

CERRÍDOWEN PRESS

SHADOW
WORLD GATES
Prince



*Jennifer
Dunne*

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Shadow Prince

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SHADOW PRINCE

Jennifer Dunne

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Prologue

10 years after Not Quite Camelot

Kerrim exchanged his empty tankard for his lute and began the next song. *“In the days lost to shadow, in a land to the north—”*

A slim dagger *thunked* into the wall beside his head, the black glass blade slipping between the grains of the wood like liquid night. He ended his song with a yelp and a discordant jangle, his gaze locked on the motionless weapon less than a handspan from his head. The elaborately patterned silver hilt seemed less a handle and more a cage to imprison the darkness barely visible beneath the metal. Something about the dagger was naggingly familiar, but fear addled his normally excellent recall.

“Let us have no songs about the lost glories of Nord D’Rae, minstrel,” a cultured baritone said in the sudden silence. Kerrim whipped around. The voice came from the shadowed corner furthest from the tavern’s fire.

Kerrim breathed deeply of the smoke- and ale-scented air, and peered past the groups of weavers and dyers seated at the round tables. Quiet conversations consumed them, and none of the patrons met his gaze. Straining his eyes to pierce the gloom beyond the fire’s glow, Kerrim saw only a black-cloaked figure in shadow, and the glint of a gold chalice as the figure lifted it to his lips. He didn’t know which frightened him more, the emotionless calm of the man who had nearly sliced off his ear, or the way the other patrons ignored what had just happened.

“Of course, my lord,” Kerrim said. Anyone with so much gold that they could make a chalice out of it had to be a member of the nobility, or near to buying a title. It never hurt to err on the side of caution, especially with people who threw deadly knives. “Does my lord have any preferences for songs I should sing?”

“The good people of this tavern have a fondness for prankster and harvest songs. But if you must play a battle hymn...” A flash of white in the darkness suggested that the lord smiled, although his dry tone never changed. “Try ‘In the Hall of Amin-Ra’.”

The conversations stopped. Kerrim shivered, but determinedly set his fingers on his lute strings. No matter how sweetly stated, he knew a command when he heard one. And this was one lord he did not dare displease, or the Heavenly Pair only knew where the next dagger might land.

His voice rang out clear and strong as he began the tale of a party of noble knights who descended into the underworld to rescue a lady. Then, betrayed by the woman they had hoped to save, they were forced to serve Amin-Ra, Lord of the Dead. Reborn as the Amin-Re, the Princes of Death traveled through the world of the living collecting souls. Normally only sung on World’s End Eve, to remind people of the dark forces at work, the tale seemed strangely appropriate.

Falling under the power of his muse, Kerrim lost himself in the song. When the last note faded, his vision cleared and he returned to reality with a start. The tables were deserted. He was alone.

The shadowed corner drew his gaze with an unseen suggestion of movement. Not quite alone.

"You play well, minstrel. Although perhaps a poorer player would have kept his audience."

"If I have kept your attention, I am well pleased, my lord Amin-Re."

The man laughed, his tone surprisingly bright. "I fear I must disappoint you, but I am no storied prince of death." The humor faded from his voice. "Narda-Re will do."

Prince of Shadows. A chill washed through Kerrim's blood, dissolving the brash confidence inspired by his performance.

A gold coin tumbled through the air to land at his feet. His eyes widened as he bent to pick the coin up off the wood plank floor. A twenty-*graz* piece!

"My lord, this is too—" He froze, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, as the shadow within a shadow stood, then approached.

As the man glided closer, Kerrim made out a human form and features beneath the cloak, and let out his breath in relief. In his heart, he had half-feared to see a night-helmed rider of darkness, or worse.

The man drew closer still, the crack and pop of the fire at Kerrim's back masking the sound of his quiet footfalls. As he approached, the pale oval of his face resolved into compressed lips, a long, narrow nose, and eyes so dark they appeared black, all framed by a shoulder-length fall of black hair. He continued gliding toward Kerrim, his dark boots and long black cloak flowing from the shadow of one table to the next. He stepped onto Kerrim's own shadow, and even that indirect contact was enough to terrify the minstrel. He locked his gaze on the man's human face, trying to convince himself that his fears were all a trick of the flickering firelight. But no matter how close the man came, he still seemed wrapped in his own personal shadow that the fire was helpless to dissipate. His hair was not blue-black, or brown-black, but a true black that absorbed all light that dared try to illuminate it.

He stopped beside Kerrim and lifted one arm, parting his cloak to reveal a black surcoat, intricately embroidered in thread of such dark green as to be almost invisible. Kerrim cringed, curling around his fragile lute. The man chuckled and pulled his dagger from the wall.

"I am collecting only my blade, not your soul."

The dagger gleamed in the light from the dying fire. Red reflections danced, not off the dull silver hilt, but from the glassy black blade. The man sighted along the weapon's edge. As soon as he was satisfied that it had received no damage, he tucked it up his sleeve, the click of the blade locking into its sheath ominously loud in the silence.

Black and silver throwing knives. The memory swam closer to Kerrim's awareness. He could almost grasp it.

The man turned, bringing his features closer to the fire. Light glinted off a paler band of black almost completely obscured by the man's hair. With the clarity of imminent death, Kerrim recognized the band as a tarnished silver circlet. The memory burst over him, of the legend that had inspired his interrupted song, and he fell to his knees.

"My lord Prince, forgive me! I did not realize—"

The prince's soft touch on Kerrim's bent head silenced him. He'd expected the prince's fingers to be cold, but they were warm and alive.

"I told you, I am prince only of shadows." His voice was barely louder than a whisper, yet it echoed with tightly leashed emotion.

Kerrim risked a glance up, and looked into desolate eyes lost in bleak visions of the past. They were the color of the depths of the sea where the sun never shone, just like in the song the prince had stopped him from singing.

"Reynart D'Altha," he breathed. This was the rebellious assassin-prince whose eagerness for his father's throne destroyed the kingdom of Nord D'Rae ten years ago, and who had carved a swathe of death throughout the empire of Illornia in the years since.

The black dagger leapt into the prince's hand from the forearm sheath where he had concealed it. Kerrim knew he had no hope of escape if the legendary assassin decided to strike.

"You are clever as well as talented. Tell me, minstrel. Having dared to name me, can you think of any reason you should not die now?"

Kerrim swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. "Because if you let me live, I shall write a new song telling the true story of the loss of Nord D'Rae."

The prince's fingers tightened on the knife until his knuckles shone white, but the blade never wavered. Then, so abruptly Kerrim almost missed it, he turned the blade and slid it back into his wrist sheath. "Very well, minstrel. You may hear the story."

Negligently waving Kerrim back to his seat on the stool, the prince's expression turned distant. "It all began with a woman."

Reynart settled in one of the abandoned chairs before the fire, his gaze focused on the glowing coals in the fireplace. Kerrim's eagerness to learn the tale outweighed his fear, and he bent forward, shifting his lute to a more comfortable position on his lap. Instantly, the dagger was in the prince's hand, his arm drawn back to throw.

Kerrim lifted his hands, slowly.

The prince's lips twisted in a brief impression of a smile, gone before Kerrim could be certain he saw it. "I suggest you sit quietly if you wish to survive the telling of this tale."

"Yes, my lord Prince."

Reynart breathed deeply, turning once more to gaze deeply into the glowing coals as he sheathed his blade. "Would that someone had given me a similar warning. But I was completely unprepared for Anjeli."

"Anjeli?" The name was unfamiliar.

"A beautiful noblewoman, untouched by the intrigues of the court. Or so I thought at the time. She was like the first breath of spring, clearing the stench from a castle too long closed over the cold winter."

Kerrim's eyes widened. The feared and deadly assassin spoke with the soul of a bard. Or a man in love.

Reynart's dagger slipped into his palm. No sooner had he flicked it up, securing it in its sheath, than it once again dropped into his hand. The rhythmic *flick-snick* was the only outward sign of his distress, and captivated Kerrim's attention. His gaze locked on the glittering black blade, he readied himself to dive to the hearthstones if the prince's arm should lift for a throw.

"She claimed to need my protection, to keep her safe from Gervaise, the court mage." His fingers tightened around the dagger's hilt, and Kerrim clutched his lute, hoping he could keep it safe when he dove to the floor.

Reynart swore, the Tsieche words unfamiliar but the tone unmistakable. Slamming his dagger into its sheath, he rose and began pacing. Kerrim silently beseeched the Heavenly Pair to lend the prince their strength. He didn't want to be anywhere near an out of control assassin.

"Fool that I was, I sacrificed everything to protect her, even helping her to flee the castle, knowing the King would brand me a traitor for such an act. I brought her to Illornia. And still, she kept up her pretense of innocence. Until I sought to find out how closely the King's guards were following us."

Kerrim didn't dare interrupt Reynart's recitation, although he was filled with questions. How could the prince protect her from a mage? Why did she need to flee? And greatest of all, why had none of the other survivors of Nord D'Rae mentioned this woman?

"There were no guards behind us. There was *nothing* behind us. Nord D'Rae was gone, the magical gateway connecting to it as dead as —"

Reynart turned away, shoulders bent as he braced himself against one of the tables. Kerrim wondered briefly if the prince would hurl the table across the room, splintering the wood in a savage effort to bleed off the anger that radiated from his quivering body.

Slowly, the prince released the table and stood rigidly erect. The totally silent control was more terrifying than any display of fury.

"Even then, I did not understand. I sent her away so that I could grieve in private. When she failed to return, I searched everywhere for her. Innocent as I'd imagined her to be, I feared she'd run afoul of thieves, slavers, or worse. I found them all, every misbegotten piece of human refuse in the city, and forced them to tell me what they

knew. She had not been attacked or captured. She left of her own free will, having learned that her mission was completed.”

Kerrim shook his head, instinctively seeking to blunt the edge of pain in the prince’s voice. “But if you didn’t find her, how could you know –?”

“Once she was gone, the spell she’d held me under dissipated, and I was free to see the truths I should have seen before.”

Calmly, Reynart resumed his seat, and dispassionately began to list all the reasons why he knew the woman he had loved had meant to betray him from the beginning.

Chapter One

Angie Blanchard threaded her way between the crowded tables in Dino's Cafe, the laughter and conversation pressing against her in a wall of sound. She fought to show no sign of her discomfort. No one must ever guess that she was different from the rest of them, but the pretense was growing harder and harder to maintain. She ached for the safe solitude of her isolated home in the desert.

The noise receded as she pushed through the swinging doors leading to the outside balcony. With a sense of relief, she slipped into the lone unoccupied chair. The unsmiling man already seated at the table tapped his gold-plated watch for emphasis.

"It's twelve-ten, Angie."

"Your watch is fast. Besides, I don't have time to eat. Say whatever you have to say, and then I'm back to the studio."

"I'm deducting this meal as a business expense, so you'd better order something."

"Fine." She looked up and caught the attention of one of the harried waiters. "Coffee, please."

Across the table from her, Donald Thorogoode sighed, and drummed his perfectly manicured nails on the tabletop. "You're impossible, you know that? What are you so busy with?"

"I entered two of my paintings in this year's competition. *The Dancing Girl*, and *The Evil Slave Owner*."

Angie grinned, pride in her work overcoming her lingering discomfort at being out in public. They were two of her best pieces. She'd captured the dancing girl in the middle of a turn, surrounded by billowing scarves and swirling smoke, her audience a dark shadow in front of her, a bright smile on her crimson lips, and exhilaration vibrating in every line of her body. The second painting was at the other extreme, showing a fat man in richly jeweled and embroidered Renaissance-style clothing, fear oozing from his pores as he cowered over the still body of his whipped and beaten slave boy, looking up at a shadowy form concealed within a black cloak.

Her coffee arrived, and she lifted the mug gratefully. She didn't want to think about the dark recesses of her mind that produced the inspiration for her paintings.

Donald sipped his half-empty scotch and soda, and fixed her with his penetrating blue gaze. "What are you wasting your time on a local competition for? You know you'll never win. The judges here want pictures of cacti and coyotes and big-eyed Native American children, the things tourists coming to see the Grand Canyon or Painted Desert buy."

"I know there isn't a lot of call for my paintings here in Sedona, but that's why you're my agent. You can sell them in Phoenix, or Tucson, or L.A."

"Or Seattle."

"Seattle?"

She set down her mug, carefully squaring the handle with the corner of the table. Seattle was known for its rain. And it was a big, crowded city. If she had an episode there, someone was sure to see her.

She noticed a faint tremor in her left hand, and quickly dropped both hands to her lap, hiding them from view.

"I got an offer for a gallery showing. You'd be one of the featured exhibitors at an international fantasy and science fiction convention. It's the sort of exposure you can only dream about down here." He knocked back the last of his drink, and signaled the waiter for another one. "If they wanted any of my other clients, I'd have accepted in an instant. But after New York —"

"I tried to get there, Donald. But there was a storm warning —"

"And New Orleans —"

"I told you not to —"

"And Boston —"

"I never agreed to the show in Boston."

Donald locked gazes with her. "And you're not going to agree to the Seattle show, are you? The best deal of your life and you're going to toss it away because you're afraid of rain."

Even as he said it, she cringed at how stupid it sounded. Afraid of rain. But far better to sound like an idiot than reveal the real reason.

She lifted her chin. "They don't need me, just my paintings. You can do the showing."

Donald narrowed his sky blue eyes, a slight frown marring his smoothly tanned face. "How many times do I have to tell you this, Angie? Galleries don't sell paintings, they sell artists. You've got to be there to mingle with the clients and discuss your work, or the deal's off."

"There are plenty of reclusive artists, and they sell just fine."

"You can be as reclusive as you want once you're famous. While you're still trying to make a name for yourself, you need to mix and mingle."

Angie gripped the wooden arms of her chair. He was right. It was the chance of a lifetime. But she couldn't possibly go to Seattle.

Her skin turned cold and clammy, and she tightened her hold on the chair, trying to still the trembling in her fingers. She had to get out before he saw her reaction, before it got worse. He didn't understand. No one could, because she didn't dare tell anyone. If

the doctors knew she was still having visions, they'd lock her away and this time she'd never get free.

Donald shook his head. "You're almost thirty."

"Twenty-seven," she corrected automatically.

"Whatever. You're old enough to know better. This fear will cripple you for the rest of your life if you don't face it. It's just water, for heaven's sake."

Her fingers ached from clutching the chair as she tried desperately to anchor herself to reality. It didn't work. She'd never learned to control the visions.

The memories she tried so hard to keep locked away burst their restraints and overwhelmed her. Angie recognized the vision instantly, as she'd relived the scenes from her hallucination so many times before. Then she was lost in the memory.

Waterlogged woolen skirts dragged at her legs, threatening to pull her from her precarious perch across Reynart's lap as his horse stumbled on the slippery trail. Reynart's arm tightened around her waist. He shifted his weight, giving an unspoken command to the horse, and it stopped instantly. The beast lowered its head and stood fetlock-deep in the oozing mud, shifting from hoof to hoof, its lathered sides heaving. A curtain of silver rain trapped them in a miniature world defined by the length and breadth of their steed. Rushing water drowned out all sounds except the slurping suction of mud grudgingly releasing hooves, and the horse's labored breathing.

Angie shivered, partly from cold, but mostly from fear. Reynart pulled his heavy woolen cloak around her shoulders, enclosing her in a warm, wet haven, and tucked her closer against his leather- and velvet-clad chest. Her cheek rested against his steadily beating heart. Unlike her, he was never afraid.

They needed to reach the last gateway before the rains washed it away. The first three were already gone. Their horse could barely stumble uphill and desperately needed a rest, but if they missed this gateway, they were dead. Yet, Reynart was a true prince, facing the challenge without fear.

Terror ate at her soul as they struggled onward in the rain, her legs turning numb from the cold as her mind turned numb from the constant fear. She was going to die, cold, wet, and on another world.

Reynart nudged her out of her stupor and pointed into the mist ahead. "There's the gateway."

He urged the horse between the pillars of the flickering but still functional gateway. A rush of inner warmth flooded through her as a disorienting blur of color and sound surrounded her. The wash of sensation isolated her from Reynart, casting her adrift from her anchor to the fantasy world.

Exerting all her willpower, she struggled free, back to reality, and drank in the comforting sight of Dino's cafe.

She was dry. She was safe. Best of all, the episode had been brief enough that it had gone unnoticed. This time.

Her racing heart slowed to normal. And yet, she suddenly missed the comfort of having Reynart's warm arm around her. Silly. He was nothing more than a delusion, part of the hallucination she'd experienced while in her coma. Yet, even the illusion of peace and safety sometimes seemed better than the constant stress of holding her fragile psyche together.

She focused her attention on Donald's earnest expression. She hadn't heard a word he'd said, but he didn't seem to have noticed her lapse as he wound down to the conclusion of his speech.

"So you see how pointless it is to be scared of something so unlikely to ever happen again. You can't allow a single accident to rule the rest of your life."

She glared at him, hating his well-meaning words. He had no idea how much that accident, and the damn hallucination it had spawned, ruled her life.

The doctors had explained it all to her. The nightmare images had come from her own brain. On some level, she'd realized that her parents had been killed in the storm-caused car accident that left her in a coma. In an effort to shield her from the truth, while explaining the aches and pains her own injuries had caused, her subconscious dreamed up the hallucination.

No, she wasn't afraid of rain because she feared another flash flood. She was afraid because it triggered episodes like the one she'd just had, sending her back into the dream.

Which was why she had to leave. Now. She had to get out of Dino's, before Donald said something that triggered a full attack. If she could just get back to her studio, she could channel her reaction into a painting. She might not be able to control the hallucinations, but at least she'd found a way to profit from them.

Donald would profit, too, if he could sell more of her work. Her fear transformed into anger.

"You know my fears inspire my paintings, but that's okay with you. As long as I don't let my fears inconvenience a gallery showing. Is that what you're saying, Donald? Are you really concerned for me, or are you just worried about losing your fifteen percent?"

He started, obviously expecting a different reaction. His frown smoothed out, and he spoke with the slow, careful words used to calm angry dogs or irrational children.

"Your paintings sell so well because your subjects show recognizable emotions, even in fantastic situations. That doesn't mean you have to limit yourself to the same settings in all of them." He dropped his voice and glanced away. "Or the same people."

"The same people? Are you even looking at what you're selling? I've done maybe half a dozen of Reynart over the years, and that's the most I've repeated anyone."

"Even if he's not visible, there's a strange shadow on the wall, or a blacker piece of darkness, and I know he's there. Hiding. Waiting." He laughed weakly, then ruined the effect by gulping half of his fresh scotch and soda in a single swallow.

He slugged back the rest of his drink. "I'm through arguing with you about it. Take it or leave it, but if you turn this chance down, you get yourself another agent."

"When would the showing be?"

"Two months from now."

Two months. She could solve her latest problem in two months, couldn't she?

"You took me by surprise with this, Donald. But you're right. It's the chance of a lifetime. Give me some time to think?"

Donald smiled, confident of her eventual answer. "The gallery needs an answer by Wednesday. You can take until then."

* * * * *

Angie dropped her paintbrush into the Mason jar with the others, and stepped back to look at her new masterpiece. She'd have to check her color book and see what her subconscious was trying to tell her by the heavy use of brown in the painting. Dark wooden planks and beams filled the background, fading into deep brown shadows at the edge of the painting. In the foreground, a suntanned teenager with ginger hair, dressed in a brown tunic and tan hose, clutched a wooden lute, his mouth half open and his eyes wide. The only things in the painting that weren't brown were the crackling fire behind the boy, and the silver-handled knife plunged into the wood beside his ear.

It was good, if a bit on the spooky side. Too bad she couldn't choose her own subjects. Or create such detailed and lifelike paintings without being in an artistic trance.

She carried her brushes to the sink and held them under the cold water tap, watching the paint spiral down the drain. Donald said her painting ability was a gift. If so, it was like the cursed gifts from the old *Friday the Thirteenth* television series. She could paint with almost magical detail and speed. All she had to do was give up control of her mind.

The water sluicing through the brushes ran clear, and she squirted soap into her hand. Crushing the bristles against her palm, she worked up a brown-stained lather, and rinsed more paint away. She repeated the process until her hands were numb from the cold water and the brushes were free from paint, except for the residual stain that would never wash away.

After shaking out the brushes, she upended them in another Mason jar to dry. She was like those brushes, her world colored by her time in the coma. And the stain would never go away. It would just build over time, getting darker and deeper until the brushes had to be thrown away.

Drying her hands on her paint-spattered jeans, Angie walked back over to her easel. Ten years ago, when she'd first come out of her coma and been reeling from the news of

her parents' deaths, the doctors in the clinic had tried art therapy to get her to reveal her inner mind. That's when she'd discovered her new gift.

She'd been able to paint whatever she chose, then. Traditional still lifes, landscapes, or scenes from her hallucination. On a whim, she'd taken some of the fantasy paintings to a local science fiction convention, hoping to sell them for enough money to cover art supplies. She'd sold everything she brought, and left with orders for more. That's also where she'd met Donald.

Sighing, Angie let her gaze travel around her desert studio. She never would have been able to afford this place if Donald hadn't found those high-priced L.A. outlets for her artwork. She owed him.

But what did she owe herself?

She busied herself putting the lids back on the jars of powdered pigment, and returning them to their neatly ordered trays. Keeping her hands busy always helped her to think more clearly.

The startled minstrel in her painting caught her eye, and she turned back to look at it. She knew who had thrown the dagger at him. Reynart. Donald was right. She did paint Reynart into all of her fantasy paintings.

But why had Reynart thrown the knife at the boy? He was only a minstrel.

She laughed. She'd done it again, acting like these people actually existed outside of her mind. What she should have said was what had her subconscious been trying to express by illustrating the Reynart construct throwing a dagger at a minstrel?

"I bet the minstrel was reminding Reynart of his responsibilities, like Donald reminded me of mine. And he probably hated the reminder." She picked up a palette knife and hurled it at the far wall, as if she was throwing a dagger. The blunt-edged tool bounced harmlessly off the adobe wall, and clattered to the terra cotta-tiled floor.

"I guess killing off your responsibilities only works in fantasies."

She couldn't silence her conscience so easily. No other agent would have stayed with her after the New York show, or rather, no-show. She'd expected Donald to sue her for breach of contract, but he'd just asked to be reimbursed the three thousand dollars he'd lost. He'd even been willing to accept the payment in installments.

No, she owed him more than she could repay with money. Which meant, like it or not, she had to go to Seattle.

She retrieved the palette knife, holding it up to the light to check for nicks in its finish. If the edges weren't smooth, it wouldn't blend the paint correctly, and she'd have to get another one. But it looked okay. Her brief lapse of control hadn't done any lasting damage.

How long would her luck hold out, though? The flashbacks were happening more frequently. She'd had two full-blown episodes in the last month, not to mention the shorter attacks like the one today. And she lost herself in her paintings at least twice a week. She'd started having nightmares about returning to the fantasy world multiple

times each night, and suspected that lack of sleep was weakening her ability to resist the visions. How was she going to make sure she survived the Seattle trip without having a public episode that would force the witnesses to have her committed?

She checked her watch. If she hurried, she could drive out to the Valley of Fire and hike up one of the trails to watch the sunset. The exercise and relentless heat always made her feel better, not to mention the tranquility the ancient holy site bestowed. It was her special "thinking place," and heaven knew she needed to think.

* * * * *

Angie lifted her arm and wiped the blood-red dust from her sweaty forehead. She could still hear the family she'd passed earlier, the father lecturing from a guidebook while the two boys shouted and whooped. Abandoning her favorite thinking rock, she continued trudging up the narrow path through the Valley of Fire. The path petered out beneath her feet, turning to hard-baked rock in every direction, and she gnawed her lip as she looked for landmarks.

Striking off blindly, Angie walked until the tourist family's voices faded into silence, then sat down on the first level rock she found. She uncapped her canteen and poured cold, clear water into her mouth. Swishing it around like mouthwash, she rinsed away all the dust she'd breathed in, and spat a stream of red mud onto the stone at her feet. She tilted her head back and filled her mouth again. The water cooled her parched tongue, and soothed her dry throat. She wanted to gulp down all the water, but forced herself to cap the canteen and save half for the trek back.

She sat for a moment, enjoying the heat of the afternoon sun beating down on her, the warmth radiating from the rock beneath her, and the arid desert air that leached the moisture from her skin.

Maybe that was part of her problem. She lived for the moment, with no goals other than enjoying her rational periods and struggling through the times when her visions overcame her. Each individual fight took more out of her than the one before. She was still winning the battles, but she was losing the war.

She closed her eyes and turned her thoughts inward, searching for the meaning behind her visions. Her breathing slowed, her body growing heavy. The rock she was sitting on seemed almost to vibrate, making her wonder if she'd accidentally perched on one of Sedona's famed energy vortices. She acknowledged the distracting thought, then cleared her mind again and settled deeper into her meditative trance.

Time passed, in an unmeasured number of inhalations and exhalations, while she waited without judgment for an answer to percolate up to her conscious mind. Slowly, a nagging sense of wrongness intruded into her meditation. Her skin felt cool and slightly damp, not hot and dry, and not-so-distant sounds of people talking and working drifted to her ears when she should have heard only silence.

Angie opened her eyes to see a gray stone building directly in front of her, its features indistinct in the twilight. More buildings of similar rough stonework stretched

to either side, lining the cobblestone street. She sat on the broad lip of a stone fountain, at one end of a public square. Behind her, a few last customers in medieval dress bargained for goods while the merchants closed up their stalls, or finished loading unsold goods into carts for the journey home.

No! Not now. Not here.

She buried her face in her hands, unable to look at any more. This wasn't a flashback. The visions that overcame her during the day always replayed scenes from the weeks she'd spent with Reynart, and she'd never seen this square before. But it was clearly part of the fantasy world that she painted.

She screwed her eyes tightly shut and visualized the baked rocks of the Valley of Fire. That's where she was, back in Arizona. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes.

No good. She was still trapped in the dream. But none of her nightmares had ever felt so real, or smelled of the lingering odor of cooked meat, trampled produce, and too many horses wandering the streets. This level of detail belonged to her hallucination, or its vivid flashbacks.

Her pulse raced. She was wearing a dark blue wool gown, with a tightly laced bodice and flared skirt, just like she had been in her teenaged hallucination, although this gown laced sensibly in front rather than the elegant but impossible back laces she'd imagined before. Reaching up, she patted her hair. It coiled around her head in an elaborate braid, unlike her own short bob but similar to the style she'd worn on her imagined sojourn ten years ago. Similar, but not identical. And she had never seen this square before.

Angie struggled for oxygen in the unyielding bodice that forced her to take short, rapid breaths. Now the fear came. Somehow, she'd fallen into another coma. Maybe she'd suffered a heat stroke or been bitten by a rattlesnake. Whatever the cause, the park guards would check their tallies at closing time, and realize she hadn't come out.

If she was in a coma, she needed prompt medical attention. But she hadn't stayed on the paths. Searchers might not be able to find her until morning. That might be too late, if she was sick or injured. She had to wake up.

She sensed a presence before her, and lifted her head enough to see black hose, black leather armor, a black surcoat, and a swirling black cloak.

"Is milady in need of assistance?"

Her head snapped up in shock. Reynart! He was older, and sharper, all traces of softness around his cheeks and jaw long gone, just as she'd drawn him in her most recent painting of him. But he was still the handsomest man she'd ever seen. And the one who'd acted as her protector in her hallucination all those years ago. She instantly felt safer, reassured that everything would work out.

Which was foolish. He was a creature of her imagination. He had no power to keep her safe, other than what her own mind granted him.

Knowing he was just a mental construct did nothing to still her body's reaction, though. Her heart hammered against the confines of her tight bodice, and heat pooled

in the valley between her legs. Never mind that he was only an imaginary knight in shining armor. She'd always thought of him as her first—and best—lover. He was the standard she'd judged her few adult relationships by, an impossible standard none had ever achieved. This instinctive response to his presence was something she'd never experienced in the real world, a reaction she wasn't sure even existed in reality. It thrilled her to her soul just the same.

His eyes widened, but he didn't move. "Anjeli," he breathed.

A goofy grin spread across her face. He still couldn't pronounce her name, but he'd had no trouble recognizing her, even after ten years. She gave herself a mental shake. Of course he recognized her. What would be the point of hallucinating someone who ignored her?

Reynart's expression cooled into an emotionless mask, transforming as if in response to her thought. "Was one kingdom not enough for you, Anjeli? Did you feel you must come back to destroy this one as well?"

In her previous dream, his eyes had glowed emerald with passion, and darkened with desire for her. They had glittered green with merriment as he tickled and teased her, shone with verdant intensity as he taught her the mysteries of her body, and nearly been swallowed by his deep black pupils when he gave in to his own needs and claimed her body with his own. His eyes had sparkled with laughter and clouded with fear for her safety, as alive and vibrant as the young prince. But the eyes she stared into now were as flat and dead as his lost kingdom.

He looked past her at the darkening square, his gaze flicking rapidly from point to point. She resisted the urge to turn around and see what he was looking at. Then he fixed his emotionless eyes on her face again, waiting for her answer.

She shook her head, framing her thoughts carefully, knowing the usefulness of the answer would be in direct proportion to the clarity of her question. "You're the one who's destroying me. I just want to go home. But before I can do that, I need you to tell me how to put this world behind me."

"If you think so little of my kingdom why did you come back?"

"I didn't mean to!"

One eyebrow crooked up, silently mocking her.

"I don't know how it happened! I closed my eyes, and suddenly I was here. Just like the first time." Her voice broke. "I just want to find my way home. Why won't you help me?"

She gripped the cold stone of the fountain with desperate tension. Losing her temper at a figment of her own imagination would gain her nothing. Only through understanding could she gain her release.

Suddenly, she remembered that ten years ago, she'd woken from her coma when Reynart banished her. He'd ordered her to leave, turning away so that her last glimpse of him had been his strong back, bent beneath some nearly unendurable pain. At the time, she'd longed desperately to return, to ease his burden.

Had that conflict been what kept her tied to the memories in the years since? Had her desire to take some of his burden on herself indicated unresolved issues of guilt and responsibility? It was hard to believe, but the psychiatrists might have been right.

Even if that had been true at the time, however, in the decade since, she'd outgrown her feelings of guilt. Now, she only wanted to trigger the situation that would send her home, and this time she wouldn't look back. She goaded him, "It's obvious you don't want me here, so go ahead and banish me again."

"You are lost to your own world? And I can keep you forever parted from the land and life you love?" Reynart's eyes narrowed, then a cold smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "I want nothing more than to repay you for what you did the last time we met. But not here. I wish to savor your misery in private."

She opened her mouth to protest, but was silenced by the wicked black dagger in his hand. She shivered. Not because it was the same blade that kept showing up in her paintings, but because she remembered all too clearly how she'd first seen it—buried to the hilt in Prince Alaric's chest, the glistening handle wet with blood.

Her hallucination had not been all hot sex and exciting adventure. The world she'd created in her mind had been brutal and unforgiving, filled with abusive people in power, like the savage King and murderous court mage. It appeared that this time, far from acting as her protector, Reynart had joined their ranks.

If this was reality, she'd never leave the safety of the market square to go with him. But it wasn't real. She had nothing to fear from him, and everything to learn. The way out of this trap in her mind led through him. She was certain of it.

She stood, smoothing down the folds of her woolen skirt. "Whatever you say, my lord Prince."

He put his arm around her shoulder, the discreet pressure of the dagger mocking his gentle touch. The deadly blade nestled against the curve of her neck, a point of chilling cold contrasted with the warmth of his hand.

A shudder rippled across her skin. Her throat tightened and her mouth went dry. Her mind flashed on their first meeting, ten years ago, and how he'd threatened her with a steel dagger to keep her silent as he smuggled her up to his room. She'd been terrified but willing then, too.

Angie reminded herself that neither the man nor the knife was real. Her dream body didn't believe her.

She turned her head to glance at his frozen features. An emotion too brief to catalog flitted across his face as he stared at her neck. The dagger's blade felt warm where it rested against her skin. Then the moist warmth slid down her neck.

Moving only her eyes, Angie glanced down. A single drop of blood blazed a thin crimson trail as it disappeared beneath the bodice of her gown. She started to tremble. Her knees felt weak. He really could kill her.

Chapter Two

Reynart lifted the blade a fraction of an inch away from Angie's neck. "I'll not kill you by accident."

Her blood pounded in her ears, and she couldn't breathe in the restrictive bodice. She had to get away from him. Maybe she could pretend to stumble and break loose of his light hold. But she wouldn't be able to run in her heavy skirts.

Her mouth felt as dry as the desert, and she tried to swallow without brushing against Reynart's blade again. What would happen if she died in her dream? Would she die in the real world, too?

She took as deep a breath as she could. He was only a character in a hallucination. Her mind had created him. She wasn't suicidal, so this figment of her imagination wouldn't kill her. That didn't mean he wouldn't hurt her. And if she really did have unresolved guilt for surviving the car accident that killed her parents, there was a good chance her subconscious wanted her to suffer.

She remembered a lurid TV special about unexplained phenomenon. It cited many examples of people who dreamt of personal injury, only to find mysterious wounds on their bodies when they awoke. Angie had to behave as if this dream was real. And no matter what else happened, she had to protect this body.

When Reynart nudged her shoulder, she obligingly started walking, her steps slow and careful in the faint light. Walking in the heavy gown was difficult enough. She didn't want to stumble on an unseen flaw in the raised cobblestone walkway running down the side of the street. He steered her toward the right, past a stable smelling of hay and horses and a windowless stone warehouse, then turned her left, past a soaring cathedral flanked by glowing braziers that held back the night. Softly chanted hymns drifted through the open doors, providing a surreal accompaniment to the otherwise silent walk.

A wide boulevard ran in front of the cathedral. Empty now, it was no doubt clogged with horses and carriages when the faithful came to worship. Reynart guided her to the right, away from the illusion of safety provided by the church building, and stopped before a doorway two-thirds of the way down the next block.

"In here."

Angie stepped inside a narrow vestibule, and he blocked the exit. She held herself rigid, refusing to acknowledge the subtle threat of his presence behind her. She'd do what he said, and not antagonize him, but she wouldn't play his power game. This was still her dream. And she needed answers.

Removing his hand from her shoulder, he exchanged his dagger for an ornate brass key, then reached past her to fit it into the lock. The door clicked open. Angie turned and glanced over his shoulder at the inaccessible boulevard, then tipped up her chin and marched inside. She faced another door and a narrow flight of stairs.

“Up.”

Clutching her heavy skirts in one hand, she gripped the banister with the other, and started up the flight. Watery moonlight filtered through large glass prisms set in the ceiling, providing enough light to avoid tripping, but not enough to see any details. Reynart followed her like a shadow, his booted feet somehow silent on the creaking treads.

She knew he was there, the weight of his regard burning between her shoulder blades, but his silence gave her no clue what he was doing behind her. Were his knives out? How close was he? How much danger was she in?

Fear skittered down her back, but she focused her attention on putting one foot above the next. She couldn't risk that his response would change in reaction to her thoughts, the way it had in the square. Blanking her mind, she kept climbing.

The stairs leveled out to form a small landing, before continuing up to the roof. Two doors faced each other across the landing, one leading to the front of the house and one leading to the back. Reynart reached around her and unlocked the back door with a thunderous crack. Or maybe it was just that his movements made so little sound, anything else seemed loud in comparison.

Angie stepped forward, but Reynart caught her arm and pulled her away from the door. He waved his fingers over the knob in an intricate pattern, puzzling her until she realized he was keying a magical lock. A chill settled over her like a shroud. She remembered the wards that had protected his rooms in the castle. If she'd tried to enter the room before the magical barrier was disabled, she could have been shocked, burned, or worse. She had to be more careful.

The door clicked softly, and Reynart pushed it open. Prompted by his surprisingly gentle nudge, Angie stepped into what she'd have called a studio apartment back in Sedona, dimly lit by more of the glass prisms set into the ceiling.

A small table and two chairs sat beneath a shuttered window directly across from her. A fireplace, its fire now just banked coals with the heat hoarded beneath a thick layer of ash, filled most of the wall between the door and the sitting area. Narrow shelves cluttered with rows of pottery jars and bowls lined the remaining space. She caught her breath, her throat tightening, at the sight so similar to the castle sitting room she remembered so well. But unlike his royal apartments, he did not have a separate bedroom here. A collection of weapons hung on the wall to her left, next to a plain pine armoire, and a large brassbound chest stood at the foot of a narrow bed.

The door behind her clicked shut. She whirled around, just in time to see Reynart reset the magical lock.

He smiled, with a cold curling of his lips that had more in common with a snarl than any expression of pleasure. She forced a sickly smile and tried to sound perky. "Now what?"

"We go to bed."

"There's only one."

"I do not recall us ever needing more than one." His arrogantly lifted eyebrow dared her to make an issue of it.

A hot flush scalded her face. Her previous dream had been downright erotic. She'd been a virgin, but she'd picked up enough information from books and movies that she'd been able to hallucinate thoroughly detailed lovemaking. When she'd lost her virginity for real a few months after coming out of her coma, she'd been surprised at how close she'd come to getting it right. Except that in her coma dream, her orgasms had transported her to realms of pure ecstasy, instead of being merely the brief releases of tension that they were in reality.

She'd imagined Reynart as warm and loving, then—her very own Lancelot. Now, he bore more resemblance to the Black Knight. For the past five years, since her first full flashback episode, she hadn't so much as dated. At the time, she'd thought she'd withdrawn because of the possibility of someone witnessing another episode. Only now, she realized she'd chosen Reynart. The vivid flashbacks to their weeks together had been more fulfilling than any real relationship. She couldn't survive losing the memory of his gentle, caring lovemaking to a memory of cold, bitter sex.

"We need more than one bed now," she insisted.

He narrowed his eyes briefly, as if surprised by her denial. Then his icy smile returned, and he twirled the dagger in his fingers. Angie watched the flashing blade in sick fascination.

"I say we need but the one. Do you still argue?"

Protect the body. "No," she whispered.

"Then delay no more. Ready yourself for bed."

When she hesitated, he reached for her laces.

She turned away from his grasp and began slowly unlacing her bodice. "I suppose there's room for both of us, if we don't move much."

Reynart's hands settled on her hips and pulled her backwards, against the hard leather of his armor. His fingers spanned nearly three-quarters of the way around her waist, and his cheek brushed her hair as he bent his head to whisper in her ear. "I was looking forward to moving a great deal."

Angie froze, her throat closing with ice. She couldn't go through with it. This was wrong, even in a dream.

Reynart brushed her limp hands away and finished unlacing her bodice. He started matter-of-factly enough, but by the time he finished, he seemed less interested in adjusting her laces than in smoothing his palms over her ribs and cupping her breasts.

She closed her eyes, dreading the moment when he slid his fingers inside her linen chemise. This was so horribly different from the way she'd dreamt him before.

"Please," she whispered. "Don't do this."

Her skirts rustled, sliding up her legs as he gathered the fabric at her waist, then lifted the dress over her head. Shivering in the chill room, she crossed her arms over her chest and wished she had imagined a bra and panties for herself.

He dropped the gown to the floor, freeing both of his hands to glide over her chemise, stroking her hips, her stomach, her ribs. One hand dropped to her waist, anchoring her hips to his. The hardened leather of his armor seemed to press against her ass with more insistence that it had before.

While she was trying to figure out whether or not he had an erection behind his protective armor, his other hand rose to fondle her breast. His fingertips swirled lightly around her nipple, tightening it into a hard bud, before he scraped his nail across the sensitive tip.

Angie gasped as liquid warmth pooled between her legs, eager to ease his entrance past her hot, pulsing flesh and into the emptiness that ached for him to fill it. Her traitorous body didn't understand that he was not making love to her. He was trying to conquer and control her. She bit her lip, hard, determined not to succumb to his charms.

His arms tightened briefly, crushing her, then he exhaled and released her.

"You are ready for bed," he murmured. "Go there."

Wordlessly, she crossed the room and slid beneath the covers of his bed. Her eyes itched as if they were full of sand, and her throat tightened until she feared she wouldn't be able to breathe. Last time, she'd imagined that Alaric and Gervaise attacked her, Alaric's sweaty hands tearing at her clothes as he babbled some nonsense about the magic of their mingled essences, while Gervaise dropped his trous and taunted her with his domination.

Yet this was even worse. Because she knew Reynart's touch. Knew it to be gentle and worshipful, even in the wildest heights of passion. Not like the rough caresses he'd just given her, marks of his possession rather than signs of any softer emotion. If he came to bed and took her now, he'd use her body for his own pleasure, with no regard for her feelings. It wouldn't hurt physically, since her foolish body seemed eager for his touch. But it would kill her soul.

Angie lifted her chin, determined not to cower beneath the covers. She'd lived with fear as her constant companion for the past ten years. She was stronger than she'd been before. And this was just a dream.

Reynart shook out her dress and folded it carefully, placing it on top of the clothes chest. His folded surcoat went on top of it, and he stored his leathers neatly in the armoire.

When he turned back, her earlier question was answered. Yes, he was aroused. Angie watched him roll the hose down his muscled thigh and calf. He had the lethal

attraction of a cobra, hypnotizing her with his grace and beauty until he would strike without warning.

Clad only in his short linen undertunic, Reynart bent and retrieved his woolen cloak from the floor. He stood motionless in the twilight, staring at her for breathless heartbeats, before shaking out the cloak and moving closer to the fire. "Go to sleep, Anjeli."

She barely dared to breathe as he spread his cloak before the fireplace. He added wood, stirring the coals to life. The leaping flames distorting his face with demonic shadows, he watched the fire in silence for a moment, then lay down on the floor. A wave of relief washed through her, making her lightheaded. He wasn't going to share the bed with her.

Insight burst upon her with a brilliant flash. This world was just a dream, and while she could certainly be terrified, she couldn't feel pain in a dream. Isn't that why people pinched themselves to see if they were awake? Why, even when he'd nicked her with his dagger, she'd only felt the trickle of blood. She'd never felt the dagger.

Angie smiled, relaxing into the soft feather mattress. She'd been afraid for nothing. She'd never been in any real danger at all.

Rolling onto her side, she propped herself up on her elbow and gazed across the room at Reynart's dark form. "It's not that late yet. And I have so many questions—"

"Much as I would love to stay awake and torment you further, I need to get some sleep. I have an appointment before dawn, and I was up all last night talking to some Pair-forsaken minstrel." His voice turned distant. "I still haven't decided what I'm going to do about him. Or you."

* * * * *

Angie awakened slowly, not sure at first what was wrong. Then the overly soft mattress and sandalwood scented sheets reminded her. For the first time in ten years, she'd slept straight through until morning without a nightmare, but it was only because she wasn't really asleep. She was still trapped in her hallucination.

She couldn't force herself back to her own body. Last night, to the accompaniment of Reynart's deep and even breathing, she'd tried wishing, praying, and repeating, "There's no place like home." Unless someone did something in the real world to pull her out of her coma, she'd be stuck here until he banished her, or until she found some other way to wake up.

Meanwhile, she had no way of knowing what was happening back in the real world. The last time she'd been in a coma, equal amounts of time had passed in the dream world as in the real world. If that still held true, it was the morning after she'd fallen into her coma. By now, the park rangers should have found her body and taken her to the hospital. They would be treating her for her heat stroke, or snakebite, or whatever had sent her into this coma. She was out of immediate danger. But she knew

the odds of coming out of a coma got worse the longer it lasted. She had to find a way to awaken, and soon.

She poked her head out of the covers she'd burrowed under and stretched.

"Finally," Reynart said. "You've slept through both the predawn and *Prima* bells. Only the laziest of worthless aristocrats sleeps past the call to *Terzem* service."

Angie glanced across the room. Blinking, she tried to reconcile the unfamiliar man with Reynart's familiar voice.

A bearded street vendor, clad in a bright red tunic and floppy wool cap, stood beside the table, transferring meat pies to the large display box belted to his waist and supported by a strap around his neck. Her mouth watered at the smell of roasted pork, beef, and buttery pastry.

Her stomach chose that moment to rumble, reminding her that her dream self had not eaten anything last night. Her real self hadn't, either. The beginnings of a headache started to throb at her temples, and Angie gave up trying to make sense of it, at least until after she ate.

The man tilted his head, making his oversized cap pitch forward. Lifting one hand to push it back into place, his baggy tunic sleeve slid down to reveal a many-times mended undertunic. It was a far cry from Reynart's finery, but he spoke with Reynart's voice. "There's a pie on the table for you. Eat it or carry it, but you're leaving with me when I finish loading this tray."

She searched the street vendor's weathered face for any telltale signs of identity. Other than the eyes, which were still green, she couldn't find any. But he had to be Reynart, if only because he was too paranoid to let a stranger into his chambers unsupervised. "Reynart? Why are you dressed like that?"

She didn't think he was going to answer, but he finally said, "I have promised to deliver something, and it can only be delivered in this guise."

"And you want me to come with you and help deliver it?"

"No, I want you out of the way." Reynart lifted something off the table and tossed it at her. A leather coin purse, attached by a length of silver chain to a sturdy bracelet, landed on her bed. "This has enough coins for you to buy a seat in the front of the cathedral. Attend the *Sezem* service, and remain until they ring the *Novem* bells. Then go back to the square I found you in last night. There's a tavern across the street, called the Twisted Skein. Tell the minstrel who you are. He'll take care of you until I can get there."

Angie bristled at his imperious tone, but didn't say anything as she got out of bed, shoved her feet into her shoes, and pulled her gown on over her chemise. Rethreading the bodice laces reminded her of Reynart's earlier threats, but she knew better than to fear him now.

Being fully dressed again gave her courage. Setting her hands on her hips, she turned and faced him.

"If you want me out of the way, banish me."

He chuckled, a harsh sound that held no humor. "You wish I would make it that easy for you, don't you? I intend to make you pay for your sins. After you have suffered, then I will consider letting you return to your own world."

"With an attitude like that, you honestly expect me to wait for you to pick me up again?" She snatched the coin purse off the bed and slid the bracelet onto her wrist. Money was always helpful, even in dreams.

"I do. Without me, you have no hope of returning to your own world."

She glared at him. Unless she found another way home at the cathedral, she'd have to meet him. She hated him for being so confident.

Reynart placed the last meat pie into his tray, leaving only one wrapped in a square of linen on the table. Striking a petty blow for her independence, Angie reached for one of the meat pies in his tray. His hand shot out and pinioned her wrist in an iron grip.

"Your breakfast is on the table."

"I want one of those."

"Do not argue."

"Don't command me, then."

Reynart dropped her hand and shrugged, his expression settling into a neutral mask. "Take whichever pie you want, but eating one from this tray will make you ill."

Angie drew her hand back from the pies. "That makes no sense. If the meat is bad, why are you—"

"The meat is fine. Take your pie and let's go."

"But you didn't explain—"

"Tuck the purse into your sleeve, or you'll attract thieves. I'll show you to the garden chamber, then I must be on my way. I will meet you at the Twisted Skein before the *Saezar* bells ring for the evening service."

Angie tucked the purse into her wide sleeve, along with the linen-wrapped pie. He gave her no time to adjust the narrow ribbon on the cuff that turned the sleeve into a sort of pocket, but immediately opened the door. As she followed Reynart out of his room, she fumbled with the ribbon, using her other hand and her teeth to try and tighten the cuff around her wrist. He stopped her on the steps with a sound of disgust, and fixed her sleeve for her. Then he led her out the back door to the building's communal garden and outhouse.

Gathering up her skirts, she stepped into the dim room and closed the door. She gagged at the stench. She'd naively imagined his castle with magically spotless plumbing, and wished she hadn't learned what medieval life was really like since then. Her subconscious seemed determined to make this experience as accurate as possible.

Reynart was gone when she came out. Briefly, she considered taking his money and running, or at least prowling through the city in search of clues to find her way home. But he was correct. He was her best chance at getting home, and she was certain he'd

know if she failed to follow his instructions. She wasn't about to give him further reasons not to help her.

Finding her way to the cathedral was simple, and so was spotting the man in embroidered vestments standing halfway down the mostly empty nave, where open space gave way to cushions, then chairs, then elaborately carved, enclosed boxes.

Trading some of Reynart's coins for a box seat was no different from bribing a *maitre d'* for a better table or earlier seating, and she was soon leaning back in comfortable privacy, nibbling on her meat pie. She could see out through holes in the intricately carved wooden screen in front of her, but no one could see her.

While she ate, she tried to think of a way to return to the real world. Having Reynart banish her couldn't be the only way to come out of her coma. What she needed to do was learn more about the dream world she was in. The cathedral and a tavern would be great places to learn more about the world her subconscious had created.

The noon service, or *Sezem* as Reynart had called it, began just as she finished eating, led by a white-robed priest and priestess. An altar boy assisted the priestess, and an altar girl assisted the priest.

Angie smiled at the evidence of her subconscious's belief in equality, and sat back to study the elaborate ritual. Ethereal singing filled the cathedral, along with a sweet balsam incense too light to be cloying.

Although much of the service's ritual seemed to be in an incomprehensible, vaguely Arabic language, Angie listened carefully for clues. The names of their primary god and goddess were Dome-Ra and Dome-Ta, although a dozen minor entities seemed to share the names Dome-Re or Dome-Te. From the few cryptic references during the parts of the service she understood, Angie couldn't tell if they were children of the primary god and goddess, minor gods and goddesses, or saintly humans elevated to godlike status.

She frowned, recalling Reynart's stories during her first hallucination, of Amin-Ra and Amin-Ta, the Lord and Lady of Death. She wondered what Dome-Ra and Dome-Ta were Lord and Lady of. Still, it appeared that her subconscious was no longer obsessed with death. That had to be a good sign.

The service culminated in the creation of a pool of blue flame on the white marble altar. The flames then rose into the air, hovering over the altar. Angie half expected the priest or priestess to pass a hand beneath the flames to prove there were no wires. Instead, they knelt, flanking the altar.

A line of parishioners approached, wailing in a peculiar undulating tone as they shuffled up the length of the nave on their knees. When the first man reached the dais, he climbed the marble steps up to the altar, still on his knees. Then, he plunged his velvet-covered arms into the blue flame.

Angie gasped, certain that the man's heavily embroidered sleeves would instantly alight. The flames flickered around him, but when he withdrew his arms, she could see the blue fire had not singed so much as a single thread on his sleeve. Bowing low, his

forehead practically scraping the treads, he scuttled back down the marble stairs, making way for another wailing man to climb up to the altar.

A stream of well-dressed men and women climbed the stairs one at a time, plunged their arms into the flames, then retreated back to their seats. Each time, the flickering flames seemed to caress the person, then retreat, leaving the man or woman shaken and crying. Angie wondered why they were putting themselves through this public torture, and what it all meant.

Then she noticed a pale-faced man, kneeling at the edge of the stairs but letting others ascend before him. The man, whose richly embroidered clothes were clearly of finer quality than those of the people he let past, rocked back and forth as he wailed, his shaking voice clearly audible as only a handful of parishioners remained in line.

A poor street vendor, dressed in a patched green outfit similar to Reynart's disguise, climbed the stairs and plunged his arms into the flames. Then, only the quivering nobleman was left.

Shaking so badly that Angie wondered how he could move at all, the nobleman crawled up the steps to the altar. He lifted his arms, then dropped them before he could reach into the flames. Simultaneously, the priest and priestess chanted, "The just have no need to fear."

The man stiffened his back, lifted his arms, and thrust them into the flames. The fire turned red, reaching out to him with hungry fingers, and he screamed.

Angie jumped to her feet, with some vague idea about running to the altar and pulling him out of the blaze. When no one else moved, not even the priest, priestess and burning man himself, she sat down again. Shielded as she was on all sides by the carved wooden privacy screens, no one had seen her *faux pas*.

The man's hands curled into fists, shaking with the effort of keeping them in the flames, and he arched his back. Then he began whispering a torrent of words. The priest and priestess started to chant, with the altar girl and boy joining in on the chorus at regular intervals.

The stench of burning flesh overpowered the incense. Angie watched in horror as the man's exposed skin blistered, but his clothing remained untouched. Blood ran down his arms to splash on the pristine white altar.

The man spoke faster, his whole body trembling with the effort of holding his arms in the burning blaze. The chants rose in volume, and the altar girl and boy picked up finger cymbals to strike ringing notes at the end of each phrase. Angie leaned forward. Gripping the wooden carving in front of her, she held her breath.

The sound built, clanging finger cymbals drowning out the fervent chanting of the priest and priestess, and the man's throaty pleas. The priest and priestess ended their chant on a shout, accompanied by one last strike of the cymbals. With a cry, the man slumped forward onto the altar, falling directly into the leaping flames.

