"Peddock," Yozerf said coldly. He deliberately pinned the human with his gaze, refusing to look away.

The woman, who was in truth a Red Guard, put her hand to Peddock's shoulder in a gesture of support. "Yozerf," she said with a nod of her head. "You look well."

"As do you, Cybelen. Or is it Kktara you prefer?"

"You think to shame me by mentioning my nature. But it shames me no more than it does you, were I to call you 'wolf'."

Yozerf snarled softly at her. "I always thought you were a foolish sheep when you were Cybelen. Truthfully, I think your other face is more flattering."

Some of the old spark must have lingered within Peddock, because he looked up suddenly, his expression ugly. "Shut up, you damned hypocrite."

Gless's temper finally snapped. "*You're* the hypocrite, you treacherous bastard!" he shouted, taking a

step forward. "By the gods, how can you live with yourself? You turned your back on your friends, on Auglar, just when they needed you most!"

Peddock's face flushed a deep red. "You don't know anything about it! You don't give a damn about anyone but yourself! You never felt anything for a woman except the thrill of conquest, and when that paled, it was on to the next! You don't know anything about love. Or about loyalty—I don't see *you* wearing Auglar's colors now!"

"And I'll tell you what I told Auglar—"

"Be silent!" Yozerf barked, but it was too late. The words were out, and if there had ever been any doubt at all that Auglar was inside Vorslava, it was gone now.

Damn it.

"Peddock," Jahcgroth said quietly, having perhaps gotten what he had wished all along, "you will not speak this way to my guests. I allowed you to come here to ask after your sister, and instead you disappoint me by trading foolish insults with one of Yozerf's Sworn warriors."

Even from across the room, Yozerf could see Peddock grinding his teeth. *Does it gall you to serve him?* he wondered, darkly amused by the prospect. *In service to an Aclyte. In love with a monster. Perhaps the gods do have a sense of humor after all.*

"Suchen," Peddock said finally. "Is she well?"

Yozerf nodded once, seeing no sense in giving away anything more. "She is."

"You might have brought her with you."

It sounded like the foolish pouting of a young boy. *A young boy whose father locked him in the basement for days at a time, whose only ally was his sister,* Yozerf reminded himself. His glee at Peddock's discomfiture faded a bit at that. Still, he made no reply.

"Come," said Cybelen, taking Peddock's hand.

For a moment, Yozerf thought Peddock would say nothing further. But the human stopped, just inside the tent, and looked back. "Tell Suchen that I miss her. Tell her ... I never meant to hurt her." Then he turned and was gone.

"A very touching show," Londah said dryly. Her gray eyes had never left Jahcgroth's face, and Yozerf knew that she was probably planning all the ways she might kill the emperor if things went disastrously wrong. "But a distraction, I think, from the business at hand."

Jahcgroth smiled faintly and took another sip of wine. "Blunt. You uphold the traditions of our clan well, indeed."

"You are the one who wanted a parlay," Yozerf said. His own patience was beginning to fray, but he made himself appear calm. All the years of his youth, when he had been forced to bite back his anger against the callow humans who treated him as something lower than a dog, came back to him in a vivid flash. *Ice. Don't let them see. Anger doesn't mean my death only, this time; it means the death of everyone in Vorslava.*

Jahcgroth sat forward, his eyes intent, and Yozerf knew that the preliminaries were finally over. Time for the battle. "Very well. You know why I came to Jenel, Yozerf. I came here for the same reason that you

took Vorslava—to keep my people safe. My motivations are the same as yours. The people of Argannon are under my protection, and I cannot allow them to starve as the Great Ice draws closer and winter takes land that used to be fields. So I brought them to Jenel, to a place where they might live."

Jahcgroth's tone was smooth and reasonable. Yozerf found himself wondering what would have happened if the emperor had somehow learned of his existence earlier, just a month, even, before Ax had sent him on the fool's errand that first brought him to Suchen, Auglar, and the Sworn.

We wouldn't be having this conversation, that's for damned certain. I'd be riding with Jahcgroth at the forefront of his armies.

"Perhaps we are alike," Yozerf said. "But there is one difference. When I took Vorslava, only Fellrant's soldiers lived within the walls. If the keep had been full of women and children, peasants, those who could not defend themselves and who badly needed the keep's stores, I would have left them in peace. Jenel was far from empty of innocents when you decided to invade."

Jahcgroth propped his chin on his fist, studying Yozerf curiously. "I understand your thinking. But surely you knew that Fellrant intended to use the food stored in Vorslava to supply his army. Surely you realized that, when you took that food, they would have to find it somewhere else. Where do you imagine they found it? You merely displaced the misery; you did not eliminate it."

It *had* been a doubt in the back of his mind, but Yozerf refused to let Jahcgroth see it. "That is the difference between us. You and Ax seek to order all the world, to bend everything to your will to fulfill your needs. But I am not responsible for all things. I did not make the decisions that brought you here or forced Fellrant to choose his army over his people. I can do only what is here, now, in front of me."

"Practical." A faint smile touched Jahcgroth's lips, and for a moment it was terribly familiar, Telmonra's memories blurring into his own. "You know what I'm going to ask."

Dangerous ground, this. "Assumptions can be fatal. Tell me what you want and be done with it."

"Very well." Jahcgroth straightened, suddenly businesslike. "The winter was hard on everyone in this kingdom, including my forces. You can see that easily enough for yourself. Open Vorslava's granaries to me. Provision my army, and in exchange I will provide you with a few of my Red Guard and some of my soldiers to help garrison Vorslava."

As you helped garrison the council, when they held Rozah prisoner? The Red Guard Jahcgroth had provided then had no doubt been meant to turn on the human council when the emperor gave the order for invasion. This offer was even less subtle. I would have to do as you say, or else be killed on the spot by your minions.

"What else?" he asked, knowing that there had to be more.

"Naturally, you will swear loyalty to me," Jahcgroth said, as if it were nothing but a trifle, "and turn over Lord Auglar and his Sworn."

"Or their heads?"

"If you prefer." Jahcgroth smiled sadly. "You know as well as I that Auglar is doomed. He was once in line for the throne—neither Fellrant nor I can leave him alive. The risk of his rallying support and challenging us is too great. At least I will promise a quick, clean death, which is more than he is likely to get from Fellrant."

"But dead is still dead."

Jahcgroth spread his hands. "What other choice do you have? There is only Fellrant or me. But Fellrant will kill *you* along with Auglar. At least I am offering to leave you alive." He folded his hands again. "So I suppose that, really, you have no choice at all."

Silence fell. The sounds of the world outside the tent seemed to come from a great distance, as if they echoed from another lifetime. Yozerf stared at his fingertips, wondering what he could possibly say that would save them.

"I wish to think on this," he said at last. *Just let me get us out of here, gods. Let us get back behind Vorslava's walls, if nothing else.* "You can't expect me to make such a decision lightly, no matter how obvious the choice may seem."

"Of course." Jahcgroth smiled, and Yozerf knew the emperor believed that he had won already. "But you in turn will understand that time is urgent. You have until dawn tomorrow to give your answer."

"And if I don't?"

"Must I resort to threats? I had hoped that you and I were beyond such things, cousin."

"Tomorrow at dawn, then," Yozerf agreed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Night had fallen over Vorslava. Beyond the walls, the fires of Argannon's army flickered like a host of stars come to earth. Within, guards kept careful watch on all approaches, in the event that Jahcgroth did not intend to keep his word after all.

Yozerf sat in the study, his chair pulled up before the hearth and his boots nearly in the small fire. All of his Sworn were there, scattered about the room, as well as Suchen, Londah, Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf. Their scents betrayed fear and uncertainty, but he had never been one to offer words of false comfort.

"Jahcgroth made me an offer," he said, without preamble. The goblet of mulled wine in his hand let off the scents of clove and cinnamon, but its heat did nothing to dispel the ball of ice around his heart. "Open the stores of this keep to him, let him garrison it with his own creatures, give Auglar to him, and he won't kill us all."

"You wouldn't," snarled Brenwulf. "By the gods, you would betray us all!"

"I did not say I had made a decision," Yozerf responded with what he thought was admirable restraint.

Auglar sighed and wandered over to the fire. Even with spring well underway, the nights held a chill. He stretched out his hands to the flames, as if he could draw the warmth from them and tuck it away deep within himself. There was sorrow in his blue eyes, but a quiet dignity as well.

"I will go," he said simply. "Of my own free will."

"You can't!" Brenwulf shouted. Buudi made a noise of protest, as did Gless and Suchen.

Auglar glanced up, but he looked at Yozerf rather than at any of those who had flinched at his declaration. "I am going to die no matter which side wins," Auglar said steadily. "If I can at least save a few lives with that death ... then I will."

"You aren't going to die," Brenwulf protested. Yozerf thought he was a fool.

"Denying the truth does nothing to change it," Auglar replied, although he kept his gaze focused on Yozerf. "I will walk out of here tomorrow at dawn. I won't force you to make the decision to have me hauled out in chains."

Yozerf smiled faintly. "That at least is appreciated."

"You would do the same. You *have* done the same. Can I do any less?"

Respect for the fallen lord suddenly touched Yozerf. Auglar stood before the fire, thin and pale, but straight and certain. He had made his decision with clear eyes and would not bend from it.

Perhaps I am not the only one who has learned from his mistakes.

"I have not said what I intend to do," Yozerf pointed out. "Don't prepare to throw away your life just yet. If flinging you from the gate tower would cause Jahcgroth to gather up his camp and leave us in peace, then perhaps I would consider your offer. But you are only a small part of what he wants. His army is on its last reserves, from what I could see, and he did not look well himself. If I had to guess, I would say that he and Ax have been engaged in their own wizard-war for some time, and it's taking its toll.

"Jahcgroth *needs* provisions. He can't simply magic them out of the air, so he hopes to convince me to give him Vorslava's. But where does that leave the people of this keep? *If* his army were to go on to a quick victory afterwards, in time for planting and harvesting, then perhaps we could afford to hand over a good portion of our stores to him. Somehow, I don't think that likely. If *Fellrant's* army is the victor instead, slow or quick ... well, there are some in this keep who can testify as to what happens to anyone who gives aid to Jahcgroth, willing or not: entire villages razed, their inhabitants put to the sword as a warning for others. I doubt that we would get any more mercy."

Londah had been lurking in one corner, but now she ghosted out into the room. The firelight caught on the hilts of her knives and glittered in her feral eyes. "I noticed that our cousin somehow failed to mention exactly what *our* fates would be, should we do as he asked."

"As did I. No doubt he hoped that I would assume he meant for me to stay in command of Vorslava. But I have defied him twice already—leaving me here would suggest that he is willing to tolerate disobedience."

Suchen stirred and cast him a worried look. "What do you think he'll do, then?"

"Probably lock me away someplace where I can't do any harm. The same for Mother, as well—I don't think he wants to kill us."

"Do you think he was telling the truth about Caden, then? That he didn't slay the dragons?"

Yozerf hesitated. The memories he had inherited from Telmonra were filled with fury and hate for the cousin she thought had betrayed her, making the next words difficult to say. "I do think so. But I could be wrong, the gods know. Telmonra certainly believed he did it, and she knew him better than I."

But even if I am right, and Londah and I would be safe ... what about Owl? What about Suchen?

"So what are you going to do, my lord?" Ji'seth asked.

Yozerf sighed and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. His head ached faintly, and he wanted nothing more than to lie down in his bed. *And then to wake up and find that none of the last year happened at all. I'll open my eyes and be in bed with Suchen in Kellsjard.*

And while I'm wishing for that, why not wish that gold fall from the sky and that being late for dinner be the worst thing that has ever happened to me?

"I can hand over Auglar to be executed, risk possible starvation for this keep, and go into captivity myself, with no certainties about what will happen to anyone I love," he said finally. "Or I can refuse to give him Auglar, take the chance on fighting, and probably seal my own fate, still without any certainties as to what will happen."

"So we fight, then," Suchen said.

Her words brought a faint smile to his face. *She knows me well.* "At least that way gives us a chance. The gods know it might not be a good one, but it's better than collaborating with Jahcgroth at our expense. He might destroy the walls and kill us all if we fight. But if we don't fight, and Fellrant wins this little war, then I know for certain we will all be slaughtered as traitors." He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I wish to the gods that there were an easy answer to this. But there isn't, so I have to make the best choice I can. I may be a total fool for choosing as I do, and if anyone has a compelling argument to make for the other path, then tell me now."

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Wulfgar took a step forward, his only hand gripping the hilt of

his sword. "We stand and fight, my lord," he said in his gruff voice. "We'll make those Argannese dogs rue the day they set eyes on these walls!"

