

## Chapter 24

### Nightstone's Dungeons

*"When they are not hostile to me personally, I find that I much prefer the dungeons of the Dark to the dungeons of the Light. Of course, the Dark sometimes uses torture, but when they don't do that- and sometimes even when they do- they prefer to keep their prisoners comfortable in other ways."*

-Selya Goldfleet.

"Are you ready to talk?"

Nightstone watched the man turn to face her. She had watched him wake up and look around the "cell" in which she had put him with a blank expression on his face. That had changed to amazement when he saw the tapestries on the walls, and realized that he was lying on a soft bed instead of a pallet. Nightstone smiled to herself. She had never seen someone who could resist the shock of being dropped into a pleasant room when they were expecting a dungeon.

"Where are you?" the man asked, his voice steady, after a moment. Nightstone sighed in irritation then. Dalznans were hard to disconcert, probably because they had been trained all their lives never to be impressed; they saw magic on a daily basis. Her dungeons had affected him, but not enough to last.

"Where you cannot see me." In truth, she was standing in the open door, but the Illusion mages who had come south to serve her in the last few days had been at work, making the open door look as if it were smooth wall. "I can see you well enough, though. Tell me what your name is."

The man stood there, considering that, as if he were wondering if it would be a real disadvantage to tell her. Nightstone took the time to study him in turn. He had the brown hair and dark eyes that were typical of Dalznans, though he spoke Orlathian with only a faint trace of an accent. He had been in the south a long time, then. He still wore the robe of a Master of the Star Circle- the Orange robe of a Master of Six Wonders, in fact- but he didn't wear it well. Perhaps he wasn't a Master after all.

Nightstone shook her head. She couldn't let her thoughts about him distract her too much, and, above all, she knew that he had to be a Master. No other could have cast Falto's Pattern.

She was putting the message that had come back from the Lady of the Star Circle, telling her that no students had been put out or exiled in the last five years, away from contemplation for a moment.

"My name is Kymenos," he said at last.

Nightstone waited. He said no more, still staring past her. He had figured out where her voice must be coming from, though he couldn't see her face. "No title?"

"Why would there be? I am hardly a royal."

"No," Nightstone agreed. "Unlike the Princess we have cooped up in the dungeons below you."

She watched him think about that. Then he said, "Then you have no more need of me, and you could let me go."

"We can cage the Princess Alliana, but Destiny protects her from us," said Nightstone. "We can't make her talk. We can only make you talk."

Kymenos grimaced. "I wish that you wouldn't. I don't like pain."

"As long as you tell the truth, we shall have no need of such instruments." Nightstone found herself relaxing. It was always possible that here she had one of the few truly reasonable prisoners. Dalznans were stubborn, but make them see that speaking was to their advantage, and they would do it. "What is your title? Kymenos of the Six Wonders, by your robe, but you do not wear it well."

"No. I have no title. I have only called myself Kymenos for years."

"But you are a Master of the Star Circle," said Nightstone, not bothering to keep the impatience out of her voice. With some prisoners, she might have tried, but she believed Kymenos when he said that he wanted to avoid pain. "You used Falto's Pattern. I know that."

"I have mastery of only a few patterns," said Kymenos. "I left the Star Circle fourteen years ago, because my teachers all agreed that I was not learning much, and there was no way they could teach me. Since then, I have wandered, mostly in Orlath and Doralissa. I sell plants that are useful for curing minor aches and pains of the blood and stomach."

Nightstone blinked at him. That was all flat truth, or she had spent years learning mastery of body language for nothing. "I do not believe you," she said, nevertheless.

Kymenos only shrugged, as if it didn't really matter to him.

"What are your elements?"

"I don't have a single one," said Kymenos, "or at least, not mastery of a single one. I work best with Light magic, but I've also used Azure and Crop. I don't have much of a talent for Scarlet magic at all."

"The Star Circle would never have left you half-trained."

"The Star Circle didn't want to teach me anything, once they found out I had no interest in staying." There was a faint trace of pride in Kymenos's voice.

"What did they say about your elements?"

"They wanted me to become Master of Twenty Wonders, but I think that they made a mistake when they estimated my elements, and then didn't want to change it."

Nightstone leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, revising some of the assumptions she had made in her head. Masters of the Star Circle were calm and composed, and if they didn't want to tell her anything, then nothing but torture would get it out of them- sometimes not possible at all, since they could use magic of some kind to leave their cells. They all had their pride, but they weren't arrogant. Their training had made them more reserved than anything else. Kymenos's defiance to her before had already suggested that he was different, but Nightstone hadn't realized how different.

She always had the threat of pain to hold over him, but so long as he told her the truth- even if it was a truth that Nightstone didn't want to hear- that threat would be useless, more an outlet for her own frustration that a creator of anything useful. And without that threat, she was largely powerless over him.

It was disconcerting.

"Princess Nightstone? Are you still there?"

Nightstone opened her eyes and stepped back to the door. "I am still here, Kymenos. You must see that you have placed us in a dilemma."

"I don't see why," said Kymenos. "You have the Princess, as you wanted. You can let me go."

"I want to know why you were guarding the Princess, why you saved her life, and what you're doing with a telepathic horse."

"Destiny chose me to guard the Princess. I didn't choose it myself." Kymenos's voice went bitter, and he pulled back his robe a little. Nightstone blinked. His upper body was covered with bruises, including one particularly nasty one under his ribs that vanished back into the robe. Nightstone hadn't seen so many colors in a long time, or so she thought; it kept her from thinking about things she shouldn't. "It hurts me when I disobey. As for the telepathic horse, I bought him from a farmer. I didn't know he was telepathic at the time. He claims to be bonded to me and to love me. I don't think that he has any connection to the Princess."

Nightstone shook her head slowly, then remembered that Kymenos couldn't see her. "I have no doubt that you believe all those things to be the truth. That doesn't mean that they are the truth. Destiny must have some purpose in choosing you, and in giving you a telepathic horse."

"That wasn't Destiny."

"It must have been. Ordinary people don't ride around on telepathic horses." Nightstone stood up, satisfied. "We will keep you here for a while, Kymenos, and see what Destiny does with you imprisoned. I trust that you have no objections to that?"

Kymenos only flopped back on the bed and didn't reply, easing the robe forward so that it covered his bruises again.

Nightstone lingered, staring at him. She expected that he would complain, or glare at the door, or do something else that prisoners did when they thought they were alone. Instead, he glared at the ceiling, and whatever he was thinking about vanished from his face. Nightstone might have stood alone with a stone for all the information he told her.

Nightstone shook her head. *I will have to come up with some way to make him talk that doesn't involve pain. Or something that will make Destiny tip its hand.* "Have a good night, Kymenos."

He didn't respond, didn't even startle at the sound of her voice. Nightstone raised her eyebrows. Well, perhaps even now he was different than she had thought he was, even on the second rethinking.

She turned for the stairs. Princess Alliana was indeed being kept below the stairs, in a traditional dungeon. She had demanded her freedom, howling at the top of her lungs and in general acting so much like a Princess out of a history-tale that Nightstone thought it would be petty to disappoint her expectations.

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Nightstone could hear the whining all the way up the stairs.

"I want to be let out! I want my mama! We had fresh bread at home. It's cold here. I want a soft bed to sleep on. I want-"

Nightstone shook her head. *If she would only talk about important things the way she babbles about the unimportant ones, then we would have no need to keep Kymenos prisoner.*

"Welcome, Alliana," she said, halting next to the bars that separated her from the Princess. "I hope that you're enjoying your stay."

"Don't sound like a damned innkeeper!" the Princess screamed at her. "You have no right to hold me prisoner here."

"You're in rebellion against the Dark," said Nightstone. "And the Dark rules Orlath. I have a perfect right. Did you really think that you could go on this little Quest of yours and have no one notice?"

It was only a guess, since neither Kymenos nor Alliana had said anything about a Quest just yet, but it was a good one. Alliana huddled away from the bars, shrieking, "I won't tell you anything!"

"Yes, they all say that," said Nightstone. "They almost always say it just before they start screaming."

Alliana suddenly calmed, as though she were listening to someone whispering in her ear. She looked at Nightstone, and smirked. "Destiny says that you can't force me to tell you anything, that Light protects me."

Nightstone shrugged. "That's true. But we can keep you here and away from your childish Quest."

That worked. Alliana sat up, her eyes flashing. "I am *not* a child. I'm as old as my sister."

That made Nightstone narrow her eyes in interest. "Your sister?"

"Yes. Lyli is her name, and she's not as important as I am. But I'm as old as she is." Alliana lifted her chin. "I'm not a child!"

Nightstone nodded agreeably, while motioning, with a hand held out of the child's sight, for a scribe to come to her. He would write faster than she could. "Of course you're not. And where does your sister Lyli live, exactly?"

## Chapter 25

### The Triaga

*"The Triaga runs out of the elven lands and to the west, and it carries the dreams and hopes of the elven people with it."*

-Attributed to the elf Lorethiel.

"Do you know where we are, Ternora?"

"Not at the moment."

"Some guide you are."

"The paths often change and shift in this part of the jungle, my Prince. It may be indeed difficult for the Lady Ternora to say where we are."

"You're just defending her!"

Ternora bent forward, studying the path that lay before them, and trying to ignore the squabble of the dragon and the Prince. They wouldn't come to blows, or at least she didn't think so. She had gotten good at judging what tones of voice would lead to blows. This was just another of the disagreements that they had every day as they walked the paths to the south, following the course of the Triaga River.

The quarrels were growing sillier and sillier. The dragon and the Prince had quarreled over the theology of Erlande, over the history of Doralissa, and over who had the stronger magic. Now they would disagree over the tone in which she had said something, or how much honor the Prince deserved, or who should walk in front. Ternora was regretting ever agreeing that Viridian could accompany them.

*Well, I didn't have much choice about that, she reminded herself. I'm regretting that I ever agreed to be the guide for Prince Warcourage in the first place.*

"The paths may have changed and shifted so greatly that not even the greatest guide could find them again," Viridian was saying at the moment. "You have to account for that possibility, Warcourage."

"I don't have to do anything I don't want to! And call me by my title, or I'll make sure that you can't follow us to the Pool of Siliyonete!"

Ternora peered ahead. The path petered out not far ahead, and lost itself in the green wood-shade. It could be a game trail, she had to admit, not one of the shifted paths they were looking for.

She turned to the dragon and Prince. "I don't remember this trail. I think it's only one that the animals have made. Let's go back to the Triaga and find another way south."

"You are lost," said Warcourage. "I knew it."

"You could always find another guide, my Prince."

"They would probably just get more lost," he replied, and turned his back, stomping towards the River.

Ternora shook her head and fell in line behind him, while Viridian began to slither forward, his tail knocking at trees when he wasn't careful. It still amazed Ternora that something so large could fit so easily through the jungles, but then again, Viridian was mostly very careful. He had kept his tattered wings folded to his flanks ever since the accident, not even spreading them when he was roaring at the Prince and Ternora knew it would have been more natural for him to spread them.

Ternora definitely preferred the dragon for a traveling companion. He was quiet, and didn't roar unless Warcourage got him angry first, and he knew as much about the jungle as she did. He didn't have to be told not to eat the pretty fruits that they sometimes found hanging from

the branches. He didn't have to have help bringing down the animals that sprang across their path.

"Do you think that Warcourage will ever learn that not everyone in the world is inclined to give him his title?"

Ternora glanced sideways at the dragon. Viridian's voice was quiet for his great size, almost empty, but his eyes were fixed on the Prince, and they flared with the dazzling fire that she knew meant anger in dragons. She could almost see the flames as separate things, moving behind Viridian's eyes.

"As long as he stays Prince of Doralissa, there is no reason he should," said Ternora. "After all, he has someone who will take up the Court position if I don't want it. There are always those who can tolerate a royal snit for the sake of the jewels and money that come with it."

Viridian was silent for a few moments, slithering along. Then he said, "But what about pride?"

"What about it?"

"I would have thought that you would be too proud to bow and scrape to this childish Prince in hope of reward." The dragon slung his head towards her. "Forgive me if you think this is an impertinence, my Lady Ternora, but you are more like a dragon than most humans."

Ternora touched one of her pointed ears in silence.

"Half-elves, if you insist." Viridian bowed his head so that his chin brushed the ground. "You must understand that, to a dragon, such things make very little difference."

"What about taste?"

"I prefer my meat scalded, and perhaps that has something to do with it, but I have never noticed any great difference in taste between humans and half-elves," said Viridian in all seriousness. "But my question remains, my lady. Why would you bow and scrape?"

"I want a Court position. More than the jewels, it will mean that I won't have to roam the jungles any more, and possibly do something stupid, the way that I could if I were by myself."

"Something stupid?"

Ternora eyed him for a moment. *Well, of course, there's no reason that he should know. Dragons don't go mad with the passing of the centuries.* "Most half-elves start to get a little crazy around my age. We become convinced that we're going to live forever, like elves, and start showing off- climbing walls that we can't climb, flinging ourselves off ledges, trying to swim the ocean. An elf could do those things, but we can't. And we die. I don't want that to happen to me."

"Have you felt the urge to do so yet?" Viridian kept his eyes on her as he crawled along, not looking ahead. But then, this was ground that they had already covered when they decided to walk parallel to the Triaga.

"Not yet. But I have heard that the urge can come upon one very suddenly. And if I'm alone when it happens, then I might die before someone else could see and stop me, or before I could stop myself."

"I see. That is a good reason for keeping the Prince company."

"Thank you."

"But not a good reason for bowing and scraping."

Ternora rolled her eyes and walked ahead. It was hard to expect a dragon to understand the affairs of two-leggers, she'd found. Every understanding achieved was superficial. They didn't have to worry about protecting themselves, so they thought that no one else did, either.

She pushed past a liana and came out on Prince Warcourage, standing near the bank of the Triaga River. His gaze on it was thoughtful, and he turned his head to the south as if the watercourse naturally led his gaze there.

"Is something wrong, my Prince?" Ternora asked, drinking straight from the River as she asked the question. Yes, there was water in the flask on her hip, but it always tasted like leather after far too short a time.

"Not wrong," said Warcourage. "But I have had a thought, and I think that we should follow my thought."

Ternora hid a sigh behind her hand as Viridian pushed out into the open. *The dragon is sure to argue with him in a few moments.* "What is that thought, my Prince?"

"If the Triaga leads directly into the sea-"

"But it does not."

Warcourage paused at that, and glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "It doesn't?"

"No, my Prince. It forms a delta with the other great rivers of the south, the Gala and Faladra. We could ride rafts down into the delta, if that is what you are thinking, but we would then float lost among the islands and the muddy waters. Sooner or later we would have to take to land again."

"I was not thinking of boating," said Warcourage. "There is time for ships when we come to the sea."

Ternora blinked. "That is the first sign of ordinary common sense that you have displayed," she said.

Warcourage stared at her for a moment, then turned regally away and spoke to Viridian. "I need to know, my lord, how to send a message down the waters so that my Lord Erlande may hear me and know that I am coming."

The dragon laid his head in the grass, and blinked at the Doralissan Prince. "He knew the moment you declared your intentions to reach the sea and try to appease Him, my Prince. Every wind that blows towards the sea carries His messengers and messages."

Warcourage stared again, then said, "Still, I think that we should send a message down the Triaga somehow."

"Why?" asked Ternora.

"It is simply something that Destiny tells me," said Warcourage dismissively, and then knelt on the edge of the River and dipped a hand in the water, closing his eyes. He moved his fingers, creating ripples. Ternora stood behind him, staring at his hand and waiting for something wondrous to happen.

Viridian was not so polite. After a few moments, he began to chuckle.

"I will send him a message!" said the Prince angrily, and leaned forward, submerging his hand on the elbow in the water. His fingers still moved, Ternora saw, trying to send out a message and only creating ripples.

Ripples in the water-

Ternora swallowed. "My Prince, perhaps you should take your hand out of the water. There are dangers in the River."

"There are dangers everywhere to one of Doralissan royal blood, while the Shadow rules his country," said Warcourage, and went on moving his fingers.

A moment later, he shrieked in pain. Ternora saw the swarm of fast-moving dark shapes, and nodded grimly. *Piranhas*.

"Pull your hand from the water, my Prince!" she yelled, grabbing his arm.

"I will send him a message! They're only fish!" Warcourage leaned further forward, though tears of pain were coursing down his cheeks. "I can almost feel Erlande through the water-

And then he screamed, and toppled into the Triaga.

## Chapter 26

### Threats and Captivity

*"I have never been fond of captivity. I find that I miss the sky, and the sense of freedom to move about my myself."*

-From *Profound Statements of the Obvious*, collected by the Mistaken Mage.

"Wake up, Kymenos."

Kymenos blinked his eyes open, needing a moment to remember how Nightstone could have known his name. But then he remembered telling her, and indeed the whole of that strange conversation.

He sat up, shielding his eyes against the flare of a torch, and then groaned. The long sleep hadn't healed his aches so much as stiffened them, and now he was moving too abruptly for his body to like. The aches all began to hurt at once, like a chorus of frogs screaming in protest.

"Here to take you to the dungeons," said the woman who held the torch. She was tall and brusque, and, as she turned away from him, Kymenos could see that she had a silvery sheen

to her skin. *Liadra*, he thought. The lightning-fey were not nearly as tolerant of mistakes or slowness as their cousins the mizanai, whom he knew better, and so he stood up and limped after her, forcing the groans back behind his teeth. He was sure that if she thought he was complaining unnecessarily, she would give him something to really groan about.

"Here we are."

Kymenos lifted his eyes, and blinked. They stood in front of a cell barred in the traditional way, and beyond the bars the Princess Alliana sat on a bed of straw, hugging her knees and glaring at him. *Why would they keep me in a room as nice as the one they gave me and put Alliana here?*

"Talk to her," said the liadra woman.

Kymenos tried to speak, but wound up coughing and panting for a moment instead.

"Is something wrong?" asked the liadra.

"Not at all," said Kymenos, his voice croaking. "But I haven't had anything to drink in hours, so I might be a little hoarse." He knelt down in front of the bars and spoke to Alliana before the liadra woman could decide whether or not to punish him for that. "Hello, Alliana. How are you feeling?"

"Never mind about that," said the liadra. "Ask her about the Quest."

"Very well," said Kymenos, anxious to appear cooperative. They did have traditional dungeon cells, after all. He was not anxious to find out if they had traditional torture chambers. "What about the Quest?"

"She won't tell us anything about it, but she snickers and giggles over the things that Destiny whispers in her ears," said the liadra. "We thought that she might tell you, her Destined guardian."

Kymenos nodded, and looked back at Alliana. "What is Destiny telling you?" he asked, because he saw no point in being subtle. The liadra's announcement had already ruined any surprise there might have been.

"Not to trust you," said Alliana, peeking through her fingers at him. "It says that you'll turn traitor, and betray me to the Dark."

"Princess-"

"It says that."

Kymenos nodded slowly. "All right. But why not tell the Dark about your Quest? Wouldn't you like them to tremble in fear and despair, and pay for ever caging you up like this and taking over your country?"

Alliana appeared to think about that for a moment, and the liadra woman touched Kymenos on the shoulder as if to say that was a good move. But then Alliana shook her head. "No. I want them to tremble in fear and despair, but I want to finish the Quest even more."

"How can you?" asked Kymenos. "We're both here, and I don't think the Dark will let us go because we ask nicely."

"You can ask any way you want," said the liadra's voice, threaded with amusement. "We're not going to oblige you, no matter what happens."

"The Quest will be finished," said Alliana. She had lifted her head from the embrace of her arms now, and her eyes almost glowed in the darkness of the cell. Kymenos frowned. *Is she quite well?* "And then I will come back with Norianna and make them regret ever imprisoning me."

"Norianna?" said the liadra sharply. "What is that?"

Kymenos had already closed his eyes, seeking in his memory for some mention of the thing. Alliana was going to seek a sword, he knew that, and most of the more famous enchanted swords had names, even if it was only something such as "the Long Blade." And Norianna really did sound familiar.

"It's a sword," he said at last, opening his eyes. "Great powers of some kind. I don't remember exactly what."

"Where could we learn what?" the liadra asked, gripping his shoulder.

"In Corlinth or in Ozue. I did research in both those libraries."

The liadra trembled for a moment, though when she spoke, she seemed to be keeping her sharper excitement from the surface of her voice. "Then I shall go at once to the Lady Nightstone and tell her of this. You, Kymenos, will accompany me. Unless you have something else to say to the Princess?"

Kymenos looked back at Alliana, only to find himself fixed with an expression of burning outrage. She leaned forward until her nose almost touched the bars and whispered, "*You will pay.*"

Kymenos couldn't help himself. He was tired, and irritated, and he hurt, and it was easier striking back at the Princess than striking back at the Dark, who had the instruments to hurt him.

He spat in Alliana's face.

The Princess just stared at him blankly for a moment, as if she didn't know quite what had happened. Then she fell to shrieking, and pawing at her cheek, as if the spittle were acid or something of the kind. Kymenos chuckled, even as he felt the liadra pulling him away. Surely they would hurt him, or at least Destiny would, but the memory of Alliana's expression would remain with him as they did it, and somewhat make up for the pain.

"You don't like the Princess, do you?" the liadra asked, as she swept him down the hall.

"No," said Kymenos, and looked back into the cell. Alliana was sitting with her head on her knees again, enfolded in her arms, probably listening to the comforting whispers of Destiny. "I'm surprised that she hasn't driven more of you mad with her constant whining."

"Some of my kin did mention something about the dungeons growing more pungent," said the liadra. "I thought they meant a literal smell. Well, then you might find the Princess Nightstone more accommodating than the Princess Alliana. We are going there are the moment."

Kymenos thought of mentioning that she'd already said that, and then decided to keep silent. He had annoyed enough people today.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Destiny had decreed that he would keep annoying them.

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"You can remember nothing more about this sword Norianna?"

Kymenos rubbed his face with one hand. His arms almost creaked when they moved, but that was less because of the aches and more from Nightstone binding him to the chair where he sat. He could hardly move his hands much further than his face. Kymenos supposed it was to stop him from weaving patterns, though just binding his hands would have been more effective.

"No, I'm sorry. I can't. I know that it talks and is a sword of enormous power, and from the name, I would guess that it was forged in Arvenna. Nothing else."

"But liadrai are Arvennese, and they know the country better than anyone else, and they can't remember any mention of such a sword," Nightstone snapped at him, as if he had disagreed with her.

"I don't remember any more," Kymenos repeated, as he had been repeating for the last hour. "You could go fetch the books in Ozue or Corlinth if you think they would help you more, but I can't tell it to you."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes and turned towards him. "Is that a threat?"

Kymenos blinked. "In what possible way could that be a threat?"

Nightstone stalked towards him, glaring at him. Kymenos matched her glare for glare. She had bound him to a chair, yes, but there were no whips or thumbscrews in sight yet, and the knots weren't tight enough to cause him pain. She was wasting her time if she thought she could make him remember more than he remembered by using these methods.

"You are threatening to withhold information from us," said Nightstone, turning back to her pacing. "Or perhaps you took the books from Corlinth or Ozue when you were done and burned them, or hid them. It would explain why you conveniently can't remember any of the book titles."

"I can't remember them because I've been looking through books for the last twelve years!" yelled Kymenos, sitting up as straight as he could. "I didn't read about Norianna because I was searching for information on her. I read about it because it was in a book that I read in looking for something else."

"What were you looking for?"

"A way to resist Destiny."

Nightstone stopped pacing to look at him then. "Why would you want to do that?"

"I have no loyalty to the Light; I told you that. Destiny has all but ruined my life by making me Princess Alliana's guardian. I was hoping to find some way to break free of that. I tried. It didn't work." Kymenos slumped back in the chair and lowered his eyes. "It only wasted another twelve years of my life."

Nightstone returned to her pacing. "You must understand that this all sounds so convenient," she said. "A sword that you can't remember any information on, but which happens to be important to the Light. Your having no loyalty to the Light, but fighting to protect the Princess anyway. Destiny hitting you soundly, when I have never seen any such thing."

"You saw it when you captured me," said Kymenos. "You must have thought it was a Gust mage, but it wasn't, was it?"

Nightstone spun towards him again, her black hair floating behind her. "You will call me by title when you address me."

Kymenos closed his eyes and fought to control his temper. He hated being helpless, and bound to his chair in the custody of the Dark sounded like helplessness to him. "Yes, Princess Nightstone."

"I want to know why you somehow were allowed to leave the Star Circle, alone of all the people I have ever heard of," said Nightstone, who stared him down for a moment more and then began to pace again. They were in a wide room, probably her office, made for pacing, and she obviously took full advantage of it; Kymenos thought he could see a faint groove in the floor, if he squinted. "I want to know why Destiny chose you for the position when you didn't want it. I want to know what this sword is, and where it is." She turned to look at Kymenos again. "You are sure that you can remember no other information on Norianna?"

