

Prophecy of Four Royals With One Mistake

Prologue

449 OR (*Orlathian Reckoning*)

"You understand the reasons why we have to exile you, Kymenos?"

Kymenos sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He had sat through the explanation of the reasons last night, and he didn't see why he needed to hear another recitation. "Yes, I understand," he said. "Though I would remind you, my Lady, that I requested to leave the Star Circle even before the sentence of exile came through. This is my choice as much as the Circle's."

The Lady serenely ignored him. Kymenos had found that his fellow mages had a habit of doing that, even when he was making the best points in the argument. In fact, they may have had a greater tendency to ignore him when he was making the best points in the argument. He sat back against his chair and folded his arms across his chest, scowling at the Lady.

She was white-haired and clad in the white robe that proclaimed her status, but other than that, there was no sign of her age. Her face was unlined, and her blue eyes tranquil in a way that could have meant the wisdom of the elderly or the odd calmness of spirit that Masters of the Wonders usually attained very young. She stared out the window, and took no notice of him.

Kymenos composed his mind the way he had been taught, when he had still been intent on mastering every Wonder they set before him, and also stared out the window. Children were shouting in the courtyard. He scowled. *They have no idea what they're getting into. They think it's all games and elemental magic, but they'll learn the truth soon enough.*

"I have decided."

Kymenos looked up. "You had already chosen to exile me. What was left to decide?"

The Lady stared at him, her eyes as cold as they ever got. "We had to decide if we would strip you of your powers before we let you leave."

"What powers?"

Again, the serene ignoring, though Kymenos fancied it took a bit more effort than before. "I have decided that you must keep them. I can sense the Destiny that flares around you, and it is obvious that you are going to be important to the Light. You will need your powers for that."

"I can only control a few elements haphazardly," said Kymenos. "What good will that be?"

"You could have controlled many more, if you would only pay attention to your studies," the Lady began, actually falling into debate. It was something that none of Kymenos's teachers had been lured into doing for quite some time. "You wanted to learn too many of the advanced Patterns and not enough of the basic ones. Your exile and your lack of learning is no one's fault but your own."

"They didn't teach me in an interesting manner," said Kymenos, knowing he sounded sulky, and not caring. "They kept trying to train me to control Metal magic, when I had shown that I had no aptitude for it."

"You could have, if you could have concentrated." The Lady shook her head. "It is a waste, Kymenos. We need Masters of Twenty Wonders, and you might have had the talent to become one of them. But you chose to waste your time instead."

"It was well-spent!" Kymenos stood up. "I managed to grow that new healing plant that even Master Diessa said was useful."

"It was wasted as far as your gaining mastery of the elements was concerned," said the Lady, only a slight flush showing her vexation at his interruption. "And then you didn't turn to a study of Crop magic."

"Why should I? I grew the plant using Light magic. What does Crop magic have to do with any of it?"

"Crop magic is involved with the well-being of plants and animals, Kymenos. You must have used it, even if you didn't realize it. Won't you please sit down?"

Fuming, Kymenos sat down again, but kept his gaze fixed on the Lady of the Star Circle. Her smile was a bit more strained than before. She glanced at him and then out the window again.

"We don't like doing this," she said. "I had to argue with Master Diessa and a few others who thought that your time among us could be spent well, even if you didn't apply yourself to your studies." She turned around again. "But control and concentration are the things most needed for a study of the elements, Kymenos, and you don't have them. I am very sorry to have to inform you of this."

Kymenos shook his head. "Never mind. I should have left the moment I learned to control those elements I like."

"An affinity is not the same as liking," said the Lady. "And you were right to come to us. Your powers were spinning out of control. They could have endangered someone else. I am only sorry that you could not learn the way that we needed you to learn."

Kymenos sat through the rest of the lecture, which was, as always, about the need for discipline and control. And he fumed quietly, as always, because the answer was right there under their noses.

I do have control and concentration. Why can't they see that? I couldn't have produced that plant without control and concentration. But they don't teach me the right way.

Kymenos dragged his thoughts back to hear the ending of the lecture, so that he could nod and stand with the Lady.

"I think that you will be very important in the wars between Light and Dark someday," said the Lady, clasping his hand. "That is the main reason that I wanted to leave your powers intact."

Kymenos snorted. "What wars of Light and Dark? They haven't happened in four generations now."

The Lady turned her head and stared into the distance. "Those of us with Mastery of Time," she said, "can sometimes see the shadows of things that are about to be born, before even the priestesses of Elle can see them."

Kymenos sighed. "My Lady, if something is going to happen that's important and involves me, then why don't you tell me?"

She turned her head and looked at him, and for a moment Kymenos felt as if he were falling into ageless blue sky. Then he shook his head and jerked himself back. That was only a trick that the Masters of the Star Circle pulled to make themselves look powerful and special. He should know better than to be ruled by it.

"Because the shadows might be wrong," said the Lady. "There is still much we do not understand about Time, and we might interfere in something that we were not meant to interfere in, do we move too quickly."

Kymenos bowed and left the room as quickly as he could. That was another reason for leaving the Star Circle, an even better one than all their teaching methods being wrong. They wouldn't fight in wars, even when one side was clearly right and the other clearly wrong. Kymenos could never have held himself back so.

They're all wrong. Why can't they see that only I am right?

Of course, they probably thought they were too high and mighty to listen to someone who was only nineteen years old.

"Farewell, Kymenos. I wish you were staying."

Kymenos forced a smile and clasped Turor's hand. "Thank you, Turor. The elements watch over you, and the Cycle turn to bring your magic into being."

"Thank you, Kymenos." Turor peered at him, as eager as a puppy. "You'll come back someday, won't you?"

"Maybe."

Kymenos turned his back before the boy could delay him any more with meanderings. Turor was a star student, capable of learning whatever the Masters wanted to teach him, and he was probably going to be the Lord of the Star Circle when the Lady died. Kymenos hadn't heard any rumors about that, but it was a good guess. And Turor was perfectly fitted for the job; he was already working on perfecting his cool gaze into the distance.

Kymenos walked down the street, nodding out of habit as he passed the old ruins of the palace. The royal family of Dalzna had once lived there, and their statues still stood outside the palace gate, too beautiful for even children who had loved the Dark all their lives to deface. They were mostly statues of the Queens, the strangest rulers and thus the best subjects for legends, with the black hound that represented the Death they could see beside them. Kymenos had often come here to complain to them, and they had always seemed to listen.

Then came another turn, and another, and then he was passing out the gates of Serian, the capital city of Dalzna. No one paid much attention to his going. Kymenos didn't like most people and hadn't made many friends; those had all bid farewell to him before he left the Tower, mostly after trying to convince him to stay. Kymenos smiled slightly. *Perhaps it would be better to say that I once had friends, at that.*

He took a deep breath and studied the landscape before him for a moment. Serian backed up to the Dalorth Mountains, and snow still gleamed on them, even this late in the year; winter never quite left the heights. Pine forest crowded their flanks. Kymenos sniffed, and he could smell the pine scent from here. It might be good to go and walk in those forests.

Instead, he turned, jogging along Serian's wall until he reached the edge of it, and then stepping determinedly south.

I'll go where I like. Besides, there will probably be some demand for my products in the south. He patted the pack slung over his shoulder, which contained the seeds of the plants that he had been working on breeding. Master Diessa will no doubt be distressed to find them gone, but the Star Circle would have tried for years and years without me to make them bloom again. It's better this way.

He lifted his head and told himself to cheer up. He was like a hero in the old history-tales, going south to seek out his fortune, and if he found it in Arvenna or Ilantra or even the jungles of Doralissa, what did that matter? He would find it.

Kymenos's mind, which had an unfortunate habit of doing this, pointed out to him that all the heroes of those history-tales were either older and more experienced than he was, or younger and consumed with powerful Destinies.

Oh, shut up.

Chapter 1

Nightstone

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"Queen Aneron marries Sorrasonde, three-quarters-fey (gold-dancer) prince of Doralissa.

"She bears two sons, Prince Feldorres and Prince Elerran, both gifted with Scarlet magic. She dies (33 OR), not having chosen either to succeed her, and the Brotherstrife erupts. Feldorres briefly usurps the throne for two years, but is destroyed by his brother. Elerran marries Princess Eldalona of Ilantra (half-ilzán) and sires three children, Princess Tyera of the Gust; Prince Kyern of the Crop; and the Princess remembered now only as Nightstone. She fell to the Dark, and her gift is not inscribed."

-From the Orlathian *Chronicle of the Monarchs*.

"Are you almost finished?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Nightstone smiled and rested a hand on the filiferna's shoulder for a moment. She was the only one she knew who would dare to touch the strange fey so intimately, but she had been part of the Dark for more than four hundred years, and was granted certain familiarities. "You need not call me that. I prefer that you reserve that honorific for Princess Alliana."

The filiferna studied her for a moment, and then said, faceted eyes glowing, "You will keep the little Princess alive then, Your Highness?"

"Yes."

"The others are being killed."

Nightstone sighed and drew her hand back. She loved the filifernai, but sometimes they had no idea about the proper way to run a Kingdom. "I know, but I think that the Princess can be turned aside from her Destiny. Call me a romantic."

The fey nodded at her, and then turned and scurried away.

Nightstone sighed again and turned to walk down the hall, still littered with stone and flickering with flames from the attack. Sometimes it was lonely, doing without human company. Few of the creatures who surrounded her understood her jokes.

One of the flames came near her. Nightstone gestured irritably, and the fire drew back, responding to the power of her Scarlet magic. *Must the dragons always be so destructive?*

Nightstone stepped over a mound of rubble, and then paused. She had thought she would be able to proceed straight to Princess Alliana's room without interruption, though of course she expected to have to deal with the guards. But there was a woman lying on the ground, bleeding to death, and Nightstone would have to step around her or over her.

She was curious to know who it was, though, since the young woman's wrist bore a band of silver and gold that was usually only worn by the Orlathian royal family. Nightstone came up and crouched beside her.

The woman gasped and turned over abruptly. Nightstone sat back. She was surprised that the woman still had the strength to move, but then again, as she could see from the face, this was Princess Desidera, Crown Princess of Orlath. Nightstone had watched her many times from a distance, and she was indeed strong.

"Who are you?" Princess Desidera croaked at her. "Why could you pass the wards?"

Nightstone shrugged slightly. "I saw those wards made, Princess. I know all the tricks of passing them."

The Crown Princess shuddered, for a moment concentrating on the pain in her abdomen. Nightstone sat and watched calmly, not blaming her at all. Gut wounds did hurt, and it was perfectly reasonable that Desidera might have to turn away and abandon the conversation a few times.

"Who are you?" she repeated, when she could turn back.

"Nightstone."

Desidera's golden eyes widened. "I know- I know that name. The Chronicle. You are one of our ancestors."

Nightstone's nose wrinkled. It tended to do that at the mere mention of children, or at least the suggestion that she had had any children of her own.. "Well, not really, my dear. I did not sire or bear any of the current royal line. I could be called your aunt, if you would like that better." She reached out and patted the woman's fire-colored head. The Orlathian royals almost always had such striking coloring. She could hardly wait to see what little Princess Alliana looked like. "Just try to relax, and close your eyes. With a wound that deep, your life will be over soon."

"You are mad."

"Why?"

"Telling me to relax, that my life will be over soon-" Desidera tossed her head in agitation, which of course made her wound ache, which of course made her cry out and ruin her dramatic speech. She settled back, panting, and then said, "How can you do that? Aren't you human?"

Nightstone shrugged. "When you live hundreds of years, it does tend to make things look a little different. But you are going to die soon. I see no reason to lie to you." She paused, then added, "If it makes you feel better, your daughter will live. I intend to raise her."

"My parents?"

"Dead, of course." Nightstone blinked at her. "Along with your brother and your husband and your cousins, to spare you the pain of asking. Of course we wouldn't let any of you live."

"Why? Why did you do this?"

Nightstone sighed. "Light has never been able to bear things in the world as they are now. Did you know that the royal families of all four southern Kingdoms had children who were powerfully Light-Destined?" She shook her head. "We couldn't allow that to continue, so we attacked."

"Shadow should have stopped you."

"Shadow has allied himself with Dark," said Nightstone. "He is most irritated that Light continues to not get the point, and continues to try and rule the world." She glanced up as some rock began to fall, and called Scarlet. It burned the stone up before it reached the ground. Nightstone looked back at Princess Desidera. "You can blame the Light for the destruction of your family, if you like. If it didn't keep trying to rule the world, then none of this would be happening."

"You were the one who killed them."

"Yes, but for the reasons I told you."

"You are evil."

Nightstone shook her head. "When a Light-devoted passes the point of calling me evil, then I know that there is nothing more to be done for her, wound or no wound." She stood. "If you would like to die in peace, then I have no objections." She turned her back.

She heard Princess Desidera gasping, and turned back. The silly woman was trying to call the Gust down on her. Nightstone shook her head and burned the Crown Princess's face off. Desidera fell dead.

Nightstone turned back to the door in front of her. "Silly woman," she muttered. "No way to run a Kingdom."

There were guards at the door, and they were clutching weapons that they probably thought would work. One of them shouted, "Stop!" and raised his spear.

The other one had been watching as Nightstone killed the Crown Princess, and he cast down his spear. "The Princess is in there," he said. "Do you really want to kill her? A helpless child?"

"It's the best time to get rid of an enemy," said Nightstone. "But, truly, I want to keep the Princess alive and raise her."

The guard glanced at his fellow. "Puen, put down the spear."

"But-"

"She might kill Princess Alliana if we don't."

Nightstone shook her head as they scurried away. She wouldn't have killed the Princess because of their behavior, but she might have killed them. "Idiots," she muttered, as she opened the door. Despite all the extra work, she was glad that she would be responsible for ruling Orlath in the future. She would do a better job of it than anyone here had.

She stepped inside a room that throbbed with the aura of Destiny radiating from the baby. She paused and gazed at the tiny Princess lying in her cradle, the sole heir to the royal blood of Orlath- if one didn't count Nightstone herself, but Nightstone didn't, really.

She stared. Most unusually, Princess Alliana didn't have the bright hair and eyes that were normal for a royal family who had spent centuries interbreeding with various kinds of fey, and who were marked out by Destiny to make them even more special. She had soft curls of brown hair instead, already abundant, and when she blinked her eyes open, they were brown, too. She looked so much like a peasant that Nightstone would never have glanced at her twice if not for the strong Destiny.

But the way she studied Nightstone, not to mention the aura, told the older woman the truth. She recognized her enemy. She would grow up to be of the Light if there was the slightest chance.

"I'm afraid not," Nightstone murmured, and stepped forward, intending to kill the baby after all.

Then she heard a slight noise behind her, and spun around. There wasn't a living human left in the castle, supposedly. Had one of the stupid guards returned to challenge her?

But the one who stood there was not human. She was an elf instead, and enough to make even Nightstone's mouth go dry. Her skin was golden-brown, her hair long and pale, and her face high and angular, tilting back towards her pointed ears. She was a Faerie elf, one of the kind most used to dealing with humans.

And, at the moment, she looked extraordinarily angry.

She turned and walked down the hall. Nightstone sprang after her, knowing she was probably going to destroy the dragons or do something else hasty. She did glance back once at the Princess, but decided it was safe to leave her. With any luck, a piece of rock would fall and crush the cradle even before she came back, sparing Nightstone the problem of disposing of the baby.

The Rescuer

"To serve Light unwillingly is still to serve Light."

-Proverb of Orlath.

Kymenos ground his teeth. He didn't want to be here. He wanted to be somewhere far away. He didn't have control of fire magic, and yet he was creeping down this hall ablaze with flames, for the sole purpose of rescuing the Princess Alliana of Orlath. The Destiny that suddenly seized hold of him this morning had been quite definite about that.

I don't want to do this, he objected in the depths of his mind.

The Destiny just pulled him forward, working his limbs like a puppet's whenever he paused. Kymenos hated that even more than he hated being dragged along in the first place, so he went along with it, at least until they came to a cross-corridor and the Destiny paused, as if it was considering something.

Kymenos tried to turn away. The force at once grabbed him along and dragged him to an open door. Kymenos could hear footsteps in the distance and guessed that someone had just left and would probably soon be back. He didn't have much time.

The force dragged him through the door and towards the cradle.

Inside was a baby who looked very peasantry for an Orlathian royal baby, staring up at him. Kymenos scooped her up jerkily, and then cradled her close to his body as if he had been holding babies all his life. He hadn't; he had been an only child, and hated children when he was one. But he held this one firmly, tenderly, and then turned for the door. Already, a new vision was filling his mind, as the vision of the Princess's room had been filling it since this morning. He could see a cabin beside a tumbling stream. Inside was a human couple, and they were cooing over a baby. It was a girl, and looked a lot like Princess Alliana.

Kymenos supposed that he was to go and hide the baby with the couple, and then she would grow up with them and come back to claim her throne, in the best tradition of the history-tales.

He had always hated those history-tales. They never explained why children who were twelve years old or whatever the number was would make good rulers, or why it was all right for the countries to suffer as they were supposed to without monarchs of the legitimate bloodline for twelve years. But when he asked the people who loved them to explain, they only looked offended.

"What are you doing?"

Kymenos looked up. Two Women of the Snake were in front of him, shining creatures with snakes in the place of arms and legs. Altogether, ten pairs of eyes were looking at him.

Destiny said nothing. Apparently he was supposed to handle this on his own. He moved his arms so they could see what he was carrying. "The Princess Alliana. I trained in dissection with the Star Circle, and I want to see if it's true that royal heirs bleed differently than other children when they're cut into."

The Women of the Snake hissed, but stepped back and let him pass. Kymenos sighed and made his way down the hall, past the falling rock and the flames, towards starlight.

Destiny gave him a stinging slap on the cheek the moment he was in the courtyard. Kymenos would have rubbed it, but he couldn't take his arms away from carrying the Princess Alliana.

"It was a joke," he said.

Destiny just growled in his head, and then presented the vision of the cabin more strongly than ever.

"I'm going, I'm going," said Kymenos, and began walking in what he instinctively knew was the right direction. He hoped he could just give the Princess to her new family and be done with it, but he supposed that wouldn't be the end of it.

Of course not. I couldn't be that favored of Luck. Or Chance.

"And she is the Princess?"

Kymenos winced, then nodded. He supposed that the couple would have the sense to keep silent once he had finished reassuring them; they had to know that Alliana wouldn't live long, otherwise. "Yes. She is called Alliana, but you will want to call her something else, of course."

"Of course." The peasant woman continued gazing down at the baby with a rapturous expression on her face. Kymenos snorted to himself. He had noticed since his arrival in Orlath that all the people sought to link themselves to history-tales, and if there was a chance that the link could become real, they wouldn't hesitate before committing themselves to the quest or the war or whatever it was.

"I was thinking Tima," he said. That was the best he could do as far as revenge. "Tima" was something that he had heard children call each other in Dalzna, an insult that implied bastardy at the very best. But he had noticed that there was no word like that in Orlathian, limited though his acquaintance with the language was. "It is pretty, and no one would connect it to Alliana."

The woman smiled. "That is true. And it is different from the name of our own daughter, Lyli." For a moment, her gaze turned in the direction of her daughter, who lay in the cradle, but then she looked at Alliana again. "But what will we tell the people who ask where she came from?"

Kymenos had to concentrate hard to be sure that he had that last word right; he still didn't speak Orlathian well, and had had to ask the woman and her husband to slow down several times. "Tell them she is Lyli's twin. Tell them that she was sickly, and that you were afraid that she would die, so you didn't want to introduce her around until you were sure."

He had to repeat the words several times, and by the time he was done, he had a massive headache from impatience and the nearness of Alliana's Destiny. He was surprised that the couple and their daughter didn't wince from the heaviness of it- but they might be used to such things, in Orlath. Most people in Dalzna didn't have heavy Destinies.

I want to go home.

At once Destiny gave him one of those stinging slaps on the cheek. *You will be needed in twelve years, when Alliana rises to take back her throne, it informed him in a stern voice. You must spend that time here in Orlath, learning the customs and the people's way of life and the language, so that by the time you become her guardian, you will be ready.*

Kymenos narrowed his eyes. If he had to stay here, then he would find some way to defeat Destiny, instead. He didn't like being handled around like a puppet.

Only mocking laughter came back into his head, but it didn't lessen his determination.

"And when will you come back?"

Kymenos shook himself from his inner argument with Destiny. "In twelve years," he said. "She should be ready to take the throne by then."

The father, who hadn't spoken much so far while his wife murmured over Alliana and said things about the honor, spoke up then. He was slowly rocking his own daughter's cradle, now and then glancing doubtfully at the royal baby. "And what happened to the others? Her family? The other royal families?"