"May the gods listen to your words," Auglar said.

Yozerf rose to his feet and stretched. His back hurt, and it came to him sharply that he was not as young as he had been, his Wolfkin blood stealing all the years that a pureblooded Aclyte would have had. But there was no time to rest. "We must be prepared," Yozerf said. "The moment I give Jahcgroth my answer, he will strike with everything he has, hoping to catch us off guard. Auglar, anything you can think of that we haven't done—do it."

He issued a few more orders, and within moments the room was empty except for him, Suchen, Gless, and Tan. "Will you give us a moment alone?" he asked, and waited in silence until the two Sworn had taken up their station in the hall outside.

Suchen still sat in her chair, looking at him steadily, and he wondered if she guessed what he was about to say. Questions must have been burning in her since the moment he came back, but she had held her tongue in the face of more important matters. Or perhaps she didn't really want to ask at all, because she feared the answer.

"I saw Peddock," he said.

She shut her eyes, as if at a sudden pain. Crossing the room, he went to kneel beside her chair, taking her hands in his own. Her strong fingers, nicked with old sword scars, lay limp as something dead within his grasp.

"Is he well?" she asked at last, but her eyes remained shut.

"He seemed in good health to me."

"And otherwise?"

Yozerf shook his head regretfully. "It is hard for me to say, my love. Peddock and I ... were never close..." *understatement of my lifetime*, "and I don't know him well enough to read all the nuances. He did seem troubled, but more than that, I can't tell. He did ask me to tell you that he misses you and that he didn't mean to hurt you."

She made no response for a long moment. Then, very slowly, she leaned forward, and her hunched shoulders began to shake with quiet sobs. Silently cursing Peddock to the depths of Hel's domain, Yozerf slipped his arms around her and cradled her against him.

Yozerf had no siblings of his own, and he realized now that he had never guessed the depth of the bond between brother and sister. Up until the moment that Peddock left with Cybelen, Suchen and her brother had never truly been separated in their lives. From what little he knew of their childhood, they had been one another's only allies in their father's house. They had fled their home together as youths, with nothing but one another and a few rudimentary sword skills. Together they had found refuge at Kellsjard, and both had risen high in the favor of their lord. Most likely they had seldom gone an entire day without at least setting eyes on one another, save for those times when Peddock accompanied Auglar elsewhere in the demesne. Perhaps they had drifted apart over the years, finding other friends and divergent interests, but, even so, he suspected that they had never truly looked to be parted.

Not that the two had never fought—they had, sometimes bitterly. He had seen only that part of it, had not quite realized that no matter how they quarreled, they still cared about each other. That they still had

been one another's allies, even as they had been in childhood—still the one person that the other could always count on to be there.

Did I begin the unraveling of that skein? he wondered with sudden sorrow. Gods, he hadn't realized, hadn't even thought about it until this moment. He had viewed his fights with Peddock as inconsequential in some ways, because he had simply not considered that not everyone was as lone as himself.

Stupid, that. But he hadn't *felt*, in his gut, the connection between siblings, couldn't even imagine what it would be like to have a lifelong friend, as Suchen and Peddock had been to each other. So he hadn't tried.

"I'm sorry," he said. It was poor comfort, but he didn't know what else to do.

"It isn't your fault," she whispered against his hair. Her sobs had eased, but he could feel her grief as if it were his own.

"I did nothing to help. Some things I could not have changed—my Aclytese and Wolfkin blood, to start. But perhaps I could have been more polite, provoked his anger less."

"Or Peddock could have tried not to be such a damned bigot."

"My trying to kill him in Segg probably didn't help, either."

"Or Auglar's secret-keeping." Suchen raised her head, wiping away tears. Her beautiful eyes were shot through by red veins from her weeping. "No one forced Peddock to go with Cybelen, though, Yozerf."

"I would have gone with you."

She smiled a little. "Would you? Or would you have tried to dissuade me, if you truly believed that I was on the wrong side?"

"But if I could not dissuade you—"

"Hush." She stroked his hair gently. "There's no point to speculating. No one can truly know what they'll do until they face the moment of decision. Peddock would never have said that he would leave us because he was in love with a Red Guard. He would have been repulsed by the very suggestion. Yet here we all are, each in our individual predicaments, where none of us ever thought to be."

"Agreed," he said wryly.

Suchen rose to her feet, tugging him with her. "But there's no time for any of this. We all have a lot to do before dawn."

Yozerf nodded and gave her hands a final squeeze ... and hoped that they would both live to see another night.

* * * *

As dawn broke, Yozerf shifted within armor grown heavy from long hours of wearing. *And it will be much longer still*, he thought. He stood on the battlements above the gate, letting the predawn wind ruffle his long hair. All through the sleepless night, tension had slowly coiled within him, until at last he began to long for sunrise and the battle that was sure to come.

When last he had seen Owl, she was sleeping, and he had no desire to wake her and shatter whatever peace she could find. Suchen had helped him with his armor instead, her eyes grim and purposeful. She

remained behind with the reserve warriors, held back from the walls where they would simply be targets for enemy archers. Wolfkin paced in the courtyard behind him, while his own archers lined the walls under such cover as the battlements could provide.

The first sliver of the sun peeked above the plains of the Kellsmarch, casting a warm glow across the waving grasses and gilding Vorslava's basalt walls. It revealed the stirring mass of the Argannese army, like an anthill poked with a stick. Before that dark crowd, the two Red Guard from the day before advanced, white flag held high.

Yozerf's throat went dry as they approached. *This is it. There's still time to change my mind.*

The messengers stopped and bowed before the gates. Hairless, fang-filled heads turned to regard with him alien, scarlet eyes. "Lord Yozerf," one said, its hissing voice respectful. "The emperor demands your answer. Open the gates to us, and ally yourself with his might."

"No."

The Red Guard glanced at one another, as if the single, unadorned word confused them. "Think carefully," one said at last. "The emperor's patience with you stretches only so far."

Yozerf glanced past them, refusing to allow their talk to distract him. High above, things circled, and he felt his stomach tighten. "Archers! 'Ware the skies!"

The black shapes folded their wings and plummeted, resolving into streaks of crimson against the dawn sky. They came out of the sun, and Yozerf swore furiously as the archers blindly loosed a volley of arrows into the glare.

The two Red Guard before the gate flung down their white flag and launched into the air, great wings thrashing as they sought altitude. A bowstring beside Yozerf sang loudly, and he saw one of them falter, an arrow protruding from its shoulder. Moments later, a second dart slammed into its throat, and it fell to the ground, writhing wildly until its body dissolved into mist and dissipated entirely.

A few other Red Guard were brought down as well, but the majority continued to drop out of the sky towards Vorslava. The first creature smashed into the defenders lining the inside of the battlements, the impact hurling bodies into the courtyard below. Its claw-tipped hands and feet savaged everyone in reach, and it let out a terrifying roar before sinking its fanged jaws into the exposed throat of one of the bowmen. Screams erupted from all sides, as swords flashed wildly, struggling to bring it down. The howls of Wolfkin broke out in a storm, and gray forms streaked up the steps to the walls, determined to destroy their instinctive enemies.

The second of the two Red Guard messengers came down on the wall only feet from Yozerf, its hind claws gripping a crenellation like some monstrous bird on a limb. Tan lunged at it, burying a pruning hook in the soft folds of its right wing. The Red Guard shrieked in pain and struck out, ripping the wooden pole from Tan's hands with enough force to break fingers.

Yozerf let out a wolfish howl, his sword held high, and rushed into the fray. The Red Guard's thick tail struck him from the side, a blow hard enough to send numbness through his leg, and he fell heavily. Ji'seth leapt past him, followed by a grizzled, three-legged wolf. A shower of acidic blood sprayed them all as someone landed a blow, although in the confusion Yozerf could no longer follow what had happened. He gathered his legs beneath him and, as the Red Guard swung its head around to snap at Ji'seth, propelled himself up off the stone as hard as he could. His sword slammed through the Red Guard's lower jaw, smashing through the upper palate into the brain. With a last snarl, the creature toppled sideways, almost wrenching the sword from Yozerf's hands.

"My lord, are you hurt?" Ji'seth asked.

He started to answer, but a flash of crimson distracted him. In a moment, another Red Guard was on them.

The world was reduced to a flurry of swords and blood. Yozerf was aware of fights erupting on all sides as the Red Guard took advantage of their wings to land within the walls, as well as on them. The smell of blood clogged his nostrils, and the screams of the dying filled his ears. His arm ached with weariness as he lifted his sword again and again. Once or twice, he used the wind to buffet the Red Guard unexpectedly, but the effort drained him further, and he knew that every expenditure of magic that weakened him now left them all the more vulnerable to Jahcgroth's power later.

Why isn't he attacking with magic yet? Was I right yesterday? Has he—gods, is he—fighting some sort of wizard's war with Ax?

There was no time to ponder the possibilities. The fighting was too fierce to concentrate on anything but what was directly in front of him, and he could only pray that none of his commanders forgot his instructions to them. Ji'seth's voice had gone hoarse from her battle cries, and now she fought silently beside him. Blood showed on Gless's hauberk, although whether his own or someone else's, Yozerf didn't know. Wulfgar stayed in wolf form, but even his frenzied snarls began to subside as the battle with the Red Guard dragged on.

Then, suddenly, there were no more opponents in front of him. All around, the battle continued to rage, but a small island of quiet had somehow formed around him. Almost stumbling with weariness, he looked out towards the Argannese army for a moment ... and saw that things had taken a turn for the worse.

Tall siege towers were being erected just beyond bow range, and he realized that the parts must have already been prepared. Perhaps these very engines had been used against Kellsjard, then dismantled and taken with the army as it cut its way across Jenel. The first of them had begun rolling towards the walls, pushed by men protected by shields held over their heads. Shielded men also carried long ladders forward, and he thought that he caught a glimpse of a battering ram.

Londah appeared at his side like a wraith, her black hair wet with the blood of her enemies. No emotion showed on her white face as she stared out at the approaching army. "Well," she said mildly, "it seems that our cousin doesn't intend to make this easy for us, does he?"

"No." Yozerf's blood ran cold. A simple frontal assault would have been one thing, but Vorslava's defenders had to split their concentration between the soldiers outside the walls and the Red Guard coming from above. But there was nothing for it.

"Ware the walls!" he shouted. "To me!"

Archers turned their attention to the approaching towers and engines. A flurry of arrows sang through the air, but most bounced harmlessly from armor or shields. Loosing a wild cry, the attackers surged forward, as if the attempt at defense had rallied them instead of discouraging them.

The first ladder hit the wall nearby. Tan and several other men shoved it back down before anyone could climb far, but even as they did so, three others struck the battlements around them. As the first man swarmed up the nearest, Londah struck him across the face with her sword, denting the edge of his helm and cleaving his nose. He screamed and fell back, carrying those beneath him down into a broken heap at the base of the walls.

"Water brigade!" Yozerf shouted, hoping that the fires burning in the guard towers had not been allowed

to go out. Within moments, women and boys too young to fight had darted out and begun to tip cauldrons of boiling water onto the soldiers attempting to scale the walls. The shrieks of those scalded within their armor were horrifying, but Yozerf ignored the sound, knowing that today any pity for others equaled death for his own people.

An odd rushing noise filled the air, and a shadow flicked over him as something passed across the now-high sun. A huge stone block, no doubt wrested from the nearby cliffs and dragged to the siege engines, crashed into the courtyard below, crushing anyone caught beneath it. Moments later, a second block smashed into the outer wall, sending men and stone alike flying through the air.

Londah cursed. As a third massive stone hurtled towards Vorslava, Yozerf turned towards the three huge trebuchets that Jahcgroth had brought. The men laboring to reload them were unprotected, but also far out of bow range. Even as he watched, the first catapult was winched back into place, and the command given to fire.

The stone ripped past, striking the wall of the keep and tumbling into the courtyard, wreaking havoc on anyone below. Concentrating on the trebuchet itself, Yozerf narrowed his eyes and tried to block out the screams of people—his people—as they died. The weapons were out of range of any bow and had no need to be shielded from arrows ... not even fire arrows.

Yozerf smiled.

It was like straining to grasp something just out of arm's reach. Forcing himself to concentrate, he let the rest of the world disappear from his consciousness. Either the Sworn would protect him from any other threats, or they would not, and he let that concern go, as well. All that existed, all that he had to worry about, was the vulnerable wood and rope of the trebuchet ... and the fire.

For a moment he thought nothing would happen, or that Jahcgroth had taken countermeasures. Then a gout of flame erupted in the center of the trebuchet, igniting rope, wood, and men alike. Blazing figures ran from the burning machine, then staggered and fell to the ground, where they twitched for a while before growing still.