"None."

Nightstone sighed. "I wish that I dared believe you, but I don't. I think that you are putting on a sophisticated act."

"Why?" Kymenos asked, fighting to keep from screaming in frustration. "What purpose would it serve?"

"To throw us off the trail and make sure that the Dark loses this war, of course," said Nightstone, with a strange glance at him.

"I don't care about the wars of Dark and Light. I don't care about the Princess Alliana. You could let me go, and I wouldn't make a difference to either side of the war in one way or another."

Nightstone shook her head, face set in the mulish expression that reminded Kymenos of some of his teachers, when they were still convinced that he could be the Master of Twenty Wonders. "I have no choice. Not the rack, I think, but given the way you fear pain, hot irons will do it." She nodded to the door, and as if she had commanded it with that nod, it opened. Two *zeyri* trotted in and towards Kymenos. Kymenos shuddered at the sight of them. He didn't want to think about what it would sound like if one of them screamed in this small room.

"Please, Your Highness, don't do this," he whispered.

"I must," said Nightstone. "I do believe that you're afraid of pain. It's the only thing that might make you tell the truth."

Kymenos thought of what the red-hot irons would probably feel like on his skin, and panicked. It was the only way that he would have reached for elemental Light, as tired as he was. In some cases, the Star Circle training had sunk in deep. He would not have tried this magic, under any other circumstances.

But he didn't try to shape or control it, and perhaps that was the reason it worked as well as it did. He simply surrendered to it, and opened up a conduit through his body from whichever world the element dwelled in to this one.

Light filled the room. Nightstone cried out, and then Kymenos heard the first faint yowls of the *zeyri*, nothing compared to the cries that could shatter a man's eardrums, but painful enough given their startlement and the confined space.

He managed to move his fingers through the ropes- Nightstone really should have bound them separately- and he went through Selide's Pattern without a mistake, something his teachers had once despaired of him doing. His mind darted like a hummingbird from the Azure to the Gust, and Mist rose and filled the room like a living, breathing presence. Even when the Light died, the *zeyri* and Nightstone would have a hell of a time seeing him.

Kymenos braced himself and managed to stand, the chair coming with him. It was awkward, and he banged it against the wall several times in trying to get out the door, since he couldn't see himself in the Light and Mist. It helped that the door was open. He staggered out and down the hall, panting, exhausted, trying to think of a hiding place. He had been in the Orlathian Court before, even if it was while the castle was falling down. Where? Where?

The stables might have done, but they would almost surely be holding the pegasi, and he couldn't think they would fail to recognize him. The *zeyri* would be running to answer their fellows' calls for help, if they weren't doing that already, and Nightstone would waste no time in summoning help that could scour the Plains for him, if he tried to hide there.

*Well, why not the place I know best? I can't imagine that it's used much now.*

He turned, sometimes blinking his eyes open but mostly keeping them shut, like a child, as if that would make the dangers he faced go away. He rounded a corner he remembered well, then another, and then he came into a hall that felt strangely empty. Kymenos tilted his head back and braced himself to open his eyes, and saw stars twinkling at him from overhead.

Yes. The roof of the hall was gone, unless the chunks of stone lying all around him were that roof. This was the hall that had held the living quarters of the royals, and the room of Princess Alliana.

Kymenos fought his way forward, looking for a place under the stones where he could collapse. The chair hindered him, blocking and scraping and in general being a nuisance, and finally caught so firmly on a large stone that Kymenos was sure that it couldn't be moved. He bowed his head and pulled with his feet. It felt as if Nightstone had put him on the rack after all.

*No, it doesn't. Nothing could possibly feel that bad, except the rack itself.*

Then he heard a sound like a crack of thunder, and for a moment thought the *zeyri* had caught him up. Then he thought his arms had parted company from their sockets, since they ached so abominably. It took him some time to realize that it was the ropes that had snapped apart, and that he was free. He sagged to the ground, crying and laughing both at once, and rubbing at his aching arms.

Kymenos crawled forward, tattered robe not providing much protection against the rocks, and at last curled up under an arch of fallen stone. They would probably find him here, but at the moment, the thought of pain was shut off by the mists of exhaustion. He had to rest. He absolutely had to. The magic had taken the very last of him.

"Who are you?" asked a voice.

Kymenos didn't open his eyes. "Have you come to take me back to Nightstone?" he asked.

"No. I oppose Nightstone."

Kymenos managed to laugh. "Freedom fighters in the castle itself. How silly. The Plains would shelter you more."

"I know the Plains, and the castle both," said the voice, "and I prefer the castle. Who are you?"

"My name is Kymenos."

"That doesn't tell me who you are."

Kymenos wondered if it was possible to die of fatigue. If so, he suspected that he was about to find out. And of course this was the way he would die, arguing with some stupid freedom fighter who was probably going to start talking about Light and the glories of the Orlathian royal line at any moment now.

He paused for a yawn that felt as if it unhinged his jaw, and then said, "They have Princess Alliana in a prison cell. You probably care about that."

"How do you know that?"

"I was her guardian for a little while. I suppose that Destiny will still want me to be, if I survive."

Cool fingers glided along his shoulders. Kymenos hissed as they poked at the bruises.

"Who did this to you?"

"Destiny. But Nightstone tying me to a chair helped."

There was another long pause. Then the voice said, "I think that I should help you. I will take you to Juladi."

"Where's that? Your hideaway?"

"Juladi," said the voice, as if the repetition would tell him something, and then the hands that were not human- no humans could have that strength- scooped him up.

"Oh, you're not human," said Kymenos.

"No. Elven," said the voice, and then they appeared to be walking somewhere. Kymenos forced his eyes open, and saw broken stone passing beneath a pair of bare feet with amazing speed. Then it changed to grass, and he supposed that the person must have borne him onto the Plains.

"That's a neat trick," he said. "I wonder-"

And then he went to sleep, though it was a strange sleep. He could feel cool hands on him even through the darkness, and sometimes a voice would sing, only to be answered by another voice. But the pain did seem to lessen, and it seemed that Nightstone's people were not going to come after him and drag him back to the rack and the thumbscrews quite yet.

Kymenos didn't see how he could ask for anything more.

## Chapter 27

### Elves Are a Nuisance

*"Elves are the lords of all the fey kind, the most beautiful of creatures."*

*-From A Study of the Fey Kind.*

"I want to know how someone bound to a chair could just walk out of the castle. You were supposed to be guarding it."

The filifernai in front of Nightstone bowed their heads, but said nothing. They weren't like the other fey kinds, or humans, in revealing some sign of embarrassment. They just watched her with faceted eyes, and accepted the blame, and were so strange that ultimately Nightstone didn't try to reason with them. She turned away with a curse and looked around the room again.

The Mist that Kymenos had raised, somehow, was finally dissipating, and she could see again. The *zeyri* sat on the floor, swishing their tails irritably. The door was open, and the scraping marks of the chair were visible against it. Nightstone had studied them carefully, trying to use them to determine what way Kymenos had gone, but couldn't tell.

"Search the castle," she said now to the filifernai. "You're not good for much else."

They bowed to her again, and then turned and filed out of the room. They would indeed search the castle, and they would be thorough about it; nothing escaped their eyes. But Nightstone had the odd feeling already that they wouldn't find Kymenos.

She scowled. She recognized such feelings, such hunches. She had had them before. And they always meant that an elf was somewhere near.

"Glow, Moonswallower," she said to the *zeyri*. "Scout around the outside of the castle. If a mouse moves, I want to know about it."

The *zeyri* would have usually argued- that was the way cats were- but they were embarrassed that Kymenos had managed to slip past them. They bowed their heads as well and trotted out of the room without a word.

Nightstone flung herself into the office's remaining chair and waited, rapping her fingers against the arm.

"Hello, Princess Nightstone."

Nightstone jumped, then scowled. Elves always sneaked up on her, even though she was expecting them. "You are Wellenet?" she said.

"That's right." The elfwoman in the door stared at her peacefully. She was a Faerie elf, as all the elves were who haunted the castle and disordered Nightstone's plans, pale of hair and dark gold of skin. But her eyes were a bright, piercing blue, and she never took them off Nightstone's face. She also never blinked. "You should know that Kymenos is gone."

"Where?"

Wellenet smiled at her.

Nightstone clenched her hands, hard, on the arms of the chair, and spoke in her most reasonable voice. "I understand that the elves feel they owe a debt of honor to the Orlathian royal family, but surely you might find some other way to expiate it than this. The Dark has taken Orlath. Why can't you accept that and compromise with me? I am of the Orlathian royal blood as well."

"But not a true Heir of its glory."

"You sound like an elf of the Light." Nightstone flung the taunt as hard as she could, even as she knew that Wellenet wouldn't react in the right way.

Of course, the elfwoman laughed gently at her. "We are not them," she said, with certainty that the taunt obviously had not ruffled.

"You must be interested in the Princess Alliana, then."

"No."

Nightstone stared at her, and waited.

"We are interested in the dead," said Wellenet, the way that all of the elves did, ignoring the look of rage that Nightstone knew was twisting her face. "We are interested in seeing someone who is a true Heir of the Orlathian family's glory walking these halls, and Alliana is not that."

"Who is?"

Wellenet looked at her with peaceful eyes, and then turned and walked out of the room.

Nightstone followed her, something she rarely bothered to do with the elves anymore, since they never gave her a straight answer. However, they had never stolen a prisoner from her before. "Do you know what the Dark will do when it finds out that the elves are still opposing it?"

"I know," said Wellenet. "It will shout and fume and storm, and then it will send some of its people after us."

"You are not worried?"

Wellenet paused near the end of the hall and looked back. Nightstone couldn't see her face in the darkness, but still she knew that Wellenet's eyes were fixed on her and not something else. There was no feeling like an elf looking at her. "Why should we be worried? You are among the best, and you have never done anything to harm us."

In a rage, Nightstone called to the Scarlet, and sent the fire storming down the corridor after Wellenet.

The elf just sidestepped, and faded into the air the way that her people had a habit of doing. The fire coiled harmlessly past her, and would have burnt the tapestries that hung there had not Nightstone called them back with a sharp word.

For a moment, she stood there, shaking, and then she recalled herself.

*Elves are a nuisance, but I cannot allow them to distract me. What might have happened, while I stood here fencing with words and flame?*

She rushed towards the dungeon, and halted on the steps when she heard the Princess's whining rising towards her. She sighed and walked the rest of the way, emerging near the cell with a pleasant expression and, she hoped, an unruffled one.

"Alliana?" she inquired, crouching down.

The Princess spat into her face. Nightstone wiped it away, blinking slowly. *It seems that she has learned a new trick since I last saw her.*

"I want to get out of this cell!" the Princess yelled. "I want fresh bread and fruit, and I want someone to take me to find Norianna!"

Nightstone shook her head, still wiping at her cheek. She thought she could feel the Princess's saliva clinging there, like acid or blood. "That is not possible, Princess. You are my prisoner until the Dark tells me what to do with you, and it may be that it will tell me to kill you."

Alliana giggled abruptly. Nightstone looked quickly at her, and saw that her head was tilted to one side, an expression of delight on her face. She looked up at Nightstone and said sweetly, "Destiny says that you can't kill me. It would go against the agreement."

"What agreement?"

But Alliana sat back on her heels, and rocked back and forth, while chanting, "I know more than *you* do, I know more than *you* do, I know more than *you do*-"

Nightstone turned away with a sharp gesture. One of the liadrai came to her at once, bowing her head when she saw how upset Nightstone was.

"When the pegasi come back, tell them to see me at once," said Nightstone, and went to her room. Even if she didn't sleep, lying on the bed and staring at the ceiling sounded like the perfect remedy for dealing with Alliana.

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It turned out not to be. Someone had been sorting through her mementos of the Orlathian royal line again, and so Nightstone was in a temper by the time that one of the pegasi kicked on the door to the balcony.

Nightstone opened them, only to smell wet pegasus and realize that it was raining *again*. That comforted her slightly. If the elves and Kymenos were out on the Plains, they were suffering a cold, miserable night about now.

"My lady," said the pegasus. It was Chive, Black Rose's second-in-command, named for his liking of the plants. At the moment, he looked as if he could have eaten hay and been content. "We have the people you commanded us to fetch."

Nightstone sighed. *At least something is going right.* "Good," she said. "Dump them in the care of the filifernai and then go to the stables."

Chive nodded and took off without a word. Nightstone smiled slightly. Black Rose would have insisted on escorting the people into Nightstone's care herself, but Chive understood the value of delegation. The filifernai would terrify the peasants more than the pegasi could, at least on the ground.

Nightstone turned back to her mirror and checked her expression carefully. Her hair was swept back, held in place with a silver coronet, and hadn't been touched by the rain. Her eyes did not have the black circles under them that she had dreaded as revealing her tiredness. She wore a dark blue gown that complemented both hair and eyes, and looked as if she were the true Queen of Orlath.

Nightstone nodded sharply, then again as she felt the last traces of her temper subside, giving way to amusement. *This should be fun.*

She swept down the stairs and into the throne room. The throne was placed beneath Queen Aneron's death banner, for maximum effect. Nightstone entertained herself with the thought, as she sat down, that while to the peasants Queen Aneron was a distant figure of awe and glory, she had only been Nightstone's grandmother.

*I know more than they do. I am older than they. There is no reason that the Dark should not win this round.*

The door opened, and the filifernai led the terrified peasants in. Nightstone eyed them with pleasure. Mother, father, and six children. All of them were gray with fear, and staring around as if they couldn't believe that they had ever come here, even in the possession of the Dark. Impressed and fearful at once.

*Good.*

She leaned forward, making them look at her. The mother choked and said something that Nightstone couldn't understand, given that her voice was mingled with a shriek. She laid her head on the father's shoulder and started sobbing. He held her, patting her shoulder, but stared at Nightstone with terror in his eyes. The younger children were sobbing.

Not the oldest girl, though. She stepped forward, and Nightstone blinked, for a moment forgetting to hold the expression meant to terrify. She was exactly Alliana's height, and had the same brown curls and bright brown eyes. Her Destiny even sparked with gold along the edges, like Alliana's.

"Are you Lyli?" Nightstone asked.

The girl hesitated, then obviously decided she wasn't going to let the Princess's knowledge of her name intimidate her. She lifted her head proudly. "I am."

"Good," said Nightstone. "I have something you value and love in your dungeons."

"Something?"

"Your sister. Alliana."

"Tima is my sister's name," said the girl at once, planting her fists on her hips. "I don't think that you have my sister at all. Why did you drag us here? What do you want with us? It's true that we serve the Light, but we've never been any trouble at all to the Dark."

Nightstone laughed soft and low. The girl had courage; there was no doubting that. "You speak well," she said. "Why don't your parents speak, though, instead of standing back and letting their daughter do it for them?" She looked at the mother and father, who were still sobbing and patting, respectively.

The mother looked up, but her defiance crumbled the moment she met Nightstone's eyes. She bowed her head. The father didn't even turn around from his wife, as if he knew already that it would do no good.

"Mother and Father are simple at times," said Lyli, drawing Nightstone's attention back to her. She stood with her arms crossed and head flung back, now, eyes fixed on Nightstone's face with an expression of intense dislike. "But they're scared. You don't have my sister. Why don't you let us go?"

"I do have your sister," said Nightstone. "She might have had the name Tima growing up, but her true name is Alliana." *And I wonder why they gave her that name, exactly? It's an insult in Dalznan. Probably heard it and thought it was pretty, without bothering to make sure it didn't mean anything. Stupid Orlathians.*

"Like the Princess of Orlath?" Lyli asked at once, with a note in her voice that said she was prepared to let this be interesting.

Nightstone nodded, and let her digest that. Lyli glanced at her parents once or twice, as if thinking they had something to tell her, but they didn't glance at her. Her younger brothers and sisters were stopping their crying, now, but they didn't look up at Nightstone either. Nightstone sighed. *The Light has come to a sad state when I must threaten twelve-year-old girls to get its attention.*

"Why?" Lyli asked then.

"Because she is the Princess of Orlath," said Nightstone. "She's not really your sister. Someone brought her to your parents long ago, and they decided to keep her and pretend that she was your twin."

Lyli blinked at that, but didn't stagger as Nightstone thought she would have done at that age. "Am I my parents' daughter, as well?" she asked.

"Yes," said her mother at once. "Oh, Lyli, we wanted to tell you, but we couldn't tell anyone—not even Tima," she added, with an uneasy glance at Nightstone, as if wondering what would happen now that Nightstone knew.

"It's strange," said Lyli softly, and her Destiny beat about her like a heart as she considered it. "I suppose that I'll have to think about it, and think about what it means. It would help if I could see Tima again."

Nightstone smothered a snort. *Tima fits her so very well, so very much better than Alliana.* "We have her in a cell here. You'll see her."

"Why?" asked Lyli, glaring at her again.

"Because I plan to take you down there and torture you in her sight until she tells me something about her Quest." Nightstone nodded to the filifernai who stood with the family. "Escort them to Alliana's cell, please. I'll join you in a moment."

"That's evil!" Lyli shouted, even as the filifernai grabbed her. A brief spray of water struck one of them in the chest, but, though Nightstone thought the girl would be a powerful Azure mage with training, she wasn't one now, and the filifernai went on hauling her. "You'll pay for your evil, when Elle judges you!"

Nightstone raised her eyebrows. *Even the bravest of the Light are no more creative than the usual run, I see.* "Only if Shara doesn't take my soul, for some reason," she said, and walked behind the family, while making a list in her mind of the torture implements she would need.

## Chapter 28

### The Heart of the Storm

*"Wait until the spring unfolds*

*The buds of glowing greens and golds,*

*Or thou wilt die in Arvennese colds."*

-Arvennese peasant chant.

Elary didn't know where she was anymore.

Of course, this was not such a surprise, when they were speeding above the ground faster than she could move on a horse, and her hands were numb, twined in the bat-thing's cold fur, and the blizzard was all around them, locking them in shielding walls of white. But it was more than that. Elary thought she couldn't be certain that they were still in the World anymore.

*Where are we? Someone, please, tell me where we are.*

She swung on the bat's back, and listened hard. When the wind died to a muted roar, she could still hear Mitherill crying. That was the only thing that kept her hanging on. If the bat-thing had killed Mitherill, then Elary would have let go, too, and dropped to her death in the snow, whatever it turned out to be.

It wasn't so much that she felt her life would end if she failed the Princess. But there wasn't much purpose in continuing to fly with the bat when she knew that her charge was dead.

But Mitherill continued to cry, and the bat continued to soar upward, and so Elary locked her fingers in and hung there, sometimes closing her eyes when it all became too much and trying to pretend that she was back in her bed.

Of course, she would have to had to be dreaming of some bitter cold, some snow-beast infinitely more powerful than the other she had dreamed of, since it was so cold here. The cold ate into her bones, cracked them open like wolves searching for marrow, and feasted on what it found inside. Elary thought she could feel her tendons shivering and splitting like frost-cracked rocks. She was dying, she was numb, she was falling-

But she wasn't. She never was. Whenever she opened her eyes, the bat-thing was still flying, up and up.

It came only gradually to Elary that it couldn't continue flying up and up. For one thing, the wind was too harsh for that. For another, the bat-thing had to know that the Princess, whom it must want to keep alive, would die if the cold got too thick. She was still suffering from roughlung, and she had worn only a thin robe when the bat-thing smashed through the window.

*Or maybe it stopped and got her warmer clothes, and I never noticed,* Elary thought, even though she knew that was silly. Her head dipped, and she jerked it back up, blinking frantically. She had to see, had to know where they were going.

Straight ahead, it seemed. Elary still couldn't see much in the endless white, but it did seem that they were soaring straight ahead into it, and it was flying past on either side of them, instead of raining down on her.

And that meant it might be possible for her to haul herself onto the bat-thing's back.

The thought came only slowly to Elary, since it had to compete with the cold and the wind and the ache in her arms and fingers and the sheer misery of her position. Then she coughed once, as if that would signal her preparation, and began to climb. Her fingers dug furiously into the fur, and she pulled and pulled and pulled. It seemed hours before she slid up an inch.

But at last she was on the bat-thing's back, and could sit up and release the clutch of her fingers on the fur. She moved her hands slowly, unable to see if she had frostbite, knowing she probably did, not caring. It felt wonderful just to put her hands in a different position again.

She looked up, and found there was a reference point in the storm at last. She could see a dark mass ahead, one that grew larger and larger as she watched. *A mountain,* Elary thought, and then blinked and yawned and lay down on the bat-thing's back, since the wind was whipping her hair horrendously around her face when she sat up.

The bat-thing flew on, and soon Elary felt the wind diminish around her. But she didn't open her eyes, because she was sure there would be something there she didn't want to see.

A sensation of walls pressing close around them, and then they were in a silent place, where Elary could hear Mitherill's sobs and continued cries clearly. She sighed and sat up. "Princess?" she called.

The bat-thing gave a high, shattering shriek that made Elary cover her ears, and then she fell off the thing's back and onto something soft. She opened her eyes and sat up, noting as she did so that her fingers were indeed pale with frostbite. She might lose them, though not if Anakora's grace was good. She glanced around, already having guessed they were in a cave.

They were, but it was much bigger than Elary had expected, high and filled with a silvery light. It had nothing like a proper floor, but instead a web of silvery strands that shed the light, as soft as the bat's fur. Other bats were clinging to the walls, and turned their heads towards Elary when she moved. Elary could see the entrance to the tunnel the bat-thing must have flown through, and could hear voices murmuring somewhere beyond that tunnel or perhaps another one.

She swept this up as quickly as she could, and then turned to look at Mitherill.

The girl still hung in front of the bat-thing that had carried her, which had not taken a place on the walls with the others but crouched awkwardly on the silver web. She still cried softly, and she didn't respond when Elary called her name, or came up to her and stroked her hair. The bat-thing let Elary do so. It was gazing intently towards the voices, and Elary thought that things would not be good when the speakers approached.

"Mitherill," she whispered. "Can you hear me?"

Soft sobs.

"Mitherill, we have to get out of here."

"I don't know where I am!" Mitherill wailed. "I don't know- I don't know- don't hurt me-" And she lapsed back into whimpering.

Elary gave the tunnel a worried glance as she shook Mitherill again. The voices were coming so closer now that she thought the speakers must round the corner in a moment. "Please, Mitherill. Please hurry."

The bat-thing tightened its scarlet claws leisurely on the Princess, revealing that it, at least, saw no need to hurry. Elary gave it a flat, unfriendly stare, but didn't know if it could actually return her gaze. It turned his head back towards the voices again, the great pointed ears swiveling.

"Mitherill," said Elary, kneeling down beside her, "we must wait it out. I think that Shadow brought you here. The moment we see an opening, we must run. Do you understand that?"

Whimpering, but Elary thought that the Princess nodded her head. She hoped so. It was all she could hope for.

The voices rounded the corner at last. Elary turned her head, and blinked. She had expected soldiers, but only one of them was, a strangely mild-looking man who walked with his eyes downcast as if he were modest. The other was a flitting figure, reminding Elary of a ghost.

"Here they are," murmured the soldier, so softly that Elary could hardly hear his voice.

"Here indeed they are," said the flitting figure, in a voice with an unexpectedly deep timbre for a ghost. "And I see that we have more guests than we expected. I hope that we shall have rooms enough for them all."

Elary raised her eyes and glared. She hated those of the Dark and Shadow who tried to be funny. "Who are you?" she spat.

The figure moved into the silvery light from the web. Elary could see that it was gliding, and that it was apparently made entirely of shadow, or perhaps mist. It halted in front of her, drifting above the web and eyeing her peacefully. Of course, she could see in a few moments that it was not really "it" but "he." And she knew then who it must be, of course.

Pride, and worry for Mitherill, still wouldn't let her do any bowing or scraping. "You're Shadow, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I am." Shadow bowed from the waist. "And I am sorry that we managed to take you along with the Princess. That was not my intention."

"What was? To shut her up here, with no one she knows?"

Shadow shook his head. "She would have company, and soon enough they would become familiar to her. But it seems that Destiny would not let you be parted from the Princess you guard." He looked at Mitherill for a moment. "I fail to see why. She's been coddled all her life, that's the problem. Treat her like a normal child, and she'll stop moaning and sit up soon enough."

"How dare you speak like that about the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna?"

Shadow shook his head. "There is no such thing, not anymore. The royal line is broken and dead."

"Not yet," said Elary, putting a protective hand on Mitherill's shoulder. "And it won't be, as long as I am alive."

"My dear," said Shadow kindly, "I know that you have worked long and hard as a healer under my reign. You have never complained. You have not demonstrated royalist tendencies. Why did Destiny choose you?"