"Destroyed," said Kymenos. He had heard a *zeyr* making the announcement as he traveled through one of the villages where he had bought food for Alliana. Dark wanted its new subjects to know the state of things as soon as it had conquered completely. "All the members of the Orlathian royal family save Alliana are dead, and so are the royal families of Doralissa, Rivendon, and Ilantra-Arvenna. Shadow rules in Ilantra-Arvenna, always its country, and Doralissa, where it has become more accepted by the elves and others. Dark rules in Rivendon and Orlath. The Light-Destined royal heirs are dead, and the people will have new governments. I think they are meaning to put together the same kind of government that rules in Dalzna, though perhaps not."

"Dalzna doesn't have a royal family?" the woman asked, looking up from Alliana again.

"No." Kymenos rubbed his eyes. *Cycle*, he was tired. Destiny had kept him moving whenever he tried to stop and rest, until he threatened to fall over from exhaustion and crush Alliana beneath him. "The royal family died long ago, when Dark conquered the country. We have two councils that get chosen by the city and the villages. They argue all the time, but they do get some things done."

He became aware of a silence, and looked up. The man and the woman were both staring at him with fascinated, horrified expressions.

Kymenos shrugged. "I don't know if that's what the Dark will really do here. It's what they did in Dalzna, but not everywhere."

The couple relaxed. The man went back to rocking Lyli's cradle, while the woman beamed at him. "How can we thank you for bringing Alliana- Tima- through fire and darkness?" she asked.

"Your guarding her will be thanks enough," said Kymenos. *I could not imagine keeping her with me, as much as I hate children. It will be bad enough dealing with her twelve years hence.* "You know that the Dark might come looking for the Princess, and you might have to guard her with your lives?"

The woman lifted her chin. "We are not afraid. And there's really no reason they should look here."

Kymenos shook his head. "No." He glanced at Alliana again. *Cycle, she's peasantry. And she looks enough like Lyli to be her sister. That twin story will work. I wonder why Destiny made her look like that?*

Camouflage?

Kymenos frowned again, even harder. Did that mean that Destiny had known this was going to happen? If so, why hadn't it done something to stop it?

"Here is to Light," said the man, a toast that Kymenos understood perfectly, since he had heard it so many times since coming to Orlath. "And to the royal line once more sitting secure on the throne!"

Kymenos accepted the wine they offered him, figuring it was the least he deserved after walking so far. But his mind was busy.

There's some contradiction here, something I didn't understand. If Destiny knew this would happen, enough to control Alliana's hair and eye color, then it should have known enough to stop it and keep the royal family alive.

Kymenos waved farewell and turned away. The couple had tried to convince him to stay, but Kymenos wanted to move. He would get a headache from all that Destiny if he stayed around much longer.

Not far from the cabin, Destiny left him. He could feel the sudden shadow lifting from his mind, the sudden feeling that he was in control of his own actions once more. He shook his head, and then turned his feet and his steps to the west. He knew that there, near the Doralissan border, lay the city of Ozue, and while it was no longer the stronghold of the Star Circle that it had once been, it was still a scholarly city.

If there is a way to defeat Destiny, or a way to understand its actions, I will find it there. And I am going to learn how to defeat Destiny. It will not string me along like one if its chosen forever.

Chapter 3

Tragedy In Her Eyes

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"I have always found the history-tales that involve children to be the saddest of all. Why should they have to pay the price for what their parents have done, whatever that is? But Dark and Light and all the other powers of the world do make them pay the price for it, again and again."

-Saying of Lyissa of the Four Wonders.

Elary sighed and stared down at the man before her, who had died in his sleep. A better way to go than he could have gone, but he had spent days whimpering in pain before that, and Elary had still thought he might recover. Life was hard.

The life of a healer is always hard, she reminded herself. But you never complained until the last twelve years.

She nodded to the boy beside her. "Cover him up, Palant."

Palant gave a small shudder as he drew a blanket over the man's face. "Do you think that it'll spread?" he asked, referring to the blood plague that the man had had. He never wanted to name the disease aloud, as though it might go away if he didn't name it.

"No," said Elary. "We got to him in time. He died from it, but he won't manage to give it to anyone else." *I hope not.*

Palant nodded and then turned away. Elary let him go. She still had to visit a few patients tonight, but the boy, who was human and only fourteen years old, had seen enough for one night.

He'll make a good healer, Elary thought as she stepped out under the full moon. Out of habit, she pulled her hood over her head so that she wouldn't flash the moonlight back from her hair and startle the patients. *He just has to lose that last tiny touch of disgust, and then he'll be popping blisters and draining pus with the best of them.*

She paused before she entered the low tent where her next patient lay. There seemed to be something strange about the air; Elary fancied that she could smell a strange scent on it. But she had been in the healers' camp that lay near the southern flank of the Dalorth Mountains for over a year now, and she had thought that she knew every scent of the pine forest and the steep heights. This was new: a slight cold tingle, like that of snow, but filled with something sharper and wilder.

Perhaps a wolf has come down from the heights. Or a snow bear.

Warily, Elary stepped to the side. She could see around the trees that led up to the edge of the camp if she just worked herself into the right place. The trees had proved a blessing. They did shelter predators, but they also let them get close enough to think they were watching unobserved, while concealing the healers who watched them back and made sure they caused no trouble.

She banged right into someone, and turned with a sharp exclamation. At once, she knew this person was the source of the strange scent. She stood small and slender, probably a young female human, but her face was hooded, and Elary couldn't see it. She could feel her heart begin to pound, much harder than it should when she accidentally met a human child in the camp.

"Who are you? Uncover your face!" She spoke as quickly and as firmly as she could, meanwhile hoping the strange sharp scent wasn't the warning sign of some new disease. *I just recovered from the blood plague. I don't want to have to take on another one and learn it so quickly.*

Slowly, a pair of slender hands rose and gripped the sides of the hood. Then the girl threw it back with a startlingly swift motion, given that she had come into the camp hidden in the first place.

Elary's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She was half-*ilzán*, and she had stared into more dying eyes than she liked to remember, trying to will them to recover. But this young woman's eyes were the most tragic she had ever seen, liquid with sorrow.

They were large, and gold, and appeared to dominate her face. By that alone, Elary knew that she had *ilzán* blood. With the hood back, she could see the girl's hair, a fall sheer as dark water to her waist, marked with a single long streak of the staring white that Elary's own hair

was, the color of the full moon above. Intermingled with the dark hair, though, the white didn't look as startling, just exotic and strange.

The young girl bowed her head, as though she couldn't keep up Elary's gaze. Then her lips trembled, and she burst abruptly into tears.

"It's all right," said Elary in Ilantran, reaching towards her. They stood in Arvenna, but it was probable that the girl came from Ilantra, the only Kingdom where many humans had *ilzán* blood. "If you're sick, you can tell me. And if you're just lost and looking for a place to stay, then you can tell me that, too."

"She is not lost," said a slightly slurred voice in Ilantran, from the darkness. There was a pause, and then it continued in the language of the *ilzánai*. "You share our blood. Do you speak this tongue?"

Elary looked up, somehow not surprised to see a full-blooded *ilzán* step out of the darkness and rest a hand on the girl's shoulder. It was a woman, standing six feet tall, coppery-skinned and white-haired. Her own eyes were green with golden flecks. She smiled down at the girl, then looked at Elary.

"Who is she?" Elary asked, expecting to be startled by the answer.

Of course, the answer that actually came startled her more than she thought it ever could.

"Princess Mitherill, True Heir of Ilantra-Arvenna."

Elary sipped again from the cup of tea that she had commandeered from one of the other healers. In a way, it wasn't fair to pile more work on the other woman, which Elary was doing with both her demands and abandoning her own work to speak with Princess Mitherill and the *ilzán*, Fier, but Elary had no choice. She wondered how long it would be before Dark and Shadow learned the Princess was here, and how soon they would attack.

But such thoughts faded to the back of her mind when she had the chance to see Princess Mitherill sitting on the bench in her tent and sipping at her tea.

The Princess had an extraordinary grace and delicacy that Elary didn't recall seeing in a child before, especially one who was only twelve years old. Anakora knew, Palant had knocked as many bowls over then as he did now. But Princess Mitherill sat and sipped at the tea, and her hands and her face and even the sheer tilt of her head reminded Elary more of a water bird than a human.

"She cannot stay here," said Elary, breaking the silence that had fallen in the wake of Fier's revelations about the Princess.

"I know." The *ilzán* leaned forward. "But she has no place to go if you will not go with her."

"I don't understand why," said Elary. "I am only a healer. I do not have any magic that she cannot work for herself. And I have always loved the healer goddess Anakora more than the Light."

"I know that," said Fier. "I once felt the same way. The concerns of my people were too great to risk for one child, even if the child was of royal human blood and breeding. But my people and I rescued her from the wrack of her family's home; Shadow did not notice us, since so

many fey of different kinds serve him. And the moment that they placed her into my arms and she gazed up at me with golden eyes, I knew that this one was different."

"How?"

"Can you feel her Destiny?"

Yes, Elary could. It hammered around her like wings, or a constantly pulsing heartbeat. When Elary moved close to Mitherill, she could almost feel imaginary feathers caressing her, or feel as if she were inside some great chest that was moving in time with the rhythms of the world itself.

"But what does that have to do with making her so different that you are willing to risk this for her?" Elary asked.

"She is special," said Fier, and her eyes glowed with a fever that Elary had never seen in the eyes of an *ilzán* before. "She has this Destiny, of course, and she is the Heir of Ilantra-Arvenna, but she is only one of four royal Heirs. One escaped the destruction of each royal family. They are coming together now. There is a prophecy that speaks of it. They will move along their separate roads, but those roads are bound to converge, and when they meet, then they will become the best rulers that we could wish for. And of course they will throw the Dark and Shadow from the thrones and rule for Light, and the world shall have a golden age."

"And why did you bring her to me?"

"You are her Destined guardian, of course," said Fier, looking slightly surprised. "You must go with her along the path of her quest."

"If she is to take back her throne, then it seems that an army would be a better choice than a lone healer." Elary looked again at Mitherill, who was gazing into her teacup and blinking back tears. "And why does she weep all the time?"

"The second question first. She remembers the night that her parents were slaughtered, and she weeps for them."

"But she must have been a baby at the time."

"She was." Fier nodded seriously. "The youngest of the royal Heirs. But she still remembers. Such Destiny-touched children always remember."

"And why not an army?"

Fier sighed and folded her arms on her knees. "That is not the way that Light and Destiny have chosen to set this grand game in motion. They know that they could not raise armies without attracting the attention of Dark and Shadow, perhaps even Chance, which would love to stop any plan of Destiny's. So they are guiding these Heirs along the paths of the oldest history-tales, and making sure that they take guardians along that no one will think to look twice at. They will move along the paths of legend, but only slowly will their people realize that the legends are coming true. And if all goes well, Dark and Shadow will never realize it at all, until it's too late."

"And why do the *ilzánai* care about this at all?"

Fier blinked for a moment. Then she smiled. "Have you felt her Destiny?"

Elary studied the child again. So far, Mitherill had not spoken, preferring to look timidly from woman to woman and then back to her tea. She struck Elary with her grace and her quiet. Most children, like Palant, talked constantly when they were this age. But Mitherill did not, despite the tragedy in her eyes, as if she were determined to bear silently a punishment that she should never have had to bear at all.

"Will you guide her?"

Elary started and looked up. Fier was leaning forward and gazing at her intently.

"I thought you said that I was the child's Destined guardian," said Elary, playing for time.

Fier nodded. "You are."

"Then surely it doesn't matter what time I choose," said Elary, but she knew the words were false even as she spoke them. Of course it mattered. The Dark and Shadow could already be on the Princess's trail. The moment they realized the royal Heirs were coming back, they would attack. Elary might already have delayed too long.

"I want to hear what Mitherill says," she said, before Fier could say anything, either in admonition or reassurance.

The *ilzán* seemed puzzled, but she nodded. "Of course. You can do that."

Elary bowed back, and then went and sat beside Mitherill. The girl watched her come, then ducked her face back beneath that long fall of black hair and went back to playing with her tea.

"Mitherill."

At that, the girl looked back up, and for a moment, anger shone in her golden eyes. "I prefer my title."

Elary looked around, but she already knew the other healers were unlikely to intrude. Unless they had *ilzán* blood themselves, they were shy around the disease-fey, and avoided the ones who came to visit Elary. "Your Highness, then."

Mitherill nodded, as though granting Elary permission to continue. Elary sighed and went on. "Is this what you wish? You have known Fier and her people all your life. Do you really want to leave them and go across the country with me, in pursuit of some unknown Destiny?"

"I do have a prophecy that tells me where to go," whispered Mitherill. "I have only to interpret it. And of course I must go. I love the people of my Kingdom, and they are in peril. They suffer daily beneath Shadow, when they were meant to be ruled by Light."

Elary narrowed her eyes skeptically. Ilantra had been Shadow's from ancient times, and the most recent monarch on the throne of Arvenna alone had been Dark. She was not entirely sure how many of the people, save the ardent royalists, suffered under the rule of Shadow. "And why do you think that you should risk your life now, Princess? Why not wait and resume the quest when you are older and probably not as likely to die from your sicknesses?"

"It must happen now," said Mitherill, clearly and with a force in her voice that impressed Elary. "There is no other way. Our people have suffered long enough, and they will continue to suffer as long as there is no righteous monarch on the throne. Their suffering tears at my heart." She bowed her head into her hands and began to weep.

Fier intervened then. "She does have a prophecy, as all the Heirs do, that speaks of such things. And the longer the suffering goes on, the more Mitherill hurts. If for nothing else, she must go on this quest to ease her own pain, and to face Shadow's evil."

Elary frowned harder. The last twelve years had been hard as far as getting the medicines she needed, and the explosion of new diseases, but she didn't think they had been filled with more suffering than they had while the monarchs sat the throne.

She said as much. Mitherill lifted her head high. "But the diseases are exploding because Shadow slew the royal family," she said. "They will not be righted and healed until I am back on the throne. I am the last one who carries the blood of the Kings and Queens. My mother was Princess Farana, the Crown Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna. This wrong is mine and no one else's to right."

Elary gazed at the young woman and felt a great yearning sweep over her. It was a long time since she had seen something so simple, something so set in terms of what was wrong and what was right. She wanted to give in, to step into the stream of the young woman's Destiny and the role that Destiny had prepared for Elary herself. She wanted to be that simple, that young, that right and wrong.

What are you doing? You know that the world is not that simple. Humans can think that if they want, but you, who have seen two centuries- you ought to know better.

And she did know better, but Elary found that she didn't care. She wanted to go along on the quest, and become part of a history-tale for a short time. Things were so dramatic and glorious there, a drama and a glory that was lacking in this healers' camp at the foot of the Dalorth Mountains where she sickened and then grew well so that she could heal, and then sickened again to learn some new disease, and then did the same thing all over again.

"Very well," she said. "Your Highness-

"Princess."

"What?" Elary blinked. Mitherill's beautiful little face had paled, and she was staring at Elary desperately, as if she were about to begin gasping for air.

"You called me Princess last time. You have to call me Princess this time."

Elary, who had switched titles once before with no trouble, was puzzled, but she bowed her head. "Very well, Princess." Mitherill relaxed at once, and then smiled as Elary went on, "I have decided that I shall come with you, and accept my place as your Destined guardian."

Mitherill flung her arms around Elary's body, and clung on with surprising strength. "Thank you," she whispered. "There are so many others who wouldn't have cared, who would have turned me forth- thank you." The front of Elary's robe grew damp with tears.

"You are welcome," said Elary, and gently pushed her back so that she could scrub at the girl's face. "Now, you should tell me what you are seeking, and then we can start planning the journey."

Mitherill was just opening her mouth to speak when the tent flap was abruptly pushed aside, and Palant stepped in. "Elary, what did you want-

He looked up from the sac of fluid he was holding, and suddenly gasped. Elary saw his eyes connect with Mitherill's, and saw the admiration that flared at once in Palant. Mitherill's Destiny flared softly back, as if in answer.

Elary had never believed that someone could fall in love at the first sight of someone else, but that was what she was seeing happen to Palant.

She frowned. *What is this going to mean? Part of Destiny's plan, I suppose, but still, it's disconcerting.*

Chapter 4

Courage for the War

"Culunata consists mostly of the Corlirin Plains, thick with grass and sometimes with farms where the land is naturally fertile. Trade routes cut it into many sections, leading either south or to the castle. Culatharion is far different, a fair and forested country, kept warm by a natural current of warm water moving up the seacoast, and by the fact that the far southern half and the islands that lie off the coast are coated with jungle. Elven magic may also have some part to play in this."

-From "A Description of Doralissa."

"Ternora, stop staring at the branches and come along."

"I wasn't staring at the branches," said Ternora, as she woke from her trance and followed Amirien. "I was staring at the walls. I wondered how long it has been since the stone was replaced."

"Generations," said the elf sternly as she walked ahead of her. Ternora wondered if she didn't want to be contaminated by a half-elf. It seemed likely. "Elves do not live among stone houses."

"I know some who did. In the Doralissan Court."

Amirien only put up her back and stalked along like an offended cat. Ternora laughed quietly. The other woman was so easy to tease. Just mention something that might offend her, and she would probably do the rest herself, even providing more things that Ternora could make comments on.

It's not that I particularly want to tease her, Ternora reassured herself as they walked deeper into the Rion Forest. But she makes it so easy. It would be a crime against nature not to take advantage of it.

They walked through cool green shadows, now and then pushing past hanging lianas or startling a brightly colored bird into flight, who would then scold them from the top of the nearest tree. Amirien hurried. Ternora wasn't quite sure why, but thought it was likely that she wanted to get out of the shadows. The elves had the odd belief that as long as they stood in the Light they still worshipped, then Shadow couldn't hear them- or Dark, for that matter.

If shadows everywhere are Shadow's eyes, the way they claim, then he can still see them. I don't understand the point of hurrying through them. I would saunter until Shadow got bored and stopped looking.

"Hurry, Ternora."

Ternora grinned up at her. "Now there's a word that I don't often hear an elf speak. What's the rush?"

Amirien looked around, then ducked close to her. They stood in a patch of sunlight, but shadows lay on either side of them. Ternora thought that Shadow could probably still hear, and thought about pointing that out, but she would interrupt Amirien that way. And she did want to hear whatever silly secret was so urgent that the elves had summoned her from her usual haunts in the Sielle Forest.

"The Heir of Doralissa is here."

Ternora blinked at that news. "Which one?"

"What do you mean, which one?" Amirien pulled back and stared at Ternora with such disgust in her eyes that Ternora was tempted to look for spittle down her face.

"Well, I know that there are some Queens who were said to have run away from the castle. And I just wondered-"

"The True Heir." Once again, Amirien leaned in and lowered her voice. "The Princes Warcourage."

Ternora snorted. "Why don't you give me his real name?"

"He has been reared among the elves, and he is used to our equivalent of his Doralissan name," said Amirien, turning away. "Besides, he might be easier to track under his Doralissan name."

"I think the title would give him away, even if you were to call him Prince Mudstain," Ternora pointed out helpfully, as the elf paused to scramble over a fallen log.

Amirien gave her yet another dirty look. "You are to be his Destined guardian, Ternora. We have reared him in silence and in secret for twelve years, but now his prophecy is beginning, and he is ready to start forth on his Quest."

"What Quest?"

"To take back the throne."

"Why would he want it? I've sat on it, at Shadow's invitation. It's rather lumpy."

"You went to the Court at Shadow's invitation?" Amirien wheeled around, and on one hand flickered the golden fire that had been the special weapon of the elves of the Light against their own kind for some time. "Do you serve him?"

"No. He had heard that I was a renowned guide, and he invited me there to see if I could tell him where the Pool of Silyonete was. I told him there was no such thing, or I would have found it already. He laughed, and he treated me well the whole time I was there."

"You should not have gone," said Amirien, lowering her hand at last, after another hard stare, and turning forward again. "I cannot tell how it will make the others react, but they will not like it."

"Then how can you tell-"

"Shut up, Ternora."

Ternora willingly shut up. They were passing through a nice part of the Rion Forest, and she wanted to look around in any case.

The trees arched high above, here, and formed a canopy that kept most of the sunlight out. Amirien hurried through it for that reason, stepping from sunlight dapple to sunlight dapple as if that would keep her out of the shadows at all, but Ternora lingered, tilting her head back. Flowers in all shades of the rainbow, and pasty white, clung to the trees trunks, drinking in the air and the wind that blew just above them.

"Ternora!"

Ternora turned around curiously. Amirien had not really shouted. Her voice had dropped, and it was soft and reverent. She gestured, and Ternora drifted forward and looked through the gap in the leaves that she indicated.