"Yes!" Gless shouted in triumph from someplace very far away. Yozerf took a deep breath and blocked out the sounds of congratulations, knowing that he had to act now, quickly, before Jahcgroth had time to rectify his mistake.

The second trebuchet went up just as it started to fire, the axle collapsing and bringing the throwing arm down with it. Sweat poured down Yozerf's brow and into his eyes, blurring his sight. The fire consumed him from within, as if his blood boiled, and he felt his control slipping. Easy, so easy, to forget accuracy and simply sweep all before him with an ever-expanding wave of fire. Wind roared about his helm, turning into a keening shriek around the dragon crest, and he heard himself scream as he forced the fire to funnel away from him in a single, searing strike.

The third trebuchet vanished instantly in a firestorm that incinerated everything around it.

All of the strength went out of his legs, and he found himself lying on the battlements, with no clear memory of falling. Frightened faces surrounded him, and he thought he heard far-off voices calling his name. The sky directly above was striped with gold and red, and for a moment he thought that it was still dawn, that all the aching, weary hours of battle had in fact been nothing more than a few minutes. Then he realized that it was sunset.

"Gods." He thrust an arm out blindly; Gless grabbed his wrist and hauled him to his feet.

"They're falling back, Yozerf," Gless said, trying to steady him. "Giving up for the day. You did it! That was a blow they won't recover from easily, I'll guess."

Blinking sweat and blood from his eyes, Yozerf leaned heavily on the nearest crenellation and stared out over the field. The attackers were indeed drawing back, taking their ladders, towers, and battering ram with them. Red Guard—far fewer in number than they had been that morning—glided back towards their own lines. Any who could not fly were trapped within the courtyard, fighting a doomed battle with Vorslava's defenders.

As the clash of weapons and screams of the injured faded, Yozerf turned his back to Jahcgroth's army. Vorslava's walls and towers showed cracks where the hurled stones had left their mark, but they stood. The air stank of blood and other fluids, and the sobs of the injured and the grieving came to him on the breeze.

But battered, bruised, and bleeding as it was, Vorslava had lived to see another nightfall.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Suchen gripped the poles of a makeshift stretcher in hands that had long ago gone numb. Exhaustion blinded her, and her skin tingled where Red Guard blood had splashed it. The endless day had passed in a blur as she stood with those defending the main doors of the keep, struggling to throw back swarms of Red Guard that sought to breach the inner defenses. Jahcgroth's minions had failed, but they had nonetheless exacted a high price.

Blood slicked the ground beneath her feet, and the moans of the injured rang in her ears. The youth lying on the stretcher she helped carry whimpered every time he was jostled. The smell that came from the wound to his gut made her feel ill; his bowels had been punctured, and she knew that he was condemned to a slow, painful death. Trying not to look into his white face, she helped carry him from the courtyard, inside to the great hall.

Guttering torches in the hall revealed rows of wounded warriors lying on pallets. Merdwyn, along with anyone else who knew even the rudiments of healing, moved among them, helping those who could yet be saved. A little to her surprise, Suchen saw that Yozerf was there, kneeling beside one of the pallets. Even as she watched, he reached out and flipped the blanket up, covering the face of the young woman lying there.

"Over here," directed a hurried Merdwyn. Suchen nodded and carefully helped settle the stretcher on the floor. Rubbing her hands together, she went to stand beside Yozerf. He looked up at her, his face drawn, and she saw the agony in his eyes.

"Who was she?" she asked quietly.

"One of the Sharneth clan." With a sigh, he climbed slowly to his feet, weariness evident in every motion. "I hate this. I feel as if I sent them all to their deaths."

"I know. But it isn't your fault."

"Perhaps."

She put a hand to his arm. "You need to rest. We all do. Tomorrow will be here too soon—there's no sense in exhausting yourself tonight, when there's nothing more to be done."

He was silent for a moment, and she saw his sleet-colored eyes move over the rows of wounded and dying. His red hair straggled about his face, tangled from sweating beneath a helm all day. The wild, glacial beauty she'd always loved in him had been honed by weariness and grief into something even more poignant, and on impulse she put her arms about him. They both stank of blood and sweat, and their armor and weapons made the embrace uncomfortable, but for the moment neither one of them cared.

The rapid patter of feet on the stone floor caught Suchen's attention, and she looked up to see Owl running towards them. The girl's eyes were large and solemn with what they had seen. "Papa?" she asked tentatively.

Yozerf smiled tiredly and picked her up. "Have you been helping the healers, as I asked?"

"Yes."

"Good girl."

Suchen could see Owl's shivers. Her heart aching, she reached out and gently stroked the hair back from the child's face. "It's all right, little one," she said, even though it was of course no such thing.

Owl's lower lip trembled. "Why won't they leave us alone!" she burst out finally. "Why do they keep following us?"

Apparently there was no difference in Owl's mind between the men who had attacked her village and those surrounding Vorslava. Yozerf winced and patted the crying girl on the back. "Don't be afraid. We won't let them inside, I promise. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"Neither will I," Suchen added fiercely, "nor your grandmother."

That seemed to calm Owl a bit. Yozerf shifted her in his arms and kissed her brow lightly. "I'm going to take one more walk around the walls before I try to sleep. Go to bed, and I'll come by, once I'm done."

She shook her head, clinging, and Yozerf's mouth quirked ruefully. "Very well. You may come, then."

They went outside, the Sworn drifting up as they left the great hall. Tan had a splint on one hand, and Gless sported a bandage where a deep cut on his temple had been sewed up. Clouds covered the moon and stars, casting inky blackness over the world. Even the light of the torches on the walls seemed dim.

Guards still stood the walls, although it seemed impossible that they could see much in the darkness. Yozerf led the way to the battlements, pausing now and again to speak to them. Although the bodies had been taken away, blood stained the dark stone wherever there was enough light to see it. Pans and cook pots filled with water stood here and there, at Auglar's suggestion, to give warning of any sappers seeking to undermine the walls. Flames reflected in them, making them look as if they were filled with fire.

They neared the section of wall closest to the cliff edge. As Yozerf bent over to inspect some damage caused by the trebuchets, Suchen stared idly at the closest pan. It showed her reflection—a thin face with hollows under its eyes, like some awful parody of the woman she had been. Then ripples chased one another across the surface, distorting the reflection until it no longer resembled her at all.

So tired was she, it took a moment to realize what she was looking at. The water rippled again, and she straightened with a gasp. "Yozerf!"

He was at her side in a moment. Wordlessly, she pointed at the pan of vibrating water, and he swore furiously. Spinning on his heel, he thrust Owl at Gless. "Take her to safety! Everyone else, to me! There are sappers beneath the walls!"

Suchen's heart pounded as she ran after him. "They must have moved in under the cover of night!" she called, damning the clouds that had conspired against them.

"Then we will use the darkness to our advantage, as well," he replied grimly, as they clattered down the stair. A handful of warriors had accreted to their group, and Yozerf snagged more as they crossed the courtyard, headed for the postern gate.

"My lord, perhaps you should stay within," Ji'seth suggested, as she jogged after them. Yozerf cast her a cold glare, and she shut her mouth with a snap.

By the time they reached the postern gate, they were a group almost twenty strong. Yozerf glanced back at them; the torchlight reflected in his eyes, reducing them to eerie green orbs. "We go swift and *quiet*. Stay together, and for the gods' sakes don't fall over the cliff."

The postern gate was barely wide enough for a horse to pass through. One by one, they slid out into the

utter darkness of the night outside the walls. Suchen gripped her sword hard, struggling to see anything at all. As her eyes adjusted, the light from the torches high above outlined the walls and a few rough features of the landscape, but the ground at her feet might as well have been nonexistent, for all she could see it.

"This way," Yozerf whispered, but his black armor obscured him from sight. Following the sound of his voice, she dropped into a low, running crouch. The occasional clink of armor and jingle of mail came from the group, sounding hideously loud to her ears. The miners and those who no doubt guarded them would surely hear them coming.

As they came around the curve of the wall, the roar of the surf became suddenly louder. Up ahead, Suchen could see a faint glow at the base of the wall, and she realized that it must be light leaking from the tunnel. Shapes moved in front of the light, but it was impossible to tell how many, and she wondered how they would possibly battle anyone in such darkness.

She had forgotten how keen Yozerf's eyes were at night. One moment he was beside her ... then she felt him break into a loping run that carried him far ahead. Wulfgar shot past as well, along with a few others who must have been Wolfkin.

Gripping her sword more tightly, she plunged after them. A sudden scream sounded in the night, then ended just as abruptly. Shouts of confusion rang out, and someone ran from the tunnel, a torch held high overhead. As light bloomed over the scene, she saw that the Wolfkin were already locked in combat with the handful of soldiers set to guard the sappers. Deciding that they were well taken care of, she darted past and ran into the tunnel itself.

It was a tiny excavation, barely high enough to stand up in. Heavy wooden beams held up the roof; when the tunnel reached beneath the wall, these would be fired, causing the digging to collapse and bring the wall down with it. The smoke from torches filled the small tunnel, stinging her eyes and making it hard to breathe.

A shape lunged towards her, swinging a pickaxe wildly at her face. She dashed it aside with her free hand, slamming her sword into the man's neck with the other. Unable to dig with the encumbrance of armor, he was unprotected, and she felt the steel bite deep into his vulnerable flesh.

The scene became one of chaos as others joined in the battle. Half-seen shapes struggled in the poor light. The smell of smoke and raw earth filled Suchen's lungs, choking her. Screams dinned in her ears in the confined space, and a body fell heavily against her, knocking her into the dirt wall. She fought free, twisting in time to skewer another of the miners.

"Come!" Yozerf's hand grabbed her elbow, dragging her back towards the entrance. Even as he did so, she could see fire beginning to lick at the pitch-covered logs. Within moments, it turned the little tunnel into an inferno.

The night air felt cold and soothing on her face. Coughing, she wiped her streaming eyes and turned back. The tunnel collapsed behind her with a whoosh, destroying all of the work done so far and leaving the wall, which it hadn't quite reached, standing firm. Yozerf pulled hard on her arm, yanking her away from the sight and into a stumbling run.

"Back to the keep, before Jahcgroth realizes what's happened and sends his forces to trap us outside the walls!" he ordered sharply, and everyone joined them in a flat-out run, back to the postern gate.

By the time they staggered back through, they were all stumbling from exhaustion. A few had taken minor injuries, but their little sortie hadn't ended in any major casualties. Suchen sank down on the ground, leaning against the wall to catch her breath. The reek of burning clung to her, almost overwhelming the

stench of blood and sweat from earlier in the day, and she thought wryly that it was amazing the Argannese soldiers hadn't smelled them coming.

She hadn't meant to close her eyes, but suddenly found herself opening them as a hand brushed gently across her face. Startled, she looked up to see Yozerf bending over her. Soot streaked his white face and added to the disaster of his matted hair. "Come on, love. You'll be much more comfortable in a bed than here."

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she let him pull her to her feet. "What about you?"

"I've given orders to be alert for more sappers, and to pour boiling water down at any suspicious noise. Beyond that, there's nothing more I can do this night."

They leaned on each other all the way up to bed. Barely bothering to take her armor off, Suchen collapsed into the furs beside him, asleep before her head fully touched the pillow.

* * * *

The next attack began at dawn. Although the trebuchets had been destroyed, the Argannese still had siege towers and ladders. Many Red Guard had died in the assault of the previous day, so at least on that one account they were spared; presumably, Jahcgroth wished to hold his remaining minions in reserve.

A group of soldiers protecting the battering ram moved forward, shields held high to ward off arrows. The shields were less effective against boiling water, but even so, they moved forward undeterred. The iron-capped head of the battering ram swung ponderously against the gates, shaking them hard but leaving them relatively undamaged. Even so, if they were allowed to continue unmolested, the gates would eventually give way.

"Prepare a sortie!" Yozerf shouted as he strode along the tops of the battlements, his attention fixed on the threat posed by the ram. His throat was raw from yelling orders over the din of battle. A grapple clanged onto the parapet beside him, and without pause he cut the rope with his sword as he went past. In front of him, two women, their hands wrapped in protective layers of cloth, wrestled a pot of coals to the edge of the wall, before dumping its contents down onto the attackers below. The screams of those they burned were lost amidst the incredible din of the fighting going on all around them.

Damn it. I've got to fire that battering ram, if I can. But if Jahcgroth has any sense whatsoever, he will have put some sort of protective spell on it last night. Curse him, I—

"Yozerf!"