"I don't know," said Elary. She was tired, and cold, and her hands ached so fiercely that she almost expected her fingers to fall off at any moment. "It just did. Why does it matter?"

Shadow shook his head. "You have no real need to stay here. We would put you back among the healers with all honor?"

"And what would you be doing to Mitherill in the meantime?"

"Trying to teach her right from wrong, complexity from simplicity, and Shadow from Dark," said Shadow. "We want to keep her alive, Elary. No one benefits from her death, not me or any of my children. She will have better teachers and care than she had among the *ilzánai*. You may leave her care in our hands, in the certain knowledge that we will do a good job."

"I don't believe you."

Shadow blinked at her, as if it had never occurred to him that she might not believe him. "Why not?" he inquired.

"I think that you would kill her, or torture her." Elary swayed, and blinked herself, trying to get melting snow and tiredness out of her eyes. "Or at least try to corrupt her so that she would serve you."

Shadow sighed. "Telling someone the truth about the world is not corrupting her, Elary. Light and Destiny have taken their toll on her mind. I would raise her as a child who is about to become a woman-

"You would rape her, too, I suppose."

Shadow shook his head. "I have no interest in such things. I would only raise her. If all things had fallen out as they should, she would have grown up in the embrace of a family who has long worshipped me, in the cradle of a country that has taken me as its lord. She did not. I would make sure that she doesn't become Queen of Ilantra-Arvenna and then try to purge me from the countries. We had a Queen once who did that, and I don't want it to happen again."

Elary nodded grudgingly. She had been alive to see the reign of that Queen. "But you should not imprison her," she said.

"I have no choice."

"Yes, you do."

"What is that?"

"Allow her to tread the path Destiny sets out for her. Isn't it possible that the Light is doing the best thing?"

Shadow smiled. "No, I don't think so," he murmured. "And recent proof that has come into my hands has made me even more unlikely to think so. Rather, my lady, I think that Light would destroy both Dark and me if it could, and Destiny would help. So. I shall keep the Princess Mitherill here."

"I'm staying as well."

"You will really refuse being sent back among your healers?"

"Yes."

Shadow nodded. "As you will, then. Separate rooms shall be prepared for you-"

"No!" Mitherill shrieked then. "I've never slept by myself, without someone in the room with me. I need someone in the room with me!"

Shadow gave her a sidelong glance. "That is only one of the problems that we shall be trying to cure," he murmured to Elary. "The *ilzánai* spoiled her. We shall not."

"I don't think that they spoiled her," said Elary. "I think she has a kind of mental sickness that necessitates things like someone in the room with her, or a circle of salt or snow around her when she sleeps near a human."

"And a white dog," said Mitherill. "And lemons, and limes. And-"

"We don't have those things here," said Shadow. "Tern, will you take them?" He nodded to Elary as if to reassure her, then spun on his heel and walked away.

The soldier, Tern, lifted his eyes just long enough to see Elary's face, then murmured, "Follow me, ladies, please."

Elary followed him over the web, which was springy and sticky to walk on, clutching Mitherill's hand. The Princess leaned close to her, now and then glancing back over her shoulder and whimpering. The bat-thing just remained crouched where it was and watched them go.

Elary sighed in relief as they stepped into a normal tunnel, then blinked on noticing that it was not quite normal. Silvery light still filled it, though this time coming from globes packed with something that looked like luminous moss rather than the strands of a great web. And there were many smaller tunnels leading off into the walls, tunnels too small for even a child to negotiate.

"Do gnomes live here?" Elary asked, as she escorted Mitherill down the hall. She felt the Princess go silent, and hoped that was a good sign.

"Some," said Tern softly. "But many shapeshifters do as well. We like secure dens."

"You're a shapeshifter?" Elary was astonished. She had been around the people gifted by Shadow with the power to transform before, and they were all strong and lively and energetic people, who walked with their heads upright and their eyes fastened on whatever they were looking at. She had never seen one like Tern.

"Yes." The man looked up at her briefly, then lowered his eyes quickly as if he had been caught committing some impropriety. "I become a gull. Watch out, my ladies, if you please," he added, and stepped over a hole in the floor.

Mitherill tugged on Elary's hand. Elary bent towards her. "What is it, Princess?"

"Gnomes will talk to me," whispered Mitherill. "They might be able to get us out of here."

Elary considered her. "Truly?" The elementals usually only spoke to the most powerful of mages. Mitherill's Crop magic must be very strong.

"Truly."

Elary looked up and saw that Tern was waiting for them, his head bowed. "We'll speak of this later, Princess," she whispered, and then hurried after Tern as he swung open a door into a wide room. The room ended in two other doors, one made of wood, the other of stone.

"Your room is beyond the stone door, my lady," said Tern, voice soft and without inflection. "Your room beyond the wooden one, Princess."

"I don't want to sleep alone!" said Mitherill defiantly.

Tern just looked at her, then shrugged and turned his back. A moment later, his shape blurred and wavered, and then a gull sprang into the air and sped away down the tunnels.

Mitherill took a deep breath and began to cry again. Elary knelt down next to her, eyes fixed on the gull, who was almost out of sight now.

She had never known a shapeshifter who could take his clothes and weapons with him when he changed. Tern must be powerful, more powerful than he liked.

"It will be all right, Mitherill," she whispered. "We'll stay together."

The Princess looked up with shining golden eyes. "Really?"

"Really." Elary hugged her protectively, all the while fuming against Shadow. *How could he speak of hurting her? She's so small and helpless.*

Chapter 29

Storms Hinder Travel

*"It is well-known that storms hinder travel. What is less well-known is that there are many different kinds of storms that may hinder travel. One of those is the storm of temper that any group of several people shut off from others for a long time is likely to experience."*

-Erjen, Priest of Erlande, on the Green Isles.

Olumer awoke to hot, sweet breath being blown in his face. He blinked dazedly, and then sat up hurriedly. Seeing a black unicorn's face that close was guaranteed to make one do that. Mourn backed away a little so that she could sit up, but his ears and the way he stamped his hoof indicated amusement.

"Where were you while the wolves attacked us?" Olumer asked between yawns, staring around. They were still inside the barrier of wood he had built, though it had considerably lost its height in the fire. Calortas and Issendan were tending the horses, clucking to them in that way that seemed to calm them almost at once. Neither Cadona nor Renne were anywhere in sight.

*About.*

Olumer glanced back at Mourn to see the unicorn holding out one hoof. There was something on it that was probably a smear of blood.

Olumer stared at him, then sighed. "I suppose that wolves are no danger to a unicorn," he said, standing.

*Quite.*

Mourn turned away, scraping the hoof in the snow and then lowering his head to graze, thoughtfully. Olumer studied him doubtfully. He had never heard of a unicorn who fought back instead of running, except in the last extreme. Since they ran so fast, they were unlikely to meet that extreme. Mourn could certainly have run fast enough through these woods to escape a wolf pack, and he was intelligent enough not to be put at bay in the places where wolves sometimes pinned deer. Why had he turned and fought them, when he didn't need to?

"Olumer. Thank Anakora."

Olumer glanced over his shoulder. Renne had come around the carriage and was striding towards him. Even from this distance, Olumer could see that her face was pale, and the bandage on her arm starting to soak with blood again.

"You should tend your wound," he said, nodding to it.

"I have something more important than that to think about." Renne seized his arm. "And so do you."

"I do?" Olumer looked around wistfully. He had been hoping someone else had done the hunting. He was hungry.

"Yes. Cadona is gone."

That snapped his attention back, of course, as Renne had meant it to. "Are you certain?" he asked. "She hides sometimes when she's very angry."

"Then she must be hiding in the woods. I've looked in the carriage and everywhere around the camp. She's gone."

Olumer sighed. "It is just like her to run off, whenever she thinks that it will cause the most inconvenience," he muttered. "Very well, Renne. I'll go with you. Let's find her."

It didn't turn out to be very difficult to track her, fortunately. Cadona had walked, of necessity since she was not riding Mourn and probably didn't know how to unhobble the horses, and the light snow still bore the impressions of her boots. Olumer knelt down by one of the tracks and forced his blurring eyes to focus. He could sleep later, when he'd found the Princess.

*Cadona*, he reminded himself, with a glance at Renne, who was examining the barrier. *It wouldn't do to let her know that I do believe this is real.*

"This is the place she climbed," said Renne, holding up a few broken twigs. "She must have climbed out after the fight. Do you think she went very far?"

"I fear it," said Olumer, standing and rubbing snow from his hands. "She sometimes keeps going as far as she can. Anger seems to warm her in a way that cloth can't." Of course, in their own woods, he knew the places Cadona most often went, and he could just go there and find her when her anger had ceased to burn so brightly. Here, he wasn't sure where she had gone.

"Could we get her unicorn to track her?"

Olumer glanced at Renne in admiration. "I didn't think of that. Let me see if he will." He turned and called back into the middle of the camp, "Mourn!"

The black unicorn jumped over the barrier smartly, as if he had been waiting for the summons, and trotted towards Olumer. Olumer looked into his eyes and saw no ill will there, though much amusement.

"Could you track Cadona for us?" he asked.

*Why should I want to? Let her go. She'll show up sooner or later.*

Olumer gaped. That was not the attitude that a telepathic companion should have. And yet Mourn stood there and spoke the words as if there were nothing unusual in him doing so.

"What is it?" asked Renne impatiently. She had been alerted by the gasp, Olumer guessed, but didn't know what was wrong.

"He says that he won't track her, that she's bound to turn up," said Olumer blankly. He continued to stare at the unicorn, who took a few steps forward, snorted, and then bowed his head and began to crop at the grass that stuck out above the snow. "I thought he was worried about her and would be happy to follow, but I suppose he is not that worried about her."

Mourn laughed at him mentally. *I know Cadona better than you ever will, Olumer, protector of the Princess of Rivendon. And I know that she's gone on a small side-trip that Destiny wanted her to take. She'll come back when she's found what Destiny wants her to find.*

"That's not reassuring."

*It wasn't meant to be. It was meant to tell you to trust Destiny, and if you don't, then you are not reacting as you were meant to react.* Mourn turned his head and began cropping furiously at the grass, ignoring Olumer when Olumer tried to question him again, and Olumer finally gave up and turned to Renne.

"This is apparently a journey that Destiny wants her to make," he said.

"Alone?" Renne's voice rose, and she gestured at the woods. "You say that you don't know the forests around here, but I know them, and I know they are dangerous. There are places where the animals guard their territories more fiercely than most humans I know. Aren't you worried about what could be happening to Cadona?"

"Of course," said Olumer. "But if Destiny took her into the middle of such dangerous forests, then surely it will protect her. Why would it go to all the trouble of arranging a side-journey, only to have her fall off a stone or get eaten by wolves?"

Renne stared at him for a long moment. Then she said, "I should have known. You really do think she's the Princess, don't you? It's the reason that she's so sick in the first place. You encouraged her thoughts, not just fed them with stories. You think that she has a powerful Destiny that will guard her through any dangers."

"Didn't you feel it?" *I knew that she was too clever for me.*

Renne shook her head firmly. "I did not. We have to find her, Olumer."

"What would you suggest?"

"Tracking her in the snow, of course. If Mourn won't follow her, then we'll do it ourselves."

*You'll not find her,* said Mourn casually. *Destiny has warded her trail so that no one can interrupt her before she's done. The footprints fade away past the treeline.*

"Mourn says that Destiny's warded it so that no one can follow her."

"And you believe a black unicorn?" Renne gave him an offended glance and stamped into the trees.

*Why wouldn't she believe a black unicorn?* Mourn sounded offended. *I tell truer stories than any human.*

Olumer shook his head. "It is rather unbelievable that an ordinary girl could walk into this forest and do very well on her own."

*Cadona is the Princess of Rivendon. And you trained her well.*

"Not to fight without weapons-"

Renne came stamping out of the forest again. She strode up to Olumer and stood looking him in the eye.

"How did you know that?" she asked. "The footprints did fade away a little inside the trees, just as if Cadona had been lifted up and carried elsewhere. How did you know that?"

"Mourn told me."

Renne cast a doubtful look at the black unicorn, and then shook her head. "We'll wait here for her. We can hardly travel on to the west when our whole reason for doing so is gone." She turned away, muttering to herself.

Olumer looked to the east. He knew that the last snowstorm of the season would be hurtling out of Arvenna and overwhelming his house soon. He hoped it wouldn't come this far south, or they would be caught in it.

*And so would Cadona.*

It was a secondary thought, though. He really did believe Mourn, that Destiny was protecting Cadona. It did seem somewhat unusual that it was having something important happen in the middle of the forest, where no one could see it, but that was its choice.

*You see? You can trust black unicorns after all.*

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"My lord."

It took Olumer a moment to glance up from his meal of nuts. He had forgotten that the carriage-drivers sometimes wanted to call him that.

Issendan nodded to him and crouched down beside him, speaking softly. "We shall have to move soon. Calortas has taken this trail before this late in the year, and he says we'll be buried under a mass of white if we don't."

"We have to wait for Cadona," said Olumer, proud of himself. He had remembered to call her by her name and not her title.

"I know that," said Issendan. "But if that snow comes down on top of us, it's going to kill her anyway, wherever she is. We thought- well, we thought that you might speak to the Lady Renne about it. We thought that she might hear it better, coming from you. You're closer in rank to her than we are."

*And it'll spare you from her temper,* Olumer thought. He sighed. "I'll speak to her. Give me the chance to finish first."

Issendan smiled and clapped him on the back, then hesitated. Olumer glanced at him curiously. The two men had been running about preparing the horses and carriage all morning, and still there were things to be done. It was unlike Issendan to shirk.

"I wanted to say- my lord, I wanted to say thank you for what you did for us last night." Issendan spoke in a carefully correct voice, keeping his eyes on the ground, as if he thought that Olumer would take offense at a thanks not properly delivered. "You saved all our lives."

Olumer smiled. "Thank you, but if it wasn't for me, the wolves wouldn't have tried to hunt you in the first place."

"I know that, but I still wanted to say thank you." Issendan bowed and then walked back to Calortas.

Olumer watched him go, then blinked and shrugged and turned back to his meal.

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As it turned out, he didn't have to speak to Renne and risk her temper after all. It wasn't much past noon, and the sky still clear though more gray than blue, when Cadona came back. She stumbled over the barrier and into the camp, eyes fixed and staring as though she'd had a great shock.

Olumer hurried to her at once, but he wasn't there as fast as Renne. The healer gripped Cadona's arm and shouted into her face.

"Cadona, can you hear me?"

Cadona turned her head to Renne and moved her lips a few times, but nothing came out. Then she pitched forward on her face, out cold.

Renne knelt beside her, cursing. Olumer knelt on the other side and clutched Cadona's hand. He took a moment, in his worry, to realize that it was clenched into a fist.

He looked at Renne, but she appeared intent on coaxing Cadona back to consciousness. Olumer carefully pried open Cadona's fist, expecting to see the great treasure that Destiny had sent her to get.

However, he found only a handful of what looked like black feathers, perhaps from a raven. When he touched them, they broke apart, cracking and drifting into the wind like dust.

Olumer stared at them in perplexity, then wiped the black dust on the ground. It made a long smear on the snow. Mourn trotted up, as if he had been waiting for that, and lowered his head to sniff.

Then he made a low neigh that Olumer could only think of as a sound of distress, and turned his head to meet Olumer's eyes.

*We should move at once. I think that Destiny's little side-trip for Cadona did not go as planned.*

Olumer stared. He had never thought that Destiny might make mistakes, or have limitations, except the ones that the existence of other great powers put on it. *What was it supposed to be?*

*I think that Destiny sent Cadona to defeat an enemy. Mourn lifted his head, studying the sky with anxious eyes. She didn't manage to destroy it. If we are lucky, the thing has gone back to sleep. But it probably has not.*

"The thing?" said Olumer aloud. Renne looked up at him for a moment, then went back to examining Cadona's ears and eyes.

Mourn glanced at him sideways. *I do not wish to name it, even in thought. It will come, do we name it too often. And it may be seeking us already to have vengeance on Cadona.*

*Can we outrun it?*

*We should move as much by daylight as we can, and make a fortified shelter in the night. There is a place not far from here that might serve. Stir the others.* Mourn turned and trotted

towards the carriage-horses. *I will speak with my lesser kin, and tell them we must move faster.*

Olumer licked his lips and turned to Renne, wondering how to phrase this.

But Cadona did it for him, opening her eyes just then and saying, "I saw it. It was horrible. I never want to see anything like that again."

Her eyes closed again.

In the wake of that, Mourn's warning went over rather well.

## Chapter 30

### The Will of the River

*"The rivers of Doralissa have a mind of their own. They are among the few strongholds of Azure magic in that country where not many Azure mages are born, and they remember the land as it once was, when only elves and the fey lived there, before the coming of humans."*

-From "A Description of the Elves of Doralissa."

"Warcourage!"

A scream and a splash answered her. Ternora restrained the impulse to dive in after him. She would only get eaten alive by the piranhas herself.

*But if they eat Warcourage, then my Court position is gone, too.*

She began to run down the bank, frantically calling. A flash of golden hair from the water, and then it vanished. Ternora plunged her hand as close to the water as she dared, and saw a dark shape dart at it. She pulled it back and swore in frustration.

"Out of the way."

Despite the warning, Ternora just barely managed to spring out of the way before Viridian stuck his neck into the water, his body following. His head bobbed on the water, chin resting on the surface for a moment as his eyes searched. Then he plunged downward abruptly and bit, hard.

His neck ran with water as he dragged Warcourage out of the Triaga. There were piranhas clinging to his neck and biting, too, Ternora saw. Their teeth couldn't get through the dragon's scales, though. They bit for a moment more, then dropped back into the water and joined the swarm in the middle of the Triaga.

Ternora's joy lasted long enough for her to see the blood. Then she hurried forward, wondering as she went just how badly Warcourage was hurt. She had seen the piranhas bite his hand, but he had been gone too quickly for her to take note of any other damage.

She halted at his side as Viridian laid Warcourage gently down, and found herself staring, then gulping and trying not to retch.

Warcourage's right hand was a bloody wreck, two of the fingers missing and the rest bleeding profusely. Bites on both arms revealed bone under the torn flesh and all the blood. Blood was smeared in his hair, across his chest, on his legs. There were many bites there, huge chunks of flesh missing.

"We should do what we can to heal him," said Viridian.

The voice pulled Ternora back to herself, and she shook her head in distraction, sighing and running her fingers through her hair. "Yes, of course. But what can we do? I am- I am no healer." She had to swallow to prevent her gorge rising up and choking her.

"Build a fire," said Viridian quietly. "Cauterize the wounds. Only way we can do it."

"And the blood?"

"He can live, I think, but we must close the wounds as soon as possible."

Ternora nodded and went to gather wood, while Viridian picked up water in his lower jaw and dropped it on the wounds again and again, to cleanse them. She gave thanks to whatever power was listening that it was the dry season, and she had quickly found any amount of wood that would burn. She headed back with it.

Viridian watched her build the fire, and said, "Stand back."

Ternora moved back gladly, her eyes on Warcourage. He seemed very still, and she wondered if he was going to die. The thought was a strange and frightening one, even given how many times she had wished him dead in the past few days, so that he would stop arguing with Viridian.

*That Court position does mean a lot to me.*

Viridian lowered his right front paw, claws all curled delicately back save for one. He plunged the claw into the fire, then turned and pressed it against Warcourage's arm; it was large enough to cover many of the wounds at once.

Warcourage woke up and screamed.

"Knock him out, Ternora!" said Viridian, his voice low and intent as he continued to hold his claw against the wound.

Ternora hurried forward and gladly sang a soft song that made the Prince's eyes glaze over. Anything that would make the boy unconscious for this was to be welcomed, she thought.

Viridian dipped his claw four times, all in all: once for the arm, once for each of Warcourage's legs, once for his hand. Then he sat back and let his tail dangle in the water, ignoring the furious horde of piranhas this attracted. "We can only wait. I know nothing about replacing blood."

"Nor do I," Ternora admitted. "If I were an Azure mage, I might do it, but I'm not and I can't."

Viridian nodded. "I will pray to Erlande. That is all I can do. But He will have felt the blood of someone of the Doralissan royal line in the water. He will be looking forward to his death, and may not want to save him."

Ternora sighed, and sat down on the other side of the motionless Prince, to wait.

*I suppose that I might have lost those jewels and coins. I also suppose that we will have to wait and see.*

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It was a strange night. Twice, Ternora jerked awake, certain she had heard something, perhaps a large predator coming to feast on Warcourage. And then she would remember that she was in the company of a larger predator than any other that stalked these woods, and she would close her eyes and go back to sleep.

Again, she woke with the wind in her ears, and the conviction that someone had been calling her name. But she saw only the light of the moon gleaming on Viridian's eyes, and Warcourage still lying motionless; neither of them had called out to her. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about the Prince dying.

And one more time, near dawn, she woke, with the crystal certainty that this was not a dream. She watched in silence as a glorious creature stepped towards the Prince and knelt, reaching out to lay a hand on his forehead. It shone with light so strongly that Ternora couldn't look at it, and only saw the faint outlines as the light sank into the Prince and illuminated his sleeping face. Then the radiance faded, and when Ternora looked up, the creature was gone as well.

But when she woke for the last time to face the day, well past dawn, there was no denying that the Prince was better. He was breathing more easily, and the terrible stillness that Ternora had feared to see possessing him was not there. Now he thrashed and murmured and stirred in his sleep, and opened his eyes to find them both staring at him with his usual look of impatience.

"Why aren't we moving?" he asked, and seemed puzzled when he only mouthed the words, without much force behind them. He frowned and repeated them, but not much louder than before.

"You were bitten by piranhas, my Prince," said Ternora. "We had to wait until you were well."

Prince Warcourage snorted and sat up, though with difficulty, and leaning against the tree behind him every now and again. "What nonsense! I feel perfectly fine. I think that you probably just didn't want to-" And then he fell silent, staring at the cauterized wounds on his arm.

"You see," Ternora murmured, though she couldn't help feeling a little smug. "You did fall into the water. The piranhas bit you."

"Why did I do that?" Warcourage asked, still staring at his arm. Ternora dreaded to think of what would happen when he noticed the ruin of his hand.

"You were trying to send a message to the Lord Erlande, my Prince. You moved your fingers too fiercely, and the piranhas came, as they will."

Warcourage turned his arm over, and saw his hand then. He at once went very still, more quiet than Ternora had thought a child could be. She stared off into the jungle, giving him as much privacy as possible. She also wondered where Viridian was. It seemed likely that he would have been back from hunting by now.

"How did this happen?"

"Piranhas."

"But--"

"Yes?" Ternora looked back at the Prince, deciding that it was probably safe for her to do so.

Warcourage was glancing back and forth from her to his hand, so bewildered that Ternora's heart went out to him. She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Ask or complain as you need to, Warcourage."

"Destiny should have protected me," said Warcourage. "Light should have protected me. This shouldn't have been able to happen to me."

"I think Light healed you," said Ternora, remembering the shining figure she had seen. It could very well have been an incarnation of Light. It had looked- at least as much as she could look directly at it- as Shadow had looked, entirely made of the substance it was meant to embody. "But it could not give you back your fingers. Not even the best healers can do that."

"The elves could," said Warcourage.

"The elves could," Ternora agreed. "But only by dreaming like fire, and only by working on something that was already there. I am not sure that even elves can restore whole fingers, only change them back to their normal state if they have been broken, or something else has happened to them."

"And you can do nothing?" Warcourage looked at her, his green eyes shining now with tears. "You have elven blood."

"As do you, my Prince," said Ternora, with a bow. "But I am only a half-elf, and I do not have the magic that is needed to do something like this."

Warcourage stared at his hand again. Ternora waited, but he didn't seem inclined to say anything else at the moment.

Crashing in the trees alerted Ternora to something large coming, but before she could even force herself to stand, Viridian pushed into the open, carrying a dead peccary in his mouth. "Damn thing gave me a chase," he muttered, as he dumped it into the middle of the camp. "Eat your fill."

"We have to cook it first," said Ternora, and looked back at the fire. It had gone down, but a few pokes should revive it.

"I know that," said Viridian. "I was just letting you know that the food is here." He turned his head so that his great eyes were looking more towards the Prince than Ternora. "What about you, my Prince? How are you?"

Warcourage looked up at him. "Is there nothing that you can do to heal my wounds?"

Viridian turned his head slowly from side to side. "Alas, my Prince, no. I cauterized them with a claw, but that marks the limits of my knowledge. I know nothing of healing humans, and only a very little of healing dragons. Erlande has not seen fit to gift me with such knowledge."

"Did Erlande do this to me?"