For a long moment, Ternora could see nothing special. Several elves of the Light were gathered in a circle of stones in the sunlight, singing softly. They did that all the time. Ternora could tolerate the music for a time, but then it grated on her nerves. She was always glad when the time came to end a visit.

She glared at Amirien. The elf gestured again, and Ternora turned around in time to hear a young voice join the others, wobbling. She couldn't see the child for a moment, until one of the elfwomen moved forward and hugged him. Then he was revealed, gazing solemnly up at the adults.

He looked about twelve, and he was already devastatingly handsome, as though he had picked up some of the beauty from the elves around him. His ears were very slightly pointed, but there wasn't enough elven blood in him for that to be the cause of his beauty. He had a tumble of blond curls that fell nearly to his shoulders; Ternora wondered how he moved in the dense trees of the Forest. His eyes were bright and green and almost painful to look at.

And his Destiny filled the clearing like the breath of some great beast, panting in and out. Ternora snorted softly. It was a wonder the elves had kept him this long. Dark and Shadow should have been able to sense that breathing and home in on him at once.

"That is him," said Amirien softly. "And the moment that he sees you, he will know you as his guardian." She stood and moved out through the trees, calling, "Prince Warcourage!" as she went.

The Prince turned and looked at Ternora as she followed Amirien out. The guide braced herself for some kind of shock.

But nothing happened, at least to her. The Prince blinked, his green eyes glowing, and then came forward and put out his hand. Ternora clasped it, studying his face intently. His hand was soft, and his face looked the same way. On the face it could be lingering traces of baby fat, but Ternora wasn't sure what it was on the hand.

"Ternora," he said.

"Ah," said Ternora. "Amirien must have told you my name."

"No." Prince Warcourage's eyes were glowing once again. It was eerie, Ternora thought, as though his head was hollow and someone had placed a candle inside that sent sparks through his eyes. "I sensed it. I knew what your name was as soon as you stepped through the trees."

The elves murmured. Ternora frowned at them. What was wrong with them? They had seen stronger feats of magic performed by their own children, and younger than this. All of them seemed to be doting on the child, and she couldn't understand it.

At least, not until she turned back to the Prince and studied his Destiny more closely. Then she nodded. It was edged with the golden sparks that meant Light was behind it, as it had been behind the births of all four royal heirs to the ruling families twelve years ago. The elves had never quite given up hope that the Light they served and loved would return to full power someday. This kind of Destiny- and it might be quadrupled, if the other Heirs had the same kind of Destiny- promised them that it might.

But something bothered Ternora.

"Destiny should not have been able to do this," she said, looking up at Amirien. "I know. It was defeated too soundly."

Amirien lifted her head proudly. "Destiny has always held some strength in reserve," she said. "And now the time has come to show forth that strength. You will go and seek with Prince Warcourage, as his Destined guide and guardian, for the Pool of Siliyonete."

"That doesn't exist," said Ternora.

"It does," said the Prince, and Ternora looked back to see that his eyes were performing the glowing trick again. "I have seen it in visions. It is far to the south, in the Shining Isles, but we will find it."

"How, exactly?" Ternora asked. "You can't sail on the ocean, my Prince. The sea god would attack you the moment he felt someone of Doralissan royal blood on the waters. He's still rather angry about whatever crime it was that your ancestress, Queen Rizzeros, committed against him."

Prince Warcourage shook his head. "I shall appease him. I know what that crime was, and how to make up for it."

Ternora frowned. "I still don't think the Pool of Siliyonete exists."

Warcourage clasped her hand and smiled into her eyes. Ternora had the odd feeling that this was supposed to be reassuring. "It does, my lady. And we shall go there. And you shall guide me, since you know the lands that lie before us better than anyone does. And, as we travel, you shall learn the meaning of Light, and truth, and faith, and even love."

Ternora laughed a little. "I have seen three hundred years, my Prince. I think I'm a little old for you."

Warcourage just smiled. "You will learn," he repeated. "And you will see that I am not alone in my quest."

"He is not," said Amirien, stepping forward. "The other four royal Heirs are setting forth on their quests at the same time. They shall find what they seek and come together, and then no force in the world can stand against them."

Ternora looked down. "You must be very certain of that, and very brave."

"Why?"

"You were standing in a shadow when you said that."

Amirien's golden face paled to the color of whey. She leaped back, even as the shadows moved, fountaining up into the gray figure of a human man that Ternora had often seen when at the Doralissan Court. He was transparent, and if someone put her hand into his body, he would feel like nothing so much as cold mist. But he was Shadow's human form, and he was powerful.

He looked around the clearing, and then at Prince Warcourage. "Ah," he said mildly. "I knew that one had escaped. Dark didn't want to listen, but I knew it."

The Prince was trembling, Ternora saw, but he stood with his chin up and his eyes sparking. "I will not give up," he said. "I will fight you."

"If you could," said Shadow, and then whistled.

A flock of birds came hurtling down from the trees, transforming as they went. Shadow was master of shapeshifters, and Ternora knew many humans and fey who had gone to the Courts he ruled, Ilantra-Arvenna and Doralissa, to learn the art. It seemed that many of those had also gone to the Rion Forest.

The elves began to chant, and Prince Warcourage began to sing. The battle was on.

Ternora sighed and set herself to fight, all the while wondering why she had accepted Amirien's invitation. *Making fun of her isn't worth this.*

Chapter 5

In the Forests of the North

"The forests in the north of Rivendon are enchanted places. They say that you might still see wolves as high as deer there, and even the silvereyes, ducking behind a tree as they watch you."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

"Olumer!"

"Coming, Cadona," said Olumer, and started walking in the direction of the call, counting under his breath. In some ways, Cadona was as predictable as thunder and lightning. She would call in another moment, in two counts, in one, in-

"Olumer!"

Olumer grinned and sped his pace. He never moved fast enough for Cadona, and she never forgave him for it. He could almost see all the wrongs building up behind her eyes, and he was

inclined to chuckle at them, which only made her all the more determined to convince him of how seriously she took it, of course.

"Yes, Cadona, what is it?" he asked, as he came out of the clump of tight-packed pines and saw his ward.

The Princess of Rivendon turned her head to look at him. Olumer could admire her, distantly, when she did that. Fourteen years old, and already she had a poise and dignity that would do credit to a full-grown woman. Her hair was long and silver and perfectly straight save for a slight natural curl at the ends, hanging down her shoulders; yet somehow it never seemed to acquire dirt or twigs from the forest around them, or to snag on branches. Her eyes were the same sheer and beautiful silver as her hair, or as Olumer's own. Her skin was dark, as was the skin of all the people of Rivendon, but hers was darker than usual, and smoother, as sleek as polished ebony. Olumer could almost see her in the formal silver robes of the Queens of Rivendon, descending the stairs to take her throne.

At least, he could until she opened her mouth.

"What does this mean, Olumer?"

Olumer winced, even as he moved towards the Princess's side and looked down at the deer she had killed. Cadona spoke as softly and sweetly as someone of her line should, of course; even when she was shouting at him, her voice could only be compared to that of a nightingale. But there was a snap in the back of it that removed all the beauty, an anger that would never quite go away. Cadona seemed to have been born angry, and had screamed even when he carried her away from the shattered castle twelve years ago.

One look at the beast on the ground, though, and he forgot all about Cadona. He knelt at once beside the white deer, and touched its throat. Blood coated his fingers, still flowing even though by now the heart must have stopped beating.

"You slew this with your knife?" he asked, looking up at Cadona.

"Of course, Olumer." She rolled her eyes, as if to say that he was stupid beyond belief to ask such a question. "Why wouldn't I? I was walking along, and the deer suddenly stood up in front of me. I would have to be asleep or blind to miss such a kill. I made it, and then I realized that I had never seen a white doe before, and called to you. I wanted to make sure that the hide wasn't worth anything."

Olumer shook his head. "That isn't it," he murmured. "I would have taught you not to kill one of these deer, had I ever thought you would encounter one."

"I don't understand," said Cadona, and planted her hands on her hips. "What is it?"

"A deer of the Lords of the Forest," said Olumer, as carefully as he could.

Cadona was not so cautious.

"The stargazers?" She laughed. "Those are myth, Olumer, like all the tales that the children in town used to tell me." Old bitterness weighed down her voice. "They made fun of my eyes. Did I ever tell you that?"

"You told me," said Olumer, and stood up, gazing at the trees intently. Nothing was moving yet, but if he knew the Lords of the Forest, they were only waiting until Olumer and Cadona came into whatever place would be most fitting for punishment. Olumer didn't think it was his

imagination that the wind had acquired a cold, mocking edge, and that the whispering of it in the branches sounded like laughter.

Cadona sighed, and tapped him on the arm. When Olumer looked at her, she said, "I'm taking the deer back with me."

Olumer shook his head. "Don't do this, Cadona. The Lords of the Forest will come after you, and they won't like it that you even thought of eating one of their deer."

Cadona laughed aloud again, ending it with a sneer. "I am the Princess of Rivendon, Olumer--"

"I told you not to speak that aloud."

"Calm down, old man," Cadona drawled. "I don't think that Dark or Shadow are hunting me at the moment. I can't hear anyone talking about me."

Olumer shook his head. It was true that Cadona had been born with magic that allowed her to listen in at any mention of her name, but it wasn't something he trusted. "Don't take the deer, Cadona, but do come with me. We need to get home as soon as possible."

"I'm taking the deer."

"Not even your Destiny will protect you if the Lords of the Forest come upon you," said Olumer.

"It will protect me," said Cadona. "I know well enough that I'm almost ready to set off on my journey. And when I reclaim the throne of Rivendon at the end of it, then I'll come here and shoot all the white deer I like. I'll have venison from the white deer on my table each night."

The mocking wind hushed. Olumer thought that the forest was listening with ears pricked now, waiting.

"Cadona, come with me, now. And leave the deer."

"You don't understand me at all!" said Cadona. "I was only doing what I need to do, and you don't understand me at all." She turned, stomping away through the forest with the white deer over her shoulder.

Olumer followed her for a few steps, then turned. "She did not mean to," he said into the trees. "She is sorry."

The wind rustled the branches. The pines seemed to have acquired eyes, all of which were gazing at him. Olumer shivered. He had hunted in this forest for two decades, and he had never felt it so hostile.

"She will leave the deer here."

He caught a glimpse of a ghostly form prowling behind a tree, and knew that he had only seen it because he had been allowed to see it. He bowed and retreated, catching Cadona up as she was about to cross the stream that lay between their hunting grounds and their home.

Olumer came up behind her and lashed out with one foot. Cadona stumbled to one knee in the middle of the stream, crying out as rocks cut through the cloth of her trousers. The deer tumbled from her shoulders, and at once was swept away in the stream, heavy with new

snowmelt. Olumer caught her shoulders, and Cadona let herself be pulled backwards, bleeding as she was from one knee

When she reached the bank of the stream, and looked down the watercourse to discover that her deer was really and truly gone from sight, she whirled around and slapped Olumer.

Olumer let her go and massaged his cheek, all the while gazing calmly into Cadona's eyes.

"Why did you do that?" she raged at him. "Do you know how much effort I went through to get that doe?"

"Little, to hear you tell it," said Olumer, and crossed the stepping stones that stood high above the waters even when they raged like this. If Cadona had been crossing those, she wouldn't have stumbled so easily. Cadona followed him across, swift and agile and still complaining.

"That isn't the point, Olumer. I killed it, and now what will we eat?"

Olumer turned so that she could see the brace of hares hanging from his belt. She probably hadn't noticed them earlier; Cadona was like that. "Hare. I know that you like the meat."

Cadona glared at him steadily for a moment, arms folded over her chest. Then she said, "I'm not hungry," and shoved ahead of him, trampling viciously through the last scattered bits of old snow.

"Cadona!"

No answer. Olumer shook his head and laid the steaming hare meat on her side of the table anyway. She would probably come and get it when she was hungry enough.

He began his own meal, all the while thinking about Cadona. It was true that she was the Princess of Rivendon, and he had tried to raise her knowing that responsibility, conscious of her Destiny, and at the same time cautious about it. She couldn't mention it too often, or Dark and Shadow would hear and come after her.

But something had gone wrong. Cadona knew what she was, and had the pride and dignity that should go with the position of a Princess. But she was also- Olumer had to spit the thought out like a bone, but there it was- spoiled and unable to imagine that anything else anyone did mattered.

On my head be it.

A low muttering caught his attention then, or he probably would have continued with his broody thoughts. He stood and crept cautiously towards the door into the other room, which was only partly open.

Nudging it all the way open, he saw Cadona standing in the center of the room, her head tilted back. The fire in the hearth was leaping and dancing to her command, as it usually was. Cadona was a Scarlet mage, and perfectly capable of controlling flame in all its aspects.

But the words that spilled from her lips were not the usual nonsense that she muttered, about getting vengeance on the Dark or the complaints that Olumer had heard other humans her age make. They were new, and they frightened and puzzled him.

*"Turn and look, my lady, to the west,
And there you will see the hope to serve you best.
May your blood flame in you like the song of birds
Who sing a moment in the morning unheard.
Seek the bird who is born of endless fire,
And there you will find the stairs to go higher."*

Olumer whistled softly beneath his breath. He had known that Cadona would have a prophecy, of course, and that it would be obscure, but he had thought it would be some time before it came seeking her.

Her Destiny is so powerful, though, that perhaps I shouldn't be surprised.

Cadona turned towards him suddenly, and appeared to have awakened from her trance. She smiled at him, and her eyes were glowing, her face happy. It both made Olumer glad and saddened him. When she looked like that, he couldn't help contrasting it with the way that she looked at all other times. If she would only smile more often, then both their lives would be better.

But it isn't my place to restrain her, or tell her what's wrong.

"You heard?" Cadona asked him. "It is time for my Quest to begin, and for the Dark to pay for what they have done. I am going to take my throne back from them, Olumer. I swear it."

"In time, yes, of course," said Olumer. "And the prophecy does sound promising. But I think that you should rest now."

Cadona shook her head. "I have to leave tomorrow."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Cadona, you're only fourteen, a child-"

Cadona's face shut down, and the sparkle vanished from her silver eyes. "You don't understand *anything!*" she screamed. "Dark took my throne, and the filifernai ate my family! I dream about it every night." She sniffled, then, but she didn't cry; Olumer hadn't seen her cry for years. She screamed instead. "I have to go and find the Dark and destroy it."

"Your prophecy didn't say anything about destroying the Dark," said Olumer, playing for time in the only way he could think of.

"That's because I have to finish my Quest first," said Cadona. "But I am leaving, Olumer. Tomorrow."

Olumer turned away from her without speaking, not knowing how he could continue the conversation without opposing her in some essential way.

Cadona was true to her word. She was gone in the morning, and so was Ebony, the dark horse that Cadona had named and who was always true to her.

Olumer sighed as he studied the tracks in the snow. Cadona hadn't taken any food with her, or extra changes of clothing. She had taken her bow, arrows, and knife. He had to track her and take her food and clothing.

"Why?"

Olumer looked up abruptly, and his breath caught. Standing there, watching him, was a figure as tall and slender as an icicle, all shining silver, from skin to eyes to hair. It smiled at him, and bared teeth as sharp as a cat's and silver as the rest.

It was a stargazer, a Lord of the Forest. Olumer dropped his gaze at once, having been told it was impolite and unwise to look a Lord of the Forest in the eye.

But the silver being said, "You may look upon me," and walked a little closer. "Why do you have to go after her? She has plagued the forest, and you, for twelve years. Rejoice that she is gone."

Olumer blinked. He had never thought about it like that. Of course, other people couldn't see the inherent goodness in Cadona that he could. He knew that she would become the best ruler that Rivendon had ever seen, that she just needed time. He knew it, but he wasn't sure how to communicate his faith to other people.

"I have to go after her," he said at last.

The stargazer sighed. "We shall be sorry to see you go. You have kept the laws of the forest, and you have a life that is lived in accordance with those laws. It seems strange that you should give it up to chase after this girl."

"She is the Princess of Rivendon."

"King or Queen, Princess or Prince, they are all the same in the end." The stargazer shrugged. "We are in the north, and they are in the south, and what should we care who sits the chair in a castle we have never seen?"

Olumer shook his head, again not knowing how to answer that. "I have to go after her."

"As you will."

The stargazer closed its eyes. Its body began to fade, melting into ice crystals that ran to the ground and became water. Only the eyes remained, and they vanished, opening just before they did so to wink at him.

Olumer took a deep breath of the suddenly cold air, then turned and ran back into the house. He would need food, and warm clothes, and warm clothes for Cadona, and his own weapons, and a number of other things.

He would have to follow his Princess, whether he had lived in accordance with the laws of the forest or not. She was the rightful ruler of Rivendon.

Chapter 6

Chaos's Promise

"Some are confused about the difference between Chance, Chaos, and Change. They are these: Chance is the most capricious of the forces, and opposes Destiny as willfully as a child, using the strangest patterns to achieve its ends. Chaos disrupts the patterns wherever it can, whether they are of Destiny or anything else. Change is the mightiest of these forces, and the only one you should never pray to. It could attract his attention."

-From a primer for the training of Star Circle students.

Kymenos took a deep breath, and then tilted his head back to look at the sun. It was nearly noon, and he could feel Destiny coiling around him, pulling him forward like a wire. He could only trust that the research he had done in the past twelve years, all preparing for this moment, was correct, and that Chaos would keep the promise it had made to him.

Let's move. I'm anxious to visit the Princess.

Kymenos turned his head and frowned at the horse next to him. "You would be," he muttered.

She must be a wonderful creature. Sykeen danced delicately from hoof to hoof. He was a bay stallion, but was small and graceful enough to look like a mare instead. After all, she is the chosen of Destiny and the Light.

"All of them are," said Kymenos. "That doesn't mean that she's any more special or wonderful than the rest." His mouth tightened as he remembered the first books he had found and read in Ozue. He thought he knew what Destiny was doing, and changing or ending the lives of countless people just so that it could make a pretty pattern was horrifying.

But she is a Princess!

Kymenos stepped forward and laid his hand on the horse's nose, compelling Sykeen's attention. "Listen to me, horse," he said peacefully. "I will buy a sword if you continue to act like this, and geld you."

Sykeen immediately quieted. His previous owner had been a farmer who had threatened to geld him all the time, and Kymenos had found it was the only way to keep Sykeen's telepathy from intruding into his head. He liked solitude, and would never have bought the horse if he had known it was telepathic, but they were miles away from the farm when Sykeen cheerily introduced himself and informed Kymenos that he was now his companion.

Kymenos had relieved his feelings by telling everyone he met in the next town that the farmer had the blood plague. They had bought nothing from him the next week, and Kymenos hoped that was enough to make him regret his trick with the horse.

Kymenos shook off the memories and glanced at the sky again. The sun was only a few minutes from noon, if that. He took a second deep breath for luck, and climbed onto the horse's back.

Come on, Chaos.

It didn't answer him, of course. Chaos answered when it chose, and Kymenos had prayed for years before he attracted its attention. It had then only promised him that something would happen when he went to fetch Princess Alliana that would make sure Destiny couldn't succeed.

Kymenos didn't know what. He let Sykeen pick his way down the ridge towards the farmhouse, all the while glancing around, almost hoping to see a servant of Chaos show up. But nothing happened, and he reached the bottom of the ridge and trotted towards the house as though everything was on schedule, as though he was about to become the proud guardian of the Princess of Orlath.

Shouting drew his attention, and he looked towards the house. The shouting was children. Of course. Kymenos curled his lips. He had taken steps, some time back, to make sure that he would never sire a child, even without meaning to. Even a largely untrained student of the Star Circle could do wonders with the books he had found in Ozue and a few elementary patterns.

All that effort he had gone to. And now he was going to have to become a guardian for Chaos knew how long to a brat of a Princess, anyway.

He watched the children as they sported, ignoring his presence. They no doubt thought he was here to talk to their parents about some farm matters; Kymenos had learned long since that most children couldn't seem to feel the pulling force of Destiny.

Seven children ran and played on the lawn, but Kymenos's gaze was drawn to one of them at once. It could only be the Princess Alliana.

She was a pretty girl, he had to admit that. Twelve years old now, but she had the vivacity and liveliness of someone who had never been told to tame her movements. *Or her voice*, Kymenos thought, wincing as her shrill shout bounced off his ears.

She had brown curls that hung to her shoulders, though the other children's hair was cut short, and big brown eyes that Kymenos could see sparkling-

He ground his teeth. *That is how much Destiny has affected my mind. I am not going to think about her eyes as "sparkling." There is a limit as to how much I will endure.*

And lastly, she had the aura of Destiny around her, edged with golden sparks. It was her.

Kymenos turned his head to look at the house. The father was standing there, looking more prosperous and less harried than when Kymenos had first seen him. But his face paled when he caught sight of Kymenos, and he bowed his head, as if he knew what was coming.