Startled, he turned and saw Londah making her way towards him, ducking and weaving through the struggling masses. Her armor was drenched in blood, none of it her own, and he knew that death walked with her.

"I have to get to the battering ram!" he shouted, even as it crashed into the gates again, sending out a loud boom and shaking the stones beneath his feet.

She reached him at last, grabbing his shoulder in one mail-gloved hand. So close, he could see her gray eyes, and the look in them chilled him to the bone. "It's a distraction, my son."

Oh Hel.

"Where?" he demanded, never doubting that she was right. He should have seen it himself.

"There is a mass of Red Guard making their way on foot towards the northern section of the wall, near

where the sappers tried to undermine it last night."

"Jahcgroth."

"I fear so."

Yozerf swore furiously, turned, and dashed down the steps to the courtyard. The Sworn pounded after him, followed by Londah. But even as he ran, he felt the ground quake beneath his feet and knew that he was too late.

The keep's warhorses stood at ready, in case the need arose for a charge. In a single, fluid motion, Yozerf mounted Windshade and kicked the horse forward. As the Sworn scrambled to follow, he leaned low over the horse's neck, feeling the muscles bunch beneath his thighs as they crossed the courtyard at a gallop. Before them loomed the north wall, and for a moment Yozerf had hope that he had been wrong, that there was still time to do something.

A brilliant light seared his eyes, like the crack of lightning from a cloudless sky. For an instant, the wall and its defenders were thrown into sharp relief. Then a concussive blast roared out, so loud that it blotted out all other sound. A wall of air hit him, even at this distance, and he felt Windshade falter.

A section of wall collapsed, its fall eerily soundless in the aftermath of the deafening blast. His heart in his mouth, Yozerf urged Windshade on, never slowing even as they rode over the rubble of riven stone and shattered bodies. As Argannese soldiers began to pour through the breach, he lifted his sword high and screamed out a battle cry.

Windshade's massive form knocked the first man from his feet, to be trampled beneath iron-shod hooves. Yozerf slashed at others, aiming for faces, where armor was likely to be lightest. Within moments, he realized that there were simply too many of them. He had mounted and ridden as fast as possible, never thinking that the Sworn could not move so quickly, that he would end up filling the breach alone.

Something heavy slammed into his left arm, the sheer force of the blow shoving him halfway out of the saddle. He tried to grab for the pommel to straighten himself, but his arm refused to respond, and he felt himself sliding. Seeing his distress, one of the Argannese warriors seized his right leg and pulled hard, bringing Yozerf tumbling to the ground.

Swearing furiously, he struggled to get up, to get away from the soldier standing over him. The man drew back a spear as if he would punch it through Yozerf's gut, and for a moment Yozerf thought he would die.

Ji'seth's poleax chopped into the soldier's neck, just below the edge of his helm. Even as he fell, she yanked the weapon free and smashed it into the face of another opponent. Blood splattered her cheeks, and he could hear her singing a battle song.

Yozerf staggered to his feet, stumbling against Windshade. Ji'seth's mount surged forward as she tried to maneuver it between Yozerf and the Argannese soldiers. Beyond her, he caught a glimpse of crimson hide, and he tried to yell a warning. Alert to the danger, she turned towards the approaching Red Guard and raised her sword ... exposing her right flank to the foot soldiers.

Yozerf cried out and lurched forward, but it was far too late. A soldier took advantage of Ji'seth's momentary lapse and thrust his spear up at her. The point caught her beneath the armpit, where she was least protected.

Ji'seth screamed and jerked, blood gushing from the wound. The soldier wrenched the spear sideways, pulling her off of her steed. His one arm dangling uselessly, Yozerf flung himself at the soldier, but others closed in between them. He tried to fight, but there were too many, and they bore him to the ground. Even as he watched helplessly, the soldier tore his spear free from Ji'seth's body and stabbed it through her throat.

Yozerf howled, a primal noise of rage and grief, and struggled to free himself. He tried to call the fire forth—he would make this Ji'seth's funeral pyre—would burn them all to ash—

Then something struck the side of his helm with stunning force, and he knew no more.

* * * *

Heavy fog rolled in as the sun set on the second day of battle. Her entire body aching, Suchen sagged back against the wall as the Argannese forces drew back once again. Fighting had been fierce in the courtyard after a breach in the north wall, but they had managed to repel the invaders. Most likely, they would now spend the night struggling to fill the gap with rubble before the Argannese could come at it again.

Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf sat nearby, along with the rest of those who had defended the keep's doors. Their heads hung in exhaustion, and their faces were gray when they pulled off their helms. Auglar was bleeding from a cut on his chin, but otherwise seemed mostly unhurt.

As they rested, Suchen caught sight of a figure with a familiar, limping gait. Wondering why he had left Yozerf to come to them, she straightened as Gless approached. The look on his face sent dread into her heart.

"What happened?" she demanded, and knew that her voice betrayed her fear.

Gless's blue eyes looked old, as if they belonged to a man three times his true age. "Yozerf ... is missing."

Auglar lifted his head in alarm. "What do you mean?"

"When Jahcgroth turned his magic against the walls, we were the first to arrive at the breach. But Yozerf didn't slow to wait for us." Bitterness dripped from his voice, and Suchen knew that he blamed his limp. "Ji'seth was the fastest after him ... last I saw, she had almost caught up with him. We ... we found her body in the breach. But there's no sign of Yozerf. Or Londah, for that matter."

Suchen closed her eyes briefly. "They took him prisoner."

"Probably. I think ... even if the horses had trampled his body, we'd still recognize his armor. Or at least his hair."

"Jahcgroth won't kill him," she said, trying to convince herself of that. *But he might make Yozerf simply vanish. Send him away somewhere, and we'll never know what happened to him.*

Oh, gods, please watch over him. Please let him be all right.

How am I going to tell Owl?

Gless took a deep breath, as if trying to clear away his own worries and focus on the matters at hand. "Yozerf left instructions as to what was to be done if he fell. I'd say they apply here, as well."

Auglar stood up slowly, looking unutterably weary. "So. The defense of Vorslava falls to me now."

Gless nodded, oddly sympathetic. "Indeed. What are your orders, my lord?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Yozerf sat on a campstool, his head aching and his stomach queasy. He could move his left arm, although only with pain, and he thought it wasn't broken, merely bruised to the bone. The air inside the tent was unpleasantly damp, and he guessed that one of Vorslava's frequent fogs had rolled in, enshrouding the countryside in a wet blanket of cold air. It would be perfect for another attempt at undermining the keep's walls, and he hoped that Auglar would think to be vigilant.

If there's anything they can do. Whatever weakened Jahcgroth, be it war with Ax or something else I don't understand, he was still strong enough to open a hole in the wall today. If his recovery is permanent ... then nothing Auglar can do will make much of a difference.

He remembered seeing the light die from Ji'seth's violet eyes, all her fierce fire draining away with her life's blood. Grief for her opened a hole in his heart. She had been the first to swear loyalty to him, that strange day when he had become lord. She had been wild and fierce and proud, all of her edges sharp and covered with spines. Not an easy person to befriend, but the gods knew, he wasn't, either, and they had been friends nonetheless.

Now she was dead.

What had happened after that, he couldn't remember very clearly. His next certain memory was finding himself here, in this tent, being tended to by a taciturn healer while a ring of guards looked on. The healer had given him an herbal tea to soothe the pain of his head and arm, then left.

So he sat here, unbound but weaponless, surrounded by guards who no doubt had strict orders not to let him escape. There were far too many of them to seriously consider even trying, at least at this juncture.

He expected Jahcgroth to put in an appearance, perhaps to gloat at him, or even to gently admonish him for stupidly resisting the might of Argannon. But as the hours dragged by, it became apparent that the emperor had other concerns more pressing than Yozerf Jonaglrir. A Red Guard brought in a meager dinner of bread and water some time before midnight, but it refused to answer his questions. Although the food was barely enough to quiet the worst pangs of hunger, Yozerf noticed that his guards stared jealously at every bite he ate.

Worry plagued him: for the keep, for Suchen, for Owl, for all the things he was powerless to control. Even so, exhaustion finally took him down to sleep, sometime in the early hours before dawn. His sleep was restless and troubled, and when the opening of the tent flap woke him, he felt as if he hadn't closed his eyes at all.

He got only a glimpse of the world outside before the flap closed again—the sun wasn't yet up, and fog still dampened the light of the torches ringing the tent. Jahcgroth entered, followed by a cluster of Red Guard who must be his Sworn. One of them faced Yozerf in her human form, but he refused to meet Kktara's eyes. A guard had followed her in, and with a shock Yozerf realized that it was Peddock.

Yozerf rose, intending to meet Jahcgroth on his own terms. But a second shock came when he saw the emperor's face. It was drawn, haggard, and etched with lines of weariness. The butter-gold hair that straggled around his shoulders hung limp and tangled, as if he hadn't bothered to comb it for days. The skin of his lips looked dry and chapped, and veins showed in the whites of his dragon-gray eyes.

"I see your battle with Ax isn't going very well," Yozerf observed.

Jahcgroth's mouth twitched. "Perhaps. Or perhaps he looks even worse than I this morn. We will take

your keep today, Yozerf. You know this."

"I know nothing of the sort."

"Defiant until the end. Some here think I should try to ransom you. How many carts of food do you think your life is worth to your people?"

A mixture of hope and fear touched Yozerf's heart, but he struggled to put it aside. "None at all."

Jahcgroth's smile was hollow. "Perhaps. There are others here who agree, who think we should kill you in front of your own gates as a warning."

Yozerf took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He didn't want to die, and he certainly didn't want to be slaughtered in front of those who loved him. Shooting a hard glance at Peddock, he thought he could guess who had argued for his execution. "But instead you chose to come here and talk me to death. Were the other options too humane?"

The look in Jahcgroth's eyes hardened. "You should be grateful that I still value those of my own blood. If not for that, I—"

He stopped abruptly, as if he had heard a far off sound. "Ah, that will be my other guest. Excuse me a moment."

With no more explanation, he left, his Sworn following him protectively. Peddock, however, lingered, and as soon as the rest had departed he crossed to stand before Yozerf. Although he didn't look as haggard as Jahcgroth, his eyes were far more haunted.

"Suchen—is she all right?" he asked.

Yozerf gave him a cold stare. "I don't see that you have the right to ask that. After all, you are a part of the army that's trying to kill her."

An expression of utter defeat and despair crossed Peddock's plain features. The look surprised Yozerf; Peddock had never shown him any face but that of anger, and this sudden vulnerability made his hackles rise. "I never meant for it to come to that," Peddock insisted raggedly. "You know that. I don't want her hurt."

"But no doubt you would be happy to see me dead. Perhaps it is difficult to choose between the two?"

Peddock flinched, as if he had been slapped. "No! I wasn't the one who argued for your death. I didn't ... I didn't argue for anything. None of the choices are the ones I would have picked."

Yozerf reflected that he would be more inclined to pity Peddock if his own life hadn't been in the balance. "You chose this road, and now you must walk it. You knew what you were doing in Segg. What other end did you possibly foresee?"

Peddock hesitated, then looked away. "I thought perhaps Kktara would leave with me."

"Then you were a fool."

"So it would seem."

At one time, Yozerf would have felt triumph at the agreement. But the circumstances were far too bitter for that now. Perhaps Peddock meant to say more, but the sound of approaching feet caused him to step hastily away. A moment later, the flap was thrown back, and a struggling, snarling form was dragged

inside.

Four Red Guard held Londah's arms behind her. Her long black hair had come unbound and now hung in a cloud around her face. The look in her eyes promised death.

"Mama!" Yozerf grabbed her arm, snarling furiously at the Red Guard. "Let go of her!"

"I believe we have all of her weapons. You may release her," Jahcgroth said.

As soon as their claws drew back, Londah jerked away. Raw fury narrowed her eyes and drew her lips back from her teeth, and for a moment Yozerf thought she might throw herself on them armed with nothing more than her bite. But then she straightened proudly, flinging the hair out of her eyes.

"Are you all right?" Yozerf asked.

She nodded stiffly. Jahcgroth smiled at the gesture. "You remind me of Telmonra—so proud, so angry at what you perceive as failure. But it was not hard to guess that you wouldn't abandon your son. So I set up a series of magical wards around the area, keyed to our shared blood, to alert me when you drew too near. May I ask how you got so close without being seen?"

Londah's eyes narrowed, but then she shrugged. "I lay on the battlefield among the dead until all the soldiers had withdrawn from both sides. The fog was a boon."

"Of course." Jahcgroth glanced briefly away, as a sentry called out the rising of the sun. "Now I must decide what to do with you. Perhaps it would be more prudent to kill you. But I find myself reluctant. You are the last of my kin in this world, and the bonds of blood are not lightly broken."