Angie undid the latch and swung the door half-open before she realized something had changed. The altar flames burned blue, and the sweet scent of balsam wafted through the cathedral.

The priest and priestess carried the unconscious man down the steps of the dais, then the altar girl and boy gently dragged him back to his seat. When the children returned to the dais, the priest and priestess concluded their rite, and the fire disappeared. The white marble altar gleamed, unstained.

Angie latched her privacy screen and sat back, shaking with reaction. Even though it was only a dream, she couldn't dispel the image of that man voluntarily burning himself alive. Why had he done it?

The priestess's words captured Angie's attention, and she focused on the woman's impassioned speech.

"Dome-Ta wore Her mask of vengeance when She struck down many members of the idle nobility with tainted meat this morning, sparing the hardworking and industrious. We pray that She wears Her mask of mercy to heal the afflicted. They know now that tithing ten percent of their income to the church is not enough to protect them if they make their profits from starving their slaves and allowing their tenants' homes to collapse from disrepair. And if they sell off their slaves' children to pleasure houses..." The priestess choked on the words, and the priest stepped forward to finish for her, although his previously steady voice now trembled.

"We pray that Dome-Ta will wear Her mask of mercy and intercede with Amin-Ra for the soul of Malek Hilary, late Lord Darion."

The congregation shuffled to their feet and joined the priest and priestess in reciting an incomprehensible prayer. Angie collapsed against the back corner of her seat and let the sound wash over her.

Instinctively, she knew who Lord Darion was. He was the fat man she'd painted, the one who had killed his slave boy. In her painting, he'd been afraid of a cloaked figure—Reynart. Reynart, who'd made a delivery of tainted meat pies this morning. Who worshipped the Lord of Violent Death and the Lady of Merciful Death. The pieces all fit together, but she couldn't make sense of the puzzle.

Angie had hoped to find an alternative way to awaken from her coma. She'd certainly learned a lot, but she was no closer to finding a way out of her dream world. Instead, everything pointed to this hallucination being tied to her unresolved fears regarding her first coma dream.

She would have to overcome it the same way she'd overcome the first coma. Her best chance for returning to her real life was having Reynart banish her.

The chanting ended. The priest and priestess alternated phrases as they blessed the congregation and charged those assembled to believe in their hearts, understand with their heads, speak of divine love with their lips, and do good works with their hands. The altar girl and boy led the way off the dais, swinging censers of sweet balsam smoke. The priest and priestess followed, lifting their voices in the hymn-like chant Angie had

heard last night. As they passed the assembled rows of people, the worshippers filed out behind them, except for a few individuals who remained behind, either praying or too shaken by the service to leave.

Angie stood and stretched inside her private box. Her legs felt as stiff as if she'd been sitting through an extra-long movie, so she guessed the service had taken about two hours. The extra-long line of parishioners seeking divine blessing, and the one man's fiery confession, repentance, or whatever it was, had stretched the *Sezem* service well past the normal hour. The *Novem* bells would ring in about an hour. That didn't give her much time to work on a way out of her situation. If she had no other way out, she'd have to join Reynart at the Twisted Skein.

She'd never been good with puzzles, but Angie finally decided that the priest's and priestess's words at the end of the service were a message for her. She needed to believe in her heart that she would wake from her coma, and she needed to understand what Reynart represented to her subconscious, so that she could determine what having him banish her meant. If she did that, she'd return to the real world and paint, or do good work with her hands.

Well-dressed members of the aristocracy and upper class were already filling the reserved seats, no doubt hoping to stave off sickness with piety, when the *Novem* bells rang. Angie rose and slipped out of her box, down a side aisle and out of the cathedral.

Retracing last night's route back to the square she'd arrived in was harder than she'd expected. Buildings looked different in the day. Then again, maybe it was just that she'd been so frightened, she hadn't paid any attention to where she'd been going.

She eventually found the square by following the loud calls of the fruit and vegetable vendors and studying the signs hanging above the street. A brightly colored tangle of yarn suspended above a tankard marked the entrance to the Tangled Skein tavern.

Angie's spirits lifted. She'd found the tavern on her own. She'd find a way home.

She stopped just inside the doorway and looked around. A man and two women were finishing their late lunches or early dinners, but otherwise the tavern was empty.

The bartender hurried over to greet her, hastily wiping his hands on his wine- and ale-stained apron.

"Are you lost, my lady?"

"This is the Tangled Skein, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lady. And the only tavern by that name in the city. Good food and drink at fair prices. But we have nothing worthy of a lady." He darted a furtive glance at a deserted table in the back corner.

"Thank you, but I'm not here for the food or drink. I was told you had a minstrel."

The bartender bobbed his head, then turned and bellowed, "Kerrim!"

A ginger-haired young man in his late teens or early twenties trotted into the main room, belting his tan and brown tunic as he ran. "What do you want, old man? I'm not due to start singing until the *Saezar* bells."

Angie's heart climbed into her throat. He was the boy from her last painting.

She glanced left, and spied the fireplace from her painting. She knew, the same way she'd known Lord Darion's identity, that if she examined the wooden plank beside the hearth, she'd find the scar left by Reynart's dagger.

The young man stumbled to a halt before Angie, then swept into an enthusiastic bow. "Begging your pardon, my lady."

"She said she's heard of you, Kerrim," the innkeeper said.

Kerrim looked up, his face glowing with pleasure. "Really? If I may be so bold as to ask, from whom?"

"A friend." She didn't want to mention Reynart's name. Besides, if he'd given these people a name at all, he'd probably used a false one. "He said to tell you my name is Angie."

"Anjeli?" Kerrim's eyes widened, and all the blood drained from his face, throwing his freckles into prominence. "But he said you were gone forever!"

"Well now I'm back." He continued to stare at her as if he expected her to disappear, or burst into flames, or do something equally surprising, so she added, "I'm expecting my friend to join me later."

Kerrim and the innkeeper exchanged a look. The innkeeper jerked his head toward the same table he'd seemed nervous about earlier. When Kerrim nodded once, the innkeeper's face turned pasty. He pulled the minstrel aside.

"I don't want any trouble, Kerrim," he whispered, his rough voice clearly audible to Angie standing just a few feet to his side.

"Then don't turn the lady away."

The man turned to Angie and bowed deeply, his lips stretched into a grimace that bore little resemblance to his earlier hearty smile. "My lady, I offer you all my hospitality. Take the corner table. I will get you my best wine."

"That's not necessary. I'll just talk to Kerrim until my friend arrives."

"Of course, of course. Whatever you say." The innkeeper bowed as he retreated into the kitchen, leaving her with Kerrim.

"If my lady would care to follow me?"

She followed the minstrel as he threaded his way between the jumble of round tables, benches, stools and chairs. He stopped in the darkest corner of the tavern, before a spotlessly clean table oddly distant from the neighboring tables, and held out the single sturdy wooden chair for her. She sat, and realized she was looking at the fireplace, exactly as she had painted it. The sight gave her chills, and she eagerly sought something else to occupy her mind.

"Pull up a chair, Kerrim." She waited while he followed her instructions, then tried to put him at ease by saying, "You know, I've never met a minstrel before."

"It's all right. But I want to be a Bard."

Warning bells sounded in her head. She'd had this conversation, or one similar, with Donald just last week. Her subconscious clearly didn't think the matter was resolved. If she could settle that issue, at least she'd accomplish something during her time in the coma. She took Donald's line, and told Kerrim, "Well you'll never succeed without artistic commitment. Talent isn't enough. The world is full of talented failures."

"I am committed."

"If you were truly committed, you would have said that you were *going* to be a bard, not that you merely *wanted* to be one."

"But it's not up to me, it's up to the college of bards. They have to approve one of my ballads before they'll accept me for further training."

"What if they don't approve? Will you quit?"

"Well, I—"

Tears glimmered in the boy's eyes, and Angie regretted her harsh words. Kerrim obviously wasn't used to dealing with someone like Donald. She leaned forward and took his hand.

"It's okay, Kerrim. If you work hard enough, I'm sure you'll succeed."

He smiled. "Thank you, my lady."

The tavern door slammed open. Kerrim whirled to face the door, jerking his hand free of hers. But the figure silhouetted in the open doorway was not Reynart.

A woman, wearing flowing trousers and a thigh-length robe of ash gray silk, stalked into the tavern. She headed directly for Kerrim and Angie. Wisps of copper hair escaped her gray silk snood, waving like pennants as she strode across the room.

The woman was no beauty. Her face was too square, and her eyes and lips too narrow. But she radiated strength of purpose and an air of command.

She stopped in front of Kerrim. She stared over his shoulder as she fell to one knee, making the gesture an insult, and presented an elaborately bound scroll with a thrust worthy of an attack. "My lord, the council of mages beseeches your aid."

Kerrim shoved his chair back, scraping the wooden legs over the uneven floorboards. He lifted both hands, as if warding off the woman and her scroll. "I am no lord. I am but a humble minstrel."

"I care not for your current disguise. The blood of kings flows in your veins, and that is what we need."

"Well, you can't have it!" He jumped to his feet, ready to bolt from the room.

"You've made a mistake," Angie said. "He is only a minstrel, and not the one you want."

The woman lifted one copper eyebrow as she climbed to her feet, dusting off her knees. "The council of mages does not make mistakes, certainly not with a divining of this import. He is the one we seek. But I can see I must convince you that I know whereof I speak before he will drop his charade."

She set the scroll down on the table. It promptly rolled off and dropped into Angie's lap. Angie smiled sweetly and handed it back to her. The woman glared, but kept silent. Without asking permission, she snatched a chair and sat down at the table. Kerrim nervously resumed his vacated seat, looking ready to bolt if she raised the issue of his blood again.

"Go on," Angie said in saccharine tones. "Convince us."

The woman gestured with the scroll. "Your creation warped the natural energies, and even now, you distress the fabric of space just by being here. You are the signal. You also contain tremendous gate energy, and as such, the council needs you. But energy is worthless without a focus. For that, we sought a member of the Nord D'Rae royal house. We divined that we would find the two people we needed together in this tavern, in this city, on this day, at this hour." She looked at Kerrim.

"You divined the wrong hour, then, because I'm not the one you want. You're looking for—" Kerrim froze, his eyes widening. "My lord Prince."

A tall shadow detached itself from the wall and stalked over to their table, his anger clear in his tightly leashed movements.

"The council of mages is nothing more than pathetic old men and women playing at having real power."

Reynart towered over the mage, but she did not flinch. She knelt and presented the scroll again. "My lord, the council of mages beseeches your aid."

He took the scroll and hurled it across the room into the fireplace. "Tell the council I refuse."

Chapter Three

The mage frowned at Reynart's refusal. "My lord, you do not understand—"

"I have no wish to." Turning away from her, he pulled out the chair she'd been using, positioned its back to the wall, and took her seat at the table.

The bartender hurried over with a sealed bottle of wine and placed it before him. He set a pewter mug in front of Angie, bowing repeatedly to both her and Reynart as he apologized, "I'm sorry, my lady. That's the best we have. I can send my wife out to buy a goblet for you—"

"This is fine," Angie reassured him. Watching him bob up and down was making her seasick. Besides, she frequently used Mason jars for glasses when she'd put off doing the dishes for too long. She wasn't about to start insisting on crystal goblets now, just because these people all assumed she was a noblewoman.

"Thank you, my lady. May the Heavenly Pair reward your kindness." He glanced between Reynart and the mage, no doubt trying to determine whether serving her or ignoring her would best please his lethal customer. With a final bow to Reynart, the innkeeper backed away from the table.

Angie slanted a look at Reynart. Judging from what she'd heard in the cathedral, Reynart had killed a man today. In cold blood. She searched for some sign in his eyes or his bearing of what he'd done. But the only emotion visible in his tightened lips and narrowed eyes was a slight annoyance.

Reynart glanced at the mage, who was lingering at the edge of their table. "Why are you still here?"

"My lord," she ground out, forcing her expression into something approximating pleasantness. "I shall stay until I deliver the council's message."

From somewhere beneath his cloak, Reynart pulled a gold chalice and a razor-edged black knife. Slicing neatly through the wax seal on the wine bottle, he stabbed the cork and wrenched it free with a savage twist of his wrist.

The mage swallowed audibly. "Your petty theatrics do not frighten me. Threats will not deter me from my course."

"I do not make threats. I warn. Once." He spoke quietly, his gaze focused on the wine he poured into his cup. "Wine, Anjeli?"

"Yes, please." She wasn't fooled by his apparent nonchalance. She'd bet her last nickel, or whatever the equivalent coin was here, that he knew the mage's slightest movement, and could unerringly skewer the woman with half a dozen lethal weapons.

He poured the wine from his golden goblet into her pewter mug, then refilled the goblet.

The mage circled the table to face Reynart. Bracing her hands against the tabletop, she leaned forward with the light of battle blazing in her caramel colored eyes. "Your scorn of magicians doesn't prevent you from using magical items."

"The goblet was created by my sister. I do not scorn the gift, because I do not scorn the giver."

The woman stiffened. "A member of the Nord D'Rae royal house can not be a mage!"

Angie thought Reynart wouldn't answer. He seemed lost in thought, contemplating the intricately detailed goblet before him. But eventually, he said, "She was of the house of Tellurah, like the Queen, her mother. If you wish to continue discussing ancient history, speak to Kerrim. His songs cover all the major facts of King Ulrich's reign."

"Even how it ended?"

"He's working on that one."

"Then he's getting it wrong."

Reynart's head snapped up, his gaze drilling into the mage's eyes. Her self-confident smile faltered, but did not fail.

"Explain yourself, mage."

"Are you ready to hear the council's message now?"

"If the council's message is relevant to your explanation, I will listen. Make it brief."

The woman nodded, pulled over a chair from a neighboring table, and sat down across from Reynart. Behind her, Kerrim pulled up a seat of his own, leaning forward to listen with intense concentration.

"Ten years ago, a disturbance in the energy fields first alerted the mages' council to the existence of rogue wizards," the mage began. "Their first major work was to create a body, which could be inhabited by a spirit pulled from another world."

Angie gasped. Many people in comas experienced near-death visions of being pulled from their bodies. Was this dream world just an elaborate near-death encounter? But if that was the case, where was the tunnel? Where was the bright light and angelic voices beckoning her onward?

She darted a look at Reynart. The black-cloaked dealer of death—was he the grim reaper, come to collect her soul? Had she returned to consciousness last time when he banished her, because it meant he'd decided it wasn't time for her to die?

No. This world and everyone in it was a hallucination brought on by her brain's attempt to process information while she was in a coma. The doctors had said so.

The mage glared at her interruption. "Created from royal blood, the body acted as a living gatepost. Their goal was to build a gateway to the spirit's world, but it didn't work. We don't know if they tried and failed, or didn't have the time to try. The influx of energy and the collapse of the Nord D'Rae gateways destabilized the rest of the network. The gateways were never properly sealed, and sporadic bursts of energy still fire through them, unbalancing the network more each time. The council was

working on a plan to restore the balance, but yesterday another influx of power turned the situation critical. If the Nord D'Rae gateways are not restored within a month, the rest of the gateways will become unusable."

Reynart lowered his goblet to the table with cold precision, but his eyes burned with fury. "The council told me ten years ago that it was impossible to reopen the gateways from this side. Are you saying they lied?"

"The mages' council doesn't lie. It would still be impossible, except for her." The mage nodded in Angie's direction, and both Reynart and Kerrim turned to stare at her.

"Why her?" Reynart asked.

Angie lifted her chin proudly under his scrutiny. "You weren't here when she explained that part. The mages' council thinks I have the raw energy needed, and you have the ability to focus the energy."

Reynart sighed. "No. Much as I would like to believe your fantasy story, it is impossible."

"You must believe me!" The mage slammed her fist against the table. "My husband died to get that information from the rogue mages. His sacrifice will not be worthless."

"You lost a husband. I lost my whole kingdom. Don't you think I'd get it back if I could?"

"You lost it through your own greed, trying to take what rightfully belonged to your betters."

Reynart's voice dropped to a growling whisper. "Alaric was in no way my better."

"His mother was the rightful Queen of Nord D'Rae, while yours —"

Reynart stood. The mage fell silent, all of the color draining from her face as he shrugged his cloak back behind his shoulders, exposing two wicked blades at his belt. Another dagger dropped from his wrist sheath into his waiting hand.

Angie held her breath. Across from her, Kerrim did the same, his eyes wide as he watched the scene playing out before them.

The mage leapt up and backed away from the table. "This is all secondary to the problem of the gateways. That's what we need to focus on."

"Why?"

"Because if the gateways to Nord D'Rae are not restored, the gateway network will collapse. Many of the more remote kingdoms will be completely cut off."

"Like Nord D'Rae."

The mage took a deep breath, straightened her spine, and met Reynart's glare with a level stare. "Your kingdom chose to be isolated. Its magical barriers proved impervious to any divination or scrying, and prevented any attempt to create new gateways."

Reynart's position shifted slightly, and the dagger vanished from his hand. "You've tried?"

"I lack the power. The council tried."

"Why wasn't I informed of the attempt?"

"You're not an easy man to find."

He resumed his seat with a swirl of his cloak, and smiled at Kerrim. "Perhaps you are not the only one who does his work too well."

Kerrim grinned back, sagging in his chair. Angie let out the breath she'd been holding, and eased into a smile of her own. The only one who didn't smile was the mage. She remained standing, although she did relax slightly.

"Won't you rejoin us, Madame mage?" Reynart turned his smile on her, the image of a congenial host caring for his guests' welfare. The mage took another half step back.

"I am more comfortable standing, thank you."

"Madame mage. That is an awkward-sounding mouthful. Have you a name by which we may call you?"

"My name is Beryl."

"Beryl." Reynart dipped his head in the barest hint of a bow. All traces of good humor evaporated from his expression, and he watched her from eyes like glimmering, reflective emeralds. "You have not explained how your knowledge effects the end of King Ulrich's reign."

Beryl nodded. "From the reports of survivors who came through the gateways before they collapsed, and because of the weakened state of the gateways which allowed them to collapse, it was assumed that a member of the royal family tapped their power, and attempted a major magical working. It is commonly believed the storm that destroyed Nord D'Rae was a backlash of the improperly used magic."

"And your information changes this how?"

"The two events were not directly related."

Reynart sat up straighter, his gaze locked on Beryl's face. "Continue."

Her eyes widened, and she slumped heavily against the table behind her. "You knew. Why did you not tell the council?"

"They did not ask before they refused to help me. Now, continue your explanation."

Beryl pointed to Angie. "Her creation was the intermediate step. As a repository of gate energy, her involvement in even a modest working would increase its potency beyond belief."

Reynart turned to Angie, his eyes strangely unfocused. He held the black knife in his right hand. "There is a simple test to prove her nature."

He slashed the palm of his left hand, then clenched his fist around the cut. Blood welled up between his fingers, running down his hand to splash on the table.

A chill crept across Angie's skin, followed by a heated flush. Her vision swam in and out in time to the pulse throbbing in her head. A babble of indecipherable voices

filled her ears, and she pitched forward, or perhaps it was sideways, or maybe backwards.

Small hands cradled Angie's head and patted her shoulders. "My lady, are you all right?"

Angie opened her eyes. Kerrim's worried face hung suspended before her eyes. She blinked, and the rest of the minstrel came in to focus. "I think so. What happened?"

"You fainted at the sight of my lord Prince's blood, my lady." Kerrim patted her shoulder again.

She looked past him to Reynart's stern visage. "I would not faint at the sight of his blood, even if I'd drawn it myself."

Reynart made a shooing motion with one hand, and Kerrim obligingly stepped away. "You are unharmed, Anjeli. More, you are a repository of Nord D'Rae gate energy, as the mage claims. What you just felt was my invocation of that energy, as only the blood of the royal house can do."

Beryl nodded. "So now you will help me restore the gateways to Nord D'Rae?"

Reynart wound a flesh-colored ribbon around his hand, then dipped his finger into the wine and used the crimson drop to seal the magical bandage over his cut palm. No doubt, it was another gift from his sister. "I see why you need her. And why you need me. But why do we need you?"

"You may know how to open a closed gate, or close an open gate. Neither of those tasks requires the mage gift. But to restore a collapsed gate, you need the ability to feel the currents of magical power, to shift their alignment, and to force them to obey your will." A half-smile touched her lips. "Although I suspect you'd have no problem with that last part."

"Do all the gateways need to be restored within one month?"

"No, just the central gateway. All of the others were keyed off that one. If we restore that gateway, the others will also be restored. We can seal them all from there, too."

"That makes no sense," Angie interrupted. "Why go to all the trouble of restoring the gateways just to seal them? Why not just seal them from the start?"

"Sealing a gateway releases the gate energy back into the network. When that energy is properly channeled and controlled, it strengthens the remaining gateways. Releasing the collapsed gateways' wild energy would destroy the network. Their energy must be controlled, and that means restoring them, before we seal them for good."

Reynart frowned. "There is no reason to seal the gateways."

"There is no reason to leave them open." Beryl shrugged. "The kingdom is destroyed. If anyone had been left, we would have heard from them by now. To leave gateways open to a dead kingdom wastes valuable gate energy better spent developing new gateways to frontier kingdoms."

“Only royal blood may activate the gateways once they’ve been closed. There may have been no one of the correct bloodline available.”

Beryl nodded. “The royal house died in the flood, as did all the mages. If any yet lived, they would have brought down the magical barrier and created a new gateway.”

“The land survived. It could be repopulated, and made viable again.”

“Nord D’Rae is dead.”

Reynart’s face froze in a mask of icy indifference. Even his eyes went blank and cold. “Then there is no reason for me to help you.”

“The people of Nord D’Rae should be happy they died quickly,” the mage snapped. “No doubt they suffered less than they would have with a bastard like you on the throne.”

Reynart’s arm lifted, and Angie sensed what was coming even before she saw the dagger in his hand. She leapt out of her chair, diving in front of the mage as the deadly weapon sailed toward the woman’s head.

The dagger caught Angie in the arm, slicing through her billowing wool sleeve and slashing through skin to the muscle beneath. The spent blade clattered to the floor. Pain rocketed up her arm, blinding her with waves of red, then black. She clutched at the tabletop with her good hand, but couldn’t feel it. She couldn’t feel anything, except the throbbing pain in her arm, and the blood welling out with every beat of her heart.

Warm hands guided her to the floor, clamped over her arm, and slowed the bleeding. Reynart knelt beside her on the rough wooden planks. His black knife sliced away her dress and chemise sleeves, then slit the linen chemise into strips.

“Kerrim, tie one of those bands around her arm, above the wound. And tie it tight. Don’t worry about hurting her.”

Angie tried to smile, for Kerrim’s sake, but when he pulled the tourniquet tight, she hissed in pain.

“Keep it tight, Kerrim,” Reynart ordered. Soaking another strip in wine, he cleaned the wound. Liquid fire ate into her arm. Angie screamed and tried to crawl away from the agony.

Reynart straddled her and pinned her to the floor with his weight, leaving his hands free. “Amin-Ra take you for his own, woman! What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t have time to think,” she whispered.

“That much is obvious.” He probed the edge of the wound gently with a fingertip. Angie bit her lip to keep from screaming again. “A bandage will never hold that.”

He picked up his black knife again and slit the end of the ribbon off his left hand. Once the seal was broken, he tore the wrapping away. His palm started bleeding again as he soaked the ribbon in the rest of the wine, then quickly wrapped it around her upper arm. He tested the seal, then nodded to Kerrim.

“Loosen the tie.”

Fire coursed through her arm. She arched her back, instinctively trying to get away from the pain. Reynart's weight across her legs held her in place.

Gradually, her mind cleared enough for one thought to get through. She could feel pain. This wasn't a dream.

Angie's mind raced as she struggled to come to terms with the ramifications of that statement. First came a crushing guilt. Real people had died in the destruction of Reynart's kingdom. Following that came a burning fury. The doctors that convinced her it was all just a dream had stolen ten years of her life. She'd lived with the constant fear that she was going insane, unable to confide in anyone because they might lock her away. And it was all for nothing. They'd been wrong!

Reynart levered himself off her legs with a chuckle. "Anyone with that much fire in her eyes has to be all right."

She focused on his face. Looking down at her, he gave her a reassuring smile. It was so like how she remembered him. And now she knew he was real. Her first lover, her best lover. Not a figment of her imagination, but real. Her chest tightened painfully, and she drew a deep breath. Before she could say anything, Reynart looked up at Kerrim, and his face once more became an emotionless mask. She'd lost her chance.

"Kerrim, tell the tavern keep that no one has been murdered in his establishment." He dug in his belt pouch, then held out a handful of coins. "This should placate him."

"Yes, my lord Prince." Kerrim took the coins in hands still stained with Angie's blood. He hesitated a moment before blurting out, "I know you didn't mean to injure her, my lord."

Reynart chuckled again. "Thank you for your support, but I believe he'll care more about the outcome than my intentions."

Kerrim ducked a quick bow and dashed into the kitchen. Beryl had wisely retreated to the other side of the room, leaving Reynart and Angie alone.

He checked her magical bandage and shook his head. "Whatever possessed you to do something so foolish?"

"I didn't think it was foolish to save Beryl's life."

"Her life was in no danger."

"But you were so angry."

"I control my emotions. They don't control me." Leaning back on his heels, he stared at her. He almost seemed to stare into her, as if trying to determine what controlled her.

Angie bit back an urge to giggle. In her own world, flashbacks to this crazy world controlled her. Now that she found herself in the middle of it, she had no idea what did. Maybe if Reynart found out, he'd tell her.

Reynart sighed. "The next time you step in front of my blade, you might not be so lucky. But unlike most rational people, that warning won't prevent you from interfering again."

"I'm not about to stand by and let you kill someone." Especially not now that she knew his victims were real.

"You need not fear on that count. I have never killed for personal reasons, other than self-defense."

"But you poisoned that Lord Darion. That wasn't self-defense."

"Lord Darion's death wasn't personal."

"How can you kill someone impersonally?" Her eyes widened and she shrank back against the rough wooden floorboards beneath her. "You're an assassin, aren't you?"

His silence was answer enough.

She turned her head away. He'd been sick with remorse after killing his brother, going into a shock so deep he'd barely been able to function, even though Alaric had tried to kill him first. Now Reynart killed for money, and felt nothing. What sort of monster had the past ten years turned him into?

Angie's skin prickled with gooseflesh. She felt tainted just from being near him. If she dared trust her arm to hold any weight, she'd try crawling away from him. But she couldn't. She was trapped by the injury he'd given her, forced to consign the man he'd been to memory and instead face the man he'd become.

Fingering the tattered remains of her sleeve, she asked, "Do you like having them all afraid of you?"

"It serves my purpose."

"And that is?" she prompted.

"None of your concern." He turned her head and forced her to look at him. Anger blazed deep within his eyes. "I will not kill you by accident. That is the only reason I told you what I did. Do not try to read some softer emotion into my words."

Angie smiled in relief. "Then I have nothing to worry about. You just said you never kill for personal reasons."

He tightened his hold on her chin. "You'll be praying for Amin-Ta, merciful Lady of Death, to save you before I'm done. I intend to make you pay for the destruction of Nord D'Rae. The destruction claimed your partner's life, cheating me of my revenge, but you will not be so lucky."

Partner? What partner? Did he think she'd been secretly working with Alaric? But no, he'd killed Alaric, not the storm. Her stomach heaved. He couldn't be accusing her of being partners with Gervaise.

Then the meaning of the rest of his words sank into her brain. Her heart and lungs turned to stone, incapable of movement. An instant later, they returned to flesh, laboring at twice their normal speed to make up for their lapse. She'd just learned how much a single knife wound could hurt. The thought of the tortures he'd once described to her...

She had to get away from him.

Kerrim entered the room, holding a bottle of wine. "The tavern keep understands, my lord Prince. He even brought up another bottle to replace the wine used on my lady's bandage."

With no sign of the threat he'd just uttered marring his expression, Reynart stood and accepted the bottle. Beryl returned to the table from her self-imposed exile, although she moved warily, her gaze locked on Reynart's face.

Angie's wild heartbeat stuttered, then slowed. Beryl was a mage, like the ones responsible for bringing Angie here. Beryl could return her to the real world. Even better, Reynart wanted nothing to do with the woman.

"Beryl," Angie called from her place on the floor. "I've thought about what you said, and I want to help. I'll go with you."

Using her good arm, she levered herself up into a sitting position. Fire pulsed through her wound. She gasped and slumped back to the floor. Her arm subsided to a dull throb, but she didn't dare move it again.

Reynart knelt by her side, checking the bandage. "Very clever, Anjeli," he murmured. "But predictable."

Angie stared at him in horror. He'd warned her that fear served his purpose, right before he terrified her so badly that she volunteered to go on Beryl's mission to get away from him. Did that mean he wanted her to volunteer? But then why hadn't he agreed to help the mage in the first place?

Reynart stood and met Beryl's stare. "She's in no condition to travel. You'll have to go without her."

"We'll find a way. But I need your help as well."

"Then you can save yourself a trip."

"I won't bother appealing to your altruism, since you obviously haven't got any. How about pride? You insist that you weren't to blame for the original collapse of the gateways. As I manipulate the energies to restore them, I'll be able to determine how they were put out of balance."

"I already know I didn't do it. It doesn't matter to me what you believe."

Shaking her head, Angie tried to catch Beryl's attention without alerting Reynart. "He's lying," she mouthed. But the mage didn't see her.

She gritted her teeth in frustration. Didn't Beryl remember how fiercely Reynart had protested his innocence earlier? He'd almost thrown a dagger at her for just suggesting he was responsible for the destruction.

Angie gasped. Reynart did not let emotions control him. So the attack prompted by his emotional outburst had been staged. Maybe the emotions had been, too. She no longer knew what to believe.

Beryl folded her arms in front of her chest. "The council thought you might need convincing. They've promised that if you help restore and seal the gateways, they will

be indebted to you. Even a mercenary like you can see the advantages of having the mages' council owing you a favor."

Reynart's smile glittered like shards of glass. "Finally, an argument that makes sense."

"There are conditions," she blurted. "The council will not help you kill anyone, or counteract a member mage's working, or perform any working against the established principles of magery."

"A limited favor. But still useful."

"So will you accept the offer? Will you help restore and seal the gateways?"

He rubbed his chin in a calculated gesture of consideration. "How do I know the council will honor their bargain? If I help you, what prevents them from saying you made the whole thing up?"

"Their offer was included on the scroll they sent you."

Reynart glanced at the tavern's fireplace. "I have only your word for that."

Beryl made a visible effort to relax her clenched fists and jaw. "What would you accept as proof?"

"Perform a minor magic for me now."

"Do you agree to help me restore and seal the gateways?"

"I give my word. I will do everything in my power to see you both safely to the gateway, and offer what assistance I can with your magical efforts. If you hold up your end of the bargain."

"Then we're agreed." Beryl walked over to Reynart. Placing her left hand flat on her chest, she held out her right.

Reynart mirrored her gesture, and they clasped hands. "Agreed."

She broke off the handshake with a smug smile. "I told the council you'd take the deal. But they insisted I try appealing to your honor and virtue first. If they'd let me do it my way, your friend would never have been injured."

"Then I know the perfect proof of your good faith. Heal her."

Beryl's smug expression vanished. "I'm a mage, not a miracle worker."

Reynart held out his dagger, hilt first. "Within four hours of an injury, if you have the weapon that caused it, a mage can heal a wound with no scar or stiffness. My sister taught me that much of magic."

Did he realize how much he'd just revealed about his life at the Royal Court? Angie didn't think so. But she'd seen the web of scars that crisscrossed his body. Her teenaged self had found them fascinating.

Those were just the injuries that couldn't be healed. She couldn't imagine how many wounds he'd endured that left no trace. No physical trace, anyway.

Beryl took the dagger and walked over to where Angie lay on the floor. Using the tattered sleeve, the mage wiped the blood off the floorboards and knelt beside her.

Angie glanced at Reynart's legs. No blood stained his black hose. Yet, he'd been kneeling beside her, right where Beryl knelt now. Some magical spell must protect the fabric.

Although she wanted to believe he'd magically Scotchgarded his clothing out of vanity, Angie feared it had a more practical cause. He wanted no evidence that could tie him to the scene of a murder.

"I've changed my mind," Angie said. "I don't want to go if he's going."

Beryl frowned. "But you gave your word."

"A promise made under duress isn't binding. And being anywhere near him counts as being under duress."

"Your word is your bond, no matter what the circumstances."

"Then at least give me a reward, like you're giving him."

Beryl's brow furrowed. "I cannot pledge the council's favor."

"I don't need their favor, only yours. When we're finished, send me home again."

"I can not make such a promise. That would be for the council to decide. But I can recommend they rule as you desire."

"That will have to be enough," Angie sighed.

"Then we are agreed?" Beryl prompted.

"Agreed."

A rush of warmth flared up her arm. Beside her, Beryl knelt clutching the dagger, her eyes closed and her face tight with concentration. More heat flared along the path of Angie's wound.

Her arm began to throb, each pulsing beat of her heart driving shafts of pain down to her fingertips and up to the base of her neck. She bit her lip, determined to keep silent. The burning pain increased, driving a hiss out between her clenched teeth. Making a fist with her good hand, she beat it against the floor, as if she could somehow lessen the pain in one arm by making the other one hurt. It didn't work.

Her world dissolved, becoming only the agony burning away her arm. And then the pain stopped.

Angie opened her eyes, and hesitantly moved her arm. It didn't hurt. Sitting up, she rubbed at the dried blood caked on her skin. It flaked off, revealing perfect pink flesh beneath. The wound was healed.

Reynart bent and handed her the golden goblet, filled with wine. "Drink this. You're going to need it."

Chapter Four

Angie gulped the bitter wine, no longer worried about it going to her head. She'd been stone-cold sober before, and she hadn't recognized Reynart's manipulations. Not until after he'd caught her in his web of lies and deceit.

She glanced at the mage, slumped wearily in a chair. Beryl still didn't seem to have realized she'd done exactly what Reynart wanted.

So had the innkeeper. The tavern was empty, and a heavy bar had been dropped across the door to keep out new customers.

Feeling a little better, Angie ignored Reynart's outstretched hand and forced herself to her feet. The stiffened skirts of her ruined gown stuck to the floorboards, glued by the drying blood and spilled wine. She wrenched her skirts free, tearing the wool, and nearly stumbled when they no longer held her in place.

Reynart steadied her, and helped her to a chair at a new table. "Careful. Your wound is healed, but you're going to be weak for a while yet."

Angie shrugged her arm out of his grasp and collapsed into the offered chair. She turned away from the dark stain marring the floor by their previous table. "Thank you. But I neither need nor want your help. You've done enough."

One corner of his mouth lifted. "This is going to be an *interesting* trip."

Beryl raised her head at the mention of their trip. "That's right. We must make haste. Leave tonight, if we can."

"I'm not leaving until I get fresh clothes," Angie insisted. She refused to wear the bloody and tattered gown for another hour, let alone for a month-long journey.

Beryl sniffed. "I expected you would bathe and change first."

"I have nothing to change into."

Reynart called Kerrim over. "You and Anjeli are of a similar size. How much do you want for a tunic and pair of hose?"

"I shall not sell them, my lord Prince." Kerrim held himself rigidly erect, his chin tipped up in defiance.

Reynart's eyes narrowed. "Oh?"

"I shall not sell them. But I will give them to the lady, if you allow me to go with you on your quest."

Angie smothered a smile. Unlike her, Kerrim didn't waste the opportunity to bargain. The boy was learning, but he was playing the game against a master.

"This isn't one of your epic songs." Reynart's voice was surprisingly gentle. "We'll be riding hard, pushing our horses and ourselves to the limits of our endurance. We'll

be hungry as often as not, sore and dirty. It isn't noble, heroic, or any of the other inspiring words used by songsters. It's a thankless trial that anyone with a lick of sense would avoid if he could."

"You're going, my lord."

"But I'm getting a favor from the mages' council for my efforts."

"And I'll get the fodder for a song." He turned and faced Angie. "My lady, you questioned my commitment to my art. I am committed. No matter what my lord Prince says, this will be an epic adventure. And the minstrel who breathes life into the telling of it will surely be accepted for bardic training. I will be that minstrel, and I will become a bard."

"It won't be easy," Reynart warned.

"It will be impossible," Beryl snapped. "We have no need of music on the journey. He's no fighter, or tracker, or anything we might find useful. He's just one more mouth to feed, more provisions to buy or game to hunt. He'll slow us down."

What would Beryl say if she knew Angie couldn't ride? Would she call off the mission and refuse to send Angie home? If they had to go slowly for Kerrim's sake, Angie's poor horsemanship wouldn't be as noticeable. Besides, she'd feel safer with another buffer between her and Reynart.

She glared at the mage. "You know what I could use on this journey? A friend. And I'm not likely to find one in either you or Reynart. I want Kerrim to come."

Angie crossed her arms in front of her chest and leaned back in her chair, waiting for the mage's answer. She was learning, too.

"Very well," Beryl grumbled. Angie wasn't sure if the mage was bargaining or merely humoring her. "But if he slows us down, we're abandoning him."

Reynart nodded to Kerrim. "Welcome to your first epic adventure. Now, tell the tavern keeper you'll be leaving. While you're at it, tell him it's safe to come out and clean the floors."

"Right away, my lord!"

"And don't forget my change of clothes," Angie called after him.

Reynart joined the women at the table. "That was diplomatically done."

Beryl frowned. "I'm not here to be a diplomat. I'm here to get you two to the Kingscap gate and restore the gateway network."

"Why did the council send you to get us?" Angie asked. She'd been wondering that for a while. Beryl obviously hadn't been chosen for her interpersonal skills.

"My husband and I spent much time researching the gateways, until his death two months ago. The council felt I would be able to restore the gateways."

Reynart pounced on her statement. "Is it not a certainty?"

"There are so many variables." Beryl waved a dismissive hand. "The gate energy coming from a person instead of the network, the Nord D'Rae magical defenses, the

length of time since the gateways were destroyed. The standard procedures may not work. Only someone who has studied the gateways as I have can compensate for all the factors."

Reynart frowned. "So if you do not succeed, another mage could not perform the spell in your stead."

"Another mage could try, if there was another seventh-level mage available between here and Kingscap, which there isn't. But even if there was, it's unlikely another mage could succeed where I failed. Why?"

Reynart glared at her, his fingers flexing as if seeking the hilt of a dagger. "I like to know all of my options."

Kerrim returned, followed by the tavern keeper who carried a dripping bucket and a mop. Leaving the man to clean up the evidence of Angie's injury, Kerrim claimed the last seat at their table.

"When do we leave?"

"Tonight," Beryl answered.

Reynart corrected her. "The day after tomorrow."

Two more nights? Impossible! Reynart had been too tired to torment her in earnest last night, but he'd still terrified her until she could barely think. And that was when she'd still believed this was just a dream. She didn't dare think of what he might do if he got her alone.

Angie warned him, "I'm not staying with you until we leave."

"Why can't we leave as soon as Anjeli is ready?" Beryl asked.

"How many horses did you bring?" Reynart answered.

"Only one. But you're a prince! You must have horses."

"Owning horses within city walls is a conceit that attracts attention. That's the last thing I want."

"You didn't answer me," Angie interrupted them. "Where am I supposed to stay until we leave?"

Beryl frowned. "I anticipated leaving tonight, so did not request lodging yet. You may stay with me, if you have the coin to split the cost."

Angie fingered the purse in her sleeve. "How much will —?"

"You have the coin." Reynart leaned back with a confident smile. "Even if your word means nothing to you, you won't abandon your only chance to return to your own world. Stay with the mage. We'll have all the time we need on the journey."

His secret smile sent fear curling through Angie's stomach. She'd have to watch him every minute, and make sure he never got an opening for his revenge.

He turned to Beryl. "But that brings up another question. The horses. And provisions. Who will purchase those?"

“The council gave me a voucher for provisions,” Beryl answered. “Any dry goodsman will accept it.”

“Dry goods? What about outfittings?”

“What need we besides food and horses?”

“Blankets. Tents. Or weren’t you planning on sleeping?”

Beryl’s cheeks reddened. “Of course I planned on sleeping. There are inns between here and Kingscap.”

“Not if you take the fastest route.” Reynart dug in his belt pouch and produced a handful of coins. He laid them out on the table one at a time. “Here’s Sungaret, where we are now. Here’s Kingscap, where we want to go. In between are Manturet, Brinegey, Hunescot, and Dendermonde.”

He traced a pathway among the coins. “The Cassiphon River comes down from Kingscap, running on the west of Dendermonde and Hunescot, swings out through Brinegey, then bends back to loop around Manturet, before emptying into the sea at Sungaret.”

A river! Angie smiled. They didn’t have to travel on horseback at all.

He continued, “The fastest route is to head north on the road to Manturet, then cut east across country here, where the river widens through the flats. If you go all the way to Manturet, you’ll have to go miles out of your way, since Brinegey is the only place to cross safely.”

“Why not just stay on the river, and take a boat?” Angie asked.

Reynart shook his head. “The river runs south, and we’ll be heading north. We will ride.”

Studying the rough map, she searched for a way to shorten the journey. “Isn’t there any way to cross at Manturet?”

“Manturet is a mill town, my lady,” Kerrim answered. “The river is fast and furious there, strong enough to drive a score of water wheels. It can not be crossed.”

Beryl traced Reynart’s suggested route with her finger. “If we skirt the river to the east of Manturet, why ride cross-country to Dendermonde? Why not head straight for Hunescot and rejoin the road?”

Reynart and Kerrim traded a look. Reynart just shook his head, but Kerrim gasped, “Have you never heard of the Hunescot Forest? All manner of dangerous beasts call it home, some on four legs and some on two.”

“I had hoped to limit the number of times we were attacked,” Reynart added.

Angie shivered. They seemed to think outlaws and wild animals were amusing. She couldn’t wait to get back home to a world she understood. A safe, uncomplicated world.

“I knew of the forest,” Beryl snapped, snatching her hand away as if even pointing to it on a map was dangerous. “I just didn’t know it was *there*. I’m from Khazac. A civilized kingdom. We don’t have these sorts of things.”

"Of course not," Reynart agreed. "You don't have enough trees in the whole kingdom to make a decent grove, let alone a forest."

"You're not a native—" Beryl bit off the rest of her comment, but it was too late. Reynart's expression resumed the closed and shuttered look Angie knew too well.

"No, I'm not. But I have spent the last ten years traveling from city to city, sometimes openly and sometimes keeping out of sight. I know the roads, the countryside, and where we can camp safely at night. I promised to get you safely to the gateway, within your month's time limit. You will get there. If you follow my instructions."

Without waiting for Beryl's response, he turned to Kerrim. "You will make certain Anjeli has clothing suitable for riding, and see if you can find a pair of secondhand boots that fit her. We don't have time for a new pair to be made. If you don't own any, get a pair for yourself, too."

He spared Beryl with a glance. "You will purchase the dry goods and other supplies we will need. Have you the gold for a pack horse?"

She shook her head.

"We probably couldn't find a fourth horse even if you did. Finding three will be hard enough. I'll take care of the horses and tents. Get only what can be carried by four mounted people. We'll graze the horses and hunt game." He smiled, a dagger slash of white with no trace of humor. "No doubt we'll all be much thinner by the time we reach Kingscap. But we shall reach it within the month."

Angie sighed. This was going to be a long trip. But at least she'd keep busy, learning how to ride a horse. "Beryl, let me just get changed into Kerrim's spare tunic, and I'll come with you to find lodgings for tonight. Then I want dinner and a nice hot bath. We can start shopping tomorrow."

"I suppose tomorrow will be soon enough," Beryl grudgingly agreed. "Although it makes more sense to visit the bathhouse first, then find food and lodgings."

Kerrim stood. "My things are in the kitchen. You can change there."

"I won't be a minute," Angie promised.

"I'll wait outside." Beryl pulled up the bar and stalked out the door.

Angie shook her head, no longer surprised by the mage's truculent behavior, then rose to follow Kerrim to the kitchen.

"Anjeli." Reynart's soft voice stopped her in mid-stride. She turned back, letting Kerrim continue without her.

"Yes?"

He hesitated, his lips parted as if he'd been about to say something then thought better of it. They watched each other in wary silence. Finally, he said, "May the Heavenly Pair guide you."

She blinked. He seemed serious. She didn't think that was what he'd originally intended to say, but for once, his words didn't seem to couch a hidden layer of meaning. "Um, you too."

He nodded and turned his attention to gathering up the coins on the table. She was dismissed.

She hurried to catch up with Kerrim, careful of the puddle remaining from the tavern keeper's mopping. Safely out of Reynart's earshot, she muttered, "He's probably just afraid I'll get myself killed before he gets a chance to do it."

* * * * *

After following Beryl through half of the city, Angie was almost ready to give up her bath if it meant she could eat. The other inhabitants of the city that they'd shared the streets with had gradually dispersed, heading home for one of the mouthwatering dinners that scented the air.

Finally, Beryl pointed to a large gray building. A low fountain cascaded over two levels of stone before it flooded the flagstones in front of the building, draining away through hidden pipes so that the water never spilled onto the street. Across the fountain, a flight of steps led to an arched and columned doorway.

"Those are the baths," Beryl told her. "I'll get our lodging and order a meal for when you're done."

"You're not coming in with me?" Angie hated to sound like a frightened child, but she had no idea what to expect.

"Through the fountain?" Beryl snorted. "I'm not bathing. My feet don't need to be cleaned."

"Is that what it's for?" Angie tossed a glance at the film of muck on the cobblestones, and the puddles she didn't want to identify. Perhaps it was a good idea to force patrons to wash their feet before entering the public baths.

"Of course. Your slippers are already ruined with blood, so it doesn't matter if you walk through the fountain in them. Better that, than baring your feet."

A flush scalded Angie's cheeks. To bare her feet, she'd have to remove Kerrim's borrowed hose. And that would bare a lot more than her feet.

She stepped into the fountain. Warm water washed over her feet, soaking her hose. A thin stream of red spun away from her slippers. She watched the thread of blood spiral down a hidden grating.

"Don't just stand there like a half-wit," Beryl snapped. "Or will you be happy with merely bathing your feet?"

"No," Angie sighed, and sloshed through the fountain to the steps. Her slippers squished as she climbed up to the archway. Now that she was closer, she could see that it was filled with strands of tiny blue glass beads, making a curtain that clicked softly as it swayed with the breeze.

She pushed aside the beads, jostling the strands with a sound like a sudden rain. The small antechamber was ringed with other blue-curtained doorways, each separated by a small fountain on the wall. From outside, Beryl called, "Half a candle mark, and no longer."

A young man, wrapped in layers of gauzy blue cloth, entered through one of the curtains and hurried to her side. "Madame desires a bath?"

"Yes, please."

"Public or private?"

"Private, please." She could just imagine the reaction of other bathers when she started rinsing off dried blood. The heat rose in her cheeks again. Unlike her familiar desert hot springs, these baths wouldn't be filled with people decently clad in bathing suits. "Definitely private."

The young man smiled. "As you wish. A single tub or two?"

"Two? Why would I need two?"

"One for washing, and one for soaking in after."

"Oh. I'd like two, then."

He smiled again. "This is Madame's first visit to the baths?"

"Yes." She darted an annoyed glance out the beaded curtain. "My companion left before telling me how much all of this will cost."

That brought a frown to his mobile mouth. "A bath is a half-*graz*. A *graz* for a private room, and another *graz* for the second tub."

That told her nothing. She had copper, silver and gold coins in her purse. Which was a *graz*?

She shook the purse out of her tunic sleeve, catching it before it reached the end of its chain. Fishing inside it, she drew out a silver coin stamped with a man's head on one side and a sailing ship on the other.

"Will this be enough?"

The young man smiled, and plucked the coin from her fingers. "For the baths, the room, *and* for an attendant. A boy to scrub your back and wash your hair?"

"No, I don't think —"

He nodded, taking in her mannish tunic and hose. "A girl, then."

"No!" Her entire face burned, all the way to her ears. "Just the bath. And some soap."

"As Madame wishes." He clapped his hands twice. A small child, swathed in blue scarves similar to the man's, darted into the room. "Show Madame to room four. Then leave her."

"Yes, *Semmazen*." The child bowed. He led Angie through another curtain, and down a narrow hallway.

Mingled masculine and feminine laughter drifted through one of the curtained doorways, accompanied by soft splashes. Through another doorway, Angie heard a man's low groans of pleasure.

She fixed her gaze on the boy before her, and tried to ignore the sounds issuing from the private rooms. Had Beryl taken her to a bathhouse or to a brothel?

The boy stopped and scooped aside the beaded curtain filling a doorway. "Number four, Madame."

She stepped inside, relieved when the boy dropped the curtain behind her. A narrow stone path circled the rectangular room, with two square, sunken tubs dividing the remaining space. Steam rose from the water, promising welcome relief from her itchy, grubby state.

Quickly stripping off the tunic, undertunic and hose, she paused to consider the purse still chained to her wrist. She'd heard of prostitutes who stole the wallets out of clients' pants pockets while the clients were busy with other girls. This arrangement didn't seem much safer.

A shelf between the tubs contained soaps and oils. She walked around the tub and hid her purse between some of the bottles. Then she slipped into the water.

Warm water captured her in its blissful embrace, rinsing away all trace of the afternoon's troubles. She tipped her head back and sighed in pleasure. When she got back to the real world, she'd have to get a hot tub. This was too wonderful to give up.

Glancing down, she saw rusty red plumes swirling away from her body. There was so much blood – far more than had stained her slippers.

She grabbed a rough sponge and scoured her skin until it glowed a healthy pink. She didn't want to be stained by this world's violence.

She washed off every trace of blood, then tried to figure out how to unbraid her hair. Suddenly realizing she had no idea how to coil it back into its elaborate style, she dropped her hands. She'd just have to lather up the braids as they were, and hope they hadn't gotten too dirty.

Finally scrubbed, lathered and rinsed to her satisfaction, she mounted the stairs leading out of her tub. The cold air chilled her after the hot bath, and she hurried into the second tub. The walls of this tub slanted at different angles, making a variety of benches from the straight-backed seat lining the first tub to a shallow slant that was almost more of a bed.

Recalling the noises she'd heard before, her cheeks steamed hotter than the water. Her constant blushing marked her as a foreigner, unfamiliar with these people's ways. She'd have to control her reactions if she was going to fit in here.

Her lips twisted. It was going to take a lot of control. Give her a girl, indeed!

Sculling her hands through the water, she let the resultant waves lap at her body. The warm water soothed and caressed her, and she let her mind wander as she relaxed.

She wondered what the proprietor would make of Reynart. Would he offer Reynart a girl or a boy? Or a woman?

Angie closed her eyes. The Reynart she'd known had been wary and cautious, but he would have been able to relax in a bath, once he deemed it safe. This new Reynart had turned healthy suspicion into cynical paranoia. He would never go to a public bath. It was too unprotected.

She cupped the water and poured it over her skin, letting it trail over her shoulders and between her breasts like fingers. But what if he did go to the baths? What if he bared his strong, muscular body, rising out of the water like a young god reborn, his flesh gleaming with reflected light?

Sinking deeper into the water, Angie felt the heat sinking into her bones, boiling her blood. Languorously, she reached for the bottles of scented oils, rivulets of water running down her arm in wet caresses. She sniffed a heady floral concoction that made her head spin, then a subtle fragrance like lilies of the valley. A citrus blend. A fragrance that was mostly cinnamon with some dark, intoxicating scent lurking beneath it. Methodically she worked her way through the scented oils, not sure what she was searching for, until she lifted the stopper of a small, rounded bottle. It smelled of green, growing things—a little like pine, a little like hay—with the resinous tang of amber, almost but not concealing an earthy, musky undertone.

It reminded her of Reynart. Of his endless afternoon sword practices, the black leather pants laced tightly over his muscular legs, the simple, flowing tunic calling attention to the grace and precision of his every movement. Of how his hair would be spiky with sweat upon his return, his skin flushed with the arousal of combat. He'd strip and rinse the dirt from his hair, bathe the sweat from his body.

She generously offered to help, gently running the wet cloth over his shoulders, across the planes of his chest and back, down to the rippled muscles of his stomach. Leaving him wet, naked, and even further aroused.

Grabbing the bottle and a soft sponge, she made her way across the tub to the side that formed a reclining bench. She poured oil onto the sponge, leaned back, and closed her eyes. In her imagination, they tumbled to his bed, sinking deep into the thick feather covers.

He quickly had her as naked as he was, and pinned beneath him. But even though the heat of his arousal was burning her leg, he wasn't interested in simply satisfying his own needs. He never had been.