Of course he does. I told him, Kymenos thought, as he slid off Sykeen and tied the horse's reins to a stump that sat nearby. *There is no mysterious knowledge, and I won't let Destiny make me think there is.*

You could leave me untied, said Sykeen wistfully into his thoughts. *I wouldn't go far. I bonded to you, and I love you, you know.*

Sword, Sykeen.

Sykeen uttered the little whinny that had always sounded like a whimper to Kymenos, and shut up. Kymenos nodded, and then turned and walked up to the farmer.

"You remember me?" he said in a low voice, as he bowed.

"Yes. Of course." The father swallowed. "And you have come to take Tima away from us."

"Yes. Have you told her about her heritage?"

"No." The farmer looked towards the children sporting on the grass. "We didn't think that she could keep it from Lyli, even if we told her to keep it dead secret. They share everything."

Kymenos looked at the other brown-haired, brown-eyed girl. She did have a Destiny, though not one as great as the one that surrounded the Princess. It had sparks of gold, for Light, along the edge.

"Perhaps she can come and join her sister when Alliana sets up her Court," he offered.

The farmer bowed.

"We will have to come up with a story for my taking her away," said Kymenos thoughtfully. "Ah. I know. She has Azure magic, doesn't she?"

"Yes. Destiny chose us well." The father's face reflected awe. "Almost all of our children have powerful Azure magic, and she didn't stand out at all."

Kymenos nodded. "Then say that I am from the Star Circle, and am taking her away for training."

"I thought you only trained those who had multiple elements."

"And especially strong single elements," said Kymenos. "This will be plausible. And certainly she will have to learn to train her magic, sooner or later."

"That is true." The farmer stared sadly at his adopted daughter. "We shall miss her. She has become Tima to us. Why are you snickering?"

"Nothing," said Kymenos, composing his face to keep from snickering again over the childish insult. "I shall take her, and then explain her real name and Destiny when I am well away."

The man bowed his head and nodded. "Then I think that you should escort her away, and get it over with. There's not much that we can do to comfort her, or ease the pain the separation will cause her and her sisters and brothers."

"You don't want to say farewell?"

"I said it every day," said the farmer quietly. "I hugged her every morning and told her I loved her, and farewell if we didn't meet again, and so did her mother- that is, my wife. She thought it was because she was sickly when she was born." For a moment, a wan smile touched his lips. "No one has ever suspected that she was not our daughter, or Lyli's twin."

Kymenos dipped his head, and then turned towards the girls. The pull of Destiny was strong all about him, humming like a hive of bees. This would be the moment that Chaos had told him something would happen, and all of Kymenos's senses were on alert as he walked lightly towards the girl.

But nothing happened, and Kymenos let out a breath of disappointment as he came to a stop before Alliana. She halted and stared up at him, tilting her head to one side as if wondering what he could want with her.

Kymenos wasn't sure what he was going to say, but then Destiny took over and the appropriate speech poured out of his mouth. It was the first time he could ever remember Destiny doing any of the work in making up a plausible story.

"Good day, my lady. I am a scout from the Star Circle. You were born with extremely powerful Azure magic, and we are afraid that if left untrained, it would consume you. Therefore, I have come to escort you, if you will, to the city of Serian in Dalzna, and make sure that you receive the training you need." He bowed his head and held out his hand, as if he were waiting for her to accept it. A real Star Circle scout wouldn't do that, of course, would just come in and take the child, but Alliana probably didn't know that.

She didn't. Her face lit, and she cried out to her brothers and sisters. They came running, and listened eagerly as Kymenos, in a voice that was not entirely his own, described the wonders of the Star Circle, and reassured Alliana that she would be well-treated there. She smiled, and beamed, and even managed to comfort her "twin" sister, who was crying. Kymenos understood, to a certain extent. Many children dreamed about going elsewhere and becoming heroes like the ones in the history-tales they were always listening to.

It didn't make him despise children any less, or stop waiting less desperately for the promise that Chaos had made.

But nothing happened, and at last, when Alliana's adopted parents had made a show of thinking about it, they were ready. Alliana quickly packed a small bag that she slung over one shoulder, filling it full with clothes and combs, and other treasures that Kymenos thought were sentimental but which she wouldn't leave behind, such as creek rocks. Sykeen didn't even snort when she put the pack on his back, and he dipped his head to nuzzle her hair, but Kymenos had to blink. The horse was looking at Alliana suspiciously with one eye, and now and then stamping a foot.

What is the matter with you? Kymenos asked as he bowed to the weeping, waving family and climbed up, then hauled Alliana up after him.

She's not you. I'm your horse. You should be the only one who rides on my back.

Kymenos rolled his eyes as he spurred Sykeen towards the northwest, the direction that Destiny told him to go. They splashed across the stream, and Alliana squealed and talked nonstop, a stream of chatter that he didn't listen to, while Sykeen lifted his hooves higher than ever in disdain of the water. *I've told you to stop saying things like that. They won't make me any happier about having another voice in my mind, where there should be only silence.*

It's the truth.

When we get to the next town along the way, I think I might stop and buy a nice, big skinning knife.

Sykeen shut up. Kymenos leaned back and finally bothered to listen to Alliana's prattle.

"-and I want a horse."

"Can you ride by yourself?" Kymenos asked, grateful to find that his mouth was his own.

"Well, no."

"Learn before you try to have a horse," said Kymenos, leaning back a little as Sykeen took the next ridge. "And make sure that you don't buy a telepathic one, whatever you do."

"Oh, you can't buy a telepathic horse!" said Alliana in a high, shocked voice. "They come to their owners. They bond to the people they're supposed to be with."

That's true.

Knives, Sykeen. Nice, big skinning knife with a sharp edge.

Sykeen gave another horsey whimper and shut up. Alliana let him advance a few steps in silence, and then said, "So, how far is it to Serian? And are we going to go across the mountains?"

"A few months," said Kymenos, remembering the time it had taken him to cross to Orlath. Two mountain ranges and innumerable rivers and forests he had crossed. Of course, he had been on foot, but except in the greatest need, Sykeen with the two of them and Alliana's pack wouldn't go much faster. Perhaps he did want to buy her a horse and teach her to ride. "But we may not go straight to Serian." Destiny was guiding him towards one way through the mountains, and then up into Arvenna and then to Dalzna, but Kymenos knew what else lay in the way: the great city of Corlinth. It was far more likely that Destiny was taking them there.

"We won't?"

"No. There is something else that I have to tell you, Alliana."

"That's not my name."

"It is your true name."

And then Destiny caught up his mouth again, and Kymenos let it pour out the whole, sorry tale, while in the back of his mind he raged at Chaos, the force he had spent so much time to contact.

Why break your promise? What's the point? You agreed, and even told me it would break Destiny's pattern, which would be to your liking. Why let me come up to the point where you could have broken Destiny's chain and then do nothing?

There came a stirring, and then Kymenos had the feeling of immense eyes looking at him. He shuddered.

I did as I said I would. I broke Destiny's chain.

How?

If you do not know, I see no point in telling you. I prefer intelligent devotees.

Then Chaos was gone, and Kymenos knew he could shout all day and it wouldn't come back unless it felt like it. Answering him the first time he had called out was a flicker of randomness in itself.

"-and you are needed by your people, but first we are going to seek for your weapon."

"Weapon?"

"Your sword," said Kymenos. "And we are going to Corlinth."

Well, that settled one question.

He only wished he could settle the others, and he worried and puzzled at them as they left the cottage behind and headed into the vastness of the Corlirin Plains, more brown than golden now at the beginning of spring.

What could Chaos possibly have done? I sensed nothing wrong, nothing different from what I thought it would be. How do I know it did anything at all? It would be in Chaos's nature to promise something and then not keep the promise.

I suppose I have to take it on faith.

Kymenos ground his teeth. He didn't like taking things on faith.

I know. You don't take my love for you on faith.

Kymenos thought rather savagely about gelding for long enough that Sykeen was almost galloping at the end of it, and brought them to the first village before nightfall.

And, of course, there they met Trouble.

Chapter 7

Lady of the Unicorns

"Oh, things like that don't happen very often. But they do happen."

--Ferran, of the Black Brotherhood of the Night.

"Will there be anything else, my lady?"

Nightstone didn't look over her shoulder. "No, Glow, that will be quite enough. Go back to Teshia now."

"I would be glad of it," said the zeyr, his voice deepening into a purr. "The kittens are getting impatient."

Nightstone did look over her shoulder then, smiling as patiently as she could. She didn't want to encourage Glow to remain and talk about his kittens. "Then shouldn't you hurry back to them?"

"In a moment."

Nightstone sighed. The other bad part of having no humans around her, besides having no one to laugh at and appreciate her jokes, was that her servants didn't feel obligated to be polite according to human codes. Glow, who sat in the door at the moment, was a *zeyr*, a small black cat mottled with dull silver spots, and he showed no intentions of leaving.

"The kittens are dashing about like adults already."

"That's nice, Glow."

"They take after their father."

"Of course."

"That was me," said Glow, as if he thought that Nightstone was doubting his parentage of the kittens. And perhaps she had made some motion or said something that had let him think that. Even after centuries of associating with the *zeyri*, Nightstone still didn't understand all the codes that bound them together.

"Of course it was."

Glow sat back as if he were satisfied, though his tail still flicked slightly. "But Teshia does need my help to keep them in line, now that they've begun to run and tumble so fast."

Nightstone just nodded, and this time, to her relief, Glow took his leave, pausing only to gaze at her with his yellow-green eyes as if searching for something in her face. Nightstone stayed still, and the cat padded out of the room.

Nightstone sighed and rubbed her face, then turned back to the window. *I know that he means well. All of them, who talk about their children and mates, mean well. But they don't know how hard it is for me.*

The window gave her a view of the Corlirin Plains, and Nightstone found herself relaxing as she gazed across them. There was much else that had changed out of all recognition since she was last here, when she was a young princess more than four hundred years ago. But the Plains were changeless. Nightstone had heard talk of putting them all under cultivation before, of replacing the endless grass with equally endless corn. But the wind and the lack of people in Orlath mandated against it. Nightstone was glad that the plans had failed. The Plains soothed her.

Especially when she knew that she had to await a strike that might come from anywhere, at any moment.

I know the Princess Alliana escaped. I don't know how, but I know that she did. And the silence about it has to be the work of Destiny. Someone must have seen her rescuer, but no one has ever reported it to me.

It made her angry that her superiors among the Dark seemed content to believe that they had destroyed both Alliana and the Princess of Rivendon. Surely, a search years ago could have found and slain them, and saved everybody much trouble and fuss. But the Dark was proud. It didn't like admitting that a first strike hadn't been perfect. And most of the time, it didn't have to. Its first strikes were usually perfect.

This one hadn't been.

Nightstone ground her teeth. *Now if they would only admit that, then we might actually stop the Princesses and the Prince before they rise again.*

For the moment, though, she was restricted from starting a search. She was nominally the ruler of Orlath, but the Dark's other lieutenants watched her, of course, especially the supposed Prince of Rivendon, Artaen. She didn't have much room to move, and even searchers who quietly combed the countryside would have alerted someone.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a gentle neigh below the window. Nightstone leaned out, and saw two unicorns waiting in the courtyard, their coats shining a soft white, shying whenever someone came near them. Very few of the Dark's servants in the castle were virgin.

Nightstone smiled. Now she could truly relax, and think about other things for a while.

She ran lightly down the stairs and into the courtyard, and the unicorns came to her at once, shining creatures who might have been made of pure light. They bowed their horns and rested them on her shoulders, and Nightstone laid her hands on their necks. They bore her touch willingly, and more than willingly; they would have borne her riding on their backs, though Nightstone rarely asked for that. She was virgin, and had been for more than four hundred years. The unicorns had liked her, and so they had lengthened her life through some magic of their own.

Nightstone could hardly complain. It allowed her to go on serving the Dark as only she could. But it did mean that there were some sacrifices, and sometimes it was difficult to keep her curiosity about bedding someone else under control. Any talk of mates or children seemed to aggravate the curiosity lately.

The unicorn on her left neighed, a sound like small bells, and nudged her. Nightstone smiled and touched his mane, like heavy strands of silk.

"Of course," she said. "I need to get out of the castle for a short time, and walk with you. Lead the way."

The unicorns turned and trotted before her. They still shied from the filifernai, the *zeyri*, and the People of the Snake who came and went, but that was to be expected. Unicorns were mostly creatures of Light. It was only Nightstone's continuing virginity that lured them to her side at all, and their visits had become less frequent once she took command of the castle.

Nightstone took a deep breath of clean, cold air as she passed out of the castle gates. She glanced at the unicorns, who were prancing beside her, but looking ahead of them with longing violet eyes.

"Go on," she told them.

The unicorns snorted at her, and raced ahead. Nightstone felt her heart break as she watched them. Clean, graceful motions, faster than any horse and infinitely more beautiful. They reared next to each other, and their horns touched. It was a motion of affection, but Nightstone didn't feel harried by it as she did when she saw humans kissing or heard Glow talking about his mate. This was just a natural part of the unicorns, this touching. Even their mating and bearing of foals was completely part of them. The other intelligent species separated it out and made it special, and that was what Nightstone found hard to deal with.

The larger unicorn came racing back for her, and danced up and down in front of her, silver hooves rising and falling in time to an unheard music.

"You want me to ride?" Nightstone asked in surprise. She had received such an invitation only a few times, and had taken advantage of it even more rarely.

The unicorn snorted at her, and then turned, presenting her with his rump. Unicorns did not kneel.

Nightstone leaped up lightly. She did wear a dark gown, liking the effect it made when it floated about her, but after four hundred years she knew how to move in her body. It didn't get in the way. She settled easily on the unicorn's back, and he snorted and began to run. His mate kept pace with them, and then turned and raced ahead, jumping and kicking her heels so that the sun caught sparks of light from them.

Nightstone looked around as they passed across the Plains. There was no one in sight, not surprising since no farms lay this close to the castle any more. Patches of snow still lay here and there, weighing down the grass, and the blades that stood upright were more brown than golden, but spring would soon rouse them back to shining green and gold. Nightstone smiled. She could already see it in her mind, as easily as if she were riding among such blades right now.

Then, abruptly, a vision flickered up in front of her. Nightstone gasped, and the unicorn stopped so suddenly she almost went flying from his back. She could see into the future, of course, being a Scarlet mage, but never before had she had a vision that came seeking her without her consent; she went seeking them in the flames and in trance.

She understood in seconds, though. This vision was different. It was important, and she knew at once from the symbol of an empty cradle that was washed away on a stream of water that it concerned Princess Alliana. She had seen the same thing in other visions over the years.

Nightstone settled the unicorn with a pat on the horn, and then waited for the vision to present something to her in obscure symbols. She had gotten used to interpreting them, though she did wish that she was like some Scarlet mages, and simply saw what was happening.

A moment later, she realized that evidently the vision had heard her silent pleas. This time, it showed only a picture of a man and a girl on a horse racing across the Plains towards a village. It was difficult to interpret it in any other way than what was happening right now.

As Nightstone watched, the vision seemed to turn, and showed her the face of the little girl, who clung to the man and chattered constantly. Bright brown eyes, and shining brown hair, and a Destiny that shone gold at the edges. It was the Princess. It must be. She was twelve years old now, and going to seek her Destiny.

The vision turned further, and Nightstone supposed it was going to show her the face of the man. She had to admit that she was curious to see him. He would have to be a very brave and dedicated servant of the Light to come into the collapsing castle and rescue Princess Alliana, and very clever to have kept her hidden all these years without a hint of her survival surfacing except in Nightstone's visions.

But, just as the vision turned so that it was in front of the rushing horse, something struck Nightstone a powerful blow. She cried out and fell to the ground, blinking. The vision tattered and fled, though not before she caught one glimpse of a red eye glaring at her.

Nightstone blew out her breath and stood, accepting the anxious nuzzling of the unicorn stallion without much thought. Her mind was on the red eye. She knew she had seen it before, but her mind had to sort through many years of memory to find what she was looking for.

One other time, she had sought to look at someone's face and found it occluded by such a symbol. But that had been a Dalznan mage of the Circle of Ameras, and he had died two hundred years ago, at Nightstone's hands. It was hard to see what he could have in common with this man, whoever he was.

Then she remembered.

"Chaos has joined the game," she said aloud. "I don't understand. What could it want with the Princess? She is entirely the creature of Destiny."

The unicorns shied and danced. Nightstone smiled at them apologetically. She didn't like subjecting them to such guesses, but they were the only audience she had, and she had always found it easier to speak aloud.

"Destiny is making a strong effort," she said. "We know that. But what in the world does Chaos want? I thought it was satisfied with making trouble elsewhere."

Nightstone.

Nightstone lifted her head alertly. That would be Artaen. He was the only one she knew who had the power to reach telepathically across such immense distances. He spoke as if he were standing right beside her.

Shadow has found the Prince of Doralissa in the southern part of the Doralissan jungles, Culatharion. And we have heard that a prophecy is coming true, and that all four royal heirs will be trying to take their Kingdoms back. This means that Princess Alliana must have survived. You are to begin searching for her at once.

"I told you," Nightstone muttered viciously, but she couldn't answer back at this distance. Only Artaen could reach out. She could only listen.

Shadow says that he has never seen anyone with as powerful a Destiny as the young Doralissan Prince. He is trying to stop him, but fears he will not succeed. And the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna may also be moving, which will divide his energies. I will deal with the Princess of Rivendon, wherever she is. Track and kill the Princess Alliana, if you can.

Nightstone dipped her head, though the acknowledgment was only for her own benefit; Artaen couldn't feel it and wouldn't care if he could. He would just assume that she was doing as he had asked.

The Grellan Ashen has been invoked.

Nightstone sighed. Of course it had been. In her opinion, the Dark was too quick to turn to that old agreement in a time of crisis. It limited backbiting among the Dark's lieutenants, of course, but it also meant that other measures weren't taken, that being thought enough. If they had let Nightstone search for the Princess Alliana years ago, instead of just declaring the *Grellan Ashen*, then perhaps she would have been able to find her and stop this mess from happening.

I will be sending you aid as swiftly as I can. Pegasi. They will scout Orlath from the air.

Nightstone blinked, then smiled. Artaen might be a bit of a bastard, but he was committed to the Dark. He would make sure that it survived and that it continued improving the lives of the people of Orlath and Rivendon, whatever happened. And Nightstone could use pegasi. Dragons were inefficient scouts, since everyone knew they were coming quickly enough to hide. Pegasi

flew much more quietly, though less swiftly, and could fly much closer to the ground before they were spotted.

I am doing this at the order of the Dark, you understand.

Nightstone grinned. Of course he was. They would continue their rivalry when the truce was lifted. That was one of the things that Nightstone loved about the Dark, and one of the things that none of the Lightworkers she had ever met understood. Rivalry was a good thing, and it insured that the people who cared most about the Dark were in the best positions to help it. Just going along with whatever the King or the Queen or the priestesses of Elle ordered was not only boring but detrimental to the Light's goals. Nightstone couldn't understand why they chose it.

Oh, ketz!

Nightstone blinked. She had never heard Artaen swear before. It was in a language that she didn't know, but there could be no doubt that that was anything but a curse. Nightstone could almost feel him spitting it.

I must move.

His voice ended then, and though Nightstone waited for a moment, it didn't come back. She shook her head, deciding that that was the end of the message, and then turned to the unicorn stallion. He let her mount again, though he still looked nervous and unhappy that Nightstone had mentioned Chaos at all.

Nightstone tore back to the castle with nervous energy dancing like the unicorn within her. Her mind hummed with plans. So much to do. She must send out the scouts that would serve her, the ones on the ground, and try to find Princess Alliana. She hadn't gleaned much from the vision, since one part of the Plains looked pretty much like another, but she had seen enough to know that they were galloping northwest. The scouts would start in that direction. And then there was the reception of the pegasi to prepare, and their routes to draw up, and the dragons to bring back, and the word of Chaos to pass along to the appropriate superior, and several other things that she had no doubt she could do.

Nightstone was smiling by the time she got back to the castle gates and yelled to rouse the sleeping Darkworkers. This was war. Dark and Shadow were going to war. This war would be real, unlike the aborted war of twelve years ago. And this time, Nightstone was sure that Dark and Shadow would win conclusively, and then perhaps Light would stop acting like a spoiled child and trying to control the world.

Light has no idea how to run a Kingdom, Nightstone thought smugly as she strode towards the throne room. How fortunate for the Dark that I have.

Chapter 8

Elf-Fire

"Through the jungles they passed like wind-whirled ash,

And tore up the ground in a bright cloudy flash,

And turned for the south, the south and the sea.