The emperor's mouth remained open, as if he would say more, but no words came out. For a moment, Yozerf wondered what was wrong, or if he were simply steeling himself to pronounce death on them both after all. Then a gush of blood poured out of Jahcgroth's mouth, shockingly red against his pale skin. He stumbled forward, and Yozerf saw the knife sticking out of his back.

"You're right," Peddock said quietly.

Several things happened at once. A small throwing knife appeared in Jahcgroth's left eye, piercing his brain and dropping him heavily to the ground. Kktara spun on Peddock, a scream of rage and betrayal erupting from her no-longer-human throat. And outside, shrieks began, accompanied by the whinnies of horses and the clash of swords.

The tent flap was ripped aside. "Your Majesty!" a man shouted as he stumbled inside. "It is the Jenelese army! They've come up behind us in the fog! We—" He stopped and stared aghast at the body on the floor.

Londah's hand closed on Yozerf's arm with a grip like iron, shoving him towards the tent flap. Broken from his paralysis, he ran, ducking beneath the outstretched arm of a Red Guard who belatedly thought to stop him. The soldier still stood in the way, so Yozerf slammed a gauntlet-clad fist into his face, sending him down and out of the way. With Londah on his heels, he burst outside into the free air.

Thick fog shrouded the world, reducing the camp to shadows and half-guessed shapes. To the east, the sounds of battle raged, and soldiers ran towards a fight that they could hear but not see. Others raced in different directions. Someone was already shouting that the emperor had been assassinated. One guard was foolish enough to try and stop the two fleeing Aclytes, but Yozerf felled him with a single kick to the stomach and kept going.

It was easy to lose themselves in the confusion and the fog. As they ran blindly in the direction of Vorslava, Yozerf asked, "Was that your throwing knife?"

Londah shot him a feral grin. "Missed one, didn't they?"

"Why?"

"He was a powerful sorcerer. I thought he might have been able to heal himself from Peddock's blow if given enough time. But I imagine it is difficult to recover from a knife in one's brain, no matter how great a wizard one might be."

They fell silent after that, concentrating on running. The fog made it difficult to judge where they were, but by the stitch in his side, Yozerf thought they had to have gone far enough to be almost on the keep. *Unless we run right over the side of the cliff instead.*

As if summoned by his thought, Vorslava's dark walls loomed abruptly out of the fog, only feet in front of them. One of the archers lining the walls shouted a warning. Afraid that he was about to be skewered by his own side, Yozerf flung up his hands. "It's us, damn it! Yozerf and Londah! Open the postern door!"

"My lord?" someone cried in disbelief. Swearing silently, Yozerf turned and loped the rest of the way along the wall to the postern gate. He could here the cries from above as the word spread: "The lord's back! Open the gate! The lord's alive!"

Gless, Wulfgar, and Tan all piled out the door the instant it was open, Gless going so far as to fling his arms around Yozerf. "Gods, let us inside!" Yozerf snarled, shoving him off. "We've got the damned Jenelese army at our backs!"

Gless paled sharply and all but dragged him inside. As soon as the gate was shut, however, a crowd descended on them, people wanting to verify for themselves that Yozerf was indeed alive. Owl ran through the crowd and flung her arms around him. As he lifted her up, he found Suchen standing in front of him, tears in her eyes.

"What took you so long?" she asked, with a faint smile.

Auglar appeared at his right side and then bowed. "The keep is yours, Lord Yozerf," he said solemnly.

"Thank you. I see it did not suffer ruin under your command."

"It was less than twelve hours, after all."

"True." Yozerf gazed at the eager faces all around him and wondered if the news he was about to give them was good or bad. "The emperor of Argannon is dead." As the crowd burst into jubilant cries, he held up his free hand to silence them. "But the Jenelese army came up on the Argannese unaware. As of now, they are fighting each other. If we are truly lucky, they will completely annihilate one another. But with Jahcgroth gone, I don't know that the Argannese will stand firm for long. At the moment, there's nothing to do but wait and see."

"Aye," said Wulfgar, and turned to shout to the walls. "Keep your eyes to the fore, damn it! Stay sharp!"

Weariness ate at Yozerf's bones, but he knew there was one more thing he had to do before he sought food or bed. "We need to talk," he said quietly to Suchen, and saw a flash of apprehension in her sapphire eyes.

The walk back to their quarters seemed unbearably long. The Sworn badgered him relentlessly, offering

to call the healers to look at him, suggesting food be brought. He ignored them, shutting the door in their faces without comment. Owl still rested in his arms, and he began to send her back to the Sworn, but Suchen shook her head. "She can stay."

Yozerf hesitated, then nodded and put Owl down. A feeling of helplessness touched him as he watched Suchen sink into a chair in front of the cold hearth. She was pale but composed, and he thought that she had to guess at least some of what he wanted to tell her.

"This is about Peddock, isn't it?" she asked, confirming the thought.

"Yes." Uncertain how to soften the blow, he began to haltingly recount the events that had led up to Jahcgroth's assassination by Peddock's hand. By the time he had finished, she had buried her face in her hands and wept softly.

"Don't cry," Owl said anxiously. She went to Suchen and put her arms around her. "Was he ... don't you have any more family?"

Suchen shook her head mutely. Owl stroked her hair with a small hand. "All my old family died, too. But now I have a new one here."

"As does Suchen," Yozerf said, knowing that it didn't really help. He went to them and held them both, leaning his head against Suchen's. "I am sorry, my love. In the end, Peddock chose loyalty to you and Auglar over his love for Kktara. I think he was more at peace dying thus than he had ever been living in Jahcgroth's camp."

Suchen made no answer. Unable to offer any more comfort, Yozerf held his daughter and his mate in silence until the tears finally stopped.

* * * *

They burned the dead at sundown that night.

The fog, which Yozerf had long ago decided must be an unnatural construct of Ax, persisted throughout the day. The guards standing watch on the walls struggled to pierce it, but it prevented even the most keen-eyed from seeing more than a few yards.

The veil between them and the battlefield outside made the sounds coming from it even more unnerving. If they could have seen the charges and retreats, could have noted how many of one side or the other fell, they would at least have felt as if they could predict what they might face on the morrow. But there was no way to know which side was winning or if the victor would even have enough soldiers left, once the battle was done, to pose a serious threat to Vorslava.

But as the sun began to sink in the west, it found an end to the fog. The wind was blowing in from the sea, and it pushed back the mist far enough to reveal a glorious sunset. The waves turned to molten gold, and the seabirds flying above them became sparks darting from the furnace of the sun. The smell of salt and brine hung heavy in the air and stirred something wild in Yozerf's heart.

All of those who had fallen in Vorslava's defense lay upon pyres built on the westernmost edge of the courtyard. Only Ji'seth left the world alone, high up on the tallest of the pyres. Her brown hair spread out around her pale, still face, and her hands clutched the poleax she had fought with. If there were any world beyond, Yozerf hoped it was prepared for her fierce spirit.

The surviving members of the Sharneth clan wailed their grief and smeared ashes into their hair. As the sun touched the waves, one of them began to sing a lament in Aclytese, high and wild as the mountains

that had once been their home. Letting the ancient dirge fill him, Yozerf reached within and pulled fire from his soul. The pyres burst into flames, burning hot and savage, until there was nothing left but ash.

* * * *

The fog remained the next morning, but now it wrapped the keep in an eerie silence. No screams or battle cries, no clash of weapons or din of hooves, came from within the all-enveloping mist. Although Yozerf had thought the sounds of fighting the day before had been unnerving, he realized as he stood peering out into nothingness that the silence was far, far worse.

Up and down the walls, soldiers shifted uneasily, muttering to themselves. Although Wulfgar stood as solid as the rock under their feet, Tan and Gless both cast uneasy glances in the direction of whatever remained of the unseen armies. "What do you think happened?" Gless asked finally.

Londah appeared beside them, seeming to materialize out of the wet, gray air. "Who can say?" she asked. "I can take a walk and find out."

"No." Yozerf shook his head. His hair was wet from the continual damp, and it clung to his face and shoulders. "It's too dangerous to send anyone outside. We wait and see what comes."

Their wait was cold; the sun had not been allowed to show its face for two days, save for a few brief moments at dusk and dawn. Yozerf felt as if the dampness of the air were eating into his bones, and he silently acknowledged that he was not as young as he had once been. Growing up in the southern city of Segg, he had always despised the summers, with their breathless heat and swarming mosquitoes. But at the moment, he would have traded a great deal for a little of their warmth, to dispel the dismal shroud around Vorslava.

The sound of hooves and the jingle of tack came suddenly, magnified by the unnatural silence. Tightening his grip on his sword, Yozerf narrowed his eyes and strove to peer through the fog. Moments later, a small group of figures appeared from the mist, all of them mounted. One bore the black-and-purple banner of King Fellrant.

Fellrant won. Yozerf felt cold settle into his gut. Although there had been no truly good outcome, still he had hoped that Fellrant might be slain, leaving both armies in turmoil. But instead he's won it all. Jahcgroth is dead, and his army destroyed. The only thing Fellrant has left to deal with...

...is us.

Although most of the men approaching the keep were large, strong warriors, the one who rode in the center of the group was small and slight of build. Despite the armor that clad his diminutive body and the helm that hid his face, Yozerf had no doubts as to his identity.

So Fellrant comes himself to this little truce.

"What do you want?" he shouted. The fog swallowed his voice, deadening the sound. The riders below came to a halt and looked up at him.

Yozerf had not expected Fellrant to answer him personally, and so was startled when the king spoke. "Ah, my old friend and companion. Some of the Argannese said that you were lord here, hoping that we would spare their lives in exchange for information."

"And you didn't believe them?"

"On the contrary." Fellrant removed his helm, letting his black hair fall loose around his shoulders. He had the face of an angel, but his eyes could have belonged to Hel herself. "I had no doubts whatsoever. You

forget the days we spent together in Segg. Even as your so-called friends underestimated you time and again, I kept a watchful eye on you. Had you come to me after, I would have offered you a place worthy of your ... skills."

A chill went through Yozerf at Fellrant's words. For a moment, he remembered the feel of the young king's lips, and a mixture of rage and shame burned through him like the fire. Swallowing hard, he forced himself to show nothing of his feelings. "I have not done so badly for myself."

Fellrant tipped his head to one side, indigo eyes gleaming. "You're wrong. Because I'm going to kill everyone in Vorslava, if I have to raze the keep to do it."

Yozerf's throat went dry. "Boastful words. Unless I am wrong, your war with Argannon is over, but your victory, not without cost. Why destroy Vorslava and its people?"

Fellrant leaned forward, a little smile playing on his lips. "What should I do instead? Will you swear loyalty to me? Of course not. Will you give Auglar to me in exchange for the lives of your followers? Will you give yourself to me?"

Yozerf could feel his heart pounding. This was it, gods, the moment he had dreaded all along. That it had been inevitable didn't make it any less terrifying. "Yes."

Someone made a noise of protest, but he ignored it, all his attention focused on the small king before him. The smile never left Fellrant's face, but now it danced in his wicked eyes as well.

"I am tempted. But, as pleasurable as your offer sounds, I'm afraid I have to pass," Fellrant settled back in his saddle, and his eyes grew hard. "You dared take Vorslava. Any other keep ... that I could forgive. But you dared to take *my* keep, and that peasant rabble around you dared to join you in your banditry. They are as guilty of treason as you, and so they will all pay the penalty.

"I sentence you all to death."

Murmurs of fear sounded around Yozerf. He couldn't blame them—he was no less afraid. Flinging back his head so that his hair flew around him, he met Fellrant's baneful glare with one of challenge. "So you claim," he said loudly, so that all could hear his words. "But I'll be damned if I let you take this keep. There is more than walls and gates to Vorslava, and I swear by all the gods that we will fight you to the end. Revoke your sentence, or you will have a battle on your hands a thousand times more bitter than any you fought with Argannon."

A few cheers burst out around him, and some of the guards on the walls stood straighter. But Fellrant only laughed.

"You've become a soft-headed fool," he said malevolently. "I'm not the only old friend you have outside these walls, dear Yozerf. Don't you remember Ax? I'm afraid that he's resting today—after all, destroying the entire Argannese army was a bit tiring."

"You lie. We heard the battle. He summoned the fog, nothing more. Parlor tricks."

Fellrant's smile didn't waver. "Perhaps. But tomorrow morning, he's going to come here and take these gates down, and then the walls after. Cower behind your battlements, dog, but know that they won't protect you when we come again."