A whisper of cynicism tried to protest that it was his paranoia, demanding she lose control first to prevent her from thinking clearly enough to be a threat to him. If that was his reason, it was the convenient lie he told himself to make the truth palatable. She'd touched his soul, his tortured, abused soul, and knew how badly he ached for loving human contact. She was a precious gift to him, one he felt deeply unworthy of, and so he worshipped her body, making himself worthy of her affection by giving her pleasure unlike any she'd known before or since.

Imagining his slow caresses across her shoulders, arms, and oh-so-vulnerable neck, she stroked the oiled sponge along the path of his fingers. It dipped down, gliding over her breasts,

circling tighter and tighter until it rasped against her swollen nipples. In her mind's eye, Reynart's strong hands cupped her breasts, his fingers kneading gently, as he licked and suckled first one plump tip and then the other.

Angie moaned softly, writhing beneath him on the thick feather covers which felt oddly like stone.

"Don't torture me," she whispered.

"Never."

He thrust inside her, hard and deep, and they both sighed in unison at the perfect fit. Slowly, he began to move, stroking in and out while his mouth feasted on her body. Their passion built, spiraling relentlessly upward in a tighter and tighter coil, until he was thrusting into her in a frenzied need to bring them even closer, to unite their bodies in a fusion so powerful it could never be sundered.

Angie threw her head back, her throat tightening to choke off her ecstatic scream as she found her release. Because even here, in the paradise of his arms, she was never really safe. If anyone heard, if anyone learned he was hiding her here, something terrible would happen.

His face buried in the curve of her neck, Reynart muffled his own triumphant shout as he filled her with his heat. Wrapping her tightly in his arms, he rolled to his back, her limp weight sprawled across his body no hardship.

Now it was his turn to whisper a heartfelt plea. "Don't leave me."

"Never."

The thick steam filling the bathing room made it hard for Angie to catch her breath. Her skin tingled, and her muscles had melted. She'd obviously been in the bath for far too long.

She climbed out and scrubbed herself dry with one of the thick towels provided. Slipping the purse's bracelet over her wrist, she chuckled at her paranoia. No doubt she'd caught it from Reynart.

As she rounded the corner of the tub, the chuckle died in her throat. Her clothes had been taken away. She'd never seen anyone enter the room. Then again, she hadn't exactly been paying attention to her surroundings.

Wrapping the towel securely around herself sarong-style, she poked her head into the hallway. It was empty.

While she was debating the merits of yelling for the proprietor, the little boy who'd shown her to the room scurried down the hall.

He stumbled to a stop in front of her, too out of breath to do more than just bow. Finally, he said, "Does Madame need anything?"

"My clothes."

"They are still being cleaned."

She thought of the blood that had flaked off on the inside of the sleeve, and the old ale stain on the leg of the hose. Now that she was clean, it would be nice to have clean clothes to get back into. "But I didn't ask for them to be cleaned."

"Please, Madame. I do not know. Wait here, and I will fetch *Semmazen*." The boy bowed again.

"Oh, all right. Go fetch him. But he'd better bring my clothes with him."

The boy raced down the hall, blue scarves snapping behind him like the tail of a kite. The proprietor pushed through the curtain a short time later, gliding down the hallway to Angie's room. She stepped aside so that they could argue in private, and he followed her inside.

"There is a problem, Madame?"

"Why did you take my clothes?"

He smiled, dismissing her concern as not a problem. "Madame gave me a five-*graz* piece," he explained. "Yet Madame did not wish the services of an attendant. The only other service for two and a half *graz* is the laundry service."

"I suppose it didn't occur to you that Madame wanted change?" Great. Now she was starting to refer to herself in third person, like he did.

The proprietor's face collapsed in a puzzled frown. Obviously, the thought hadn't occurred to him. "But what—?"

"Oh, never mind. Just bring my clothes as soon as they're cleaned."

His brilliant smile returned. "Of course, Madame. They shall be returned well before the half candle mark your companion specified."

She shook her head. The man was either simple, or amazingly devoted to customer service. Her cheeks heated as she recalled the sort of services his customers might require. And she was wearing only a towel.

"I'll expect them soon." She made one-handed shooping motions at him, clutching both her purse and the knot of her towel with the other hand. Still smiling, he bowed and backed from the room.

Belatedly, she realized that once again she'd made a bargain without being aware of it. Or rather, someone else had made a bargain for her, and she'd agreed to the terms after the fact.

Angie paced the narrow walkway around the two tubs as she waited. She remembered a bumper sticker she'd seen once, *Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you*. She'd thought it was funny at the time. Now she wasn't so sure.

This was Reynart's world. Maybe he was right about it. Maybe the only way to succeed was to protect yourself from other people, and manipulate them into doing what you wanted before they manipulated you. Had his world changed so much in ten years? Or was she just seeing a different side of it now?

A chill dread settled in her stomach. She couldn't live that way. But she'd have to pretend that she was as cold and ruthless as he was. The proprietor wouldn't have dreamed of taking Reynart's clothes while he bathed. Of course, she couldn't imagine Reynart being so lost in sensation that he'd miss someone walking in and stealing his clothing.

The child rattled the beaded curtain, letting her know he was there, then carried in her clothes. He placed the pile on the floor and bowed his way out of the room before she could thank him.

She dropped her towel and pulled on her borrowed hose. The child certainly seemed afraid of her. Maybe she was getting the hang of being an intimidating bully.

The thought didn't make her happy. She pulled on the undertunic, then paused with her hand on the tunic. Reynart's last warning flashed through her head, *May the Heavenly Pair guide you.*

He'd known the dangers and temptations the baths concealed. But for once, he hadn't tried to manipulate her. He'd let her choose her own path.

She saw again the white-faced boy backing through the curtain as fast as he could, and swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth. If she'd passed the test, why did she feel like she'd failed?

Straightening her shoulders, she jerked on Kerrim's borrowed tunic, now fluffy soft and smelling faintly of lavender. It didn't matter. She'd be whoever she had to be and do whatever she had to do so that she could get off this world. That was what was important, getting home. Repairing the magical gateways was just a way to get the mages' council to send her home. Angie couldn't lose sight of her goal.

Chapter Five

Two days later, Beryl shook Angie awake before dawn, to the accompaniment of faint cathedral chimes. "Time to rise. The *Giorzur* bells are ringing. We must meet at the stables before *Primae* so we can leave as soon as the city gates are opened."

Angie grunted agreement. Climbing out of bed, she pulled off the sleeveless shift she'd slept in, all that remained of her former chemise, and reached for the clothing she'd purchased yesterday at the bazaar.

Her new chemise had been designed for riding, and featured a split tail and roomy sleeves. She wore a ribbon-embroidered bodice over it. The woman who'd sold the outfit to her had helped her to adjust all of the ribbons until it cupped and supported her breasts—so she could sit a trot without injuring herself. The fitting session had been embarrassingly personal. Fortunately, the woman had sold her goods from a tent, not one of the open-air stalls, or else Angie would have suffered the bumpy ride.

Holding her breath, she cinched the bodice laces tight. After she knotted the bow, she exhaled slowly, testing the fit. Snug, but not uncomfortable.

She pulled on the soft pair of hose next. The previously scratchy wool had been transformed by a thorough laundering, and now hugged her legs like a second skin.

The final piece of her outfit was called a riding skirt, but the brown wool garment was really a loose pair of pants. It only looked like a floor length skirt if she stood still.

She stepped into the pants, or skirt, and pulled it up over her hips, then laced it closed. A beribboned peplum attached to the waist of the bodice, covering the top of the skirt so that her chemise couldn't peek through the gap.

"All set," she announced to Beryl. The mage wore a comfortable-looking pair of pants and tunic of fawn-colored leather, embroidered with mystical symbols. Or, at least, Angie thought they were mystical symbols. They could have been laundry marks.

Beryl looked her over. "You look like a proper lady."

Angie sighed. She'd rather look like a mage or a minstrel. They both dressed for comfort. Proper ladies dressed for fashion. But Kerrim had refused to help her purchase anything he felt wasn't suitable for her station.

She shook out her shift and folded it up, then tucked it into her satchel with the clothes she'd borrowed from Kerrim. As she bent over the bag, her skirt rode up in back, showing her stockinged feet.

"You forgot your boots!"

"If only I could." Angie glared at the hideous footgear. She'd preferred a pair of low boots in a burnished auburn color, but Kerrim had insisted on these knee high, boiled leather boots of mottled brown. A long tear down the outside of the left calf had been

inexpertly repaired with a different grain of leather, which hadn't taken the dye well. It was starting to return to its natural mustard shade, and darkened the surrounding leather with the runoff dye.

Angie sat down on the bed and wrestled the first boot on. "No proper lady would wear boots like these."

"If the choice was between slippers and those boots, any proper lady who didn't want her legs rubbed raw within half a day would choose the boots."

Angie froze, the second boot dangling limply from her foot. "What do you mean, rubbed raw?"

"You need something to protect your legs, or you'll get sores where your skirt catches between you and the horse. What do you wear to ride in your world?"

"Most people don't ride horses in my world. I never did. In fact, the only time I was on a horse, Reynart carried me, so it didn't matter what I wore."

Beryl stared at her. "You don't know how to ride? Why didn't you say something when we were planning our route?"

"I did say something, but Reynart insisted we had to ride." She shrugged. "How hard can it be? You sit on the saddle, put your feet in the stirrups, and steer with the reins. If you want to stop, you say, 'Whoa.' If you want to go faster, you kick your heels."

She'd seen plenty of westerns. Riding horses was easy. The really spectacular stuff was done by stunt riders, like jumping off a balcony onto a waiting horse, or hanging from one stirrup at a gallop while shooting targets fifty feet away. But enough actors and actresses rode them that it couldn't be hard to learn.

She yanked on the boot and stood. Swinging her new travel cloak over her shoulders, she glanced around the room one last time. She hadn't forgotten anything.

"Let's go."

Beryl tossed on her own gray wool travel cloak and picked up a heavily embroidered satchel. "When I settled our bill last night, I told them to have a breakfast ready for us."

The inn was more advanced than Reynart's lodgings, and had indoor cold-water plumbing, as well as amenities for the traveler. Angie pocketed a handful of the powdered scraps of linen that acted as combination toothbrushes and breath mints, and followed Beryl downstairs.

The food was waiting on a table in the main room, covered by a linen cloth. Beryl flicked the cloth away, revealing a half dozen golden brown pastries, two oranges and two pears. Through a split in one of the pastries, the tempting aroma of last night's roast wafted out, mixed with leftover vegetables.

"We should save most of this for the road," Beryl reminded her.

"I thought you bought enough supplies for our journey."

"I did, but I'd rather wait as long as I can before eating them. Have you never been on a long journey, either?"

"Of course I have!" She bristled at Beryl's condescending tone, and didn't feel the need to add that her trip had been in an air-conditioned station wagon, with nights spent at a series of Holiday Inns.

Somehow, Beryl guessed the truth anyway. "In a coach, stopping in cities for the night. But I'll wager you've never traveled across open country for a month at a time."

"No, I haven't. But I was a Campfire Girl."

Beryl stared at her. "That's not something most people would brag about."

Angie gazed back in confusion, puzzling out how Beryl might have misinterpreted her. Her cheeks heated. "Not a camp follower. It's an organization for teenaged girls."

Beryl continued to stare at her. Now what had she said wrong? She gave up trying to explain, and devoted her attention to separating out the pears and two pastries that had split open. "We can share the oranges easier than we can share the pears. And this will still leave one pastry for each person."

They ate their pastries in silence. Angie found a jug of crisp cider keeping cool in the shuttered window embrasure, and they washed down the remains of the meal. Beryl folded the remaining pastries in the linen cloth and tucked it into her satchel, followed by the oranges. She tossed her pear core into the fireplace, then nodded to Angie.

"Ready?"

Angie threw her core into the fireplace as well, and adjusted the strap of her satchel. "As I'll ever be. Let's go."

They walked outside onto the city's main boulevard. The sky was beginning to lighten, although a handful of the brightest stars were still visible. Beryl turned to the west, and headed toward the heart of the city. The early spring morning still held the memory of frost, but a few blocks' brisk walk soon warmed them.

"We'll leave through the western gate," the mage told Angie. "The stables are closer to the Cathedral gate, but that will be too crowded with people coming in."

Dawn was stretching pink fingers into the sky when they finally arrived at the stables. Reynart and Kerrim were waiting for them, the horses already saddled and loaded with supplies.

Beryl claimed the reins of a spirited gray mare, and fastened her satchel to the saddle. "She's never ridden before."

Kerrim's eyes widened, but Reynart just nodded. "I know. The bay gelding is hers."

Angie smiled at him, glad he'd considered her skills, or lack of skills, before purchasing a horse for her. "Thank you."

"I suppose the black is yours?" Beryl interrupted before he could answer.

"No. He's handsome enough, but dumb as a stone. Kerrim is riding him."

Angie looked at the only horse left. It started off white. Spots of reddish brown appeared around its middle, getting larger and more plentiful until the hindquarters were completely colored. While not exactly ugly, it didn't suit Reynart's black hose, surcoat and cloak nearly as well as Kerrim's steed.

Then she noticed that while the other horses were shuffling their hooves or tossing their heads up and down, Reynart's horse stood perfectly still, only its ears twitching, as if it was listening to the conversation.

"What kind of horse is it?" she asked. "It seems well-trained."

Reynart smiled. "She was a cavalry horse. Her master had an unfortunate addiction to spice smoke, and sold her for half her value."

"A girl horse? I figured you'd ride a stallion for sure."

"Why? I'm not wearing battle armor. A mare can carry my weight. Besides, Beryl's horse is a mare. I couldn't risk taking a stallion on a month-long journey with her. If she went into heat, not only would it delay us, but the stallion could injure the geldings if he saw them as threats."

Kerrim struggled into his saddle. Beryl swung easily onto her horse, then glared at Angie. "Can you even mount?"

"Let me help you onto your horse, for now," Reynart volunteered before Angie could answer.

He clasped her around the waist and lifted her into the air. Mimicking Beryl's actions, Angie dug one toe into the stirrup and threw the other leg across the horse's back. The horse skittered forward, and she clutched the front of the saddle, crouching low over the supplies tied there, and hugging the horse with her legs. It shook its head and stepped forward in a bouncing walk that nearly shook her from her seat. She clung tighter, and the foolish beast moved faster.

"Whoa!" she shouted.

Reynart clattered up beside her, his horse moving in a smooth, rolling gait. Leaning down, he grabbed her horse's reins and gave them a quick tug. She didn't think it was a strong enough pull for the horse to even notice, but the beast stopped instantly. So did Reynart's horse, and he hadn't even touched those reins.

He held her horse's reins out to her. When she faltered, he wrapped her hands around the leather the correct way.

"I thought Kerrim's horse was the stupid one," she complained.

"He is. Yours was smart enough to recognize the signal for a trot. If you have more trouble with him, you can ride the black. But the bay has a smoother gait."

Angie shuddered. "That was smooth?"

"That was a trot." Reynart grinned.

"Oh." She was very glad the woman had adjusted her bodice ribbons. If she was going to be bouncing around like that for any length of time, she wanted everything

important tied down. It looked like this riding business was a lot harder, and more uncomfortable, than she'd thought.

"You will ride next to me," Reynart told her. "I can catch you if you fall off."

His horse stepped forward in a graceful walk, and Angie's mount lurched into motion. Behind her, Beryl's and Kerrim's horses' hooves clattered against the cobbles.

"What are you smiling about?" the mage griped.

"We're setting off on a grand adventure," Kerrim answered, his voice quivering with excitement.

"Adventure is overrated."

"But the heroes—"

"You want to hear about a *real* hero, not one of your made-up song heroes? A noble and good man who gave his own life to protect and save people he never knew?"

Beryl's voice turned surprisingly rough, and Angie resisted the temptation to turn around in her saddle and look back.

"I would be honored," Kerrim said.

"He was a mage, and his name was Nestor..."

* * * * *

Angie watched the hypnotic rise and fall of her horse's head as he plodded along behind Reynart's mare. She'd been interested in the countryside earlier, but now she limited her interest to brief glances at the road ahead. The wide dirt track cut a pale scar through the grasslands.

Reynart turned in his saddle to call back, "The road levels out ahead. We can pick up the pace."

Angie groaned. Another bone-crunching trot. Her legs ached from trying to stay on the horse, when with every other step he tried to fling her off his back.

Ahead of her, Reynart nudged his mount into a trot, leaning forward until the mare's legs stretched out in a ground-eating stride. Angie's horse lurched into motion, bouncing her up and down like a trampoline. She struggled to find the way she'd discovered of sitting to minimize the shaking, when the horse's gait smoothed. The scenery flashed by faster than ever, but she rocked gently in the saddle, swaying back and forth with the beat of his hooves. She relaxed her trembling legs. She could do this.

The gentle rhythm of the horse lulled her into a half-sleep. When he shifted back into the jouncing trot, he nearly pitched her from the saddle. She fell forward, dropped the reins, and clutched his mane. One foot slid out of its stirrup.

Then he slowed to a walk. A blessedly even, bounceless walk. Sitting back in the saddle, she gathered the reins and fished for her missing stirrup.

The gelding's gait seemed rougher than normal, thwarting her attempts to hook the toe of her boot through the bouncing stirrup. Angie glanced up, and saw they'd left the

road. Grassland surrounded them on three sides, although sunlight reflected off water in front of them. They'd reached the Cassiphon River ford.

A beautiful teal blue, the river was so clear, she could see the rocks lining the bed. It stretched about a quarter of a mile across, but the clarity of the water made judging the depth impossible.

Reynart's mare stepped into the river with no hesitation. Swirling eddies of water formed around her white and red legs, half way to her knees. It was only about a foot deep.

Angie's mount splashed into the water behind the mare, kicking up plumes of spray. While he was occupied with picking his way across, she leaned down to adjust her stirrup.

His hoof struck a rock and slipped. The gelding lurched, scrambling for footing. He churned the water into mud, overturning rocks and making the riverbed even more precarious. He stumbled again, tossing Angie forward against the supplies. Her other stirrup flew off. She clamped her legs tight, trying to hang on, but her shivering muscles weren't equal to the challenge. She started to slide off the side, down toward the rocks and her horse's flailing hooves.

Reynart grabbed her as she started to fall, and pulled her across his legs. She clung to him, afraid to look, as his sure-footed mare forded the river a second time.

His arms wrapped tight around her, holding her against his chest, just like she remembered from her last visit to his world. She'd been tired, wet and scared then, too.

The mare came to a stop on firm ground. Reynart shifted Angie's position, holding her away so that he could look into her face.

"Are you all right?"

Honest concern darkened his eyes to a deep forest green, and she caught her breath. It was as if she'd once again fallen under the spell of her vision, except this time, it was real. When she'd relived her former adventures, she remembered the fear, fear that had grown with every repetition. But now her pulse raced and her splayed fingers trembled against his chest for a different reason. This was the man she'd fallen in love with ten years ago. This was the man she'd never stopped loving.

"I'm f-f-fine," she whispered.

He smoothed his hand up and down her leg, the warmth of his palm reaching her chilled flesh even through the damp wool of her riding skirt. "You're shivering."

"I'm not used to r-r-riding."

That explained her quaking legs, but not her trembling arms and fluttering heartbeat. She glided her hand over his surcoat, until her questing fingers rested above his heart. It beat as erratically as hers did.

She smiled, her fingers tightening in the soft wool. He still cared for her, too, or his heart would not be racing this way.

Tossing his head back, Reynart closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. His heartbeat steadied. When he opened his eyes, she'd lost him. The cold, unfeeling stranger had returned.

Her throat tightened, eyes burning with the grief she refused to let him see. Two could play at this game. She'd be just as cold as he was. After all, he was a murderer. An assassin. He'd said it himself all those years ago. He didn't deserve her love.

Now if only she could convince her heart.

He turned in his saddle and called to Kerrim and Beryl, "We'll stop here and rest the horses."

Shifting her weight slowly so as not to spook his horse, he sat her on his left thigh, her legs dangling, then lowered her the rest of the way to the ground. His hands glided over her body in a mockery of a caress as she slid through his hold. She shrugged off his touch and stood on her own for just a moment before her unsteady legs buckled, and she crumpled to the grass.

"I think I'll sit," she announced.

Reynart kicked free of his stirrups and swung down from his saddle, then led his mare and Angie's gelding a short distance away. At his signal, Kerrim and Beryl forded the river.

They both dismounted. Beryl stretched and walked in small circles, while Kerrim clutched his stirrup for balance for a moment before tottering after her. Even at a distance, Angie could hear Beryl's droning voice. Kerrim had listened to her tales since they'd left the city. It kept them both occupied, and as an added bonus, talking about her husband had curbed Beryl's usual acid tongue.

After throwing the reins over the horses' heads so that they wouldn't run away, Reynart returned to Angie.

"You should get up and walk around."

He didn't seem inclined to say anything about saving her, so she asked, "Why'd you catch me? The way you've carried on since I've gotten here, I thought you'd be happy to have me trampled by a horse."

He frowned. "I gave my oath to the mage that I would do my best to see us all safely to the gateway."

His words struck her chest with the force of a blow. Had she imagined the spark between them, the light in his eyes?

"So that's why you saved me? Because of your oath?" She shouldn't have expected him to admit to tender feelings, but the answer still stung.

"Of course." His gaze hardened, his eyes becoming like two glittering chips of stone. "My word is not given lightly. But once given, I will do whatever I must to fulfill my oath. All of my oaths."

She shivered, chilled by the icy warning in his tone. She whispered, "What other oaths have you given?"

He sank to his knees beside her. Claspng one of her hands between both of his, he answered, "When you first disappeared, I vowed that I would find you again."

"You did."

He smiled with dagger-edged sharpness. His grip tightened, nearly crushing her hand. "And then once I realized how you had betrayed me, I swore that I would make you pay for what you had done."

She strained to withdraw her hand. "I didn't do anything."

His fingers clenched, driving the feeling from her fingers. "Because of you, I killed my own brother."

"I was just the excuse. Even without me, Alaric would have tried to kill you to cement his claim to the throne, sooner or later. You still would have killed him to save yourself."

He ignored her response, his eyes burning with barely controlled hatred. "Your magical interference destroyed my kingdom. You have much to pay for."

"You promised to keep me safe," she whispered, pulling away as far as his hold allowed.

"There's safe," he answered, jerking her back so that she fell against him. He removed one hand from his punishing grip and cupped her neck, forcing her spine into an arch. "And then there's safe."

He was taunting her the way he had in his lodgings, but she knew him better, now. He wouldn't rape her. Not because of any moral reason, but because he couldn't predict how she'd react to such an attack, and he wouldn't risk adding an uncontrollable element to his plan.

She wasn't sure how far he'd let himself go, but it wouldn't be far enough to satisfy his need for vengeance. He had to know that. Which meant he had another goal in mind.

The lump of fear lodged in her throat dissolved. She was still the mouse to his cat and he was just toying with her. He wanted to frighten her, to manipulate her as he had in the tavern. Not this time.

"I'll scream," she warned.

"Go ahead. Beryl won't care. As long as you're alive when we get to the gateway, it doesn't matter what condition you're in. And she's already made it clear that since I'm a bastard, she expects such behavior from me." A hint of bitterness tinged his voice.

"What about Kerrim? He'd protect me."

"The boy is entertaining, but expendable."

Angie stiffened. "You said you never killed anyone for personal reasons."

"If he threatened the completion of my mission, he'd become business."

She pulled free of his grasp, falling backwards into the grass. Her legs were still too exhausted to bear her weight. Reynart leaned over her, pinning her to the ground.

"Is that an invitation, milady?"

"No!"

"Too bad."

He moved closer, bending his head to claim her lips with his. Sunlight glinted on the band of silver in his hair.

"Your circlet!" she cried.

Reynart stiffened and sat up. "What about it?"

A thrill coursed through her. She'd found the weak spot in his emotional armor. For a moment, she feared that he'd meant her to discover it, but she dismissed the idea as too far-fetched, even for Reynart. She'd discovered a secret about him. Now she just needed to figure out how to use it.

"You're wearing your circlet."

"I've always worn it," he snapped.

"No, you didn't. You weren't wearing it at the tavern—"

"Yes, I was."

She shook her head. "No. I'd have seen it."

"I polished it while we were riding. But I've always worn it."

"Why polish it now?"

"There's no one to see it out here and recognize me."

She ignored his answer. "You're reclaiming your kingdom. That was another vow you made, wasn't it?"

He stood and brushed the grass from his hose. "The horses have rested enough."

She tried to get to her feet, but fell back. "I haven't."

"I don't care. We're leaving."

"Then you're leaving without me."

He frowned. "You said you weren't injured."

"I'm not used to riding. My legs are as shaky as San Francisco in an eight-point earthquake."

His forehead creased as he tried to make sense of her words. "You can't stand," he guessed.

"No."

"Or ride?"

"I don't think so."

"We have hours yet to travel before sunset. We can't camp here, by the river. You'll have to ride."

He reached down and pulled her to her feet, wrapping a muscled arm around her waist to support her. If she didn't walk, he'd probably drag her. She put one arm around his shoulders and leaned against him. Her legs quivered. He tightened his grip

on her waist, then reached up to catch hold of her hand, leaning more of her weight across his shoulders.

One step at a time, he walked her to the waiting horses. Beryl stopped and frowned at their approach, but Kerrim sprinted to Angie's side.

"My lady, were you injured in the crossing?"

"I'll be fine," she reassured him. "I'm just not used to riding."

They reached the bay gelding. The beast had his nose buried in the grass, ripping up huge mouthfuls. He didn't even have the grace to look apologetic.

Reynart lifted her arm from his shoulder and moved to stand behind her. Then, he was lifting her into the air like a figure skater.

She fumbled her leg across the horse's back. Reynart released her, and she slumped into the saddle.

The horse whipped up his head and danced two steps to the right. Starting to slide, she clutched the saddle straps to stay on the horse.

Reynart stopped the gelding with a snap of the reins. He guided Angie's foot into the near stirrup, then handed her the reins. "Kerrim, get the other side."

The minstrel hurried to do Reynart's bidding. He stuffed her boot through the stirrup, then stepped away.

"I'll go mount up," he blurted. "My lord Prince. My lady."

Reynart watched him scurry away. "The boy still hasn't forgiven himself for daring to lay his hands on you back in the tavern."

"He helped save my life."

"He might need to again." Reynart leaned against the gelding's shoulder, turning his too-observant gaze on Angie. "You're not going to be able to ride tomorrow."

"If you get me in the saddle, I'll stay on."

"No. Before the day's out, your legs will feel like they're on fire. The lightest brush of fabric against your skin will be burning agony. If you tried to trot, you'd probably pass out from the pain."

"That should make you happy," she snapped.

She didn't think he would answer. Then he sighed. "I swore to get us to the gateway within the month. You have to be able to ride."

"But you just said —"

"I have a salve in my pack that will fix things."

He walked to his own mount. After readjusting some of the packs, he opened a saddlebag and dug around in it.

The small jar he eventually pulled out looked innocuous enough, made of bright blue pottery and sealed with red wax. But she didn't trust him. He was the one who'd told her how badly her legs would hurt. He could have lied. After all, they didn't hurt now. They were just a little wobbly.

Angie tightened her grip on the reins. Was his description just another empty threat? Maybe he was trying to frighten her into doing something again. She didn't know. And with Reynart, there was no way to tell.

He crossed back to her, and held out the jar. "This will deaden the pain. You need to rub it into the muscles."

"How am I supposed to do that while I'm on a horse?"

"Wait until next time we rest the horses."

She reached over and took the jar. It was warm from the heat of his hand, and she remembered how he'd smoothed the fabric of her riding skirt over her legs.

"How much do I use?"

"A palm full is enough for both calves, or for one thigh. Smear it on, front, back, and sides, then massage it in until it's absorbed into the muscles."

She rested the jar on the supplies in front of her. "No. I won't do it."

"Why not?"

"I saw the shelves full of jars and bowls in your room. Full of the poisons you used to kill people, I bet. You've made it clear that you want me to suffer. So, if you think I'm opening that jar and getting it on my skin, you're crazy. That's what will burn me, not the aches from riding."

Reynart's hand curled into a fist, clenching the black strands of the horse's mane between white-knuckled fingers. "I will see you to the gateway, in time and in health. If that means I have to strip off your skirt and hose and apply that salve myself, I'll do it."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

He just stared at her, his eyes reflecting none of his inner feelings. Finally, he whispered, "No. But my feelings don't matter, only my vow."

Chapter Six

They rested the horses again later in the afternoon. Angie's legs ached, but the mild discomfort was nothing like the burning pain Reynart had described, and she could dismount if she held on to the stirrup for support. She decided he'd been trying to trick her, and refused to use the salve.

By the time Reynart and Beryl agreed on a suitable campsite for the night, she realized he'd told her the truth.

Starbursts of pain blossomed behind her eyes with every step her horse took. She gritted her teeth and clutched the straps on her saddle, no longer able to see even the bobbing brown and black head of her horse, let alone the trail. She'd dropped the reins hours ago, trusting the gelding would follow Reynart's mare without any direction from her. That's what it had been doing all day.

The horse jolted to a stop. Slowly, Angie's vision cleared. They were in a small valley, carved out by a narrow creek. The others had already dismounted and begun to unload their horses.

"Anjeli?" Reynart dropped his last saddlebag onto the pile at his feet. "Can you dismount?"

"No," she admitted, too tired and sore to care about pride. "Can you lift me down?"

He walked over to her, leaving his mare cropping grass. "First kick your feet out of the stirrups."

"I can't." Her legs had stopped obeying her commands about half an hour ago. If she hadn't retied the saddle straps around them, she'd have fallen off for sure.

Reynart noticed the leather straps holding her legs against the horse's sides and frowned. "How bad is it?"

"I've been having trouble seeing."

He muttered a curse, then called to the others, "Anjeli needs the muscle salve applied, and she can't do it. Beryl?"

The mage looked up from her unpacking. Her eyes softened to a golden brown. "I wish I could help. But I found out when I healed her knife wound that strong emotions increase her power over the gate energy. When she's in pain, the magical energy fields are warped all around her. I'd be risking my own abilities by getting near her again. And I need to be in top form when we reach the gateway."

Reynart nodded, accepting her answer. With the odd clarity of severe pain, Angie realized she'd misjudged the mage. She'd noticed that Beryl kept her distance whenever Angie and Reynart quarreled. She'd thought the mage was a coward, or overly concerned with her own safety. But Beryl had been protecting her magical abilities from

Angie's erratic power. She'd have to learn to control her effect on the gateway energies if she was going to get close to the mage. And she needed to get close to the mage, so that Beryl would help send her home.

Reynart glanced at the minstrel. "Kerrim?"

"My lord Prince, no!" Kerrim threw up both hands as if warding off an enemy. "I can not touch a lady in such a way!"

"You will do as you're told, or you will come no further with us."

The minstrel darted an agonized look at Angie, then lowered his head and took one trembling step toward Reynart. "Yes, my lord Prince."

Growling under his breath, Reynart jerked the supplies from Angie's horse and hurled them at Kerrim. "Your shaking hands would do her no good. Make yourself useful and set up her tent."

Abandoning his own packs, Kerrim hurried to unfold the canvas and assemble the jointed end poles.

Reynart's hands hovered above the straps holding her leg in place. His head was bent so she couldn't see his expression, but his body was full of the rigid tension she'd learned to associate with his tightly leashed anger. Was he mad at her for disobeying his order and slowing them down? Or was his simmering fury coming to a boil, making him eager to enact a little of the vengeance he kept threatening her with?

Her mind was muddled by the pain, the world swimming in and out of sharp focus and muzzy gray fog, as he stood there unmoving. His fingers flexed, stilled, then flexed again. Drawing a deep breath, he took hold of the knotted straps.

In a surprisingly gentle voice, he warned, "This is going to hurt."

She nodded, clenching her teeth in anticipation. His fingers brushed against her thigh as he worked the leather free, and a hiss of pain escaped her lips. But it wasn't too bad.

Then the strap fell away. Her abused muscles suddenly had to support the weight of her leg.

Angie gasped as her vision blurred. A red wash colored the world. Reynart's fingers dug burning gouges in the softened clay of her flesh as he wrenched her boot free of the stirrup. Then he locked his grip around her ankle and straightened her leg. She cried out.

The frightened horse danced away from Reynart, pounding nails of agony into Angie with each step. She barely felt the increased pain as Reynart caught the gelding, then released her other leg. She was swimming in a red-black haze, drowning in a cloud of suffering.

Reynart pulled her off the horse and draped her over his shoulder. Her travel cloak fell over her head, shutting out the light and sound of Beryl and Kerrim setting up the campsite. All Angie could see was the fine black wool of Reynart's cloak.

He held her in place with one hand on her hips, while the other undid the laces of her riding skirt.

"What are you doing? Put me down!" Bad enough she couldn't undress herself, but to be undressed in this position added insult to injury. Plus, all the blood rushing to her head was making her woozy.

"Kerrim. I'll hold her, and you pull those boots off. You can touch her boots, can't you?"

"Yes, my lord Prince. Right away."

Kerrim ripped the boots away. The agony of flexing her ankles drove burning knives into the front of her calves. Angie bit down on a mouthful of wool to keep from screaming, and dug her fingers into Reynart's back.

He pushed her riding skirt down her legs, leaving the hose on. Then he began walking, jolting her with brands of fire at every step.

"My lord Prince," Kerrim called. "The tent is this way."

"But the creek is this way."

Reynart slung her from his shoulder. With a splash, she landed in the creek.

Icy water flowed over and around her legs, cooling her burning muscles. Reynart's hands supported her under her arms and kept her from falling. She pulled the cloak off her head and tossed it onto the bank, then put her hands into the cold water to hold herself upright.

She sighed with pleasure as the pain faded. "I guess I didn't need the salve after all."

"Yes, you do. The water is numbing your legs."

Angie realized she could no longer feel her hands. "Still, it's kind of you to lessen the pain. Why'd you do it?"

"The salve is supposed to be applied before the muscles swell. I'm hoping if we draw the heat off, it will still work. But you may not be able to ride tomorrow."

Her stomach churned. "Can we afford the delay?"

"Why? Do you care about the consequences of your actions now?"

"I always did. But my world doesn't have magic. How was I supposed to know Alaric had unleashed the gate energies in me ten years ago?"

"You felt the activation in the tavern. You would have felt it then."

"All I felt in the tavern was sick. I wouldn't have known it was gate energy if you hadn't told me. Ten years ago, I figured feeling sick was a pretty normal reaction considering he'd tried to rape me, and ended up skewered on your dagger."

Reynart didn't reply, so she twisted her head around to look at him. He stared into the distance of memory, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

"You felt the activation *after* I stopped him?"

Angie forced herself to remember the scene in detail. "You pulled Gervaise off of me and threw him across the room. Then you wrenched me out of Alaric's grasp, and pushed me toward the door and safety. You were turning to follow me when I saw him pick up the knife behind you. I shouted a warning, you spun, and hit him in the chest with your dagger. There was blood everywhere..."

She swallowed, fighting down the nausea the memory invoked, and focused on the cold water of the stream flowing over and around her. "Gervaise shoved past me to run down the stairs."

"You let him go," Reynart snarled. "He could have healed Alaric."

"They'd hit me so hard, I could hardly stand. My vision was swimming in and out, and I was fighting not to throw up. I couldn't have stopped a baby, let alone a powerful mage!"

Angie shivered. Now that she knew it hadn't been a dream, the memory was much harder to face. "You picked up the papers with Gervaise's spells written on them, and started to read them. Then I passed out, just like I did at the tavern. You shook me awake and said I'd fainted."

She shuddered, and wrapped her wet arms around her chest in an instinctive gesture of protection. It was ten years ago. Her attackers were both dead and gone. Yet the feeling of being completely helpless and powerless to stop them remained. She never wanted to feel that way again.

She lashed out in anger at Reynart. "Why does it matter when I felt the activation?"

He shook his head, all expression gone from his face and voice. "You wanted to know if we could afford a delay. The journey to Kingscap takes three and a half weeks, three if the weather holds. With the time spent getting ready, we have between two and five days to spare."

He obviously wasn't going to say any more about Alaric. That was fine with her. She'd just as soon forget it had ever happened. "So we'll be all right even if the salve doesn't work?"

"Yes. But I'd rather not waste our time." He reached into the water and laid his hand on her thigh. "You're no longer radiating heat. Get ready."

He hauled her to her feet, then over his shoulder again. Agony flared up Angie's legs, but not as badly as before, even when he tightened his hold on her to lean down and grab her cloak.

"It seems a little better," she gasped.

"Just wait. I haven't started applying the salve yet."

She couldn't tell if his words were a promise or a threat.

He carried her into the canvas tent she was supposed to share with Beryl, and laid her facedown on her blankets. She noticed a problem immediately.

"We didn't pack pillows."

"You'll use your cloak tonight. I'll spread it out to dry."

He carried the cloak out of the tent. Alone, with nothing to distract her, she started to worry. How badly did he want her to suffer? She'd nearly passed out just getting off her horse and out of her boots. She didn't want to think about what it would feel like if Reynart tried to hurt her.

Her mind returned to the memory of Alaric punching and slapping her, knocking the fight out of her before pinning her to the couch. He'd nearly killed her. And he hadn't even been mad at her, just frightened of Gervaise.

She forced her thoughts away from the distant past. Instead, she remembered Reynart's brief flash of concern that afternoon, when he saved her from falling off her horse. He could deny it all he wanted, but some small spark of feeling for her still lingered. Was it enough to counteract his thirst for vengeance?

He knelt beside her when he returned from hanging out her cloak. "Your hose must come off."

She reached back to make sure the tail of her riding chemise hung down as far as it could. It covered more than a miniskirt would. Of course, she'd always worn underwear with her miniskirts.

She slipped her fingers between her stomach and the blanket, and fumbled open the drawstring. Gritting her teeth, she managed to shove the wet wool over her hips. "Go ahead," she gasped.

Reynart rolled the hose down her chilled legs, squeezing out icy water as the material compressed. As long as he didn't move her legs, the muscles didn't complain too much.

When the hose were removed, he paused. She hoped he was getting the salve ready. Clenching her fist, she forced herself not to readjust her chemise.

"Try not to scream too loudly," he warned.

"What are you—?" Then his fingers dug into the muscles of her thigh. She screamed. It felt like getting a tooth drilled without Novocain, except it went on and on.

She didn't know how long it lasted, but when he stopped, she was panting with exertion and sweat ran down her forehead. She unclenched her fists from the blankets.

"Are you done yet?"

"Not yet." His voice trembled.

She twisted around to look at him. He was still kneeling, but had leaned back to sit on his heels. He bowed his head, and his shoulders trembled. When he lifted his head, his face was as white as flour, and curls of his black hair clung damply to his forehead. His eyes were so dark they looked black. He shivered, and she thought he was going to be sick.

"May Amin-Ra roast his miserable black soul," he whispered, his voice choked with emotion. His fingers clenched into tight fists that shook with his efforts to hold back his anger.

"Whose?" Fear overwhelmed any lingering pain. Unlike the contrived scene in the tavern, he wasn't faking this time. She'd never seen him so close to losing control in anger.

"My father." He swallowed. "He insisted we learn all of a king's duties. That included torturing prisoners. He never trusted a jailer to do it right."

Angie held her breath and let him continue.

"Alaric said he just did it to please our father, but I always suspected he enjoyed it. I never did. But I learned. I had to do it. He would have tortured me, otherwise. Those were the rules. You followed the rules, or you paid the price."

He shook his head, as if that could banish the memories. His gaze focused on Angie's face. "I was only a boy. I couldn't hold out for very long."

She saw again an image of the scars that made a patchwork quilt out of his back. How many had been inflicted by his father, not as punishments but as deliberate torture, a twisted and sadistic method of training his son?

"Not many people would have tried to hold out at all," she whispered.

Clenching his fists, he took three deep breaths. His features settled into an impassive mask, and she could see him willing his emotions back into the shadowed recess of his soul from which they'd escaped. "I'm sorry. It was just that your screams reminded me..."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "You knew what this would be like. That's why you said you wouldn't enjoy it. So why did you do it?"

He picked up her leg and started massaging salve into her calf muscles. The previous application had already gone to work, and this barely stung. Instead, a tingling warmth radiated outward from his strong fingers.

"Reynart?" she prodded.

"A muscle injury like yours would take at least a week to heal naturally. I had no choice."

He redoubled his efforts, grinding the salve deep into her flesh. Angie moaned, feeling his silent anger, but also noticing how his fingertips gently caressed her calves and thighs as his thumbs pressed into her muscles. It was that gentleness she responded to, growing more and more aroused as his hands moved higher and higher. She wriggled restlessly, rubbing her hips against her blankets and easing her legs further apart in mute entreaty.

An entreaty he ignored. He finished the second application of salve, and left the tent, all without saying another word.

When he left, Angie buried her head under her arms. He hurt her, hated her, and she still wanted him to make love to her. God, she was as screwed up as he was.

Later, Beryl brought in a mug of hot tea. She seemed almost apologetic as she set it on the ground where Angie could reach it. "I thought your throat might be sore."

"You heard?" Stupid question. The woman wasn't deaf.

The mage toyed with the end of her sash. "I have never known anyone who suffers from the leg cramps to continue riding after the first ones attack. I did not realize they got so much worse."

"They're better now."

"I should not have let him apply the salve. I know how much he hates you, and wants to make you suffer for the destruction of Nord D'Rae. I should not have given him the opportunity."

Angie couldn't share Reynart's confidences with her, but did what she could to reassure the mage. "He didn't take advantage of the situation."

"I heard you screaming." Beryl shook her head. "I couldn't get near you, because of your effect on the energy fields, but I could have insisted Kerrim apply the salve."

"It would have hurt no matter who applied it. At least this way, I know it was done right. And I won't make the same mistake again. The lessons most painfully learned are the ones most vividly recalled." Angie quickly changed the subject before the mage could suspect she wasn't talking about her riding. "Speaking of my effect on the energy fields, can you teach me to control that?"

"I don't know —"

"It's got something to do with my being a conduit for the gateway energy, right? And you said you were the expert on gateways."

Beryl smiled. It was the first time Angie had seen the expression on the mage, and it transformed her face. "I suppose teaching you the basics of mental control can't hurt anything. We'll start tomorrow. Right now, I have to get back before Kerrim ruins dinner."

Just after she left, Kerrim called from outside the tent, "My lady? Would you like to hear a song while you wait for your meal?"

"Come on in, Kerrim."

"Oh, no, my lady. It wouldn't be proper. You can hear me where I am."

"All right. Could you play something light and entertaining?" Laughter was supposed to be the best medicine, after all.

"Of course, my lady. How about the story of Lord Fadela and his talking cow?"

She chuckled. "That sounds fine."

* * * * *

The next morning, Reynart studied her as she walked back and forth in front of the loaded horses.

"You still look stiff, but you aren't limping or favoring either leg," he pronounced. "How do you feel?"

She felt like she'd been trampled by a horse. But she couldn't say that. She'd spent a sleepless night, worrying about him until long after midnight, when she heard him return to the camp. She felt like going back to bed. But she couldn't say that, either.

"A little stiff. But otherwise, fine."

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't argue with her. "If your legs begin to hurt worse, tell me immediately."

"I will. I don't want a repeat of last night."

He turned away, and she instantly regretted her words. Without looking at her, he said, "Mount up and let's get going."

His mare led the way out of the valley, and he never looked back. Kerrim offered her a boost into her saddle, then traded places with her in the riding order, so she could ride beside Beryl. If she couldn't control her tongue, she could at least learn to control her magic.

"Can you teach me about mastering gate energies while we ride?"

The mage chuckled. "You're persistent. That's good. I hope you're patient, as well. Most mages study for years before they can cast the simplest of spells."

"Years? But we only have a month!"

"You won't need to cast any spells. The Nord D'Rae gateway is unique in that a member of the ruling family controls the power of the gates. All you have to do is provide that power to the prince. I'll be casting the actual spell and directing his use of your gate energies."

Angie frowned. She'd hoped she could contribute more to their mission's success if she learned to control her magic, but it sounded like her part would be passive. Still, it would get her closer to the mage, and she depended on Beryl's persuading the council to send her home.

"Will there be enough time to learn control?"

"Most novices master the basics in a month."

"Teach me what you can, then."

Beryl nodded, and settled back into her saddle. "First of all, a mage must have self-confidence. The magical energies are controlled by your will, and if you have the slightest doubt about your capabilities or your course of action, the spell will not work. At the lowest level, a failed spell can have amusing side effects. I once tried to turn a churn full of cream into butter, and filled it with corn instead."

Angie's face flushed with heat, then cold. If she needed to be free of doubt to control magic, she was in big trouble. She'd spent the last ten years in a state of constant doubt, doubting her sanity, doubting the reality of her experience, and doubting the source of her painting ability.

"What about at the higher levels?"

Beryl turned serious. "The magic that destroyed Nord D'Rae was a failed ninth-level spell."

Angie swallowed. According to what Beryl had said in the tavern, Angie's involvement had led to the spell being so powerful. Had her doubt also led to its failure?

"You said before you were seventh-level. What do the different levels mean?"

"Of course you wouldn't know. Let me think how to explain it." They rode in silence for a while, until finally Beryl said, "Everything is interconnected. The same magical energy flows around and through all aspects of the world. A first-level mage has mastered the energy of his or her own body. A second-level mage can also affect single items outside the body. A third-level mage starts to affect groups of items. Every level increases the number of connections the mage has mastered. At the ninth-level, a mage is capable of affecting the entire world."

Angie struggled with the concept. If ninth-level magic affected the entire world, then eighth-level magic would affect, say, a continent. A seventh-level mage could affect an entire country. Beryl had the power to influence an entire country with a single spell.

Then Angie realized the corollary of that concept. That's why Beryl had deferred to the council. She didn't have the power to send Angie home. "The magic that drew me here extended beyond this world. Is there something higher than ninth-level?"

"Theoretically, there is a tenth-level. The mages' council has forbidden anyone to attempt tenth-level magic, because of what could happen if the spell went wrong. And the spell is almost guaranteed to go wrong."

"Why?"

"Most spells are taught from a master to an apprentice. You watch it done correctly, until you can repeat it. Since tenth-level magic is forbidden, there is no one to learn it from. Spells must be researched and constructed with no guidance. And, as I said before, mages must be certain that their capabilities and their course are without doubt for a spell to work. That makes trial and error learning virtually impossible, since mages are conditioned never to consider even the possibility of a mistake."

"They succeeded with the spell that brought me here."

"You don't know that. We have no idea what that spell was supposed to accomplish. They may have been trying to create a standard gate."

Angie watched her horse's bobbing head as he picked his way through the grasses already flattened by the two horses before him. He dipped his head and snatched a mouthful of grass, chewing as he walked.

Sheep dotted a hillside to the east, looking like tiny clouds. No buzzing machinery or low flying aircraft disturbed the tranquil beauty of the scene. The crushed stalks of grass smelled sweet, like hay, and rustled with the sounds of tiny animal life disturbed by their passing. It was a beautiful, peaceful country. She didn't want to destroy it.

"What level is the spell to restore the gateways? Ninth?"

"Fifth."

Angie jerked around in surprise. Confused, her horse started to turn, and she spent an anxious moment getting him pointed in the right direction again. When he finally had his hooves on the rough trail left by the others, she nudged him with her heels.

"Come on, boy. Catch up to Beryl."

He lurched into a trot, his hooves striking the ground like hammers on an anvil. She gritted her teeth. They pulled up beside Beryl's plodding mare, and Angie tugged on the reins.

"That's enough."

The gelding stumbled into an awkward walk, then lowered his head and snorted. A twitch rippled through his skin, and he snorted again.

Angie shut her eyes, daunted by the enormity of the task before her. She couldn't even control her horse. How was she going to be able to control her magic?

Beryl's concerned voice broke into her thoughts. "Are you in pain?"

"No." Angie forced herself to smile. "Just frustrated. I think he was laughing at me."

"He's just restless. The grasslands are flat. You can't see the ground well enough to risk a canter or gallop, but a trot would be safe enough. He thought you were giving him a chance to stretch his legs."

Angie glanced up at Reynart and Kerrim, riding side by side about twenty feet ahead. The black horse plodded along, his hooves striking the ground in tempo with his bobbing head, but Reynart's mare lifted her head, looking right and left, her ears swiveling in constant motion. As Angie watched, the mare lengthened her stride, slowly pulling past Kerrim's horse. Reynart checked her gait and dropped her back to the black's side with ease, as if he'd been practicing the move all morning and no longer needed to think about it.

"Why aren't we trotting?"

"The prince suggested that your legs would heal faster if they were not strained further."

"Damn Reynart and his Machiavellian need to control everything! I don't suppose he considered I'd like to be told my legs weren't healed? Of course not." She glared at the mage. "Did he tell you to keep me occupied by discussing magic, so I wouldn't notice?"

Beryl held herself rigidly erect. "He does not command me."

"I'm sorry." Angie scrubbed at her face. "It's just, I'm trying to fit in here. I never meant to cause any trouble. And I want to fix it before I go home, if I can. But he makes everything so difficult."

"You're going to have to work with him to restore the gateways."

"I know. But he wants them restored." She sighed, and slumped in her saddle. "It's what he plans to do after the gateways are restored that worries me."

"I don't follow you."

Angie stared at the mage in surprise, then realized she was witnessing an example of mage-blindness. "He tricked you into making a deal to restore the gateways. He's been waiting ten years for a chance like this. You couldn't have stopped him from coming on this mission."

Beryl's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "But after I explained that the restored gateways would be sealed, he wanted nothing to do with the plan. He threw a knife at my head."

"It was an act. He doesn't lose his temper." She'd seen him lose control, now. That scene in the tavern had been perfectly staged.

"But he promised to do everything in his power to help us."

"The mages' council should have sent a lawyer. He promised to do everything in his power to get us there safely. He said he'd do what he could to help with the magic. I'm sure he'll discover that a previous obligation as prince prevents him from sealing the gateway once it's restored."

Beryl shook her head, still refusing to accept that she'd been wrong. "But he won't be performing the magic. I will. He will just be providing the link to the Nord D'Rae gateways, so that I can cast a fifth-level spell on him rather than needing a ninth-level spell to reach the actual gateways."

"What happens if he severs that link after the gateways are restored?"

Beryl's eyes widened, and she turned whiter than her horse. "It will become a ninth-level spell. I'm only a seventh-level mage. It will fail."

"I think you'd better have a talk with Reynart about magical realities. Or he's going to destroy his kingdom all over again, and take this one with it."

Chapter Seven

Later that morning, they came to a narrow creek. Reynart pronounced it large enough to water the horses and declared a rest period. Determined to prove she didn't need Reynart's help, Angie kicked her feet free of the stirrups, and got ready to dismount.

Yesterday, Reynart had first assisted her, then later lifted her onto and out of the saddle. He hadn't bothered to explain the exact process of dismounting.

She watched Beryl swing down off her mare, and tried to copy her actions. Angie put the toe of her left boot back in the stirrup, and swung her right leg around so she was standing on the horse's left side. Then, leaning across the saddle, she planted her hands on the leather and kicked her left foot free of the stirrup.

The stirrup hit the gelding's side, and he stepped to the right. Angie's arms slipped, and she sprawled across the saddle.

Startled by the sudden weight on his back, the gelding whinnied and danced a few more paces to the right, tossing his head up and down. Angie clutched the stirrup hanging in front of her face.

"Whoa, you stupid horse! Whoa!"

Beryl snatched the horse's reins. Murmuring soothing words, she stroked his neck until he settled down. He blew out a gusty sigh, dislodging the gray silk scarf wrapped over her hair, then lowered his head and let her scratch his ears.

"It's all in how you talk to them," Beryl said.

Hands closed around Angie's waist and lifted her off the horse. Reynart stood her in front of him. "Interesting technique."

"I'll do better next time. Of course, it would help if you'd ever actually told me how to get off the horse."

"You never asked."

"And I suppose that's why you didn't tell me my legs are still too weak to ride anything faster than a walk?"

Behind her, Beryl led the horse away. Angie's emotions must be making the magical energies too unsteady for the mage. Angie clenched her fists and breathed deeply, struggling to control her anger.

Reynart didn't bother answering. Instead, he walked around her, arms folded, and studied her. "The weakness in your legs does not seem to be coming back."

She really hated the way he manhandled conversations into the direction he wanted. This time, she wasn't following his lead.

"Since we were riding so slowly this morning, I had a chance for a nice long talk with Beryl. I told her you tricked her into promising the council's favor in return for your help."