"Why would He?" Viridian asked in surprise, watching as Ternora built the fire up.

"I put my hand in His water. Would He do this kind of thing to me, just to get revenge for my ancestress's crime?"

"It was the river, my Prince, and not Erlande," said Viridian, gazing back at Warcourage. "That is what I think."

"The river?"

Viridian glanced at the Triaga. "The river is thick with magic, and it knows those who are hostile to the Azure. I have heard tales of it attacking Scarlet mages before now. Perhaps it attacked you because it knows that you hate the water. And you do. I can feel the hatred beating all around you."

"But it never tried to attack me before, when I was drinking from it."

"You probably didn't touch the surface long enough."

"You mean," said Warcourage, in a voice that Ternora recognized as treading near the boundary of tears, "if I had just pulled my hand out of the water in time, or hadn't kept it in so long, then the piranhas wouldn't have come?"

"Perhaps they would have," said Viridian. "I don't know, not for certain. But the longer you kept it in and the more you moved your fingers, the more chances you give the Triaga to strike."

Warcourage turned his head. Ternora kept a close eye on him as she built up the fire and asked Viridian to skin the peccary, wondering if he would start weeping in a moment, or storming off into the jungle.

But the Prince was only silent. He remained silent as the dragon skinned the animal and Ternora cooked it, only shaking his head when Ternora offered him a slice of the cooked meat. Ternora ate her own piece with gusto, studying him with worried eyes. He seemed to have taken the blow harder than she thought he would. She had expected him to damn Shadow for making him lose two fingers, or perhaps the river, and then just keep right on moving to the south.

But he sat there instead, and it was Ternora who suggested putting out the fire and moving to the south. He did stand with alacrity and follow Ternora and Viridian, but he also lingered behind, staring at his hand and at the river with the same stricken expression on his face.

"What do you think is wrong with him?" Ternora asked Viridian in a low voice.

"Wrong with him?" The dragon turned his head to look at her, at the same time negotiating the length of his neck around a tree.

"Well, he hasn't said a word since this morning, and he's not looking at the trees or lianas or trying to taste the fruit anymore. Wouldn't you say that something is wrong with him?"

"No," said Viridian. "He's acting like a young dragon at last. He could stand to."

"I don't know what that means." Ternora glanced backward again, and found the Prince staring at his hand with the same silent fascination. "I don't know how young dragons usually act."

"They're happy until the day they find out that they can't defeat everything," said Viridian, carefully sliding his tail past through a low stand of bushes. "Then they slow down a little, and become silent and thoughtful, like this. They have to realize that the world is dangerous, even to dragons."

"But he knew he had enemies. He knew that Shadow was coming to get him. He saw the elves die. Why would he think that he could take on everything and live?"

"Perhaps because this is the first harm that has fallen upon him, and not on someone else, like the elves."

"What will it do to him?"

"Most young dragons recover from the shock and continue right along, though they're more cautious than before."

Ternora glanced at the Prince again. He turned his head with a jerk as she watched and stared into the jungle. "And what happens to the ones who can't stand the shock, or their new knowledge?"

"They try to do harm to themselves. We may have to keep a watch on the Prince, but I don't think he'd do that. He doesn't strike me as someone who cares more about remaining inviolable than about his Kingdom."

Ternora dropped back towards the Prince. He watched her come, even nodding. Ternora made another attempt to start the conversation, though she thought he would probably only fall into his dogged silence. "What are you thinking, my Prince?"

"That the world is a place where strange things happen," said Warcourage, startling her. "And sometimes bad things." His gaze strayed towards his hand again, but he turned his head away to look at the river this time, before he could resume the stare at his missing fingers. "And sometimes nobody can change those things. You said that you didn't think anyone could heal my hand, even the elves."

"No," Ternora agreed quietly, wondering where this was leading.

Warcourage sighed. "Then I want to go on south, to the Pool of Siliyonete, and stop thinking about this."

Ternora blinked. For the first time, she felt-

Well, not hopeful they would succeed. She had thought there was a good chance of that from the beginning, or she would never have joined Warcourage. But she did feel hopeful that Warcourage might turn out to be a Prince worth following, after all.

"I'm hungry. Why didn't you save some of the meat for me?"

Ternora sighed. *And then again, maybe not.*

## Chapter 31

Juladi

*"So many gifts the elves have, and world-traveling is not the least among them- but neither is it the greatest."*

-The Lord of the Mountains.

"Don't move too fast."

The warning came too late; Kymenos had already opened his eyes and tried to sit up rapidly after realizing that there was a hard surface beneath him, too hard for a bed. At once he fell back down, clutching his head and wincing.

"An unfortunate consequence of the healing," said a soft voice in his ear, musical and elven. "Just lie still for a moment, and let it pass. It will pass."

Kymenos closed his eyes without answering. He had to take time to understand the confused glimpses he'd caught, anyway. He'd seen flashes of green and brown that were in so many places around him he seemed to be in a tent of them. And surely there was a very bright light?

"Where am I?" he asked, to try and order his scattered thoughts.

"Juladi," said the voice.

Kymenos slowly forced his eyes open again, only to find that he was looking directly into the sun, or whatever the brilliant light was. He turned away, squinting, and said, "Why are you speaking Dalznan?"

"It seemed the language that you were most comfortable with," said the elf, with surprise in her voice. "And of course we know the language, as we know all the mortal tongues. But I may go back to Orlathian, if that would comfort you."

"No," said Kymenos, reveling in the sound of his native language being spoken by someone else for the first time in fourteen years. "No, it's all right." He had managed to see through the afterimages now, and he found the elfwoman sitting a few inches away from him, on what looked like a large brown plank at first. It was only as the afterimages faded, still flashing, that he realized what it was.

"We're in a tree?" he asked.

"In Juladi," said the elfwoman.

"Yes, I know that," said Kymenos, staring around. "But- the world is an enormous tree?"

It seemed to be, at least from every way that he looked. Branches stretched in every direction, and the leaves that danced in some great wind running high above his head were at least as big as his body, and probably bigger. He had never heard of this before, and wanted to look around in wonder, but the moment he hoisted himself on one elbow, pain exploded through his head again. He fell back with a small moan.

"It will hurt," said the elfwoman. "I am sorry about that, but I did warn you, if you will remember."

Kymenos closed his eyes and contented himself with nodding. He remembered. Of course, nodding did make the pain in his head worse.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Annalithiel." The elfwoman was bending closer to him, from the sound of her voice, perhaps studying his face. "Would you like a cool cloth? I've found that it seems to help some human patients."

"Please," said Kymenos, too stunned to say anything else. He heard the elfwoman stand and move away. He wondered for a moment where she was going to get cool cloths in a tree, but it was driven out of his head by the greater wonder.

Annalithiel! He had heard of her; of course he had. Traditional guardian of the Orlathian royal line, friendliest of all the Faerie elves to humans, and supposedly killed when the Dark took the castle of Orlath twelve years ago. It was hard to kill an elf, but it could be done, and everyone had supposed her dead rather than alive to endure such a violation of the line she guarded.

*Perhaps she is still alive because Alliana is, Kymenos thought. Perhaps she won't die until the last of the line is dead.*

"Here you are."

Kymenos opened his eyes and reached up for the cloth, which Annalithiel gave to him with a motion that brought tears to his eyes. Elves were endlessly graceful, too beautiful to be real, or at least human. Annalithiel tucked herself to a squatting position beside him, moving like flowing water, and making even the squat look graceful and effortless.

"Thank you, my lady," said Kymenos, as he laid the cloth gingerly against his head. "I don't know why you rescued me, but thank you."

"I found you," said Annalithiel.

"And you think that I can be of some use to the Orlathian royal line?" he asked.

Annalithiel just smiled at him and said nothing in response. Kymenos studied her again. Her long pale hair hung halfway down her back, straight and as fine as mist. Her skin was the muted brown-gold of the Faerie elves, almost matching the bark of the tree they sat on. She had the pointed ears and the superlatively beautiful face that all elves possessed, but her eyes were direct and dark, at once more human than a Light elf's and more mysterious.

"Are there other elves here?" Kymenos asked, glancing around.

"Oh, of course," said Annalithiel. "But not many around at the moment. Most of them are travelers, who just decided to visit Juladi next in the round of worlds."

"But someone helped you sing me awake, didn't they?"

Annalithiel eyed him in curiosity. "I see that our singing was not deep enough to put you completely to sleep. Yes, I had another elf with me, but he has gone back to Orlath to keep watch."

Kymenos nodded. "How can I thank you for what you did for me?"

Annalithiel blinked. "There is no need to thank me."

"I must, somehow."

"Very well." Annalithiel linked her hands together around her ankles. "Then tell me about Alliana."

"What do you want to know?"

"What kind of Heir she is to the glory of the Orlathian royal line."

Kymenos blinked. "Well, she- ah- carries their blood, of course." He mopped at his head with the cool cloth again. It did seem to be working, amazingly. It never had when his mother had tried it.

"I know that," said Annalithiel. "We would know if the Princess was not of the royal line." For a moment, she smiled as if at something in the distance, but then looked back at Kymenos and went on before he could ask her what the amusement was for. "But what is she like in personality?"

"I'm biased," Kymenos muttered, hiding behind the cloth again. "I don't like her that much."

"And why not?"

"I was forced to serve her. I'm hardly going to like someone I'm forced to serve, will I?" Kymenos looked up at her. "Not even the elves were forced into service as much as choosing it."

Annalithiel blinked at him. "And is that the only reason? Because you hate Destiny?"

"No."

"Ah."

Kymenos glared at the cloth, which was now bundled and crumpled in his hand. *How can I tell her the truth, when I know that she'll only dislike me for disliking Alliana?*

"The truth, Kymenos. Or the truth as you see it."

Kymenos glanced up swiftly. Only a few of the stories about elves claimed they could read minds, but from the way that Annalithiel was glaring at him now, he thought it was likely to be true.

"Why should I tell you when you'll kill me?"

"We are not humans," said Annalithiel. "We do not kill humans for a truth told. Now. What is it about Alliana that bothers you so much?"

"Everything," said Kymenos at once. "She demands things that I can't get at the moment, and then acts as if that truly hurts her, not to have them. She eats everything with no consideration for other people. She has no consideration for animals, either; she wouldn't take care of the horses properly. She has knowledge from Destiny and Light that could be vital to the completion of the Quest, but she keeps it to herself instead of sharing it. She's convinced that she's right and going to win out. She's fanatical already."

"And what was she like before you came and got her?"

"I don't know. I rescued her as a baby, and then didn't see her for twelve years. I was busy studying so that I could be free of Destiny when the time came."

"So it's possible that you could have molded her and trained her in a different way?"

Kymenos hadn't considered that. He did now.

For about two seconds.

"How could I have traveled about unnoticed with a baby? Everyone notices a baby, and someone who has a child that just happens to resemble the last child of the Orlathian royal line is going to be even more noticed. And I hate children. Everything about them gets on my nerves. No, Destiny made the best choice to raise the baby where it did. It even made her look just like another daughter of the family "

"My," said Annalithiel, while grinning more widely than ever. Kymenos eyed her in some puzzlement. *I didn't think I was being that amusing, especially to an elf who guards the Orlathian royal line.* "That is good planning. Now. Do you really think that you should have intervened in the girl's life?"

"No."

"There is no doubt in your voice. None at all."

Kymenos shook his head. "I didn't ask for this. I wanted to be part of the Star Circle at first, until I found out that I wasn't good at it, and then I wanted to grow plants. And Destiny dropped this on me instead. I wasn't going to get involved in the wars of Dark and Light than I already was."

Annalithiel watched him calmly. "I have known others who said similar things, if not the same thing," she said. "And yet, they became involved in the wars. You cannot help it. The wars will sweep you up. Given that, haven't you wasted twelve years of your life studying a way to defeat Destiny, when you knew that you couldn't?"

There were other tales that said elves saw into the depths of the human heart, saw all the things that were wrong and hurtful there, and didn't mind at all pulling those into the light.

"Perhaps," said Kymenos, when he could get the words past the lump in his throat. "But I would rather have wasted twelve years of my life doing that than following the Princess around and trying to train her out of habits that I rather suspect she would have picked up anyway. Destiny wants her that way, Chaos knows why."

"Why do you hate children so much?"

"Their whiny voices. And reason doesn't work with them. And they require constant care and vigilance that I could be giving to someone else." Kymenos locked his arms into place around

his legs. "Are you going to help me, or did you really only bring me here to heal and then interrogate me?"

Annalithiel smiled at him. "Careful," she murmured. "You might confuse me with a human again."

Kymenos smiled as best he could, but did not relent. "Why did you bring me here, if you don't want my answers?"

"That was the reason I brought you here, but the interrogation was so gentle as to hardly deserve the name of interrogation." Annalithiel glanced up. "Ah, Pannerel. This is Kymenos. What did you find?"

Pannerel, a male elf who had just appeared walking down the branch of the tree, nodded to Kymenos, and at once brought his attention back to Annalithiel. "They are searching for him, but they don't appear to know that elves have brought him to another world."

"And the Princess?"

"They have her family," said Pannerel, without altering his serene tone or expression. "They are torturing them in front of her."

"You can't let that happen!" Kymenos burst out, before he could stop himself.

Annalithiel glanced at him. "And why not? The last I knew, you didn't think that these people could raise a child decently."

"That's not a crime," said Kymenos. "They don't deserve to be tortured. Aren't you going to rescue them?"

Annalithiel tilted her head to the side. "That would be intervening in the wars of Dark and Light."

"And you won't do that? Why did you bring me to Juladi, then? Isn't that as much an interference in the war as stopping someone from being tortured?" Kymenos didn't know where the gate back to his own world was, or he would have leaped up and gone through it at once. Yes, the peasants had taught Alliana ridiculous things and probably cared too much about looking after the future Queen of Orlath, but that didn't mean that they deserved torture.

"No," said Annalithiel. "That was the way we have chosen to fight Nightstone, by not interfering."

"How was taking me not interfering?"

"It wasn't."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't." Annalithiel turned to Pannerel before Kymenos could attempt to make his point again. "And you have seen no sign of Emrissa?"

"Annalithiel," said Pannerel gently, and then, with a glance at Kymenos, went on in Onnalathiel, the language of the Faerie elves, which Kymenos had never learned. He listened in silence, but heard nothing that sounded familiar.

Frustrated, he glanced around the tree they sat in, but could see no end to it, and no sign of a gate back to his own world. The branches stretched in every direction, winding through the gulfs of air, winding around him until he felt that was in the center of an unimaginable maze. The leaves swayed and shone. The sun beamed, and Kymenos had no way to get back.

He would have to depend on the elves.

He felt his heart cool as he looked at them, Pannerel still speaking in the elven tongue, Annalithiel still listening to him with a patient look on her face. They probably thought of this as nothing more than a joke, a game. They had probably rescued him on a whim. Fey often did things like that, and the elves were only the greatest of the fey, not gods with some concern or care for humankind. They had only rescued him for their own reasons, and they were keeping him here for their own reasons.

"Kymenos?"

Kymenos turned his head back to Annalithiel.

"You will need to stay here for a little while," said Annalithiel. "They are still hunting you. They won't be able to find you, but they won't stop trying. I think it's best if you rest until then."

"Until what?"

"Until we are ready to take you back to your own world," said Annalithiel, and then stood and walked away along the tree branch with Pannerel. The male elf was again speaking to her in the elven tongue. Annalithiel was again listening, with the same patient expression on her face.

Kymenos watched them go, eyes narrowing. So they weren't about to tell him anything except to rest, were they?

No. He wasn't going to just lie here and obey them, not when there were humans being put to the rack and the thumbscrews and worse things. He would go back to Orlath and rescue them by whatever means necessary.

It was only when he tried to stand up that he began to appreciate how hard that would be. His aches still screamed. His muscles still pulled at him, begging for a rest. The elves had been able to heal the worst of his pain and exhaustion, but he was obviously still far from fully healthy.

He tried to walk anyway, turning up the branch in the direction that Annalithiel and Pannerel had gone.

At once, the sky spun around him, and he toppled out of the tree. He saw the branch rushing up to meet him, heard the sound of the wind and the leaves in his ears, and then hit hard.

It was a long time before he saw the sunlight again.

## Chapter 32

### Mitherill's Dream

*"Prophetic dreams are common to the Masters of the Star Circle, to those whose elemental magic is Time- and to the royals of the families who have often faced danger in the past."*

-Noros Goldfleet.

"Elary?"

Elary opened her eyes at once. She was getting better at that where Mitherill was concerned. And seeing the little girl lingering before her, pale as a nightmare, made her sit up at once and reach out.

"Mitherill? What is it? Are you all right?"

Mitherill shook her head and buried her head against Elary's chest at once. They had decided to sleep in the bed and on the floor respectively, since while Mitherill was used to sleeping with another person, she wasn't used to sleeping with another person actually holding her. But now the girl cuddled close to her, not even seeming to notice how cold the floor was, and began to cry.

Elary held her and let her do so. Mitherill's eyes had bespoken anguish and a piercing need to weep without interruption. Only when the girl's sobbing calmed down did Elary ask her, softly, what was wrong.

"I dreamed," she said, turning her golden eyes up to Elary's. "That should not have caused me to weep, should it?"

"It depends on the dream," said Elary, wincing as she thought of a few nightmares she'd had. Even when she was not a child, her dreams had sometimes terrified her.

"I dreamed- I dreamed of Ilantra."

Elary nodded encouragingly. "And what did you dream? It wasn't something good, was it?"

The Princess shook her head and wiped her eyes with one hand. "I dreamed of something that started out good, though. I was walking towards the throne, and I was clad in the formal robes of the royalty, and I had the crown on my head. I was smiling and waving to the people around me. They were all glad to see me there. I thought for a moment that I had won, and that I was the Queen of Ilantra-Arvenna again, the way it should be." Her voice sank.

"And?" Elary pressed her gently.

"And then I realized that I wasn't- me."

"What do you mean?"

"I walked past a young girl, and she looked up at me, and I realized that she had my face." Mitherill glanced at Elary, then lowered her head and dug her hands firmly into the healer's side. "I was seeing myself, not being myself. The person in the dream with the crown on her head and the formal royal robes wasn't me. I didn't become myself again, either, but I did see that the girl- me- was crying. And then the dream ended."

Elary stroked Mitherill's dark hair in silence. The girl coughed with the rough lung for a few moments, and Elary held her to the side so that she could empty the golden-green bile on the floor. All this time, she thought.

*Does this really mean that defeat is inevitable? That we have no choice but to emerge as the beaten servants of someone else?*

*But how could we do that? Destiny and Light wouldn't have chosen champions who could lose.*

"Elary?"

Elary blinked and looked down at Mitherill again. Unfortunately, that didn't really help. The girl was gazing at her hopefully, clutching her robe with eager hands.

"What do you think it means?"

"I don't know," said Elary. "But you can't assume that you'll lose the throne, Princess. It could mean something else."

"Like what?"

Elary groped for words a moment. "Why- it might mean that you shouldn't be too proud. Perhaps the dream just wanted to warn you about letting yourself grow too high and mighty and start dreaming of the throne. Perhaps you will win the throne best by letting yourself be small and humble."

"How can I be?" Mitherill asked, voice soaring in surprise. "I am a Princess."

"I know that," Elary hastily reassured her, her voice gentle. "But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be humble."

"It was small that I objected to," said Mitherill at once. "Of course I must be humble, since that is the virtue the Light treasures. But I can't be small. I am a Princess. No, I am the Queen of Ilantra-Arvenna, and I have been since my birth, since no one else of my family is left alive. How can I possibly forsake the Quest and try to be small, so that Shadow and Dark don't notice me?"

Elary didn't really know the answer to that question, but it was better trying to answer that one than trying to answer questions about the dream. She did her best, and after a little while Mitherill sighed, thanked her, and got out of her arms and back into the bed.

Elary watched her lie there, back aching from the hard floor, but heart aching more for the girl.

*What is she going to do? She's so small, and so proud, and so very alone. I will do what I can to protect her, but I am afraid it will not be enough.*

She didn't expect to fall asleep in the middle of all that musing and wondering. But, strangely enough, she did.

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And she found herself in a place that she had only seen a few times before, and not for a hundred years now, but knew: the throne room of Ilantra, the place where the monarchs of

Ilantra-Arvenna were crowned since the two Kingdoms became one. Elary had not been there since the crowning of King Halieth, and thus she was staring around, mildly interested, when the great doors swung open and everyone in the murmuring crowd around her stilled at once. Then they bowed to the ground, and Elary alone was left standing.

No, not alone. She glanced over at the sound of a sob beside her, and found Mitherill standing there. She was trying to muffle her sounds by pressing a hand over her mouth, but it wasn't working. She was still sobbing behind the hand, and the tears were still trickling down her cheeks.

Elary put an arm around her shoulders, but Mitherill took no notice. Elary wondered if she could even feel her, in the dream.

That led to the extremely odd conclusion that perhaps she was dreaming the dream at the same time Mitherill was dreaming it. But, if so, the Princess was too caught up in her grief to take any comfort from Elary's presence.

The murmuring of the crowd had returned, though they remained crouched on the floor. Elary could hear the words sounding now and then, when she wasn't working on comforting Mitherill. All the words in all the voices, low and high, young and old, human and fey, seemed to consist of only two.

"The Queen- the Queen- the Queen-"

Elary at last had the feeling of someone approaching her, and turned her head, filled with desperate hope. Mitherill hadn't been able to see the Queen's face because of her perspective, but there was a chance that Elary could see it, and at least tell Mitherill who had taken her promised position. There was even the chance that Mitherill would be pleased, if it was someone who would reign well.

She blinked. She had no idea who the tall, stately woman wearing the robes was. Her hair was pale, indicating at least some *ilzán* blood, but her skin looked much like a normal human's, as though the disease-fey blood was distant. She had large, intelligent dark eyes, and she was waving and inclining her head to everyone along the path, though most of them didn't see it since they were crouched in obeisance. Then she came to Elary and Mitherill.

And there she paused. Elary looked up at her, and found the gaze discomfiting. It looked as though the elegant woman was peering straight into every scorched corner of her soul, which of course couldn't be happening, but that was what it felt like. And then she turned her eyes on the crying Mitherill.

Elary was not sure what she expected the Queen to display. Hatred? Reverence? Affection? But there was only a look of distant pity there. Instead, the Queen reached out and brushed her hand across the Princess's forehead, in blessing.

"I am sorry," she said, in a voice that made Elary startle and be certain that she would know this woman if they ever met outside a dream. Her appearance was nothing special, but her voice was sweeping, musical, the voice of a singer. "I never meant to take the position from you."

"You *did*," said Mitherill, sniffing and rubbing her nose on the back of her head. That was a gesture that Elary had never expected to see from the Princess. She supposed the graceful little girl was just too upset to care. "You meant to take the throne from me since the moment of the Crumbling."

The woman sighed. "I never did. I have only accepted the will and laws of the country. Can you forgive me that?"

"No."

The Queen bowed her head for a moment, as if that rejection had hurt her. Then she turned and went on walking up the aisle to the throne. The rejection hadn't hurt her enough to stop her progress, Elary supposed.

Mitherill turned with a cry to Elary then. Elary laid her hand on the girl's shoulder. Mitherill sobbed, "Do we have to watch this? Can't we go?"

"Of course," said Elary. "I thought that you might want to watch the crowning of the Queen of your country, but we can leave."

The words startled her, as did the tone of her voice. It was cold and weary, as though she were disgusted with Mitherill. But she could think of no reason why she would be. Hadn't the girl just had to watch the throne she had always striven for, always been told she would occupy, taken by someone else? She had a right to be a little upset.

They turned to the door, but they had to stop as the crowd surged forward around them, shouting for the woman on the throne. Elary turned to see that the Queen had just sat down, and lifted her hand.

Elary strained for a name in the roaring cheers, and above Mitherill's sobs, but still, all they shouted was, "The Queen- the Queen- the Queen-"

"But *I'm* Queen of Ilantra!" Mitherill screamed suddenly, and tore loose of Elary's arms. She ran towards the throne, her hand held high, the walls and ground already trembling as she called on her Crop magic. It was probably to destroy the woman on the throne, though Elary wasn't sure about that. She could also have meant to destroy everyone who had come to watch this woman be crowned, to catch them all in one place.

The Queen turned her head, her face white and startled. But still the sobbing went on and on, until Elary could hear it above even the roaring of the crowd.

And then-

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She woke up.

"Elary! Elary!"

Elary rose and hastened forward, catching Mitherill where she rocked and whimpered on the bed. Her eyes were tightly shut, her head turning from side to side as if seeking something. "I'm here, Mitherill," she whispered into the little girl's ear. "I'm here. What's wrong?"