So they ran madly, the unicorns running free!"

-Doralissan poem describing the Flight of the Bright.

Ternora braced herself as two of the birds landed on the ground and shapeshifted into humans. They were carrying swords, and she found herself briefly distracted with wondering how they had done that. She didn't think that shapeshifters could carry anything with them but themselves, not even clothes or weapons.

Then she realized that those swords grew out of the men's arms, and wariness filled her. It was one thing to admire *dondanari* as guardians at Shadow's Court, another thing altogether to try to fend them off in the middle of the jungles.

"I don't want to fight you!" she yelled at them.

The *dondanar* on the left, whose left arm turned into a slim sword and his right into a dagger, shrugged. "We heard enough, my lady, to know that you're meant to guide the Prince in search of the Pool of Siliyonete. We will kill you for that. We are sorry. It's nothing more personal than that, really. I enjoyed your music and magic when you visited the Court." He spun on one heel and lashed out with his sword at her. Ternora knew it was no more than a trick to make her go left so that he could stab her with the dagger, and yet she almost couldn't avoid the dagger.

She began to sing. Her voice rose and blended with Prince Warcourage's, and for a second, Ternora was sure that she could feel his approving eyes on her. She ignored that sensation, keeping her eyes on the *dondanari*. She had very carefully sung only normal songs in Shadow's Court. This kind of song was a secret, a weapon that she had kept in reserve. She had gone to the Court out of curiosity, but she hadn't been entirely sure if she would come out of it again.

Rather like this Forest, actually.

The *dondanar* facing her dropped off to sleep at once. The other fought a little longer, swaying, his eyes glassy. Then he tumbled forward, falling over his partner, and began to snore at once.

Ternora turned to face the other shapeshifters. Almost all of them were fey, she saw, *dondanari* and mizanai and some other kinds, though a few were human. And all of them were now looking at her, as if they thought that was the most dangerous one of the group.

Ternora shook her head. "He's the Destined Prince," she said, pointing in Warcourage's direction.

"Ternora!"

That was Amirien. Ternora ignored her, and nodded the fey hopefully in the direction of the Prince. "He's the one you want," she said. "Take him, and you would be doing everyone a favor."

"Do you serve the Light or not?" one of the humans asked.

"No."

"Whom do you serve?"

"Myself." Ternora pointed again at the Prince. "See? I'm perfectly happy if you take him, and spare me trouble."

One of the mizanai moved smoothly forward and pressed her sword against Ternora's neck, smiling into her eyes. Ternora swallowed. It wasn't as if the chaos-fey needed swords, what with their power of lightning, but they liked them anyway, so that they could send lightning up the lengths of metal and into their opponents' bodies.

"Do you like swords?" asked the mizan.

"No. I hate swords," said Ternora as quickly as she could with one of them pressed against her throat.

"Why?"

"They make me bleed." Ternora pointed urgently towards the Prince again. "But if you make him bleed, that's fine. I can stroll out of here."

"Can you-"

Abruptly, Shadow's voice cried, "Down, my children!"

Everyone in sight who wasn't an elf flung themselves flat on the ground. Ternora joined them, because a warning from a power of the world was probably of something really nasty.

She looked up in time to see elf-fire pass through Shadow's misty form, of course not affecting him. She looked back at Amirien and the others, who were pale gold but still glowing to call up the elf-fire. Warcourage stood in front of them all, or at least a small and brightly glowing figure that Ternora thought was Warcourage. Trying to see his face was like trying to see the face of the sun.

Shadow waited until the elf-fire had passed through him, without affecting anything- it was only made to hurt people, and thus didn't even hurt the trees- and then said in a voice that made Ternora shiver, "I would not have hurt any of you. I am only trying to take the Prince away before he does any more harm."

"He is not doing harm!" said Amirien, her eyes shining and her hair dancing around her with the power that she and the other elves had summoned. "He will bring the throne of Doralissa back to the Light!"

"And destroy half of Doralissa in the process."

"Those who welcome my coming will be spared," said the Prince, in a very eerie voice.

"I will not let you destroy my children," said Shadow, and his voice was as threatening as the snarl of an island dragon crouched over her eggs. Ternora shuddered. She had heard that Shadow was more susceptible to such protective rages than Dark or Light, but she had never seen him in the middle of one. She supposed this was something to report to her children about, if she survived.

"They are not your children, but your slaves," said Amirien, voice full of fierce satisfaction.

Ternora closed her eyes. *She thinks annoying one of the great powers is a good thing.*

I am never visiting her again.

"Dare you speak of them so?" asked Shadow, and Ternora decided that she would never visit the Forest of Rion again, either. If Shadow left any of it standing, it probably wouldn't be worth visiting.

"I do dare," said Amirien. "The time has come when Destiny and the Light together will make the world what it should be."

"Destiny and Light have always hated me," said Shadow, still softly. "But I am surprised that they have decided they hate the Dark, too."

"Both of you would make the world what it should not be," said Amirien. "You would change the world into something blurred, where the lines between good and evil are not clear, where things are complicated for the sake of complication, where what is right and what is wrong are declared to be the same thing."

"I cannot answer that accusation," said Shadow. "I can tell you that I will not let my children be destroyed."

Amirien laughed, and it was sharp and ugly, not something Ternora had ever thought she would hear from the throat of an elf. She glanced cautiously at Amirien, and found the elf's face all but blazing. Elf-fire was building up inside her, and yet she was doing nothing to release it. Was she mad?

Well, of course she's mad, Ternora. She wouldn't have challenged Shadow if she were not.

"You are too late, Lord of Shapeshifters. In the end, they will all die, or be destroyed, unless they acknowledge that Light and Destiny are the ones who know best."

"I do not understand why," said Shadow, and there was sadness mixed with the rage. He was the only power Ternora had ever heard speak with such emotions in his voice, much less mixed, and she lifted her head to look at him in interest. He stood with a misty outline growing brighter around his body, and she could not guess what he would do next. "Surely we can share the world- not without war, but without destroying each other's children."

"This is the end," said Amirien, and then she flung her arms up. In the moment before the elf-fire burst free, as she knew it would, Ternora stood and began to flee into the jungle.

"Take me with you!"

Prince Warcourage was running beside her. Ternora, much as she despised him for causing this in the first place, picked him up without breaking stride. No one deserved to see what was going to happen back in that clearing when Amirien let the elf-fire loose, not even an annoying brat of a Prince.

They had gotten a thick trunk between them and the blast when Ternora felt it begin. She whispered to the Prince, "Close your eyes."

For a wonder, she saw him doing what she asked, before she slammed her own eyes shut.

The elf-fire passed over and through them. It carried all the sorrows and joys of an immortal life, all shoved into one second. Ternora knew the intensity would kill any mortal it touched, and had no doubt that most of Shadow's shapeshifters back in the clearing were dead.

She set her teeth and rode the blast. She was half-elven, and she had lived three hundred years; she could somewhat deal with the memories. She heard Prince Warcourage whimpering, and looked down cautiously, when she thought it was safe, to see what was wrong.

His eyes were screwed shut, and he continued to whimper and thrash and jerk in her arms, but he seemed to be riding it out, too. His Destiny had defended him, or perhaps the elven blood he had a few generations back.

Ternora shook her head and tried to shed the images of the sea and the isles and the jungles and thousands of other worlds. It worked, after a moment. Most mortals died in the first seconds of an elf-fire. After that, the memories simply slipped free of a mind never meant to hold them.

The Prince whimpered a moment longer, then opened his eyes. The green glow was dimmed, for which Ternora was glad. That was irritating and unnerving to look at, as well as eerie.

"What happened?" he whispered.

Ternora edged back around the tree, becoming aware now that the Prince was heavy. She set him on the ground. He clung to her hip. He was short for his age, she thought, only a little over four feet tall.

She pushed through the fronds and leaves that had shielded the clearing, and then winced. As she had thought, more than one elf had contributed to that blast of elf-fire, and they had been killed doing it. There was no trace of them left, but the birds in the trees would come and sing a lament soon enough, as they did every time an elf went out of the world.

The shapeshifters were lying on the ground, their faces twisted in expressions of joy or terror or sadness, depending on the memory that had killed them. Ternora looked around cautiously. There was no sign of Shadow, but she did not think that he had been destroyed. Above all else, there wouldn't be this sullen anger in the air, this brooding rage, if he had been.

"Ternora?"

Ternora started and looked down at the Prince. He looked back at her with tears in his shining eyes.

"They're gone, aren't they?"

Ternora nodded. She didn't see any point in lying to him, but she did brace herself for a storm of tears.

Warcourage looked down, exhaled, then looked back up and said, "Then there is only one way to make sure that they did not die in vain. I suppose we should go."

"Go where?"

"In search of the Pool of Siliyonete, of course."

Ternora shook her head. "I never found any evidence that it existed, though I searched for more than a century. I don't see why you think it exists, or what you will do if you find it."

"Ask it to grant me a weapon that will win the war, of course," said the Prince, as if she were stupid. "And I know it exists because Destiny tells me so."

"I still don't see why I should take you there."

"You are my Destined guardian."

"I feel no compulsion."

"Didn't you know that the guardian will not only guide and protect me, but also become my trusted servant?" asked the Prince, smiling at her. "You will become my closest advisor in the Court, Ternora. How could you do anything else, after the perils of the road we shared?"

"Will share."

"Of course."

Ternora studied him, and then the clearing. It was damn sure that he wasn't about to get any more help from the elves, and she didn't know how long he would last in a *donasa* village. Shadow would find him easily.

And a position in a Court wouldn't be a bad thing. She was getting older. Even half-elves didn't last forever. Indeed, most of them began to think they were as immortal as elves at about this age, and got themselves killed doing stupid things. Ternora was determined that that would not happen to her.

"You will trust me?"

"Yes."

"Even if we can't take the most direct route to the Pool of Siliyonete?"

"Of course." The Prince smiled at her. "Why would I not trust you? You are the best guide in the jungles, and you were in training for a reason. You were training to become my guide."

"I have heard history-tales of heirs who insisted on taking the most direct path to their goal, and suffering for it."

Warcourage shook his head firmly. "No. I know that Shadows is after me now, and I know that the Lord of the Shapeshifters is a powerful enemy." He looked at the dead humans and fey, and shuddered. "I will sneak and use all the subterfuge that I can, until the moment comes to strike directly."

Ternora nodded slowly. The words sounded unnatural coming out of a twelve-year-old child's mouth, but they also sounded appropriate to the situation. They were what she needed to hear.

"Very well. Then I will take you."

She turned and moved south through the jungles, her mind already planning out the net of roads that they would take towards the sea, and the ship route oversea to the Shining Isles. Warcourage followed her without hesitation.

Ternora found her head rising and her shoulders straightening as they walked. She even smiled.

This might not be so bad, if I get a Court position and some fame out of it. Don't know about Destiny, but I've always liked Luck, and I'm not about to refuse one of his gifts.

Chapter 9

True Love and Other Annoyances

"Of course the heroes and heroines of history-tales need to fall in love. What is a history-tales without a touch of romance? I only wish they wouldn't do it when they're only fourteen and have not the slightest idea of what they're doing."

-Attributed to Icefinder, gatherer of history-tales for the Kings of Gazania.

Elary glanced anxiously from Mitherill to Palant, and back again. She didn't know what she was waiting for; the most momentous thing that was going to happen to them had already happened. But she felt the humming tension in the air, and she wasn't sure how to end it. Perhaps that was it.

"My lady," said Palant in the tongue of the *ilzánai*, his voice hushed and strained. He slid to a knee and bowed his head. It was a courtly gesture that Elary had never seen him make before, and one that he accomplished without any of his usual clumsiness. "I want only to serve you. I love you."

"You've never seen me before," said Mitherill, though with a stain of blood in her cheeks that was very becoming. Elary was beginning to think that nothing the girl could do was ugly.

"That doesn't matter," said Palant. "Can you not feel the pull of Destiny? We are meant to be together, my lady. We must be."

"Yes, of course, I see that," said Mitherill, and then glanced at Elary. "What is his name, my guardian?"

"Palant," said Elary. "He is one of my students, and I can give a good report of his determination and his eagerness."

"Then he shall come with us."

"Really, my lady? I shall?" Palant sprang to his feet, never taking his eyes off the Princess, as if he were drinking in the delicate lines of her face. Of course, that meant that the bag of fluids he was carrying splashed all over him. He yelped and danced. Elary could smell the stink, and knew that it had been urine, probably mixed with something else, if the patient he had taken it from was sick with the blood plague.

Elary rose to her feet. "I'll take care of cleaning him up," she said. "Fier, Mitherill, why don't you plan our route, and think of things that we might need to take with us?"

"I will think of such things," Mitherill whispered. "It will keep me from dwelling on my sorrow." She turned her head away from the mess that Palant had made of himself, looking slightly ill.

Elary blinked, then shrugged. *It's probably only that she isn't used to this kind of mess. The ilzánai would have kept their dwellings clean.* She grabbed Palant's arm and dragged him out of the tent. He stared after the Princess for as long as he could, then began to shiver when the cool night air touched him.

"Who is she, Elary?" he asked, as the healer guided him towards the low pool that the healers used for washing up. "I've never seen anyone so wonderful."

"I will tell you," said Elary, "but you must keep quiet about it. She has enemies." They reached the pool, and she pulled Palant's tunic off, ignoring his squawk. He had recently become shy about losing his clothes around anyone else, but the tunic would only cling to him and stink if he left it on. She ducked it into the water, and Palant pushed his hair and face into the pool as well, scrubbing at them severely.

"How could she have enemies?" he asked, when he came back up. "I don't think that anyone could harm her. One look from those golden eyes, and an attacker would fall on his back and begin to grieve for all the sorrows of the world."

"You might think so," said Elary. "But you would be wrong." She glanced around. No one seemed to be about, but then, most of the patients were settled for the night and the healers were snatching sleep while they could. "She is the Princess Mitherill of Ilantra-Arvenna, Palant, and she will rule the country someday if she can get the throne back." She gave him his tunic back.

Palant stared at her, eyes widening, then disappearing briefly as he pulled the tunic over his head, then appearing again wider than before. He said, "Does that mean that I am to be her King?"

"Perhaps." Elary thought so, but she could recall history-tales where Destiny brought in a rival in order to create a tragic love story. "But you must say nothing of this to anyone, do you hear?"

"And am I really to go with you?"

Elary studied him doubtfully. She would not take him with her if she had the choice. Palant was eager and determined, yes, but he still had a lot to learn about healing. He had odd ideas about what it was right for him to do, and what it wasn't right for other people to do to stop him. He wasn't trained in walking for a long time, or in fighting. He was, in short, fourteen.

"I promise I'll be good," said Palant, no doubt mistaking her gaze for something more judgmental. "I promise!"

"That's not it," said Elary. "I don't know how fast we can move if you accompany us. You can't walk far."

"I know I always complain, but I want to go with you, Elary! I promise! I love the Princess-"

"Mitherill."

Palant nodded and lowered his voice, looking around as though he thought agents of Shadow were standing right behind him. "I love her. I'll never be happy again unless I'm with her."

Elary narrowed her eyes. He was probably right. He was twitching as he stood there, obviously fighting the impulse to break away and go back to Mitherill. She wouldn't do much good, and perhaps much harm, if she tried to stop him.

At last, she nodded. "You can come with us."

Palant opened his mouth to shout, but Elary clapped a hand over it. "If you learn to be quiet," she said into his startled face.

Palant nodded, and Elary released his mouth. "This is what I've always dreamed of," he said, the moment she backed away from him. "I wanted to be a prince in a history-tale, and fall in love with someone as wonderful as Mitherill, and have her love me back. This is what I've always wanted."

"I thought you wanted to be a healer."

"It was what I wanted if I couldn't get anything better," said Palant, and turned away, ignoring Elary's wince. "Now, let's go back and see the Princess again."

Elary nodded, and started to walk behind him. But, abruptly, some sense of danger made her turn and scan the sky.

"What is it?" Palant asked behind her, loud and impatient.

Elary shook her head, and Palant shut up, then moved beside her, tilting his head back to scan the sky too.

Elary saw only the stars for long moments, glittering sharp and cold the way that they always did on a night of late winter or early spring in Arvenna. Then she saw a dark shape fly across some, and the stars winked out and then back on again. The shape came back for another circle.

Palant gave a noisy gasp. "Is that a dragon?" he asked.

"No," said Elary, quiet but certain. She had seen dragons fly before, during the night and while scouting, and she would have recognized the silhouette. This was something else, something that whirled and moved and came back again, something that shifted and flowed as though its boundaries were made of smoke. Elary thought it was not one but many creatures, flying in close formation that occasionally shifted as they turned against the wind.

Then one of the creatures cried out, a high, sweet, piercing note. Elary had been hearing it on the lakes and in the meadows of Ilantra for a hundred years now, and she knew what it was.

"Black swans," she said quietly. "They're fey shapeshifters, servants of Shadow."

"We have to get the Princess out of here!"

Elary nodded to Palant and began to retreat towards the tent, not yet taking her eyes off the swans. Were they coming in the direction of the healers' camp? She actually couldn't tell, since they swerved and moved as much with the wind as anything else. They could be randomly scouting. It was probable that they weren't even looking for the Princess, but for

some other threat or enemy. Elary didn't recall seeing them this far north before; still, there could have been some threat along the border with Dalzna that she hadn't heard about. Royalists who were still loyal to the dead royal family dwelled in the Mountains, and sometimes struggled with the people of Dalzna, who despised all royal families. Their fighting not infrequently wound up taking in innocents.

Elary had decided that, when she saw the flock split in two. One part headed south, still belling that high and clear trumpet. The other flock sped towards the camp, or at least in the direction of the Mountains.

It could still be a coincidence, but Elary wasn't willing to trust the last surviving royal heir of Iantra-Arvenna to a coincidence. She turned and ran for the tent, and found the Princess just standing and smiling at her, the first time she had seen a real smile on the child's face.

"We have decided," said Mitherill, and handed Elary a list written in delicate, curving script.

Elary looked over the list, and blinked.

Jugs of water, waterskins filled with wine, healing supplies, warm clothes, pepper, salt, lemons, limes, a white dog, a white cat, a white horse.

Elary looked up and shook her head. "My lady, we will of course take what clothes and healing supplies we can, but we cannot pause to find the other things, even assuming we have them. We import no lemons or limes, and not many animals are here at all. And we must leave without pausing to search for them. There are black swans coming, servants of Shadow."

Mitherill's lip trembled, and then she turned and grasped Fier's waist, beginning to sob into her chest. Elary blinked at her, then looked up at the *ilzán*, hoping for an explanation.

Fier only frowned sternly at her as she folded Mitherill close, though. "You must have these things when you travel with the Princess," she said. "It has been decided."

"By whom?"

"Mitherill."

"You didn't have them," said Elary, trying to make her voice stay calm, when her mind was silently insisting that the black swans were right outside. "And you managed to come here."

"It's not required when she travels with an *ilzán*," said Fier. "But when she travels with a human-" she glanced at Palant "-it is."

"Why?"

"It just is, The Princess grows nervous and agitated without the food and the animals nearby."

Elary shook her head. "We don't have time. The servants of Shadow are coming. We must move."

Mitherill continued to weep. Fier stood straighter. "I don't think you understand the severity of this," she said. "The Princess must have the food and the animals, and we must take time to search for them."

"We don't have it-"

"Ah."

Elary turned swiftly. A fey woman stood in the tent flap, smiling at her. Dark of hair and skin and eye, she moved as gracefully as if she still had wings on her back, though in this form she looked more human than anything else.

"I thought we might find her here," said the black swan woman, looking at the sobbing Mitherill. "Well. Just give her to us, and then we will fly back to our lord and trouble you no more."

"We won't give her to you," said Elary.

"Why not?" The swan woman sounded offended. "We would treat her well. I am Neretsa, and I don't make promises lightly."

Elary swallowed. Neretsa was still a name of terror in Arvenna, for the way that she had led flights of black swans long ago and turned human souls into other swans. There were reports that she was changed now, different, or even that the Neretsa who served as Shadow's lieutenant was not the same one as the name of terror in the legends, but Elary didn't believe that.

"The child is of the Light, and Destined for the throne," said Elary. "You must let her go and make her Quest, and then she can come back and assume the throne."

"We have seen what kind of ruler she would be," said Neretsa, her mouth tightening into a thin line. "Shadow has made that mistake before, trusting to Destiny to make the ruler kind and good, and it didn't happen. We won't kill her, but we must have her, to insure that she can't take the throne in her lifetime."

"You cannot have her!" Fier cried, lifting her head.

Neretsa blinked, then inclined her head. "I did not know that anyone fey was here," she said, her eyes beginning to glow. "Well. Now that you are, you must see how important it is to give the girl to us."

"Never."