Reynart lifted an eyebrow, but as usual, refused to agree with anything that could incriminate him. "Does it matter why she promised the council's favor?"

"She also thought you'd promised to seal the gateways. I corrected her mistake."

His expression darkened. "I did not lie to her."

"No. I didn't say you did. But she didn't ask the right question, and you didn't give the whole answer. You promised to do what you could to help her seal the gateways. But the truth is, you can't give her any help, can you?"

"If you already know the answer, why ask the question?"

"Stop avoiding the issue! What prevents you from sealing the gateways?"

He turned away, and watched Kerrim and Beryl watering the horses.

"Okay, fine," she snapped. "Don't tell me. It's enough to know that you won't help her. See, that's the other thing we discussed. What would happen if she expected your help, and you didn't give it."

"And did she have an answer for this hypothetical situation?"

"Yes. Her magic, a spell of the same magnitude that destroyed Nord D'Rae the first time, would fail."

Reynart whirled to face her. "What do you mean, 'the first time'?"

"Exactly what you think I mean. If there's anything left after the flood, this second spell will destroy it. Because you will doom the spell to fail."

"No." Reynart clenched his fists.

"Yes. I didn't know what was happening last time. But I can stop it from happening again."

"She lied to you. The mages' council never trusted Nord D'Rae, because our mages were not subject to their law. Sealing the gateways would solve their problem permanently. That's why Beryl set you the task of convincing me."

"She didn't set me the task. I volunteered."

"The same way you volunteered to accompany her on this journey?"

Angie stepped back as his barb hit home. Had Beryl maneuvered her into talking to Reynart? Could she trust anything the mage had said, or were the woman's methods as convoluted as Reynart's?

The first step toward control was banishing all doubt. Reynart was confusing her, making her doubt what Beryl had told her. He, on the other hand, never doubted himself. And Angie was sick of him always being in control.

It was true that she'd been tricked into volunteering for this journey. She could admit that. But to dwell on it, to use one lapse as a basis for distrusting all future situations, was foolish. She'd learned her lesson. She would consider the person before

believing the message. And while Beryl was strong-willed and opinionated, she'd shown herself to be a competent mage by healing Angie's arm. Angie could trust Beryl's description of how magic worked.

She stiffened her back and looked Reynart in the eye. "You won't distract me or shake my faith in what I know is true. If you don't help Beryl seal the gateways, you'll destroy Nord D'Rae all over again."

"What would you have me do, then? Help her permanently sever the last connection to my kingdom?"

"No."

His eyes widened. "No?"

"All I'm asking is that you tell her the truth. When the time comes, tell her that you can't help her. Don't let her start the spell believing you'll be there, discovering that you're gone when it's too late to stop the magic."

He considered for a long moment before nodding. "That, I can do."

She let out her breath in a sigh. History would not repeat itself. Another kingdom would not be destroyed.

"But Anjeli," he warned. "If what you're saying is true, she can not be allowed to begin the spell to seal the gateways. If she tries, I will be forced to kill her."

Angie swallowed, then whispered, "I'll be sure she knows that."

* * * * *

"Now pull on the right rein and press your right leg against his side," Reynart ordered.

Angie tried to follow his instructions, but instead of veering to the right, her horse started to turn in a wide circle through the tall grass. She pulled on the left rein, trying to straighten him out, but he just stopped in his tracks.

"You're still using too much force on the reins. You don't have to pull his head around, just let him know you want him moving to that side."

"But when I'm gentle, he ignores me," Angie growled in frustration. She kicked her horse to get him started again, then steered him beside Reynart's well-behaved mare.

Reynart watched her with a practiced eye, making her even more nervous than she had been. After four lessons with him, Angie could now mount and dismount, sit a trot, and most of the time keep her horse at the desired speed. But steering the beast still eluded her. Her riding had improved every day, but his superior skill intimidated her.

Actually, Reynart himself intimidated her. Even when he was just describing the countryside or listening to her talk about her visions and paintings, she felt like everything she did or said played into his hand. Her role had been precisely mapped in advance, a game piece that moved around the board hopelessly trying to figure out the rules before the game ended.

The only thing that made her feel better about the situation was knowing he was trying to figure her out, too. He'd stopped threatening her, and confusion or calculation showed in his expression rather than fury or hatred. She'd thrown him by warning him about the consequences of not helping Beryl. He couldn't figure out why she'd told him, and what she hoped to get from the deal. After all, if Beryl didn't seal the gateway, Angie wouldn't get the council's help to go home. Until he understood her motivation, he wouldn't know whether or not he could trust what she'd told him.

So they'd shared information, carefully feeling out each other's motivations. It had felt almost like her original visit to his world, when they'd spent hours telling each other stories of their respective worlds. She'd seen glimpses of the brilliant tactician with a hunger for knowledge that he'd buried beneath his cold, hard persona. That gave her hope, that the other aspects of his personality that she'd fallen in love with ten years ago were also merely in hiding, rather than gone completely.

Because the physical connection between them was as strong as it had ever been. She sensed his presence, like a flower sensed the sunlight, no matter what she was doing. He made no move to touch her, unless she needed his help with her horse. Even then, his touch was all business, impersonal and unfeeling. That was probably for the best. Sex between them would just confuse an already confusing situation even more. So she followed his lead and kept the physical element out of their tentative relationship, although every night in the darkness of her tent listening to Beryl's soft snores, she fell asleep longing for Reynart to come to her, and dreamed of his urgent possession.

Her lessons in magic were far more successful. This morning, she'd mastered the first step, much sooner than Beryl had expected. She'd imagined herself in her studio with so much detail, she'd felt like she'd been there. Beryl called the mental safe place a sanctum, and said most magic was performed from inside it.

Angie smiled. Of course, she'd chosen her studio as her magical safe place. It had been her one safe haven in the real world, too.

"What were you thinking of?" Reynart's voice recalled her to the riding lesson, and she tightened her hold on the reins. The horse shook his head, jerking the leather out of her grip.

"Magic," she answered, struggling to pick up the reins and still keep the horse headed in a straight line. Great. Reynart was a demanding teacher when she was paying attention. He'd be impossible if he thought she wasn't listening to him.

He surprised her. "You ride better when your mind is elsewhere. Your hands are still, and you don't confuse the horse with constant tugs and twitches. Drop the reins."

"What?" She stiffened, and her horse jolted into a trot. She pulled on the reins, forgetting she hadn't adjusted their length yet, and the horse turned left. She leaned forward to tighten the other rein, and the horse took advantage of her inattention to quicken his pace.

"Whoa, damn you!"

Reynart chuckled, calling to her, "Lean back and relax. Drop the reins, and move your legs away from his sides."

Certain the beast would gallop off with her if she gave him the chance, Angie nevertheless followed Reynart's instructions. Amazingly, the horse slowed to a steady walk.

"You're learning." Reynart trotted up beside her. "Horses are much like people. Act as if you don't care, and he loses interest in going fast."

She folded her hands in her lap, away from the temptation of the reins. "Is that how you get your way? By pretending you don't care?"

He smiled, a patently false and not at all reassuring expression. Then, with no obvious guidance, his horse moved through an elaborate pattern of steps and turns, at one point even backing up. Through it all, Reynart kept his gaze locked on Angie's.

"Only when you fully understand the basics should you consider the master class."

Show-off. If she had her Jeep, he wouldn't look so smug. She'd show him a thing or two about skillful driving.

His attention shifted, and he scanned the waving grasslands. "Field burr warrens. Head to the right."

She couldn't see any of the woodchuck-like creatures' holes, but took Reynart's word that they were there. He wouldn't risk breaking one of the horses' legs just to prove a point. Using only her legs, she encouraged her horse to veer to the right.

She glanced at the sun, just beginning to gild the grass that stretched as far as she could see to the west. "We'll be setting up camp soon. You'll have good hunting tonight."

He chuckled, a soft, low rumble like the warning cough of a tiger. "I have good hunting now."

She flinched, startling her horse into a fast trot away from Reynart. For once, she and the beast were in perfect accord.

* * * * *

They'd been lucky so far, and the weather held. Reynart had allowed time in their schedule for the spring rains that turned the soft grassland soil to treacherous mud and flooded the tiny streams and creeks, making travel slow and laborious. Since no rain had fallen, they'd been able to make up most of the time they'd lost during Angie's recovery. Nine days into their journey, they were already nearing the northern end of the grasslands. The Hunescot Forest loomed dark and ominous to the west, breaking up the grasslands with increasingly common outgrowths of single trees and small groves. To Angie's right, the rolling foothills that formed the eastern boundary of the grasslands were also changing, beginning to take on jagged edges and look more like mountains as they led to the sharp peaks in the north.

"Concentrate," Beryl snapped. "Stop looking at the scenery."

"Sorry."

Angie closed her eyes and focused her attention inward. After practicing for the last week, she was able to bring up a vision of her studio back in Sedona with very little effort. She imagined a blank canvas in front of her on the easel, just waiting for inspiration to fill it with paint.

She slipped into the meditative trance she'd used so often while painting, letting the images flow freely onto the canvas. This was the first spell Beryl had taught her, and she was determined to get it right.

"I can see our trail," she said. "It is bright behind us, between us and Reynart, and for a short way ahead of him. Then it grows fainter, but still continues on."

"Correct," Beryl said in surprise. "You are picking this up remarkably quickly."

"Maybe it's because as an artist, I'm used to visualizing things. But what does the image mean?"

"You are seeing the effect of willpower on the magical energies. As we traveled, all four of us marked our passage. So did the horses, the animals we disturbed, even the grasses that we trampled. We can predict where we will ride for a short distance, but after that, only the prince knows our exact course."

Remembering Beryl's earlier scolding, Angie didn't open her eyes to match her mental map against the land they traveled. Instead, she watched as the faint line ahead of their party branched and twisted, one path running closer to the thinning energy fields of the mountains, and one path moving closer to the teeming swirl of energy marking the forest.

She described what she was seeing to Beryl. Then one pathway darkened, leaving only the trail running past the forest.

"Very good," Beryl encouraged. "The prince just decided which of two routes to travel."

Angie opened her eyes and looked forward, past Kerrim, to where Reynart rode well in front of the party. About a hundred feet past Reynart, a stand of small trees blocked their way.

"I wonder why he decided against going to the east? I'd think there'd be more trees in the way the closer we rode to the forest."

Beryl shrugged. "That is not important. What is important is that his decision affected the energy currents, and that you were able to read the changes."

"Trees have life energy. Why wasn't I able to see them on my map?"

"In time, you will. When you are first starting out, it is easier to see changes in energy. Things that stay the same are easily overlooked."

Angie nodded. "So there's actually something to the east that convinced Reynart not to go that way. But I couldn't see it, because it wasn't moving."

She leaned to the right, straining her eyes to see what Reynart had spotted that her magic had missed.

"Come back!" Beryl demanded, no longer beside her.

"How'd I get off the path?" Angie glanced around in confusion, then glared at her horse's swiveling brown ears. "You again."

Her stupid horse had interpreted her shifting weight as a command to turn right. She tried to steer him to the left, urging him back to the path, and the troublesome beast decided she wanted him to trot.

Another creek cut through the grasslands. This close to the forest, the ground held more rocks, and the creek had carved a deep bed for itself. The gelding planted his hooves at the edge of the grassy bank, throwing Angie forward.

Her feet slid out of the stirrups, and she wrapped her arms around the horse's neck to catch herself. He snorted and lowered his head. She fell forward, twisting in the air so that she didn't hit the water headfirst.

The rocky creek bed slammed into her hip with enough force to make her teeth ache, and she sprawled full-length in the water. The cold took her breath away, and she came up sputtering.

Sitting in the creek, water pounding her back and flowing over her hips and legs, she looked back at the annoyingly dry horse. He snorted.

"You stupid beast. You *are* laughing at me. Well the laugh's on you, because I'm going to be dripping all over you for the rest of the day. How do you like *that*?"

Reynart, Beryl and Kerrim rode up to the side of the creek.

"She can't be hurt too badly," Reynart said. "She's picking a fight with her horse."

Kerrim laughed, and launched into an impromptu song.

"The lady was dripping.

The fire in her eyes

Brought steam from the water,

From her horse heartfelt sighs."

She splashed water at them, but the droplets fell far short of their targets. "Shut up, the both of you."

She struggled to her feet, hampered by her soaking wet skirt tangled around her legs. Slowly, she waded back to the bank. Reynart dismounted and offered her a hand. It was a sign of his growing trust for the party that he didn't try to hide his smile, but right now, she didn't appreciate the change.

"Go ahead and laugh. I must look like a drowned rat." She glared at her horse. She'd gone three days without a riding mishap, but would her companions remember that? No. They'd remember that she'd tumbled off her horse into a creek. The annoying beast was calmly cropping the grass beside the creek, not caring in the least that she was soaked.

"We were due for a rest stop, anyway," Reynart said. "We'll let the horses eat and drink while you get changed into dry clothes."

Angie brushed back a sopping strand of hair that had escaped from her braids. "It's a warm day. I thought the clothes would dry while I rode."

"I don't like the idea of you riding with a soaking wet skirt. That might be all that's needed to bring back your leg cramps."

She raised her hand to cut off the rest of his explanation. "I'll get changed."

They crossed the creek to the west, where the banks ran smoothly to the water. Angie pulled Kerrim's borrowed clothing from her pack, and disappeared into the relative privacy of the trees to change.

She pulled off her boots, tipping them upside down to pour out the water, then wedging them into forked branches to drip dry. As she fumbled with the waterlogged laces of her bodice and riding skirt, she kept her ears peeled for any sound that might indicate one of the party's approach. Of course, Reynart could thread his way through the scant trees with no sound at all, and he was the one most likely to come after her, to see why she was taking so long.

Her fingers trembled, and she had to stop and breathe deeply before resuming her attack on the skirt's laces. He'd help her out of the wet clothing if she asked. But then what? Would he touch and caress her the way she wanted, the way that brought a heated flush to her skin just thinking about it? Or would he calmly, coldly inform her that his only interest in her had been revenge?

The light breeze was warm, but it raised goose bumps on her damp skin as she stripped off her riding gear, sodden chemise, and dripping hose. She pulled on the warm, dry undertunic as fast as she could, then snuggled into the tunic. Holding the fresh pair of hose in one hand, she considered the merits of putting dry hose in wet boots, or walking around the damp soil near a creek in stocking feet, and decided to go barefoot for a while.

She returned to the others, carrying her damp clothing, and discovered Kerrim rummaging through their food stores. "Is it time for lunch already?" she asked.

"Since we were already stopped, my lord Prince felt it would be the most efficient arrangement."

They'd quickly divided the chores based on everyone's skills. Beryl fed and groomed the horses, and cleaned their tack. Since Kerrim had picked up a pointer or two while working in taverns, he prepared the food. Reynart picked out their trail during the day, and hunted small animals like the field burrs to supplement their supplies. And Angie had quickly mastered setting up and taking down the tents.

So it came as no surprise to see Beryl down by the creek with the horses, Kerrim in the middle of preparing the luncheon meal, and Reynart standing, staring off into the distance.

Angie walked over to Reynart, still carrying her sopping garments. "What should I do with my clothes?"

"Hang them over tree branches to dry while we eat." He turned to face her. His eyes widened, then he grinned. "Perhaps you should have asked what to do with your hair."

She reached up. One damp braid had fallen down to loop around her ear. She'd lost the leather thong holding another in place and it had started to unravel. Worst of all, wet tendrils of hair had pulled free all around her head. When they dried, she was going to look like Medusa.

"There's a comb in my bag. But even if I had a mirror, I wouldn't be able to do my hair the way it was. It'll just have to be in two thick braids." She'd look like Laura Ingalls from *"Little House on the Prairie,"* but that was better than looking like Medusa.

"I'll do it for you," Reynart volunteered.

When she just stared at him, he shrugged. "I'm not doing anything else. Besides, you don't have to look at it."

"All right," she agreed reluctantly, unable to think of a good reason to refuse.

Her heart beat faster, anticipating the caress of his strong fingers through her hair. Then reality intruded. She didn't have freshly washed and conditioned, soft and silky hair. She had wet, snarly hair that had been rinsed in the occasional stream but hadn't been truly washed since the bathhouse in Sungaret. It was full of the dust and dirt of the trail. He wouldn't find the task of combing it the least bit arousing.

She tamped down her anger. Hefting her waterlogged clothes, she eyed the trees. Their thick limbs twined over and around each other, not separating until well above her head. She tossed her soggy clothes at Reynart. "You're taller. Hang these up while I get my comb."

She rejoined him just as he draped the last item over a branch. Selecting a tree that didn't have any clothing dripping from it, he sat down and leaned back against the trunk.

"Here. You sit in front of me."

His expression gave nothing away.

She glanced around. While Kerrim wasn't in immediate hearing distance, both he and Beryl could be summoned by a shout. And Kerrim tossed frequent glances their way while cooking. Reynart wouldn't try anything.

She sat down where he indicated, careful not to get too close to his folded legs. Wordlessly, she passed back her comb. His fingers slipped through her damp hair, undoing her braids, until a blonde curtain hung almost to her waist.

"I had no idea my hair was so long," she said softly.

"Is it so different on your world?"

"Well, it's the same color. But I keep it short, not even down to my shoulders. Just long enough that I can put it up if I'm going out for the evening, or to pull back in a ponytail if it gets too hot."

He sighed. "From all you've said of your world, there is far too little beauty in it."

She pictured the spring desert in bloom, or sunset in the Valley of Fire. "We have beauty. It's just harder to find, sometimes."

He started combing the knots out of her hair, using slow, steady strokes, and holding the hair above the comb so that he didn't jerk her head back when he hit a snag.

"You've done this before," she guessed aloud.

"I used to comb my sister's hair for her. She claimed she didn't trust any of the servants enough to let them do it, but the truth was, it gave us a chance to see each other."

His sister had been away during Angie's previous visit, so she'd never seen the two of them together. Still, she couldn't imagine the warrior prince acting as a lady's maid.

"I was an only child, but I thought most brothers and sisters didn't get along."

"Possibly. But we had an additional bond. After my father's second marriage, we both understood how precarious our positions were."

Angie blinked. She'd seen firsthand the results of the king's insane encouragement of the sibling rivalry between his two sons. But this was the first time she'd heard that it included Reynart's sister as well. Or did that threat come from a different source?

"Your stepmother didn't like you?" she guessed.

Reynart laughed. "She didn't like anyone. She despised us. No, our problem was that neither of us was legitimate."

"Neither of you?" They had only briefly touched on the circumstances of Reynart's birth all those years ago, but she thought he'd said his sister was the daughter of the king and his first queen. Maybe that marriage had been annulled to allow his second marriage, illegitimizing his daughter after the fact. But then why had she remained a princess?

Angie thought over what she knew of royalty on Earth. "I can see recognizing a son, if there wasn't a legitimate heir. But isn't it unusual to recognize a daughter?"

"It's more than unusual. The standard practice is to kill any bastard offspring when they are born."

She shuddered. "That seems a bit extreme."

"You forget, the power of the Nord D'Rae gateway network was concentrated in the royal family. So long as no one else could control the gateways, they had an unassailable advantage in wars. To risk the enemy gaining that advantage was unthinkable."

"I thought Nord D'Rae was an isolated kingdom. Who would you fight?"

"There used to be many kingdoms. Over the years, we conquered them all. The last independent kingdom was Tellurah. And my father's first marriage, to the Tellurah princess, was part of their terms of surrender."

Angie considered what she knew of the king. "Whose terms?"

"The Tellurah king's. He mistakenly thought it would give his province special consideration from the Nord D'Rae crown. I suppose it might have worked, if she hadn't become pregnant with another man's child."

"What?" Angie turned to face him.

Reynart placed his hands on either side of her head and firmly faced her toward the front again. "Ladria had already been recognized as the heir before my father discovered his mistake. She could not be bonded to the gateway energies. Worse, she showed magical aptitude of her own."

"There's no magic allowed in the Nord D'Rae royal family?"

"No. A mage capable of drawing on the power of the gateways at will would be too much of a threat." Reynart paused, his fingers buried in Angie's hair. "The king told everyone that Ladria's gifts had been discovered prior to the binding ceremony, which is why they hadn't gone through with it. To hide the truth, that the binding failed because she had no royal blood, my father killed both the mage who had performed the binding, and the visiting mage from the Tellurah court who had acted as the observer. From the queen's reaction, the king knew who Ladria's father had been."

Reynart began separating Angie's hair into sections, his tone purely conversational. But she wondered what expression she'd see on his face if he allowed her to turn.

"Officially, he claimed that the queen had slight magical abilities, and therefore, they had tested the child before bonding her. Since the bonding must be done as an infant, even if there were no other children, she could never rule."

"What did he do to the queen?"

"He made her pay for betraying him." Reynart pulled Angie's hair painfully tight as he wove it into braids. She wasn't sure if he did it on purpose or not, and didn't want to ask. "She killed herself a short time later."

He fell silent, the only sound the swish of the comb through her hair, and Angie's involuntary hisses when he tugged too hard.

"It has to be tight," he explained. "Or the hair will escape."

"Can't let that happen," she muttered. His mania for absolute control even extended to hair, a trait he appeared to have learned from his father. The king must have been furious when the queen found a way to thwart his control.

She didn't want to antagonize Reynart, but who knew when he'd be in such a talkative mood again. His discussions rarely revealed any of his personal history. She had to find out all she could while he was willing to tell her. And right now, she wanted to know how he fit into all of this. She knew better than to come right out and ask him, though.

"So what you're saying is that the queen died because she had the bad judgment to take a lover, and get caught. What about the king? Did he have many lovers?"

"As far as I know, he didn't have any."

"None? But then how...? You...?"

He chuckled. "You must be more precise in your word choice. The king had no lovers, no women whom he loved. He was not above using sex as a weapon, or a punishment."

Angie stiffened. The way Alaric had tried to use her. The way Reynart had threatened her in his lodgings. Like father, like sons.

As if he could read her mind, Reynart's hands tightened, jerking her head back. "I am not my father!"

He immediately had himself under control again, releasing her hair and saying quietly, "You know very little of men, Anjeli, if you believe a late night and an early appointment would have stopped me, had I cared to continue."

She rubbed the tender spot on her scalp. "Then why...?"

He sighed. "My purpose was better served by having you fear what I might do to you, than by having you plotting revenge for what I had already done. You might also have made the grave miscalculation that the worst had already happened."

Pushing her hand out of the way, he resumed braiding her hair. "I had not anticipated Beryl's information. That changed everything."

"So now your purpose is better served by...?" When he didn't supply the answer, she worked through the logic. He wanted to restore the gateway to Nord D'Rae. For that, he needed Angie's cooperation. Was that his purpose? No. She could give her grudging cooperation. He was after something more. He wanted her complete cooperation, and total willingness to follow his lead.

"You want me to trust you!"

He tied off her last braid, and attached it to the tower already formed on her head. "Yes."

She whirled to face him. "You planned this whole heart-to-heart conversation. It was all just a ploy to win my trust and sympathy."

He narrowed his eyes. "I did not seek your sympathy."

"Was any of it even true?"

"It was all true." He smiled coldly. "And you should have realized by now, Anjeli, I plan everything."

Chapter Eight

Angie successfully avoided Reynart during lunch, and spent the afternoon riding alongside Kerrim. She smiled and laughed at his stories, but her heart wasn't in it. When they stopped to make camp for the night, she was glad to see Reynart ride off on a hunting trip.

She unrolled the canvas tents faster than normal. The borrowed hose and tunic were so much easier to move around in than her cumbersome riding outfit. She glanced over at Kerrim, who was balancing the tripod stove over the cooking fire. He stood much closer to the flames than she'd dare in her skirt.

Shading her eyes with her hand, she scanned the creek bed for Beryl and the horses. The mage was climbing over the rocks to reach a branch that had tangled in one of their lead lines. Angie wouldn't be able to clamber effortlessly over rocks in her skirt's billowing yards of fabric.

She shoved the anchor pole into the ground, and stretched to hook the canvas over it. "I think I've finally figured it out," she grumbled. "My whole problem is that I'm dressed like a medieval fashion plate. No wonder even the horses don't take me seriously. If I could wear practical clothes like these, I'd be able to actually do something. Not that the lord prince high and mighty is likely to give me the chance to do anything."

She wrestled the other tent pole into place, and started hammering the tent spikes into the ground.

"Trust him, he says. Well, how am I supposed to do that? As soon as he gets what he wants out of me, I'm back to being public enemy number one. No matter what I do to help him restore the gateways, he'll never forgive my part in destroying them. His people have elevated holding a grudge to an art form."

The thunder of hooves interrupted her litany. Too many hooves to be Reynart returning. Could the other horses be stampeding? But they were to the east, and this was coming from the west.

She struggled to get her head out from under the billowing canvas rain flap, so she could see what was going on. Then something flat and heavy hit her in the back of the head, and she fell to the ground. At least, she thought she did. The world turned black, and her mind no longer seemed attached to her body. She couldn't feel the ground beneath herself. She couldn't see. She couldn't move. She would've thought she'd been killed, but she could still hear.

Her heart raced. The pounding blood filled her ears, and she struggled to calm her thundering pulse. She had to be able to hear.

A muffled struggle, punctuated by grunts, ended with a yelp. Kerrim! What had they done to him?

Horses stamped and nickered, betraying their riders' nervousness. The low rumble of men's voices gradually resolved into recognizable speech.

"The boy's taken care of. What about the girl?"

"She won't put up a fight."

"Then let's go!"

"He said he wanted her unharmed."

Who wanted her? And how had they taken care of Kerrim? Had they killed him? Not another death. He was on this trip because of her. She'd never forgive herself if she caused his death, too.

"She'll be fine, soon as she wakes up."

"Can she breathe? Maybe we should take the sack off her head."

Oh. That must be why she couldn't see anything. But why couldn't she move?

Cold fear spiraled through where her stomach should be. She'd felt this disassociation of mind and body before. If she fell into a coma here, would her consciousness somehow be transported back to Arizona? She wanted to go home, but not yet.

"Let's go before the mage attacks."

"Check the girl later."

A high-pitched whine drowned out their argument, followed by a burst of explosions. It sounded like a Fourth of July party.

Horses screamed in terror, and men shouted.

"The mage!"

"Watch out!"

"Go! Go! Go!"

A hoof clipped her leg, a sharp stabbing pain. Had one of the men dropped her?

"Now!"

"Ride!"

She tried to cringe, to make herself smaller, but her body didn't respond. Horses thundered past, shaking the ground. Her feeling was coming back.

Then the heavy canvas tent collapsed on top of her. It wasn't fair. She'd survived the bandit attack, only to be smothered by her own tent.

Hands grabbed her feet and dragged her free.

"No!" she screamed. "You aren't getting me!"

"Anjeli," Reynart's voice cut through her panic. "They're gone."

The bandits were gone. Everything was going to be okay.

"Is she all right?" Beryl asked, her voice high-pitched with worry.

"She should be," Reynart answered.

She kicked her feet. He dropped them, and she struggled to sit up. The world spun, and she felt like throwing up. "Oh, my head."

"One of the attackers hit you, probably with the flat of his sword," Reynart explained.

Angie glanced from Reynart, to Beryl, to the scattered cooking gear. Black spots danced in front of her eyes, but she blinked them away. "Where's Kerrim?"

"They took him," Beryl whispered.

Angie rubbed her throbbing head. "No. They took me. I heard them, after they hit me."

Reynart knelt in front of her and looked steadily into her eyes. "You look all right. But you're not making much sense."

"I couldn't see or move or even feel the ground, but I could still hear."

Reynart's gaze sharpened and he went completely still. "What did they say?"

"It all happened so fast. I'm not sure."

"Try," he snapped.

She recoiled as if he'd struck her, moaning and clutching her head at the sudden movement. His expression darkened, and she blurted, "They said Kerrim was taken care of, and I wouldn't fight. And that they'd put a bag over my head."

"They called Kerrim by name?"

"Uh, no. They said 'the boy' and 'the girl.' And they called Beryl 'the mage.' They didn't mention you."

"Did they say who sent them? Or where they were going?"

"No. Just that whoever it was didn't want me hurt."

Reynart sat back on his heels, frowning. "He may be safe, then. At least until they realize their mistake."

He stood up, turning on Beryl. "Ready the horses. We must ride, quickly."

"After Kerrim?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You'll take Anjeli away from the forest. Use your magic to protect her. I'll see you safely away, then go after Kerrim."

"The attention spell I cast is bright and noisy, but it can't really hurt anyone."

"Then I suggest you think of one that can."

Beryl hurried to resaddle the horses. After one look at Angie, Reynart hastily disassembled the tents and rolled up the canvas. She stared at the frantic activity around her, still trying to catch up with what was going on.

"But I don't understand. How could they mistake Kerrim for me?"

Reynart glanced over his shoulder at her. "Were you half under the tent when they rode in?"

"Yes. I was putting in the tent stakes."

"And you're dressed in Kerrim's clothes. If they were in a hurry, they must have assumed the boy was setting up the camp, and the girl was cooking dinner. From horseback, riding at speed, they wouldn't have gotten a good look at his face, especially if they threw a bag over his head. They wouldn't be able to tell he wasn't a girl."

"But he's just a teenager. I'm almost thirty years old."

"You are little changed from the first time I saw you. If someone looked quickly, and did not study your manner, or search your eyes, they might easily believe you were still a girl."

It didn't have to make sense. It was magic. She focused on what mattered. "What do you think they'll do when they discover Kerrim's not me?"

"They will come back for you." Reynart's expression turned distant. "And if Kerrim's lucky, they'll kill him."

She gasped. "You think they might torture him?"

He turned back to his packing, but his fixed expression spoke his agreement as clearly as words.

"You do! Can you get to him in time?" She paused, a new thought striking her abused head. "Why are you going after him at all? Is it to prove you're not like your father?"

He stiffened, then resumed his work. He folded the canvas with short, sharp motions, but his voice was calm as he answered, "I knew another minstrel once. He had the poor judgment to tell me the truth about my mother. She was the handmaiden who helped the queen escape. He thought the story made a wonderful song. My father did not agree."

"What happened?" Angie whispered.

"The minstrel died. Eventually."

She didn't want to ask, but she had to know. "Who tortured him?"

Reynart's fists clenched in the canvas, and he bowed his head. It was all the answer she needed.

Beryl led the saddled and bridled horses into the center of the campsite. She held herself stiffly erect, and announced, "We should all ride together. Away from here."

"No!" Angie cried. "You can't abandon Kerrim!"

"I like the boy. And he was writing a ballad about my Nestor. But we must remember what is important. I must get you—" She stopped and glared at Reynart. "Both of you, to Kingscap within the month. We can not risk either of you."

"We risk nothing. Anjeli will stay safely with you. I will go in alone, find Kerrim, and either bring him out, or avenge his death."

"Do you have any idea where they have taken him? Who is holding him? How many men are there? What kind of mundane and magical protections they have? Going after him is madness!"

"We might not know where they're going," Angie said. "But I'm sure they do."

Reynart turned to her. "You can discover their track by magic?"

"Yes," Angie answered, even as Beryl said, "Not necessarily."

He glared at the mage. "Then do so. They may continue on to their original destination, or they may double back, and lay an ambush for us. That would be a grave risk to your plans."

Beryl grimaced, but folded her arms and closed her eyes.

Angie closed her own eyes, picturing her studio. Someone had closed the blinds since the last time she imagined it. She pulled the cords, filling the studio with light, then approached her waiting canvas. A winding track led into the swirling depths of the forest, then stopped.

"That's odd," Beryl's voice said from a distance.

Angie looked closer at the place where the track ended. The same swirls of life energy cloaking the rest of the forest filled the area. She peered deeper, looking for anything that wasn't moving. But her paintbrush stippled the canvas in an ever-changing pattern.

No! The pattern wasn't ever-changing. The area where the track ended fluctuated through the same series of energy patterns, over and over again.

"The Heavenly Pair preserve us," Beryl whispered. "If those men hadn't been riding straight for it, I'd never have seen it. It's invisible."

Angie opened her eyes and looked at Beryl's white face. "You mean the piece of forest that repeats the same energy patterns over and over again?"

"You saw it, too? So large, the size of a chalet or small castle. And every inch of it imprinted with the energy pattern of the forest it replaced. I can't even begin to guess how much power that required."

"So we're dealing with a mage?" Reynart asked.

"Not just any mage. A very powerful, very talented mage. We must leave now."

"What?" Angie squeaked.

"The men are still a few candle marks from their base. Once they reach it and discover their mistake, they will have to ride back. We can travel a long way in that time. Perhaps far enough that they won't be able to catch us. Especially since we have an extra horse now."

Reynart clutched his killing dagger. "Go ahead. I can handle a mage."

The two glared at each other, neither willing to back down.

"What if we didn't have to fight him?" Angie asked. They turned and stared at her.

"You think you can just walk up to his front gate and demand that he return Kerrim?" Beryl scoffed.

"Yes. He doesn't want Kerrim. He wants me. So give him what he wants."

"No!" Reynart and Beryl both shouted.

Angie smiled. "I don't mean *really* give him what he wants. Just make him *think* you've given him what he wants."

"How?" Reynart wanted to know.

"Stuff my clothes with grass, and make a dummy. If you lay it across your horse, it will look like I'm unconscious. Promise the mage to trade me for Kerrim, and then when they bring Kerrim out, grab him and ride."

Reynart shook his head. "It's a good idea, but there's not enough time to get away. They'll discover the dummy isn't you almost immediately." He glanced at Beryl. "Unless there's something you can do?"

"Nothing that would fool a mage powerful enough to build that fortress. The energy patterns of a person are too different from the energy patterns of grass."

Reynart shrugged. "Then we're back to the original plan. You two ride as far away from here as you can, and I'll go in after Kerrim. We'll catch up to you later."

"It's too dangerous!" Beryl insisted.

"It has the best chance of working."

"I'll convince the council to owe you another favor if you come with us now, and forget this foolish notion."

He stared her down, until she drooped in defeat. Compassion colored his voice as he told her, "There is nothing that you could offer me capable of replacing what I would lose by not going. But I will not risk the failure of our quest. If I can not safely retrieve him, I will ensure his swift death. He will not betray our plans to our enemy."

Beryl hung her head and stared at the ground. "If I can not convince you to forsake this task, then I must ensure its success. I can not animate a sack of grass, but I could disguise myself. Trade me for Kerrim."

"But how will you escape?" Angie demanded. "It does no good to merely trade prisoners."

"In order to be mistaken for you, I must hide my magical energies. I can imprint them in an object, which you will carry. When the time comes, you will need to reunite me with my powers. I can then transport myself to where the object is."

"You want me to do magic? But I'm just beginning to learn how to read energy fields!"

Beryl looked up, her caramel eyes dark with sadness. "How's your headache?"

"What's that got to do with anything? My headache is—" Angie stared at the mage in shock. "It's gone."

"You successfully performed a first-level spell. With no training. You didn't even realize what you'd done."

"But it takes months, even years, to train a mage," Reynart protested.

"Most of that time is required to teach a novice how to tap into the energy fields. She is an energy field."

Angie frowned. "I opened the blinds in my imaginary studio. How am I supposed to transport you? Imagine I'm calling a taxi?"

Beryl shrugged, dismissing the unfamiliar phrase. "I will give you something. When you look at it in your mind, you will see a bird. To return my power to me, simply release the bird."

"That's it?" Angie stared at her. "That's all I have to do? But that's easy!"

"Of course it's easy," Beryl snapped. "Do you think I'd ask you to perform a spell that would fail, when not only my life but the entire magical structure of the world hangs in the balance?"

"No," Angie admitted.

Reynart smiled with encouragement. "Nevertheless, your part is vital to our success."

"As is yours," Beryl cautioned. "You must convince the mage that you are willing to trade the embodiment of your kingdom's gate energy for a minstrel who, in all likelihood, will already be dead."

He ignored her hint, asking instead, "What do you need to complete your spell?"

"I need an object to transfer my power into. The less energy of its own it has, the better, so ideally it should be metal or stone, and as pure as possible." Beryl pulled the pin from her travel cloak and examined it. She snorted, and reattached the pin. "I knew I should have gotten a more expensive piece."

"Does it need to be something of yours?" Reynart asked.

"No." Beryl swept the ground with her gaze. "Any piece of quartz or marble would do."

"How about solid silver?" He reached up and pulled off his circlet, then held it out to her.

Beryl's eyes flicked rapidly between his face and the outstretched circlet, but she made no move to take it.

Reynart picked up her hand and folded her fingers around the silver band. Slowly, he pivoted, fixing Angie with his imperious gaze.

"I need the mage to succeed if she is to restore the gateway to Nord D'Rae. That is all."

His hair remained matted in a narrow strip circling his head, where the weight of his circlet had pressed it flat. The circlet he'd worn for ten years.

"I understand." She smiled. She probably understood better than he did. He was nothing like his father at all.

Angie and Reynart finished breaking camp in silence, while Beryl sat with her eyes closed, lost in her magic. They transferred all of the supplies to Beryl's mare and Kerrim's gelding.

"He'll follow you no matter where you go," Reynart whispered. "You won't need to worry about a lead line getting tangled in the dark. And our plan won't work if you get thrown from the saddle or pitched in a river, so I want you on the safest riding horse."

"The first step is completed," Beryl announced.

They turned to look at her, and Reynart staggered back against the gelding. His gaze jumped back and forth from Beryl to Angie.

Angie stared at the young woman before her. No more than eighteen or nineteen, her mass of golden braids piled high on her head gave her the look of a little girl playing dress-up, an effect enhanced by her wide blue eyes.

"So that's what I look like," Angie mumbled. "It's worse than I thought."

Beryl gestured at her gray trousers and tunic. "I can't wear a mage's garb. I need your clothes."

Angie dug the slightly damp riding skirt and bodice out of her pack. "Here. Reynart and I will finish loading the horses while you dress."

Angie put the reassuring bulk of the gelding between her and her *doppleganger*, gasping when Reynart came up silently behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. His fingers flexed and tensed like the claws of a nervous cat.

She shifted her position slightly so that she could see him. "What is it?"

A self-mocking smile twisted his lips. "I just need to reassure myself that you're real."

She turned to face him. His hands loosely held her upper arms. She slid her fingers over the solid reality of his chest, onto his muscled shoulders. "I know what you mean. All this time we've been talking about magic. But to finally see it... Now I'm not sure about anything. Is that really how I look?"

He pulled her closer, his hands skimming over her back with the same nervous rhythm. Tucked against his chest, she could no longer see his face.

"Exactly. Which is why I need to be certain I'm giving them the right one."

Angie stiffened. Her fear for Kerrim had made her forget her fear of Reynart. "Because you want me to help restore the gateway to your kingdom before you make me pay for destroying it?"

"I vowed that you would pay for what you'd done. I will not forsake my vow," he warned. "No matter what. But...I would not want to misjudge the extent of what you actually did."

She pulled back, needing to see his face. His green eyes shone with sincerity.

Angie almost cried with sheer frustration. He was the model of contrition. But she'd seen him model other emotions, too. And he'd never been less than perfect. She had no

way of knowing if he was telling the truth, or trying to manipulate her again in some way she couldn't even begin to imagine.

"Can I believe you?" she whispered.

"I wouldn't if I were you," he admitted. "Then again, I don't trust anyone."

The good man she'd known was still there, deep inside. Perhaps, even now, he was struggling to get free. What she questioned was whether or not he was strong enough to overcome the vengeance-driven man Reynart had become. She suspected that even his decision to rescue Kerrim was not based so much on his wish to save him, even though he genuinely liked the minstrel, as to even the score for the minstrel his father had forced him to destroy, and to prove he was the cleverest, deadliest man around by stealing Kerrim back from whomever had kidnapped him.

Reynart lowered his hands and stepped away from her. The moment was lost. He knew she hadn't believed him.

He checked the horses one last time, then swung up onto his mount. Looking down at her, he said, "Until the gateway is restored, I will keep you safe. After that, I do intend to make you pay for your part in Nord D'Rae's destruction. But Anjeli, no matter how much I feel you should suffer, I would never let another harm you. That is my responsibility, as prince. And my payment."

Nudging his mare into motion, he reached out and grabbed the bay's bridle. The two horses walked off, leaving Angie alone with the black and Beryl's mare. The gelding lowered his nose to the ground and ripped up great mouthfuls of grass, too stupid to realize he was watching someone's heart break. The mare spared Angie a curious glance, then turned away, as uncaring as her mistress.

Angie picked up Beryl's discarded garments, and stowed them in her saddlebag. The mage herself was walking toward her, delicate, mincing steps replacing Beryl's forceful stride.

Beryl held out the circlet. "Here. Tell me what you see."

Angie accepted the silver band, warmed by the mage's touch. She closed her eyes, and pictured herself in her studio. Nestled in her cupped palms was a sleeping dove.

"A dove," Angie whispered. "It's asleep."

"Put it someplace safe."

Angie scanned her studio. A pile of rags lay on the counter beside the sink, waiting to wipe up spilled paint or dry the tin of turpentine. She nestled the dove in the rags, and stepped back. It continued to sleep.

"Open your eyes," Beryl instructed.

Angie dutifully opened her eyes. The silver circlet was now cold to her touch. She looked at Beryl, and did a double take at the woman's changed appearance. Bone-deep lines of weariness scored her face.

Beryl mustered a faint smile at her reaction. "I look that bad? Well, I will have time to rest on the ride."

“How long will you be? When should I release your powers?”

“You ride as long and as hard as you can. Every time you stop to rest the horses, look at your tracking map. When we near the mage’s fortress, watch what happens. Wait as long as you can, but if I appear in trouble, release my powers.”

“But how will I—?”

“You have all the skill you need. Believe in yourself, and you will find a way.”

Reynart led the horses around, and Beryl turned away. She struggled into the bay’s saddle, too tired or too encumbered by the damp riding skirts to swing up smoothly.

Reynart looked at Angie. “Ride north. If you must detour around something, try to head east. It’s a clear night. You can steer by the stars. But the most important thing is to keep riding. When morning dawns, I want you as far away from here as possible.”

He waited, watching until she’d mounted Beryl’s mare and led the black away at a gentle trot.

“Faster!” he called.

Then he and Beryl rode into the woods.

Chapter Nine

Gervaise leaned against his balcony railing, watching as the moon set and full night claimed the forest. Darkness snuck up on the unwary world gradually but inexorably. It would not be denied. Just as his plans were now coming to fruition, after ten long years of effort. Soon, his power would be as undeniable as the night.

The boy's screams made the moment all the more poignant. Gervaise could feel the power generated by the boy's fear and pain, pulsing through the channels built into the chalet. The power pooled and collected in the recently rebuilt gold and crystal vessels designed to hold it. And the vessels were keyed to release their power to Gervaise.

He smiled, amused by the irony. That pitiful mage who had dared to try and infiltrate the Brotherhood of Chaos, had been intent on uncovering their secrets. Instead, he'd been the final test subject for Gervaise's grand creation. The only secret he'd uncovered was a flaw in the design of the power vessels. While the bindings prevented the victim from using any attack magic, the mage had tapped into accumulated power in the vessels and sent out a last plaintive cry for help. Gervaise would not let the girl's power escape him so easily. The redesigned vessels worked perfectly.

Perhaps he should tell his men to stop torturing the boy. Since he had no magical gifts, the power that could be harvested from him was hardly worth the effort. He'd been amusing and quite creative when he begged and cried, but that hadn't lasted long. Gervaise had come out to his balcony when the boy lapsed into incoherent screaming, no longer interested in watching. Given a chance to recover, the boy might prove amusing again.

Still, the torture served a purpose. With every atrocity his men inflicted, they imagined what Gervaise would do to them if they failed again. The torture chamber was not set up to collect the power of their fear, but their terror was not wasted. It would make them unstoppable the next time they tried to take the girl.

Gervaise frowned. His men would need to be unstoppable, because this time, Reynart D'Altha would be ready for them. The former prince had been an efficient killer as a young man, fighting his father's wars. He'd even bested Gervaise, the one time they'd been in direct conflict, although only because his attack had surprised him. Reynart had matured into a most deadly adult and Gervaise didn't intend to be surprised again.

As long as at least one of his men survived to carry off the girl, he didn't care what happened to the rest. But he needed at least one to survive. It might be better to oversee the girl's retrieval in person.

He drummed his fingers against the smooth iron railing. Reynart was not as simplistic as his brother, and could not be as easily outmaneuvered. He'd proved that ten years ago by thwarting Gervaise's plans.

Of course, Alaric's stupidity was partially to blame for that failure. If he'd used his own blood in the spell to create the girl, invoking the royal connection to Nord D'Rae's gateways as he'd been instructed, then reinforced the connection by bedding the girl, Gervaise would have been able to access her power through his link to Alaric. Instead, the fool had used his brother's blood, then misplaced the girl and allowed Reynart to establish the connection. He'd ruined the spell Gervaise had spent eighteen years perfecting.

But not this time. Gervaise no longer needed a middleman to process the girl's gateway power. He could drain it directly from her and store it for his later use. Then, when he was ready, nothing could stop him from creating the gateway to her world, and siphoning off all of its magical potential. Or maybe he'd transport himself to her world, and style himself as a god. It would be amusing to have an entire world catering to his whims. Baiting the mages' council had ceased to be entertaining decades ago.

The boy's screams ended in a choked gurgle. Gervaise cocked his head, listening. The screams did not resume. He hoped they hadn't killed the boy yet. Still, shoddy work was the price one paid for hiring men with no standards.

Gervaise turned to go inside, but a flash of light in the forest caught his attention. A flickering torch drove back the darkness. Who dared to challenge his desires in the heart of his stronghold?

Focusing his mage sight on the trail leading to the chalet, he spied two figures on horseback—one dark with controlled energy, and one blazing like a World's End Eve bonfire. Reynart had brought the girl to him!

As he watched, Reynart guided the girl off the trail, as if such incandescence could be hidden. He continued up the trail alone, stopping just within hailing range. His eyes scanned the outside of the chalet, until he picked out Gervaise standing on the balcony.

"Greetings within," he called.

"Who greets us?" Gervaise called down. He could blast Reynart into oblivion and take the girl, but decided to play Reynart's game first. It might prove amusing.

Gervaise glanced at the girl's radiant power and licked his lips. He'd play the game. But not for long.

"Who I am is not as important as why I'm here. A party of men took something of mine by mistake, earlier. I'm here to get it back."

"By mistake, you say? Then you had something of theirs that they meant to take?"

Reynart glanced back toward the girl, then lowered his voice slightly. "What they meant to take was also mine. But I would be willing to sell them what they wanted."

This was too amusing for words! Rather than hinder their efforts, Reynart intended to help them. "Come closer, and let us speak plainly."

Reynart nudged his horse, a bay to judge from the little light that shone on him from the torch, closer to the gate. "Don't think to try and kill me then take her away. We are both protected by magical spells."

The girl's natural power hid any magical signature, but Reynart had no such disguise. No magical signature clung to him. The mage he traveled with was as inept as her husband had been.

No. Gervaise would not underestimate Reynart's treachery. The prince had called his attention to their lack of shielding, so perhaps the seeming absence of protection was a trap.

Gervaise saw no sign of a third horse on the trail. They must have left the mage behind. Had she used the wrong spell to protect them, and not taken the distance into account? He wasn't sure, and didn't want to risk the girl.

Still, if Reynart believed magic protected him, he might do something rash. That could prove interesting. But first Gervaise had to provoke him.

"Did you not think I would be honored to greet the legendary Reynart D'Altha?"

Reynart did not so much as twitch. "Your efforts to hide your home suggest a dislike of uninvited guests."

The hand of Amin-Ra! Not only hadn't Reynart reacted to Gervaise's knowledge of who he was, he'd correctly divined that Gervaise was the master, and not just a guard.

Reynart didn't know Gervaise's identity, though. And the only way he could know of the chalet's magical protections was if the mage had told him. Gervaise smiled. A side effect of the Nord D'Rae royal family's bonding with the gateway energies was that they were completely blind to any and all other forms of magic. Gervaise could force a link to the former prince, and Reynart would never know about it.

He hesitated, recalling the young prince's mental resistance to a magical link. Judging from his energy patterns, time had only increased Reynart's strength of will. He might kill the prince if he forced a connection, and his elaborately planned spells to get the girl's powers had been based on the assumption that her link to Reynart remained intact. Destroying that link could have a disastrous effect on the outcome of Gervaise's spell. It wasn't worth the risk, not if he was going to hand over the girl anyway.

"Why are you willing to sell her?" Gervaise asked.

"The mage tricked me into taking them both to Kingscap, by saying she could restore the Nord D'Rae gateways. I questioned her, after the attack on our camp."

Ah-hah! That's why the mage hadn't been able to ride with them. And why they had no protections. Gervaise was well acquainted with the methods the Nord D'Rae royal family used for questioning. Perhaps the mage had miscast her spell on purpose, hoping Gervaise would attack Reynart.

Reynart continued. "She admitted that her spell was more likely to destroy this kingdom than reconnect to Nord D'Rae. I've already fled one kingdom. I don't want to

do it again. And even if she succeeds, what is left for me in my old kingdom but devastation? I'd rather have money."

"How much money?"

"One bag of gold. It shouldn't be a problem for a mage as powerful as you."

Gervaise summoned a bag, freshly imprinted with the wax seal of the king's counting house, and held it aloft. "Ten thousand *graz*."

The horse shifted his weight, responding to Reynart's hastily concealed reaction to the money. Such a sum would have meant nothing to the prince, but represented a comfortable retirement for the assassin he'd become.

Gervaise shook the bag, jingling the coins together. "You give me the girl, I'll give you the money."

"And the minstrel."

That was unexpected. Gervaise smiled. He did love a good baiting, and his men were no challenge at all. "The minstrel is dead."

Reynart studied him quietly, squinting up at the balcony. "No, he is not."

Gervaise glared down. Amin-Ra take him, but the former prince was good at this game. And while Gervaise enjoyed the game, he enjoyed winning it even more.

"He is, I say."

"No. You do not fear I will abandon the deal, so you are prepared to offer him if it looks like I will."

"Why does the minstrel mean so much to you? Ten years ago, it was the girl you were willing to kill for."

Reynart's cool green gaze never wavered. "The icy spring that quenches a young man's passion can seem too cold for a man of experience."

Gervaise laughed. He'd watched Reynart over the years, since the former prince was the key to the girl's return. In all that time, he'd never seen Reynart wenching, or visiting a house of pleasure. Now he knew why. The time spent in his father's army had given Reynart a taste for male companionship as well as killing. Given his kingdom's taboos, no wonder the former prince fed his guilty pleasures in secret.

"The boy's performance may disappoint you."

Reynart frowned. "Has he been gelded? Have you cut off his hands or tongue?"

"He is yet whole," Gervaise answered. Even if the boy had been damaged since, he'd been intact less than four candle marks ago. He could be repaired. "My servant will bring him out to you."

"Give your servant the bag of gold as well, and we will make the trade."

Gervaise tapped the stored power to transport himself to the torture chamber. He needed the vessels empty, anyway, before he filled them with the girl's gate energies. Why not make an impressive exit?

The boy hung limply in the chains, blood running from the corner of his mouth like drool. His back and chest were covered with congealing blood. The stench of burnt flesh filled the room, overpowering the smells of blood and the boy's fear.

Jahan, the leader of Gervaise's men, dropped the iron he held back into the glowing coals, and presented himself. "My lord."

Gervaise glanced at the boy's stained hose. Too much blood had soaked into them to be certain of its origins.

"Did you remove anything from him? Tongue? Eyes? Manhood?"

"No, my lord." Jahan flinched, as if anticipating Gervaise's displeasure.

The mage raised a hand, forestalling any apologies or explanations. "Cut him down and bring him to the gate. I'm trading him for the girl you were supposed to get."

Jahan cringed and hurried to release the chains suspending the boy in the center of the room. The boy fell to the floor as if dead. His life energy had dimmed, but was not in danger of fading out.

As Jahan lifted the blood-slicked body to his shoulder, Gervaise motioned to one of the men trying to remain inconspicuous in the shadows. The man scuttled over, avoiding eye contact by staring at Gervaise's feet.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Take this." Gervaise held out the bag of gold. "Go with Jahan to the gate, and give the boy to the man waiting there. Once he gives you the girl, give him the gold."

He dismissed the other men with a wave of his hand, smiling as they stampeded through the door. Once he got the girl's powers, he'd hunt Reynart down, kill him and get his gold back. But for now, Gervaise needed to concentrate on his plans for the girl.

He turned his attention to the torture chamber. He'd be spending the next two weeks in here with her. He used the last of his stored power to cleanse all trace of the boy from the room.