The Princess gave a great gasp and awakened. Then she clung to her and wept. Elary let her, only gently turning the Princess's head away when Mitherill vomited up some of the roughlung liquid. This was the only robe she had, and she wasn't sure that Shadow would give her another one.

"You had the same dream this time, didn't you?" Mitherill asked. "I could feel you there with me. You had the same dream."

Elary nodded soberly.

"You saw that woman take my throne?"

Elary nodded again, stroking the long white streak in Mitherill's hair. It was colder than the rest, but she was coming to think that was only normal for the Princess.

"And you didn't stop her?"

That made Elary blink. "Princess, in the dream I wasn't aware of a way to stop her. Your people were there, and they were cheering, acclaiming her as Queen. There really was no way to stop her."

"But you betrayed me," said Mitherill, looking up at her with big eyes, tears spilling down her cheeks. "You didn't want me to rule, either. I could feel that."

"Mitherill, I felt-"

"If that dream is a true foretelling of the future, then that means that you will betray me sometime in the future." Mitherill turned her back with a very final thump on Elary. "I want you to go back to the floor and think about what you've done, and promise in your heart never to betray me again."

"Mitherill, of course I-"

"Think about it and promise! And remember to address me by title the next time that you want something!"

Elary opened her mouth to say something she would surely regret. At the least, she would never have taken that behavior from an apprentice healer, and she didn't see why she should have to take it from someone who was under her care and charged to learn from her.

And then she pulled herself back with a jerk. After all, Mitherill could hardly be blamed for acting this way. She had seen her throne taken, if only in a dream, and her guardian, who should always stand loyal to her, betray her.

"Good night, Princess."

Mitherill at once rolled over and reached out again. Somewhat startled, Elary let herself be embraced.

"I didn't mean it, of course I didn't, how could you think I meant it?" Mitherill asked against her chest. "It was only a dream, and dreams don't mean anything."

"Of course not," said Elary, uneasily, but letting herself be convinced. She wasn't really thinking about Mitherill's mumbled apologies, anyway. She was thinking about something else instead. She had once known one of the healers who would get angry, slap or pinch someone else, and instantly grow contrite and apologize. It had happened again and again, until Elary at last dismissed her from that healers' camp.

*But why should that remind me of this? Mitherill hadn't offered me violence. She never could; she's not that way. And she's a child. To expect her to act like any adult is silly.*

## Chapter 33

### In the Aftermath of Torture

*"Only those who have felt the pain of the rack can understand the rack, just as only those who have heard the screams of pain at the torture can understand the pain."*

-Attributed to Selidon, Priestess of Anakora.

"Still not ready, Alliana?"

The girl glanced away from the shivering mess that had been her father and looked up at Nightstone. "No, not yet. Did you know that Destiny has been telling me your defeat is certain?"

"Is it?" Nightstone smiled at her and then picked up another curved knife, heated until it glowed in the Scarlet she'd called. She knelt down beside the peasant man and pressed the blade to his foot. The children screamed and sobbed, and his wife fainted again, only held upright by the liadrai around her. The oldest girl, Lyli, was squirming and biting at the filifernai who held her, trying to break free and rush to the man. "Is it certain now?" Nightstone asked, lifting her voice to be heard above the man's continuing screams.

Alliana just watched her with those big brown eyes, and then smiled as if nothing had taken place at all. "You don't understand, Nightstone. You don't understand that you laid the foundations for your defeat the moment you entered the Dark. The Dark will always lose to the Light. So says Destiny."

"That's not the same thing as it being real, is it?" asked Nightstone, but she was disappointed. She had hoped that Alliana would at least show some signs of breaking in the aftermath of her family's torture, but so far, not one scream or sob had come from her. She had only sat there, and watched Nightstone with big eyes, and smiled, and said these ridiculous things. She nodded at the healers who had been waiting just out of sight. "Take him and make sure that he doesn't die from those burns."

"You're evil."

Nightstone turned away from the bars to the daughter she had counted on getting a response out of, and found Lyli glaring at her, fists clenched. Nightstone smiled. "Even though I'm just doing this to help the Dark win?"

"Yes. It's evil."

Nightstone inclined her head. "Of course, if you say that, my lady, I shall have to believe you."

A snicker came from the cell. Nightstone glanced thoughtfully at Alliana. She wouldn't have broken at torture of her friends and family, either, but she had long since left them behind to give herself to the Dark. And she would have laughed at such a dramatic remark coming from some Light-obsessed fool, too. Perhaps she and Alliana were more alike than she'd thought.

"Don't you care, Alliana?" asked Lyli. "Just tell them. Tell them, and we can all go home."

"No," said Alliana. "Not now. This castle is my home, and this woman is my enemy. She slaughtered my parents."

"You never knew them," said Nightstone, a little surprised. A quiver had appeared in the girl's voice, and her eyes shone with tears, as they had not earlier. *Can this be true, then? Can the memory of her dead parents, instead of the torture of the living ones, be the key to making her break?* Nightstone tapped her chin as if just remembering something, all the while never taking her eyes from Alliana. "Though, of course, I did. I saw them during my scouting for the Dark, when we finally realized what Light had done to the youngest child of all the ruling families, and I came to kill you the night that we took the castle."

"You didn't manage to kill me," said Alliana. "Here I sit."

"Yes," said Nightstone. "There you sit. But I did see your mother, the Princess Desidera, lying on the floor, and I talked to her for a little while until she died."

Alliana sat up as though she'd heard a trumpet call. "Until she died? How did she die?"

Nightstone hid her smile as best as she could. *Ah, Destiny, you should not choose children as your emissaries. They are so very transparent.* "I flung fire in her face, and I think that killed her reasonably quickly. Of course, she did die in horrible pain, but it was the swiftness that was important, wasn't it?"

Alliana hauled herself to her feet against the bars, which seemed hard since she was shaking with rage. "You are evil," she said to Nightstone, not seeming to remember that she had snickered when Lyli said that only a few minutes before. "And I will hate you with all of my heart, forever."

Nightstone laughed and strode casually back towards the cell. Her heart was beating fast with excitement, but she had had a few centuries to learn how to hide signs like that. "And why should I fear that, Princess? You're caged in this dungeon. You're never getting out again, I promise you that."

"Liar."

"Why should you call me that?" asked Nightstone, trying for an expression of injured innocence. She thought she managed a credible one, though she wasn't really sure without a mirror around to check. It seemed to convince Alliana, who began to scream and beat her fists against the bars. Nightstone raised her voice above the screaming. "You will stay here for the rest of your life."

"No!" shrieked Alliana. "I won't! Kymenos will come back and rescue me and take me to Corlinth, and we'll find Norianna!"

*Ah.* Nightstone smiled, and bowed to the Princess, who just stared back at her as if not realizing what she was bowing about. "Thank you, my lady," she said, "for sharing that information about your Quest with me."

Alliana stared at her for a moment, and then clasped her hands over her mouth and sank back into the corner of her cell that was furthest from the bars. Nightstone nodded to her pleasantly, and then turned and looked at Lyli and the rest of her family. The mother had come around and was staring at Nightstone with a strange look in her eyes, as though she had

only just then realized what the Princess of Orlath was capable of. Nightstone gave her a wink and then glanced at the liadrai.

"Escort them to the upper cells. Make sure that all of them are comfortable, and well-fed, and that no two of them are together."

"And the Princess?" one of the liadrai asked. It had become the custom to leave a guard near the cell, even though Alliana didn't try to escape, just crouched in the corner and listened to the mumbling of Destiny.

Nightstone glanced at Alliana, and then smiled at the girl's gaze of absolute and utter hatred. "I think that we shall leave her alone for a little while longer, to think about what she did," she said, and turned away amid the laughter of the liadrai and the filifernai.

"Keep her father alive, though," she called back over her shoulder. "He might be useful later."

"I hate you."

Nightstone glanced down. This was not Alliana this time, but Lyli, whom she had been passing. The girl glared up at her, and Nightstone thought it was only the tight grip of her guards that kept Lyli from trying to lash out at her in some way or another.

"I am sure that you do," Nightstone found herself saying, with gentleness that she rarely used even to someone who was part of the Dark with her. "I am sure that you must hate me with all the passion of your heart."

Lyli blinked as if she hadn't expected to hear it phrased like that, but then the flicker passed, and she stood glaring at Nightstone. "That's right," she said. "I hate you like that."

Nightstone felt a moment of unease as she gazed into the girl's eyes. Lyli did have a Destiny, though not so strong a one as Alliana's, and there was the chance that she might hurt Nightstone if the Light won.

But the Light had little chance of winning now, really. Nightstone reminded herself of that. Flying rumors said that Prince Artaen had captured the Heir of Rivendon, and Shadow had the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna in his control. Light was not going to win.

Still, a little warning might be in order.

"I shall worry about that if I am ever your prisoner," said Nightstone, and then put out a hand to cup Lyli's cheek. She jerked her head back, but Nightstone just moved her hand again, and this time Lyli was caught at such an angle that she couldn't move again. "But I think that I should give you something to worry about, too. And because you seem to care so much about your father-

She called the Scarlet through her palm. Lyli screamed as the flames bit her, and Nightstone smiled. The fire was always eager to harm someone whose magic was water. It hated Azure mages for being the hosts of the element that could quench it.

"-you can share some of his pain." Nightstone took a step back and bowed her head. "I know the craft of burning, my lady, and you will bear that mark on your face until the day you die."

Lyli touched the burn with her fingers, and then flinched as though it had hurt her once more. Then she let her hand drop limply to her side and stood there simply staring at Nightstone.

Nightstone winked at her and then turned and walked up the corridor, calling out orders to the liadrai and filifernai as she went. Her back tingled pleasantly with the hatred of Lyli's gaze. The girl could grow into a true challenge, if Nightstone didn't lose patience and kill her first, or if the Dark didn't demand that she die first. Nightstone would enjoy such a challenge.

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Unfortunately, there were a good many things she enjoyed rather less, and she had to face some of them when she came back to the Great Hall. There were papers to be read carefully and signed, including one that the priestesses of Shara had no doubt hoped she would not pause to read. They wanted to build more temples to the Lady of Night in Orlath, which Nightstone approved; Shara was her own goddess, and while Orlath had allowed Her worship for some time now, most people still disdained Her. But they also wanted permission to destroy the temples of Elle for "building material." It was a transparent attempt to continue the struggle between the two religions, nothing more than that, but it did necessitate an hour-long lecture, until Nightstone was sure the priestesses were sufficiently cowed to obey her.

At least until the next piece of legislation came along.

And then there was the daily noble-placating detail. Nightstone had expected the Orlathian nobles to rebel against her the moment she took the throne, and had been somewhat surprised when they had not. She had since found out that was because each of them wanted the glory of throwing the Dark from the Kingdom, and they couldn't agree on precedence for long enough to form cabals. There were still plots, though, with the nobles all convinced they were outsmarting each other, and they tried to court Nightstone's favor at the same time. Nightstone had to nod and smile at them, reassure them she hadn't forgotten them, and all the while endure the knowledge that they were smugly congratulating themselves on being more clever than she was. She maintained the deception of stupidity because the Dark thought the nobles were less trouble here than running around the country and acting like heroes. Nightstone agreed with that, but just once she wished she could have revealed knowledge she wasn't supposed to have and seen a noble's face turn white.

Then she went back to her rooms, and found that once again her mementos of the Orlathian royal family were disturbed. Nightstone swept them into a drawer, all the while swearing viciously beneath her breath.

"No sign of him, Your Majesty."

Nightstone turned sharply. Glow stood behind her, his tail twitching as he gazed at her insolently. It hadn't taken the *zeyri* long to get over their shame at letting Kymenos escape, especially when they brought her news like this.

"None at all?" Nightstone asked, to give herself time to recover her composure.

"None at all," Glow repeated, giving her a slow blink that suggested yet more insolence.

Nightstone's eyes narrowed. She was rather enjoying this, in the way that she did when someone was stupid enough to challenge her to her face without having properly prepared first.

"Don't you see," she said, lowering her voice, "that this can only mean one thing?"

Glow's tail swished the faster, and his eyes never left her, as if Nightstone were a particularly juicy mouse that he had dreamed of catching. "What is that, my lady? What can it mean?"

"That he must have had help to escape," said Nightstone. "Help from inside the castle. And that means that your people are the ones I would first suspect, Glow."

The *zeyr* immediately sat up very straight. "My lady, we have always been very loyal to the Dark."

"But not to me," said Nightstone, enjoying the sensation of being right. Here, she had no need to conceal her knowledge. The Dark encouraged its lieutenants to plot against each other and have ambitions, but if one of them was discovered, the prize went to the lieutenant who had done the obviously smarter thing and discovered the plot. "You have always thought that the Dark shouldn't have appointed someone who was once of Orlathian royal blood to the throne at all, that we should have done what we did in Dalzna."

"It is tempting," said Glow, his tail twitching the while. "Particularly since Dalzna has worked out well."

"The people hated that royal line before we stamped it out," said Nightstone, who could well enough remember riding through the gates of Serian on that day. The people of Dalzna had danced and shouted in the streets, hailing the names of their deliverers, who were now long-dead. "They wanted the Dark to conquer them, so strange and mad was their Queen. But the Orlathians did not believe that Princess Desidera or Queen Leilante were mad."

Glow shook his head. "I will not bargain with you, Nightstone, and I will not make excuses. We did not find Kymenos. But that does not mean that we hid him, or that we have him, or that we are plotting against you."

Staring into his intent eyes, filled with more emotion than a *zeyr* would usually show around a human, Nightstone found herself actually believing him. And there was always the possibility that the elves had taken Kymenos. She had to keep that in mind when she thought about this, too.

But it wasn't her imagination that the *zeyri* were quietly going around and sounding out those with discord in their hearts. She had that much straight from Black Rose.

*Unless Black Rose is lying, of course.*

Nightstone smiled, and found herself relaxing for the first time since she had burned Lyli's face. She had long enjoyed this game of contending minds, and she would find a path through as she always did. She had lost the game before, and been forced to flee, but she always came back stronger from that. And the intrigues of the Dark were much more interesting to contemplate than the intrigues of the Light, even when they were aimed straight at her.

Nightstone went to one knee and reached out, scratching behind Glow's ear as if he were a cat. He stared at her fixedly, while his tail swished faster and faster. Just as the *zeyri* rarely showed any emotion more complex than hunger or satisfaction around humans, humans rarely treated them as they would an ordinary animal. Nightstone was even less likely to do that.

"I hope that you make good plans," said Nightstone, just to feed him ambiguous information along with the ambiguous gesture, and then turned and walked back to her window, hoping to catch one of the pegasi and talk to them.

It was a long moment before she heard the click of Glow's claws as he turned and made his way down the hall. Only then did Nightstone smile.

## Chapter 34

### The Enemy Above

*"Dark things on dark wings*

*Live in the Rivendon Mountains.*

*And when they come forth*

*In the forests of the North,*

*The blood leaps in fountains."*

-Old and not very comforting bard song from the north of Rivendon.

"Olumer, will you stop looking at the sky?"

Olumer started and looked at Cadona, who was riding on the drivers' seat this morning, within easy reaching distance of Issendan if she decided to try something stupid like leaping off the carriage. She'd tried it twice so far. "It can't hurt to be too careful, Princess. You brought something back from the enemy that Destiny sent you to destroy."

Cadona turned her eyes away for a moment, then snorted. "I think I did destroy it. And what makes you think it would come from the air, anyway?"

Olumer just shook her head and turned to look up again, hearing Cadona mutter something about his stubbornness. He didn't want to tell her that he was looking up because Mourn was.

The black unicorn trotted behind the carriage, which held Renne and Calortas- most of the time. The rest of the time he was running in the woods on either side of the trail, or scouting ahead, or even walking away down the road behind them and standing there for a moment before he came cantering to rejoin them. But whenever he broke off to scout, he always tilted his head back and looked at the sky, rather than glaring at the forests as Renne had begun to do.

Olumer thought the unicorn knew what this was. He thought the threat would come from the air.

However, the afternoon was changing into a gray but still calm twilight, and nothing had happened yet. Olumer prayed that they were only being jumpy. Cadona thought they were. She told them so, loudly and unbelievably, at every chance.

"Why do that? They'll think you're mad, looking up at the sky like that. Looking for treasure in the clouds, Olumer?"

By about the middle of the afternoon, Olumer began to hear a small, distinct sound that underlined Cadona's comments. He finally glanced towards her when he heard it, and found that it wasn't her at all. Instead, Issendan was leaning forward behind the Princess, staring at her, and the small, distinct noise was almost certainly the sound of his teeth grinding.

Olumer smiled at him in sympathy. He had dealt with Cadona for twelve years himself, and there were still times he had trouble. She was the Princess of Rivendon, and often made that mean more than it should.

Issendan looked startled for a moment, then smiled back.

Unfortunately, at this point Cadona glanced over and noticed the change. She frowned, then said, "Why are the two of you grinning like that? I bet that you were making fun of me."

Issendan just looked in the other direction, whistling.

Cadona glared at Olumer. "You were? Weren't you?"

"Princess-"

"You *were*."

Olumer was a terrible liar, and especially when someone he knew well was looking at him. He made a feeble gesture.

"Princess, it wasn't like that-" he said, and that was as far as he got before Cadona fell back on the usual torrent of abuse that she used when something like this happened.

"Some help you are! You raised me for twelve years, Olumer, and still you can forget about this, that I am a Princess and will have to bear more than you ever will. You forget that I saw my entire family eaten in front of me, that I have to suffer nightmares about that every night, and that I wake up in the morning and sob from the pain that I can feel Rivendon in! You do that because you're so selfish, so convinced that my doing what you do and bearing it quietly would be best. You can nod and smile all you want, Olumer, but it only makes you look like a puppet."

Then she did leap from the carriage and bolt towards the woods. Issendan shouted, but Olumer touched his arm and nodded after Cadona. Mourn was already cantering after her, and had reached her before she entered the trees. Cadona halted, stared up at the black unicorn, and then grabbed his neck tightly, hanging on as if she would collapse without him.

"Ah," said Issendan, now looking slightly uncomfortable. "She was a bit much, but I didn't mean to drive her to tears-"

"It's not tears she uses," said Olumer, flinching a little to think of what was coming. "Watch."

Cadona gripped Mourn's smooth shoulder, threw back her head, and began to scream. The screams were as regular as sobs would have been, and a great deal louder, but filled with anger and not pain. Cadona went on screaming for almost five minutes, and then she came back and leaped onto the drivers' seat of the carriage again as if nothing had happened.

"Where are we going to stop and rest?" she asked Issendan, carefully avoiding Olumer's eyes. It was the only sign that she was still angry with him. Olumer sighed. He had gone to all this trouble to avoid antagonizing her, and it seemed that it was wasted work.

"In a few hours," muttered Issendan, still staring at Cadona. Olumer smiled sympathetically. He knew the impulse.

Unfortunately, Cadona turned around then and noticed him smiling at Issendan, and she narrowed her eyes.

"Is there something funny, Olumer?"

"No, Princess-"

Cadona leaped off the drivers' seat and went towards the unicorn again. Olumer sighed.

Another noise caught his attention before Cadona could start screaming, though, and he turned to see Renne leaning out of the window. Her eyes were fixed on him, and they were extremely clear and steady.

"You really do believe that she's the Princess of Rivendon, don't you?" she asked.

Olumer licked his lips, since they were so dry. "Well- she-"

And then came the scream. Olumer reeled from the power of it, and stared at Cadona, unable to believe she had made a sound of that magnitude. Then he realized she hadn't, but was standing with her mouth open, staring up.

Olumer turned his head to follow her gaze, hearing now a heavy, regular, thumping noise, like the beating of great wings. But before he caught more than a glimpse of a dark shape, fear fell on him.

Olumer had never felt terror so complete. It ate at him, and he could feel his memories, his honor, his conscience, his own self, retreating before it. He shook, and then dropped to the ground, everything draining out of him as he lay there and flowing into the beast, whatever it was.

It thumped towards him. Slowly, slowly, Olumer lifted his head.

He could not really comprehend the thing that stood before him, black against the snow, shining black as an insect. It was as large as a dragon, but it had many wings and many legs. Olumer could see those wings fluttering like leaves in the breeze, sometimes moving so that they revealed the dark shining body, sometimes closing so that they hid it. The head was a like a dragon's, though, he thought as it came towards him, turning on a long, graceful neck. There were jaws, and they were parted, as though the thing were breathing or drinking. The eyes shone like moonlight, stricken as if by moonlight, even though no moon was shining.

And the terror. Olumer was little more than a hollow shell before the terror it spread, and he could feel it growing worse, though he had never thought it could grow worse. He shut his eyes.

The thing was just above him now. He could feel it breathing on his neck.

But no, it wasn't breathing, was it? It was drinking, drinking in his memories and emotions and self.

Distantly, Olumer heard sounds, odd, regular thumping sounds that were not the sounds of the creature's wings or legs. He managed to lift his head and focus his eyes, looking past the beast with a supreme effort of will.

Mourn was charging it, his head lowered and his horn pointed forward. He covered the snow in a graceful flurry of motion and hit the beast hard and low in the side, just under one of the wings.

The beast turned its head. Its cry seemed a long time in coming, though Olumer couldn't decide if it really was or not. His head seemed to be filled with fog, his sight clouded and burned with afterimages every now and then that flashed and burned and shone. The beast and Mourn looked too bright against the snow, and even the day seemed lighter, as though his eyes were forgetting darker days that they had seen.

The beast began to flop and flap, dragging itself in a circle, while Mourn bounced along after it. Olumer wasn't sure, but he thought the unicorn's horn was buried too deeply to be pulled out. He wouldn't be surprised if that was the case, given how hard Mourn had charged.

The beast then lowered its head and parted its jaws in Mourn's direction. At once the unicorn's struggles weakened, and Olumer realized that the beast must be using the same weapon on Mourn that it had used on him. As if to prove that, he felt the terror easing out of him like running water.

He scrambled to his feet, not even pausing to think about it before he called on his magic this time. The spirits were there in droves, faster than he had ever known them to respond, and asking what bodies he would have them choose.

*Big bodies. Swift, strong, and fast.*

In seconds, large dark cats, black tigers, had formed, and sprang on the beast without hesitation. Olumer was glad to see that some things were still happening as he expected them to. If the spirits of silvereyes magic had hesitated, then he would have known there was something deadly different about this beast, and begun to despair that it could be defeated.

The moment that the beasts sprang, the heavy wings unfolded, all at once, standing up like oars lifted in salute. Olumer gagged when he saw what was beneath them. Many, many faces, most of them human, were embedded in the creature's body, opening and closing their mouths and eyes in a sequence that seemed to be in time to the heavy beat of the wings before.

They began talking all at once, and the cacophony made Olumer put his hands over his eyes. Worse, he thought he could feel their memories brushing against him, thoughts and desires and dreams snatched by the creature who had been eating him, and turned into some endless nightmare.

The tigers went right on attacking without taking notice of this, though, and in a few moments the mouths stopped screaming and the beast turned with another long, wavering cry and began to pick the spirits' bodies apart. Mourn loosed his horn at last and staggered in a circle, his head lowered as if it weighed too much, his mane brushing the ground.

The spirits reformed as fast as they were broken apart, but Olumer shuddered as he felt the pain the beast was wreaking on his magic. It hurt more than ever to keep it outside his body, embodied in the tigers, and yet he could hardly pull it back now. It was the only thing that was keeping the creature from attacking them.

"Go!" he shouted to the others, who were still sitting in the snow and staring at the beast.

Issendan never questioned. His whip snapped once, and the horses woke from their trance and began to run. Olumer could see Renne and Calortas looking out, and could see their

mouths moving as though they were shouting something, but he couldn't hear them over the eerie, discordant wailing. Cadona looked around, blinked for a moment, and then turned and ran after the carriage.

That left him, and Mourn, and the tigers, to face the beast. And from the way that Mourn still staggered, this time as if he had an arrow in his eye, Olumer didn't think that he was going to be much help.

The beast turned to look at him again. Olumer braced himself as those moonlight-stricken eyes rested on his face, and the jaws parted.

Then, abruptly, Mourn spoke, his telepathic voice seemingly audible to both of them. *We are not your prey by blood-right, thiria. We never were. The ones who hurt you were never Rivendonian.*

The beast- the thiria?- paused and glanced at Mourn. It might have said something back, but if so, Olumer couldn't hear it, and Mourn continued as though he had heard nothing at all.

*You might fly to the south. I know that the blood of the one who hurt you lives there still, though she is long since dead.*

Another long silence where the thiria might have said something Olumer couldn't hear. But he was beginning, absurd as it was, to hope. He swallowed and began to call the tigers back towards him. They came, complaining, but they came.