Neretsa paused, gazing at the *ilzán* intently. Then her eyes narrowed, and she looked directly at Mitherill.

"I have changed my mind," she said quietly. "I think that death is the only way to keep this infection from spreading."

"No!" Fier cried, and flung herself forward, prying Mitherill's arms from her waist without slowing down. "Take her, Elary!"

Neretsa met the other fey in a flurry of beating wings. She called, clearly, and a chorus of voices answered from outside the tent flap. Elary grabbed the screaming girl's hand and ducked out the back of the tent.

At once, black swans descended upon her. Elary cursed. She should have known Shadow wasn't stupid, and would watch both openings in the tent.

"Back!"

Elary glanced over her shoulder. Palant had a sword that he had found Anakora knew where, and was beating at the swans with clumsy skill. The swans circled, trying to get past him and to Mitherill, but he wouldn't allow it. Elary knew the respite would be small, and she gathered the girl close to her.

"Mitherill," she whispered. "Which way does your Destiny lie?"

"North," came the word in among the hopeless sobs, almost sounding as though it were spoken by another voice, firm and adult.

"North it is," said Elary, and glanced up at the Dalorth Mountains in despair. They hadn't had time to snatch any warm clothes, and winter still lurked among the peaks.

But death lurked here, and a swan that had managed to get past Palant dived at them, proving just that.

Elary shook her hair, making it flash in the light of the full moon. The swan screamed, temporarily blinded, and blundered into another of its kind who was diving at the same time. They fell to the ground in the middle of twisting necks and snapping beaks.

"Go!" Palant cried. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Very well," said Elary, and then began to run. Mitherill dragged her feet, perhaps because she didn't have the food and animals she seemed to need, and so Elary picked her up and just carried her along.

The forest wasn't far away; the last trees stood not far from the healing houses. Elary made for it, ducking whenever a swan swooped at her, confident that they were going to make it. Did not Destiny protect them?

Then a swan swooped at just the right moment, and hit Elary with a wing. She felt the breath go out of her, and crumpled to the ground. Mitherill went flying from her arms and scrambled up, wailing.

The swan turned towards her at once. Elary watched in despair.

Mitherill held up her hands, and closed her eyes. A golden glow briefly surrounded her, echoing the golden edges of her Destiny and yet separate from them. Then the ground seemed to explode, and vines snaked out of it, reaching up and snaring the swan. It fell to the ground with a screech.

Elary began to breathe again, and stood up, running towards the Princess. She was a Crop mage, and a powerful one, to create plants that would attack her enemies instead of simply commanding existing ones. Elary knew that they would have at least that grace if Mitherill was attacked while she was alone again.

Elary picked her up, and they continued running towards the forest. No more swans came after them. They circled in the sky instead, and called. Elary listened as intently as she could, and found that she could just hear other calls, faint as the howls of wolves on the peaks. She grimaced. The alarm was flowing south across Arvenna, and would no doubt reach servants who were capable of following her and Mitherill, even counteracting the Princess's Crop magic.

Well, I can't worry about that right now. To the north we go.

They reached the edge of the pine forest at last, and ducked in. The trees promptly began to reach uphill. Elary slid to a stop, the adrenaline abandoning her, and dropped Mitherill. The girl fell to the ground and began to sob. Elary glanced over her shoulder, but saw neither Palant nor Fier catching them up. Of course, there weren't enemies either, which was pleasant.

"Where's the salt?"

Elary looked down at Mitherill. "What?"

"The salt. I have to have salt to scatter around me, so that I can purge myself of the feeling of someone else touching me." Mitherill wrapped her arms around herself and began to rock.

Elary shook her head. She was a healer, but she specialized in the diseases of the body, not the mind. *I hope that Fier is still alive. She might be able to tell me about whatever disease Mitherill has.* "There's no salt. Come on, Mitherill." She pulled the girl to her feet.

Mitherill flinched away, screaming, "Don't touch me!"

Elary sighed. "Very well. Come on, Mitherill."

"Call me by my title!"

"As you will, Your Highness."

"The other one."

Elary ground her teeth. "Very well, Princess. Come on. We have to go north, and we have to find some place to shelter until the snowstorm goes past."

"What snowstorm?"

"We're always hit with one about this time of the season," Elary explained, glancing upwards. The stars glittered at her through the branches, but her gaze was fixed on the moon, which had a ring around it. She nodded. "One last great snowfall, and then spring comes. But it's going to hit us while we're in the open and kill us if we stay here. Come." She turned north, and began to push through branches. Mitherill floated after her.

They hadn't gone far before crashing announced the passage of someone else. Elary turned around.

Panting, Palant came through the branches and flung himself to one knee before Mitherill. "It is done, my lady!" he said in Arvennese.

Mitherill stared at him blankly.

Elary said, "She only speaks the tongue of the *ilzánai*, Palant."

"Oh." The boy blinked, then repeated himself, and Mitherill smiled and reached out, just glancing his forehead with the tips of her fingers.

"Thank you, my true knight," she said, and then turned away, ignoring or just not seeing his flush of pleasure. "Now, we must hurry, since my guardian says the snow will blow over us soon."

"Is Fier still alive?" Elary asked Palant in a low voice as they began to walk, forcing their way through thick branches and past drifts of pine needles as thick as drifts of snow.

Palant shrugged. "I don't know."

Elary frowned, then trotted up to Mitherill. "Princess, should we wait for Fier to catch us up?"

Mitherill shrugged. "If she survived, she will come after us. She knows what we're seeking, and her Destiny is twined with mine."

Elary studied the golden eyes for a moment, but now they weren't dimmed with tears; they were aimed ahead, and Mitherill looked as happy as Elary thought she could look.

Of course, she's a child, she wouldn't mourn the death of someone as much as an adult, and why does this disturb me? Shouldn't I feel as though Fier's life was well-given, in the defense of a heroine of a history-tale?

But, nevertheless, she didn't feel that way, and kept looking back over her shoulder as they walked, until no trace of the camp could be seen. She wasn't comforted, either, by the high, clear calls that rang in the sky for hours, until at last they faded away towards the south.

Chapter 10

Mourn

"There are creatures in the world that you cannot control, and should not try to tame. You are liable to end up spitted or bitten or trampled to death if you do."

-Eresse, Master of the Twelve Wonders.

Olumer slowed and contemplated the snow ahead with a hunter's caution. There were still the hoofprints of Ebony, which he had become accustomed to tracking. And now there was a new set of hoofprints, and they followed Ebony's.

Had some rider of the Dark picked up the trail?

Worried, Olumer began to move faster. He had caught sight of Cadona once or twice, but had kept back, since he didn't want her to know that he was following. If she was going to be in a battle, though, he wanted to help. Cadona wasn't as good with her bow and arrows and knives as she liked to think she was.

The hoofprints continued, following Ebony's closely. Olumer stooped as near as he could, though, beginning to sense something strange about them, something that he hadn't noted in his first panic about Cadona being in trouble. For one thing, they didn't wear shoes, the way that the hooves of a horse would have to.

For another, they were cloven hooves, like the hooves of a deer though more delicately slotted, and not solid at all.

Olumer shook his head. He didn't know why a deer would be following Cadona, but the forests held many things he didn't understand. He picked up his pace, ducking behind a stone whenever he found the shelter. Cadona was riding across the rocky foothills, home to hardly

any trees, that lay just outside the immense Rildon Forests, and he was tracking her mainly by the recent snowfall. He had to shelter from her sight behind boulders and ridges, which he was less experienced at using for that purpose than trees, and he was almost afraid she had seen him.

Then he came into sight of Cadona and the thing that was following her, quite suddenly, and forgot about hiding. He moved, stringing an arrow to his bow as he ran. He had kept the bow strung, not good for it, but necessary if he was going to help Cadona in the battle.

Cadona was backing Ebony in a circle, controlling him using just her knees, her knives out. Facing her was a black unicorn, darker than any beast that Olumer had ever seen; it made Ebony's coat or Cadona's skin look gray. It was delicate, its hooves smaller than a deer's, its neck swan-like, its black horn a spiral that looked more like a long, slender version of the corkscrew used to open wine bottles than a blade. But it moved with a grace and speed that made Olumer fear for his ward, and that horn was still sharp; the unicorn was feinting with it, trying to draw Cadona off guard.

It heard him coming, though, and turned, hooves striking the ground with a noise like stone on stone. It snorted at him, horn lowering as it prepared to charge. Olumer stopped and leveled the bow, while his heart bled to have to kill such a beautiful thing. It was evil, but still lovelier than any other creature he had ever seen.

"Olumer! Do not!"

Olumer turned to look at Cadona in astonishment, and the unicorn charged him.

Olumer managed to spin to the side, and the horn didn't gore him through the chest in the way that it seemed the unicorn had planned. But it did rip through the sleeve of his coat, and then, with a jerk, the unicorn put him off balance. Olumer staggered in a circle, just keeping ahead of the kicking, lashing hooves.

"Don't you dare hurt him, Olumer!" Cadona was yelling.

Olumer rolled on the ground as the unicorn clashed past him, and then stood to meet it as it turned again. His bow was on the ground now, and that left his knives. Olumer drew those reluctantly, though quickly enough, seeing how the unicorn danced towards him. He had last used these against a mother bear whose cubs he had accidentally disturbed; he still remembered the screams and grunts and blood and the pressure of the claws.

"I told you not to hurt him!"

Cadona was riding at him now. Olumer tensed, waiting until the unicorn was committed to the charge, and then sprang into the air just as Ebony swerved past him.

He landed on the horse's back, and wrapped his arm around Cadona's waist. Off he jumped again, tugging her with him while she screamed her head off and the unicorn crashed forward.

Its horn struck and gored Ebony. The horse staggered, bleeding and neighing pitifully. The unicorn pulled back, and Ebony went down, kicking and screaming, that horrible high sound that had always sounded to Olumer like a child screaming. The unicorn turned towards them both.

"I told you to leave him alone!" Cadona shouted in Olumer's face, demanding his attention. "I wanted to fight him. This is my battle. But I won't do it with blades." She bit Olumer's hand, making him let her go in shock, and then walked towards the unicorn. It danced up and down,

tossing its horn, and snorting. Olumer watched tensely. Cadona's Destiny was flaring about her, and it was possible that she could tame a unicorn just with her presence; she was still a virgin, as far as he knew. But it still made him uneasy. The beast had been trying to kill him, if not her, just a few moments ago.

Cadona stopped before the unicorn, and stared into its eyes for a few moments. It stared back, and snorted, lion-like tail swishing like an angry cat's. Olumer took that moment to note that it was male, as the beard and the length of the horn really should have told him already.

"I know that you're part of the Dark," said Cadona. "But I am of the Light, and I am Destined to redeem you and the rest of the Kingdom of Rivendon. Will you bow your head to me and serve me? Or do I have to destroy you?"

The unicorn screamed and reared just above Cadona, his hooves dancing around her head. She stood firm and stared up at him.

Olumer swallowed. The Princess of Rivendon had survived, unnoticed, in his care for twelve years. He had to wonder if that was going to end now, with just one kick from an angry beast.

But the unicorn suddenly dropped back to the ground, and rested his head on Cadona's shoulder. Cadona smiled and ran her hand through the heavy mane, then glanced at Olumer.

"I told you this was my battle. I have redeemed him. He shall be part of the Dark no more, but my steed and companion." She listened for a moment to a telepathic conversation that Olumer could not hear, then smiled. "His name is Mourn."

"That is an ill-omened name," said Olumer, before he could stop himself.

Cadona's silver eyes flashed. "Nonsense, Olumer! I'm going to ride him, and you can't stop me!" She jumped onto Mourn's back, and the unicorn stepped a little, but calmed. Cadona stroked his neck and smirked triumphantly at Olumer. "Do you see? You have only to listen to me, Olumer, and forget that Mourn was ever a creature of the Dark, and all shall be well."

Olumer looked at Ebony. The horse was still alive, shrieking and kicking. "What about Ebony, my Princess?"

"She couldn't move out of the way fast enough. She deserves whatever she gets."

Olumer shivered at the cold tone in Cadona's voice, and moved forward to cut Ebony's throat, and then to retrieve his bow and arrow. Ebony stared him in the face and screamed before he covered her eyes and gave her death. For a moment, a hoof lashed out, almost hitting him in the temple; then she calmed at last, and there was only the slight sound of blood flowing across the stones.

Olumer stood up, and closed his eyes. "Where the silvereyes run, let you run with them," he murmured. "They will care for you and raise you to a home among the stars, where children will look up at you and marvel."

"Olumer, are you quite done?"

Olumer nodded, gathered up his weapons, and then turned to Cadona. She looked tall and proud and triumphant on Mourn's back, and for a moment he stopped wondering about what he had turned her into. Then he saw the cold look in her eyes, and remembered what she had said about Ebony, and started wondering again.

"Listen to me, Olumer," said Cadona. "You think you know me. But you don't know me at all, not really. I am not the child I was for so long in your care, and which you would be content to leave me forever, if you could. I am a Princess now, and I have a duty to care for my country and my people." Her eyes shone fervently, despite all the coldness in her face. Olumer was reminded of the way that icy water seemed to burn. "If you want to blame someone for this, blame the Dark who took my throne, or blame yourself. You cannot stand back and let me go to my duty when I need to do it, even though I'm not a child anymore."

"Cadona-"

"You just don't understand, Olumer. Do you?"

Olumer bowed his head. *Whether I failed in my duty to raise a royal heir, or whether she speaks the truth and I am now standing in her way as a parent should not do with a child, then I must yield to her.*

"Yes, Princess."

"Good. Follow me."

Olumer stood and watched Mourn canter away. He glanced back once at Ebony, mourning the faithful horse, and then followed the unicorn.

He came up beside Mourn as they crossed the last of the stony hill country and passed down into a little valley once more dotted with trees. Cadona ignored him, gazing ahead. Olumer could almost see the grand dreams that filled her mind.

But Mourn turned his head and winked.

Olumer blinked. He had mistaken that slow closing and opening of an eye; he was sure of it. He must have mistaken it. Right?

But Mourn repeated it, and then looked forward and snorted coldly, as if he were on some mission of evil.

Olumer continued following, by now thoroughly confused.

Chapter 11

Trouble

"Who can say what effect the smallest action may have on the whole? You may save a child from stubbing her toe one day, and that may mean that she is kind to her younger sister, and perhaps her sister will grow up to become a great priestess of Elle and serve the goddess well, while always remembering that kindness when she needed it most. We can never tell where our actions may lead."

-Rera, High Priestess of Elle.

"Look, Kymenos!"

Kymenos flinched, then sighed. He supposed there was no harm in the child speaking his name aloud. He wasn't well-known, and no one would think that because it was him, he had to be traveling with the Princess Alliana. "Yes, Alli, what is it?"

"You said-"

"I can hardly call you by your full name or title in front of so many witnesses," said Kymenos in a low whisper.

"Oh. Right." There was silence, while Sykeen picked his way past food stalls, and stalls selling pots, and past a stall that sharpened knives with a severe lowering of his ears. Kymenos smacked him on the neck in annoyance. The horse was going to be worse than useless if he had to act like this every time they passed a place that might concern him, just possibly.

"What was it that you wanted me to look at?" Kymenos prompted, when some minutes had passed.

"Oh! That."

Kymenos turned his head. So slowly did the crowd flow in the village on the end of a market day that they hadn't gone far past the place where Alliana had first shouted at him. He saw a stack of cages, most of them wooden, some metal, and animals inside peering between the bars. Alliana was pointing to the topmost one, but Kymenos could see only a flash of dark gray fur and sometimes a flash of eyes. It wasn't enough to tell what kind of animal it was.

"What about it?" he asked.

"We should go there and get that poor creature out," said Alliana.

Kymenos snorted. "How would we feed it? And why in the world would you want something that isn't even visible?"

"Destiny told me so."

Kymenos ground his teeth, but turned towards the stall. It wasn't wise to directly disobey Destiny, unless he wanted a slap on his face or a ringing in his ears for hours. He nodded to the stallkeeper, who smiled when he saw them dismount and held up a cage in which a falcon crouched.

"Take this fine bird, now. He could bring down a bird in midair, if that was what you wanted," the man said, falling into a patter that sounded so accustomed Kymenos supposed he had used it many times before. "And of course, this cat-" another cage "-is a champion mouser. And this-"

"The cage at the top," said Kymenos. "What's in it?"

"Oh, a creature rare around here," said the stallkeeper, his enthusiasm redoubling. He turned and somehow plucked the cage down without disturbing the other animals. "He comes from the forests of the north, he does. Beautiful creature, isn't he?"

Kymenos considered the creature. It snapped at him, and then snarled when Alliana leaned across Sykeen's back and looked through the bars. If there was anything special about it, any intelligence in the eyes that would mark it out as telepathic, Kymenos couldn't see it. The creature was striking, with gray fur and black mask and ringed tail, even delicate paws that looked like hands, but he wasn't sure what would make Destiny point it out to Alliana.

"What do you call it?" he asked, because the seller was beginning to stare at him.

"A raccoon," said the seller. "And it's fully tame. Would your daughter like to hold it, sir?"

Kymenos blinked, then nodded. The stallkeeper opened the cage, and the raccoon tried to bite him.

Alliana reached out, cooing, before Kymenos could tell her to think better of it, and scooped up the raccoon. It stared at her, then snarled. The long paws clenched. Kymenos saw claws at the end of them.

Alliana looked up at Kymenos, playing the winsome daughter for all she was worth. "Oh, please, Father? Could I? Could I, please? I promise that I would take very good care of him, and that I would buy food for him with my own money."

"You don't have any money, Alli," said Kymenos, watching the villagers around him with uneasiness. More and more were beginning to turn their heads to look at Alliana; they couldn't quite see her Destiny, but he suspected they would if they stared hard enough. "And I don't know why we should buy the creature. What is he useful for?" he asked the seller.

"It doesn't matter what he's useful, Father," said Alliana, cuddling the raccoon close to her. "I want him. I want to have him." She peered at him, her eyes tragic and accusing. "How could you leave something so soft and helpless in a cage?"

Kymenos stared into the raccoon's face. The green-golden eyes glared back at him. He could call it many things, but "helpless" wouldn't be one of the words he chose.

"Alli, I don't think-"

The raccoon abruptly did what Kymenos had been waiting for it to do, and brought its claws down sharply. Alliana squalled as it sprang from her shoulder and at Kymenos, obviously intent on using his shoulder as a launching point to one of the roofs or into the crowd.

Kymenos caught it firmly instead. The raccoon screamed and twisted, but Kymenos had gotten used to handling testy animals; once those who could afford it found out what his medicinal plants did, they had brought their cats and dogs to him quite often. He grabbed the raccoon behind the neck and clenched, then around the middle of the body and clenched likewise. The raccoon's claws scraped at the air a good distance from his body.

Kymenos looked at the seller, whose face was flushed. "He's fully tame, then?"

"I'm so sorry, sir," said the man, in a babble. "He's never been any trouble-"

"That should be his name," said Kymenos grimly, trying to stuff the thing back into the cage. The raccoon was sufficiently different from the dogs and cats that it was a chore. "Trouble."

The raccoon abruptly stopped kicking. Kymenos glared at it, and it glared back at him, but now there was a shine of the light in its eyes that meant it probably was an intelligent, or special, or telepathic creature.

Kymenos glanced sideways at Alliana. The shine of the Destiny around her was brighter, and she was smiling at the raccoon. Kymenos sighed. He did have plenty of money, and Trouble was probably meant as her companion.

"How much?" he asked the seller.

"I- sir, it attacked your daughter! I couldn't sell it." But the man's eyes had begun to gleam, much like the raccoon's, though this shine was anything but special.

"How much?" Kymenos repeated.

"Four copper pennies."

"Three."

"Three, and you give me one of the saddle blankets from your horse." The seller nodded to Sykeen. "They're quite finely-woven, I noticed."

"My wife's work," lied Kymenos easily. "They have sentimental value."

"Two copper pennies, and the blanket."

"Done."

Kymenos handed over the money and the blanket, handing the suddenly docile Trouble to Alliana as he did so. He did notice the gleam in the stallkeeper's eyes. The man thought he had gotten the better end of the deal, and perhaps he had, but Kymenos knew how small the price was to pay for an exotic creature.

"And another two copper pennies for you after all if you can tell me where a good horse-seller is."

"The other side of town," said the man at once. "Sidor's Stables. He has horses nearly as fine as your bay."

Kymenos grimaced. Sykeen wasn't really all that fine, for a horse.

I heard that.

You'll have company. You should stop complaining.

I don't want company. I want you to pay attention to me.