* * * * *

Angie reined in the mare at the top of a low hill. The horse's sides heaved beneath her legs, and they both lowered their heads in exhaustion. The gelding huffed beside them, only slightly less tired.

Unable to climb in and out of the saddle any more, Angie closed her eyes and slipped into her imaginary studio. The light coming in from the windows had faded each time she searched for Reynart and Beryl, until last time she'd been forced to turn on the overhead lights in order to see her painting.

Slipping deeper into an artistic trance, she watched the painting that formed on her canvas. They had reached the fortress!

Angie darted a look at the dove, still sleeping in its pile of rags. How was she going to watch Beryl and determine when to release her powers?

She reached up and touched the silver circlet resting in her hair. Although she imagined her own body, clothed in comfortable jeans and a tee-shirt, Reynart's circlet had come with her. Perhaps that was the connection she needed. After all, she'd watched Reynart and painted his daily activities for the past ten years, without realizing it. She should be able to do the same thing on purpose.

Her paintbrush flew over the canvas, depicting Reynart and Beryl in front of a chalet. They were loading something onto Reynart's horse.

With a gasp, Angie realized that the red and black bundle they were strapping in place was Kerrim. They'd already lashed his legs to the saddle, using the same straps Angie had used on her first disastrous day of riding. Now they were binding his hands to the front of the saddle, to insure he didn't slide off to either side. He must still be alive, or they would have just laid him across the saddle.

The painting froze, no longer moving, and Angie realized she'd started chewing on the end of her brush.

"Kerrim will be fine," she told herself, consciously trying to banish her nervousness. It didn't work.

She picked up another brush to chew on, and resumed painting.

Reynart and Beryl had walked away from the horse, turning toward the chalet. Reynart stepped aside to let Beryl precede him. As she passed, he slammed the hilt of his dagger into the back of her head. She dropped to the ground.

"No!" Angie yelled.

Reynart accepted a heavy bag from a blood-spattered man. Nudging Beryl's limp body aside with his foot, he crossed to the other horse and tied the bag to the saddle. Then he mounted and rode off down the trail, the mare and her grisly burden following.

The painting started to follow Reynart and Kerrim down the trail, but Angie focused her will, and the picture stabilized on Beryl's limp body.

The blood-spattered man lifted her to his shoulder and carried her inside. Angie's painting shifted styles, becoming more impressionistic, and she suspected some sort of magical interference was at work. The man brought Beryl into a room with gray walls, most likely stone, and suspended her from chains hung from the ceiling. Then, bowing low, he backed away so that another man could approach her body.

The second man wore a dark robe that wouldn't show blood stains, but Angie didn't think it would be stained. This man looked like he let his underlings get dirty for him.

He pulled his arm back and slapped Beryl hard enough to spin her around. She oscillated back and forth, her body twisting the chains first clockwise, then counterclockwise, but never opened her eyes or moved.

The man shrugged, said something to the bowing servant, and left the room. The servant walked over to a low stool and sat down, leaning back against the wall to wait.

Angie opened her eyes, returning to the moment. An image of Kerrim's burned and bloody body rose up in front of her, and her stomach heaved. She just had time to lean away from the horse before she was sick.

The mare danced a few steps to the side. Angie patted the mare's sweaty neck.

"Sorry about that, girl. You're lucky you're just a horse, and can't understand what they did to Kerrim. What they would have done to me, if they'd caught me. What they're going to do to Beryl if I don't get her powers to her."

Her stomach trembled, but this time she controlled it. Beryl would be okay until she woke up from the blow Reynart had given her. Had he known that? Or had he taken advantage of the moment to pay back his frustrations with the mage?

Knowing Reynart, probably both. And it looked like he'd earned a sizable payment for his efforts, too.

Angie nudged the mare into motion, and headed down the hill. The gelding followed them. She'd go down this hill, across the valley, and up the next hill. When she got to the top, she'd check in on Beryl again.

She didn't know how long a head start Reynart and Kerrim would need. But she couldn't let Beryl suffer. Who knew what the guard had been told to do as soon as she woke up? No, even if Beryl was still unconscious by the time Angie got to the next hilltop, Angie would release her powers. That way, the mage would have them when she needed them.

Angie urged the tired mare to walk faster.

She'd lost all concept of time when the mare finally stumbled to the top of the next hill. They were both exhausted, and the gelding wasn't in much better shape. Angie slid out of the saddle and collapsed on the ground. She wouldn't be riding any further. She focused her thoughts, and entered the quiet spot in her mind.

As soon as she found herself in her studio, she grabbed the paintbrush. Beryl still hung from the chains, but her eyes were open. The robed man was in front of her, gesturing with his hands as he spoke.

Angie hurried over to the sleeping dove. Throwing open the window, she scooped up the bird and tried to convince it to fly away. It fluttered its wings, but refused to leave.

"Go! Fly back to Beryl! She needs you!" Angie tossed the bird into the air, forcing it to take flight.

It banked and flew away from the open window, deeper into her studio.

Angie chased after it. "You're Beryl's powers. Go to Beryl!"

The mage was depending on her. What if Angie couldn't do the magic required to return her powers? What if she failed?

The lights flickered, as if to underscore her doubt. Angie shook her head. She had to believe she would succeed. It was just a matter of figuring out how.

The dove had found a perch on top of her easel. Angie looked at the painting. Could the bird fly through the painting to reach Beryl?

Angie reached out and touched the canvas. A dab of gray paint came off on her finger. No. The bird couldn't fly into the painting. It had to go out the window.

She tried shooing the dove toward the window again. It circled the room, but came back to roost on the easel.

Tilting her head, Angie considered bird and painting. She believed the bird had to go through a window. The bird seemed to want to fly into the painting. They could compromise.

Angie quickly painted a window frame and open window on the canvas, so that it appeared to be in the wall of Beryl's torture chamber. She saw Beryl's face contorted with horror, and the man's face darken with suspicion. Then they both turned to face her window. The man snarled and lifted his arms, just as the dove swept past Angie and through the open window. Beryl glowed briefly, then disappeared.

The man stepped toward the window, reaching for Angie. She screamed, and threw a Mason jar of dirty turpentine at the canvas.

The colors blurred and ran, and she leaned against the counter, breathing heavily. That had been close. Too close.

A hand shaking her shoulder roused her back to her body. Still wearing Angie's clothes, but otherwise looking like herself again, Beryl smiled.

"You did it."

Angie hugged the mage. After a stunned moment, the mage returned her embrace.

"I was so afraid I wasn't going to be able to get you out," Angie confessed. "I saw what they did to Kerrim. And I thought they were going to do that to you."

"You returned my powers in time." Beryl paused, studying Angie. "Although you used a third-level spell to do it."

"Really?" Angie scrubbed at her gritty eyes. No wonder it had seemed so hard. "Was there a first-level spell that would have worked?"

"When you woke the bird, and it took flight, it should have transported itself to me immediately."

"You mean it would have just disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Angie considered a disappearing bird. "I think that's where the problem was. You told me to imagine myself someplace safe and familiar to do magic. I picture myself back in my studio at home, and that's in a world where birds can't just disappear. I wanted it to fly out the window. It wouldn't, so I had to paint a window for it to fly through."

Beryl stared at her. "But that means your first spell failed."

"No. It couldn't have. There weren't any repercussions, like you described."

"Did nothing unusual happen?"

"Well, the lights flickered."

Beryl's forehead creased in confusion. "What lights?"

"In my mind. The studio kept growing darker every time I went into it to check the map, so I had to turn on the lights. Um, sort of like smokeless candles, permanently mounted in the ceiling."

"Has your mental studio ever darkened before?"

"Once. When I had my headache, I thought someone had lowered the blinds over the windows. But it was still bright outside. This time, the windows were wide open, but it was dark out."

"It sounds as if the light represents the amount of magical energy you have available. Your headache prevented you from using your magic, but the energy was still there. As you performed additional magic tonight, you depleted your energy. But that doesn't make sense. You *are* magical energy. How could you run out?"

"I think I'm just the entrance point for the energy. When Reynart did that stunt in the tavern, where he invoked the power of the gateways, I felt a rush of power. It might be that I can't access all of the energy unless the gateway power has been invoked."

Beryl leaned back and closed her eyes. After a few minutes, she said, "Yes. That would be consistent. But it makes his part of the mission more vital than ever."

Angie whispered a prayer for Reynart's and Kerrim's safe return. Then, to be on the safe side, she addressed the same prayer to the Heavenly Pair who were this world's deities.

Beryl opened her eyes and looked at Angie. "I've been thinking about the flickering light you mentioned. From all you've described, it seems that you've found a way to internalize the energy of failed magic spells. That might have something to do with the fact that you're really a magical construct yourself."

Angie winced. She hated being reminded that she wasn't in her real body. Desperate to change the subject, she thought of what she'd seen through her painting.

"Just before I finished the painting of the window, I saw your face. You had such a look of horror. What did that man say?"

A shadow of the same horror passed over Beryl's face. "He told me he was the one who tortured and killed my husband."

Chapter Ten

Angie and Beryl rested their horses and themselves through the darkest part of the night. As soon as the faint light of pre-dawn started to wash the stars from the sky, they mounted up and headed north.

Out of the grasslands now, their path took them over and around the foothills of the Gray Mountains. Every time they crested a hill, they paused to sight out their route to the next hilltop.

Angie rode the black gelding, since Beryl had reclaimed her mare. Going down one hillside, the mare's hooves struck some exposed shale, breaking thin shards of rock loose. She stumbled on the suddenly uneven footing, and Angie tried to guide her mount around the broken rock. He refused to obey any of her commands, not responding to her legs or to the reins, and followed blindly across the crumbling rock. Angie clutched the saddle straps and hung on as the gelding lurched and slid after Beryl's mare.

"Horse, you're an idiot," Angie told him. She didn't know how Kerrim rode the beast so easily.

She recalled the image of Kerrim's bloody body being strapped to Reynart's mare.

"Beryl?" she called. "You saw Kerrim. How was he?"

The mage hadn't spoken since her revelation that the man who'd tortured Kerrim had also killed her husband. Angie was certain Beryl would remain silent, but eventually she spoke. "He was in pain, but he will live. Unlike my Nestor. They tortured him for five days, until Amin-Ta saved him from further pain."

She spurred her mare ahead, preventing any more discussion.

By the time they reached the next rise, Beryl appeared composed, but grief still shadowed her eyes. She dismounted. "They will be out of the forest now. The prince will choose which landmark to ride towards."

Closing her eyes, she reached out with her magic. Angie tried, as well, but her mental studio was dark, and the light switch no longer worked. She'd run out of magical energy.

Beryl opened her eyes and scanned the distant horizon. She pointed toward a craggy gray mountain, the westmost of the range. "That's Kingscap. But he's riding toward Highreach."

Her finger shifted to the east, pointing at the next mountain. Taller than its fellows, the mountain also turned rocky above the tree line, but continued up past the frost line, so that its upper reaches were white.

"So we're riding toward Highreach now?" Angie asked.

"No. We angle our route to intersect their path. Once we meet them, we can ride straight north to the Highreach-Kingscap road. Using a road should gain us back some of the time we lost rescuing Kerrim and riding so far out of our way to the east."

Angie slid down off her horse and stretched her legs. Her calves ached, and walking around didn't help. Tiny trails of fire crept up from her ankles, still so faint that she could ignore them. Sighing, she reached into her pack for the muscle salve. She'd learned the hard way not to ignore the subtle threat.

"We may as well let the horses graze," Angie said. "I've got to apply this salve again."

She sat down on an outcropping of rock and stripped off her boots, riding skirt and hose. She would have preferred to continue wearing the borrowed tunic and hose, but Kerrim would need the new clothing when he returned. That is, if he was able to wear a tunic.

A picture rose up in her mind of Kerrim as she'd last seen him, his hose stained with blood, and his back stripped raw and blackened with burns. She swallowed.

She forced her thoughts away from what Kerrim had looked like, and concentrated on rubbing the oily salve into her calf muscles. The pain helped distract her, letting her block out things she didn't want to think about.

Reynart had helped her apply the salve the first time, even though it reminded him of past tortures. And it had nearly undone him. What must he be going through now, remembering the minstrel he himself had tortured and killed?

Angie clenched her fists, wild hatred coursing through her. She hated Reynart's father, for what he'd done to his son. She hated the evil mage for what he'd done to Kerrim. And she hated this horrible world that accepted such pain and violence as a way of life.

Beryl shook her shoulder, recalling Angie from her thoughts, then thrust some dried fruit into her hands. "Eat. We'll need our strength."

While their horses snatched mouthfuls of grass, the two women chewed and swallowed the fruit. It tasted like sawdust to Angie, dry and powdery. Or maybe ashes.

After their brief rest was over, they remounted and headed down the hillside, angling toward the west now to intercept Reynart and Kerrim.

Beryl glanced toward the mountain range. "He's a clever one, the prince. Now that he knows magic can track where he intends to go, he heads for the wrong mountain."

"If he's being followed, where he's going won't matter. They'll know when he changes course."

"But they won't be able to ambush him." Beryl rubbed the back of her neck. "I just wish I could be sure whose side he's on."

Angie sighed. "Never doubt it. He's on his own side."

Beryl dropped into silence again. Trying to avoid the oppressive nature of her own thoughts, Angie concentrated on what she would do when she returned home. She'd

lost her chance at the Seattle art show. Although if Donald was his usual cynical self, he might have convinced the gallery that works by an artist in a coma were easy sales. Art investors would snap the pieces up, hoping they'd appreciate in value quickly when she died.

Yes, that would be Donald's style. So maybe she shouldn't rule out the Seattle show. But what about new work? Her artistic gifts weren't the prelude to an impending mental collapse, the way she'd feared. They were the result of the unstable gateway energy tying her to Reynart and his world. When the gateways were restored and the energies stabilized, what would happen?

She had to be prepared to lose her artistic abilities. She had some skill, true. But she doubted she'd ever be able to duplicate the emotional impact of her magic-inspired work. She'd become an example for a future client of Donald's. *You don't want to be like Angie Blanchard. She was a promising young artist, with her whole career ahead of her. But nobody ever heard of her, because she never did any shows. And then she lost it completely, and was never able to paint again.*

Was that her destiny? To be a cautionary tale stressing the importance of getting publicity while you could, because you never knew when your career might end?

She pulled her travel cloak out of her pack and huddled in its useless warmth. Mere wool could not dispel the cold that shrouded her soul.

It was late afternoon when the sound of hoofbeats interrupted her dismal thoughts. Ahead of her, Beryl stopped, scanning the western horizon.

"It's them."

Two horses and riders thundered into view. Reynart led the way on the bay, although sweat stained the horse's coat so dark that he looked black beneath the froth of lather. As they neared, she could see the white foam dripping from his muzzle, and his wild, white-rimmed eyes. Foam also flecked the mare's muzzle, but her eyes remained brown, and the steady rhythm of her hooves never faltered.

Kerrim slumped upright, lashed to the saddle and wrapped in Reynart's black cloak. Judging by the mare's flapping reins, he made no attempt to guide her.

Something seemed wrong about the horse's coloring, but at first, Angie couldn't place the change. Then she realized that the mare was supposed to be white until midway along her sides. The brownish-red spots over her neck and front quarters were bloodstains.

Reynart reined in as soon as he saw them, the bay snorting and tossing his head in a doomed bid for control. Leaping off as soon as the horse slowed, he hurried over to Kerrim. The mare stopped, her head down and her sides heaving, too well-trained to move even when Reynart unstrapped Kerrim from the saddle and the unconscious minstrel toppled off the horse.

Reynart caught him and carried Kerrim to where Angie and Beryl waited. Laying Kerrim gently on the ground, Reynart called out to them in a raspy, barely audible voice, "Make camp here. Horses can't run any further. Take care of Kerrim."

Angie leapt off her horse and ran to Kerrim's side. He looked even worse in person. Wrapped in Reynart's black cloak like a shroud, his face was as white as death.

No! She wouldn't think that way. He wasn't going to die. She wouldn't let him.

Fumbling for his hand beneath the billowing cloak, she ignored the sticky fabric and rusty stains. She held his hand and told him, "You're going to be all right, Kerrim. We got you out, and you're going to be okay."

She glanced up. Beryl was stripping the sweat and foam covered tack from the horses, while Reynart crouched, head down, in an attitude of complete exhaustion. He looked ready to pass out himself.

"Forget the horses," Angie snapped. "Come help Kerrim."

Beryl loosed the bay's girth and pulled off his saddle. "I told you before, I'm a mage, not a healer. Without the weapons that caused his injuries, and so long after the damage, my magic can do nothing for him."

Reynart lifted his head. "Pot. Water. Medicine in my pack."

Angie's heart beat faster. They had a chance after all. "Can you go fill a pot at the last stream we passed?" she asked Beryl.

The mage pulled the two largest pots from their cooking stores and rode off.

Reynart forced himself to his feet and staggered over to Angie's horse. He pulled out her water flask, uncorking it and taking a deep draught. Then he poured what was left over his head.

He shook his head, spattering droplets of water, then ran his hands through the sides of his hair, pulling it away from his face. A second motion pulled back the damp curls hanging in his eyes.

He'd worn the circlet for so long, he compensated for it even when he'd stopped wearing it. Angie nodded at her pack.

"I'm sure you want your circlet back. Thank you for loaning it to Beryl."

He dug out the band and settled it on his head, the bright silver gleaming against the wet black strands. "It served its purpose."

"Your voice sounds better."

A wry grin touched Reynart's lips. "I did not bring enough water. Whenever Kerrim was awake, I talked to him. Sometimes I couldn't tell if he was awake or not, so I talked to him anyway."

"Why did you do all the talking?"

"To distract him. And because he could not."

Angie froze. "He can't talk?"

"Nor make any sound. I hope he will recover, but I am not a healer."

The world blurred, shifting shapes running around her. "What happened? Did they...?"

She wasn't sure what sort of injury would prevent someone from making any noise, but suspected it would be both horrible and painful.

Reynart's brows drew close. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

No. She didn't want to know what atrocities had been perpetrated on her helpless friend, what horrors meant for her Kerrim had suffered in her place. But she needed to know. How else could she help him get well?

"Tell me."

Reynart took a deep breath. "His hands and fingers were neither broken nor amputated, although his wrists are badly cut from where the bindings dug into his skin. I didn't have time for a thorough exam, but I found no sign of intentional damage to his eyes, ears or mouth. My guess is that when they discovered their mistake, they beat him senseless."

"They only beat him?" she asked, hope sneaking into her heart. Perhaps her visions had been wrong. She was still learning. Perhaps she'd seen what the men intended to do, rather than what they'd really done.

Reynart shook his head, his movements jerky and lacking his usual grace. "No. They beat him in anger. Later, when he awoke, they tortured him."

His eyes turned distant, and his voice took on a singsong quality, as if he repeated words from memory without regard for their meaning. "First, the whips. A plain, single braid of leather, to raise the skin. Then a narrow lash or a many-tailed whip to lay open the back. Follow with a barbed whip, to carve deeper still. The victim will pass out, if allowed, so apply salt or vinegar as needed to bring him around."

All the warmth evaporated from the afternoon, leaving Angie shivering. The air froze solid and she couldn't breathe, couldn't force her ice-laden lungs to work.

Oblivious, Reynart continued his grisly recitation. "Repeat on the victim's chest. Avoid the neck and lower organs. Cuts or blows there may cause him to die too early. Suspend the victim upside down and work over the soles of his feet with a tap stick until they blister and split. Then, begin the irons. Warm first, to raise welts and boils on arms and legs. Then hot, to —"

"Stop!" Angie shrieked. She didn't know which horrified her more, hearing what had been done to Kerrim or the emotionless way that Reynart described the tortures.

Angie clenched her fists in the fabric of her riding skirt. She wouldn't think about what those men did to Kerrim, or Reynart doing those things to countless nameless, faceless victims. She wouldn't. "What can we do for Kerrim?"

"He needs a healer and two weeks in bed." Reynart shook his head. "With limited herbs and a hard ride ahead of us, he may not survive."

"Don't say that!"

"You asked for the truth."

"It's not true until it happens. And it's not going to happen!"

He sighed. "Then set up the camp. Prepare a tent for him. I will build a fire."

She clung to Kerrim's hand. "I don't want to leave him."

"He will not know if you are there or not, but a tent to keep him warm tonight will make a difference."

Grudgingly, she released Kerrim's hand. "But you watch him. If there is any change, call me."

Beryl returned to the camp just as Angie was pounding in the last tent stake. Reynart's fire was already snapping hungrily at the small twigs he'd fed it, and licking at the larger branches.

Reynart took the two full pots of water from the mage, then she dismounted. "I searched the trail you rode, all the way back to the chalet. No one is following you. You got away safely. How is he?"

"Still unconscious," Angie answered.

Reynart retrieved rolled strips of linen from his pack and handed them to Angie. His movements were still sharp-edged, and his gaze flicked restlessly around the camp, seeking an enemy that didn't exist.

"Soak these in the water, then let them cool before washing his chest and back. He will start bleeding again. As long as the blood flows slowly, disregard it."

He turned to Beryl. "Can you make a poultice, to prevent fever and aid healing, if I give you the herbs?"

"Yes. But what will you be doing?"

"I have another mixture to see to." He took a small wooden box from his pack and gave it to Beryl. "You'll find everything you need in there."

He filled a ceramic bowl with boiling water and carried it away from the fire. Picking up his pack as he walked past, he disappeared inside one of the tents.

Beryl and Angie exchanged a look, then set about their assigned tasks.

Kerrim awoke when the first cloth touched his skin. He arched his back, his eyes wide with terror and pain, and a hideous gurgling noise came from his throat. At least he was alive.

"Shush, Kerrim, it's all right," Angie reassured him. "You're with your friends now. We'll take care of you. But we have to get all of this blood and dirt cleaned off you, so that Beryl can apply a healing poultice."

Kerrim's wide brown eyes focused on Angie, and he gurgled again.

"Please, Kerrim, don't try to talk." Her voice shook, and she blinked to clear her blurry vision. "You're going to be okay."

He nodded, and reached for her hand. She held his fingers gently, afraid of hurting him, but he squeezed her hand tightly.

She gripped his hand firmly, giving him what comfort she could. She owed it to him. He wouldn't be here if she hadn't insisted he accompany them.

She touched the cloth to his chest again. His body arched, and his fingers clamped tightly around hers, but he didn't make a sound. As the dried blood sloughed away, the welts and cuts beneath became visible, as well as the sear marks from hot irons. There weren't as many burns as she'd feared. Much of what she'd thought had been charred flesh was actually dried blood that had blackened.

When she turned to get a new cloth, he raised a hand to stop her before she could continue. He pointed to her, then her mouth, then made open and shut motions with his hand. After thinking about his gestures a moment, she asked, "You want me to talk to you?"

He nodded.

"Okay. I'll tell you about my world. Who knows, maybe you can make a song about it." Heat flooded her cheeks when she realized what she'd said. "Oh, Kerrim, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

He tightened the grip on her hand, and slowly shook his head. Then, he pointed to himself, at his throat, and made the same open and shut motions he'd used earlier.

"You will talk again?"

He nodded, then repeated the motion, but holding his hand open longer.

"And you'll sing?"

He nodded, his eyes shining with determination. He would sing again, too. Unlike her, Kerrim wasn't destined to become a cautionary tale. He was a true hero.

He'd be *her* inspiration. If Kerrim could overcome such a horrible event and become the bard he dreamed of being, surely she could face any challenges that stood in her way, whatever world she was on.

She told him all about her home in Sedona, although from his expression, she suspected he thought she was making up a fairy tale to keep him amused.

He passed out again before she'd finished cleaning his chest. She was glad, because then she didn't have to worry about hurting him when she rolled him onto his side so she could clean his back.

She sucked in a hasty breath and held her hand over her mouth while she tried to control her stomach. It looked like someone had used a cheese slicer on him, exposing long strips of angry red flesh.

Her hands shook, but she resolutely finished her job. The sooner she cleaned him off, the sooner Beryl could apply the poultice, and the sooner he could start healing.

Beryl returned with the mixture just as Angie wiped the last section clean. The mage gasped, and almost dropped her bowl. "Heavenly Pair! They did all this in a few candle marks?"

She sank to her knees, staring at what remained of Kerrim's back. "Nestor, my love, how did you endure for five days?"

"Beryl?" Angie reached out a tentative hand and touched the mage's shoulder.

Beryl turned toward her, her eyes gradually focusing on Angie. "Yes?"

"Do you want me to apply the poultice?"

"No. I will care for him. As I could not care for my husband." Beryl knelt beside Kerrim, and began applying the greenish-gray paste. As she finished coating a section of his skin, she laid a clean scrap of linen over it.

While she worked, she murmured softly to the unconscious minstrel. Angie couldn't make out most of the words, but thought she heard the name Nestor more than once. Tears ran unhindered down the mage's cheeks.

Angie picked up the blood-soaked linen she'd used and headed down to the stream. She could use a good walk. And Kerrim would be in good hands, now.

She returned after washing out the linen strips to find Reynart and Beryl arguing with each other.

"You're not getting near him," Beryl insisted, standing over Kerrim's body like a guard dog.

"If I wanted to kill him, I could have done it long before now and saved myself much trouble."

"I heard you earlier, saying you didn't think he'd survive."

"And he still might die. That doesn't mean I won't try to prevent it." Reynart's eyes narrowed. "Although you're the one who was concerned about our progress being slowed by an invalid. Did you really mix a healing poultice?"

Bright spots of color flamed on Beryl's cheeks. "I would not poison the boy! Unlike you."

Angie hurried over to them before they could come to blows. "Stop it, right now! What's going on here?"

Beryl glared at Reynart. "He wants to poison Kerrim."

"No," Reynart corrected her. "I want to apply a watered-down version of a poison that will paralyze his throat and allow him time to heal."

"He's no longer trying to talk. He'll heal on his own," Beryl insisted.

"No, he won't. As the damage heals, the new skin will itch. He will cough or clear his throat, both natural responses he can't control. That will be enough to tear open the healing skin, making it bleed again. As he continues healing then reopening the injury it will form a scar. He may talk again, but he will never sing."

"Are you sure?" Angie asked.

Reynart met her gaze, his green eyes dark and bleak. "I have seen it happen before."

"Then do it."

"But he's going to poison—" Beryl began.

"I said, he'll do it," Angie snapped. "Kerrim is my friend, not your husband. And he's getting his chance to be a bard. Now move out of the way, before I borrow one of Reynart's daggers and move you out of the way myself."

Beryl's eyes widened, but she stepped aside. Reynart knelt next to Kerrim's linen-swathed body, and gently opened the minstrel's mouth.

Reynart looked up at Angie. "You don't have to watch this."

"He's my friend. I owe it to him to be here for him, even if he doesn't know it." She sat down and clasped Kerrim's limp hand. Glancing over at Beryl, who stood white-faced beside the tent, she asked, "Do you want to stay?"

"I..." Beryl swallowed and shook her head. "No."

The mage ducked into her tent. A moment later, she began chanting softly.

Angie looked at Reynart. "Go for it."

He frowned. "Go—?"

"I mean, I'm ready for you to start."

He picked up a small lantern and adjusted it so that light shone through the curved glass on one side, focusing into a narrow beam.

"Hold this, and aim the light inside his throat," he instructed.

She did as he asked, pleased that the beam didn't tremble much at all.

Reynart picked up a bowl that had been sitting beside Kerrim, and withdrew a thin metal rod whose end was wrapped with linen. A narrow swath of linen hung down from the wrapping. It looked like a medieval version of a Q-Tip swab that was starting to come undone.

Liquid dripped from the end when Reynart lifted it out of the bowl. Intent on his work, he carefully applied the poison exactly where he wanted on Kerrim's throat. When he removed the swab, blood soaked the end. He rinsed it in the bowl, and then applied more poison.

Angie lost count of how many times his steady hands guided the poison to the exact spot of injury, careful never to brush the inside of his mouth or any other part of his throat. Finally, he sat back and set aside the bowl.

Looking at the limp minstrel, he said, "I have done all I can. Now it is up to the handmaidens of Lady Death to decide how much you will suffer. But it will not be at my hand."

He stood and stretched, his voice almost normal as he told Angie, "I'm going to move him into the tent, and wrap him in a blanket instead of my cloak."

She nodded. "You'll need to rinse out your cloak before the bloodstains set."

"Later."

Stepping aside to let him carry Kerrim into the tent, Angie glanced up at the darkening sky. Someone should probably do something about dinner. And since she seemed to be the only one to think of it, that someone was her.

Her stomach turned, reminding her of the horrors she'd seen. She didn't feel like eating. But letting herself become too weak to ride wouldn't help Kerrim. She could probably force herself to eat something, as long as it wasn't meat.

Delving into their stores, she withdrew some apples and some hard, thin loaves of bread. The horses' biscuits looked more appetizing than the bread, but Kerrim had assured her the bread was nutritious and stayed edible indefinitely.

She sighed, looking forward to the day when she'd hear his voice again. She wouldn't allow herself to doubt his recovery.

Poking her head into the tent she shared with Beryl, she saw the mage curled up on her blanket, face to the wall. She left Beryl an apple and a loaf of bread, and went to give Reynart his share of the meal.

She poked her head into the tent he shared with Kerrim, to find Kerrim laid out on a thick blanket in the center of the tent. Looking closer, she saw that Reynart had piled both blankets on top of each other. But where was he? And where did he intend to sleep tonight?

She looked out at the campsite. Reynart's cloak was missing. He'd gone to the river.

Throwing her own cloak around her shoulders, she headed after him. She might not be able to do much in the way of first aid, but she could make sure everyone ate.

Once away from the campfire, she realized how dark it had become. But she could still see the trail carved by the horses' hooves, and the stream wasn't that great a distance.

When she reached the stream, she thought at first she'd been mistaken about Reynart's destination. She didn't see him anywhere. Deciding to get a drink as long as she was here, she stepped closer to the stream. The water was red with blood.

She recoiled, but quickly recovered. Reynart must be upstream rinsing out the cloak.

She marched along the bank of the stream. As she rounded a gentle curve, she almost tripped over a dark shadow. She bent closer, and saw it was Reynart's neatly stacked armor.

Stepping around the armor, she completed the curve. Reynart stood in the deep center of the stream, bent over a dark garment that he was swishing through the water. He straightened, holding up his dripping surcoat. Then he tossed it over a branch that hung into the stream, where it joined his travel cloak and hose. He was wearing only his undertunic.

Angie gasped. He had a knife in his hand and ready to fly at her head before she called out, "It's Angie."

He stuffed the knife back into the sheath on his wrist. "What do you want?"

He waded ashore and climbed up the rocky bank to join her. Water soaked his cotton undertunic. It clung to his body, reminding her once again of how they had felt ten years ago, when they had trusted each other enough to be lovers.

Hot desire flooded through her. She was alive. They were all alive, but she'd seen how easily that could change. Her blood pulsed, demanding that she celebrate life while she could. She tried to ignore it.

“I thought you might be hungry,” she whispered.

His gaze dipped down to her figure-hugging bodice, and he took a single step forward.

She backed up, holding out the apple and flat bread. “I brought you dinner.”

Chapter Eleven

Reynart took the apple and flat bread from Angie, and gave them a speculative glance. "You've ruined your test of my selflessness. I may have saved Kerrim just so I wouldn't starve on the journey."

"Don't bother protesting now. I won't believe you, not when you nearly lost your own voice trying to distract Kerrim from worrying about losing his."

Reynart turned away and took a juicy bite out of the apple.

Angie watched his silent denial with sudden understanding. "You didn't plan on telling me about that, did you? You didn't realize you were losing your voice until it was too late. So why did you tell me? Why didn't you make something up, or just retreat into another stony silence?"

"I was tired, and not thinking clearly."

She frowned. "But you haven't slept since returning."

"Nor am I likely to."

He finished the apple, and hurled it against the outcropping of rock in the center of the stream. The core burst apart, raining fragments that were swallowed by the current.

His muscles strained with tension, as if the destruction of the apple could not begin to relieve his tightly wrapped emotions. Angie slid a step backward.

Although she tried to be quiet, a twig snapped beneath her boot heel. Reynart spun at the sound, dagger at the ready.

"It's just me," she hastened to reassure him. She held out her hands in peace, even though she still clutched the apple and flat bread that were her own dinner.

He dropped to the ground, leaning his back against the security of a broad tree trunk, and sat, flipping the dagger into the air and catching it. The dark blade rose and fell with eerie precision. He stared past it, sightlessly viewing the stream.

"Reynart?" She edged nearer, ready to bolt if he made a move toward her.

"He didn't do anything." The rhythm of his dagger flipping increased. "Kerrim. He didn't do anything, but he was tortured anyway."

"But we got him free."

"I wonder what reason they gave him." He caught the dagger blade between his fingertips and stared at it. "I don't suppose it matters. It never does."

His voice sounded oddly flat, almost as if he was resigned to the horror, having seen it all before. A nasty suspicion crawled up her back. "Are we still talking about Kerrim?"

Reynart darted her an unreadable look. "Who else?"

"I thought maybe you were talking about yourself." She held her breath, realizing after she'd said it that he might not appreciate her prying into his past. As tightly wound as he was, anything could set him off. She got ready to run.

He slammed the dagger back into its sheath, the violence of the action making her jump. He chuckled, but the sound had a brittle edge to it. "I said he was innocent, so we couldn't be talking about my childhood. I deserved every punishment my father meted out. He was the king. He had to be right."

Drawn by the barely concealed pain in his voice, Angie sank to the ground beside him, letting her dinner tumble into the grass. She reached out, meaning to put a consoling hand on his shoulder, but he flinched away from her touch. A throwing knife slid into his hand.

He stuffed it back into his wrist sheath. "Don't do that."

A chill washed over her. He didn't seem in control of his reactions. She clasped her hands behind her back, making herself as non-threatening as possible. "I won't touch you."

"Good." He went back to contemplating the stream.

Since silence was all he would accept from her, she sat quietly beside him. Moving slowly, she picked up her flat bread and nibbled on it. She shouldn't stay here. He didn't want her company, and with his hair-trigger responses, she'd be safer back at the camp. Besides, Kerrim needed her.

But Kerrim had Beryl to keep him company and watch over him. Reynart had no one. Except her.

Evening drifted slowly into night as they sat beside the stream. Finally, after she'd eaten both her flat bread and her apple, he spoke again.

"I told myself my father's punishments were unjustified, but I don't think I ever really believed that. On some level, I felt certain I deserved what I got; because of what I did, what I failed to do, or just who I was."

Reynart turned to look at her, his eyes as dark as a night sky without stars. "But Kerrim was innocent."

He drew up his legs and wrapped his arms around his knees, hunching over as he stared into the stream again. Softly, he asked, "Do you know why Kerrim was tortured?"

"Because he was kidnapped by small-minded, vindictive sadists."

Reynart shook his head. "Because of a mistake. They blamed him, instead of placing the blame where it belonged. On themselves."

"So you're saying your father punished you for his own failures?"

He didn't seem to hear her. "You were a stranger to my world. You told me that enough times, even though I didn't believe you. There was no way you could recognize the gateway invocation, or know what it meant."

Angie frowned, unable to follow his sudden change of subject. Or his change of heart. He couldn't be trying to tell her that he no longer blamed her for destroying his kingdom.

Too late, she realized where he was headed. "Reynart, you don't think that you —"

"I knew what a gateway invocation felt like. I should have recognized it. And I knew that the royal house was forbidden from using magic." His voice lowered to a whisper. "It is possible for the victim to be undeserving of torment. But only if the torturer is guilty."

He drew his dagger again, and tested the edge with his thumb. The knife parted his skin, calling forth a bright stream of blood to christen its blade. "The guilty must be made to suffer for their crimes."

"No!" Angie pulled the dagger out of his hand, flinging it aside, then twined her fingers with his so that he could draw no more weapons. "You are no more to blame for what happened than I am."

He struggled halfheartedly to pull his hands from her grasp. If he'd used his full strength, he could have easily broken her simple hold. But his attention was focused inward, on a battle against a much more formidable opponent. Himself.

She searched for an argument that might convince him.

"Reynart, listen to me. When I was waiting in the cathedral, the first day I was here, I saw them conduct a service. They had a blue fire that burned above a white altar, without any fuel, and without leaving a mark."

He focused on her face. A chill washed over her, and her tongue froze to the roof of her mouth. His eyes were windows into hell, opening onto an expanse of devastation and desolation.

"The flames of justice," he whispered.

Recalled to her story, she stumbled on. "Well, a long line of people went up to that fire, crying and wailing because they were so evil and deserved to be punished. And you know what? The flames never even flickered. The only time they reacted was when a frightened man reluctantly put his hand in."

A spark of hope lit deep within Reynart's eyes. She leaned forward, desperate to catch that spark and fan it to life.

"They all accepted what they'd done, and were willing to pay for it. That was enough. The man who suffered was the one who refused to admit his guilt." She clenched Reynart's hands, willing him to absorb the lesson. "You had a part in the destruction of Nord D'Rae. But so did I. So did the mage who created this body out of gateway energy, and pulled my spirit into it. But if you accept your part, you can pay for what you did, not with suffering, but with atonement. Restore the gateways. Restore the kingdom. And rule it as a just and merciful king."

Hope kindled in his eyes, then hardened into determination. A subtle change rippled through his posture, as once again every bone and muscle obeyed his

command. She thought he'd pull away from her, but he continued to hold her hands, turning them over as if to search her palms for answers.

"Why? After all I've done to you, why did you risk yourself to save me?"

She considered. She'd acted without thinking, disarming him and preventing him from hurting himself because someone had to do it, and she was there. But there was more to it than that. "There is still a good man inside you, beneath the hired killer you've become. He's the one I saved."

He nodded, accepting her incomplete answer. He valued his own privacy enough that she knew he'd respect her silence. Changing the subject as smoothly as if he'd been the one who wanted to avoid the topic, he said, "I hope you didn't throw my dagger too far. I wouldn't want to lose it."

"Gift from an old girlfriend?" she teased.

He chuckled, a rich sound lacking any of the bitter edge he'd shown earlier. "A gift from a forty-year-old army veteran who was my first weapons master, to congratulate me on my success in the field. They were delivered during your last visit."

Angie leaned forward, eager for any scrap of Reynart's history. "Were you a very promising student?"

"Hardly. He found me fighting with another boy behind the stables. I forget who or why – most of the pages and squires hated me, and picked fights whenever I fell out of my father's favor. The other boy had split my lip, and I'd blackened his eye. Chevall pulled us apart, sent the other boy running, and sat me down for a lesson. We'd shown good judgment, he said, by fighting in private. But it didn't matter, since anyone who saw us afterward would know what had happened. He offered to teach me to fight in a way that would let me hide my involvement." Reynart shrugged. "So I learned to be an assassin."

"Will you teach me to fight?" Angie blurted.

"You want to be an assassin?"

"No. Of course not." Angie's face heated, and she was glad of the shadows that shielded her, however slightly, from his penetrating gaze. "I want to be able to defend myself."

"Tomorrow. Kerrim won't be able to ride far, so we'll have plenty of time while it's still light." He stood, drawing Angie to her feet.

"Should he be riding at all? What if his wounds reopen?"

"We have no choice, if we're going to reach Kingscap before the month is out. We may need to leave him behind yet. But I won't abandon him until I know he'll be safe."

Angie frowned. "Why wouldn't he be safe? Beryl said no one was following you."

"Anything you can use magic to see, you can use magic to hide. It's like this cloak." He reached out with his left hand and pulled his travel cloak from the branch.

"What about it?"

Reynart swept the cloak around so that it covered his right hand. "What did I pick up, besides the cloak?"

She hadn't been paying attention to his other hand. "Your dagger?" she guessed.

He flipped the cloak aside to reveal the flat bread he'd dropped earlier. "Wrong. The mage knew our route, if he used the same tracking magic you and Beryl used. As long as he doesn't follow on the same path, he needs only a simple disguise and Beryl won't see him, because he's not where she's looking."

"You're thinking like an assassin. If the mage is at all like Beryl, that won't even occur to him."

"No. This mage is a devious one. He'll think of it."

"Why? Because he tried to kidnap me?"

"That would have been good strategy, if it had worked. No, he reminds me of someone." His forehead furrowed in thought, then he snorted in disgust. "I'm too tired to recall the exact details. But it was not a good memory."

Angie's stomach clenched. After Reynart's dispassionate description of being tortured by his father, she didn't want to know what horrific things he'd consider a bad memory. While he gathered up the rest of his still-damp clothing, she scoured the area for his dagger. It was buried halfway into the ground.

"I found your dagger," she called, standing over it.

When Reynart finished dressing, he walked over and pulled the blade free. "It will be hard for you to fight, if you refuse to touch a weapon."

"I'm not afraid of touching a dagger." His willingness to believe she was a shrinking violet stung. She snapped, "You, on the other hand, are both dangerous and possessive. I know better than to touch your weapon without permission."

"Yes, that could be dangerous. But not necessarily unpleasant." A fleeting smile brushed his lips. Then he wiped the blade clean on the edge of his cloak and sheathed the dagger. "I will set a knife aside for you."

****Angie didn't sleep well. Every time she drifted off, Kerrim would wake in a panic. The bangs and crashes jerked her awake, her heart pounding and adrenaline pumping. She could hear Reynart's soft, steady voice from the other tent, calming Kerrim, and wished someone would calm her. Beryl, finding yet another way to be annoying, slept through it all.

Shortly after dawn, Kerrim woke Angie for the last time. Seeing that Beryl was already up, Angie crawled out from under her blanket, dressed, and staggered to the campfire. Reynart was brewing this world's version of coffee, a drink that tasted like bitter chocolate, but that packed the kick of a double espresso.

"Pour me a cup, too, would you?" Angie rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Or just give me the pot. I'll drink it all."

Reynart stepped away from the fire to get another one of the stackable tin traveling cups, and Angie saw Kerrim had been sitting behind him.

Blood spotted the bandages wrapped around his chest and arms. His struggles during the night had reopened some of his wounds.

He did not acknowledge Angie at all, keeping his gaze fixed on Reynart while the prince opened a pack, removed a cup, and returned to the fire.

She smiled, even though he wasn't looking at her, and said, "Good morning, Kerrim."

Kerrim tugged on the corner of Reynart's travel cloak. When Reynart glanced back at him, he nodded.

"He says good morning to you, too, and he's feeling much better, thank you."

Kerrim nodded again, pleased with the translation. He even flashed a brief grin.

Reynart tested the heat of the brew on the back of his wrist before filling three cups. He gulped his down in a single long swallow, then turned to help Kerrim.

"Drink it the same way you drank the water. Pour a little into your mouth, then tilt your head back."

Angie picked up her own cup and turned to look for Beryl, giving Kerrim his privacy. She hadn't considered before what effect a paralyzed throat would have besides rendering him mute. She swallowed, then swallowed again, trying to pay attention to which muscles she moved.

Fortunately, Reynart had known exactly what he was doing when he applied the poison to Kerrim's throat, since Kerrim seemed to have a slight swallowing reflex. If Reynart had paralyzed Kerrim's entire throat, any liquid Kerrim tried to drink could end up in his lungs as easily as in his stomach. And, unable to cough, he wouldn't be able to clear them. He'd catch pneumonia if he didn't just drown.

She darted a surreptitious glance at Kerrim. He looked like a duck, tilting his head back and thrusting his chin upward two or three times in rapid succession to encourage the liquid to flow down his throat. But he didn't appear to be choking.

Reynart had already turned his attention back to a second pot heating over the fire. When he stirred it, Angie saw that it contained a runny gruel.

"But we didn't bring any of that in the supplies," she protested.

Reynart hissed at her to be quiet, but Kerrim had already heard her comment. He tugged at Reynart's cloak again, his face eloquently asking the question his voice could not.

"I warned you that it wouldn't taste very good. But it's not because my cooking skills don't equal yours. It's because the gruel started this trip as a horse biscuit."

Kerrim lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes, a horse biscuit. You can't eat much, but if one of these can feed a horse, it can certainly feed a small minstrel."

Kerrim's youthful face took on a seriousness beyond his years, his expression firming with determination. Angie didn't need a translation. He was a minstrel. He was going to sing again.

Munching on an apple, she quickly struck the tents, rolling them up. Beryl brought the horses over, and they loaded supplies while Reynart readjusted Kerrim's bandages and helped him into a tunic.

When they were ready to go, Reynart lifted Kerrim into the saddle of his red and white mare, and strapped his legs in place. Reynart looked up at Kerrim and smiled.

"Don't worry, your legs won't end up like Anjeli's. This is a military saddle. It's designed to carry people who've been wounded."

Reynart stopped Beryl before she could mount her mare. "You should ride Kerrim's horse, and let Anjeli ride yours."

"Why?" Beryl asked, clinging to her mare's mane.

"Because he has to ride my horse," Anjeli answered. "The black's no good as a leader."

"Why can't you ride the black, then?"

"He has the roughest gait," Reynart said. "And unlike Anjeli, you don't suffer from the leg cramps. We'll be riding these horses for the next few days, and she'd never last that long on him."

Beryl shoved her mare's reins into Angie's hand, then swung up onto the black gelding.

"You should have thought of that when you bought the Pair-forsaken beast, and gotten one with a decent gait instead. And some brains," she added as the black turned his head around to lip at her boot. She pulled on the reins, and he reluctantly straightened out. A moment later, he turned to the other side and tasted that boot.

Angie chuckled as she mounted Beryl's mare. After checking one last time to make sure the cook fire was smothered, Reynart swung up onto the bay gelding and led the party away from their camp. Kerrim winced as his mare began moving, following Reynart, but didn't try to stop. The black settled into his accustomed place behind the mare, leaving Angie to bring up the rear.

Kerrim passed out before they'd ridden an hour, but his mare continued to trot and canter without his guidance, following Reynart's lead on the bay. Angie's caffeine-inspired alertness faded, and she focused merely on following the black gelding in front of her.

Their hasty lunch, eaten on horseback, wasn't sufficient to restore her, and she lost herself in daydreams of a soft pillow and a warm blanket. She was dimly aware of skirting the foothills, and of distant sheep dotting the hillsides, but didn't pay much attention to her surroundings until Reynart halted them in a secluded valley.

"We'll camp here," he announced.

Beryl frowned. "But it's still early afternoon."

"The horses need rest and so do we. This valley is defensible, and it has enough grass for the horses to graze. The creek's not much, but we can water the horses and refill our water skins."

"We need to press on toward Kingscap."

"We'll never reach the gateway in time if the horses drop dead of exhaustion."

Beryl grunted, but dismounted. Anticipating a welcome nap, Angie slid off her mare and began setting up the camp. Reynart swung down off the bay, undid the straps holding Kerrim to his saddle, and lifted the minstrel off the mare. He helped Kerrim sit on a secluded patch of ground, away from the bustling chaos.

If Kerrim was able to sit up, he couldn't have been truly unconscious. Angie felt much better about his prognosis. He must have been just sort of drifting in and out. She grimaced. A lot like her, except he had real cause. She was just tired and cranky.

While Beryl saw to the horses' needs and Reynart ministered to Kerrim, Angie set up the two tents. It took her longer than usual, because her mind kept wandering. She pounded the ground as often as she pounded the stakes she was aiming for.

But at last, they were set up. She could crawl inside and take a nap.

Smiling, she picked up a bedroll. Reynart stopped her.

"It's time to begin your fighting lessons."

"Now? But I got hardly any sleep last night."

"Do you think your attackers will wait for you to be rested and at your best?" he asked, sarcasm lacing his tone.

"I guess not."

"You can be sure of it. They will come in the night, waking you from a sound sleep, or pursue you for days, hounding you into a state of sleepwalking before they catch you. You must be able to defend yourself by reflex, without any thought."

Something rustled in a nearby tree. Reynart whirled, speeding a knife through the air, and a dead crow tumbled to the ground. One wing was sheared most of the way off.

"Reflex," he repeated.

Angie swallowed. "What if the noise had been made by one of us?"

"You and Beryl were in front of me, and Kerrim was to my right. The sound came from behind me."

She nodded, although his answer didn't reassure her. He hadn't gotten any more rest than she had last night, and he'd admitted to suffering from lack of sleep prior to that. Reflexes might be all he had left, and she didn't trust the sort of reflexes he'd acquired growing up in Nord D'Rae's paranoid society.

She focused her attention on Reynart. The adrenaline spurt caused by his knife throwing helped make her alert. "So, are you going to teach me to throw a knife like that?"

"No. It requires too much practice before you can hit anything. You need skills you can use right away." He reached up his sleeves and removed both wrist sheaths, then unbuckled his dagger belt. Tossing the weapons aside, he advanced on her unarmed. She instinctively backed away.

"Your best chance of surviving an attack is simple," he told her. "Don't be where the weapon is. Run if you can. Dodge if you can't."

His right hand streaked out, aiming an open blow at the side of her head. She turned her head aside, raising her arms to ward off his attack, and his left hand caught her in the stomach. When she doubled over, he hooked a foot around her ankles and swept her legs out from under her. She hit the ground, hard.

Shaking his head, he reached down and helped her to her feet. "That was too easy. Remember, your first goal is to get away from a fight. Dodging to the side kept you in reach of my follow-up attack. You should dodge backwards, or try to go around your attacker. Anything to get out of reach."

He aimed another blow at her head. This time, she stepped backward. He followed her, again going for her stomach with his left hand. She moved to the right, then backed up as he struck out with his right hand again.

"That's it," he encouraged.

He changed the rhythm of his strikes, aiming for her head, chest, arms, stomach, even legs – whatever was closest. She narrowly avoided some of the blows, feeling the whoosh of air as his hands passed near her. Their bizarre dance led them halfway across the valley before Angie stumbled on the uneven ground. Reynart struck her shoulder, then her side, and she fell to her knees.

She panted for breath, and slowly climbed to her feet. Her side ached. She was going to have a nasty bruise there tomorrow.

He nodded his approval. "Not bad."

"When do I get to fight back?"

"You've become rather bloodthirsty."

"I just want to see you sprawled out in the dirt."

He laughed, his eyes sparkling. He was actually enjoying knocking her to the ground!

She glared at him. And then she charged.

He stopped laughing and stepped aside at the last second. Grabbing her arm as she passed, he swung her around and into the heel of his other hand.

It felt like he'd hit her in the chest with a brick, and she went down for the count, lying on the ground and struggling to breathe.

"That is a classic example of how not to attack someone," he told her, crouching on his heels beside her. With a light touch, he ran his fingertips over her rib cage.

Fury blinded her, dissolving the world in a red haze. He was checking for broken bones. If he hadn't taken the precaution of disarming himself, his damned reflexes would have killed her.

"You might have warned me," she gasped, "that you weren't pulling your punches."

“I gave you a training blow. If this had been a real fight, I would have crushed your chest. That’s what happened to the last man who charged me the way you did.”

Angie closed her eyes and groaned. “Running away is sounding like a better and better option.”

Chapter Twelve

Reynart helped Angie to her feet. She drew a deep breath, wincing at the flare of pain in her chest.

"I'm going to be one solid black and blue mark," she complained.

"Pain makes a memorable teacher. If you encounter one of the men who tried to kidnap you, will you charge to attack him?"

Angie placed the palm of her hand over her chest. Heat radiated from the bruised flesh, and it was already starting to swell.

"Not on your life. I'd run away."

"Good." Reynart flashed her a smile. "But if they outnumber you or take you by surprise, you may be forced to fight."

He glanced around the area they'd turned into a practice field. Spotting what he wanted, he picked up a branch lying on the ground. Keeping a foot-long section, he snapped off the rest. Then he stripped the smaller twigs away, until he had a stick roughly the size of a dagger.

He held up the training weapon. "Pretend that this is a dagger. There are three basic ways to hold it."

A slow series of claps interrupted him. They turned toward the noise. Kerrim stopped clapping, pointed at them, then pointed at his ear.

"You want to hear this, too?" Reynart asked.

Kerrim nodded. He was recovering from his wounds quickly, and Angie suspected Beryl was funneling some magical assistance to him, even if she couldn't heal him outright.

Reynart's expression turned distant. "I would expect the mage realized I lied about the prisoner exchange when Beryl disappeared from his dungeon. But if he didn't, he might think you'd make a valuable hostage. All right. I'll show both of you how to fight, but you're not to practice. Agreed?"

Kerrim nodded.

"What lie did you tell the mage?" Angie asked. She hadn't considered it before, but her plan hadn't included the reason Reynart was supposedly willing to trade her for Kerrim.

Reynart shrugged. "I implied that Kerrim and I were lovers."

Kerrim's eyes widened, echoing Angie's shocked, "And he believed it?"

Reynart chuckled. "Which do you find more unbelievable, that I could want a man, or that I'd be capable of love?"