It was Yozerf's greatest fear, the one thing he didn't know how to fight against. His mouth tightened into a hard line. "I see the shape of things now, Fellrant. You style yourself king, but you're nothing more than Ax's messenger boy."

Somehow, he scored a hit. Fellrant's eyes narrowed sharply, and a look of displeasure twisted his sensual mouth. Without another word, he spun his horse and kicked it sharply. Moments later, they had all vanished into the fog.

Uneasy silence fell over the keep. Gless shifted his weight to lean more heavily on his staff. "So," he said after a long moment, "what do we do now?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

Yozerf sat alone in his study as night grew nearer. A pile of moldering books and scrolls lay before him, sending the smell of dust and decay into the air. Ancient leather and parchment cracked when he touched it, sometimes crumbling into dust as he read. The words of his ancestors lay before him, written before Caden's fall, and although he had spent months perusing them before, in desperation he skimmed them all again.

The Jonaglirs had been sorcerer-kings, who defied the rest of the world for three thousand years. They had laughed at other wizards and spat upon monarchs, whose empires turned to dust while the Jonaglirs endured. It had taken treachery to bring them down—and perhaps luck, as well: the perfect confluence of events that had allowed Ax to destroy the dragons and kill Telmonra. Surely, Yozerf's ancestors had known secrets that could help him save Vorslava.

But if so, they survived in no record he could find.

The door opened, and Yozerf glanced up to see Londah, framed against the light of the torches in the hall outside. Realizing how gloomy the study was, he lit a few more candles, using the fire of his mind.

"Gless said that you sent for me," Londah said as she closed the door. She crossed the room and settled into the chair on the opposite side of the desk.

"Yes." He studied her for a moment, wondering how he was possibly going to ask her. Wondering, too, if he might have missed something, some vital clue that would show him another way out of this trap. As always, her face was serene, her thoughts hidden away.

She tipped her head elegantly towards the pile of papers on his desk. "Have your ancient books told you anything?"

Yozerf sighed and shook his head. "No."

"It may not have made any difference. If Ax was able to destroy the dragons, what hope does a lone sorcerer have against him?"

"I don't think he could have slain the dragons alone," Yozerf said after a moment. "He and Jahcgroth were students together. I think ... he might have used Jahcgroth in some way. Or perhaps Jahcgroth unknowingly gave him the key. Somehow, Ax was able to turn Caden itself against the dragons, entomb them in a lake of ice, something that should have been impossible for someone not of our blood. That's why Telmonra assumed that Jahcgroth had betrayed her. How Ax did it, I don't know. I didn't think to ask Jahcgroth what his opinions were on the matter."

She cracked a thin smile at that. "Indeed. So do you think there is hope?"

"Yes."

"But I thought you said that the scrolls had revealed nothing."

"They haven't. Nothing I didn't already know." Yozerf hesitated, unsure of how to go on.

No, not unsure. I don't want to go on at all. I don't want to say it aloud, because then it will be real.

Gods, if you have ever existed, then give me the strength to do this.

Londah tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. "So there is something."

"Yes."

She sighed—then unexpectedly leaned forward and reached across the table. Her hand gripped his gently, and for a moment he was a very young child again, and his mother the strongest woman in the world, a heroine who would keep all the bad things at bay. He thought of all the dying warriors he had heard on battlefields across Jenel, who with their last breaths called out, not to gods or wives or commanders, but to the women who had birthed them.

"I love you, Yozerf," she said quietly, calmly. "Whatever it is you wish to ask of me, I will do it. For you."

"I know." He smiled wistfully, wishing that things had been different between them. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"There is nothing to be sorry for, my son. Now tell me what I must do."

* * * *

Suchen found Yozerf sitting on the edge of Owl's bed, watching her sleep. He held a book loosely in his hands, and she thought he must have been reading to the girl while she drifted off into slumber. The fur blankets were pulled up to Owl's chin, and her bright copper hair spilled over them like a blaze of fire. Suchen paused in the doorway, taking in the scene, and felt both love and grief fill her heart, until it seemed it must break.

Fellrant would kill them both. How could anyone do such a thing?

I swear I'll die first. He'll only reach them by going through me, and to Hel with what Yozerf says. He can't make me stay back tomorrow, not when so much is at stake.

Yozerf turned towards her, and she saw his eyes reflect the torchlight, turning into green coals. Moving quietly, so as not to wake Owl, he stood up and slipped out, past the female guard who waited unobtrusively to take his place. Suchen took his hand in hers; his skin felt cold, and she tried to warm it with her fingers.

"Have you eaten?" she asked as they walked away. The Sworn fell into place quietly behind them, but like Owl's guardian, they did their best to remain in the background.

Yozerf shook his head, his red hair falling into his eyes as he did so. "No. I don't find that I have much of an appetite tonight."

"Neither do I." She sighed and squeezed his hand as they approached their quarters. "I don't suppose that anyone does."

"No." He was silent for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts. "Suchen ... I'm going to try something tomorrow morning."

"Magic?"

"Yes. But it means that I have to go up to the highest tower in Vorslava to prepare."

"I'll help you."

"You can't." They went through the door into his quarters, and then through the inner door into the bedroom they shared. As soon as they were alone and out of sight of the Sworn, she saw his shoulders slump with weariness. "I'm sorry, but it's a thing only a Jonaglir can do. Mother has agreed to help me,

but it means that I can't stand on the walls and command when the battle begins tomorrow. So I'm giving my authority to Auglar. I ... I know that you'll stand behind him, no matter what comes."

Something about the tone of his voice, the sadness in his eyes, made her suddenly afraid. "Is it dangerous, this magic?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose one might say that."

"Then don't do it!"

"What choice do I have?" He took her hands in his and held them against his chest, so she could feel his heartbeat. The grief in his eyes shook her to her bones. "Someone has to fight against Ax, and I'm afraid that there isn't anyone but me to do it. I wish ... I wish I could pass this burden to another. But I can't."

"If it's dangerous..."

"No more dangerous than standing on the battlements while Ax tears the walls down around me." His grip on her fingers tightened gently. "That way is certain death, Suchen, and you know it. If I attempt to invoke the magic ... I may not come back from that, either. But at least I might be able to save Vorslava. Save Owl. Save you."

Suchen felt tears gathering in her eyes. "Damn it, Yozerf, I can't lose you again. Don't you understand that? I can't."

Yozerf leaned forward, so that their foreheads touched. His scent, of clean fur and smoke, rose up around her, so familiar it made her ache inside. "I have never asked you to promise me anything," he said softly. "But I want a promise from you now. Swear to me ... if I don't come back, swear to me that you'll raise our daughter."

Emotion constricted her throat so tightly that she could barely breathe. "I will," she managed through the tears streaming down her face.

"Thank you." He kissed her gently. "Then there is only one more thing I want to tell you. I love you. I've always loved you, since the moment I first saw you. You are my sunlight, my moonlight, my stars, every good thing that there is in this world. My life would have been immeasurably poorer without you, and I can never thank you enough for all that you have done for me."

"Yozerf," she whispered, and then began to cry in earnest. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. *I can't lose this*, she thought desperately as she clung to him. *It can't end this way*.

She drew back a little, wiping her eyes against one sleeve. "Now promise me something. Promise me, if there is any way through this ... you'll come back to me."

The look in his eyes told her that he didn't believe he'd have that choice. But he nodded. "If there is any way to return to you, Suchen, I swear I will."

There were no more words to say after that. They went to bed and made love, first tenderly, then with fierce desperation. Afterwards, Suchen lay in his arms with her eyes open, refusing to squander even one precious second on sleep.

* * * *

Suchen climbed the stairs to the battlements, even as the first light of dawn touched the sky. Dew clung to the stones, making them slick, and she felt as if a chill had settled into her bones. Sometime during the night, Ax had allowed the fog to dissipate, so at least they would be able to make their final stand

beneath the sun.

Auglar stood in Yozerf's place, Brenwulf and Buudi beside him. Although his helm made it difficult to read his expression, his mouth was set in a grim line as he stared out towards the enemy army. Nodding to her friends, Suchen took up position beside them and turned her eyes outward as well. It was still too dark to see anything past the light of the torches set on the walls, but the stench of death rode the air, turning her stomach.

The sun came up with aching slowness, as if it were as reluctant as they to face the new day. As its rays groped tentatively across the grassy plain of the Kellsmarsh, gray silhouettes began to emerge from the dying night. The edges of swords and shields gleamed faintly, teasing the eye. Straining her sight, Suchen finally saw the great mass of the Jenelese army, which seemed to be holding back from Vorslava for the moment. But other shapes lay between the army and the walls—shapes that did not move.

As dawn broke, Suchen heard gasps of horror all around her. The gorge rose in her throat, and she forced herself to swallow hard, even as despair gripped her heart. The field where Argannon and Jenel had come for their final battle lay revealed. The bodies of thousands of dead Argannese soldiers sprawled rotting in the sun, some in clumps, some singly. The sheer scale of the carnage was overwhelming, and Suchen understood exactly why Fellrant and Ax had chosen to reveal it to Vorslava's defenders, rather than keeping it hidden within the enshrouding mist.

"Dear gods," Brenwulf whispered, staring fixedly at the dead. "So many ... How can we hope to stand against an army that slaughtered so many?"

"Because we aren't like them," Auglar said grimly. "They were leaderless, exposed, and blind. We are none of those things."

Maybe, Suchen thought, staring fixedly at the abattoir along with everyone else. But, gods, Yozerf, if you have some trick to save us ... do it now...

* * * *

Yozerf climbed the long stairway to Vorslava's highest tower, his heart heavy within him. After seeing Suchen off to the walls, he had gone to where Owl and the other children hid, deep within the keep. The memory of her trusting face and eyes bit into him with sharp teeth, and it had been everything he could do, not to betray to her that this parting was their last.

Perhaps I should have told them the truth, he thought for the thousandth time. But they would have tried to dissuade me ... and, gods forgive me, they might have succeeded. It was difficult enough to face what he had to do, without the pleas of his mate and his daughter in his ears. He could only hope that, if they both survived the coming day, they would somehow find it in their hearts to forgive him.

There was a small room at the very top of the tower. A short ladder and trapdoor led up to it; Yozerf stopped at the foot of the ladder. He had not told his Sworn what he was about, either, afraid that they would think it their duty to stop him. "I fear the rest of you have to wait here," he said regretfully. "Only those of Jonaglir blood can be present."

Gless looked uneasy. "Are you certain?"

"I'm certain." On impulse, Yozerf clasped his friend's arm. "Wish us luck."

"Aye."

Londah went past them and climbed the ladder, flinging open the trapdoor and disappearing into the

room above without a backward glance. His heart like a lead weight in his chest, Yozerf took one last look at his Sworn and then climbed slowly after her.

* * * *

The sound of horns rang out across the field, startling Suchen. As she watched, the forces of Jenel began to move, forming into a column that streamed directly towards Vorslava's gates. The lead soldiers held their shields over their heads to deflect arrows. Behind them came a small, tight knot of warriors who appeared to be protecting something in their midst.

But what? Or ... who?

Ax.

"Ready bowmen," Auglar ordered calmly. His pale blue eyes narrowed as he watched the approach, waiting for them to cross the invisible line that would bring them into range of the bows. "Fire!"

A storm of arrows sliced through the air like deadly hail. Most struck the protective shields and bounced away, but a few found flesh, and the cries of the wounded began. Encouraged, they loosed another volley, and another, but still the mass of soldiers came on.

"Ready the boiling water," Auglar said sharply. But the approaching army did not march up to the gates, as they had expected. Instead, they suddenly split apart, moving into two columns and revealing the wizard in their midst.

The distance was too great to determine how badly Ax had been drained by his private war with Jahcgroth. He stood straight and proud, his white robes shining spotless, his face seeming to blaze with an inner light. Suchen remembered their first meeting, how she had thought him a kindly old man, and the memory made her feel faintly ill. *If I had only been able to see this moment then, perhaps none of this would have happened. Or perhaps we would have found a different way. But gods, how could anyone have guessed?*

Yozerf might have. But he saw Ax more clearly than any of us.

Ax strode fearlessly towards the gates. A dozen arrows flew towards his seemingly unprotected body, but before they could reach him, he made a sudden gesture. The arrows went astray as if buffeted by the wind, their points digging into the grass instead of flesh. The frightened oaths of the archers filled the air.

A smug smile on his face at their discomfiture, Ax stopped and raised his arms.

Sudden foreboding touched Suchen. "Back from the gates!" she shouted. "He's going to—"

Then the wall exploded.