The thiria turned its head back towards him, but just then Mourn said, *It is no longer the country of elves, or at least, not most of it. It is mostly the country of humans, and the descendants of the one who hurt you.*

The thiria turned, shaking the last of the tigers from its body as though they were fleas, and then spread its wings. At once, the mouths of the faces embedded in its body began to scream again, but Olumer ignored even that in his hope. Was the thiria really going to leave?

It seemed so. The heavy wings began to beat, and the dark thing leaped into the gray sky and oared southwards. In seconds, it was lost to sight, moving so swiftly that Olumer thought it would look like a cloud from a distance.

He turned towards Mourn. The unicorn at once came to him, managing to lift his head from the ground as he did so and walk more like his normal self. *Are you all right, Olumer?*

Olumer licked his lips. *I'm well. Why did you tell it to do that?*

*It got it away from us, didn't it?* Mourn turned his head towards the road. *We should follow the others. They'll be worrying about us, or at least everyone other than Cadona will be.*

*Where did you send it?*

*Orlath.* Mourn looked sideways at him. *It is a legend, at least among those who truly know such things, that Queen Aneron of Orlath killed a number of the thiria. They do not forget; they feed on memory, so they hardly would. This one will be seeking her, or to visit its vengeance on her blood.*

*Will it come back?*

Mourn dropped his head again, letting out a little whinnying sigh. *Yes, I'm afraid it will. It doesn't like its meals to get away, though a little delay is acceptable.*

*What will we do then?*

*Learn in the meantime to defend ourselves.* Mourn lifted his head. *We really should be going.*

They walked in silence for a few minutes, and then Olumer said, as he called the last of his magic back into his body and dismissed the last of the spirits from their conjured bodies, *You saved my life. Thank you.*

Mourn stood a little straighter and gave him a scornful look. *Do you think I did it for your sake?*

*Well, yes-*

*You are the protector of the Princess Cadona. You must remain alive.* Mourn broke into a brisk canter that put some distance between him and Olumer.

"Why would the Dark want me alive?" Olumer called after him.

Mourn turned his head and closed his left eye in that quick wink, then began cantering once more. Olumer shook his head and walked behind more slowly. He was not eager to face Renne.

He quite often found his gaze straying to the south, though, and wondering what would happen when the thiria came to Orlath.

He winced, and tucked the thought away. Renne was better than that.

## Chapter 35

### Forerunners of the Lord of Waters

*"All the gods have their favored children, their special messengers. For some, these may be elementals. Others, like Elle, prefer to appear in their own guises. And still others, like Shara, are more the gods of fey than the gods of humans, and may array themselves as elves or otherwise."*

-From "A History of the Gods."

"Ternora."

Ternora blinked and glanced up. She had been walking in a half-daze lately, and arguing with her body with every step she took. It wanted to stop and rest. Ternora was determined to keep going until they reached a campsite that was more protected than just the open bank of the Triaga.

"What is it, Viridian?" she asked, turning her head. She had long since given up on talking to Warcourage, who had not forgiven them for not saving meat, and had gone ahead.

"It seems that Erlande has felt my message after all," rumbled Viridian, with surprise in his voice. "And Warcourage has met some of the emissaries He sent."

Ternora listened intently, and what she heard made her smile. She had heard that kind of laughter before, and that kind of outraged screaming. It was always a sign that the undines were teasing someone.

"Shall we hurry?" she asked.

"You can't hurry as fast as I want to go," said Viridian, and then coiled his tail to the side. Ternora didn't have much chance to think before she found herself rising into the air, wrapped in the tail, and settling firmly on the dragon's back. Viridian began to slither faster, flattening himself and forcing Ternora to duck as he went beneath a mass of swaying lianas.

"You could have warned me," said Ternora, when she got her breath back from both the suddenness of her rise and the grip of her tail.

"What is the fun in that?" asked Viridian, predictably, swinging to the side and around a great baobob.

Ternora drew breath to answer, but once again she lost it. This time, though, it wasn't a squeeze. They had come around the curve of the river that had shielded Prince Warcourage from sight, and there were the undines, leaping from the water and teasing the Prince in the fading light.

It had been too long since Ternora had seen them, or indeed any elementals at all. They were made of pure water, and they poured in and out of the Triaga as they willed, sometimes growing bigger, sometimes diminishing. Their bodies were clear and shining, the bodies of small women with tumbling hair like waterfalls. Their eyes were blue and piercing, or silver and the same way, and they were laughing as Prince Warcourage tried to catch them with his bare hands, and instead found water trickling down his palms back into the Triaga.

He looked up at Ternora and Viridian, and a look of relief took over his face, something that Ternora had never thought to see. He stood back from them, holding his wounded hand slightly to the side, as if to make sure that they couldn't see it. "Make them stop, Ternora," he said.

"What were they doing?" Ternora asked, looking at the undines and trying to sound stern. In reality, she couldn't.

The undine who surfaced near Viridian's claw stared up at her with intense curiosity, and no sign of fear. Of course, the elementals had very little to fear, since they could just retreat into the River if someone threatened them, and if she was not really an elemental but a Person of the Blending, there was almost nothing that she could not flee. If an Azure mage came along, she could just transform into another elemental, or an elf, or a human, or something else entirely. The People of the Blending were the ultimate shapeshifters, the only ones in the world who owed nothing to Shadow.

Shadow-

Ternora glanced around nervously. She hadn't liked the shadows lately; in fact, she could almost understand Amirien's anxiety about them. Sometimes she seemed to hear low chuckles when they crossed through the shade, though of course when she turned around no one was ever there.

"Who are you?" asked the undine.

"Ternora is my name," said Ternora, and slid from Viridian's back, gasping in terror for a moment as she thought she was sliding out of control. Viridian lifted a claw without taking his gaze from the water elementals and steadied her, for which Ternora smiled at him when she landed. "I am the guardian of the Prince Warcourage, and am guiding him in search of the Pool of Siliyonete."

The undine turned to look at the Prince at once, her face showing lively curiosity. "He has to find water?"

"Yes."

"And voyage across water?"

"Yes."

"Even though he's of the Doralissan royal line?"

"Yes." Ternora sometimes became tired of answering elementals' questions like this- they could be even worse than the fey for asking about the obvious- but she had the tumble of the undine's hair to watch, and that made it less tedious than it might have been.

"Strange." The undine dived then, or rather let her essence spill into the water and dissolve. She surfaced in another ripple near the Prince, who was staring at the undines as if they would attack him, and said, "Here, you."

Prince Warcourage turned his head, staring at her with intense dislike.

"Is it true that you're really a Prince of Doralissa, and descendant of the line that angered Erlande?" asked the undine.

Prince Warcourage stood straighter, as if he had taken heart at being addressed by his title. "Yes, that is true."

"Thought so. Your guide, at least, doesn't look like the kind of person who would lie." The undine turned and called to the others, who were now springing in the air and then coming back down like dolphins. "Hey! This is the one that we came to guide and guard. Show him what kind of reception he can expect."

The undines dived into the water at once, and then reappeared in front of the Prince. He gazed at them expectantly. Ternora looked back with narrowed eyes, wondering what the undines were playing at. It wasn't like them to be polite, or even pretend. Of course, if they were really under the command of Erlande, then she supposed it might be different.

The undines rose out of the water on embracing waves, shaping them like flowers as Ternora watched, and all of them stuck their tongues out at once, so that streams of water shot out of their mouths and splattered Prince Warcourage. He rolled on the ground, swatting at his face and mewling as if the water had been acid.

Ternora moved to stand over him, but she found her lips twitching. "You shouldn't have done that," she said to the undine who had started this.

"It is what Lord Erlande thinks of him," she said, with a little shrug that looked like quicksilver moving in the water. "But we did come to guide and guard you south to the sea, and so we shall."

Ternora knelt over Prince Warcourage, cooing and making all the little noises that he would require, while looking up at Viridian in question. The dragon curved his neck, eyes shining with amusement and nothing more. It seemed as if he was inclined to trust the undines.

That actually made Ternora wonder if she should be more prone to distrust, since Viridian didn't like Prince Warcourage. But she didn't think the dragon would betray the boy to death, at least not until after they had found the Pool of Siliyonete.

She turned to the undines, meaning to ask if they thought that the land-walkers should build boats or not, and stopped. The undines had all vanished, with the exception of the one who seemed to be their leader, and she was staring at something on the ground and trembling. Ternora turned to follow her gaze, wondering what could have happened in the few moments since then.

She saw at once. The shadows were boiling, and something was rising up in the middle of them, something that looked like a head.

Ternora fell back at once, hiding the Prince behind her, and stood ready to battle, now and then glancing up at the trees. She expected shapeshifters to come hurtling through them at any moment. Viridian moved up beside her, hissing, steam escaping from his jaws. The undine remained floating where she was, but she seemed frightened.

Shadow stepped out of the shade and stood facing them, once again the misty gray human figure Ternora had seen in the elves' clearing.

There was a little silence.

Shadow glanced from Ternora to Viridian, and then took a step forward.

Viridian breathed out a blast of steam that traveled right through the figure. Shadow halted, but only looked patiently at the dragon, and said, "Did you really think that such a weapon would have an effect on me?"

"I had to try," said Viridian, who had lowered his head and was now showing the teeth that Ternora thought were quite threatening enough on their own, even if it weren't for the promise of steam and all the power of a lunging neck behind them.

"I know," said Shadow. "It seems that you are going to find the Pool of Siliyonete, after all."

"You won't stop us!" shouted the Prince.

Shadow ignored him, instead looking at Ternora and making a disappointed pout. "And you told me that you didn't know where it was, my Lady Ternora. I am most irritated to find out that this is not the case."

Ternora blinked. Even knowing that some said Shadow was the most human-hearted of the great powers was no help. She had no idea how to deal with this apparent irritation instead of anger. At least, she thought, Shadow should have come to them angry about the deaths of his soldiers they had caused. "Ah- my lord-"

"Yes?"

Ternora licked her lips. "I didn't know about the location of the Pool at that time."

"And now you do?"

"More or less. Destiny is guiding us."

Shadow began to laugh. Ternora stared at him, not sure what to make of that. The laughter was not angry, but beautiful and merry as birdsong.

Shadow came back to himself soon enough, and said, "I would not trust Destiny to guide me through the corridors of my own palace. Are you sure that you are making a wise decision?"

"It is not *your* palace," the Prince shouted, from behind Ternora. Ternora wished she had thought to sing him to sleep before Shadow formed fully. He was likely to make an unfortunate encounter even more unfortunate. "It belongs to my kin and my ancestors, and we shall inhabit it once again."

"Actually," said Shadow, the only sign of possible temper a bite in his words- it still made Ternora shudder- "I was speaking of my palace in Ilantra, where I know every nook and cranny. The people there have worshipped me, with a few unfortunate breaks, for over six thousand years. But I think that I shall manage to introduce a few of my customs to Doralissa, as well."

"Not while I am alive!" the Prince shouted.

Ternora closed her eyes, wishing he hadn't shouted that, just *knowing* what would come next.

"Well, that's easily solved," said Shadow.

"My lord."

Ternora turned her head, opening her eyes. The undine had been so silent up until now that Ternora hadn't expected to hear her intervene. She sat in the center of her water-flower, rippling a little when she met Shadow's eyes, but holding steady otherwise.

"What?" asked Shadow.

"Erlande has an interest in the boy," said the undine. "He has traveled beside the Triaga for some time now, and received the River's mark. And he has promised to make amends for the crime that his ancestress committed long ago. It would be best if you let him pass to the south."

Shadow nodded thoughtfully. "I could see my way clear to doing that."

"If?" asked the undine, sounding less shaky now. Ternora wondered if she had expected Shadow to ignore her and attack the Prince anyway. Ternora certainly had.

"If you tell Erlande that I remember what he said to me when I first walked upon the shores of Doralissa," said Shadow, inclining his head. "And remind him that there are shadows even in the sea."

There was a long silence. Ternora let her gaze wander from the undine to Shadow, wondering what was happening. At least Viridian was doing the same thing, and she didn't have to stand in the dark completely alone.

The undine bowed her head, so that her hair flowed down her back and mingled with the flower she sat on. "I will have to speak with Him, my lord. A moment."

She dived back into the water-flower. Shadow stood watching the surface of the Triaga for a moment, then turned to Ternora. "Are you really happy serving Warcourage, Ternora? You could come back to the Court with me, and I would honor you. There would be the small matter of punishment for fighting my children first, but that would be easily solved."

"Why would you do this?" asked Ternora.

"To take you away from me and get back at the Light, of course," said the Prince loudly from behind her.

"He is entirely correct," said Shadow, with a little bow. "Or, at least, mostly correct. I have heartily disliked the Light for some time now. It annoys me." He said that in a polite voice, but Ternora still shivered at the look in the gray eyes. "But I also hate to see competence wasted, and you are wasting it on this journey. He has promised you a position as a Court adviser, of course."

"Yes, he has."

"And you will accept it?"

"Yes. Of course."

Shadow tilted his head. "I could match it and more than match it. I told you, I hate to see talent wasted, and I would pay you well to come and work for me."

Ternora swallowed. "And what would happen to Warcourage?"

"I would kill him if he got too annoying. But there is another Heir I am trying to educate. I could do the same thing with him, and see if it took."

"It will never take!" said Warcourage loudly. "I serve the Light."

Ternora shook her head. "My lord, I could not serve someone who talked of killing children, and meant it."

Shadow's eyes suddenly turned bleak. "My lady, I have heard that argument before, and I assure you, all of my children suffered for it. I will not submit to it again. These children chosen by the Light are not really children; they are corrupted mockeries of children, filled so full of the spirit of a force that they cannot claim to be human. They are its avatars instead, and they destroy."

Ternora said nothing, but reached behind her and clasped the Prince's hand. It turned out to be the ruined one, and that only strengthened her resolve.

Shadow shrugged. "As you will. But, remember-"

The water stirred then, and the undine appeared. "My lord, He says that He remembers, and bids you a pleasant twilight."

Shadow smiled then. "I thought that might be the response. My farewells." And he turned and sank back into the shade.

There was a long silence. Ternora said at last, "That's it?"

"That is it," said the undine, and called, the kingfisher's call. The other undines sprang out of the Triaga again. "Shall we go? The Lord of Waters is most anxious to meet Prince Warcourage."

Staring at the shadows, Ternora wished she could find a way to hear that as something other than a threat.

## Chapter 36

### Wonders of the Elves

*"There are things I have seen in the elven worlds that I would give my heart, my sanity, my spirit to see again. And there are many things I would give the same never to see again."*

-Attributed to Shondel of the Eleven Wonders.

"Kymenos?"

Kymenos blinked, and then blinked again. There seemed to be a persistent blurring in front of his eyes, which wouldn't clear away. He reached up a hand to wipe whatever clung to his eyes away, but a hand caught and stayed him. Kymenos supposed the hand was elven, just like the voice that had spoken his name.

He turned his head, and caught a blurred impression of gold. "Annalithiel?" he asked.

"She has gone back to your world to scout," said the voice, which Kymenos did recognize now. "I am Pannerel. You must lie still. You hit the back of your head when you fell, and your vision is in peril."

Kymenos swallowed, and lay very still, in the meantime trying not to think about that. He had hit the branch head-first? He didn't remember that, but then, he didn't remember much save a last glimpse of the sunlight flashing on the leaves as he fell past them.

"Did you want to ask me questions?"

Kymenos started, and then wondered how Pannerel had known that. Well, he might have muttered something about it in his sleep. "Yes. Why could you rescue me, and not intervene in the torture of Alliana's family?"

"We could not," said Pannerel quietly.

"And why not?"

There was a long silence. Then the elf said unhappily, "I have spent too much time around humans. Your thoughts are beginning to infect me. There is more than one reason that we have stayed distant from Orlath since the Dark's conquest. The humans of that Kingdom have always had the power to make us see things- differently than we would wish to see them, at the least."

"I'm not Orlathian, I'm Dalznan. Does that comfort you? Now tell me what the hell you mean."

"I- we know that there are many powers moving in this matter," said Pannerel. "Some of them have ancient grudges against the elves, and others would use us if they could. We must stay distant from this, or be drawn into a fight that we could not win, not in your world, not since the weakening of our magic and our presence there. We could rescue you because no such power was hunting you when you stumbled out of the castle. Other mortals we may simply oppose, but not the powers, and not the gods. And most of them are interested in Alliana's family."

"Which ones?"

Pannerel said nothing.

"Which ones?"

"To name them aloud would reveal that we know."

"You are cowards," said Kymenos, and pushed angrily at his eyes, wishing they would stop their blurring. He wanted to see the expression on Pannerel's face and accuse him properly. "All of you."

"Cowardice is one of the fates of immortals," said Pannerel, with what seemed a little sigh, "and one that I fear we have fallen into."

"Then get yourself out of it. Not only rescue me, but rescue Alliana's family. I am sure they would be happy to be rescued."

"They would. But not the powers that wanted them to be there."

"Why do you care about that? Do what you think is right, and not what the powers want or what you're most comfortable doing. I know you've done it before," added Kymenos, remembering quite a few history-tales.

"That is true," said Pannerel. "But you are not responsible for the safety of all elves, or even just a few of us. Annalithiel and I are."

"Responsible for the safety of all elves?"

Kymenos thought he could feel Pannerel moving away from him, and then the elf's voice said, "I have been seduced by the human in me, and revealed far more than I should. Go to sleep, Kymenos. With all luck your blurred sight will be gone in the morning, and then we might show you some of the wonders of the elves before we send you back to your world."

"Stay here!" said Kymenos furiously to the golden blur. "I want to talk to you, damn it!"

But the golden blur walked away, and Kymenos was left with nothing to do but fall back on the branch and curse under his breath.

He hated this.

He didn't want this to happen.

But he couldn't find his way out of Juladi without elven help, either, and he knew he had no magic to return to his own world. He had heard of Masters of the Star Circle who could worldwalk, but such a thing had never been part of his own training.

He would have to wait. But Kymenos thought he would remain awake for a great many reasons, especially his bitterness.

He fell asleep in the middle of listing his reasons.

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"No. I think that Dark has made a mistake, my lord."

Kymenos snapped suddenly awake, but lay there, breathing softly, eyes closed, to try and lure the one who was speaking into thinking he was still asleep. He wanted to hear more of this. It probably wasn't a servant of the Dark who had tracked him here, not if he thought the Dark had made a mistake. Who was it, then?

No good.

"He's awake, my lord. I must leave as soon as possible."

Kymenos opened his eyes, delighted to find that he was seeing clearly save for a faint blurring around the edges, and lunged at the bird that sat on the branch near where his head had lain.

The bird lunged upward, though, squawking and flipping its long red tail feathers out of Kymenos's grip. He lay there and cursed, watching it fly into the uppermost branches of the tree. He had not seen that kind of bird before, and wondered idly if it was one that only lived in Juladi.

"You are awake."

Kymenos turned his head. After last night, or morning, or whenever he had last been awake, he wasn't eager to see Pannerel, but the elf was carrying a tray that smelled very good. Kymenos could feel his mouth watering, and didn't even attempt to disguise it. He lunged forward the moment Pannerel laid the plate on the branch, and began to eat hungrily. The food was meat, and bread, and fruit, and several things that looked like leaves but tasted like cakes. Kymenos hadn't eaten so well in a long time, at least since before he went to Alliana's house to fetch her.

"You were hungry?"

Kymenos glanced up to see Pannerel sitting on the branch and watching him with delight on his face. "You didn't know?" he asked, wiping his mouth. A piece of the last leaf had fallen on the branch, and Kymenos plucked and ate it. He had never tasted anything so sweet.

"No," said Pannerel. "But then, I rarely see mortals here in Juladi."

"You said you had spent time around them in my own world, though," said Kymenos, wiping his mouth again. The leaves did have the tendency to crumble and leave crumbs everywhere like cakes, the only negative consequence of eating them.

"Yes," said Pannerel. "But it is one thing to see a mortal eat in Juladi, and quite another to see them eat in your world."

"Why?"

The elf only sat and smiled at him as if he were some kind of curious child. Kymenos sighed and sat back from the plate. "And now what are you going to do for me?"

Pannerel stood, that same rippling, flowing movement that Annalithiel had, and every other elf Kymenos had ever glimpsed. "I would like to show you some of the wonders of Juladi. We have been most unfair to you, taking from your world and having to dump you back again without a word of explanation. I want to make that up to you, if I can."

"You can't. Nothing can make up for leaving humans to suffer torture knowingly."

"I thought that you did not care for them," said Pannerel.

"It's not that," said Kymenos, and wished he could say what he was feeling without it sounding strange. "I just don't like to see suffering, that's all. I don't like pain."

Pannerel looked at him for a moment more without speaking, then turned away. "Come. There is one thing in particular that I think you should see."

He paced up the branch and Kymenos stood, following carefully. The care wasn't needed, as he soon realized. The branch spread out until it was as broad as a room, and he could walk in the middle without anything but the unexpected gust of wind to worry about. And he soon learned to avoid those by watching Pannerel. The elf would spread his arms every now and then, and the wind would come sweeping by a moment later. Kymenos spread his arms as well. The wind would tug at his clothes for a moment, and then leave him alone.

As they worked their way onto another branch, and then towards a distant cluster of leaves, Kymenos asked Pannerel, "Is the whole of Juladi a forest?"

Pannerel glanced back at him. "I'm afraid that I don't know what you mean."

"Well, Orlath has plains and mountains, for example, and Rivendon has mountains and forests and meadows."

Pannerel just nodded.

"So, does Juladi have nothing but a forest of these immense trees?"

"Ah." Pannerel's face cleared. "So often, even spending time around mortals will not tell you everything they might think or anticipate. No, the whole of Juladi, as you would say, *is* this tree. The tree is Juladi." He turned and began to walk up the branch again.

"What's the point?" asked Kymenos before he could stop himself.

Pannerel glanced over his shoulder. "The point?"

"What's the point of a world without mountains, or forests, or rivers?" Kymenos looked down into the mist and clouds that cloaked both the lower branches of the tree and his own sight. "But there must be ground, at least. Hasn't anyone ever gone climbing down the tree and found the ground?"

"No," said Pannerel. "A few elves did try, but they found themselves back on top of the tree. And that was only after they had spent a few centuries descending. Juladi is very great." He turned forward again.

Kymenos followed the elf, his brain spinning. So the tree didn't have roots, or a place above it from which the sunshine came? How did it grow? Where ran the streams of water that fed it?

He had just opened his mouth to ask again when he heard a loud buzzing from his left. He turned his head, and found that he was very close to a cluster of crystalline flowers. They had long petals arranged like a bell. As he watched, the buzzing noise sounded again, and the bell of the buzzing flower swayed back and forth.

"What is that?" asked Kymenos.

Pannerel turned and paced back to Kymenos's side. He studied the flower closely for a moment, then smiled. "It seems that we will not need to travel far to see one of the wonders of Juladi, after all."

He murmured something in Onnalathiel then. Kymenos didn't know what, but it made the flower react. Slowly, the bell tilted upwards, and then spread, the petals tipping back as if peeled. A small figure sat in the center of it.

A figurine, Kymenos thought at first. It did look like that, a tiny statue carved of crystal, though the statue was one that he would never have thought to find in an elven world: a human woman, seated on a throne. Her arms lay on the arms of the throne, a crown lay on the long curls that hung to her shoulders, and her eyes were closed. She was wearing what Kymenos supposed was a gown, though the crystal became so vaguely defined below the face that he wasn't sure.

Suddenly the thing's head turned, and the little statue opened her eyes. Kymenos could see her staring straight at him. He thought it was his imagination for a moment, but then the crystalline figure smiled, and stood up from her throne. As she moved, he could see that she was indeed wearing a gown, though it was of a design that he had never seen before.

"Be welcome, Kymenos," she said in Dalznan. "I have a gift for you."

Pannerel said something in Onnalathiel. The figure shook her head serenely. "Nothing that would be destroyed when he left Juladi. Only words, and you cannot take words away and lock them in another place."

"What words?" asked Kymenos.

"A prophecy."

"About the Princess Alliana?"

"No," said the figurine, and then she began to sing before Kymenos could ask any other questions.

*"She who sings sees now a great vision;*

*The cry of ravens she hears, who deride*

*The attempt to reclaim those who have died.*

*The great ones of Light come to a decision,*

*And influence the birth of four Heirs of Light*

*Who shall make the world forever bright,*

*And turn the Kingdoms into a deep paradise,*

*Though only with blood and fire's sacrifice.*

*But they must be the true and four royal Heirs,*

*Or else this paradise shall never come to pass.*

*This prophecy is as fragile as glass*

*Before the advent of the black stone's cares."*

Then she sat down on the throne and closed her eyes, in a moment melding with the crystal once more. The figure rotated back into the depths of the flower, which closed its petals again.