"Both," she admitted.

"He seemed amused by the idea, but accepted the explanation—" Reynart stopped in mid-sentence. Then his expression darkened, and his fists clenched. "Gervaise."

"The court mage? But he's dead." Angie's skin crawled, remembering how easily he'd used his magic to paralyze her and render her mute, then taken her up to his tower room where he and Alaric planned to rape her to get access to her power. That couldn't be the mage who'd tried to kidnap her. He couldn't still be alive and after the gateway energy she represented.

"That's what I thought. But the mage who kidnapped Kerrim knew that you'd been the cause of my final argument with Alaric. The popular story is that my father was planning to name Alaric the sole heir to the throne on his birthday, and that I killed him so that I'd be named heir. The storm was supposed to cover up the evidence of what I'd done."

"But Gervaise would be in his sixties by now. This mage looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties."

"Gervaise might have taken an apprentice." Reynart frowned. "With my brother dead, Gervaise had no influence at court, and no reason to remain. He could have fled, rather than staying behind to try and stop the magical storm."

Angie shivered. "If that slimy creature trained this mage, then I doubly don't want to be captured by him. Show me the right way to use the dagger."

Reynart nodded, and held up his stick for both her and Kerrim to see. "There are three basic ways to hold a dagger. The first is used if you are plunging the blade into your victim's heart. Most novices hold it like this, as well as anyone performing a sacrifice."

He adjusted his grip on the stick so that the dagger "blade" protruded beneath his clenched fist.

"That's an animal sacrifice, right?" Angie clarified.

"Usually. Now, why would you choose this grip?"

She touched her swollen bruise, and imagined a dagger plunging into her chest. "You can get more power behind the blow, in case you hit a rib?"

"Very good." He flipped the stick, so now the "blade" pointed up and slightly outward. His fingers curled around the "hilt" of the stick at an angle, no longer making a fist. "This is the grip of a knife fighter. It's more maneuverable, enabling thrusts, slashes, and blocks."

He demonstrated, whipping the ersatz dagger through a blurring array of figure eights, thrusts, sideswipes, and parries.

Angie could barely follow his motions. There was no way she could repeat them. "Could you do it again, but slower?"

"You won't be fighting this way. I just want you to see it, so you can recognize it." He met her gaze, then Kerrim's, in turn. "You won't last long in a match against a good knife fighter. I don't want either of you to try."

"So how are we supposed to fight, then?"

Reynart flipped the stick over, so that his fingers curled around the "hilt" and the "blade" rested against the underside of his forearm. If he hadn't held up his arm for them to see it, she wouldn't have been able to tell he was holding anything. "The assassin's grip. An opponent can knock a knife out of a knife fighter's hand, or imbed the point in cloth or wood. Not an assassin's grip. Any blow only tucks the blade tighter to your arm, and the point is hidden, protected from catching in anything."

He dropped his arm down to a casual position. "The assassin's grip is used only for slashing attacks. Aim for the throat, if possible, otherwise go for the shoulder, or thigh. If your enemy is not armored, you can also aim for the chest. If your first attack succeeds, you can use the point of the dagger on the return to finish off your opponent. But you must be certain he won't be able to retaliate."

He whipped his forearm up and across his body, as if he was punching an invisible opponent in the jaw, then flexed his wrist slightly, shifting the dagger into the first position he'd shown them, and snapped his arm down and out. The blade would have pierced the heart of his opponent, finishing him off if he'd somehow survived having his throat slashed open.

"Any questions?"

Angie cleared her throat, trying to get rid of the lump blocking it. "What if your hand is tied, or broken, or something?"

"Use your other hand." Reynart flipped the stick into his left hand and repeated the same series of motions. "If both hands are bound, use your whole body to move the dagger into position. Or use whatever you can. Remember, your goal is to get away. If you've been captured, you will most likely have to kill the person who captured you in order to escape. But don't focus on killing him. Focus on escaping."

He presented the stick to Angie. "Try it."

She took the stick from his hand as gingerly as if it was a real dagger covered in the blood of his imaginary opponent.

"I thought you weren't afraid to touch a dagger," he taunted.

Gritting her teeth, she folded her fingers around the stick's "hilt" and tucked the "blade" against her arm. "I'm not."

"Good. Are you afraid to use it?"

"No."

"Then attack me. And this time, do it right."

He stood before her, arms hanging relaxed at his sides. Then he grinned, as if he knew she posed no threat to him.

She lashed out with her stick dagger, reaching up and across for his throat the way he'd showed her. He caught her fist with one hand, and forced her arm down. "Too slow. Again."

He beat back her second attack as well. "Still too slow."

He caught her third and fourth attacks without comment. When her fifth attempt failed as well, he admonished her, "You're not trying."

"Yes, I *am*." She struck out at him on the last word, putting all of her strength behind the blow.

Her fist smacked into his palm hard enough to make her fingers tingle, but once again he'd stopped the attack before it came close to him. "No," he answered, tightening his hold on her hand with each word. "You are *not*."

The stick fell from her numb fingers.

Reynart bent and retrieved it. "Your enemy is not out here," he said, gesturing with the stick. He rapped her sharply in the center of her chest, right on her bruise, and she hissed at the sudden pain. "It's in there. You can't worry about hurting me. That's why I gave you a stick to practice with, not a real dagger. If you need to fight, you'll be fighting for your life. Anything goes. No holds will be barred, no attacks disallowed as unsporting. And if you fail, no rematch."

He handed her the stick. "Now, try it again."

She gripped the stick. He was her enemy. She wasn't concerned about hurting him. It was him or her. Her fist flashed out, arcing the stick dagger towards his throat.

He stepped back, out of her range. "That's more like it. Speed, not strength, is your best asset."

He nodded, and she struck again. Once more, he had to step back to avoid her blow.

A third time, she attacked and drove him back.

"Very good. But have you succeeded in your goal?"

Well, no, she hadn't actually connected with him. But she'd forced him to step back rather than be hit by the stick.

She started to say yes, then caught sight of Kerrim shaking his head. "No. My goal is to get away. And if you're not hurt, you can catch me if I turn to run."

Reynart glanced at Kerrim, then back at Angie. "I think you had help with that answer. But you're correct. This is not working to get you free. So what would you do?"

"Don't stop after the first attack?" she guessed.

"Try it."

Once again, she lashed out, forcing him back. She took a step to close with him, and aimed her stick dagger at his shoulder. He spun away, and she slashed at his chest. Again, he stepped back, out of her range.

"Come on, Anjeli. You can do it. Make contact. Hit me with the stick."

She slashed at his throat, his chest, his arm, and his throat again, but he always remained just out of reach. In desperation, she grabbed his arm with her left hand as she slashed at his throat. When he stepped back, he pulled her with him, and she slammed the stick against his chest.

The tip splintered against his armor.

He nodded. "Good. Except for one thing. My heart is here." He pointed to the left of the bits of wood clinging to his surcoat. "Your blow would have wedged your dagger in my armor. The point would have hit a rib, too shallow to puncture the lungs. You'd lose your weapon, and you still wouldn't get free."

She stamped her foot in frustration. "Have you forgotten, I'm just learning this?"

"No. That's why I'm going easy on you."

"Easy?" She stared at him in disbelief.

He nodded. Unhooking the clasp pinning his travel cloak over his shoulders, he used the hidden blade to trim the splinters off her stick. Then he returned her weapon, and pinned his back in place.

"I thought you tossed all of your weapons aside while we trained," she said.

"I got rid of the ones that could easily come loose and cause injury. I never disarm myself completely. Ready to try again?"

"You're going easy on me?"

"Yes."

"Anyone I have to fight won't be holding back. How will I get the skills I need unless I practice against someone who fights no holds barred, anything goes?"

His eyes narrowed. "You think you're ready to try real fight conditions?"

She ignored Kerrim, who was frantically shaking his head. "I'll never know unless I try."

"All right. Ground rules. I have just captured you. If you can disable me and reach the creek," he nodded at the trickle of water twenty yards away, "I'll consider that you've escaped. If I take your weapon, or if you would have been injured in the fight, I'll consider your escape attempt failed. If the fight lasts for longer than an eighth candle mark, help would have arrived, and you'll fail. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Angie gripped the "hilt" of her stick with sweaty fingers. Suddenly, this didn't seem like a very good idea any more.

"Oh, and one more thing." Reynart grabbed another stick from the ground. "Your opponent is also armed."

He stepped forward, and pinned her arms to her sides in a loose, one-armed hold. "Whenever you're ready," he whispered.

Muscles corded the arm holding her, pulling her back against his rigid strength. She had no hope of overpowering him. For a moment, she despaired of even trying.

As if he sensed her hesitation, he spoke softly into her ear. "Remember what will happen if you don't get away. Think of what they did to Kerrim in only a few candle marks. First, they'll beat you. Then they'll rape you. They'll flay your skin off. They'll use hot irons to burn what's left. Then they'll get creative."

Angie listened to his litany of tortures in trembling horror. Gradually, a single coherent thought formed in her brain. She could not let them capture her. She had to get away.

She kicked backward. Reynart stumbled, loosening his grasp, and she bolted for the creek. In two steps, he'd caught up to her. Grabbing her cloak, he yanked her backwards.

She fell to the ground. When Reynart stepped around to catch her hands, she kicked his feet out from under him. He hit the ground beside her.

His weapon flashed upward. Her mind whispered that it was only a stick, but her terror-filled heart saw twelve inches of gleaming steel aimed at her chest.

She rolled away, and scrambled to her feet. He bounded beside her, once again aiming for her heart.

She dodged backward, then slashed up at his throat when he closed for another attack. This time, he hopped back.

The creek was too far away. She followed up on her attack, fear and desperation lending her strength. He dodged most of her blows, but the tip of her weapon scratched a glancing blow along his cheek. A dull red welt marred his pale skin.

He pressed his attack, shifting from the knife-fighting grip he'd used earlier to the more secure assassin's grip. She dodged backward, scrambling to avoid his flurry of blows. Ducking beneath the last, she came up under his guard and slashed at his thigh.

Cursing, he jumped out of the way. An elbow strike to her temple knocked her to the ground again. He followed her down, pinning his left forearm across her throat.

She couldn't hear anything over the ringing in her ears, and the world was starting to fog into darkness. Looking up, she met his eyes. He showed no sign of recognition.

Flinging her useless weapon away she gasped, "I give up! You win!"

For a terrifying moment, she thought he hadn't heard her. But she didn't dare struggle. Then the pressure across her throat eased.

Reynart blinked. "Anjeli?"

He sounded so lost. She swallowed, and whispered, "Yes."

He held himself perfectly still, only a subtle tightening around his eyes betraying his emotion. "Are you hurt?"

"I'll live." She licked her lips and swallowed again. "Reynart, when was the last time you had any real sleep?"

"I slept last night."

"I barely got any sleep last night, and every time I was awake, I heard you talking to Kerrim. If you slept at all, it wasn't for longer than half a candle mark at a time."

"Then, two days ago. Or maybe three. I forget. Before they kidnapped Kerrim."

She stared at him. "Were you going to mention this? No. Of course you weren't."

"It doesn't matter."

"You almost killed me!"

He pulled away from her. "It was your idea."

"Yeah, but I didn't know you were suffering from sleep deprivation and wouldn't be able to tell who I was."

"What would you have me do?" he sighed.

"Get some sleep. Now. Tonight, let Beryl stay with Kerrim. She's the only one who got any sleep last night. She can stay up tonight."

"If Beryl takes my bed, to watch Kerrim, where shall I sleep?"

Angie's cheeks burned. She hadn't thought that far ahead. "You'll sleep in her spot, in my tent."

"You are not concerned that I shall attack you in your sleep?" He tried for but missed his usual mocking tone. He'd never admit it, but she'd bet he'd scared himself almost as badly as he'd scared her.

She shook her head, and gave him the honest answer. "I'm more concerned about what you might do if you don't sleep."

She sat up, and noticed Kerrim watching them, his eyes wide with fear. "It's all right, Kerrim," she called. "We were just practicing."

He smiled and relaxed.

"You're not telling him the truth?" Reynart asked.

"He's got enough to worry about. Besides what I told him was true, as far as it went. We were just practicing, until you decided to take it seriously."

He touched the welt on his cheek. "Your reflexes are excellent."

"But I didn't get free."

"If you'd been fighting anyone other than me, you would have."

* * * * *

After dinner, a dried meat and hard potato concoction that tasted mostly of salt for Reynart, Beryl and Angie, and more horse biscuit gruel for Kerrim, Kerrim went to bed. Reynart nodded to Angie.

"I'll get my things out of the tent now, so I don't disturb him later."

As he walked away from the campfire, Beryl asked, "What did he mean by that?"

"I suggested a change in the sleeping arrangements."

"If this has something to do with the way the two of you were rolling around in that field this afternoon—"

"It's not what you think. He was teaching me how to defend myself with a dagger."

"That's how his face got scratched?"

"Yes."

"I'm impressed."

"Don't be. I still lost. But when he was fighting, he didn't recognize me. I surrendered, so he didn't hurt me, but he scared me half to death. When I asked, he admitted he hasn't slept since before Kerrim was kidnapped."

"So how will changing tents help?"

"You're the only one who got any sleep last night. Kerrim kept waking up, knocking things over and making all sorts of noise. If you stay in his tent tonight and watch him, maybe Reynart and I can get some sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Yes, sleep." Angie snorted in frustration. Beryl was determined to see a relationship that wasn't there. Maybe she thought part of her job included being a chaperone, but it was annoying. "Look, if you've got a problem with that, I'll stay with Kerrim. You sleep with Reynart. And if he wakes up in the middle of the night with a knife in his hand and doesn't recognize you, remember, it was your choice."

Beryl paled. "Of course, I'll keep watch over Kerrim. You're overreacting."

"Well, if I am, it's because I'm tired! I got hardly any sleep last night."

"You said that already."

"You'd better get whatever you need out of our tent."

Angie scrubbed the dishes, while Beryl went to move her things into Kerrim's tent. She almost wished Beryl had taken her up on her offer. Angie would have watched Kerrim, and let Beryl watch Reynart.

The other two returned to the camp fire, and the three of them discussed how far they were likely to be able to ride tomorrow, whether or not they were still on schedule, and what lay between them and Kingscap. Angie crawled off to bed while Reynart and Beryl were arguing over which road they should use to go up the mountain.

In the darkness of the tent, she changed into her sleep shift and slid beneath her blanket. If her luck held, when Reynart came in, he'd think she was already asleep.

She shook her head. For nearly a week, she'd fallen asleep imagining him kissing and caressing her, or dreamed of him making love to her. Now he was actually going to be sharing her tent, and she didn't want to so much as talk to him.

It wasn't her fault. He was tired and on edge, his reflexes primed to attack first and ask questions later. She was safer if he thought she was asleep and no threat to him.

Although after he got some sleep, what then? When they woke in the morning who would she be sharing her tent with, the new, hard-edged Reynart, or the gentle, loving

Reynart she remembered? In that moment before sleep completely vanished, would he be vulnerable to his true feelings? Would he look at her with love in his eyes?

Her pulse sped, imagining his lips closing softly but firmly over hers as his arms wrapped possessively around her. Her breathing turned ragged, her body heating in anticipation of his touch.

She groaned, and buried her face in her arms. She'd never fool him into thinking she was asleep if her entire body was quivering in anticipation of his touch. Forcing herself to breathe deeply, she retreated into her mental studio and catalogued her jars of pigment, sorting them by color until her heartbeat and breathing slowed.

Reynart entered the tent a short time later. She could hear him moving around in the cramped space as he undressed. She recalled the first night she'd spent in this world, watching him get ready for bed, and thought of all the threats he'd made. He'd changed his mind about her, but would he remember that, in the blurry realm between sleep and wakefulness?

He lay down and pulled the blanket over himself. "Good night, Anjeli."

"How'd you know I was awake?"

"You were holding your breath."

"Good night, Reynart. Pleasant dreams."

He seemed to take her suggestion, because his breathing slowed and deepened. Listening to the steady rhythm, Angie slid into sleep.

She woke in darkness, tangled in her blanket, with her heart beating an urgent tattoo against her sore ribs. She held her breath, trying to figure out what had awakened her.

On the other side of the tent, Reynart tossed in his sleep. He restlessly flung his blanket on top of her, then turned again. He rolled once more, and made a soft sound deep in his throat.

Angie shook off the second blanket. She'd thought Kerrim had thrashed in his sleep, knocking things over and waking her and Reynart. But perhaps Reynart's thrashing had woken Kerrim. Lacking a voice to call to him, maybe Kerrim had crashed things together to wake Reynart from his nightmares.

Angie crawled across the tent to Reynart's side.

"Reynart," she hissed. "Wake up. You're having a nightmare."

He mumbled in his sleep, twisting away from her.

"Reynart. Wake up."

She didn't want to shake him, or do anything he might perceive as a threat. But without knowing what he was dreaming of, she wasn't sure what else to do.

He threw up an arm to protect his face, his body spasming in response to his dream. He mumbled again, then cried out. It sounded like the soft whimper of an injured animal. But considering that the words he spoke in his dream were barely audible, he was probably screaming.

“Reynart. Wake up, Reynart. Please.”

She took a deep breath, reached out, and touched his shoulder. He flinched, twisting away from her at the same time as he kicked out. She sprawled on the canvas floor of the tent beside him.

His thrashing grew more violent. His arm caught her a glancing blow in the side, where he'd bruised her earlier. She moaned.

The sound seemed to reach his dream where her earlier pleas had not. He turned toward her, one arm outstretched, before he jerked, and curled into a ball.

“Yes, sire... I will, sire... No, si—” His last word ended in a howl as he writhed in pain, no longer lifting his arms to defend himself, just twitching as each remembered blow fell.

Now that she knew what he was dreaming, Angie could help him.

She wrapped her arms around him and held on. “He's gone, now. He won't hit you anymore.”

Reynart whimpered and turned toward her. “It hurts, Dri.”

Dri? Did he mean Ladria? Had he gone to his sister for comfort after his beating? At least he'd had someone who cared about him, even if it was just another powerless child.

“It's over.” She stroked his hair, and he burrowed closer.

Dampness soaked through the front of her chemise, and she realized he was crying. How young had he been, that he could still cry?

He clung to her, his voice cracking as he said, “I didn't do anything, Dri. I swear I didn't!”

“I know you didn't. It wasn't your fault. It never was.” She stroked his hair and rocked him, repeating the words like a mantra. “It wasn't your fault.”

She felt the change in his body as his dream shifted, his muscles tensing and his spine going rigid. What horrors did he face now?

He buried his face between her breasts, and whispered brokenly, “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I failed you.”

Angie froze. She knew those words. She knew that tone. He was dreaming of their time together, just after they'd escaped from the destruction of Nord D'Rae.

Automatically, she stroked his hair, back and shoulders, the way she'd done all the times she'd relived this moment. “You didn't fail me.”

He shuddered, drawing in a deep, gasping breath. “You are trapped in this world you loathe.”

Sharp pain ripped through Angie's chest, but she forced herself to continue the remembered conversation. Leaning over him, she kissed his temple, and whispered, “But I'll be with you.”

An agonized cry broke from him. “How can you forgive me?”

"Because I love you." Her arms tightened around him and she departed from the script. "I will always love you."

He lifted his head, and found her lips with his. Angie shivered at the torrent of raw passion, drowning beneath his fervor. He drew back only long enough to breathe, and whisper her name, before kissing her again and pushing her down to the blankets.

His hands trembled as they skimmed over her chemise, stroking and caressing her with the gentlest of touches. She shuddered, closing her eyes and arching into his embrace. Thrusting her fingers into his thick hair, she brushed against the heavy band of his circlet.

"Reynart," she whispered, her voice breaking. "Make love to me."

He groaned, deep in his throat, then pulled her chemise over her head in one swift motion. His undertunic followed a moment later.

That was all the proof she needed to know that on some level, he was completely aware of his surroundings. She was familiar with how lightly he slept, the slightest disturbance enough to pull him from sleep ready to fight. Even taking into consideration that he'd had little or no sleep for three or four days, she couldn't believe he could sleep through this. No, he was refusing to wake on purpose. He wanted, needed, to reach out to her, and his mind had found the only way he'd let himself do that.

His body covered hers, and he pushed himself up onto his arms, looking down at her with his eyes closed. A soft smile gentled his expression.

"I love you, Anjeli," he whispered.

His mouth closed over hers, swallowing her reply. Then he was moving, in perfect synchronization with her, as if they'd never been separated. She clung to his muscled back as he thrust deeply, over and over again, their lips and tongues meeting and retreating in echo of their other movements. She came quickly, arching beneath him with a muffled cry. He thrust twice more, then followed her with his own release.

Slowly, their hearts and breathing returned to normal. He rolled to his side, his breathing growing slower still. Soon, he'd truly be asleep.

"Reynart," she whispered. "We need to put our clothes back on. It's cold and the blankets are thin."

Unerringly, he grabbed his undertunic and her chemise. After dressing himself, he helped her into her chemise, never opening his eyes. Then he tucked her against his body, covering them both with his blanket.

"I will keep you warm, milady."

Closing her eyes, she cuddled against him. It was true, even if only for tonight.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, Reynart woke Angie as he tried to slide his arm from under her neck. She opened her eyes and he froze, holding perfectly still until she turned and looked at him.

“Why are you beneath my blanket?” he demanded.

Her heart shattered. He didn’t remember making love to her. But maybe it was better that way. Their relationship was strained enough already. So she edited that part out of her explanation.

“You woke me in the middle of the night. You were having a bad dream. I tried to wake you, but you just grabbed me and went back to sleep. You wouldn’t let go.”

His gaze locked onto her face, alert for any signs of treachery or attack as he eased away from her. “Then I thank you, but your help is no longer needed.”

She recoiled from his frosty dismissal, flinging off the blankets. A knife blade appeared inches away from her eyes, and she froze, afraid to move, afraid to speak, afraid to let the deadly blade out of her sight.

Their silent stalemate stretched until she knew one of them must snap from the tension. Then Reynart sheathed the knife and pulled away from her. “You shouldn’t move so quickly.”

She trembled.

What if he’d mistaken her for a threat last night? He might have killed her in his sleep. He still could. Unless they went back to their previous sleeping arrangements, but then she’d be putting Kerrim at risk. And she didn’t imagine Reynart would agree to sleep with the horses.

He quickly pulled on his hose and boots. Kneeling in the center of the tent where there was the most room, he laced on his armor, and shrugged into his surcoat. Then he scooped up his travel cloak and slipped through the tent opening.

Angie pulled off her sleep shift, moving slowly to give herself time to think. He’d warned her off, cautioning her not to get too close. But something had changed during the night. Freed of his normal fear and rigid self-control, he had trusted her. And she had comforted him.

His waking mind could deny the truth from now until they reached Kingscap, but he needed her help. And she was the only one that *could* help him.

She picked up her riding chemise, then paused to check on her bruises from yesterday’s weapons training. They were gone.

Disbelieving the evidence of her eyes, she prodded her sternum, searching for any sign of tenderness. Nothing. Then she checked her side. Again, nothing.

Being the embodiment of magical gate energy seemed to have some useful side effects. She frowned. If she understood how she used her magic, maybe she could help heal Kerrim.

She had cured her bruises. She had cured her headache. So why was she unable to do anything about the burning cramps in her leg muscles?

She puzzled the thought over while she finished dressing, and didn't like the answer she came up with. The headache and bruises were things that disrupted her magical body's normal energy patterns. But it had been created with a flaw in the leg muscles, so her innate magic actually worked against healing them. Her body had been constructed by a mage who wanted her unable to run away. What good would her lessons in self-defense be if her own body defeated her? And her peculiar gift could not help Kerrim at all.

She exited the tent. Kerrim was waiting outside, and searched her face anxiously when she appeared. Turning pale, he shrunk in on himself.

Angie forced the grim expression from her face, willing herself to smile for Kerrim's sake. She walked over to him.

"How'd you sleep last night, Kerrim? Better?"

His eyes shadowed, but he nodded. Then he lifted his eyebrows and pointed to her.

After a quick glance around to make certain they were alone, she whispered, "You knew Reynart was the one having nightmares, didn't you?"

Kerrim hesitated.

"Didn't you?"

He nodded, his lower lip trembling.

"It's all right," she reassured him. "I'm not mad at you."

He blinked, but didn't uncurl from his defensive posture.

"Really. I'm glad you let us make that mistake. Now I can help him, if he lets me."

Kerrim leaned forward eagerly.

"No, I'm sorry." She chuckled. "I don't think you can help."

The corners of his mouth turned down and he slumped. Angie recognized the sentiment even without words. But he was wrong. He wasn't useless. She needed to find some way for him to prove that to himself.

"You can't help with Reynart, but you can help with Beryl. Will you continue to share a tent with her, and let her help with your recovery?"

Kerrim tilted his head and looked up at Angie.

"In my world, it's called transference. Her husband was tortured and killed by the same mage who captured you. Letting her take care of you will help her work through her grief at not being able to take care of him." And if it also gave Angie the chance to help Reynart, so much the better.

Kerrim considered her words, then nodded.

* * * * *

Reynart drove them mercilessly, resting only when the horses stumbled. Kerrim managed a full day of riding, fading in and out of consciousness, although he was almost too exhausted to drink his gruel that evening. As soon as he choked it down, he rose, ready to crawl into his tent.

To everyone's surprise, Beryl rose when he did. "I will make sure you have everything you need, in case you wake during the night."

Kerrim glanced at Angie, then nodded to Beryl. The two of them left the campfire together.

Angie started to scrub the dinner dishes, but Reynart stopped her. "I'll do that. You need to practice. We do not know when our enemies may strike again."

"How can I practice fighting if you're doing the dishes?"

He dug a battered black forearm sheath out of his pack. After pulling up her sleeve, he laced the sheath to her arm. "When you tense your muscles, a spring will release the dagger. You need to practice catching it as it's released."

"There's no dagger in the sheath."

"That's the other thing. You need to practice sheathing it." He smiled and held out a plain steel dagger, its cross-wrapped black leather hilt facing toward her.

She took the weapon from his hand. "It's heavier than the one you use."

"Unlike my knives, this is not meant for throwing. And you won't damage the blade if you miss your target or have to block an opponent's knife strike."

Rolling back his sleeve to reveal the similar sheath laced to his forearm, he demonstrated the process. He opened his hand, tensed his forearm muscles, and the dagger appeared in his hand, his fingers around the hilt, ready for use. He relaxed his hand and let the hilt slide up to his fingers, then flicked the dagger back toward the sheath. It slid into place with a soft click.

"I'd suggest using your left hand to sheath it the first time," he cautioned. "You'll have enough to worry about just learning not to slice your sleeve, or your fingers, to ribbons."

She slid the dagger into place, feeling its weight on her arm.

He reached over and positioned her fingers correctly, forming her hand into a cup. With his hand wrapped behind hers, he said, "Now, tense your arm."

Watching carefully, she tensed her arm. Nothing happened.

She looked up. "What did I—?"

"Keep it tense," he told her. Slowly, he folded her fingers up and in, bending her wrist. The dagger shot out and slammed into her fingers.

He guided her through the motions until she could sense when the sheath would trigger. Still cupping her hand in his, he smiled.

"You learn very quickly. Perhaps I am the one who should check you for weapons?"

She opened her mouth to protest, then spotted the glint in his eyes. He was teasing her!

Despite the ever-present threat of pursuit, a warm contentment spread through her. She was getting through to him.

The heat of desire pulsed low in her body, reminding her of how thoroughly he'd gotten to her last night. If they kept making progress like this, one day soon he'd turn to her in passion while he was fully awake and aware. Despite all the reasons to know better, to put this world behind her and return home as quickly as possible, her pulse thundered, her breath turning shallow, as she imagined the two of them making love as they once had. With effort, she forced her mind away from the delicious image, and focused on the here and now.

She grinned. "I think you'll be safe for a while yet. I've still got a lot to learn."

He kept an eye on her while he cleaned the dishes, but his instructions grew less and less frequent. Finally, as he banked the campfire and set about his own chores, he paid no attention to her at all.

She practiced until her fingers felt numb, and she started dropping the dagger. "I can't do any more tonight."

Reynart looked up from the knives he was sharpening. "You were doing well, until your muscles tired."

"But you weren't watching! And how'd you know what my hand felt like?"

"I was listening. When a dagger is drawn and sheathed correctly, it has a certain rhythm to it. And I recognized the way you fumbled the last couple of draws. Remember, I too had to learn."

Angie fingered the leather wrapping her dagger hilt. "How long did it take you?"

"Two months. But I had to practice in secret. You'll learn the basics within a few days, then have the rest of our journey to work on perfecting them. If we're attacked before we reach Kingscap, you'll at least have a chance of defending yourself."

"I'm going to master it," she promised.

"I know you will. Or I wouldn't waste my time teaching you. Now, go to bed and get some sleep."

"What about you?"

"I have things to do."

She nodded and turned away. Some things hadn't changed at all.

Curled beneath her blanket, she'd almost fallen asleep by the time he entered the tent. He undressed and slid beneath his own blanket, on the other side of the tent.

"Reynart?" she whispered.

"What?"

"I... Pleasant dreams."

"Good night, Anjeli."

She waited until his breathing told her he'd fallen asleep, then rolled over in disgust, thumping her cloak to rearrange the lumpy pillow. What had she expected? That he would take her in his arms? Join her beneath the blanket and hold her through the night, even if they didn't make love? That everything would be the way it had been ten years ago?

It was stupid, but she knew deep in her heart, that's exactly what she'd hoped. Somehow, she'd thought that if she could just break through the shell Reynart had erected over the years, she'd find the man she'd known ten years ago. Well, she'd found him, but he couldn't be disassociated from the man he'd become.

She drifted off to sleep, only to be awoken by Reynart's tossing and turning. This time, she didn't even hesitate. She just pulled her blanket over next to his, and wrapped her arms around him.

"It wasn't your fault. Whatever you're dreaming of, whatever you're remembering, it wasn't your fault."

He quieted instantly, settling into her embrace. Stroking his hair, she slid back into sleep.

* * * * *

Despite the urgency driving them onward and the constant danger of ambush or pursuit, Reynart found himself enjoying the new pattern to their days. Rising with the dawn, they rode until the light started to fade. Then he found them a campsite. Beryl cared for the horses, Anjeli set up camp, and he checked on Kerrim's injuries. If Kerrim needed anything, however, Beryl insisted on doing it for him. Within a few days, Kerrim had recovered enough to resume cooking dinner, for which they were all grateful, although he usually went to bed immediately after drinking his gruel.

After dinner, by the flickering light of the campfire, Reynart gave Anjeli lessons. Sometimes he worked with her, showing her the best ways to attack someone from various positions, and sometimes she practiced alone, drawing and sheathing her dagger or slashing at the target zone he'd marked on a tree.

She learned her weapons lessons quickly. Unfortunately, she was correspondingly slow to learn that he wanted to be left alone. The sad side effect of their weapons lessons was that he was losing the ability to frighten her into obedience.

He'd finally conceded to her argument that as long as they were waking beneath the same blanket, they may as well go to sleep that way. They'd been sharing their blankets for the last week. But he refused to share more than his blanket with her.

Curled against him in the dark of the tent, Anjeli ran her hand lightly down his back. Even through his linen undertunic, he could feel the warmth of her hand and the slight tremble of her fingertips. His breath caught, and he felt the tension in the base of

his spear as it reacted to her hesitant caress. Waves of heat skittered across his back, radiating outward from her touch, and he longed to arch into her embrace, pulling her close and running his own hands over her soft, smooth flesh until they were both mindless from the pleasure.

But he could not. She had not intended to betray him. He knew that now. She had been used as a pawn by Gervaise, for his treason. He appeared to have passed the knowledge of how to summon her to his apprentice, the unknown mage hidden in the Hunescot woods. It was reasonable to assume he'd passed the secret of controlling her gateway energies, as well. She could easily be used against Reynart a second time, regardless of her intent. He could not afford to relax his guard.

Even as he thought it, he knew the obvious danger was the lesser of his fears.

He deliberately chose not to think about what might happen to his other, tightly constrained emotions, if he ever did relax his control. Ten years of hate and death and fear had scarred his soul more deeply than any whip or blade had ever scarred his skin. Rigid adherence to duty was all that kept those darker emotions in check, and if he allowed himself to be swayed from duty even once, he feared he would lose all ability to rein in his lethal nature.

Imposing his will on his traitorous body, he schooled his breathing, and forced his spear to go limp. Let her think he no longer found her desirable. She must not learn how much power over him her touch contained.

"Go to sleep," he scolded her.

She stroked her hand down his back again, all the way to the hem of his undertunic. Then she slipped her hand beneath the fabric and trailed her fingers up his thigh, around his waist, and up the scarred ridges of his back.

He froze, certain that if he allowed himself to move, he would kill her. She was a threat, and threats must be eliminated. His duty demanded no less.

"Anjeli, remove your hand. Now."

She caressed his rigid shoulder muscles. "Don't you trust me?"

He twisted to the side, wrenching her hand away and shoving her from him. Crouching against the wall of the tent, he put as much distance between them as he could. Four feet wasn't enough.

She sighed. "You know I'm interested. I've made it as plain as I could this past week. And I know you're interested, no matter how much you try to hide it. So why do you keep denying it?"

"This will go no further. I will not allow it."

"What are you afraid of? That you might actually have a heart? That you might be able to feel?"

She moved toward him, and his reflexes took over. He shoved her away, knocking her across her folded clothes and into the opposite wall of the tent. The canvas strained. Behind him, a tent stake ripped free of the ground and the tent shuddered.

Clenching his fists to keep from drawing a weapon, he growled, "I can't."

She sat up slowly, shaking her head. "What do you mean, you can't?"

"I know what you want, Anjeli. You want what we had ten years ago. You think I can open my heart and let those feelings free." As he spoke, thoughts and feelings roiled inside him, struggling for release. He prayed she would understand, because he wasn't sure he'd have the strength to do this again. "I can't. If they exist, they are buried beneath the weight of darker emotions that I dare not release. And I know not how to control only some of them. I must control them all, or let them all range free."

"Reynart..."

"Good night, Anjeli."

He grabbed his cloak and fled the tent.

Stalking around the perimeter of the camp, Reynart walked off his frustration. The night air cooled his anger, and the grass cushioned his bare feet.

He stopped and looked down. Yes, his bare feet. He'd grabbed his cloak, but completely forgotten his hose or boots. That kind of inattention to detail would get him killed.

It was all Anjeli's fault.

No. He would shoulder his share of the blame. She forced him to face his emotions, true, but that wouldn't be a problem if he didn't still have feelings for her. He'd loved her ten years ago. And even when he thought she'd betrayed him, he'd never stopped loving her. Why else would he have insisted on personally punishing her for her sins?

Ten years ago, he'd been as much a child as Kerrim was now. He'd believed love would be enough. He'd allowed it to blind him to his responsibilities to his kingdom and his people. That must never happen again. He would restore Nord D'Rae. Anjeli herself had said it. That would be his atonement. That is how he would pay for what he had done ten years ago. He couldn't afford to give in to love again. He didn't dare fail a second time.

A branch snapped, and he whipped his head up, looking for the cause. Moonlight glinted on golden braids.

Anjeli! She'd come out looking for him. But she was going in the wrong direction, east toward the Gray River ford.

This time of year, the river was swollen with runoff from Highreach. He'd heard tales of experienced woodsmen who died when the undercut banks crumbled beneath their feet. Someone as unfamiliar with the woods as Anjeli had no business wandering off.

He hurried after her, a cold fear settling into the pit of his stomach. She had no idea of the dangers in the woods, even if Beryl's magic assured them the area was free of human predators.

As he ran after Anjeli, he wondered how she managed to keep ahead of him without speeding up. He stopped. She halted, exactly the same distance in front of him. He stepped forward. She took one step forward.

He snapped his wrist, dropping a throwing knife into his hand. In one smooth motion, he flung the knife at her back. It passed through her and imbedded itself in the trunk of a tree.

The hand of Amin-Ra, but he'd been a fool!

He turned to go back to the camp, and found his path blocked by the mage who'd kidnapped Kerrim.

"Going somewhere, milord prince?"

Reynart took an involuntary step back. Milord, not my lord. The mage claimed equality. Only one other mage had ever done that.

"Gervaise. But how...?"

"The Brotherhood of Chaos isn't bound by the council's pathetic laws of magic. Immortality is really a simple spell. The only hard part is arranging to sacrifice a few thousand people at the same time."

The second of Reynart's throwing knives slid into his hand and flew through the air at the mage. It sailed through the man's image and bounced off an invisible shield blocking the path. Where was the real mage? In the camp? With Anjeli?

He sidled toward the edge of the path. If he could distract the mage by arguing with the image, perhaps he could sneak around the barrier and get back to the camp.

"Amin-Ra take you! You planned to destroy Nord D'Rae!"

"That would be rather shortsighted of me, don't you think? Especially since I had such a nice arrangement with your brother."

Reynart stiffened. "What about Alaric?"

"You mean you didn't know? I'd get rid of his enemies, and he gave me the power from his prisoners. Of course, he had to torture them to release the power, but suffering is good for the soul, is it not?" The mage snickered. "But I don't have to tell you that."

Reynart shook his head. Alaric had been misguided, and perhaps enjoyed torturing prisoners a bit too much, but he'd only tortured the ones their father chose. Hadn't he?

Of course he had. Gervaise was trying to confuse him, telling him things that couldn't be disproven.

"Alaric didn't have that many enemies."

"Not when I was done." The mage frowned. "I couldn't touch his main enemy, though. You had too many magical protections around you."

Alaric had not been Reynart's enemy! Yes, their father had played them off against each other, but underneath it all, they were still brothers. He'd loved Alaric, even if he hadn't always liked him. Growing up, they'd always been close, until that final summer, when Alaric came on campaign with the army.

Reynart squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force away the memory. It didn't work.

Alaric, surrounded by Duke Ballord's forces, wheeled his horse and called a retreat. He couldn't see the captain of his guard, who'd had his horse cut out from beneath him. The man was standing against his horse's corpse, fighting off the Duke's wheeling cavalry with only his short sword. A valiant fighter, he couldn't last much longer.

Reynart signaled his own troops to follow him, and swept down onto Alaric's abandoned position, circling around to protect the fallen man until another soldier could pull him onto his horse. That the Duke chose that moment to sound a retreat was irrelevant.

At least, Reynart thought it was irrelevant. Alaric claimed Reynart had made him look like a coward. Their father had rewarded Reynart by giving him command over both units, including command over Alaric. Alaric declared that he hated Reynart, and that he would never forgive him for humiliating him in front of their father and the entire army. He'd never rescinded that declaration.

"He really did hate me," Reynart whispered. All the things he'd forgiven over the years as youthful high spirits and sibling rivalry could as easily have been thinly veiled hatred. And he questioned what had always been unthinkable. Had Alaric seen the soldier cut down, and chosen to abandon him?

The mage giggled. "If you could only see your face. You never had the vaguest idea of what was really going on, did you?"

"What was he going to give you in return for killing me?"

"He'd get what he wanted most, and I'd get what I wanted most. A world of my own, untouched by magic, whose power was just waiting for me to tap into it."

Anjeli's world!

"We finally got rid of your sister, convincing the king to send her on that ridiculous diplomatic trip to her uncle in Tellurah. Her protections over you wore thin without her there to renew them. While we were waiting, I told him to go ahead with the plan to establish the connection to the new world. Everything was going fine until you found the girl before he did."

"You're the mage who created her body, and brought her spirit here."

"And an adorable body it is, too, don't you think? Some of my best work. I'm looking forward to tapping the power from it. My studies have advanced over the last ten years. I no longer need to use tools, such as your brother, to tap the power for me."

Reynart's stomach roiled and his final throwing knife dropped unbidden into his hand. That's what Alaric and Gervaise had been trying to do when he found them with Anjeli. It was even worse than rape.

"You ruined everything," the mage continued. "You tapped her power instead of your brother. I tried to reach her power through you, but your will was too strong and wouldn't let me interfere. It was too late to call back the spell at that point. But at least sacrificing all those people served some good."

Reynart tightened his hand around the throwing knife. It would do no good to hurl it at the mage's image, but he wanted to do it anyway.

A woman's scream rent the night.

"Anjeli!" Reynart sprang forward, right into another invisible barrier.

"This time, my men got the right one. And no false bargain of yours will save her. You must come visit me on my new world." The mage disappeared.

The magical barrier fell away, and Reynart raced back toward the camp.

Chapter Fourteen

Angie sat at the tent opening staring out into the chilly night. Reynart had been gone an awfully long time. He'd taken his cloak, but left his boots behind. Maybe he intended to sleep outside tonight.

That was stupid. The late spring nights were still cool, especially here in the shadow of the mountains. They couldn't afford for Reynart to get sick.

She dressed quickly, then pulled on her boots. "I'll just go out there and talk some sense into him. We can pretend this whole night never happened."

Crawling out of the tent, she glanced around the camp. She didn't see Reynart anywhere, but the horses were snorting and pawing the ground more than usual. Maybe he was with them.

Four horsemen thundered into the camp, one from each quarter. As they met in the center, they each threw a metal cylinder to the ground. The four cylinders chimed against each other, but the noise was too loud to be natural, and echoed for too long. The volume built as the tone rose in pitch. Angie covered her ears, and fell to her knees.

Beryl's agonized scream ripped through the camp, and left silence behind. For a moment, Angie thought she'd gone deaf. Then the men shouted, and drove their horses at the tent Beryl and Kerrim shared.

Moonlight glinted on steel as the men slashed open the tent.

"It's the mage and the boy!" one shouted.

"Find the girl!"

One of the men grabbed Beryl by the hair and dragged her limp body alongside his horse. Blood ran from the mage's ears.

Angie tensed, holding back her first reaction, to run to the mage's rescue. Her chest throbbed with the memory of Reynart's lesson. She wouldn't charge her enemies. She could do more for Beryl and Kerrim by escaping and drawing the men's pursuit.

She crept toward her horse.

"She's over here!" one of the men cried, spurring his horse so that the beast thundered toward her.

Angie turned and ran toward the edge of the woods.

She heard a distant yelp, then a curse. "The boy's got a knife."

"Forget him. Go after the girl."

More hooves thundered in her direction.

Barely three feet from the safety of the trees, a hand grabbed the back of her bodice and hauled her off the ground.

She landed across the thug's legs, her head hanging down beside his boot in the stirrup. The man pinned her arms behind her, leaving her no way to balance. She struggled to break his grip, and he let her slide forward. If he released her, she'd fall off the horse and break her neck. She held perfectly still.

The world spun crazily as he pulled the plunging horse to a stop, then whirled it around.

The man reached beneath her and groped her breasts.

"We got the right one this time," he called.

Another rider drew up beside them, trapping her dangling face between two hot, sweaty horses. The men tied a rope around her wrists, settled her weight more securely across the one man's legs, then spurred their horses and rode into the night.

The sound of the hoof beats changed, growing sharper and more pronounced. They'd reached a road. The men turned west.

Reynart's lessons played in her head as she bounced against the man and his horse. Her goal was to get away. That's the only thing she could think about.

She felt like throwing up from the constant jarring, but she was in no immediate danger. She had time to plan.

There were four of them, all armed. She couldn't succeed against those odds. She had to split them up somehow.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she moaned.

"Shut up."

"Please, stop the horse." She gagged for effect.

The other man asked, "Problem?"

"The girl's getting sick," her captor answered.

"What do you expect, with her face hanging next to your boots? Put her on the horse the right way."

Her captor grunted, but slowed his horse to a walk. Winding his hand in her braids, he yanked her head up. "This better?"

She dropped into her mental sanctum. The windows were shattered, and the rocks that had broken them littered the floor. The men's opening attack had been magical as well as physical. Her ears still rang with the echoes, making it difficult to concentrate. But she didn't need a big spell. Just enough to spook the horses.

She sketched the rough outlines of a dirt road and four horses, then added a rabbit in the middle of the road.

A small bundle of fur darted between the lead horse's hooves, and he reared in panic. Her captor's horse blundered into him, kicking out in fear and surprise. The other two horses spooked and bolted. The lead horse ran after them, favoring his right rear leg.

Her captor struggled to control his horse with only one hand on the reins, and she slid over the side. Only the man's hold on her braids kept her from crumpling to the road.

She got her feet under her and stumbled along beside the slow-moving horse, ignoring the pain of her hair pulling at her scalp. Now was her chance.

Tensing her forearm, she shot the hidden dagger into her waiting hand. She sliced through the rope on her wrists, then reached up to slash the hand holding her.

He jerked his hand away. "Why you —"

She sheathed her dagger, but didn't turn to run, anticipating his retaliation. He lunged for her, and she remembered again Reynart's lesson on not charging your enemies.

Grabbing the man's arm, she used his own momentum to pull him from his horse. He fell on top of her, but she didn't waste time trying to get out from under him. She released her dagger again, catching it as her arm was driving up between their bodies, and slashed the man's throat.

Hot blood gushed over her, choking and blinding her. She shoved the man. He didn't move. She panicked, shoving him again. And again. Throwing all her strength into one last shove, she twisted to the side at the same time. The dead man rolled away. In slow motion, he tumbled against his horse's legs.

His horse squealed and thundered down the road.

The other men would come back soon. She had to get away.

She stumbled into the trees. There weren't enough to hide her.

She tripped over a fallen tree trunk, and landed in the dead leaves filling the hollow beneath it. Perfect.

The leaves stuck to her bloody clothes, and she piled more leaves on top of herself. They'd never find her now. She'd be invisible.

The lead man returned, riding her captor's horse and leading his own lame mount. His curses carried clearly to Angie's hiding place.

Soon, the other two men thundered up the road.

"What the...?"

"The assassin."

"He was supposed to be delayed."

"No girl did this. It had to be him."

"Think he's still out there?"

The men fell silent, the horses' restless movements jingling harness and creaking leather.

"He's got the girl. He's long since gone. Assassins don't wait around after a kill."

"We'll have to tell our lord master we failed again."

"You tell him. Maybe we can still catch them before they reach their camp."

“Or get the mage and the boy. We’d at least have something to show for our trouble.”

The lead man dismounted. “Leave Jahan’s body here. You two go after them and get the girl, or the mage and the boy. I’ll go meet the next team and send more men to help you.”

The men rode away.

Angie lay under her tree trunk, unable to move. They might come back.

The night remained silent. Then insects resumed chirping. In the distance, an owl hooted. The danger was over. The men were gone.

A shiver racked her body, and she couldn’t stop shaking. Oh, God. She’d killed a man.

She didn’t know how long she lay there before the report of steel horseshoes against the cut stone road echoed through the valley, announcing the galloping horse long before he thundered past Angie’s hiding place. The rider wheeled the horse in a circle and came back, no doubt to study the body in the road.

“Anjeli?” Reynart called.

“Here,” she whispered. She swallowed, and tried again. “Here!”

He brushed past the low hanging tree limbs. “Where are you?”

“Under the log. In the leaves.”

Then he was kneeling beside her, clearing away the crumbling leaves. Matted blood flaked away with the remains of last year’s foliage, and she started to shake again.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

She shook her head. Her teeth were chattering too much for her to speak.

He sat down on the log, and pulled her into his arms. For a long time, he held her, waiting for her shaking to stop.

She tried to pull away. “I’ll ruin your clothes. I’m filthy.”

“Don’t worry about it. They’ve seen worse.”

Taking a deep breath, she confessed, “I killed a man.”

“I know.” Reynart held her close, keeping her safe in the warmth of his embrace.

“His name was Jahan,” she whispered into the black wool surcoat beneath her cheek.

Reynart’s arms tightened briefly around her. “It’s always harder when you know their names. It makes them more human.”

She groaned. “How can you do it? Knowing what you’ll feel like afterward, how can you make yourself kill someone?”

“Because of how I’d feel if I didn’t kill them.”

She felt sick to her stomach and her entire body ached. She didn’t have the strength to play word games with him. Leaning against his chest, she said, “I don’t understand.”

"I'll explain later. We must go. There may be more of them."

She cringed and grabbed his surcoat. "Two of them are headed for the camp."

"Don't worry about them. They didn't get far."

He rose, lifting her in his arms, and carried her back to his waiting horse. The mare stood perfectly still as Reynart placed Angie sideways in front of the saddle, then swung up behind her. Pulling her securely into his arms, he guided the mare with his legs to turn and start walking back to camp.

Angie nestled against his chest. This much hadn't changed. He still made her feel safe and protected merely by holding her. After all, who would dare to challenge him?

They rounded a curve in the road, startling two riderless horses. The horses kicked up their heels and raced away down the road, leaping over the obstacles blocking their path. The two dead bodies lying in the road.

She choked and buried her face against Reynart's chest. Their horse lurched, stepping over the obstacles. Then the road was clear, and Reynart nudged the mare to greater speed.

* * * * *

When they rode into the camp a few minutes later, Angie was amazed at the scene of destruction greeting her. Broken tent poles, slashed and tattered canvas, and charred wood from the campfire that had been trampled and scattered, all bore mute testimony to the violent attack that had occurred.

The three horses stood saddled and ready beside the remains of the campfire. Beryl slumped on a makeshift stool, her face nearly as gray as her tunic, while Kerrim held onto his horse's stirrup so that he wouldn't collapse. His free hand clutched a knife.

Reynart dismounted, then helped Angie to the ground. Her legs shook, and she fought to stay standing.

He nodded to Beryl and Kerrim. "Mount up. Take the food and your blankets, and leave everything else behind."

Reynart led the gray mare over to her. "Want a hand up?"

She'd been quite proud of her growing skills as a rider, and had almost mastered the smooth, swinging mount the others used. But right now, she felt incapable of all but the most basic muscle functions.

"Please."

He lifted her into the saddle. She stuffed her toes into the stirrups and picked up the reins.

"All set. Thanks."

He nodded, then swung up onto the bay gelding. He sat for a moment facing the three of them, like a general inspecting his troops.

"The men who tried to kidnap Anjeli fled west down the road, toward Dendermonde. My best guess is that they were meeting the mage there. Those men will not bother us, but there may have been more. And the mage knows where we're headed. They'll take the trail from Dendermonde up to Kingscap, following the river, and try to beat us there. They may also send men after us."

He paused, searching their expressions. Beryl looked ready to pass out, Kerrim didn't look much better, and Angie didn't want to imagine how she looked.

Reynart continued, "We're going to circle to the east, and pick up the trail that connects Kingscap with Highreach. It's not as smooth as the river trail, since it's cut through the rock, but it's faster. If we push as hard as we can, I think we can get to Kingscap before the mage."

"I can not help us to travel more quickly. My powers were bound by the spell the attackers launched in the camp," Beryl admitted.

"They will return before we reach Kingscap?"

"Yes."

"Then it is unimportant. Any other comments?"

Kerrim and Angie both shook their heads.

"Lead on," Angie said.

They rode late into the night, halting only once for him to retrieve his daggers from a clearing to the east of their camp. True to Reynart's warning, when they finally had to stop to sleep, they found a sheltered outcropping of rock and wrapped themselves in their blankets and cloaks.

She was exhausted in mind and body, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw Jahan's dead face. Wrapping her blanket around herself like a second cloak, she walked over to where Reynart stood watch.

"I can't sleep."

Smoothing away a few leaves that still clung to Angie's sleeve, he said, "You wanted to know how I can kill someone. Let me tell you about Lord Darion, a loathsome creature masquerading as a man."

"The one you poisoned the day after I arrived?"

"Yes."

Angie blinked. He'd just named his victim and admitted to killing the man. And he didn't even seem to notice. Of course, she'd seen the evidence of two more murders. She concentrated on his story, blocking out what she'd done, what he'd done, and the mysterious other team that even now might be following them.

They sat beneath the stars, huddled inside their blankets, and Reynart told her of the man's cruelties and outrages. Protected by his wealth and position, he did what he wanted, ignoring the laws designed to safeguard slaves, until even the church was forced to notice.

“His death was called for by two of his slaves, a married couple. Darion killed both of their children. The son, he beat to death in the street. And the daughter, a girl of eight, he sold to a pleasure house. She died less than a week later. To pay for an assassin, the parents sold themselves to heretics, acolytes of the hunter god Jaege, as willing human sacrifices. Darion had no respect for law, but even he was not fool enough to cheat the hunters. He claimed a fair amount for the sale, and the hunters gave me the rest of the payment.”

Reynart’s hand clenched into a fist. He forced the fingers to relax, although he still hummed with tension.

“Knowing what he would do if he lived, knowing how many more lives he would destroy, I had to kill him. Those people had no one else to turn to.”