Kymenos had never known a horse could whine like a child. He handed the money to the stallkeeper, nodded back to him, and then swung Alliana and Trouble onto the horse's back. He jumped up himself, and guided Sykeen around the suddenly ebbing crowds towards the other side of the village. Sunset was falling, and most people were convinced that the creatures of the Dark who ruled the Kingdom were particularly savage at night. Kymenos, who had traveled after nightfall by himself several times, looked at them with scorn, but also with relief. Fewer people in the streets meant fewer people glaring at Alliana.

The only good part of having another horse around is that I won't have to carry the two of you and that beast.

Kymenos chuckled. *And I won't have to ride in front of her anymore.*

Are you agreeing with me?

I suppose that I am.

I knew we had something in common! Sykeen sounded rapturous, and even pranced, shifting his hooves in delicate patterns and swishing his tail. *I knew that we could bond.*

Kymenos rolled his eyes and didn't respond to the horse's other entreaties, keeping his eyes open for stables instead. He saw them soon enough; a man was leading a fine black horse out of them, no doubt preparing to go home.

He paused when he saw Kymenos, and shook his head. "Sorry, I'm not buying right now."

"Not asking you to," said Kymenos. "I'm asking you to sell. Do you have a gentle mare, one who can keep up the pace but is suitable for a child who's never ridden before?"

"Father!" said Alliana's voice. Kymenos ground his teeth. *To think I was avoiding that title for years, and now it's been heaped on me.*

Sidor studied him for a moment, then nodded. "It might be that we could work something out. Come with me."

Kymenos tied Sykeen to the hitching post, despite the horse's whines, and then followed Sidor inside. At least it got him away from the cooing sounds that Alliana was making as she cuddled Trouble close.

Sidor led him between rows of horses in silence; he didn't seem inclined to babble like the stallkeeper. Kymenos eyed the horses and decided that the seller hadn't directed him wrongly. The stalls were full of animals of unusually fine blood and breeding. Good thing that he'd brought lots of coin.

"Here we are. This is Glory."

Kymenos looked into the stall. A dapple-gray mare stared at him and sniffed doubtfully. Kymenos liked her at once. She had a calm manner and long legs. Besides, she didn't have the shine of intelligence in her eyes that would have meant he had yet another telepathic horse to deal with.

"How much?"

"You're not going to test her first? See how you like her?"

"I thought that you were anxious to get home, Master Sidor."

Sidor smiled for the first time. "Not if I'm going to make a sale. My wife will appreciate the extra coin more than an extra hour of my time. Check Glory. I guarantee that you won't find anything wrong with her."

Kymenos leaned forward, examining her teeth. That was the first place to start with horses, he had heard, though he didn't know that much about them other than that. Those looked fine. He opened the stall and stepped inside, running his hand over her shoulder and speaking softly. Glory only turned to look at him, the expression in her big dark eyes almost bored. She had seen this many times, she conveyed, and was even a little impatient that he was only repeating the same things that she had already seen.

Kymenos ran a hand over her legs, carefully testing their firmness and looking for any hint of swelling. He found none. He reached up and ran his fingers through the mane, then did the same thing with the tail. Nothing, or at least nothing other than heavy hair and the smell of horse.

"Let's see her walk," he said to Sidor.

Sidor led her out and down the aisle. Kymenos watched closely. This was one area where he was an expert, since Sykeen had taken to faking limps when he was feeling petulant. The mare walked with no problems, though, her head up and her stance relaxed.

"I'll take her," said Kymenos.

"Very well. And tack, food, other supplies?"

"Give me a bridle, oats, nosebag, hoofpick-" Kymenos rattled off the supplies while drawing out his bag of coin and calculating how much he could afford to spend. There had to be some left for food, of course, both on the journey and after they had arrived in Corlinth. Kymenos knew that the inns there could be quite expensive; he had stayed there while searching for ways to defeat Destiny.

"How much?" he asked at last.

Sidor named a price that was plainly ridiculous. Kymenos laughed and settled into the bargaining. This was the kind of gameplay that he really enjoyed, two minds measuring themselves against each other and circling, looking for any advantage that they could find. It was the kind of challenge that he suspected he would have to leave behind once they arrived in Corlinth and began looking for this sword that Alliana had to have. A twelve-year-old child wasn't going to know anything about the things that Kymenos preferred to talk about.

It's going to be a long spring. Or year, perhaps, if this Quest lasts that long. Kymenos shuddered. I sincerely hope it doesn't take that long.

It was full dark when Kymenos led Glory forth, the mare walking patiently at the end of a long lead. She wore a bridle, and the saddle that Kymenos had been talked into buying after all, hung with bags packed full of the things that were needed to take care of her.

Kymenos was satisfied- until he looked at Sykeen and saw that his back was empty of both Trouble and Alliana.

"Where are they?" he snapped at Sykeen, while tying Glory beside him.

They said they were going to hear the crier.

"What crier?" Kymenos untied the stallion and looked around. Sidor came out, not noticing that Alliana was gone, and nodded to him. Kymenos nodded back and made himself keep still, as if everything were well, until Sidor had mounted his horse and cantered out of sight.

The one in the middle of the town, yelling something about the Dark and the search for the Princess Alliana.

"Ketz!" said Kymenos, and then mounted Sykeen, untying Glory as he went. The mare stamped a hoof, but followed docilely enough when Kymenos grabbed the lead rein. He rode straight towards the sound of cheering that he hadn't noticed before, certain of what he would find there.

And he found it.

Alliana was standing on a stage in the middle of the crowd, a stage that had no doubt been built to hold the rather bewildered Dark crier clad in the livery of Princess Nightstone. She was crying out words that made Kymenos shiver, and know that she had destroyed all hope of concealing her.

"I am the true Princess of Orlath! I am Princess Alliana! I have come to spare you from the ravages of the Dark and restore the Light to its proper place on the throne of Orlath." She held up Trouble, who hung in her arms and didn't look happy about it. "With this companion at my side, I shall-"

Trouble twisted to one side and bit her on the hand. Alliana shrieked and dropped him. Trouble scuttled away gods knew where. The crier shook off his stupor and stepped forward to deal with the Princess.

Kymenos took a deep breath and called on the magic he almost never used, weaving his hands in Falto's Pattern. His mind moved in the proper direction, from Azure to Dust.

The crier coughed, once. Then he halted and gave one final cry before his body shriveled, skin tightening to bone, all the water in his body turning to Dust at once. The crowd backed away, screaming.

Kymenos forced his way forward; it helped that the two horses were following him and shouldering people ahead. *That will tell them that I am a mage, as sure as snowfall. But at least it worked.* He had not been entirely certain it would. He had practiced no magic for years save for the patterns necessary to make his plants grow.

Alliana was screaming about being the rightful heir to the throne when he reached out. Kymenos grabbed her and turned towards the horses, intending to fling her on Sykeen's back no matter how much the stallion didn't like it. At least he could carry her without direction.

"Where's Trouble?" Alliana cried, twisting in his arms. "Trouble- I can't leave without him-"

Kymenos stared out over the crowd. More people in the livery of the Princess Nightstone were coming. He didn't have much time.

"Where's Trouble?"

"Coming," said Kymenos sourly, and smacked Alliana across the face. She stared at him, bleeding from her lip, but silent. Kymenos flung her at Sykeen, who reared and caught her precisely.

Kymenos hurried down the stage and onto Glory's back. The mare pricked her ears up and turned for the outskirts of town. Kymenos smiled. Maybe she was more intelligent than he had thought.

"You hit me!" Alliana screamed.

"Shut up," said Kymenos, and then kicked Glory's side, while shouting, "Lead her, Sykeen!"

The stallion burst forward, and the Darkworkers fell back before him. Kymenos snorted as Glory followed. *They would only have to threaten him with their swords, and he would be helpless.*

Furiously, they tore towards the edge of town. Alliana clung on with shock and instinct, still calling for Trouble every now and then, and screaming about Kymenos hitting her.

As Kymenos had hoped, there was no one waiting at the borders of the village for them; news had spread behind them and not ahead. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the chasers falling further behind.

"Sykeen!" he called. "Can you guide us to a hiding place?"

Speak telepathically, Kymenos. They cannot hear you that way.

Kymenos grimaced; to think he should have to be reminded of that by a *horse*. But he turned to telepathy. *Can you see well enough to guide us?* The moon was full tonight and already risen, but he was not sure how much that would help a horse's eyes.

I can.

Off they ran, towards the north, Glory keeping just at Sykeen's heels. Kymenos saw the chasers fall further and further behind, but not give up completely. And he knew the alarm was flowing back south and east, towards the castle.

All the Dark will be after us now. He glared at Alliana. *Why in the name of all the gods did she have to do that?*

He knew the answer, of course. Destiny.

And he could feel it tightening its grip around him, prepared to make him suffer for hitting the Princess.

Kymenos grimaced. *If I must, I must. At least it made her shut up and stop screaming.*

Chapter 12

Just Behind

"I always seem to be just behind when I am pursuing my enemies- just behind the ones running away, just behind their plans, just behind their grand attempts to take the throne back. It irritates me."

-Complaint of King Delian of Ilantra.

Nightstone sighed. "You did the best you could, Black Rose."

The pegasus facing her jerked her head in agitation. "We could have done much better," she said. "If only we had arrived a day earlier, or flown just a little faster-"

"You did the best you could," Nightstone repeated, and then patted Black Rose's mane. It was a gesture that the winged horses would not usually allow, since they felt it made them too familiar, but it was one that Nightstone had long been able to make. She had been part of the Dark too long for them to reject her like that, she felt. "We'll find them soon enough. We know that Princess Alliana is alive now, and that she's in a general, very small area. Other pegasi are flying it. We'll find them."

Black Rose snorted. "That is so. You can trust the eyes of my people." She hesitated. "Did you want to see my memories?"

"Yes. A moment."

Nightstone had been standing on the balcony where the pegasus had landed, enduring the cold night air for the sake of hearing Black Rose's report. Now she opened the door into her chambers and gestured Black Rose to come inside. The winged horse did so, slowly, snorting when her hooves clacked on the smooth stone floor. She stood with her head up and ready to fly as she looked around. Nightstone waited patiently until the pegasus turned towards her, and then seated herself in a chair, leaning her head against Black Rose's neck.

The memories came swiftly.

Here was the village, not so far from the castle after all, where the Princess stood on the stage and defied the crier. Black Rose had seen it from far above, as she and her people flew towards the castle and Nightstone's aid. She had curved down at once, hoping she might get there and actually be able to snatch the Princess off the stage before anything else happened.

Then the Princess's strange creature bit her, and ran away. The crier started forward, and crumpled.

Black Rose watched in horror as his skin dried and tightened, until he looked like a corpse she had seen once in the deserts of Aljunia. She did not know what had caused this, and she swerved higher into the air, snorting a warning to the blaze of pegasi that followed her. If magic could slay the crier from a distance, it might be able to slay them.

Nightstone opened her eyes in shock, breaking the flow of the memories. She had indeed seen such magic before, but only in one place; it wasn't often that the Masters of the Star Circle showed off the power they were capable of mastering. And Falto's Pattern was considered a nasty death, usually used only on traitors within their own ranks. Nightstone had never known a Master of the Star Circle who would do that to someone else.

And weren't the Masters of the Star Circle supposed to avoid becoming involved in wars of Dark and Light?"

Yet there was nothing else it could have been.

Black Rose snorted. Nightstone said, "My apologies," and leaned forward again, linking her mind to the pegasus's with a touch.

Black Rose, hovering, had seen a man and two horses race forward. The man picked up the Princess and tried to put her on the back of one of the horses, but she screamed and struggled. The man slapped her.

Nightstone opened her eyes again. That someone would slap the Princess of Orlath was an alien thought.

And an oddly amusing one.

But it didn't help her find the one she was looking for, and so she fought back the urge to smile and closed her eyes again.

Black Rose did follow the horses as they ran, confident that she hadn't been seen. She would see where the Princess went to ground, and then go after her later, when she thought that her protector might have gone.

But they went to ground in the twisting mess of gullies that lay not far outside the village, shielded from the sight of even pegasi by the high grass. Black Rose and the other pegasi circled the area like hawks for an hour, but didn't see the Princess again. Black Rose wasn't even sure by then where she had gone to ground, or if she had stopped moving. She could have kept riding, with her guardian, along the gullies towards wherever they were going.

"Thank you, Black Rose," said Nightstone, waking as she realized that the next memories were of flying back towards the castle, and the dejection that the pegasus felt. "You have no reason to feel downcast. You did the best you could, and it was only chance that you heard Alliana's voice as you were flying over the village. We know where she is, now, when it might have taken notice of it a day to reach us otherwise. You are to be commended."

"If I hadn't lost her-"

"The Plains have hidden people with less reason to run for years," said Nightstone firmly, remembering the way that she had hidden there until her family gave up looking for her. "And scouts can't see someone who isn't moving, or is moving only under protection of the grasses. You did well."

The pegasus snorted softly, finally allowing herself to be convinced, and trotted towards the door onto the balcony, which Nightstone had left open. "Are we to fly tomorrow?"

"Yes, but not until the afternoon. I want you to rest your wings."

Black Rose danced and stamped. "But the Princess may have moved further away by then."

"That is true," said Nightstone softly. "But you will be rested, and able to fly after her the faster."

Black Rose snorted in agreement, and then stepped out onto the balcony and spread her wings. In seconds, she was gone, soaring towards the stables where the rest of her blaze lay.

Nightstone watched her go, then closed her eyes as if she were composing herself for sleep. In truth, once she had the unicorn magic wrapped around her, she no longer needed much sleep. She still rested sometimes, but no longer for more than a few hours, and most often did not dream.

Now, her mind was occupied in trying to solve the riddle of Alliana's guardian, a riddle almost as intense as a dream.

A Master of the Star Circle couldn't step into the middle of a war between Dark and Light without losing his powers. That that man is a Master is out of the question. But he used Falto's Pattern. I saw that, too many times to mistake it. Nightstone grimaced. The time that the Dark had decided it wanted the Circle subdued and tried, unsuccessfully, to attack its tower did not make a pleasant memory for Nightstone. The Masters would use their powers to defend themselves.

He must have Master training, and not be a Master himself. But they hunt down renegades.

Dark! No way does this riddle make sense.

Nightstone considered the face of the man, as Black Rose had briefly glimpsed it when he jumped onto the stage and grabbed the Princess. He had the dark brown curly hair that was common for an Orlathian peasant, but was also common in Dalzna, and the sharp lines of his face would also mark him as Dalznan. At least that answered part of the question, Nightstone thought. He wouldn't hesitate to slap Alliana, because he had no innate reverence for the Princess. He didn't have much of innate reverence for royals at all, if he was Dalznan.

But he could easily have gotten Master training if he was Dalznan, even stayed in the Circle until he finished mastering all the possible elements he commanded. Why had he left?

Nightstone smiled abruptly. *When in doubt, use the simple solution.* She wouldn't need all the pegasi of Black Rose's blaze to scout for Alliana, and there were no swifter flyers, save dragons themselves, who were considerably more obtrusive. She would send a pegasus north to the Circle, asking about any of their students who had departed in the last few years. That should solve the mystery.

Good, Nightstone thought with sudden alarm. I was becoming a bit too interested in this riddle. I must remember that such thoughts could threaten my life.

She rose from her chair, determined not to think about humans at all for the rest of the night. Her chastity sometimes seemed a fragile mask over a boiling maelstrom of curiosity and even something that felt suspiciously like lust. Nightstone would remain virgin, and one good method of remaining that way was to make sure that she didn't think about other humans much, any more than she spent time around them.

I wish that I could speak with Artaen. I should like to know how his search for the Princess of Rivendon is going.

Nightstone smiled wryly as she stepped onto the balcony again and looked to the north. Almost, she would have been willing to trade places with Artaen. He would have to hunt down his Princess, and considering the exclamation he had ended their last conversation with, he would have an exciting time doing it. Nightstone knew where her prey laired now. A few more days at the most, and she would have the Princess safely and securely wrapped in one of the fire prisons, where her Azure magic would be helpless to save her.

And the guardian will be dead, along with all the riddles- and possible temptations- that he represents. In a way, it is a sad thing that the world should lose a man willing to slap a Princess.

But not too sad.

Nightstone drew the cold air into her lungs and nodded to herself. Yes, that was the way it should be. She might envy Artaen, but she would never try to make more excitement than necessary for herself. The important thing was serving the Dark. Really, she should be glad that this capture would be so easy. Then the Dark would finally have one Kingdom firmly in its grasp. One royal heir would die, the one that Nightstone was personally responsible for, and Light's plot would fail in Orlath. It might even fail altogether, if Nightstone was right and Light had bound all four royal heirs together.

Why did Destiny and Light do that? I think they thought they would win without trouble, but what makes them so sure?

Nightstone stood there and let the light, earnest speculations pass through her mind for long moments, before she laughed and turned for bed. She hadn't slept much at all for the past six days; perhaps best to lie down and let the slumber she might need overcome her for at least a little while.

She paused. Someone stood in her room, the moonlight flashing as Nightstone watched from long pale hair. Not startlingly white, so the intruder didn't have *ilzán* blood, but it could be an elf. The elves considered themselves bound in debt of some kind to Orlath's royal family, and often came and glared at Nightstone, as if they thought that that would make her leave the castle.

"Who are you?" Nightstone asked, stepping forward.

There came a noisy gasp, and then light footsteps. Nightstone chased her, now almost sure it was an elf, but she lost her when the woman vanished around a turn and then appeared to step into air. Nightstone slowed, snorting. The elves knew many secrets of the castle, passages or even magical gates, which was one reason that Nightstone hadn't been able to catch them and kill them as she would have liked to do.

She turned back to her own room, curious as to what the visitor had wanted.

To her surprise, she found that the visitor had been sorting through the small collection of treasures that Nightstone had kept from the royal family themselves. A comb that Princess Desidera had once worn, the tiara that Queen Leilante had preferred to the cumbersome royal crown, and even the small cameo of the Prince Consort Erres, who had died soon after the birth of his daughter Leilante at least ninety years ago. Nightstone had kept them to remind her of the royal blood she shared, a touch of human contact where she could have none, and even then had to make sure that she didn't think about them too often.

"What would an elf want with those?" Nightstone said aloud into the room. "They can remember the royal family, just as they were."

But no answer came back.

Nightstone shrugged, and went to bed.

Chapter 13

Kneel To Your Queen

"There are some ideas that should simply never be considered. A single combat deciding a war is only the worst one I can think of at the moment. I am sure there are others."

-Ernetere Felloros.

"Stay back, Olumer."

Olumer tensed, even as he kept his eyes on the ground. He had learned in the last few days that "Stay back, Olumer," meant Cadona was about to do something Queenly, and very stupid.

They had already left a trail of chatter behind them that would easily reach the ears of the Dark, as the woodcutters and hunters spoke eagerly about the ascent of the Princess of Rivendon. Olumer wondered what Cadona was going to do now that they were approaching a village.

"Cadona-" he started to say.

"I could hear if they were talking about me," said Cadona patiently. "Don't you remember?"

Olumer considered that. It was true that Cadona seemed to know when the Dark made plans to seek her- she claimed it was like voices sounding in her ears- and then they would hide, and a few moments later a blaze of pegasi or something else would sweep past, hunting them. Olumer wondered how long it would take the Dark to realize it was missing her, and just keep blazes of pegasi flying in the air at all times.

"That's true," he said at last. "But what if the villagers talk about you and it reaches the ears of the Dark, Your Highness?"

Cadona turned and smiled at him. "I knew that you could learn to call me by my title, Olumer! It just took a little training, that was all."

"Yes, Your Highness. But what if the villagers do talk, and alert the Dark to your presence?"

Mourn snorted. The noise sounded contemptuous. Cadona nodded and stroked the unicorn's neck. "I'm in collusion with him, Olumer. You're far too cowardly. We want my people to know that a Princess of Rivendon has risen, that I am returning to claim my throne!"

"But we hide when the Dark comes seeking us."

"Yes." Cadona gave him a sidelong glance that was echoed by Mourn. "I don't want them to imprison me."

"But you don't mind giving them news of you."

Cadona laughed and shook her head. "The idea is to frighten them, Olumer, and at the same time stay free! They can't catch me. I am gone like lightning. I am the wind, the breath of the skies."

"Your magic belongs to fire," said Olumer.

Cadona's eyes widened, and she stared at him. Then she said, "I was making a poem, Olumer," and rode ahead with her back stiff. Mourn lifted his tail and deposited his waste in front of Olumer, making him have to hop and shuffle back and forth, and so enter the village in what was hardly a dignified way.

All the while, he kept his eyes on Cadona and Mourn and wondered what the hell had happened to her.

How could I not see this before? She isn't ready to take the throne. She never will be, as long as she's like this. I have to make sure that she survives long enough to grow into someone different, a Queen worthy of Rivendon.