Kymenos stared at the flower, then at Pannerel. "Can you remember that?" he asked, his mind spinning with the attempt to keep the words in place.

"Of course," said the elf, with evident surprise. "Can't you?"

"Mortal memories don't work like that," Kymenos murmured, while the spinning went on. *The black stone would be Nightstone. Almost certainly. And of course most of the rest seems clear. But why here? Why now? Why not have a priestess of Elle or the Oracle of the Mountains sing that in our world, where it would at least make sense? And why to me? Surely the four Heirs should hear that.*

"It's so random," he said at last, looking up at Pannerel.

"Yes? And?"

"It shouldn't be."

"Why not?" asked Pannerel.

"Prophecies are supposed to be ordered things of Destiny, that make sense," said Kymenos.

"This makes a great deal of sense," said Pannerel. "And prophecies do what they want to do. Do you want to see a harpbird's nest?"

"No," said Kymenos. "I want to go home."

"Ah, good," said Pannerel, who smiled at once. "That is good. I have wanted to visit the mortal world for an extended period of time."

"You'll be taking me home?"

"Coming with you on your journey."

Kymenos stared at him. The elf stared back, slowly losing his smile. "Is something wrong?" Pannerel asked. "Your head aching, perhaps?"

"Why would you come with me?"

"Because I want to."

Kymenos put his head in his hands.

"Are you sure that you don't want something else for your head?" asked Pannerel.

## Chapter 37

### The Usual Routine

*"It is amazing how easily we fall back into the confines of a familiar routine, even when we think that it has been disrupted beyond endurance."*

-Theretta, Princess of Gazania.

"Olumer."

Olumer opened his eyes slowly. He didn't want to move. There was a blizzard howling outside the cave they'd found, and if Renne wanted him to go out into the cruel winds, then she was just wasting her time.

"It's Cadona."

Olumer sat up at that. Unless she had run away again, Cadona would be inside the cave, and not outside. "What about her?"

"She- well." Renne paused, and listened. Olumer turned his head, listening as well, and heard the Princess of Rivendon scream, loud and heartbreaking. Issendan and Calortas were already awake, heads turned towards the sound. Mourn and the two horses could apparently ignore it.

Olumer sighed. He had thought that, since Cadona hadn't had nightmares most of the nights they were on the trail, they might finally have departed. She was prone to have them the moment things slowed down a little, he supposed. "She dreams of the night that her family was eaten," he said, fighting his way to his feet, "and that makes her scream."

"Olumer."

"Yes?" asked Olumer, making sure that he had a waterflask with him. Sometimes, cold water was the only thing that would bring Cadona back from the worst dreams.

"You told me that you found her wandering in the woods, that you had no idea who her parents were." Renne's voice, and face, when he glanced at her, were both quiet and expressionless.

Olumer shrugged and turned, avoiding the healer's gaze as best he could. "She thinks that she is the Princess of Rivendon, and she thinks that she remembers the filifernai eating her family."

He walked over to Cadona's blankets, or what remained of them after her thrashing, now actually more worried by the pressure of Renne's eyes on his back than he was about the nightmare. The nightmare he knew how to deal with. Renne was- well, unknown at the least.

He knelt down beside Cadona and called her name softly. She ignored him completely, if she even heard him, which was doubtful. Still she screamed and thrashed, and moaned the name of the Princess Terdona, her mother, as though she had just seen the woman die.

"I'm here, Cadona," said Olumer, as he had said in that long-ago time when he had arrived too late to rescue the Crown Princess. His heart ached with the thought of it. He had failed his duty then, but he would not fail it now. "Please wake up. You're only making it worse, when you thrash around like this."

More screaming.

Olumer poured some of the water from the flask across Cadona's face. That made her wake up at once, blinking. Olumer reached out and tenderly curved an arm around her, pulling her from the wet blankets.

"Was it the usual nightmare?" he asked quietly, mopping the water from her face with his tunic.

Cadona lay there a moment, trembling. She always allowed herself that before she pulled away and became the haughty self that she thought was more suited to a Princess. Olumer stroked her forehead.

That seemed to recall Cadona to herself. She pulled herself away with a flip of her silver hair, and sniffed. "Do you really think that I would scream like that about any other dream, Olumer?" Her eyes searched the corners of the cave, and she seemed relieved when she saw only people and animals that she knew there.

"I don't know," said Olumer, and spoke the words that were to come as carefully as he could. He had to be careful, or Cadona would accuse him of trying to coddle and strangle her with swaddling clothes. "I thought that you might be dreaming about the thiria."

Cadona sneered. "Why would I? It is a little danger, hardly of the scope of the Dark. It's not even a creature of the Dark. It could not challenge the Princess of Rivendon."

*Actually, it might.*

Olumer started, then nodded in understanding as Mourn trotted towards them. He still jumped whenever the unicorn spoke to him. Too many years without telepathic contact, he supposed. The unicorn bowed his head so that he could look the Princess in the eye. *Your father was the Prince Haniron of Orlath, wasn't he?*

"So what if he was?" asked Cadona, her head up and her hair falling down her back in the smooth waves that Olumer was used to again. Cadona's hair never seemed to achieve the snarls and tangles that his own hair did so effortlessly.

*That means that you share the blood of the Orlathian royal family, said Mourn placidly. Not the direct line of the throne, or I think that the thiria would have attacked you then and there. And since you are considered the Heir of Rivendon and not of Orlath, it might not have sensed you at all. But it will come back when it has finished its business in the south, killing the last of the Orlathian royal line, and then it will sense and slaughter you, I shouldn't wonder.*

Olumer cursed under his breath. He hadn't even thought about that. Princess Cadona was cousin to the Princess Alliana, and probably the Heir to the Orlathian throne if anything managed to happen to that Princess. Of course she would be in danger from the thiria, if it really was seeking to exterminate anyone who had the slightest trace of Queen Aneron's blood.

"Is there anything that we can do to help?" he asked, looking at Mourn.

Mourn swished his tail. *Why should there be? The blood of Queen Aneron flows in Cadona's veins, and you cannot step back in time and erase the crimes that she committed against the thiria. The thiria will come. All that you can do is be ready to meet it when it comes.*

"That is what I meant. What kind of weapons should we have against the thiria? How do we fight it?"

Mourn gave a small snort. *I will speak with you later. For the moment, I think there is someone else who rather demands your attention.*

Olumer turned swiftly. Renne was striding towards him, her healer's robes flowing behind her. She inclined her head to Cadona, but didn't even pause to stop and speak with her, instead seizing Olumer's arm and dragging him towards the side of the cave furthest from the Princess and the unicorn.

Olumer held her gaze and tried to calm his urgently pounding heart. *You knew, when you took the Princess from the castle all those years ago, that it might come to this. Be calm.*

"I want to know the meaning of this," said Renne in a low voice. "You asked me to help you heal Cadona, and yet all you do is play into her delusions. You even think that her nightmares come from seeing her family eaten. You encourage her in this. Tell me why I should not leave you here and take Cadona with me, that she might heal apart from your encouragement."

Olumer sighed. "I think that you will find I am not the only one encouraging her."

"What do you mean?"

"Mourn also believes her. And if I am not mistaken, Destiny or Light is speaking to her and encouraging her."

Renne's gaze went from him to Cadona. She was sitting up in her blankets, apparently uncaring that they were wet, and arguing with Mourn. The unicorn was snorting in a way that Olumer thought meant he was arguing back.

"You- you really think that she is the Princess of Rivendon," said Renne quietly.

"I do."

The healer turned to look back at him, moving as slowly as if she were in a dream. "And why is that?"

Olumer straightened his shoulders and met her gaze. He couldn't think of a good story, and it was almost a sure thing that Cadona would be revealed sooner or later to the Dark anyway. Perhaps it was best that they be revealed now. "Because I came and took her alive from the wreckage of the palace all those years ago. I have kept her hidden and safe for twelve years while the Dark hunted for her. I know that she is the Princess Cadona of Rivendon. She did see her family eaten in front of her, and she has nightmares about them. I am your enemy, my lady, since you serve the Dark, and you probably should have killed me while you had the chance."

Renne only shook her head, and Olumer took advantage of the distraction. They couldn't run, not with the blizzard howling outside. They would have to kill Renne, and perhaps Issendan and Calortas, if the two men were not willing to either follow Cadona or keep quiet about her.

Olumer hammered a punch into Renne's midsection, while she wasn't expecting it, and she fell in a heap. He turned and ran towards Cadona, who had turned to look at him with a blank expression on her face.

"She will delay us if she can!" Olumer cried. "We need to kill her, Cadona."

The Princess's face lit at once, and she stood, hands extended. Scarlet whipped forth from her in long ribbons, heading straight for Renne. The horses promptly began to scream and kick at the hobbles that bound them.

Issendan and Calortas were paying attention by now. Issendan shouted, "What is happening?" while Calortas cowered.

Olumer turned to him, confident that Cadona's fire magic would kill Renne on its own. "She is truly the Princess Cadona of Rivendon," he said. "Will you serve her, or at least not betray her location to the Dark?"

Issendan snorted. "She is truly the Destined Queen of our land? Gods help us all."

"Will you?"

Issendan studied him thoughtfully. "Renne paid us to take her to the Western Crescent. Pay us something, and we'll go along with you at least until the end of the journey. You'll need our expertise, won't you?" He had to raise his voice above the crackle of the flames, but Olumer heard him well enough.

"I'm not sure that Cadona would want to pay someone for the services that she would think they should offer to her freely," said Olumer.

"Then we have no bargain."

Olumer reached down to touch the pouch sewn into his clothes. He had brought what he thought was enough silver for something like this, though if the drivers wanted more than the silver he had, the bargain would be off. "Very well. I will pay you, if you will go with us on into the Western Crescent."

Issendan smiled. "Very good."

Olumer turned towards Renne, expecting to see a smoking corpse where she had lain. He felt sorry, because he had liked her, but he did know that something like this could happen, and he had sworn that he would protect the Princess from the Dark when he took up the burden of protecting her at all. He couldn't flinch when someone of the Dark did find out who and where she was.

Instead of a corpse, though, there was only a shining circle of light in the air. Cadona's Scarlet magic was hammering on it and being absorbed by the light as though it were water.

Olumer cursed and scrambled towards it. He had seen enough circles like that when the Dark came to the castle to know just what they were. *A portal. Renne has gone through, but it would have closed if she had only called it to aid her. Someone else is coming through.*

He called on his own magic, but he was very tired, and the spirits chose to argue with him, not believing that he could provide proper bodies if they were to come through into the world. Olumer was still arguing with them when the portal rippled, and someone stepped out of it.

Olumer lost his breath, and his concentration on summoning bodies for the spirits. He had only seen this man once, from a distance, but some impressions tended to linger.

He was tall, dark of skin as all the Rivendonians were, and green-eyed. But his hair was golden, a strangely metallic color, almost certainly showing off fey blood. He wore a tunic and trousers as if he were anyone, but the coronet on his head and his extremely composed manner would have been enough to show that he was not. Prince Artaen, they called him, Prince of Rivendon, and one of the Dark's highest lieutenants.

"Ah," he said calmly, looking towards Cadona. "I thought that Renne's report had the ring of truth. You are the Princess, I suppose?"

Cadona stood at once, trembling, her flames falling back to form an aura around her. Olumer had to admit that she looked impressive, though he would have been happier if they were running. He cast another longing glance towards the entrance of the cave, and the blizzard howled at him, as if to remind him that they weren't about to go anywhere.

"I am the Princess Cadona," said Cadona. "And I am your enemy."

"Of course you are," said Artaen. "They always are. And your unicorn is most impressive, of course, even though he is on our side. And you have the drivers who brought you this far." He addressed Issendan. "Did you raise this girl for the last twelve years? I must commend you on keeping her hidden, though of course I shall then have to kill you for doing the same thing."

Issendan pointed past him with a shaking finger. Artaen turned, and blinked a little when he saw Olumer.

"Goodness," he said calmly. "A silvereyes? I would not have thought it. She would hardly learn formal manners in the middle of a forest."

"I am not pure silvereyes," said Olumer. One of the traditions that his mother had taught him, though never saying if it came from her people or his father's, was a regard for truth. If he was going to die, then he would tell the truth. "Only a halfbreed, but yes, I have raised Cadona in the middle of a forest."

Artaen shook his head. "No wonder I never found her. I was looking in the wrong places. I should have remembered some of the history-tales that spoke of children raised as peasants coming to claim the throne."

"I am not a peasant," said Cadona. "I wasn't raised that way. Turn around and face me, you *gibetzu*."

"Language," said Artaen, without raising his voice or turning to face her at all. "Tell me, man-what is your name?"

"Olumer."

"I know that name," said Artaen. "You were on the last roll of visitors the Crown Princess of Rivendon received. But no one seemed to know anything about you. Not a noble."

"No."

"What, then?"

"A scout and courier and spy." Olumer smiled, feeling the years seem to rush backward, claiming the full flower again of what he had once been. "Older now, of course, but still ready to strike against the Dark."

"Even though the Crown Princess and most others of the Rivendonian royal line loved the Dark?" Artaen asked, his eyebrows rising.

"My mother was *not* of the Dark! You take that back!"

Artaen ignored that entirely, still gazing at Olumer. "You are very interesting, and I think that you probably know secrets I need to know."

"I won't reveal them."

"Oh, yes you will," said Artaen dismissively, and then turned around to look at Cadona. "But first-"

He closed his eyes, and Cadona screamed. Olumer knew what was happening. Artaen was powerful in Azure magic, and was congealing the blood in her veins.

Olumer lunged forward and hit the Prince of Rivendon, not knocking him down but disrupting his concentration. Artaen glanced at him in some annoyance, and said, "You're being tiresome."

There was pain then, and pain, and more pain, and though Olumer fought to remain awake, he fell into darkness instead, pursued by Cadona's screams.

## Chapter 38

### In the Company of Undines

*"Oh, undine, undine, will you ever return,*

*Or make less fire within my heart burn?"*

-Song said to have been composed by a bard who was in love with an undine.

"I don't like them."

Ternora made a little noise that she hoped sounded sympathetic as she trudged along after the Prince. The undines were sporting in the River, now and then vanishing altogether as they chased each other under the surface, but mostly appearing visibly and speaking in high squeaking voices. Then they would vanish back again. This seemed to distress Warcourage, but Ternora couldn't really find the words to comfort him.

"It's not just the crime that my ancestress committed, either," Warcourage added defiantly, as if Ternora had been about to say something about that. "They're so- they're so *frivolous*."

"That is an odd word to apply to an undine," said Viridian, who crawled along behind them. He seemed content to watch the undines, and didn't argue with the Prince nearly as much. *But*, Ternora thought, with a roll of her eyes, *I suppose he couldn't resist the opportunity*. "It would be better given to human Court advisers who drip with jewels and yet never manage to accomplish anything."

Ternora glanced sharply back at the dragon. That was the first time he had said anything like that. Was he attacking her? And why?

"Prince, Dragon, Lady."

That was the undines' way of addressing them, and it made Ternora glad that she could turn away from the bickering between the other two and speak to someone else. "Yes, what is it?"

The undine who looked up at her solemnly was either the leader or someone who looked just like her. "There are dead elves ahead. The Lord of Waters told me, that I might tell you, and you might not be distressed."

The Prince made a distressed sound anyway, and started to run ahead. At once a shimmering band of water uncoiled from the Triaga's surface and barred his path.

"No," said the undine. "The Lord of Waters wants Ternora to look at it first. If there are any of her kind among them, then He will try to choose us a different path."

Ternora swallowed. "I will go look."

Warcourage clutched her hand before she could move far forward. "If they are Light elves, come back and tell me at once," he whispered hoarsely, his face pale.

"She'll do what she wants," said the undine.

Ternora clasped his ruined hand, then turned and walked towards the sight that must lie around the nearest bend, since she had seen no sign of the slaughter in the River so far.

It probably was best that she went first. Warcourage wouldn't have seen elves die, Ternora thought, except by the relatively clean method of elf-fire. That was one way of killing them.

There were others.

Ternora stepped around the bend, and then closed her eyes. It was as bad as she had feared, or worse, the only mitigating factor being that none of these were Light elves. All of them had the golden-brown skin and pale hair of Faerie elves. There were five of them, perhaps six. It was hard to tell.

If one didn't have elf-fire, the surest way to kill an elf was to dismember her body, and that was what the attackers had done.

Ternora picked her way silently among the shattered bones and limbs, avoiding looking at the faces, but scanning the ground in case there was a clue as to who had done this. She found only one track that wasn't the mark of an elven boot, a large paw. It could have matched a dragon's, but was smaller.

"It is horrible."

Ternora turned to face the River. The undine who had summoned her was floating there, staring at the slaughter with silver eyes that had lost some of their shine.

"Even you feel that?" Ternora asked. The elementals usually didn't care that much about the fey.

The undine lifted her eyes and nodded. "This should have not have happened. What could have killed them like this?"

"You don't know?"

The undine shook her head, making her hair ripple. "Nor does our Lord Erlande. He only bade us report this to you. He does not know what happened."

Ternora swallowed and turned back to the shattered bodies. Something must have done it; the elves wouldn't have been able to kill each other, not fighting this way. But the idea that something could have taken on five- perhaps six- elves and lived was as frightening as the thought of Faerie elves fighting each other.

"We can't let Prince Warcourage see this," she said at last. "Can you carry us across the water to the other bank for a time?"

"Too late."

Ternora turned hastily. The Prince was coming up behind her, and his face was pale as he stared at the torn bodies.

"I wanted you to stay back there," said Ternora, when she had managed to recover her voice. Bad enough to see it on her own, but looking at the expression on his face made it seem as if she were seeing it through his eyes as well.

"I- I wanted to see." The Prince took a deep breath, and then his shoulders dropped, relaxing. "Well, at least it wasn't as bad as it could have been."

"What do you mean?" Ternora asked blankly.

"They aren't Light elves."

Ternora turned away, not trusting herself to answer. But after a moment she did speak, though in a high and tight voice that sounded very unlike her own. "And do you think that the one who did this will wait long before he or she or it goes after Light elves, my Prince?"

"But at least it wasn't Light elves *this time*," said Warcourage, still as if that should make a difference, and turned to the undine while Ternora was groping for words. "You don't have any idea what did this?"

"No."

Warcourage nodded. "Then lead us on, and let us put this place far behind us." As the undine dropped into the water, he added in an undertone to Ternora, "I don't think that's true. I bet that they do know the things who attacked these elves, and they're lying about it."

"Why would they?" asked Ternora, mystified. "Surely whatever it is could be as much a danger to them as it could be to us."

"They're of the Dark," said Warcourage. "Their deceptions don't have to make sense. They indulge in it for the sake of deception."

Ternora bit down on her lip and carefully refrained from replying. Warcourage wouldn't like what she had to say.

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"What are you doing?"

Ternora looked up from the reed she was pruning. One of the undines floated nearby, staring at her in interest.

"Trying to fashion a pipe," said Ternora. "I would like to sing a mourning song for the elves who died."

"We are going to do that when the sun touches the horizon."

Ternora blinked at that. She had heard legends that the undines sang, but only to lure people to watery dooms. "You would really mourn the elves? Even though they are only fey, and not elementals?"

"When they die as they have died, then there is no difference between fey and elemental," said the undine, and dived back into the water.

Ternora looked at the reed she had been smoothing and threw it away. She was terrible with instruments anyway, and much better with her voice. She had tried the pipe at all only because she vaguely remembered elves playing them in the mourning rituals of her childhood.

When sunset came, the red light blazing in the surface of the Triaga, the undines' song rose abruptly, breaking over the argument that Viridian and Prince Warcourage had begun over who would better be able to face a forest fire. Viridian lifted his head, his eyes shining but his body still. Warcourage clapped his hands over his ears and whirled.

Ternora stood looking into the water with intensely mixed emotions. The undines swam back and forth, their bodies and hair appearing and then disappearing again, their voices high and liquid and haunting. Some of them rose on water-flowers and turned to face the sunset, sculpting the water moment by moment into new shapes. There were elves there, and swords, and dancing figures that might have been elves or some other kind of fey, even dolphins leaping in the waves of the Lilitha Ocean. They warbled, they soared, and they sang, and Ternora could feel her heart speeding and aching with the sadness of it.

She joined in the song of her own accord, her voice not the song that would put people to sleep but something else, something steadier. She usually sang to keep herself company as she walked the endless trails, but she rarely let other people hear that; it wasn't polished enough for public performance. Now, though, she gave herself over to the wordless music of the mourning rites, and the undines' voices twined around her own and led it deeper into their crystal maze, so that Ternora ceased to worry about whether the tune was polished enough or not. It would be hard to tell her own voice from all the others, anyway.

The song rose, and then fell again, like rain splashing into pools. Then it rose again, and Ternora closed her eyes, swept away with it. Not even the light of sunset was worth keeping her eyes open for, not with the visions forming behind her mind's eye.

She could see the Faerie elves, six of them after all, walking calmly along beside the Triaga. None of them had weapons, but then, they needed none. They could worldwalk, and together they could dream like fire, and altogether, elves were extremely hard to kill. They moved with no awareness that danger was near, either, at least as far as Ternora could read the expressions on their faces. She had always found it harder to read Faerie elves than Light elves or other kinds of fey.

Then something struck among them, something silvery and fast-moving. The elves tried to step into another world to evade the attack, and found the portals closed against them. They tried to dream like fire and change the attacking thing into something else, but nothing happened. The enemy was beyond such magic, or at least Ternora had the distinct feeling that that was so.

They died.

Ternora wanted to close her eyes to the bloodletting, but the swelling funeral song would not let her. The music mourned something that had happened, and her mind was grimly determined that she would see what had happened. The silvery thing tore the elves limb from limb, severed their spines, ripped off their heads, until at last their bodies lay scattered in the same pattern that Ternora had seen next to the Triaga.

The figure slowed then, and became or took on a new shape. Ternora stared. The woman who stood there was unmistakably human and not fey, though she shone with silver light that meant great power. Everything about her was silver, or white, from the shawl over her shoulders to her skin. And she was weeping, hands over her face so that Ternora could not make out her features. The sense of sorrow that hung around her was palpable, almost stronger than the sorrow that gleamed in the undines' song.

And then the figure threw up her arms and vanished.

Ternora opened her eyes. The song was dying, and with it the vision. She shivered. What could have done that to elves? No human she knew, and yet the woman hadn't been fey. She was sure of that.

The funeral music died. For a long moment, even with the knowledge of death in her head and the sunset gleaming on the River, Ternora was content. The elves had been mourned, and the world could go back to its turning.

Then a clump of grass and dirt hit her.

Ternora looked up. Warcourage was standing there, his face twisted with disgust, another clump of dirt and grass ready to throw.

"Do you have to mourn them like that?" he asked. "You didn't sing for Amirien and the other elves who died. Did you have to sing like that for them?"

Ternora smiled. She knew what was wrong. She had seen it before, from those with less elven blood than she had. They were jealous that Ternora could fall so completely and fully into the mourning, while they were exiled into the human. Sometimes being a half-elf was not wonderful, but there were benefits.

Given how many times Ternora had seen this reaction, she was inclined to accept it philosophically, but it seemed that the undines were not. Even as Ternora watched, a few of them detached themselves from the clump and swam towards Warcourage, who watched them come with a sneer on his face.

He wasn't sneering when they rose out of the water on gleaming waves and caught him up by the ankles.

"Ternora! Help!" he screamed.

Ternora really wasn't all that inclined to help. She stared blithely at the tree branches overhead and remarked to Viridian, "Did you ever see such colors? This will be a fine spring."

Viridian chuckled. "That it will."

Warcourage yelled. Ternora glanced at him, and saw that the undines had pulled him out of the water, only half-drowned. He was suspended by his heels above the Triaga, though.

"Are you ready to calm down and stop saying such things?" asked Ternora.

"No!" Warcourage doubtless meant to say something else, some grand pronouncement, but it came out as "blub" as the undines dunked him again.

Ternora took a seat on the bank and settled back to watch. She was sure that the undines wouldn't drown him, since Erlande had sent them as escort and apparently was waiting for the Prince to come to Him and make amends for Queen Rizzeros's crime.

Well- fairly sure.

At the moment, she had to admit that she couldn't bring herself to care much. Her heart was still sore with grief, and there was the strange woman whom she had seen tearing apart the elves to consider.

But she had partially healed the one and didn't have any thoughts as yet about the other, so it was pleasant to sit there, chat with Viridian about the colors of the leaves, and watch the undines dunk Warcourage until he agreed to stop being such a brat.

He was stubborn. It took a lot of dunkings.