Angie studied his face. Although his eyes were filmed with sadness, he showed no sign of regret. Given the choice, he would do the same thing again.

“You never stopped being a prince, did you?” she asked.

His lips trembled in an attempt at a smile, but he couldn’t achieve it. “Ordering executions and punishing the guilty?”

“No. Protecting the people you feel responsible for, regardless of the cost to yourself.”

He drew himself upright. “I was well-paid for my efforts.”

She held his gaze, refusing to let him back away from the depth of feeling he’d revealed. She wouldn’t let him trivialize his emotions by pretending he’d only killed the man for the money.

Reynart slumped and scanned the trail for any movement. “I trust that answered your question.”

She’d been so caught up in his story, she’d forgotten what prompted her original question. Or maybe she’d wanted to forget so badly, she would have been captivated by a grocery list.

The horror of what she’d done washed over her again.

“You executed a man who deserved to die. But I didn’t mean to kill Jahan. I was just thinking about getting away.”

“You did what you had to do. You resisted, as you will resist any further attempts to capture you. He planned to turn you over to the evil mage who tortured Kerrim. A mage who would use your power for his own goals and destroy the gateway network. You knew that would have devastating effects on thousands of innocent people. And what you didn’t know, but which I learned, is that the mage wants your power so he can enslave your world.”

“Earth? He wants to enslave Earth?” It was like a scene from a bad science fiction film. She was the hysterical woman, in the arms of a dashing hero, while the mad scientist plotted to rule the world. If she could just find some aliens shaped like giant carrots or squids, it would be perfect.

A giggle bubbled up from inside her. She was becoming hysterical. Or maybe she'd been right all along, and over the past ten years, she'd slowly gone insane.

She threw her arms around Reynart's neck and buried her face in the curve of his shoulder. "I can't take any more of this. Make it go away!"

His arms tightened around her in a breathless hug. Pressing his cheek against her hair, he whispered, "You must face what you have done. I cannot make it go away. But I can help you to reach the gateway in time to use your magic to preserve our world, and to save your own. I can help ensure Jahan's death will not be wasted."

She recognized the truth in what he said. After all, it was practically the same thing she'd told him. She pulled back. Unshed tears clung to her lashes, distorting her vision, and she blinked rapidly to clear them.

She sniffed, then cleared her throat. "Get us to the gateway, and I'll do my part."

He smiled, a light kindling in the depths of his eyes. "You are an amazing woman."

Her emotions were too raw, too close to the surface. Every nerve screamed for his touch, the feel of him pressed close against her, their breaths and bodies merging into one, and she lacked the strength to resist.

She lifted her face to him, even as she slid her hands into his hair and pulled his head down. He didn't resist. In fact, he met her halfway, tilting his head so that his lips could claim hers.

He kissed her with all the feeling he'd kept hidden. She trembled, swept away by the onslaught of emotion.

When he finally lifted his head, his cheeks were flushed and he was breathing heavily. Angie felt dazed, so light she could float, yet her limbs were so heavy she couldn't move them.

Reynart closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I have terrible timing."

"Why?" He couldn't regret finally kissing her!

"We had to leave the tents behind. We have no privacy. And no safety. Another group of men could attack us at any moment."

Angie sighed. "You waited this long. I'm sure you can wait a little longer."

"I may have learned how to be patient. I never learned how to like it."

* * * * *

They were all stiff and sore when they woke, but gobbled a cold breakfast and set off again.

After three days of this pace, they reached a broad meadow carved into the side of the mountain. Grass and tiny flowers had taken root in the dirt and stone brought down in a landslide generations ago.

Even though it was still evening, and they might have ridden for another hour, Reynart called a halt.

"We'd better graze the horses while we have the chance. They'll have little else to eat the next few days."

Kerrim hung his head.

"He's not blaming you," Angie hurried to correct the minstrel. "It's not your fault you can't eat real food. After all, he knew you'd be stuck drinking gruel for two weeks when he paralyzed your throat."

Reynart helped Kerrim to the ground. "I do so enjoy being discussed as if I'm not even present."

"Sorry." Angie swung down and pulled off her horse's bridle, freeing it to eat its fill. "We're all a little edgy, and seeing insults where none were meant. It's the stress and lack of sleep talking."

Beryl released her horse as well and walked over to where the others were gathered. "I need one of your daggers."

Reynart stared at her. "I thought you planned on fighting with magic, not steel."

"It's not for me. It's for you. I've finally been able to break the binding spell that snared me in the camp, and can use my magic again. You said your weapons wouldn't penetrate the mage's shields. Those shields are his greatest weakness."

"What are you talking about?" Angie asked. "How can something that protects him be a weakness?"

"A mage's shields should come from attunement to the energy flows around him or her. They take very little effort, since the mage is acting in harmony with energy patterns that are already there. But he is not in harmony with his environment. He controls it. He dominates it. And he forces a shield into place where a shield does not belong."

"So he's overextending his power?" Reynart asked.

"He's stolen the power to create and maintain the shields. He can use the power, but it is never truly his. It retains the energy signature of the original owner."

"He stole part of that power from your husband, didn't he?" Angie guessed.

"Yes. And I know Nestor's energy signature as well as I know my own. I can imprint one of your knives with his pattern. The shield will accept the knife as belonging to itself, and not stop it."

Reynart sighed. "I doubt it will be that easy. But if I can get close to him, I will end our problems quickly."

He slid a throwing knife out of the wrist sheath on his left arm. "Use this. Will it tax your magic too greatly to imprint your husband's energy signature on three of them?"

Beryl took the knife from his hand and considered it. "Yes. Three would be too great a drain. But I could manage two."

Reynart slid out a second knife. "Thank you. I always prefer to have a backup."

Holding the knives in her palms, Beryl sat down on the grass. "Anjeli, watch how I do this. You will need to be able to build a shield if we confront that mage again, and to do that, you'll need to attune yourself to the energy fields."

"I thought I was an energy field," Angie muttered as she sank to the ground beside Beryl.

Behind her, Reynart led Kerrim away for his daily reapplication of healing ointment.

"Close your eyes and concentrate on your inner sanctum," Beryl instructed.

Angie closed her eyes and pictured herself in her studio.

Beryl continued her instructions. "Go to the window."

"Which one?"

"Any window. Open it wide. Feel the heat of the sunshine on your face. Smell the air. What does it smell like?"

Angie opened the window and let the desert into her studio. She breathed deeply. "It smells like time. The rocks are ancient. They've been there longer than anyone has lived there, and will continue long after we've all gone away."

"What in your sanctum also smells like time?"

"The clock?" Angie turned to the wall clock, a bright red Cheshire cat whose eyes and tail wagged with each passing second.

"Are you sure?"

She felt a little foolish, but Angie walked over and sniffed the clock. It smelled of hot metal and oiled parts, which was odd, considering that it was made out of plastic. But ever since her mistake with Beryl's dove, Angie knew better than to expect familiar rules to hold true in her sanctum.

"No. The clock smells like industry."

"Good. You're not being fooled by appearances. Find something that smells of time."

Angie hunted through the studio, searching out the elusive fragrance. The breeze wafting in from the desert eddied and swirled around her, confusing her senses, but eventually she detected a whiff of that dry, ageless scent. It was coming from a box on the top shelf of her storage closet.

She lifted down the old cardboard moving box. It was one of the ones she'd taken when she went to live with her grandmother, and had never unpacked. The one containing her parents' things.

Angie opened the lid, unsure what she'd find inside. A powdery smell, like fine dust, assaulted her, making her sneeze.

"This isn't right. It's old, not ageless." She lifted out books that her parents had read to her, and a daisy-patterned tie she'd given her father for Father's Day and that he'd actually worn to work. She'd been so mad at her mother when she spilled bleach on it while doing the laundry. Now, looking at the ghastly gift she'd inflicted on her father, she realized her mother had ruined it on purpose.

Angie chuckled, admiring her mother's clever solution to sparing a child's delicate feelings. The tie glowed briefly, and the bleach mark disappeared.

"What happened? It changed!"

"I can't see what you see, only the effects. But you just opened up part of your awareness that had been closed before. Did you change the way you'd viewed something?"

"Yes...." Slowly, Angie emptied the box. As she lifted out each object, she paused to consider how she felt about it, what it represented, and whether or not her feelings were valid.

The scents of baby powder and lavender swirled around her, happy memories that would live on in her heart. In a way, they were timeless, but each really belonged to the precious seconds from which it had been created. She still hadn't found the source of the ageless smell, and the box was empty.

Upending the box, she shook it. A thin gold necklace, stuck in one of the corners, fell onto the floor.

Angie picked up the delicate chain, with its tiny gold heart. It was her mother's favorite necklace, because it was the first piece of jewelry her father had ever given her. He'd won it for her at a carnival when they were seniors in high school.

According to her mother's often-told story, he'd won the prize, given it to her, then announced that since he'd just given her his heart, she had no choice but to go steady with him. And she had, until he graduated from college and they got married.

Angie closed her fist around the necklace. "Love is eternal."

"You've found your key," Beryl said. "It attunes you to your environment. Now, rather than pouring your energy out to build a shield around your sanctum, pour your energy through your key. That will resonate with the energy around you, and if you need a shield, one will be created for you."

Angie fastened the chain around her own neck. The tiny gold heart felt warm against her skin, and she envisioned more energy flowing into it, making it grow hotter.

A sudden dust storm whipped up outside her studio. The wind howled, blowing sand and grit in a swirling cloud around the building.

Startled, Angie stopped concentrating on the necklace. The storm immediately calmed down, although a strong breeze still gusted, stirring the rocky soil.

"You see? It takes very little power to maintain a shield like this."

Angie opened her eyes, and returned to the outside world. Night had fallen, and glittering stars carpeted the sky. The grass around her stood out in sharp relief, the moonlight casting tiny black shadows for each individual blade. She'd never seen such a beautiful sky, such a beautiful night.

"So this is what it's like to be attuned to the energy around you?"

"Yes."

"Wow. I'd think people would become mages just for this."

“Most do not find it so easy to delve into their own minds, or are not so accepting of what they find there. They are the ones who take the harder path, and send their energy outward rather than face what is inside.”

Angie laughed. She was great at introspection and self-analysis. All those years of psychotherapy had been good for something. But she'd bet that never in their wildest dreams had her doctors tried using their techniques for something like this.

She wondered if she would still be able to tap into the magic once she returned to her own world. Although, now that she'd attuned herself to this world's energies, maybe she wouldn't be able to return to her own world. And even if she could, she was no longer sure she wanted to go.

Chapter Fifteen

Soft footfalls whispered through the grass, just loud enough to distract Angie.

“Have you finished?” Reynart asked Beryl.

The mage held up his two throwing knives. To Angie’s new eyesight, they glowed with an inner fire. Reynart examined them closely before returning them to his wrist sheath.

“They don’t look any different.”

Beryl shook her head. “Not to you. The spell that bound you to the Nord D’Rae gateways as an infant also blinded you to magical power. It was a fail-safe designed by your ancestors to keep any one person from having both the power and the knowledge to use it.”

“Won’t that make restoring the gateways difficult?”

“Not with Anjeli’s help.”

“I can see the magic,” she agreed. “But how does that make restoring the gateways easier? So far, every time I’ve used my power, I’ve imagined things in my head. I’ve never looked at the magic around me.”

“Sit,” Beryl told Reynart. “We need to discuss this, and we may not have time once we reach the gateway.”

She waited while he sat down in the grass next to Angie, then said, “Magic is life energy. The simplest magic uses a mage’s own life energy, working a transformation in the mage’s own body. But the whole world is full of life energy, and a skilled mage can tap into that as well.”

“What about gateway magic?” Angie asked.

“Over time, pools of magic collected, in places such as river deltas and forests. The mages of old discovered they could build a gateway from one pool to another, and people could use the magical gateways to instantly move from place to place. The problem was that the energy also flowed through the gateways, gradually draining one pool. To correct this, they built an interconnected series of gateways, so that the energy flowed in a constant circle.”

Reynart shook his head. “That’s not how the Nord D’Rae gateways work.”

“Separated as they were by the high cliffs and the sea, not to mention a racial bias toward paranoia, your people developed their magic independently. They faced the same problem, but there wasn’t enough magical energy in Nord D’Rae to create a webwork of interconnecting gateways spanning everywhere they wanted to travel. Instead, they developed a way to control the flow of magical energy between the pools anchoring the gatepostgateposts. As a result, they were able to create energy pools

where none had existed before, by forcing the power through a new gateway. That's why they could build a gate to the top of a mountain."

"But I don't understand," Angie interrupted. "Once one set of mages figured out how to control the gateway magic, why didn't they just teach the other mages?"

"Compare the prince's mare with the black gelding. Both are horses, embodying roughly the same amount of life energy in roughly the same form. Yet what would have happened if Kerrim had been riding the gelding when he passed out?"

Angie thought the question over. "If there had been other horses, he would have followed them. Otherwise, he probably would have stopped for a meal. And he might have tried to knock Kerrim off his back."

"And the mare?" Beryl prompted.

"She knew enough to find a safe path, and protect her rider," Reynart answered. "An inexperienced or unaware rider could travel safely on the mare, but a rider needs either luck or skill to travel safely on the gelding."

Beryl winced, and rubbed the base of her spine. "Even then, it's not a very comfortable journey."

"But how does that relate to gateways?" Angie wanted to know.

"Magic is life energy, but gateway magic is life energy that has been given a specific form, and is bound by certain constraints. Two forms of gateways were developed, each with different constraints, like the two different horses. Our gateways are like the mare. Anyone can use them. The Nord D'Rae gateways are like the gelding. Their power must be harnessed, and then a skilled rider must use the harness to direct the power."

Angie nodded, applying the analogy to their situation. "I'm the horse, he's the harness, and you're the rider."

"Yes." Beryl glanced at Reynart. "Isn't that so?"

"It's not the way I learned it, but it's close."

"How did you learn it?" Angie asked.

"I was taught that the gateway energy was raw power, and the member of the royal house distilled it, transforming it into something the mage could work with."

Angie grinned. "Given the choice, I'd rather be a distillery than a harness, too. Who wants to get all full of horse slobber?"

He shot her a smoldering look. "That depends entirely on who is the horse."

Beryl stood up and brushed the grass from her pants. "There is a pool of water at the end of the meadow. It's not large, but it's cold."

She walked away. Reynart chuckled as he watched her. "I believe we were just reprimanded."

"You were reprimanded. I was innocent."

Angie was amazed his gaze didn't kindle the grass beneath her.

“Innocent? No. If I remember correctly, what you lacked in knowledge, you made up for with a willingness to learn.”

Her cheeks heated as she remembered exactly how willing she'd been as a teenager, and some of the more creative things she'd learned. She looked away. They were in the middle of an open meadow, for goodness sake! Ten years ago, she might have followed his lead with no thought for the consequences, but she was an adult now. What did he expect her to do?

He expected her to do nothing, she realized with a flash of insight. He could make his overtures as blatant as he wanted, knowing she wouldn't dare take him up on any of them. Not with Beryl and Kerrim right there, and their blankets open to the stars. Not with the constant threat of attack.

Anger surged through her. This was just another one of his control games.

She turned to him, ready to tell him off, but the naked suffering in his eyes stopped her. He was exercising his control, all right. But she was no longer sure of his target. He seemed to be tormenting himself more than her.

She didn't even want to try puzzling out the psychological ramifications of that insight. She'd done enough analysis of her own hidden feelings earlier. He could work out his inner demons by himself.

“Beryl's pool sounds like a good idea. Why don't you check it out?”

He levered himself off the ground. “You may also wish to consider it.”

* * * * *

They rode well into the night for the remaining three days of their trip. Finally, in the early afternoon of the fourth day, they saw Kingscap.

A wooden palisade walled off half of the mountaintop, separating the official outpost from the beginnings of a town that had grown up beside it. The gleaming wooden posts stood as straight and true as the day they'd been laid. The rough wooden shacks and trade stalls beside the fence had not weathered the ten years of abandonment as well, in some places collapsing, and in others, leaning drunkenly against their neighbors.

They approached the edge of the deserted village. Now that they were closer, Angie could see that a ragged white line encircled all of the posts making up the wall, about five feet above the ground.

“What's the line for?”

“High water mark,” Reynart snapped.

Beryl raised her hand. “Something's not right...”

Three arrows flew over the wall. The first burst against Beryl's invisible shield. Reynart's quick reflexes let him dodge the arrow meant for him, and the third arrow

lodged in Kerrim's pack. Angie mentally clutched her charm necklace, reinforcing her magical shield, but no arrows shot toward her.

They kicked their horses and rode for the cover of the sturdiest buildings. As they galloped to safety, another flight of three arrows speared the dirt behind them.

"Amin-Ra roast his black soul!" Reynart cursed. "He must have used magic to get them here before us."

"Well he is a mage," Beryl snapped.

"So are you. But that didn't help us travel any faster."

"Stop it, both of you!" Angie ordered. "We can figure out who to blame later. For now, let's decide how to restore the gateway. Can we do it from here?"

Beryl closed her eyes, her expression going distant. "No. I can't see the energy patterns well enough to direct the magic. I need to be at the gateway."

"Then we need to get inside." Angie looked at Reynart for suggestions.

"The hill forts are designed to protect against an invading force. The only entrance is the one that's barred against us, and the only retreat is through the gateway." Reynart frowned, and scanned the palisade wall. "The soldiers stationed at the hill forts used to complain that they spent most of their duty rotation repairing the palisades."

Angie studied the wall. "Aside from the water mark, it looks in great shape."

"He hid his presence inside," Beryl mused. "What else might he have hidden?"

She closed her eyes, and held out her hands. Angie felt a shift in the energy currents as Beryl gathered her magic.

Angie closed her own eyes and touched her mental good luck charm again. The gold felt cold.

She cupped it in her hands. No doubt about it. The temperature of the charm was slowly dropping.

She ran to the window of her mental studio. Huge earthmovers and backhoes were tearing up the desert.

"No!" she screamed. She concentrated all of her energy on raising the heat of the charm, protecting not just herself but the whole desert.

The whirling dust storm swept up the backhoes and all but one of the earthmovers – the one that the mage was driving.

He leapt off, his crimson robes whipping in the wind. The machine tumbled away in the storm but the mage remained, impervious to the blasts.

"Very good," he mocked. "You've learned to use your powers. But next time, leave the magic to real mages. Or didn't you notice that one of these machines was shoveling the dirt back into place? I'm afraid you've destroyed your friend by mistake."

"No! You're lying!"

He laughed. "You are so predictable. Hardly any fun at all."

Then he disappeared.

Angie opened her eyes, expecting him to pop up beside them. Her horse shifted restlessly beneath her.

Beryl was slumped over her horse's neck, all the blood drained from her face.

"Beryl! Are you all right?" Angie jumped off her horse. Gervaise was a liar. He'd injured Beryl, not her.

She never reached the mage. As soon as her feet touched the ground, a bolt of green lightning shot from the hill fort. It struck Beryl with enough force to throw her from her horse.

The mage landed in the dirt at an impossible angle. Angie knew the truth, even as Kerrim launched himself from his saddle and ran to Beryl's side.

"No," he croaked.

Ordinarily Angie would have been thrilled by his returning voice, but now her attention focused totally on Beryl's still form. No magic clung to her, not even the dissipating power of the lightning bolt. Beryl had no more life energy to generate magic.

"She's dead," Angie announced in a flat tone. And with Beryl's death, all their hopes for restoring the Nord D'Rae gateways and stabilizing the rest of the gateway network died. They'd come so close to success. Then, in an instant, it was over.

She staggered and leaned against the living warmth of her horse. She half expected it to topple over dead at her touch. It didn't. Not that it mattered. Everything was over.

Reynart slipped around the corner of the building to peer at the looming palisade. When he returned, he said, "She completed her spell. Gervaise's illusion is destroyed."

"Is that all you care about? Whether or not her spell worked? Beryl is dead!"

"Do you propose we express our sorrow by letting Gervaise torture and then kill us? Because that is what will happen if we do not stop him." Reynart's face could have been carved from solid granite. Even his eyes showed no warmth of feeling.

Before, she might have been fooled into thinking that meant he didn't care. But now she knew better. He was hiding his feelings, so that they wouldn't get in his way. He was going to kill someone.

"Kerrim, come here," Reynart ordered.

The minstrel obediently rose from his place beside Beryl's corpse, and walked over. Tear tracks ran down his cheeks.

Reynart glanced from Kerrim to Angie, and frowned. "He has not won until we stop fighting. Do not hand him the victory so easily."

Angie stiffened. "But Beryl was our only mage. We can't restore the gateways without her."

"Beryl was our only trained mage. You are also a mage. But restoring the gateways is our secondary objective. Our first goal must be to destroy Gervaise."

"Gervaise?" That was the second time he'd used the name. "But I thought you said this mage was Gervaise's apprentice."

"I was wrong. He used the deaths of my people to restore his youth. For that alone I would gladly see him tortured for years. But he is too dangerous to leave alive. He must die."

"How?" Kerrim croaked.

"A distraction. There are two weak spots in the palisade wall, where the posts have rotted. In one spot, a man could force his way through the gap. In the other, a charging horse would bring down a whole section of wall."

Reynart pulled off his travel cloak and surcoat, then started unlacing his armor.

"You, wearing my cloak and armor, and riding the bay Gervaise thinks is my horse, will charge the wall. Gervaise will not notice me slipping through the other opening."

"Won't he be expecting something like this?" Angie asked.

"Yes. Which is why we will first distract him by invoking your bond to the gateway energy. While he's trying to determine what magic you are preparing, Kerrim will attack the wall. He will think the first attempt was the shield for the second, and not look for a third."

Angie nodded, remembering his lesson. "It's easy to hide when your opponent isn't looking at you."

"Yes." Reynart shrugged off his armor, then measured it against Kerrim. "Leave your tunic and bandages on. You'll need the padding. But take off the cloak."

Kerrim removed his bright green cloak, and held out his arms so that Reynart could fasten the armor around him. He winced when the weight of the boiled leather bore down on his shoulders, but otherwise didn't complain as Reynart laced the armor into place.

Reynart's surcoat hung past Kerrim's knees, and his cloak brushed the ground.

"You'll look fine once you're on a horse," Reynart assured him. "Put the hood up to hide your hair."

Kerrim pulled up the hood, covering his hair and shading his face. Then, with Reynart's help, he mounted the bay gelding.

"Sit up straighter in the saddle," Angie corrected him. "And hold your head stiffer, as if you'd never even consider looking anywhere but straight ahead."

Kerrim adjusted his posture.

"What do you think?" Reynart asked.

Angie considered carefully. "I've ridden with you for three weeks, and I'd think that was you."

"Good. Now, I just need to convince Gervaise to show himself, and also not to kill me on sight."

Kerrim and Angie both stared at him.

“Don’t worry. That’s the other part of the plan.”

He pulled out his black-bladed knife and slashed open his left palm. As the blood spattered the ground, Angie felt a wave of power rise up and crest over her, similar to the one that had caused her nausea when Reynart first invoked the gateway energy in the tavern. Her lessons in magic allowed her to drift upon the tide, buoyed rather than buffeted by the influx of power. As it receded, it seemed to draw all the warmth from her body. Then another warm wave crested over her, followed by a sudden chill as it receded.

Abruptly, she found herself in her studio. It was full of white-robed people. One of them was opening the taps on the faucet, letting the water gush forth.

“Who are you?” she asked.

A woman who looked suspiciously like Beryl stepped forward. “We don’t actually exist. We are your mind’s representation of the gateway power. The number of us in the room indicates how many multiples of your own power you are handling.”

Angie scanned the crowded studio. She couldn’t even count them all. She’d known the gateway network had a lot of magical energy in it, but seeing the evidence shook her.

“What about the faucet?” she asked.

“That is how much energy you are draining off to give your partner. You don’t need to worry unless the sink starts backing up. Then you’re trying to send him more power than he can absorb.”

“Thank you.” Angie threaded her way through the crowd to the counter, and adjusted the taps so that a slow, steady trickle of water flowed out.

Then she opened her eyes, to find Reynart staring at her.

“What did you do?”

“Why? What happened?”

“Before, it always felt like a flood of power from the gateways. It started the same way this time, but now I can barely sense the power.” He frowned. “Gervaise isn’t interfering with the gateway energy, is he?”

“No. I discovered I can control how much of the power flows out to you. I thought we might need the power later, so I cut it back as much as I could.”

“Good thinking. Less power should also make it harder for Gervaise to see me.”

He adjusted his throwing knives, moving the ones Beryl had modified to his right wrist sheath. Then he tossed Kerrim’s cloak over his shoulders and pulled the hood up over his head.

“Let’s go. I’ll do the talking, but they’ll need to think Kerrim is the one speaking, so don’t look away or adjust your stirrup or anything. I’ll stand on Anjeli’s left. Kerrim, you’ll be on her right. When I tell you to, charge the weak spot in the wall.”

Kerrim and Angie both nodded.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she whispered.

"I always know what I'm doing." He waited until they were almost in position before admitting, "I'm just not certain whether or not it will work."

The heads of three men peered between the pointed tips of the palisade. Nocked arrows tracked their advance.

"Once before, I told you not to attack me, Gervaise," Reynart called. "This time, it's the truth. I have invoked Anjeli's gateway connection."

"That doesn't matter to me," the mage called back, although he didn't reveal his position behind the wall. "Once she's activated the power I can make it my own."

"Not if I banish her."

Angie gasped. He wouldn't! And then she realized what her reaction implied. She didn't want to go home. She wanted to stay here.

Gervaise laughed, a high-pitched sound that was more than half giggle. "You don't have the power to banish her. Members of the royal house can't use magic."

"You should know this spell. You created it for a member of the royal house to use."

"What are you talking about? I never gave you a spell." Gervaise's head popped up over the palisade.

"You gave Alaric the power to create an embodiment of gateway energy. The power to banish that embodiment was part of the same spell. But you didn't count on his squeamishness to seeing his own blood. Royal blood was called for, but he used mine, wiped off a blade from a practice fight."

Gervaise's face turned bright red, and the hands clutching the post tops trembled with rage.

"Now, Kerrim," Reynart whispered.

Kerrim dug his heels into the bay's sides and raced for the distant weak spot in the wall. Reynart slid out of the bright green cloak and slipped across the open space to the shadows at the base of the wall. He ducked through the opening before Kerrim had covered half of the distance to the larger weak spot.

Gervaise spotted the galloping horse and tossed a lightning bolt at it. At the last moment, he changed his mind, and the bolt disappeared.

"No. You may be lying. But I can't risk losing the girl."

A green wall sprang up in front of the palisade, reinforcing the wooden posts. Kerrim hauled on the reins, slowing the horse and turning him in a wide circle to avoid smacking into the glowing barrier.

"Give me the girl," Gervaise called. "And I'll restore the Nord D'Rae gateway for you."

Reynart couldn't answer. He wasn't there. But the mage couldn't learn that.

"He won't do it," Angie hollered. "I'd kill him before I let him hand me over to you, and he knows I could. After all, I killed Jahan."

All four heads disappeared below the top of the wall. Angie could hear a heated discussion, but not make out the words. Then there was a bright green flash of light, followed by a man's scream, abruptly silenced.

Gervaise looked over the post tops again. "Are you letting a girl do your bargaining now?"

Angie couldn't answer a direct question to Reynart. But Kerrim could.

"No," he called, pitching his voice lower, in Reynart's register. The croaky quality wasn't as pronounced as it had been before.

Gervaise laughed. "You're not as good a horseman as you thought. You sound a little singed." Then his face darkened and he clutched the posts. "I didn't feel a magical impact. You weren't injured just now."

Gervaise dropped the posts, whipping his head around. "Where is he? You two, find that assassin. He's somewhere in the palisade."

Angie didn't catch their response, but Gervaise screamed, "If you don't, I'll kill you myself. And I'll make it much more unpleasant for you."

She and Kerrim returned to the dubious safety of the building they'd hidden behind earlier, and she dismounted.

"I'm going to see how he's doing."

Kerrim nodded. She hoped he hadn't reinjured his throat pretending to be Reynart.

Closing her eyes, Angie found herself again in the crowded studio. She hurried to the easel, anxious to see how Reynart was faring.

She no longer needed to imagine herself painting the pictures. The canvas rippled with color, then steadied to a view of Reynart ascending the stairs to the guard walk on which Gervaise stood. Gervaise was turning from side to side, scanning for Reynart's approach.

As soon as Reynart got a clear shot at the mage, he released one of his daggers. Gervaise whirled, alerted by the slight sound, and the blade passed by him, slicing his robes but not touching him.

"How did you defeat my shield?" Gervaise demanded. "Never mind." He raised his arms, calling down a lightning strike at Reynart.

Angie clutched her pendant, pouring her energy into its protective field, and shouted to her crowded studio, "Someone turn the water on full power!"

The lightning smashed into a glowing blue shield, inches above Reynart's head. He didn't seem to notice, and continued stalking the mage.

Gervaise cursed. "That girl is interfering. Just wait till I get my hands on her. I'll teach her a thing or two."

He lifted his hands and called down a second lightning strike. Angie clenched both hands around her pendant, retaining her hold even though it was starting to burn. The second lightning stroke also slammed into the blue shield and dissipated.

"You have ceased to be amusing," Gervaise snarled, stepping backward as Reynart approached.

Reynart lifted his left arm and fired a knife at Gervaise's head. The mage turned away. The knife bounced harmlessly off his shield, but the damage was done. He'd reacted the way Reynart expected him to, and positioned himself for Reynart's next strike with Beryl's enchanted knife.

The knife sailed through the shield and imbedded itself to the hilt in Gervaise's chest.

The mage fell to the floor, and Reynart followed him down. Blood spurted, and Angie turned away from the picture. It was enough to know the mage was dead. She didn't need to know how.

She hurried over to the sink and turned off the water. It was already half-full with standing water, but with no new water flowing in, it drained quickly.

Opening her eyes, she found Kerrim staring at her with a white face and wide eyes.

"It worked, Kerrim. Reynart killed the mage."

Reynart had killed Gervaise, but Gervaise had already killed Beryl. Both mages were dead. They had no one to cast the spell to restore the gateway. And they only had two days to find another way to keep the gateway network from collapsing.

"It worked," she whispered. "But what do we do now?"

Chapter Sixteen

The door to the hill fort swung open, and two men rode out. Darting wide-eyed looks over their shoulders, they held their horses to a walk only until they reached the open square of the deserted village. Then they kicked their horses, shouting as they galloped for the trailhead and the safety of Dendermonde.

Reynart followed the two men on foot, looking regal even in his stained linen undertunic and black hose and boots. It was all in his attitude. His steps were measured and unhurried, and his gaze focused on Kerrim and Angie, virtually ignoring the fleeing men as being beneath his concern.

"You're letting them go?" Angie asked.

"What would you have me do instead? Kill them?"

"They tried to kill us."

"But they did not succeed." Reynart shook his head. "Their leader and their master are both dead. The beast has been beheaded. And I told you before, I will not kill for personal reasons. One step down that road is one step too many."

He flexed his shoulders and rubbed the back of his neck. "We need to take care of the mages' bodies. There's enough dry wood here to easily build two funeral pyres."

Kerrim frowned. "Two?"

Angie agreed. "Gervaise doesn't deserve a proper burial, or whatever the custom is here. Toss him off the side of the mountain and let the crows pick his bones."

"You are becoming quite bloodthirsty and vindictive. The Nord D'Rae royal court would approve."

The blood drained from Angie's face. This world had finally gotten to her. She was embracing the violence, calling for it with an irrational anger that had gotten Beryl killed. "I spoke without thinking. Of course, I don't want to take revenge on his corpse for things he did during his life. But why can't we just leave his body, like the bodies we left in the road?"

"My knowledge of magic is limited, and doesn't discriminate between truth and folk tale. I'm taking no chances. No piece of his body that could tie Gervaise to this place and time can remain."

After reclaiming his clothes from Kerrim, Reynart joined Angie. Together they gathered wood that had fallen from collapsing buildings and collected it in what had been the market square. Angie worked until she ached, hoping the physical pain could banish the pain in her heart. It didn't work.

Kerrim insisted on helping, so they gave him the easier task of stacking the gathered wood. He layered the planks and boards to create two pyramidal platforms,

on opposite sides of the square. The smaller was barely two feet high, and just long enough for a body. The larger rose over four feet, and had a top the length and width of a queen-sized bed.

When the pyres were built, Reynart carried Beryl's body to the larger pyre, gently laying her out. "Kerrim, you arrange her belongings as a funeral gift."

Kerrim nodded and retrieved Beryl's packs. With great care, he removed the clothing and possessions, setting them neatly around Beryl's body. He folded her travel cloak and placed it beneath her head as a pillow.

Angie watched Kerrim work, and wished there was something she could do, some way she could honor Beryl. She'd respected the woman, admired her skill, and had even been growing to like her. But there was nothing more Angie could do.

She hadn't realized Reynart had slipped off until he returned from the fort carrying Gervaise's headless corpse over one shoulder. He held the mage's head in his other hand.

Bile rose in her throat, and she turned away. She heard the crash as Reynart tossed the body onto the second pyre.

"Anjeli, go down the trail until the trees start, then gather some pine boughs."

She did as he requested. The pine smelled wholesome and joyous, reminding her of long ago holidays. She slashed at the lowest boughs with her dagger. She could do this, at least, for Beryl. When she could no longer lift the dagger, and could barely see past the pile of branches in her arms, she returned to the square.

Kerrim and Reynart arranged the branches around the base of the pyres, with most of them going to Beryl's pyre. Then Reynart took a pinch of herbs from each of two paper envelopes, and sprinkled them onto Gervaise's corpse. He emptied the rest of the contents of the envelopes onto Beryl's corpse. Angie recognized sprigs of mint, and yellow-brown slivers of wood.

Reynart lit the dry pine boughs, watching until the flames caught and spread to the wood of the pyres. Kerrim cradled his lute and sat on the ground upwind of the leaping flames. The first notes of a mournful lament rose from his instrument.

"Will you play the full mourning rites?" Reynart asked.

Kerrim nodded. "Until the last embers die."

"We will be inside."

Reynart took Anjeli by the elbow and led her into the hill fort. Once through the main gate, she could see that the fort consisted of the outer palisade wall, with inner buildings clustered against it, much like the stalls outside. The roofs of the buildings made up a walkway that circled three quarters of the way around the fort, with the walkway across the front wall attached to the wall itself, and supported by posts driven into the ground. The center of the courtyard was empty, except for a pair of tall stone gateposts.

They circled around the gateway, past the largest of the buildings. A stench of rot, mildew and horse flowed through its open door. A horse whickered as they passed the doorway. Gervaise's steed must still be stabled there.

"Shouldn't we let the horse out?" Angie asked.

"He's as foul-tempered and mean as his master, and bites or kicks anyone who tries to get near him. He nearly kicked the wall down when Gervaise's two soldiers retrieved their horses. Let him stay there until hunger curbs his aggression."

Reynart led her to a smaller building on the far side that had survived a decade's neglect better than most. He held open the door for her, and she entered what must have been the officer's quarters. A bed frame, the straw or feather mattress long since scavenged by animals for their own bedding, and a wooden chest occupied half of the room, with space left over for a small table and two chairs.

Thumping both chairs to ensure their sturdiness, Reynart swept the seat of the chair closest to the door with the corner of his cloak, then sat in the other chair, facing the opening. She took the seat he'd dusted for her.

"Now what?" she asked.

He shoved his fingers through his hair, then sighed and rolled his neck. He slouched in his chair, giving in to his weariness. "I don't know."

"I thought you had a plan. You always have a plan."

He chuckled, mocking himself. "There was a plan. It called for getting us to Kingscap, gaining access to the gateway, and preventing Gervaise from interfering. The problem is, at that point the plan called for Beryl to restore the gateway with our help."

Angie squeezed her eyes shut. "It's my fault she's dead."

"What did Gervaise tell you?"

Angie stared at Reynart in shock. "How did you know he'd told me something?"

"Because you would never think of something so foolish on your own."

"But it's true! I saw the tractors and backhoes in my mind, but I didn't check to see if Beryl might be on any of them before I swept them away. And then she was dead."

Too late, she realized her words would be meaningless to Reynart. But he picked out the parts he recognized, and asked, "You didn't check before using your magic. Did you check afterward?"

"No. She was already gone."

"Then how do you know she was there?"

"Well, Gervaise said..." She faltered.

"It's one of the oldest tricks there is. Present your enemy with a fear that can't be confirmed. Good sense calls for the fear to be denied, which your enemy interprets as guilt, proving to himself, or herself, that the fear is true."

"Then Beryl's death had nothing to do with me."

"I didn't say that. Gervaise was both crafty and experienced, and I know too little of magic to judge. He could have used your powers against Beryl in some way. But even if he found such a way, your actions did not cause Beryl's death."

"I was so afraid. I didn't think I could do any magic right." Angie realized what she'd just said. "He made me doubt my ability. My own doubt would have doomed any magic I tried to perform."

"I suspect that was his goal all along."

Hope surged through her. "Then maybe I can perform the magic needed to restore the gateway."

"No. We can't risk it. You warned me of the consequences of failure."

Angie fidgeted in her seat. "Actually, what I told you wasn't entirely true. I later found out from Beryl that, because of my nature, being created from gateway energy, I'm able to absorb failed spells back into myself with no repercussions."

Reynart sat up straight, his emerald gaze boring into her. "You are certain of this?"

"When I tried to release Beryl's powers back to her, the first spell failed. But there was no magical backlash. I just kept trying different things until I found a spell that worked."

"Then it might be possible to restore the gateways." He grinned. "We have two days to figure out how."

"I can attune myself to the gateway energy. And you can use your power to invoke that energy. But then what? Beryl was going to get the energy from you. But how? And what was she going to do with it?"

Reynart considered in silence for a long time, before slowly answering, "She indicated that the difference between activating a gateway and restoring a gateway was that a gateway needing to be restored no longer had energy flowing in the proper channels."

"How does the energy normally flow?"

"The energy is invoked in the life essence of a member of the royal house. Calling upon that power, the gateway power is tapped. Then the person visualizes a portcullis being raised. The portcullis is lowered to deactivate a gateway."

"Then you just need to examine the visualization for anything not in the proper channel, and remove it. For a portcullis, maybe the chain would be broken, or the gears would stick, or there'd be something jamming the track. That would be the energy imbalance."

He stared at her in wide-eyed surprise. "You see things in such detail when you visualize them?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"No. It looks like a stick figure drawn by a child, and I imagine just the portcullis. There is no wall, no chain, not even any ground. I somehow know whether or not it is open or closed, but not because of anything I see."

“Try it now, and see what happens.”

He started unwinding the ribbon around his left palm, reopening the cut, but she stopped him.

“I’ll just turn the taps back on.”

She closed her eyes and slipped into her mental studio. It was still crowded with white-robed people, and Angie suppressed an urge to yell at them all to get out of her head. It made her feel like she was developing schizophrenia, to have all these people and voices sharing her mind. She liked it much better when her studio was quiet and secluded.

Pushing her way through to the sink, she turned on the water full blast, or rather, tried to. She opened the taps all the way. No water ran out.

She opened her eyes and looked at Reynart in confusion. “The power that flows from me to you isn’t flowing.”

“Each invocation is for a limited amount of time, about a candle mark.”

She thought back to his earlier description. “You use the power in your life essence for the invocation. But so do mages. Why do you have to cut yourself?”

“It is not the life essence itself which provides the power, it is the sacrifice of it. A cut would do no good if it did not bleed. Anything that diminishes the reservoir of life essence will work, such as blood letting or ritual starvation.”

Angie flashed back to Gervaise’s attack on her ten years ago. The mage had originally wanted Alaric to make a blood sacrifice, mingling both his blood and hers. It wasn’t until Alaric objected that the mage had changed the plan to rape. A mingling of life essences. He’d been getting ready to invoke the gateway magic through her.

“Gervaise and Alaric had a different method in mind.”

Reynart’s eyes took on telltale blankness, and his voice was completely toneless as he answered, “Yes. A full release of that kind would also sacrifice his life essence.”

Angie’s cheeks heated. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation. But she had to understand how the gateway magic worked if she was going to be able to restore it. “You and I made love plenty of times. Why didn’t that ever invoke the gateway energies?”

“The sacrifice is only part of the invocation. There are also certain words that must be said, or at least thought, to bind the essence, and thus the energy. Because I did not realize you embodied the gateway energy, I never completed the spoken part of the invocation.”

Angie rubbed her temple, trying to massage away the beginning of a headache. “Okay, here’s what we have so far. I need to attune with the gateway energy, then you invoke it. You visualize a portcullis going up, or that’s supposed to go up but isn’t, and I have to figure out what’s wrong with that picture, and fix it.”

“You can see what I visualize?” Reynart asked in surprise.

"No," Angie sighed. "That's the main problem with the plan. That, and I don't know how I could influence your visualization. It would be so much easier if it was something I was imagining. I wonder how Beryl was planning to do it?"

"The only magic I can perform is the opening and closing of gateways. But I can tap into the gateway energies and transfer that power to a mage, to power larger spells. I gave that assistance to my sister a few times."

"That's it! How did you transfer the power?"

Reynart frowned and leaned back in his chair. "I can't say for certain. I know I gave up my will, and became merely a conduit for her will to influence the gateway energy. But I don't know how it was done."

"If you invoke the connection to the gateway energy by sacrificing your own energy, maybe you invoke the connection to a mage's control by sacrificing your own control."

"It sounds reasonable." He nodded.

She grinned, and leaned forward across the table. "We're right. I know it. I can visualize a garden hose attachment to the sink, which would be a conduit for the power. That would be you. And then, by controlling the hose, I'd control the water, so I could affect the image of a portcullis. It'll work."

"Your enthusiasm and confidence do you credit. But how is this sacrifice supposed to occur?"

"I don't know. How did it work with your sister?"

Reynart smiled. "She was my older sister. She merely put her hand on my shoulder and said, 'I'm taking control now.' I trusted her completely, and followed her lead. Beryl must have been planning on performing a spell, but I don't know what."

"Hmmm. Were there any clues in her analogy?" Angie stood and began to pace the length of the room. "A skilled rider and a harness. A method of guiding? Some sort of application of force?"

She continued pacing, discarding ideas as fast as she tossed them out. Nothing felt like the right answer.

Finally, Reynart interrupted her. "I don't know what method Beryl planned on using, but I can think of one way to sacrifice control. At the same time life essence was sacrificed."

Angie stopped in her tracks, and slowly turned to face him. "You think the answer is making love? I know that's not how Beryl planned on doing it."

"But you don't know what method she did plan on using. For all you know, she may have intended to use an arcane fifth-level spell. We have to work with what we have."

"So bedding me will be a double sacrifice? You sure know how to make a girl feel wanted."

He frowned. "You're the mage, or the mage in training. You tell me. Could we transfer control of the gateway energies to you that way?"

She considered his proposition from every possible angle, then reluctantly admitted, "I can't see any reason why it wouldn't work. But I'm just a beginning mage. I really don't understand these things."

"I understand even less of them than you do. But I do know that Alaric would not have helped Gervaise attack you unless he believed he'd gain access to your gateway powers by doing so. Gervaise told him to do it. And while Gervaise was an evil, twisted man, he was also a skilled and knowledgeable mage."

Angie sighed. "This is too important. If there's even a chance it might work, we have to try. I'd just hoped that after all these years, when I finally made love to you, awake and aware, it would be special."

"If it works, we'll be saving the world. How much more special did you hope for?"

She sat down, studying his reaction. She expected that he'd be pleased, perhaps even eager. But his hands were clenched into fists, and his neck and shoulders were rigid with tension. Even his eyes had a shadowed, hunted look.

"You don't want to do this!" she said in surprise.

"No."

"But you've been dropping hints and making suggestions all week, ever since you kissed me."

"I wanted to seduce you. I still do. I wanted to give us both pleasure. But I always planned to remain in control." A quiver rippled through him. "To give up control is to leave yourself at someone's mercy. In my mind, I trust you. But in my heart, I learned a long time ago not to rely on other people's mercy. And if I forfeit control, I forfeit all control. Not just magic, but all the emotions. Will you be able to handle those, as well?"

"But it will only be for a moment—"

"No. If we're going to do this, we'll do it right. It will be a complete sacrifice. You'll take the lead and be in complete command."

He was asking her to seduce him. A ribbon of warmth curled through her at the unexpected possibility.

"All right," she agreed. "We'll try it. But first, I have to attune myself to the gateway magic. That might take a candle mark, or even more. How long will Kerrim be playing funeral dirges?"

"Until the last fire burns out."

"We have plenty of time, then."

A shiver rippled through Reynart. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. She could practically taste his terror.

But she knew him well enough to know he'd never back down from something he'd vowed to do. He'd given his oath to do everything in his power to restore the

gateways, and that's exactly what he'd do. His personal feelings didn't enter into the matter.

She frowned. In this case, his personal feelings could very well affect the outcome. If he was too frightened, his fear might prevent him from performing. There would be no sacrifice of personal essence.

"While I'm doing magic, you can get used to the idea," she suggested.

He shook his head. "Forgive me, but it is the last thing I want to spend time thinking about."

"Whatever. Just be ready when I come out of my trance."

She closed her eyes and slipped into her mental studio. White-robed people filled it from wall to wall, and some had even climbed up to sit on the counter.

"There are more of you than before," she told the man in front of her.

He nodded. "The gateway energy is becoming more unbalanced, and it is building up here."

"Well, I can't work with all you people here. Get out!"

She shoved her way through the crowd, forcing a path with her elbows. When she reached the door leading to the rest of her house, she threw it open.

"Everyone out. Into the house proper. The studio is now off-limits."

The people started filing through the doorway. When about half of them had already gone through, the woman who looked like Beryl stopped at the threshold, and turned to Angie.

"You realize that if we enter your home, we will enter all aspects of your mind? Only by confining us to your studio can you confine our effects to your magic."

Cold ripped through her. Her earlier fears had been right. If she went through with this, she'd end up insane. Really, truly insane. The idea of losing her mind terrified her as much as the thought of giving up control terrified Reynart. But like him, she had no other choice. She was this world's only hope.

"I'll deal with that later. Right now, I've got a world to save."

The orderly exodus continued, but it no longer gave her any pleasure. Each white robe swishing by only reminded her of doctors' jackets, straight jackets, and white padded cells. If her efforts here failed, she hoped she died in the attempt. Because she didn't want to go back to that.

When her studio emptied, she closed the door, and opened the window. The same ageless, timeless smell of desert permeated the air. But there was something else. Gasoline.

She peered out the window. Two cars waited on the hard-parked desert soil, their engines revving. A girl stood between them, a handkerchief held high in the air.

They were drag racing on her desert!

She stopped herself before she ran outside to confront them. The people weren't real. The drag race wasn't real. It was all just a metaphor for the gateway energy.

What did it represent? The answer sprang instantly to her mind. Potential. And power.

She started searching through her studio for anything that also reflected potential and power, and that smelled like gasoline.

Not surprisingly, another box of belongings waited on the shelf in her storage closet, reeking of gasoline. She lifted it down, and started going through the objects one by one.

She lifted out an umbrella and laughed. She couldn't help it. Had it been less than a month ago that she'd confessed to Donald that she couldn't travel to Seattle because she was afraid of the rain? After all the magical things she'd faced, a little normal, ordinary rain was nothing.

Next came a program for the Seattle art show. Donald had accepted on her behalf. If she woke from her coma tomorrow, she'd just have time to get there before the show began. But strangely, other than a slight curiosity as to how people liked her work, she had no wish to attend the show. She had no wish to return to her real body.

The program smelled of possibilities, like a morning mist. She set it aside.

She dug through layers of items whose significance all seemed to be tied to her return to her real body, in her own world. Somehow, they failed to inspire any longing to go back.

Then she lifted out the final object in the box. A gold circlet, unadorned except for engraved scrollwork, gleamed in her hands. It smelled of gasoline – power, and potential.

She placed it on her head. In her mind, she wore her own body, with her own serviceably short hair. With no braids to get in the way, the circlet settled smoothly into place, as if it had been made for her.

A memory flashed before her. When she'd first seen Reynart's circlet, ten years previously, she had asked if he got to choose the metal himself, since the silver went so well with his coloring. He'd explained that he wore a silver circlet because he was a prince. Only the king and queen were allowed to wear gold. And with the rest of the royal family dead, Reynart was the King, even if there was no formal coronation.

The circlet must illustrate her connection with the Nord D'Rae royal house, embodying the gateway energy that only they could access. She accepted that connection, even as she hoped for a deeper and more meaningful connection to the remaining member of that royal house. She willingly bound herself to this world, whether or not she ever became Reynart's Queen. Here, she could make a difference. She had the power to fulfill her potential.

She opened her eyes. She was sitting in the chair in the officer's room, with Reynart sitting across from her, watching her.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm attuned to the gateway energies."

She stood, and unpinned her cloak.

"Now, are you ready for your sacrifice?"

He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Yes. What do you want me to do?"

A thrill of power coursed through her, as she considered all of the potential ways they could go from here. But her goal was to sacrifice his control, while maintaining her own. She could think of only one way to do that.

"Take off your cloak and spread it on the floor," she instructed. When he had complied, he stood silently, waiting for further orders.

She approached him, and caressed his cheek. He trembled, but neither backed away nor leaned into the caress. An infinite array of possibilities for what to do next opened before her, and another thrill of power rippled through her.

Reaching down, she caught the hem of his surcoat. She lifted it up, gathering the fabric around his chest, before she realized the problem of his being taller than she was.

"You'll have to take it the rest of the way," she said.

He pulled the surcoat over his head in a single smooth motion, then held the crumpled fabric in one hand. She took it from him, and draped it over the back of the chair.

She undid the laces of his armor, then let him remove that as well. It joined the surcoat on the chair.

He shivered, but not with cold, as she lifted the undertunic. Her fingers glided up over his stomach to his chest, tracing the ridges of muscle marred by hard lines of scar tissue. He twitched every time she touched another scar.

"Do you want to leave your undertunic on?" she asked.

He took two deep breaths, letting them out on shaky sighs, before he trusted himself to answer. "That is for you to decide."

He'd be more comfortable with it on, a bit of psychological armor. She almost said he should keep it. But then she wondered if psychological armor, no matter how flimsy, might prevent his total sacrifice of control. Too much depended on them to take that risk.

"It comes off," she decided.

He jerked the undertunic over his head, as if determined to do the unpleasant task as quickly as possible, and hurled it at the chair holding his other clothing.

Angie gasped. White lines scored his chest, shoulders, and stomach, many more than she'd been able to feel. She hadn't remembered it being this bad. Or else, he'd not had an easy ten years.

Slowly, starting at his shoulders, she kissed the length of every one of his scars. His eyes closed and he groaned, but he made no move to stop her.

Then, she stepped around behind him.

Her eyes widened and she couldn't catch her breath. Her chest felt like it had when he'd slammed the heel of his palm into it. It hurt, especially when she tried to breathe.

She blinked rapidly, hoping that the nightmare of scars before her was a result of double vision. Surely one man could not have sustained so many injuries.

Twining her arms around him, she pressed her cheek to the puckered flesh between his shoulder blades and hugged him tightly.

"You're crying," he whispered, his voice full of wonder.

"Who did this to you?"

“I was caught, once. I foolishly believed that if I left no evidence, they could not find me. The lack of evidence merely proved to them that it was the work of a master assassin, so they captured me and attempted to make me confess. When I did not, and reminded them that I had powerful friends who would not want to see me wrongfully imprisoned or executed with no proof, they were forced to let me go. I fled the city before they realized I had no friends, and was in fact guilty, but very good at withstanding punishment.”

Angie squeezed her eyes shut, trying to blind herself to the images his words conjured. But she couldn't.

As she had with his chest, she started at his shoulders and kissed the length of every scar. By the time she reached the scars dipping below the waistband of his hose, he was trembling.

“Anjeli, please. I can not remain standing much longer.”

“Then you may sit, on your cloak. And remove your boots and hose.”

He collapsed onto the cloak, kicking off his boots and stripping away his hose. Her exploration of his chest and back had already aroused him. She knelt beside him and closed her fingers around his shaft.

He threw back his head and groaned, pulsing beneath her hand.

Angie smiled, delighting in the now-familiar rush of magical energy that filled her. He'd let her take the lead in their lovemaking so far, but he'd still retained control of himself. That was about to change.

Stroking her fingers lightly along his length, she squeezed gently. He groaned, growing firmer and thicker beneath her touch. Repeating the gesture with her nails elicited a tortured moan of pleasure. Then she slid her palm to the base of his shaft, cupping and rolling the warm weight of his balls.

He whispered her name, his shaft quivering and glistening with the first drops of his seed.