* * * *

The tiny room at the top of the tower was more a lookout post than a true chamber. Although it had a roof, it was open on all sides, with columns in place of walls to hold up the ceiling. The wind screamed in Yozerf's ears, grabbing his hair and twisting it into a mad tangle within moments. The smell of the sea filled the air, combined with the mournful shrieks of the gulls, and he thought that he couldn't have found a more perfect setting for what they had to do.

Dropping the trapdoor back into place, Yozerf very gently slid home the bolt, moving it slowly so that the Sworn wouldn't realize he had locked them out. He and Londah couldn't afford any interruptions now, no matter how well meant.

Londah waited calmly, her black hair whipped into a storm by the wind. The stone basin she had carried sat ready on the floor, and she held her favorite knife loosely in one hand. No other trappings were required for the magic they were about to perform.

Yozerf could feel his heart beating as if it might break ribs with its force. "I don't know that this will work," he reminded her. "From what I can tell from Telmonra's memories, this ritual was always carried out at the Dragon Stone. Since we aren't there ... the magic might not come."

"Perhaps." Her eyes were utterly unafraid. "But the magic of each new monarch also was awakened while on the Stone; yet yours came forth without it."

"You don't have to do this. Perhaps I was wrong to ask you. I might be enough—"

"No." She took a step forward and clasped his shoulder with her hand. "You knew when you asked me that two had a better chance than one. I will not let you do this thing alone."

"I know. One other thing ... I'm not certain that I *can* do it. My Wolfkin blood is inimical to my Jonaglir. It might be that it will disrupt the magic, prevent it from doing its work."

Londah smiled thinly. "Then I would suggest you concentrate very hard on *not* turning into a wolf."

"Aye." He took a deep breath, knowing that it could be put off no longer. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Yozerf drew out his own dagger. They both went and knelt beside the basin on opposite sides. Gray eyes met gray, and Yozerf felt the power beginning to rise.

"Do you, Londah Jonaglir, come here of your free will, to make sacrifice for your land and your people?" he asked. The question was an ancient one, as old as Caden, as old as the Jonaglirs. He felt the words in his blood, as if they had sparked something that had always been there, sleeping away the years until the moment when it was most needed.

Londah's silver eyes were wild and fierce, even as magic blazed in their depths. "I come here to give my life, so that I might rise up anew to protect this land and this people."

Then she raised her knife, and in a single, quick stroke, drew it across the white column of her throat.

"As do I," Yozerf whispered. And did the same.

* * * *

Stone and wood exploded from the gate, flinging Vor斯拉va's defenders into the air or crushing them beneath smoldering debris. Suchen had made it most of the way down the stair, but even so, she was dashed to the ground inside the courtyard by a moving wall of air. Another body struck hers, knocking the breath from her lungs.

"Gods!" shouted Auglar, rolling off her. Buudi and Brenwulf staggered to their feet as well, turning dazedly towards the gaping hole in the wall where the gate had once stood. The cheers of the Jenelese army sounded over the screams of the wounded and dying, and enemy soldiers poured through the breach, even before the dust and smoke began to settle. Suchen caught a glimpse of Ax standing behind them, his hands raised yet again, and she knew that he would continue the attack until there were no walls left at all.

It doesn't matter. There's nothing I can do now but fight.

Gripping her sword, she ran towards the breach, determined to take at least a few soldiers with her before she was cut down. Yet even as she did so, she saw Ax falter and look up towards the high towers of Vorslava. A crack like thunder split the air, and she turned involuntarily to look herself.

Then she saw a tiny figure running across the courtyard towards her, arms outstretched.

"Owl!" she shouted in horror. "Gods, get back!"

Owl ignored the order, instead running to Suchen, tears streaming desperately down her cheeks. As she came closer, Suchen saw something that made her heart go cold with fear.

Owl's eyes were entirely gray.

"Oh gods," Suchen whispered.

* * * *

Twin torrents of blood gushed out, spilling into the basin. *I expected more pain*, Yozerf thought almost dreamily, as he watched his life leave his body. *I've been wrong about so many things, though, haven't I?*

The blood shimmered oddly in the basin, then seemed to dissolve, as if something drank it down. A moment later it reappeared, transmuted into streamers of golden light that reached back to him. Yozerf felt them touch his dying face, warm and gentle as a lover's caress. Peripherally, he was aware that he and Londah had both stopped bleeding, their wounds sealed by the soft light.

Now, he thought, and stumbled to his feet. The edge of the tower loomed. Stretching his arms wide, he flung himself off it and into the embrace of the wind.

Fire awoke in his blood, an agonizing blaze that began at his heart. He writhed blindly, but there was no escaping it. It burned him from within, devouring all that he had been, a white light that grew and grew, hollowing out his bones and filling his mouth with flame...

Then the wind caught his wings, and he stopped falling.

* * * *

"No!" Owl screamed, clutching at Suchen in her desperation. But Suchen could only stand and stare, could only watch in a mixture of horror and awe and terrible, terrible grief, as two vast shapes took to the sky. They were sleek and huge and deadly, and somehow they were the most beautiful things she had ever seen. One of them was the color of mist, from the tips of her horn-crowned head and hand-like forepaws, to the enormous expanse of her wings. But the other ... the other was black as night.

Dragons.

Suchen hugged Owl to her, feeling tears stream down her face as the dragons split the sky above the castle. The wind from their vast wings washed over her, blowing her hair away from her eyes. The black one let out a deafening roar, a deep bellow that shook the stones and throbbed in her bones.

"No!" she screamed, even though it was far, far too late. "*Yozerf!*"

But Yozerf was gone, and only the dragon remained to hear her.

The Jenelese soldiers, still rushing through the gap in the wall, faltered. A few stood and stared, either rooted in place by terror or simply uncertain what to do next. Others turned and fled back through the ruined gate. What had been an all-out assault only moments before wavered and collapsed.

Ax stood alone at the gate, staring up at the dragons. But as Suchen watched, his look of terror faded, to be replaced by one of pure rage.

"Stand fast!" he shouted at the fleeing soldiers. "The enemies of Jenel are before you! Stand fast, or by the gods I will kill you myself!"

The black roared, as if he heard Ax's words and took them as challenge. His sinuous tail whipped through the air, sending up a crack like a whip. Both dragons folded their wings and fell towards Ax, teeth gleaming and dagger-long talons ready to tear. The gray's head whipped forward, and an enormous column of flame burst from her mouth, incinerating everything before her. A dozen screaming warriors died at once, and the wind from her great wings scattered their ashes. But when the firestorm faded, Suchen saw that Ax was still standing.

A roar of fury shattered the air. Hardened warriors flung down their weapons and ran, or else collapsed to the ground, cowering in terror. Fire poured down on them again, incinerating all in its path. Ax was bathed in an eerie glow, and although the ground around him baked and cracked, he remained untouched.

The fire ended, the dragons sweeping around for another pass. Ax staggered, and Suchen guessed that defending himself against their assault was draining him. Crying out arcane words, he stumbled away from the gate, towards the edge of the cliff. Light flashed from his hands, and the black dragon swerved, narrowly avoiding whatever spell had been cast. Then their battle carried them out of Suchen's sight.

Suchen and Owl clung together, both of them weeping freely. As the dragons vanished from view, Suchen stumbled to her feet with the vague idea of running after them. Even as she did so, however, she heard the sound of horns blowing a rallying cry from outside the ruined gates. "Take the keep, fools!" shouted Fellrant over the din. "Or else we'll have no protection against those monsters if they return!"

At least some of his men were able to overcome their terror and see the truth of his words. Desperate now, driven by their fear of the dragons, they rushed towards the hole in the wall and into the courtyard.

"Owl, run!" Suchen shouted, dropping the girl. She thought Owl obeyed her, but she couldn't spare a moment to make certain as the first wave rushed down on her. The clash of another sword on her own sent a shock down her arm. With a howl of fury, she threw off her attacker and ran him through.

I hate you! she thought wildly, even as she gutted another. *This is all your fault! You did this to us, you forced Yozerf to give up his life, you took him away from me. I'll kill you all!*

More and more warriors began to pour through the breach. Vorslava's defenders ran to form a line, but there were far too few of them to hold back the army determined to get in. Suchen found herself fighting ferociously near the ruined wall, with Auglar, Buudi, and Brenwulf on one side, and Gless, Tan, and Wulfgar on the other. Blood covered her, her own and others, and her sword arm began to go numb. Through the press, she glimpsed Fellrant's personal banner; the king himself could not be far away.

I'll kill him. I swear to the gods, I'll cut his heart out, even if it costs my own life.

Fellrant's Sworn had drawn into a tight knot to defend their king, as they strove to break through into the keep. The tides of battle swept them closer, then closer still. Suchen could feel her heart pounding in anticipation, until her only thought was to live long enough to face Fellrant over crossed swords. She hacked closer, a madwoman with no desire but to have her revenge, until she found herself battling the Sworn seeking to protect him. Just a few more to kill, she only had to survive a little while longer, and she could take Fellrant down to Hel's domain with her...

Then the line broke.

It happened suddenly. A mass of Fellrant's soldiers made a concentrated attack on the right flank, which held for only a few moments before crumbling. Within seconds, howling warriors were running through the courtyard towards the keep doors, while others came around to the backs of what remained of Vorslava's defensive line.

"Draw in!" Auglar shouted above the din. Suchen snarled in helpless fury, dragged away from Fellrant by the undertow of struggle. She found herself back-to-back with Auglar and a handful of others. They were cut off, surrounded on all sides, and she realized in despair that she would not live to see Fellrant's death after all.

A spear jabbed past her and found its mark in Brenwulf's throat. Auglar cried out and hacked uselessly at the haft, but it was too late. Blood gurgling out of his mouth, Brenwulf slowly collapsed, first to his knees, then to the ground.

"Close in!" Buudi screamed. "Close in!"

Suchen stepped over Brenwulf's dying form, leaving him outside their protective circle. There was nothing more to be done. Her sword had grown heavy in her hands, and she dimly realized that it would not be much longer before the rest of them were cut down as well. A curious sense of resignation came over her. Everything that they had lost, everything that they had sacrificed, everything that they had endured ... in the end it had made no difference at all.

A sound intruded on her consciousness, even over the hellish clang of steel on steel, the shrieks of the dying. It was a sound that didn't belong on a battlefield, and for a moment she couldn't identify it, so out-of-place did it seem. The cacophony all around her began to quiet as other warriors heard the noise and paused, wondering what it could mean.

It was the howling of wolves.

Not one or two wolves, though, not to make such a noise. It was the howls of hundreds—perhaps even thousands.

What ... who?

The Jenelese soldiers fell back, uncertain what the howls boded. As the battle stuttered to a halt, Suchen peered out through the gaping ruin of the gate to the plains. Indistinct shapes moved in the grass, and at first she was unable to make them out. The shapes grew closer and closer, the sound of howling approaching with them, and at last she realized what she was seeing.

Wolves. Not just a few, not just a pack, but a veritable flood of them, running flank-to-flank straight at Vorslava.

"Who in the name of Hel are they?" Wulfgar wondered.

The wolves never slowed as they approached the battlefield. The closest Jenelese soldiers began to draw back from them ... then began to run. The lithe shapes slammed into Fellrant's warriors, knocking them off their feet or dragging them down, biting and rending any bit of exposed flesh. Within seconds, what discipline remained broke as men sought to flee the gray shadows.

But there was nowhere for them to run. More wolves came, and then more, so many Suchen couldn't hope to count them. In their midst was a small group of human figures mounted on horseback. The morning wind caught the banner they carried, unfurling it to reveal a white horse on a blue field.

Auglar's personal device.

"What the...?" Auglar murmured, shading his eyes to see. Then an expression of utter disbelief crossed his features, and he shook his head, as if denying something. "Is ... it can't be ... *Sifya?*"

Sifya's golden hair was filthy and tangled, and her clothing, almost in rags; but her fierce eyes were proud and her smile was triumphant. She rode at the front of the small group, a child cradled before her in a sling that left her hands free for fighting. Behind her came familiar faces: some of Sifya's cousins Suchen had known at Kellsjard, as well as Jiara the healermage.

Auglar let out a cry of joy. The battle forgotten, he ran to greet the wife and child he had thought dead. But even as he did so, a small, dark figure lunged at him from one side, a bloody sword in its hand.

Suchen moved automatically, bringing her sword around in a desperate attempt to protect Auglar. She felt the blade's edge scrape armor, then find the gap between plates and bite deep into flesh. Fellrant staggered, blood spurting from his mouth. A look of confusion crossed his beautiful face ... and then vanished as his features went slack.

Suchen wrenched her sword out as he collapsed among the other bodies in the yard. He looked small in death, like a child almost, young and lost. Although she had expected to feel some kind of triumph, there was nothing, only a lingering sense of anger and grief.