Chapter 39

The Education of Mitherill

*"There is only one power in the world that will ever have a claim on a child: the power introduced to them soonest after birth. Gods are a different thing, and they may follow a god who is aligned with a different power. But whether Light or Dark, Shadow or Luck, claims a child first, the grip of that power is never to be shaken."*

-From Galden Ferent's *Principles of Orlathian Noble Education*.

"Princess."

Elary opened her eyes at once, and sat up, turning to face what she thought had to be a threat. She hadn't heard someone enter the room.

But the person in question only looked at her blankly, as if she were of no more notice than a chair, and then turned and gazed at Mitherill. "Rise, Princess," she repeated. "Your teachers are waiting for you."

Elary studied the woman with her eyes narrowed. She wasn't human, of course, but then, Elary doubted Shadow had many purely human servants; he was too strange. She had the pointed ears of an elf, but her face did look almost human, and her skin was a dull yellow, like gold that had ceased to shine. Elary didn't know what she was.

That only made her more cautious, of course.

Mitherill stirred, then immediately began to cry. Elary hastened to her side, while the woman only stood there, saying nothing.

"Mitherill," Elary whispered into her ear. "What is it? Are you all right?"

"I have to have a lemon in the mornings," said Mitherill, "to wash my mouth of the taste of bad dreams."

"We have no lemons here," said the golden-skinned woman, who could evidently hear quite well. "Rise, Princess. Your teachers are waiting for you."

Elary faced her, wishing the woman would show some trace of a human reaction, even if she wasn't human. That would make it easier not to explode in anger. "What is your name?"

"Quenent, my lady."

"And what is your kindred?"

"My lady?" Quenent had gone back to staring at the floor, as if she were unable to keep her eyes on Elary's face all the time.

"I said, who is your kindred? What is your kind? You shame them, whoever they are, in treating the Princess like this."

"I only do as my Lord Shadow and his teachers have asked of me," said Quenent quietly to the floor. "And the Lady Mitherill can rise from her bed, or be dragged. That was what they told me."

Mitherill began to cry harder. Elary knelt next to her, with a hard look at Quenent, and whispered in her ear, "It's all right, Princess. I'll be with you."

"I need the lemon!"

"Can you bear up without it?" Mitherill only sobbed harder, so Elary tried the one tactic she thought might work. "Your people are probably being forced to go without many things at the moment, Princess, in both Ilantra and Arvenna. Can you be strong for their sake? Can you make sure that, even though you suffer, you do not let them down?"

It worked. At once Mitherill's tears dried up, and she nodded. "Yes," she said. "For the sake of sparing them suffering, I may do much."

Elary let out a sigh of relief and turned to look at Quenent. "The Princess will be ready in a moment. But she will need a new gown, and cloths to clean up the roughlung bile during the lesson."

The woman bowed, without once changing expression, and turned away, closing the door behind her. Elary smoothed her hand over Mitherill's brow. "Can you truly bear up?" she whispered. "I hate to see you suffering."

Mitherill met her eyes and smiled shyly. "Thank you for your care, Elary, but I am sure that I shall bear up now. You reminded me of the suffering of my own people, which is ever greater than my own."

Elary nodded to her, then stood back as Quenent entered the room again, apparently with the things she had asked for. "And is the Princess allowed to have some breakfast before she goes to the lessons?" she asked coolly.

"The breakfast will be served with the lessons," said Quenent, head bowed as she laid the gown on the bed. It was suiting to a Princess, Elary had to admit, being made of pure white silk. The cloths went beside it, warm and thick. "And Shadow has told me that the Princess is to hurry."

That necessitated another bout of crying, another bout of comforting, and then they managed to get Mitherill into her gown and wrapped around with the cloths, as she had another bout of bile that necessitated them. Elary noticed that Quenent moved with careful grace, as though she knew her way around a Princess's clothes, but whenever she tried to catch the woman's eye, Quenent resolutely looked down.

Elary sighed. *I cannot make her an ally yet. Well, perhaps I can make her an ally later, when we actually escape.*

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"Welcome, my ladies."

Elary started. She had taken in two people in the room when she stepped in, but she hadn't seen the third, lounging off to the side. He rose to his feet as they entered, and bowed from the waist.

It was Shadow again, of course. He seemed to favor this misty form and the gesture of the bow.

"My ladies," he repeated. "I hope that you will find everything to your comfort and your liking here."

"There is little chance of that," said Elary coolly, "since you have shown that you care so little for the Princess's comfort."

Shadow smiled. "Lemons for breakfast? A white dog when we have none? My Lady Elary, surely you think too highly of the young Princess. I don't think that we have deprived her at all, just taught her that she can do without some of the luxuries when she must."

"It is a harsh lesson."

"Why?"

Elary shook her head and turned away. Shadow was not Light, and did not have Light's compassion. He hadn't looked into Mitherill's eyes and seen the tragedy gleaming there, nor lost his heart to helping the young Princess in the way that Elary had.

Shadow winked at her, she was almost certain, and then said, "Welcome to your first lesson, Princess Mitherill. What do you think the lesson is?"

"You have no breakfast for me?"

"Ah, very good," said Shadow, sounding as pleased as though he were a teacher himself. "Actually, we do have breakfast for you, but receiving it is the first test. The first lesson." He gestured to the two people Elary had noticed on entering the room again, and she and Mitherill both turned to look at them more fully.

One was a mizan, a lightning-fey, who smiled at them. She had a covered platter in front of her, but as Mitherill and Elary watched, she uncovered it. A steam rose at once off the contents, and Elary could feel her own mouth watering. Veal and hot bread and soup that she wasn't familiar with, but which smelled wonderful anyway.

"That is one teacher," said Shadow. "Her name is Lumorien. And this is your other teacher, called Rekastien, and he has a different kind of lesson."

Elary turned to face Rekastien, and recoiled. He looked like nothing so much as a living clump of thorns, from above which a human face watched them mildly. His arms extended from his sides to a tray that rested on his knees. There was bread there, and slices of dried fruit. It was a good meal, but nothing compared to the heavenly smells that were rising from the meal Lumorien held.

"Your test," said Shadow, "is to go and eat your breakfast."

"That doesn't sound hard," said Mitherill, and cast a glance at Rekastien, followed by a delicate little shudder. She turned for the hot meal that Lumorien held, and reached out a hand to take up the bowl of soup when she was only a few inches from the mizan.

The next moment, she was tumbling backward, clutching her hand and screaming. Elary hastened forward to help her, grasping her hand and seeing that it was black, and smoked slightly. Lumorien laughed softly and merrily from her corner.

"You understand," said Shadow. "You can't just take the food from Lumorien. She will send lightning into your hands if you do."

"That isn't fair," said Elary. She thought these were the words that Mitherill would have spoken herself, but she was too busy sobbing. Elary had to raise her voice slightly so that they could hear her above the weeping, in fact, which gave her some hope. If Shadow and the

others could see how cruel this was, they might be tempted to give in and just let Mitherill eat her breakfast. "You haven't told us anything about how to learn these lessons."

"You should know," said Shadow. "We are starting with the very basics, since these are the things that Mitherill should have learned when young, only she had no one to teach her. Or, at least, no one who would teach her in the right way. Mitherill can't just take the food from Lumorien, but that doesn't mean that she can't eat. She just has to speak politely to the mizan, and ask for it."

"You didn't say that before."

Shadow smiled at her. Elary shivered. There was hardness in those misty eyes, even contempt, as though Shadow really didn't care that Mitherill had been hurt. "I thought that it was a basic thing. If Mitherill doesn't know it, she needs to learn it. Or you should have warned her. Would you have remembered your manners and asked permission before taking something from the tray?"

Elary lowered her gaze and said nothing, confused. Actually, she couldn't remember thinking that since she had come into the room and seen the offered meals. She had been thinking only of sparing Mitherill some unnecessary pain.

"And this one?" she asked, turning towards Rekastien.

"That is a different test," said Shadow. "If Mitherill is determined to take food from Lumorien, then she will not face it today."

And it did seem that Mitherill was determined to take food from Lumorien, if the way she shrugged off Elary's grip on her shoulder and moved forward was any excuse. She reached out towards the tray, faster this time. But Lumorien only laughed and burned her hand again.

"Do you really think that you can move faster than the lightning?" asked the mizan, as Mitherill lay sobbing on the floor. "Of course you can't. But everyone always thinks that for some reason."

Elary whispered soothing words in Mitherill's ear, and then decided to try the test herself. Rising, she walked towards the mizan. Lumorien just watched her come peacefully, making no attempt to lunge at her, as Elary had half-thought she might. Elary took a deep breath and said, "Is it all right if I take some of the bread?"

"Of course."

Elary scooped up the hot, fresh bread from the tray, not quite believing it. But the mizan did not sting her, and she ate a few bites of it without anything poisonous or hurtful happening.

She took it back to Mitherill, who looked up at her in disbelief and then tore the bread from her hand, beginning to eat greedily. Elary shook her head. Shadow was right that she lacked manners, and that she would have to learn them before she could sit at the high table and eat in a Court. But that didn't mean that she would have to stay the same way, always, or that she had to be tortured because of it. She had burned hands, and that was enough to make Elary excuse some of the supposed bad manners.

She turned to glare at Shadow, who was watching her with narrowed eyes. "And what will you do if I just fetch food for her? Will you start punishing me, too?"

"Oh, no," said Shadow. "Of course not. You can fetch as much food as you like, provided that you do it politely, and bring it to her."

"Thank you," said Elary coldly, and did just that, requesting some of the meat and the soup from Lumorien, until the tray was empty. Mitherill refused to eat the meat, but she ate most of the soup and bread, and looked revived.

"Thank you, Rekastien, Lumorien," said Shadow, when both Elary and Mitherill had finished eating. "You may go. Send Rior in, if you would."

"Are you sure?" Lumorien asked, even as she stood. "I would like to come back and teach the Princess some more."

"Not right now, Lumorien," said Shadow very firmly.

The mizan sniffed, but left the room with Rekastien hard on her heels, disappearing into one of the tunnels in the wall.

Shadow turned back to Elary. "This teacher was once human."

"Once?"

"He's not anymore," said Shadow, as if it didn't really matter. "But it might make him easier for you to understand. He was once Ilantran, as well, and should be able to tell Mitherill something about that country."

"I know everything there is to know," said Mitherill, lifting her head proudly. "Light has been telling me."

Shadow only glanced at her, then turned away as someone else came into the room. Elary blinked. For a moment, she thought Shadow had somehow doubled himself, and there were now two of them standing before her.

Instead, she realized after a moment, this was a distinct figure, though like Shadow himself he was made out of mist or shadow. The outlines were sharp and distinct, though, showing a man in his early thirties, with the features that marked him as someone who was of Ilantran royal blood. There was a deep calm in his eyes that Elary recognized, and which steadied her. Someone who worked around the dying much of his time sometimes took on that look, but it was one that Elary didn't see often enough, especially in experienced healers.

"My name is Rior," he said, bowing his head. "I am going to be Mitherill's teacher in Ilantran history."

"I don't need one," said Mitherill.

"What did the Light teach you about Ilantran history?" asked Rior.

Mitherill looked a little taken aback. Elary wondered if she had expected a servant of Shadow to react with anger to the pronouncement about the Light. She glanced at Elary, then said, "Well, about the conquest by Shadow, of course. And how long Light ruled in Ilantra."

"How long?"

"For seven hundred years."

Rior was smiling a little, though Elary couldn't see why. That sounded like most of the history she had heard. "And what about other than that?"

"Other than that?"

"Before the seven hundred years? Or after them?"

"Ilantra was only founded seven hundred years before Dark took the country," said Mitherill, irritation creeping into her voice. "Or seven hundred and fifty years, I think. And then Dark took the throne for a little while, and then Light came back, and it ruled until the conquest that orphaned me." She bowed her head.

Rior didn't melt into tears, but he did frown, and glance at Shadow. "You know what I think about this," he said.

Elary gaped. She had never heard someone address a divine one, power or god, that way. But, when she glanced at Shadow, she found him in a lounging position against the stone, studying Rior with deep affection and nothing else in his eyes.

"I know, Rior," he said. "You have made your opinions abundantly clear. You always have. But I think that what we have to teach Mitherill here is more important than what happened twelve years ago."

Rior turned more fully to face Shadow, though as far as Elary could tell this just involved rearranging the mist of his body a little. "I will only do this if I can tell her the true reason behind the conquest."

Shadow narrowed his eyes. "You don't want much, do you?"

"I mean it. My lord." The last sounded like an addition.

Shadow studied him for a long moment in silence. Even Mitherill's soft sobbing didn't seem to interrupt it. Elary looked from shadowy face to shadowy face, and wondered what she was missing here.

"Very well," said Shadow. "But the truth about everything else, Rior. If you think that she can bear to hear why I had to conquer my own country, then she can hear about the other things, too."

Rior nodded, then spun back to face Mitherill. His face was calm, though with a touch of regret.

"The first thing you have to realize," he said, "is that almost everything you know about Ilantran history is wrong."

## Chapter 40

### Audacity

*"Prudence can be its own reward, but audacity can easily fill that role as well."*

-From *The Book of the Obvious*.

"You came."

Nightstone smiled a little as she sat down on the chair near the door. "What kind of Princess of Orlath would I be, were I not sympathetic to my subjects' needs?"

In reality, of course, she had come because she was amused at Lyli's presumption in summoning her. The guard had brought the message to her for a laugh, and Nightstone had laughed. But she was also curious about what the girl had wanted with her, and so she had come to the luxurious room in which Lyli was locked.

Now that she had the Princess here, the girl didn't seem to quite know what to do. She paced back and forth for a moment, fingers clenched into fists. Nightstone watched her, regretting it a little. Lyli was someone she could easily feel sympathy with, much more so than Princess Alliana. She had been meant to run free on the Plains, or- garden, or do whatever peasants did now. Even her strong Destiny shouldn't mean she had a cage here like Alliana's.

"Why did you hurt my father?"

Nightstone blinked, and turned her mind back to the conversation in question. "I don't know what you mean."

"You hurt my father." Lyli turned towards her, eyes very wide and face pale but feet braced. "I know you did. I know you ordered it."

"Of course I did," Nightstone agreed, eyeing the girl curiously. If Lyli knew she had ordered it, she must surely know the reason why.

"Why?"

*Well, perhaps she does not know.* "Because I thought it was possible that your sister might scream and ask me not to hurt her father, or offer to help him," said Nightstone, with a small shrug. "And she would have given me the information about the Quest that she was hugging so tightly to herself. As it turned out, the torture was unnecessary and even useless, but I could hardly have known that when I began to torture him."

"That's wrong."

"Of course you think it is," said Nightstone pleasantly. "The Light always thinks that the Dark is wrong, and you are a loyal little subject of the Light, whatever else you are."

"You said yourself that it was unnecessary and useless," Lyli snapped at her. "Why do you think that it was good?"

Nightstone smiled slightly. She probably shouldn't do this, and it probably wouldn't make much difference anyway, but it was a choice to be made. Lately, it seemed that she had few choices. Chase Princess Alliana, try to make her give up information, wait until the Dark had informed her about what was going on in Rivendon and what she should do with Alliana- and not much else.

"Come with me, Lyli," she said, standing. "There are things that I want to show you."

"If you try to torture me, I'll- I'll fight!" But her chin was trembling and her eyes shone with tears. Nightstone sighed. *I could have wished for her in the cell. She would have been far easier to persuade than Alliana.*

"I'm not going to torture you," she said. "We are going in the direction of the dungeons, but only for another reason."

Lyli stared at her for a long moment, then nodded slowly. Nightstone bowed from the waist, enjoying the idea that the little girl had decided to trust her only slowly, and that her trust or distrust might make a difference here. Sometimes, it was pleasant to engage in play-acting, though she hadn't been a child, and her life had included very little of pretend games, for the past four hundred years.

"I have only to arrange for guards," said Nightstone, and stepped out of the room to arrange for them.

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"Where are we going?"

"To a certain exhibit."

"But these aren't the dungeons inside the castle."

Nightstone smiled at Lyli, watching the way the girl's brown hair blew in the wind. *It truly is too bad that I'll probably end up having to kill her. She is a lively child.* "No. These are the places where the dungeons, or the main ones, were when Light ruled the castle."

Lyli eyed her warily. "The Light has no need for dungeons."

"Really?" asked Nightstone mildly, and then stepped over a chunk of broken rock. "Mind that, now."

Lyli avoided it. "Where are we going?"

"Here." Nightstone halted next to a railing, and then gestured so that Lyli would lean over it and look. "This is the place where the Light used to keep its prisoners, in days long ago and far away."

She enjoyed the words, even the pretentious note that her voice had taken on. She frowned, just a little. *Am I having too much fun with this? Will I begin to long for children, and endanger my chastity?*

"It looks like a great pit," said Lyli, interrupting the flow of her thoughts. "Just a big pit where rooms used to be. Why leave it in the middle of the castle? What was the point?"

"I think that most of the rulers of Orlath wanted to remind themselves of what could happen," said Nightstone, coming back to herself once again. Amusement drowned the other emotions. *Surely I will know if I am coming too close to the edge of my control. The unicorns will warn me.* "This used to be the temple of Elle, did you know that? She was worshipped here in the castle, and most of the rulers would send their enemies into the pits now and again."

"The pits," said Lyli, staring at the broken rubble of staircases, shattered rooms and tunnels, that had once been covered by the soaring mass of the Temple. "Why? What was down there?"

"The priestesses of Elle were skilled in the arts of torture," Nightstone murmured.

Lyli stared at her in anger. "They were not! You take that back."

"Oh, yes, they were," said Nightstone, and pointed towards a room filled with broken pillars that she had good cause to remember. "They kept Deathweaver Spiders in that room, for instance. And they wouldn't order them to bite you hard enough to make you die, but they would be painful, nonetheless."

"You? You were there?"

*The child is very quick. I will have to be more careful with what I say in front of her.* "Yes," said Nightstone, meeting Lyli's wide-eyed gaze. "Not that the Chronicle of Monarchs likes to record that, of course, or any of the historians. A Princess of Orlath, turned traitor to the Dark, who wasn't killed in battle or converted back to the Light? Why, we can't have that." She became aware that bitterness was spilling into her words, but she couldn't seem to stop speaking them. "I was taken into that room, and bitten, again and again."

"You don't have the markings," said Lyli, staring at Nightstone's arms as if she expected to see them suddenly break into scars.

Nightstone shook her head. "The damage was healed."

"By whom?"

But this was truly not her secret to tell, and Nightstone shook her head again, without difficulty. "No, Lyli, there are some things I can't tell you, unless you become a loyal servant of the Dark."

The girl drew back as if revolted. "I would never do such a thing! One doesn't do such things."

"I did," said Nightstone. "I was raised in the Light, but I saw how wrong it was, and how much better the Dark was."

"The Dark tortures as well."

"The Dark is practical," said Nightstone, "and takes as many steps as it needs to to achieve its ends. But I have never heard anyone in the Dark claim that they were doing something wonderful when they tortured, or doing something differently than the Light. The Light does the same thing, but adds the sin of prancing hypocrisy."

Lyli turned to stare back into the pits again. "I don't- you can't-" she said, and then fell silent.

Nightstone was just as glad. Staring into those shattered rooms awakened distress in her, but not all the memories were bad. A few times she had dared to come into the Temple on scouting missions, disguised so that no one would recognize her, and knelt and pretended to be praying to Elle. She had done that even in the reign of her blustering fool of a brother, King Kyern. And she had rescued a few people from the dungeons of Elle herself, whenever she thought she could risk it and the Dark had permitted her.

She remembered weeping, when the news came north that the Temple had been pulled down.

"That doesn't make the Dark good," said Lyli at last.

Nightstone gazed at her, and for a moment blinked. *I am getting old. The dead influence everything I see now. Of course, she is very near Alliana's twin, and I saw my sister in her face the other day.* "No," she said. "It doesn't. It just makes the Dark the Dark. I'm not sure what you mean by good, really, unless you mean the Light, and the Light isn't the same thing as goodness."

"The Dark can't tell the truth," said Lyli.

Nightstone shrugged. "You can see if I'm lying to you or not. I think they kept most of the old trial records, and I've opened them so that anyone who wants to can look through them. The record of my sentencing is probably there somewhere." She hadn't looked for it, though. There were some pains that not even four hundred years could ease.

"The Dark can't love."

Nightstone smiled a little at that, thinking of one couple she had known three hundred years ago, and yet another who had gone about sighing and pining for each other a little nearer in time than that. "You're wrong about that, too. We don't love in the same way as Lightworkers, perhaps, but we are not loveless. The fiercest sorrow and joy I have known has been because of love, and both of those were in the Dark."

"You loved someone? Who was he?"

Nightstone shook her head. "No. I have not loved." *Nor will I.* Curiosity and bitterness and loneliness ate at her for a moment, and then faded back into amusement. "But I have seen it. It is strange, how quickly it grows the same, and yet it does change every time."

"Do you have children?"

"No."

"Oh." Lyli blinked at her hands on the railing. "My mother said- well, she didn't say it to me, she said it to my father, and I wasn't meant to overhear, but I did- that she heard some women in the Dark bore children to men they didn't love, just so that there would be more Darkworkers."

Pain again, but this time it was at the thought of her sister, who had stayed in the Light and said words so much like that to her, during a time when Nightstone had been part of the Light as well. Nightstone sighed and banished the memories to the back of her mind. They could just stay there until she was ready to join them. "That happens often," she said. "I cannot pretend it does not. But it happens among the Light, as well, when a Princess marries a Prince she does not love, for the sake of perpetuating the line."

"That's different," said Lyli. "Marrying royal blood is different than just marrying to have soldiers."

"I don't really see why," said Nightstone. "Have you studied the history of Orlath, Lyli? Pointless wars, and after each one the royal line picks itself up and marries someone else to have more children to die in the next pointless war."

Lyli gave her a blank stare, and Nightstone reminded herself again that the girl was only twelve years old. She would have heard history-tales about the glories of war against the Dark and brave Princesses and Princes sacrificing everything for their country. She wouldn't have heard the older tales, the darker ones.

"Never mind," she said. "But you have seen what I wanted you to see. Back to your cell, now." She nodded to the liadrai guards, who waited behind the broken stone, not far from them.

Lyli abruptly shot Azure at her and tried to run.

Nightstone recovered at once from the splash of water and called on the Scarlet. Raging flames rose before Lyli, burning on bare stone because Nightstone willed it so, and then, as Lyli turned to run, fire sprang up there, too. The girl slumped and glared at her in hatred.

"I thought I might escape," she said. "I have a strong Destiny, and I think my Destiny is to free Alliana from the prison cell."

"Perhaps," said Nightstone, though she was thinking that the order might come to kill Alliana first. "But, for now, you have a prison cell to get back to."

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The message came that night. Nightstone woke from a light, restless dream about her sister to find a battered-looking pegasus standing on the balcony, with a message bound about his throat and the marks of gryphon talons on his back. Nightstone gave him her thanks and took the message. Artaen's handwriting, and that was unusual. Usually, he relied on his telepathy.

Perhaps he had thought that she would hear too much excitement and passion in his voice this time, not to write.

*To Nightstone, Lieutenant of the Dark in Orlath,*

*I have captured the Princess of Rivendon, and the guardian, Olumer, who was with her. One of my own agents was instrumental in her capture, and actually found the girl some days ago, though at the time she thought her mad.*

Nightstone snorted softly. Of course the agent would have done that. Most of Artaen's agents were convinced that they had seen the Princess of Rivendon killed years ago. *A good piece of Illusion magic, that*

*I have received messages from Shadow, and he has the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna in his care. He has been unable to locate the Prince of Doralissa, but has a good general idea of where he is. He has proposed that we meet again as soon as we can, and kill all four Royal Heirs at once. He thinks that it would be the best way to handle the situation, and I must agree. There are things happening that we do not know about. Word has come from the south of Faerie elves slaughtered, and of shapeshifters flung mutilated through a portal. And there is an unusual silence in the temples, say the priestesses of Shara. The goddess answers their prayers, still, but they say that She also seems busy with something else, some other battle.*

*Tell me when the time has come for us to meet again. I trust that you trust my messenger.*

*Artaen, Prince of Rivendon.*

Nightstone sniffed as she crumpled the message. It wasn't as if Artaen actually had royal blood.

But she could feel her own blood, royal and not, moving, and she began composing the return message at once. Just the right sequence of words, it would have to be, and she would have to copy it onto the paper that the Dark had given them for such emergencies, paper infused with Azure magic that would crumple and smear the moment someone of the Light tried to read it. Nightstone disliked touching the paper, as a Scarlet mage, but it had to be done.

The real source of her excitement, however, lay in thinking about twelve years of worry and fuss and missed sleep-

*And its ending.*