She felt the magical energy gathering, as his release neared and his control thinned.

She pushed his knees apart, and knelt between his legs. Bending her head, she took him into her mouth, sliding up and down his length, and caressing him with her tongue. He balled the cloak in his fists, his head whipping from side to side, as he fought to remain still beneath her. She listened to his ragged breathing and felt the heat of his arousal, using his body's own clues to guide the speed and strength of her loving. Then the last of his control dissolved. He cried out, his hips rising as his hot seed flooded her mouth. She swallowed, then swallowed again, absorbing his essence into herself.

Chapter Seventeen

Angie found herself in the mental replica of her studio, confused by the unexpected shift. Water gushed from the faucet, pounding into the sink and spraying droplets onto the tiled floor.

She hurried over, sliding the last foot across the wet tiles, and adjusted the taps until a steady stream of water flowed into the sink. The water pouring in was just slightly less than what spiraled down the drain, and the standing water slowly receded.

Stepping back, she wiped her forehead and let out the breath she'd been holding. That had been close. But at least she knew the first part of their plan had succeeded. Reynart had invoked her connection to the gateway magic.

She scanned the studio, looking for anything new. Reynart's gift lay on the counter, a coiled silver garden hose.

The hose was not plastic or rubber, but a fine weave of steel wire. It reminded her of the cutaway views of tires she'd examined while waiting for work to be done on her car.

She grinned. No doubt she was the only one to ever own a steel-belted radial garden hose. But it suited its creator. A normal hose might crack or tear, providing less than perfect control of the water flowing through it. Not a drop would escape this hose, unless the pressure built up so much that the walls of the hose blew out.

Recalling the white-robed figure's caution not to let the sink overflow, she shivered, aware for the first time of the risk Reynart took every time he invoked the gateway magic. Maybe the spell that blinded members of the royal house to magic wasn't to keep them from having too much power, but to prevent them from seeing the threat of the power they did use.

She picked up the end of the hose. Rather than a simple nozzle, it had a pistol grip to control the flow of water, a swiveling nozzle to control the force and dispersion of the spray, and a series of unmarked levers and slides on the side whose purpose mystified her.

She uncoiled the hose and fitted the other end onto the faucet. Water pressure swelled the silver mesh, and tried to pull the grip from her hand.

Holding the pistol grip with one hand and the nozzle with the other, Angie released a burst of water into the sink, coloring the sink red. She almost dropped the hose in surprise. It didn't squirt water. It shot paint.

Well, in a way that made sense. Reynart had said that his role was to convert the energy into a form the mage could use. And she used paint.

Dragging the hose over to her canvas, she adjusted the nozzle for a thin, wide spray, then held down the trigger. The force of the escaping paint nearly tore the hose from her grasp, but she held on.

The picture that formed on her canvas was of a portcullis, just as Reynart had said. But it was an ornate, wrought iron work of art, depicting the royal crest of Nord D'Rae. The business end of the portcullis consisted of barbed steel shafts, a hand span apart, that rested in a groove

between neatly laid paving stones. An arch of similar gray fieldstone surrounded the portcullis, with channels cut into the sides to guide the heavy iron, and a dark opening at the top that the portcullis would rise up through. The arch was in the center of a crenelated wall, two or three stories high, with the top story marked by cross-shaped slits every few feet.

As soon as she stepped back to study the whole picture, Angie recognized the landmark. It was Castle Altha, the Nord D'Rae seat of power. But it didn't look quite the way she remembered it.

She leaned forward, examining the details. A single blue pennant hung limply from the highest tower, rather than the cluster of flags she recalled. And, of course, the last time she'd seen the castle, the portcullis had been up, and two smartly uniformed guards had stood at either side, watching the flow of people. Now the portcullis was down, the wooden gate behind it closed and barred, and no guards remained.

She looked for anything that might prevent the portcullis from being raised, but saw nothing. So, focusing her thoughts on seeing the heavy iron rising into the recess in the wall, she directed another spray of paint at the canvas.

Nothing changed.

She adjusted the nozzle, tightening the spray to a single pinpoint, and tried again. Still nothing.

Growling with frustration, she stomped back to the faucet and turned the taps full on. When she returned to the canvas, she blasted it with the full force of the spray.

The painting flew off the easel and smacked onto the tile floor.

Angie dropped the hose and hurried to pry the canvas off the tiles. It had fallen paint side down, but when she picked it up, not a drop of paint clung to the floor.

"This is magic," she reminded herself. "Things are not always the way that they seem. The laws of the real world don't necessarily apply."

She picked up the canvas and set it back on the easel, then examined the levers and slides on the side of the nozzle. She imagined the nozzle's pistol grip as part of an actual pistol, dimly remembering a BB gun she'd used for target practice years ago. One of the slides was slightly up and to the rear, roughly where she remembered the BB gun's safety being.

She slid the metal bar forward, and was rewarded by a satisfyingly loud click. Something had changed. She just wasn't sure what.

She glanced at the painting, and stared in shock. It had come alive, as if she looked through a window onto the actual castle. A gust of air lifted the blue pennant, snapping it to its full length.

But the castle was strangely isolated. No birds relieved the milky white sameness of the sky, and no trees or grass surrounded the castle. It was as if the building remained, but all indication of life was gone.

Angie shuddered, uncomfortable with where that thought led, and focused her attention on the painting again. She directed another burst of spray at the portcullis. This time, water jetted out, splashing the wrought iron and staining the wooden gate behind it.

She'd found a way to interact with the painting! Directing the nozzle at the seam between the wooden gate and the arch, she let rip with the full force of the water.

The gate shook in its mountings. But the water pressure wasn't enough to break it loose.

Angie chose one of the switches on the side of the nozzle at random, and flipped it. Flames shot from the hose into the picture, licking at the wooden gate and raising curls of steam.

She flipped the switch back to the water setting. A flamethrower might have been a good thing to try first, but she'd soaked the wood with water. It wouldn't burn now.

She flipped a different switch, and the hose transformed into a fire hose, complete with a two-handed nozzle grip. She hung on for dear life, as the hose writhed and twisted. Unlike the garden hose's pistol grip, the fire hose had no method for restraining water flow. If there was any water pressure at all, the water would come squirting out.

After drenching her studio and herself, Angie managed to get the hose under control, and pointed at the painting. Water pounded against the wooden gate, shaking it in its hinges. And then the gate flew open in a spray of splintered wood.

She stumbled forward, no longer balanced now that the resistance to the water was suddenly gone. Water flooded the castle courtyard. She thumbed the switch that would convert the hose back into a controllable garden hose again.

With a hiss and a pop, the overhead light flared and burnt out. Other bulbs around the studio blinked and died in a chorus of snapping filaments. She'd overextended her power, big time.

The garden hose suddenly went limp in her hand. She pressed the trigger, and only a faint trickle of water seeped out.

As she watched, the hose shimmered and disappeared. A few last drops of water plopped from the now-naked faucet into the sink, then the flow stopped completely.

She shut off the taps. Her candle mark of borrowed power was over. And she'd failed. She hadn't raised the portcullis.

She opened her eyes to the officer's quarters. She knelt on Reynart's cloak, her joints aching from having been in the same position for so long. While she'd been busy with her magic, Reynart had gotten up and dressed, and now sat on one of the chairs, watching her.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"I don't think so. I did something, but I didn't raise the portcullis."

He slumped in the chair, asking as an afterthought, "What did you do?"

"I visualized the main gate at Castle Altha. The portcullis was down, and the wooden gate behind it was shut and barred. I opened the gate, but I ran out of time before I could raise the portcullis."

"Do you think the barred gate could have been the imbalance you were looking for? Now that it's removed, the gateways will work as they are intended?"

"It's possible. But I don't want you to get your hopes up."

"There's only one way to know. Come." He stood, then reached down and hauled her to her feet.

She remained standing on the cloak. "Reynart? About what we did..."

"It was necessary for your magic. I understand."

"I just wanted you to know, you did everything you could have done to restore the gateway. If it didn't work, it's my fault, for not knowing how to use the gift you gave me."

He pushed through the door, and stood in the courtyard. Gazing through the open gate, he watched the flickering light from the funeral pyres silhouetting Kerrim's bent form.

"My vow to you is fulfilled," he whispered. "Bind me not when you leave this world."

She hoped he was talking to Beryl's spirit, because she had no intention of leaving. Not now that she'd found a place and a person to whom she could truly belong.

Angie picked up his cloak and stood behind him, waiting for him to turn around. Eventually, he did.

"One other thing about what happened," she said softly, needing to say it before she lost her nerve. "What I did. I would do it again. Not to take your control, but to give you pleasure. If you asked it."

It was the closest she could come to admitting her feelings for him. If she outright told him that she loved him, after all this time and all that had happened between them, either he wouldn't believe her, or he'd be frightened away.

She could see him weighing and sifting her words, sorting through all of their possible meanings and implications. He frowned, as if troubled by the conclusion he'd drawn, then his eyes widened and he searched her face. She had no idea what he was looking for, but he must have found it, because his expression softened, and he smiled.

"If you asked, I would let you do it again."

She stepped back, stunned by his admission. Did he really trust her so much that he'd willingly relinquish his control just because she asked it? Or was it more than trust? Deep down, did he still love her, too?

He held out his hand. "Come, let us see if your magic succeeded."

She let him lead her to the pillars in the center of the courtyard, but she wanted to throw herself on the ground, scream, cry, and kick her feet. It just wasn't fair. Every time she got close to him, something interfered. Would it really have mattered if they'd waited one more minute before rushing back to try and save the world? Couldn't they take even a smidgen of time for themselves?

Sighing, she stood beside him, watching the gateway. She already knew the answer to that question. She didn't even need to ask it.

She frowned, leaning forward to examine the gatepost. Subtle lines of energy twined around and through it, glowing faintly in the afternoon sun. Her pulse sped up, and she tugged at Reynart's sleeve.

"I think it might have worked. Can you tell if it's active?"

"It's not. There's no ripple in the air between the gateposts."

"Can you activate it?"

"I can try."

He exposed his left palm. Irrationally, she hoped the constant slashing of his skin before it had fully healed wouldn't leave a scar. He already had so many.

His lips moved silently, and he raised his fist, holding it squarely between the two posts. Blood welled between his fingers, and dripped to the ground.

A wave of heat rushed over her, then cold, as the magical energies around the gateway fluctuated wildly. Bright lights arced between the two posts. Reynart didn't react to them, so she guessed they were magical lights, and he couldn't see them.

He turned to her, his ear-to-ear grin and sparkling eyes making him look no older than Kerrim.

"It worked! The gateway is restored!"

She grinned back. The rising energy buffeted her, making it difficult to stand.

"We have to get through to the main gateway, and restore the rest of them," she shouted over the howling wind. "The network is getting dangerously unstable."

He nodded, and took her hand. Then he led her through the gateway.

* * * * *

She wasn't sure what she expected to see. Barren desolation, maybe, or another village deserted like Kingscap. She certainly hadn't expected to face a ring of pikemen with their weapons trained on her and Reynart, with an outer ring of mounted archers lining them up in their sights.

Reynart froze, his gaze sweeping the assembled troops. Then he dropped her hand and stepped forward, where they could see him clearly.

A murmur ran through the men. The circle opened, and a thin man in his early forties stepped forward. He wore silk trousers and tunic of a deep blue, of the same style as Beryl's. If his clothing hadn't given his profession away, the aura of controlled energy surrounding him would have.

He whispered something, and gestured with his hands. A cloud of glittering sparkles drifted over Reynart, then settled to the ground. Angie checked her impulse to sweep the sparkles from the air, forcing herself not to interfere in something she didn't understand.

The man's eyes widened. "It is not an illusion. You have returned."

Reynart didn't bother to answer, still sweeping the scene with his gaze as if he couldn't get enough of the sight.

The mage folded his hands and bowed his head, saying quietly, "My lady queen, the situation is not dangerous, but requires your personal attention."

A moment later, the air beside the mage imploded with a loud pop. A tall, dark-haired woman wearing a richly embroidered gown appeared next to him. A gold circlet held back her flowing hair.

"This had better be..." Her brilliant gray eyes widened, then a smile of angelic purity lit her face.

"Dri," Reynart breathed. "You're alive."

As if sleepwalking, the two drifted slowly toward each other, meeting at the edge of the stone pavement surrounding the gateway. They clasped hands, neither saying a word, just staring at each other.

Finally, Ladria grinned and said, "Welcome home, little brother. You always did know how to make an entrance."

"I'm sorry I'm late. I had some unexpected delays."

"I'm sure." An impish light twinkled in her eyes. "You do realize the barrier curtain was up, don't you?"

He blinked. "Why did you lower it?"

"We didn't. It crumbled." Her expression turned serious, and she looked over Reynart's shoulder at Angie. "I thought your friend might know something about that."

Angie frowned. She was still trying to get used to the idea that Nord D'Rae appeared to have survived the flood that supposedly destroyed it. More than that, the sister Reynart trusted more than anyone else had abandoned him instead of going after him. Yet, he didn't seem angry. She was missing something. "What's the curtain?"

"Ten years ago, Nord D'Rae was attacked by hostile magic. Although we were able to repel the first onslaught, many people died. The advising council felt we might not be able to repel a second attack, and requested that the borders be sealed. The curtain prevented anything, including magic, from going in or out of the kingdom."

"The advising council?" Reynart asked. "What about the King?"

"Drowned."

"The Queen?"

"Killed in the confusion. By accident, of course."

"Of course." He shook his head. "But you're a mage."

"I'm not really Queen. I'm only Queen Regent." She pulled the circlet from her head and handed it to him. "I've been holding this for you, hoping that you would find a way to return."

As he took the circlet from her, the pikemen dropped to one knee, and the archers bowed low over their horses' necks. Angie had a sudden urge to snatch the gold band away from him, to prevent him from taking his place as king. But she couldn't do that. He'd make a good king. He'd made a vow, by the stream that night, and he always redeemed his vows.

Mocking laughter filtered around her, and she glared at the surrounding pikemen. But they were all kneeling, their faces serious as they gazed upon their king.

Another wave of laughter rippled past her, mingled male and female voices. The shadow mages. The laughter was coming from inside her own head.

She gritted her teeth and forced herself to watch as Reynart lifted off the silver circlet he wore, replacing it with the gold one, and handed the silver to his sister. Ladria brushed back her hair with her fingers, then slid the silver circlet into place.

She grinned. "The gold's pretty, but it's too heavy. I much prefer the silver."

A burst of sound came from Angie's right, as the shadow mages on that side of her head all shouted. She couldn't hear what they said. There were too many of them. A breeze gusted across her legs, chilling her. That was followed by a hot desert wind. Except the thin film of dust covering the flagstones around the gateway never moved. The shifting currents were not air, but energy. Gateway energy.

Angie cleared her throat.

"I hate to interrupt your reunion, but we have to stabilize the gateways."

Reynart explained to his sister, "Anjeli and I were recruited by the mages' council to restore the Nord D'Rae gateways, as their uncontrolled magic was corrupting the entire gateway network."

"And what if it is? The mages' council has done nothing for us," Ladria snapped, finally sounding like a member of the Nord D'Rae royal house.

"How could they? You were sealed in a cocoon."

"You said that you would never support their efforts."

"I changed my mind."

Ladria's eyes narrowed. "What's your game, little brother?"

"I haven't time to explain it now. Will you trust me?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

The two walked back to join Angie beside the gateposts. Ladria placed one hand on Reynart's shoulder and closed her eyes.

Her eyes flew open and she snatched her hand away. "It is you who no longer trusts me." She darted a look at the armed troops watching them, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I wanted to go after you, but the advisors wouldn't let me. They insisted that at least one member of the royal bloodline had to remain in Nord D'Rae. How could I tell them they were wrong? Things were chaotic enough without starting a civil war."

The breezes buffeted Angie's legs, making it difficult for her to stand. And the chattering shadow mages made it difficult for her to hear. She focused all of her attention on Reynart and his sister. Their words were important. She couldn't remember why, but she knew that it was so.

"I thought you were dead, and the kingdom destroyed," Reynart said, his voice almost too low to hear.

"We sent messengers out to look for you, using the gateways that hadn't collapsed. The few that returned died of their wounds before they could tell us anything. We had to assume our enemy was watching the gateways, and ambushing them. If he was readying an attack force, we had no defense. Most of the mages died containing the storm, and the flash floods destroyed the army. The soldiers couldn't swim in their mail." She shook her head, her gray eyes flashing. "We had to close the gateways. We had no choice. And I could not deactivate them. I had to seal the entire border. That was the only way to protect the kingdom."

"I don't blame you, Dri," Reynart said softly, brushing her shoulder. "And it's not your fault that you can't tap the power. I don't trust anyone."

Angie flinched at his words. It wasn't true. He trusted her. He'd proved it by offering to surrender his control to her, for her asking.

Oh no. That couldn't be the answer. He'd hate her. But they had to see this through. They'd unleashed the power of the gateways, and it was up to them to restore them.

"What do you need to restore the collapsed gateways?" Angie asked Ladria.

Ladria studied her, piercing gray eyes seeming to read right into Angie's soul. "It is a simple attunement spell, tuning the individual gateways to the master key. But I cannot perform it alone. I need the gateway energies distilled, so that I can use their essence."

Reynart and Angie traded a secret glance, recalling the use of other essences. Then his eyes widened, and he shook his head. She pretended she didn't understand his gesture.

There was no other way. Maybe, if she'd had more time, Angie could have stumbled through the attunement spell on her own. But now, with the shadow mages filling her thoughts and distracting her, the gateway network would crumble before she could finish. She only hoped Reynart would be able to forgive her as easily as he'd forgiven his sister.

"Reynart, I'm asking now. Surrender your control to me."

His eyes squeezed tight and he grimaced, as if he tried not to give in. But whatever corner of his mind was responsible for the ultimate decision recognized the words of his vow, and ceded control.

This time, when she suddenly popped into her mercifully silent studio, she was ready. She attached the hose and turned the taps on full blast. Then she concentrated on what she was about to do. She needed to be able to bridge her power and his control, so that the distilled power was usable by Ladria.

The image of a star-capped magic wand sprang into her head, and she opened the nozzle, painting it into existence. Then she adjusted the hose settings, and made the wand real.

She opened her eyes, and saw a glittering silver wand in her hands. She handed it to Ladria. The woman's eyes widened.

“But how did you – ?”

“That’s not important. Use it to restore the gateways.”

Ladria clasped the wand in both hands and closed her eyes. Angie felt a rush of power swirl past her. The shadow mages surged forward, running in crazy circles through her mind. They shouted, but whether in happiness or terror, Angie couldn’t tell.

Then Ladria opened her eyes and lowered the wand.

Angie’s mind was suddenly silent.

She collapsed to the paving stones, all of her energy gone.

The wand disappeared, and Reynart dropped to his knees beside her. “Anjeli, are you all right?”

“Just tired.” What else could she say? That the imaginary people in her head had taken all of her strength when they disappeared?

Lifting her into his arms, he stood and faced the assembled troops. “The gateways have been restored, although most of them are deactivated. The active ones leading out of the kingdom must be guarded. I need twelve volunteers.”

The men all stepped forward. Angie smiled weakly. They were all willing to do their king’s bidding, and Reynart commanded them with ease. He had no other choice but to be king. She was confident he would do well.

He chose two pikemen for the gateway a day’s march to the north, and two more for the gateway half a day’s march to the east. He selected six mounted archers to ride to the other three active gateways, all of which were further away. Finally, he chose two pikemen to remain at this gateway.

He gestured to the chosen pikemen, and also the mage. “Go through the gateway. On the other side, you’ll find a minstrel playing the funeral songs for two pyres. Remain with him as long as he needs to play, then bring him and his horses through the gateway, and direct him to the castle.”

Kerrim. She should be worried about Kerrim. He wasn’t yet healed, and he’d grown very close to Beryl over the past few days. She knew she should care, but somehow, she couldn’t find the strength. That should have terrified her, but she could only muster a mild unease.

The pikemen saluted, clashing the hafts of their pikes against their round shields, and Reynart turned his attention to the mage. “What level are you?”

“Fourth level,-my lord King.”

Reynart didn’t even blink at the honorific. “That should be high enough. Accompany the pikemen through the gateway. The lower of the two pyres contains the remains of a mage named Gervaise.”

Ladria sucked in a startled breath.

Reynart glanced over at her, then continued, “I want you to make certain that not even his ashes survive. Do I make myself clear?”

The mage paled, but nodded. Angie wondered what sort of punishment the mage expected for failure. He didn't realize Reynart was not his father. None of them did. But they'd see. He'd be a good king. He'd made a vow.

Angie frowned. Her thoughts seemed to be running in a loop. A tightening loop that slowly spiraled into madness. But the shadow mages were gone. Wasn't that a good thing?

The mage said, "Yes, my lord King. Nothing of the mage Gervaise is to survive his burning. It shall be as if he never existed."

"Good." Reynart nodded, dismissing them, and they hurried through the gateway.

Reynart turned and scanned the archers he had not already chosen. "You. Come forward."

The man nudged his horse forward. About ten feet from Reynart, he stopped and bowed low over his horse's neck. "Your servant, my lord King."

Reynart glanced at Ladria. "You can only transport yourself, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then you go back to the castle and warn them. I'll ride."

The archer dismounted, remaining bowed while Reynart set Angie upon the saddle, then swung up behind her. Looking down on the bowing man at his feet, he asked, "Is the fastest route to the castle still the track through the lowland farms?"

"Yes, my lord King."

Reynart nodded. He swept the remaining troops with his gaze, then announced, "Dismissed."

As the group broke up, he put his heels to the horse's sides and galloped down the track toward the castle.

Chapter Eighteen

Riding behind each other proved too difficult at a gallop, so Reynart slowed the horse to a gentle canter and sat Angie sideways across his lap. They rode through the countryside in silence except for the horse's hooves striking the dirt track.

Reynart's head swiveled from side to side as he tried to see everything. Angie just let the panoramic scenery unfurl before her, too numb to do more than observe as it scrolled by. She could see why he'd missed it.

The grass was a brilliant emerald, shading either to blue or yellow as it crept up hillsides and around outcroppings of rocks. The warm brown wood of slender-trunked trees, similar to elms and birches, gleamed with red and gold highlights.

A flock of gray-brown birds burst from cover beneath purple heather. They squawked in fear and indignation as they circled the area, waiting until it was safe to land.

It's beautiful.

"Yes, it is," Angie answered.

"Pardon?"

She glanced up. Reynart's forehead was creased in confusion. With the birds making such a racket, she'd probably spoken too softly.

"I was agreeing with you."

"I didn't say anything."

Her skin turned icy. Now that he mentioned it, the voice she'd heard hadn't been his. It belonged to one of the shadow mages she'd expelled from her mental studio. But they were nowhere near a gateway. The white-robed invasion of her mind had begun in earnest.

"Anjeli? You don't look well."

"I'm fine. Just tired." And going insane, but she couldn't tell him that.

He shifted his hold, gathering her more securely in his arms and pillowing her head on his chest. They were returning to the castle in almost exactly the same fashion as they'd left it ten years ago.

The gateways were repaired. The rightful king was restored to his throne. She couldn't shake the feeling that her time here was rapidly coming to an end.

If she'd had the energy, she would have ranted at the cruel twist of fate that was sending her home just as she was deciding she wanted to stay in this world. There was so much she still wanted to do. And she wanted to do it with Reynart.

"I'm sorry I used your promise against you," she said.

"The kingdom must always come first."

"You'll make a good king."

"I hope so."

They rode in silence through neatly laid out fields, passing row after row of swaying golden grain. It smelled a little like hay. She would always associate the scent of hay with bittersweet happiness, now.

She expected to see farmers out working in the fields, but the land was strangely deserted. The track wound past a farmhouse, and a flutter of white at a window caught her attention.

"Did you see that?"

"The curtain being dropped? Yes."

"But why are they hiding?"

"I would assume because they know who I am. I spotted a couple of boys hiding near the gateway, looking at the pikemen and archers. They ran away when Ladria transferred the crown."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"The news had to get out sooner or later." He glanced back at the now-shuttered farmhouse and sighed. "The army will remember me. But the people will remember only my father."

"You'll show them."

She closed her eyes, lulled by the rocking motion of the horse, and the warmth of Reynart's arms around her.

"When we get to the castle, do you have official duties you'll need to fulfill right away?"

"I doubt Ladria's had time to prepare anything."

"Good." After a moment, she added, "Do you think we could be alone?"

"I will guarantee it." His fingertips stroked wisps of hair away from her face. Then he lifted her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips.

His kiss started softly, sealing his promise. But it soon blazed with the heat of passion too long restrained.

He lifted his head, struggling for breath. His green eyes were dark with desire as his free hand roamed over her hip and thigh. She had trouble catching her own breath, clinging to his battered surcoat as if could climb right inside it in her effort to get closer to him. Her lips tingled, partially from the remnants of magical awareness, but mostly from his sinfully skillful kiss.

"The fields are deserted," he offered.

"No." She wanted to pull him from the horse and make love to him right then, and she wouldn't have cared if the fields had been as full of people as the Grand Canyon during the height of tourist season. But she had the awful feeling that her first time with

him would be her last, and she wanted a memory she could cling to that meant more than a quick tumble in a deserted field. "I told you, I want our first time to be special."

"Special." He sighed, and winced as he shifted her weight. "And that would be what?"

"You. Me. A soft bed. And no interruptions for hours. I mean, candle marks."

"From the first bell of *Prima* to the last stroke of *Derna*, I would devote the entire day to you." He grinned. "But I'd prefer if you didn't make me wait until tomorrow's dawn to prove it."

She smiled. "You won't have to wait."

* * * * *

By the time they rode through the great entrance to the castle, now properly flanked by eight guards in spotless black and red livery, the voices in Angie's head were making it difficult for her to concentrate on what was going on around her. Ladria met them in the courtyard, and recited some sort of formal welcome speech.

Reynart helped Angie down from the horse. "Thank you, but my lady is feeling tired from her magical efforts. Where can she lie down for a few candle marks, undisturbed?"

Angie shook her head. She'd thought Reynart called her "my lady," the term used to one's superior, instead of "milady," denoting a peer or someone beneath you to whom you were being formally polite. But the honorific made no sense. No one outranked a king.

"The king's chambers have been prepared for you. My things are still in the queen's chambers, but she is welcome to rest there, if she likes."

Reynart's answer was drowned out in a buzz of conversation from the shadow mages. Angie clung to his arm as he led her through the castle. They moved slowly, for every hallway contained servants and retainers who needed to profess their delight that the king had returned. This usually involved bowing deeply or falling to their knees, although some insisted on flinging themselves prostrate across the stone floor. Not one of them appeared sincere.

Reynart ignored them all, although Angie was sure he was cataloging the faces and responses of everyone they passed, as well as keeping an eye out for the few servants he'd respected and admired ten years ago. Finally, they reached a pair of double doors at the end of a hallway. Four guards in black and red livery flanked the doors at stiff attention, two clutching pikes, and two armed with swords that looked far more serviceable than ceremonial.

At Reynart's nod, the pikemen swept open the doors. He ushered Angie inside, then turned to tell the guards, "We do not wish to be disturbed. For any reason."

The guards paled. She wondered how the old king had punished guards who disturbed him. Saluting stiffly, the men pulled the doors shut, sealing Reynart and Angie in the king's chambers.

They stood in a parlor, no doubt intended for receiving favored guests. A scattering of elegant chairs clustered around the blazing fireplace, framing two low tables. Elaborate tapestries, depicting scenes of battle and conquest, curtained the walls, and a plush carpet in a red and black abstract pattern covered the stone floor.

Doors led both right and left, and Reynart chose the left-hand door. It opened onto the bedroom, dominated by a massive canopy bed hung with burgundy brocade.

Hooks driven into the stone high up on the walls indicated that more tapestries had previously decorated this room, too. Angie wondered what their subjects had been, that Ladria felt they needed to be removed to prepare the room. Considering Reynart's father, maybe it was best that Angie didn't know.

A cheery fire banished the slight chill seeping in from the stone, and Reynart led her to the bed. He reached for her, then hesitated.

"Now that the time has come, I fear I shall wake to find this all but a dream."

His words echoed her own sentiments too closely. In answer, she flung herself into his arms.

Their doubts quickly faded in the face of their rising need, and they sacrificed themselves to the pleasure they had withheld too long. Shedding their clothing as quickly as possible, they tumbled naked to the bed, sinking deep into the thick down bedding. Reynart groaned in pleasure.

"By the Pair, a decent bed. I've missed this."

Angie laughed. "Is that all you've missed?"

He growled and flipped her onto her back, pinning her to the bed, then leaned back to admire her, his eyes darkening with desire. His fingertips traced her features, skimming over her brows, cheeks, hairline, and jaw. His pupils dilated, eclipsing all but the faintest corona of green around them, and he lowered his head, claiming her lips with his own.

The brief delay had only strengthened their ardor, and it burst into full flame with his kiss. She stroked and caressed his muscled back and slim hips, cupping his backside and pulling him between her legs where he belonged. He braced his weight with one hand, with the other squeezing and caressing her breasts, smoothing across her hips and stomach, and stroking her hair. All the while, they continued kissing, as if they would suffocate if they did not breathe each other's breath.

Her mind was spinning, a combination of lightheadedness from lack of oxygen and the drugging effects of his touch, by the time he finally broke the kiss. Gasping for air, he pressed openmouthed kisses along her jaw, her neck, her collarbone, and between her breasts. She writhed beneath him, her fingers fisting in his thick hair, mutely encouraging him.

When he lifted his head, she forced her passion-dazed eyes to focus, and looked up at him. To find him watching her, eyes open and intent. He was fully awake, this time. He was here with her now completely, in both body and spirit.

She begged, "Reynart, please."

Claiming her mouth in another soul-searing kiss, he thrust inside her. Their satisfied groans mingled with their breath. Then he was moving, pressing her deep into the soft down beneath them with the force of his thrusts. She arched up to meet him, their bodies finding the rhythm beyond their conscious command. Faster and faster they moved as one, forging a world where sovereignty and supremacy meant nothing and all that mattered was giving each other happiness. They reached that happiness together, her body spasming in uncontrolled release as his seed poured into her.

Afterward, lying naked in each other's arms, Reynart whispered, "Promise you will never leave me again."

Angie bit her lip to keep from crying. "I can't. The power that created me has gone back into the gateways. I can feel it fading."

"No. You are just tired."

"You've always been truthful. Don't start lying now."

Reynart squeezed his eyes shut, as if he could block out the truth by refusing to look at it. Then he opened his eyes and stared at her, as if memorizing her every feature. "Will you return?"

"Gervaise summoned me the first time, and I think he summoned me this time as well. With his death..."

"I will find another mage to summon you."

"No!" At his wounded look, she hastened to explain. "Beryl said the spell that created this body and pulled my spirit into it was a tenth-level spell. Do you know what sort of devastation that would cause if it failed? You mustn't take that risk."

He paled and bolted upright. "When you described your paintings, you spoke of a connection to this world. That is the same connection that you used to come here?"

"Well, I didn't use it. Gervaise used it to bring me here. At least, I think he did. I'm not really sure how it worked."

"Then so long as that connection exists, mages from his Brotherhood of Chaos may try to exploit it. They may try to complete his plan to reach your world through you."

"Maybe. But I doubt any of them is a tenth-level..."

She jerked upright and stared at Reynart in horror. So long as her connection to his world remained, she threatened its safety. Unscrupulous mages who didn't care what happened if they failed would be unable to resist the lure of easy power.

Perversely, Gervaise's first failure had protected her, by isolating the Nord D'Rae gateways and requiring Reynart's assistance to bridge the gap. But now that the Nord D'Rae gateways had been reconnected to the greater gateway network, any mage could access the power. Or could try.

She was going to have to cut herself off from Reynart's world completely. Once she returned to her own body, she would never see him again, not even as paint on her canvas.

The voices in her mind that had been silenced briefly when she and Reynart made love, returned with a vengeance. When she severed the magical connection, the voices would go with it. Her mind would be her own again.

It seemed too high a price to pay for her sanity.

She reached for Reynart, making love to him with quiet desperation. Instead of the fevered passion that had driven them moments before, this time they were both trying to memorize each other. She touched every inch of his skin, determined to remember forever the play of muscle beneath his taut flesh, the path of each and every scar, the soft furring that arched down to his proud erection, and even the way his dark hair flopped into his eyes without his circlet to contain it. It was all important, because her memories were all she would have of him.

Meanwhile, his hands and mouth traced the contours of her body with equal thoroughness, until she was mindless with an aching need that only he could satisfy. He slid inside her, filling her body even as love for him filled her heart. Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks as she buried her face against his shoulder, and they strained toward another perfect completion.

Faster and faster they moved, their hips meeting and parting over and over again in an endless frenzy. Finally, he pushed her over the edge, shouting with his own release a moment later. They held each other close, neither speaking, while their hearts and lungs returned to normal speed.

Reynart kissed her lips gently, and whispered, "The kingdom must always come first."

He dressed quickly, stopping only for one more drugging kiss, and went out to give the guards a new order. She could hear him through the open doorways.

"I need to speak to Ladria. Now. Bring her to me at once."

The guard hesitated, clearly not certain of the correct response, before asking, "My lord King, you are aware that it is after *Pasanae*?"

"I am. And I would not care if it was after *Dernae*. Summon my sister."

"Yes, my lord King." The guard's armor creaked as he bowed extra low, then hurried down the hallway.

* * * * *

Ladria arrived a short while later, a velvet robe belted around her sleeping gown. Reynart and Angie were waiting for her in the parlor.

"I see time has not tempered your impatience. Could this not have waited for morning?" she asked.

"No."

Her eyes widened at his flat denial. "I am at my lord King's command."

"Sit. This will take a while." He waved her to one of the chairs before the fire, and seated himself opposite her. Angie stood beside him, and he drew her into his lap.

Ladria's eyebrows lifted, although she didn't comment.

Speaking quickly, Reynart outlined the situation as they understood it. When he'd finished, Ladria nodded.

"I learned of Gervaise's plan and Alaric's treachery while I was in Tellurah." Her expression hardened. "They thought because I was out of the castle, I could not see or hear them. My uncle granted me a cadre of mages, and we were returning to Castle Altha when the storm hit. That's the only reason we were able to save as much as we did. But if I knew of his plan, you can be certain other mages did, as well. And they may try to resurrect it."

"We must sever Anjeli's connection to the gateway energy."

"But that would kill her!"

"No," Angie corrected. "That will kill this body. My real body is on another world, in a coma. A deep sleep that I can't be woken from unless my spirit returns."

"I must protect Nord D'Rae," Reynart said. "And to do that, Anjeli's true body and spirit must be reunited, and her connection to the gateway energy destroyed. I believe that if I banish her, her spirit will return to her true body. Could you then destroy the connection?"

Ladria considered this, from time to time sketching glowing figures in the air and studying them. Finally, she answered, "Yes, it can be done. And done safely."

Reynart nodded, as if that was the answer he'd expected. "Now I have a more difficult question."

Angie twisted around to see his face. They hadn't discussed anything else.

"Can her body be summoned to join her spirit, replacing the construct body she inhabits now, and then the connection destroyed?"

Angie's heart beat faster, and she fumbled for Reynart's hand. Please, oh please let Ladria say there was a way.

"It is possible," Ladria admitted, after more consideration and study of glowing figures. "If her body rejoins her spirit, the connection may be closed. But that is only one of the possible outcomes of that spell. The other is that her spirit may be forever joined to the gateways, and both bodies destroyed."

"Isn't there any way to tell which way it will go?" Angie knew the answer, but had to ask.

"None that I could predict. It depends on whether your spirit's energy patterns are more attuned to your body or the gateways. Whichever one the spell chooses, your connection to the other would be forever destroyed."

Reynart frowned. "Can you not force one outcome over the other?"

"I could try. I will not."

His eyes darkened, and Angie cut in before he had the chance to say something he'd regret. "I think I see the problem. If you use your spell as a catalyst, to help connected things that are already attuned find each other, you can be certain of the spell's success, but not of its effect. If you try to force a specific connection, you can be sure of the effect, but not of the spell's success."

"Exactly. And I will not jeopardize Nord D'Rae by failing at such a high-level spell."

"Could a higher level mage attempt it?" Reynart asked.

Ladria's expression turned stormy. "I may still be your sister, but I am no longer a little girl."

"My apologies." Reynart bowed his head, holding the position longer than necessary before glancing up again. "I spoke from ignorance of magic, not doubt of your skill."

"I understand. And if there was any way to save your lady, without risking the kingdom, I would do it."

The shifting shadows in her mind made it difficult for Angie to concentrate. "Whatever you do, you'll have to do it soon. The gateway magic is taking over."

Ladria's forehead furrowed as she tried to interpret Angie's words. Finally, she guessed, "The gateway energies are reabsorbing the energy that built your construct body?"

Angie nodded. That was easier than trying to explain about the voices in her head.

"I can be ready to perform the spell within a candle mark. Only tell me which choice you prefer."

"You must return to your own world," Reynart answered immediately. "You will be safe there."

"But I don't want to be safe. I want to be with you!"

He smiled at her inadvertent insult, but the expression soon faded into sadness. "As I would be with you. But you are attuned to the gateway energies. That was the magic you performed at Kingscap."

She laid her palm against his chest. "That wasn't the only magic I performed."

Reynart covered her hand with his, and looked deep into her eyes. "But that sacrifice was justified. Do not risk your life when you will surely fail. Return to your own world."

"If I return to my own world, some mage could always create a new construct and pull my spirit back. Or he could try, and fail. If my spirit is here, no mage would try."

Reynart ignored Ladria's startled gasp. "You only say that because you hope you will restore body and spirit both. It is the height of folly to base your decision on something so unlikely, just because you want it to be true."

They argued further, but he remained implacable. Eventually, she conceded. Her choices were the normal life she'd always dreamed of, with no connection to Reynart or Nord D'Rae, or a future as pure energy, incorporated into the gateway network.

She sighed. "There's an old saying on my world, 'Be careful what you wish for. You may get it.' Send my spirit back to my body. At least I'll have my memories."

Ladria stood and tugged her robe firmly into place. "I shall make my preparations, and come back to perform the spell in one candle mark."

She hesitated, searching Reynart's face, then walked over and rested her hand on his shoulder. "I am truly sorry for what I must do. But the needs of the kingdom come first."

He sighed. "I know. Go and prepare your spell. We will be ready when you return."

Ladria patted Angie's shoulder, too, then turned and swept out of the room.

Reynart held Angie close. "There are so many things I wished to tell you, things I wanted to show you. You would have loved Nord D'Rae."

He'd given her the perfect lead line to confess her feelings. It was now or never. And "never" would be coming frighteningly soon.

"I already love Nord D'Rae. Because I love you."

His eyes widened and he stared at her. When he finally found his voice, it was soft with wonder. "You do."

"Yes. I do." She smiled. Even if he never spoke the words outside of a dream, his eyes said everything she could hope for. He loved her too.

She laid her head on his shoulder. "It's just not fair!"

"Nothing ever is. I've survived the last ten years by capitalizing on that, playing the odds in every situation. And one thing I've learned is that you have to use every opportunity you're presented with."

Cradling her in his arms, he stood and walked back toward the bedroom. Once inside, he undressed her and laid her on the bed. Then he worshipped her with his body, letting his deeds say what his words could not. This time, his only pleasure came from her fulfillment, every kiss and caress designed to lift her that much higher, her cries and pleas spurring him on to greater and greater inventiveness, until his final kiss between her legs sent her soaring up to Heaven.

Afterward, he held her close, stroking her while he described the wonders of his kingdom that he'd hoped to one day share with her.

"Silver waterfalls? They sound beautiful. I wish I could see them with you." She sighed.

He chuckled. "So you can speak again?"

She blushed all the way down to her toes. He had been very thorough, and she'd been very...vocal.

His fingers traced the contours of her face. "Our time is not yet through. May I now hold you to your words?"

Her passion-drugged mind slowly unraveled his request. "You want me to do what I did in Kingscap? For your pleasure?"

"For pleasure. And also...I wish to gift you again with my strength and control. You will need it more than I."

She smiled as she pushed him onto his back, remembering his first gift. "I accept, because they are freely given. As your essence was already given."

"Then accept one last gift, freely given though too late found. My heart. And my love."

Angie closed her eyes and bit her lip. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't ruin her last precious hour with him.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and blinked her vision into focus. "I accept. And give you my heart and my love in return."

Unable to trust herself to speak after that, she pressed her lips to his chest and kissed a raised white reminder of life's cruelty. Mindful of Ladria's imminent return, she did not kiss every scar, but zigzagged a path down the crisscrossing network of ancient injuries. And then the souvenirs of past pain and suffering faded into unimportance as she tasted his exultation of love and life.

All too soon, they rose and dressed, their efforts hampered by their constant need to touch each other. But they were ready and waiting when Ladria returned.

She nodded to them both, her face set in serious lines. Wordlessly, she wrapped a brightly colored shawl around Angie's shoulders, and led her to the center of the room.

Ladria closed her eyes and extended her arms, murmuring beneath her breath. A strange tingle invaded Angie's toes, then skittered along the bottom of her feet and crept up her calves. Soon, she couldn't feel anything below her waist, and the tingling reached all the way to her shoulders.

She didn't dare look down, for fear that she might not see a body there. Instead, she turned her head to look at Reynart. He was standing stoically, observing her dissolution with the air of someone determined to do what was best for everyone besides himself. She had to be strong for him. Let his last memories be of her facing the future with the same calm knowledge of having done what was right. The pain could come later, when she was alone.

Taking advantage of his gift and the little magic that still remained to her, she wrapped herself in his strength and iron control. As the tingling spread over her face and her vision started to fade, she forced all of her love into one last smile. He smiled in return. And then her vision darkened and went black.

She seemed lost in a fog, filled with glowing beads of light. Terror gripped her soul, that she had somehow been cast into the gateway network after all. But then one of the beads grew brighter, expanding until it swallowed her.

She floated, weightless, above her body. Banks of high-tech equipment lined the room, and wires snaked between her motionless form and an array of beeping monitors.

The monitors went wild, flashing red lights and shrieking warning alarms. An army of nurses, orderlies and interns swarmed through the door.

But even as she watched them racing to save her, she knew it was too late. She wanted to tell them not to bother, but they couldn't see or hear her.

One of the interns charged a pair of shock paddles. The whine of harnessed electricity rose in volume, and Angie realized she had a choice. She could let them restart her heart, and draw her spirit back into her body. Or she could use the energy of the paddles to power a spell of her own, and draw her body into the ether with her.

She didn't hesitate. As the paddles descended, she cast her spell and pulled her body away.

Sudden silence reigned in the room. All of the monitors were dark, devoid of power. And the medical professionals gathered around an empty bed that had contained a patient only a moment ago.

Angie smiled as she rose up out of the bubble and back into the swirling glow between the worlds. She could still feel Reynart's strength flowing out to her, and she followed it home.

She reappeared on the carpet, exactly where she'd been standing before, except her real body wore only a blue hospital gown.

"Anjeli?" Reynart asked, shocked by the appearance of a woman he couldn't possibly recognize.

She smiled and nodded.

He rushed to her side, hugging her and pressing fervent kisses to her lips, as if he feared she might still be taken away.

"I don't understand." Ladria circled the happy couple, making arcane passes with her hands.

Reynart broke off his kiss long enough to say, "You cast the wrong spell. You called her body back instead of sending her spirit away."

"Oh no, I meant to do that. But her spirit should have merged with the gateways."

He froze. Slowly, he turned to face his sister. Gone was the loving brother, and in his place stood the deadly assassin. "What did you say?"

All the color drained from Ladria's face, and she took a hasty step backwards. "You heard her yourself. The only way to keep someone from trying Gervaise's spell is for her body and spirit to both be lost to the gateway energies. It was for the good of the kingdom, Rey."

“You forget yourself. The king decides what is good for the kingdom.”

Angie felt his muscles bunching beneath her embrace. “She’s your sister,” she pleaded. “And misguided or not, her actions brought us together.”

His tone could have given a polar bear frostbite. “There is another way to prevent anyone from trying Gervaise’s spell again. Curtain Anjeli’s world, so that no man or magic may pass.”

“That would require too much power. Why, the entire mages’ council—”

“Has enough power to perform such a task, if they work together. Tomorrow morning, you will leave on a mission to speak to them. Explain the situation. And if they refuse to act, tell them I am collecting my favor.”

Ladria hesitated. “And then? Am I to be allowed home?”

“You are my sister. And I do understand why you acted as you did.” He sighed. The facade of the assassin dropped away, leaving behind only the man who had been betrayed once again by a person he loved and trusted. “Perhaps by the time you return I will be able to forgive you, as well.”

She knelt, brushing her forehead against the carpet. “Thank you, my lord King.”

He pointed to the door. “Go.”

She scrambled to her feet and dashed out, startling the guards stationed outside. The doors closed, shutting out the clatter of weapons and shouted challenges.

Reynart and Angie faced each other in the sudden silence. “So, this is what you really look like. It suits you.”

She smiled, not realizing ‘til he’d mentioned it how nervous she was that her changed form might change his feelings about her. She reached up and patted her shoulder-length hair.

“I’m going to have to grow my hair out, though. I mean, if I’m going to be staying here.”

“You’re staying.” He grinned. “And since I’m the King, my word is law.”

She smiled back, snuggling against his side. “We’ll see about that. But in this case, I’m more than happy to agree.”

Epilogue

Reynart tucked Angie's gloved hand firmly in the crook of his burgundy velvet-covered arm. He wasn't giving her the opportunity to bolt again.

"You can not avoid the celebration in honor of your new Collegium. It is but a single dance," he whispered.

"Dance, hah!" she snorted. "Marching in time to the music is more like it. I don't mind dancing with you —"

"I should hope not."

"—but I hate dancing with all the Dukes. Sooner or later, I always forget which way I'm supposed to turn, and then they have to pretend their Queen didn't just stomp on their feet."

She nervously twitched the layers of cerulean blue satin that tangled around her legs when she tried to dance. So far, her efforts to suggest a more casual style of dress had been met with horror by every seamstress she'd dared mention it to. Maybe she should include fashion design as one of the arts her new school was teaching.

A pair of trumpets blared, cutting off all conversation in the room beyond. Liveried guards swung open the doors, and she and Reynart stepped into the silent hall. She felt Reynart tense, scanning the bent heads for any sign of danger.

He relaxed slightly, but stayed alert to the shifting crowd. He found these formal functions as tiring as she did, but he never even considered shirking his duty to attend. Unlike her.

She smiled. He was the picture of kingly elegance in his jewel-studded burgundy velvet doublet over a matching satin undertunic. No one guessed he carried more weaponry concealed beneath the fluid cloth than his four guards carried openly. Old habits died hard.

They reached the open center of the hall. Reynart nodded to the musicians, and they began a long piece of music. Angie dutifully followed his lead, walking, turning, walking, turning the other way... His sharp tug on her wrist prevented her from blundering into the crowd, and kept her moving the way the dance form demanded.

"I wonder if I could teach them to play the Alley Cat?" she mused. "It's still just stepping and turning, but it's faster, and everyone expects you to mess up the steps."

"You can discuss it with the new Royal Bard."

"You're announcing the appointment tonight?" He'd found fault with all of the applicants, and she'd thought he wasn't going to accept any of them. She glanced at his expressionless face. "What are you hiding?"

“The Tellurah Duke is anxious to partner you in the next figure, my lady Queen.” He handed her off to the middle-aged man waiting on the sidelines, and held out his arm to the Duchess.

The other high nobility thronged the floor. After pacing their way through another elaborate set, the low nobility joined them. Angie thought her dancing had much improved. She only stepped on the Tellurah Duke’s foot once, and the Davarin Duke’s twice, although she did elbow an overstuffed matron in the ribs. But that wasn’t her fault. The woman simply took up too much space.

At the end of the last figure, she gratefully allowed her partner to escort her to the dais. Reynart reclaimed her arm, then addressed the crowd.

“As you know, many competitions have been held in the past months to select a Royal Bard, who will also serve at my lady Queen’s Royal Collegium of Artists.”

Why couldn’t they just call it an art school, like she’d wanted? Still, after more than a year in Nord D’Rae, she’d learned that there were some battles it just didn’t pay to fight.

“While many fine musicians and teachers applied for the post, none were well-suited for the dual role required. Until the latest applicant.” He paused, as excited murmurs ran through the crowds. They’d seen the caliber of artist Reynart had refused.

Reynart shot a pointed look at the low table beside her elaborately carved chair. It held a silver medallion on a red and black striped ribbon.

She picked up the medallion, then almost dropped it when she saw whose neck it would adorn.

“Kerrim! You’ve finished your training?”

He knelt before them. When he spoke, his voice had a smoky quality it hadn’t contained before his torture, but every syllable was as clear and pure as music. “Yes, my lady Queen. Last month. I raced to get here before your Collegium opened, hoping for a position. I never dreamed...”

“Wait until you hear his graduation piece,” Reynart told her. “You’ll understand why I chose him.”

Angie hung the medallion around his neck. “Congratulations, Kerrim. Will you sing it for us now?”

A servant appeared with Kerrim’s lute and a stool for him to sit on while performing. Angie and Reynart took their seats while Kerrim checked the lute’s tuning. He bowed once to them, then sat sideways on the stool so that his voice would reach the gathering crowd as well.

He strummed a chord, bringing a hush to the assembly. “This is a new work, called *The Ballad of Beryl Ap-Ardhre*.”

*“In a Sungaret tavern
Long miles from his throne*

*King Reynart D'Altha
Had destiny sewn.*

*"With a crash as of thunder
The doors, they flew wide,
And Beryl Ap-Ardhre
Came striding inside.*

*"To the left? To the right? No,
To neither she glanced.
'My lord and my lady
There's only one chance.'"*

Angie knew the story already. After all, she'd lived it. But the assembled crowd hung on Kerrim's every word, leaning forward with wide eyes as he told of Beryl's courageous impersonation of their Queen, allowing her to escape the evil mage while at the same time saving the life of an insignificant young minstrel. They gasped as he described the horrible threats made against her. And one young noblewoman swooned when the mage's evil henchmen overpowered Beryl to steal the Queen away. By the time he reached the last battle at Kingscap, tears were running down many of the people's cheeks.

*"'For the death of this mage, your
Own death did you bring,'
Swore Reynart D'Altha,
Assassin and King*

*"Holding fast to the dagger
That Beryl had spelled –
Her last living magic –
Gervaise, Reynart felled.*

*"Then he tore down old Kingscap
To build her a pyre.
And Beryl Ap-Ardhre
Was born off by fire.*

Angie rose out of her chair and joined the rest of the crowd in thunderous applause. Lords and ladies approached the new Royal Bard to compliment and congratulate him, while pockets of listeners tried to repeat their favorite sections of the ballad. Younger ladies fluttered around the edge of Kerrim's circle, trying to make eye contact, then retreating into demure silence if he glanced their way.

Angie couldn't believe she'd once questioned Kerrim's ability to make it as a musician. Surreptitiously, she wiped at her damp cheeks. Why, if they'd been back in her world, he'd be a multimillionaire rock star, with all the appeal of Elvis or The Beatles.

He glanced her way, and she smiled. "Beryl could not have asked for a finer funeral gift. And we could not have found a finer Bard."

Reynart signaled to the musicians, and they launched into another dance. Gradually, the gathering drifted away from Kerrim, joining the spiraling figures being carved on the floor. Reynart led Angie outside, away from the crowd, and they both paused to look up at the curtain of stars shimmering overhead.

Angie turned toward Reynart. "With Kerrim heading up the music department at the new Collegium, we'll turn out the best musicians anywhere. This could be the start of a new golden age for Nord D'Rae. Just think about it! Art, music, and truly progressive things like indoor plumbing for everyone."

Reynart chuckled. "Do you think perhaps you are overextending your reach?"

"No. My world had wonders yours hasn't even dreamed of, and I want to bring them all to your people. Not to mention developing the wonderful things native to this world." She leaned close. "What do you think we should focus our efforts on first?"

"Your ambitions do you credit, but I prefer a more traditional legacy. Let us first focus on creating an heir."

She grinned. "I wasn't planning on giving up *that*. But I'll have plenty of time to devote to other pursuits while you're busy doing the political thing."

"Were you always this devoted to your painting?" he complained.

She glanced up at the stars again, wondering which one was the familiar sun, being circled by the Earth. Reynart had recently received a message from Ladria saying her mission was a success. No one from this world could ever reach the Earth again.

Angie shook her head. "You were right, Donald. I'll never get to that show in Seattle now. But who needs it? I've got the best of both worlds right here."

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