For a moment, no one moved nor spoke. Then Gless took a limping step forward, until he stood beside Auglar.

"The king is dead!" he proclaimed. "Long live the king!"

Auglar cast him a puzzled look, but Buudi instantly saw what Gless was about. "Throw down your weapons!" he shouted at those who had been part of Fellrant's army. "Auglar of Kellsjard is King of Jenel by right of inheritance! Cease your actions, or else risk treason against your lawful monarch!"

It's true, Suchen thought, dazed and shocked. In the absence of any heirs of Fellrant's body, Auglar was legally next in line for the throne.

One by one, the nearest soldiers dropped their weapons to the ground. Many of them appeared to be nothing more than peasant farmers forced into the army, who didn't want to be there to begin with. Others either agreed with Auglar's claim, or else preferred taking a chance on his mercy over taking a chance against wolves and dragons. A few fought on, but any real opposition had fallen apart.

An odd silence descended over Vorslava's courtyard. Auglar held Sifya and their baby to him as if he would never let either of them go. "I'm sorry it took me so long," Sifya said, after their tears had subsided. "When Kellsjard fell, we fled to the forests of Shalai. I have family there, but it ... took a while to convince them to help."

Auglar managed a hoarse laugh. "You never were on time for anything."

Sifya handed him the baby, and he cradled it close, kissing its face. All around him, men and women either bowed or knelt, silently offering fealty to their new king.

Gods, Suchen thought as she joined them. *It's over. It's really over. We won.*

I'm alive.

Oh, gods, Yozerf...

The sound of great wings echoed from the direction of the cliffs. A moment later, two dragons appeared high over Vorslava. The edges of their wings were tattered, and blood and burns stained their leathery hides. The black held something in his forepaws, but it was too distant to see what it was. Letting out a cry that seemed to combine both triumph and anguish, he dipped lower over the keep and let his burden go.

Ax's burned and battered body crashed into the rubble of the destroyed gate, where it lay unmoving with the rest of the dead.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Suchen and Owl walked slowly along the beach north of Vorslava. The weather had grown steadily warmer in the three weeks since the final battle, and the salty breeze that blew in from the sea cooled sweat from their faces. Gulls circled above or bobbed on the waves, uncaring of any human troubles. The endless waves continued their assault on the land, crashing against the black basalt of the sea stacks and sending a fine mist into the air.

Owl hadn't wanted to come. She had cried herself to sleep every night, angry and hurt over what seemed to her a betrayal on Yozerf's part. All the explanations in the world couldn't change the central fact that he was gone, and this final abandonment had been almost too much for her young heart to bear.

For a little while after, the two dragons had hung about near Vorslava, never drawing too close but still palpably present. Their eerie, mournful cries sounded at dawn and dusk, and their shadows flickered across the stone walls like passing birds. They would perch upon the great sea stacks, their hides revealing hidden iridescence in the sunlight, and call back and forth in weird, harsh barks. What they spoke of—or if it were speech at all—Suchen did not know.

As time passed, however, they disappeared for longer and longer stretches. The gray in particular was spotted farther and farther north of the keep. When Buudi remarked on the fact in Owl's hearing, the girl had turned her gray eyes on him and said simply: "Caden is calling them."

Suchen gently stroked Owl's hair back from her face. It was impossible to say what magic Yozerf had inadvertently passed on to her along with his blood during the adoption ceremony, or how it would manifest in the years to come. The thought of all those long years hollowed out Suchen's heart, and she wondered how she would face them alone, knowing that Yozerf lived and yet was lost to her. She didn't know the lifespan of dragons, or if there was any point in seeking him out again someday, once Owl was grown.

The gray had not been seen for two days now, and Suchen suspected that she had already left for the dead kingdom that bound her. The black still lingered, but in her heart Suchen knew that he would not be able to stay for long. So, when she had seen him this morning, perched on a stack near the beach, she had asked Owl to come with her to say good-bye.

He roosted on a low stack that stood in shallow water, his black hide gleaming in the sun. Long claws gripped the rock with confidence, and the delicate, membranous wings were folded neatly along his back. As they approached, his horn-crowned head swung around to watch them, and Suchen saw that his eyes were still the same sleet-gray as they had always been.

They came to a halt a few feet away. Suchen glanced down at Owl, but the girl refused to look up. Squeezing Owl's hand gently, she took a deep breath and turned to the dragon.

"I know you can't stay long," she said, although in truth she didn't know if he could even understand her anymore. "So we've come to say good-bye."

Those gray eyes fixed on her, and she felt a terrible pang at the sight. Despite everything else, they were still Yozerf's eyes, and her loss overwhelmed her once again. "I ... there are some things I wanted to tell you, before you go. Vorslava's doing well. We're still repairing the walls, but it won't be much longer before they're back together. A lot of people left to return to their own homes, though, to see if there is anything to go back to. There are crops to be planted, and houses to be rebuilt. I think it will be a long time before Jenel heals from this war, and if the weather stays bad it will be even longer. But Auglar's doing everything he can."

She swallowed hard against the knot in her throat, but she forced herself to go on. This was her only chance to tell him, after all. "A-Auglar doesn't want just to rebuild what we had; he wants things to be better than they were before. I think he would have been a good king if this war hadn't happened, but because it did—because he had to experience the things he did—now I think he'll be a great one. The very first edict he handed down was to allow Aclytes the right to own property. The second was for them to be able to legally marry."

She was crying now, but she couldn't help it. "Owl and I miss you so much," she managed to whisper, before she dropped to her knees in the sand.

Owl began to cry as well, great sobs that shook her body, and they clung together. "Don't leave us, Papa!" she said, although her tears distorted the words. "Please, don't leave us, come back!"

Suchen held Owl to her, and they clung together, each the only solace the other had. Over Owl's shaking shoulder, Suchen saw the dragon fling his head back. A long, moaning cry erupted from his throat, so lonely and sad that it broke her heart.

Then the dragon dropped his head. He climbed to his feet and spread his wings, and for a moment Suchen thought that this was it, that he would take to the air and leave them forever. But instead, a spasm ran through his lean body. A groan of pain escaped him, and he shook his head violently back and forth.

"Something's wrong," Owl whispered fearfully.

Suddenly afraid, Suchen stood up, although she didn't know what she could possibly do. The dragon's groan turned into an anguished roar, and his entire body suddenly convulsed. Wings stretched out, his back arched, and his claws broke the rock in his agony. His eyes wept tears of blood, and more blood began to leak from his nostrils and mouth. The roar escalated, grew higher in pitch...

And became the howl of a wolf.

The dragon lost his grip on his perch and plummeted into the waves. Even as he fell, Suchen saw his body shimmer, shrink, pull in on itself...

The wolf's head broke the water. With a cry, Suchen ran towards him, Owl on her heels. Before they could reach him, a wave caught his body and shoved it hard into the sand. He staggered to his feet, took two steps, and then collapsed.

Suchen grabbed him by the forelegs and pulled hard, desperate to get him out of the reach of the waves before they could drag him out to sea. Owl helped, and together they wrestled the wolf higher onto the beach. As they laid him down on the sand, his eyes cracked open, blinking against the crust of blood drying around them.

The fur beneath Suchen's fingers faded into white skin. Yozerf lay on his side, gasping for air as if he had been drowning. He looked half dead, with blood all over his face, but Suchen didn't care. Hardly daring to believe this was real, she let go of his wrists and tentatively touched his cheek. "Yozerf?"

He licked his cracked lips, then managed a smile. "Promised you, didn't I?" he whispered, his voice hoarse and so faint, she could barely hear him.

"Oh gods, yes!" She flung her arms around him, not caring that he was soaking wet. She could feel him shivering, and she let go just long enough to take off her cloak and wrap it around him. Owl clung to his neck, refusing to loosen her embrace for even an instant.

When enough strength had returned to allow him to sit up, Suchen pulled back a little and looked

wonderingly into eyes as gray as the dragon's had been. "But ... I don't understand. How is this possible?"

He looked achingly tired, but even so, he smiled at her. Owl crawled into his lap, and he stroked her hair. "Don't you remember?" he asked. His voice still sounded ragged and hoarse, and for the first time Suchen noticed the thin white scar that ringed his throat. "My Wolfkin blood is inimical to my Jonaglr. I could never call upon both magics at the same time. As soon as I tried to be the wolf, the fire and the wind would be gone."

"So changing into the wolf broke the spell?" she guessed. Then she frowned as another thought came to her. "Why didn't you do it earlier? Gods, why put us through three weeks of torment, thinking you were lost forever?"

He winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't ... it's hard to explain what it was like to be a dragon. I had lost myself, somehow. All of my other memories were fading, and I had to fight to cling to them, to stay here near you. But when you began to speak to me ... when I realized that this was my mate and my cub before me ... Those are things of the wolf."

"So you were able to shape-shift and break the spell." She wiped a strand of blood-colored hair back from his pale face, marveling that she *could* do such a thing, that he was here with her.

"You make it sound so easy," he said. Even as he spoke, his eyelids fluttered, as if he were fighting sleep, and his body began to sag. He had fought a hard battle, she realized, and it had taken almost everything he had to give to return to them.

"You're tired," she whispered, and kissed him on the forehead. "Lie down and rest a while, my love. I'll keep watch."

"I know," he said, and fell asleep in her arms.

* * * *

The light of a high summer sun streamed through the windows of Vorslava's great hall. King Auglar stood on the dais before as many of the keep's inhabitants as could fit into the hall at one time. Before him on the lower step stood Yozerf and Suchen, with Owl in between. Over their heads arched a canopy held up by Gless, Wulfgar, Buudi, and Afwyn.

Yozerf smiled at Suchen over Owl's head. His mate looked truly radiant today, her blue eyes shining with tears that for once came from happiness instead of sorrow. A gown of blue silk trimmed with gold thread clung to her slender body, and he thought that he had never seen anything more beautiful.

For this one day, he had abandoned his own habitual black and instead dressed in pure white. The golden necklace that marked him Lord of Vorslava clinked gently when he moved, and the scent of the blood-red roses twined in his hair filled the air around him.

Auglar took Yozerf's right hand and lightly bound a silk cord around his wrist, then tied the other end to Suchen's. At Yozerf's encouraging nod, Owl reached out and laid her own small hand over their intertwined fingers.

Yozerf looked into Suchen's eyes and felt his throat tighten with emotion. But they had agreed that he would speak first, so he cleared his throat before realizing that it would make little difference. His voice would forever have a raspy quality to it, scarred by the knife that had taken his old life in exchange for the dragon's shape. It was, he thought, a small price to pay.

"I never imagined this day," he said, and she smiled at his unadorned honesty. "The path that led here was long and painful, and there were so many times when I couldn't see any end, let alone one like this. The path that leads away from here is wholly new to me, and I can't see very far along it. But if you will walk it with me, I promise to you that I will be your lover, your mate, and your friend. I will protect you and shelter you and comfort you. I promise to be a father to our daughter and to love you both for all the days of my life, however long they shall be."

Suchen smiled at him, strong and confident. "I will walk the path with you. I promise that I will be your lover, your mate, and your friend. I will protect you and shelter you and comfort you. I promise to be a mother to our daughter and to love you both for all the days of my life, however long they shall be."

Auglar unbound the cord, but their hands remained clasped. "Let it be known from this day forth," he declared to the crowded hall, "that Yozerf Jonaglir, Lord of Vorslava, and Suchen Keblava are henceforth husband and wife."

They came together for a kiss, then parted, each one taking one of Owl's hands in their own. Together, they walked down the flower-strewn aisle and out the doors leading into the courtyard. A cheer went up from the crowd waiting outside, and well-wishers threw more flowers at their feet. The commotion startled a flock of birds from their perches in the eaves; they took to the air, circling higher and higher, until they were lost in the blue sky.

About The Author

When Elaine Corvidae was eight years old, she came home from school one day and declared that she was going to be a writer. Elaine is not certain what prompted that declaration, but unlike so many other decisions in life, it stuck from that day on.

Elaine has worked as an office assistant, archaeologist, and raptor rehabilitator. She is currently earning her Masters degree in Biology at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. She lives near Charlotte, NC, with her husband and their three cats, who are just like children, except they never ask to borrow the car.

Elaine is a vegan (strict vegetarian) and interested in animal rights. She enjoys backpacking, wasting time on the computer, good beer, and loud music.

Her first published novel, *Winter's Orphans*, was the recipient of the 2001 Dream Realm Award and the 2002 Eppie Award.

To learn more about Elaine Corvidae visit her official website at www.onecrow.net.

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