But he was not sure how he was going to do that.

Mourn trotted up the main street of the village, making the children scatter from him and the adults stare out the windows. A black unicorn was hardly a common sight here, and one carrying a human on its back, even more uncommon. Cadona gazed at her people, drawing the drama and dignity that Olumer had taught her about her like a cloak. Soon she had a small crowd following her towards the center of the village, obviously curious to hear what she would say.

Cadona turned Mourn around in the center, which was more a green than anything else- now still buried under snow- and addressed the people who had followed her. "You must have grieved in the years since the Dark took the country, since the royal family was lost to you forever, as many thought."

The people facing her exchanged glances. Olumer shook his head. Cadona was too young to know or want to listen to the truth; since Dark had conquered in the last war between it and the Light, most of the people of Rivendon had learned to live with it, even if their ancestors had owed allegiance to the Light. Only the suddenly tight grip of the Dark and its slaughter of the royal family were unusual. Otherwise, the people of Rivendon had not lived under Light in generations.

Someone called, "What do you have to do with this?"

Cadona gave the speaker a frozen look, and he fell silent with a little mutter. Then she faced the crowd again, and said, "I am the Princess of Rivendon, Cadona. My Destiny and my silver eyes proclaim my heritage. I ride a unicorn I have redeemed and turned back to the Light. I shall soon take my throne, and those who kneel to me shall achieve honor, while the others will have the Light's condemnation forever. Kneel to your queen!"

Glances flashed from face to face. A few people dropped to their knees, but most of them didn't. Olumer smiled before he could help himself. Rivendonians were strong of will, unlike those weak Orlathians to the south. They didn't honor someone who proclaimed she was the Princess of Rivendon unless she could prove it, and then they would still have to judge her and decide if she could rule.

"Kneel to your queen!" Cadona cried, sounding on the verge of hysteria.

Olumer blinked as a new idea struck him, and then walked forward. "There you are, Cadona," he called.

Cadona glared at him. "Yes, here I am, Olumer. You knew that. Convince these people that I am the rightful Princess. You know I am."

Olumer nodded and smiled at her, then turned to the people of the village. "Forgive her," he said. "She is my ward, and has been for the past twelve years, since she came to me as a child. I am afraid that I told her many stories about the royal family of Rivendon, and, as you can see, she has a strong Destiny towards the Light. I am afraid that the shock she went through and the stories unsettled her mind. She thinks she *is* the Princess of Rivendon."

"Olumer!" yelled Cadona from behind him.

The village looked more than half-ready to believe him. The man who had spoken before and suffered Cadona's stare as a result said, "And what about the black unicorn?"

Olumer shrugged. "I do not pretend to understand his reasons. He may have decided that he felt sorry for my ward, or decided that she was right for him to bear, for whatever reason."

The crowd smiled at that. Everyone knew that unicorns sought the company of virgins alone, and that was a much more plausible reason for a black unicorn to carry Cadona than the one she had offered.

"Olumer," said Cadona at his back, "I will kill you!"

Olumer turned quickly enough, knowing that note in her voice. She had once brought down a bear with a single arrow when she was that angry. Anger seemed to make her more able to aim, not less.

The arrow was already strung and pointed at him, but Mourn stepped to the side, and it went into the ground and missed. Olumer came up to her and took the bow away from her while she was trying to restring it. Anger did make her aim more steady, but it didn't make Cadona more adept at stringing the bow.

"That's enough, Cadona," he said to her.

"Why are you doing this to me, Olumer?" she appealed to him, tears flowing from her eyes. "You know what I am."

Olumer sighed. *Yes, I am afraid I do.* "We must get back to the safety of our cottage," he said. "You're not ready to face the world that doesn't acknowledge you yet. I told you that." The crowd of villagers watched in amusement, obviously deciding that this was all part of the ruse that Olumer would use to lure his mad ward back home.

"This is the time," said Cadona. "This is the time of my Quest. I can feel that much. Bite him, Mourn."

The black unicorn stared boredly into the distance instead. Olumer tried hard to hide how much this amused him, and took hold of the unicorn's mane. That earned him a hard look but no bite. Olumer wondered if black unicorns had greater tolerances for non-virgins than white unicorns.

"Cadona," he coaxed, "come home. You have already suffered enough from this little adventure of yours."

"No!"

As Cadona exploded into a wail, someone tapped Olumer on the shoulder. He turned his head, and found a tall woman clad in pale healer's robes that matched her white hair smiling at him. The hair made him think that she was old, but the face beneath it was tireless and unlined. Only her green eyes were filled with the kind of tiredness that Olumer had seen other healers exhibit. He supposed it came from peering into the eyes of dying patients and seeing them fade.

"Yes, my lady?" he asked.

"My name is Renne," said the healer. "I think that it might profit us both if I were to take a look at your ward."

Olumer looked over her doubtfully, saying as he did so, "No other healer who looked at her has been able to help her," to disguise his real purpose. And he found what he was looking for, nestled on the robes over Renne's heart.

It was a small silhouette of a dragon in flight. It meant, in this case, that Renne served the Dark, and Prince Artaen, who had taken over the rulership of Rivendon.

"Most healers know the diseases of the body," said Renne. "But I know the sicknesses of the mind. Will you bring her with me?"

"She does well," said a woman who had moved forward to Olumer's elbow. "My daughter was, for a time, convinced that she needed to drink blood and eat her meat raw, and that there was fur growing on the inside of her skin. A delusion that caused us much horror, of course. But Renne was able to look into her mind and heal the disease, and today my daughter is married and normal."

Olumer sighed. He didn't see that he had any choice. "Very well. Come, Cadona."

"No!"

"I am surprised that you let her have weapons, if she's sick," Renne said, as Olumer wrestled her knives away from her.

"I didn't know until recently that she was this sick," said Olumer. "Weapons and stories seemed to keep her quiet, and I didn't know that she would strike out on her own and endanger herself like this."

"I see."

Olumer could feel Renne's eyes almost staring through the back of his head. It came to him that she must know he was lying.

He ignored the feeling. At least, if they were in a healer's captivity, then they were likely to receive fairer treatment than they would have if Prince Artaen's soldiers had captured them.

He couldn't persuade Cadona of that, of course, and wound up having to turn over her care to Renne. The woman wrestled her off Mourn and took her in the direction of the village's largest building, probably its inn. Olumer shook his head and followed, praying to anyone who might listen that his ruse wasn't going to get them in more trouble than the truth would.

"There is no doubt that she is sick."

Olumer started and looked up to see Renne coming down the stairs of the inn, her face grave. She took a seat across from him and said, "I do not think that I can treat her here. The delusions are as strong as steel. She thinks that she really *is* the Princess of Rivendon, and I can't break her out of it."

"And there is no chance that she could be right?" Olumer had decided to take the risk. If they were in the captivity of the Dark, and he had failed in his task of keeping Cadona safe, then he wanted to know.

"Of course not," said Renne. "I will admit the silver eyes are unusual, but I saw the Princess of Rivendon die."

"You did?"

Renne nodded. "And there was certainly no subterfuge about it. I saw a sword drawn across her throat."

Olumer sat at the table, blinking. He knew that Cadona was the Princess; he had visited the Court before its destruction and seen her, at the time a cheerful girl of two years old. He knew that he had taken the right little girl. Who was the girl that Renne had seen die?

"How did she come to you?"

Olumer spoke the lie that he had already made up, using his distracted gaze on the mug to keep from revealing, he hoped, how nervous he was. "I found her wandering in the woods. I searched for her parents for a long time, thinking they would be easy to find. After all, how many children have silver eyes? But I found no sign of her parents."

"You yourself have silver eyes."

Olumer smiled. "My father was fey. I suppose that one of Cadona's parents must have been, too." That was a lie, as he knew very well. Silver eyes had long ago been simply established in the Rivendonian royal line, probably to mark them as different from the peasants around them.

Renne nodded. "I do not think it will be easy to treat her insanity. She seems sane otherwise, but she brings up being the Princess of Rivendon every time I try to make her talk about something else. That is usually a sign of deep and lasting madness. I would like to try to heal her elsewhere."

"Where?"

"In the Western Crescent of Rivendon, there is a large sanctuary for patients with this kind of sickness," said Renne. "I might be able to cure her there, if we go before the disease is much more advanced."

Olumer was silent. He wondered if he could permit this, and then wondered how he could stop her. Renne was looking very determined. He probably couldn't stop her, he decided with a sigh.

"Very well. I will accompany you, of course."

"Yes." Renne leaned forward across the table and looked at him sternly. "As long as you tell her no more of those stories. She seems to feed off them, and Anakora knows what she would do if she became more convinced than she already is."

"I promise," said Olumer meekly, dipping his head.

All the while, he was wondering if this was a good or bad thing. Cadona's prophecy had said something about going to the west.

He thought.

This could be a good thing. It could. Perhaps we can escape from Renne when she isn't looking, and then continue the Quest.

Then Olumer heard Cadona scream from upstairs, and winced.

Even if this could be good, I know that Cadona won't like it.

Chapter 14

Into the Mountains

"The Dalorth Mountains begin in Dalzna, where they form part of the border between that Kingdom and Amorier. Then they swing south and west in a wide bend, and run into northern Arvenna, their foothills continuing even into Rivendon. They are sometimes called the Deadly Mountains, and there are those who say their name means that, in a forgotten language. In the winter, well they deserve that name. The ice and the snow linger until the months of summer."

-From "A Description of the Dalorth Mountains."

"Why is the fire so small?"

Elary stirred. She didn't know how much sleep she had gotten, but she knew it wasn't enough. And the shrill voice of Princess Mitherill seemed to be pressing into her ears harder than a voice possibly could.

"I'll make it bigger, Princess."

"See that you do. And- did you make sure that you placed the twigs in a cross before you began the fire?"

"Why?" Palant asked incautiously.

"Because that's the way it has to be!" Mitherill abruptly began to cry, and Elary could hear the boy trying to comfort her, only to be rebuffed with a wail that seemed to mingle tears and half-coherent words about losing her parents.

Elary sighed, and opened her eyes. They had camped in a cave, hanging as many pine branches over the entrance as they could, and piling more for beds. Elary's back still hurt like hell, and she levered herself to her feet with another sigh. *Ilzánai* did not show signs of age their whole lives long, but she had as much human blood as *ilzán*, and she was beginning to feel its impact.

"Mitherill," she said, interrupting both the crying Princess and Palant, who knelt at Mitherill's shoulder and patted hesitantly, "do you know what you are looking for? What sort of object?"

Mitherill stared at her with wide golden eyes. Elary began to wonder if she didn't know, and was about to repeat the question, when Mitherill flung herself on the ground and began to cry.

"What is it?" Elary asked, glancing at Palant.

"You didn't address her by her title," he said, and looked down at the ground. "She's very sensitive about that."

Elary shook her head. "I don't know why." She had to raise her voice slightly so that Palant could hear her above Mitherill's howls, but she was used to doing that with shouting or

drunken patients. "One title is just as good as another, and if Shadow is hunting us, which we know he is, then the name is safer than either."

"She has to have it that way." Palant glared at her in a way that Elary knew he would have never dared to do just a few days ago. He had been affected by falling in love with the Princess, it seemed, and not for the better.

"This is about enough," said Elary, and stepped forward, gripping the Princess's long dark hair and hauling her face up. Mitherill rose with a wail, which blended well into the tears she kept on shedding. Elary glared at her sternly. "I don't know why, but you're behaving far more like a child than like a Princess. Is that what you want your people to think about you, too?"

Mitherill blinked, but managed to whisper in between the gasping sobs. "I can't help suffering like this. I feel the suffering of my people as long as they have someone of Shadow instead of Light on the throne. I must cry and sob along with them, and then perhaps they will feel their pain begin to ease."

"How?"

"If I can cry hard enough-"

"I don't intend to allow this," said Elary, and stepped away from her, scattering the ring of snow that had been placed around the fire as she walked to the entrance. Mitherill immediately began to wail again.

"I had almost thought that was salt! I thought that I was safe from contamination!"

"I'm sorry, Mitherill!" came Palant's anxious voice. "I'll find more, and then you can think it's salt again, right?"

A wail came back.

Elary leaned on the stone outside the cave mouth and scowled at the sunrise, which was creeping over the lowlands in the east. They had kept moving far past midnight, until they had finally found the cave to take shelter in. Definitely not enough sleep.

In the clear light of the day, with the mystical edge taken off the Princess by her wailing, it seemed much less clear to Elary why she had agreed to do this in the first place.

You want to help Ilantra-Arvenna.

Yes, I do. But I'm not convinced that putting Princess Mitherill on the throne, as she is now, would be helping.

Yet, unless there was another heir of royal blood around, then she would have to put Princess Mitherill on the throne. And Destiny had even chosen her for the task. Elary hoped that was because she had the power to make the Princess sit up straight and stop sobbing.

She turned back into the cave. Palant had made another ring of snow around Mitherill, which Elary was careful not to disturb. She knelt down in front of the Princess, who avoided her eyes.

"Princess."

Mitherill looked at her. Elary sighed. It was a start. Not much of one, but a start.

"I know that this is hard," said Elary, "but you must endure it. And when we come to the throne, then there will be bards who sing tales about the trek through the mountains."

Mitherill blinked. "Truly?"

"Truly."

"What will they sing of?" Mitherill leaned forward, almost touching Elary in her eagerness. "Tell me what they will sing of."

"They will sing that the brave Princess Mitherill, True Heir of Ilantra-Arvenna, and the healer known as Elary, and Palant, the future Prince of Ilantra-Arvenna, went through the mountains together, and faced cold and suffering unimaginable to allay the suffering of their people," said Elary, making this up off the top of her head. Most of the songs she had heard like that sounded the same.

Mitherill's eyes were glowing, now. The effect was rather disturbing, as though a second sun had arisen in her eyes and was shining through a transparent golden surface to illuminate the cave around her.

"I like that," she said softly. "And you are sure that the bards will sing songs about us?"

"It will be matter for song for a hundred years," said Elary. And it would be, too. She didn't like bards very much, considering their tendency to change what had really happened for the benefit of a good story or even a good rhyme. A royal heir taking the throne back would send them into raptures, both of fighting to write the best song and fighting to make up the most dramatic embellishments.

"I want to go," said Mitherill. "And I'll be good, Elary, I promise. I'll try. But I have to have certain things just so."

"I know," said Elary, smiling at her. It was easier to believe that the girl was right and good, when she was quiet and looked like this. "But we can't get all those things in the mountains."

"It's all right," said Mitherill, rubbing at her eyes. "So long as we have the snow around the fire each morning and the fire built in just the right way, then I should be able to keep going." She lifted a brave face to the sunlight. "And the sun's risen already. We should eat and get moving."

Elary glanced at Palant. "Did you manage to find something to eat?"

"Birds' eggs."

Elary nodded. It was better than nothing, at least.

Palant gave her an egg, cracking his open on the stone and eating it raw. Elary did the same thing, only pausing when she realized that Mitherill had taken the egg and sat with it in her hand, staring at it sadly.

"Is something wrong, Princess?" Her voice ground and rasped, and Elary frowned, then shrugged. *I didn't sleep well. A cold is coming on, if I'm any judge, one that I haven't had before. My back hurts. I have the right to express at least a little irritation.*

Mitherill looked up and shook her head. "No. I can't eat this, though. It would have been a baby bird." She laid the egg gently on the floor of the cave.

"I could pluck some plants-" said Palant, standing. "If I can find any."

Mitherill shook her head. "I would not trouble you. But I cannot eat this morning." She turned and walked out the cave mouth, her head high and her long dark hair streaming back. The white streak in it shone like fiery moonlight in the sunshine.

Palant watched her go, and then turned an admiring face to Elary. "Isn't she wonderful, Elary? She could teach the sun how to shine."

Elary blinked at him as she swallowed the rest of the raw egg, trying not to think about what she was eating. "I didn't know that you were a poet, Palant."

"With her, I am. With her beside me, I can be *anything*." Palant stood up and followed Mitherill, making an offer that was sharply refused. Palant sounded disappointed, but came back with his eyes still gleaming. "She rejects the idea that she suffers, in comparison to what her people are suffering! Is that not noble?"

"She'll slow us down," said Elary, considering the egg on the ground. Mitherill still stood with her back to the cave, resolutely not coming back in and eating. Elary nodded to the egg. "Do you want this, Palant?"

"That? I couldn't eat it. The mother bird will suffer when she finds the eggs gone. I am beginning to regret taking them."

"Very well," said Elary, and cracked open the egg, sipping at the yolk herself. She grimaced, but swallowed. She had eaten more unpleasant things than this before, when she was working in the front lines during a war, sometimes hauling the wounded away under the very eyes of the soldiers who had caused them to fall.

"Elary!"

Elary looked up. "I'm sorry, Palant. Did you want it, after all?"

"No," said Palant. "But- that you could eat that, Elary, without thinking of the poor mother bird! I would have restored it to the nest."

Elary's sour mood returned. Her apprentice was looking at her as if quite shocked, which didn't suit her. "I was thinking of poor us," she said shortly, and stood. "We should get moving, Palant, but put out the fire first."

"I think that you should."

"You lit it."

"That was for the Princess." Palant folded his arms and turned his back on her. "I'm going to be the Prince of Ilantra-Arvenna. I don't see why I should have to do the chores any more."

Elary stared at his back for a moment. She could ignore this and smother the fire herself. Indeed, it felt a little childish to be arguing with Palant over this.

But she had been watching human children and the way their parents raised them for more time than most of those parents would live, and she had no intention of letting Palant begin to assume the adulthood he seemed to think he was ready to take on.

Palant squawked as Elary grabbed his ear and twisted it sharply. She murmured, close to his face so that he could hear her, "You can either put out the fire, Palant, and do as I tell you to at other times, or you can whine and shriek and *be made* to do them. You aren't a Prince yet."

"I'm not an apprentice healer any more, either," he said sulkily, going to put out the fire as Elary let him go. "You should remember that."

"I do," said Elary with a mutter, and went out to the stand beside the Princess on the ledge outside the cave. Again, she regretted her decision to accompany Mitherill to the north.

"Princess," she said, disturbing Mitherill from her dramatic staring off to the east. The girl turned towards her, obviously trying to calm her irritation.

"What, Elary?"

"What are you seeking? Do you know?"

Mitherill smiled. "Of course I do. The prophecy that the priestesses of Elle spoke over me tells of it."

"What is this prophecy?"

Mitherill closed her eyes and began to sing in a high, sweet voice. Elary listened and tried not to be swept up. It was true that Mitherill had the sweetest voice that she had ever heard, but that was no reason to be swept up.

"From the north there will come a fear

Greater than any which you have known.

To turn it back you will need the clear

Treasure of the old Kingdoms, the stone.

Search in the mountain forests of Ilantra,

And you will find she who is your heir.

And the wild slopes and forests of Arvenna,

Will an unexpected and blooming hope bear."

Elary considered that for a moment. Then she said, "And should we then go south and west, towards Ilantra, and not north?"

Mitherill shook her head, making her long dark hair fly around her. "No. That is where we will search for my heir. We must go north first. The clear stone is the Diamond of Ezudlos. It will be hidden in these mountains."

"I have heard of it," said Elary carefully. "But I don't think that we can find it. It was hidden out of all sight long ago."

"Not all sight," said Mitherill, and touched the skin beneath her own golden eyes with a highly dramatic slowness.

Elary sighed. *I wish this Quest had come along when I was younger, and better able to bear such drama, even to think it wonderful.* "Then we should go north, Princess. Will you lead the way?"

"I do not know where the Diamond is right now. Where is the largest group of caves in the area?"

Elary thought. She had not explored the Dalorth Mountains herself, but she had listened to the tales of the other healers who had, mostly the native Arvenese ones.

"The Caves Radiancia," she said at last. "They must be. A system of caves, not far from here, which would hold whole mountains in them, if I remember the tales aright. The healer who told me the story said that we had only to look for the mountain that resembled a three-headed serpent, and we would find it."

"Is that it?" Mitherill asked, gesturing to the north.

Elary looked up. She had rarely been so high, and the air here shone like a lens for looking at gut wounds. She could, if she squinted, make out a mountain with what looked like a cracked summit, forming three peaks.

"That would be it, I imagine," said Elary. "I don't see how this woman could have meant anything else."

"Then we will go there," said Mitherill.

"Princess, if we go there, we are going towards the winter," said Elary. "We *must* have food and warm clothes and climbing supplies, or we will not last long."

"I am not concerned about that."

"You are not?"

Mitherill shook his head. "I told you that I could feel the suffering of my people. I know that there is a village not far from here. We will go there, and I will heal their ills, and in return they will give us what we need. Of course, they would give it to us anyway, since I am the Princess of Arvenna as well as Ilantra, but I want to heal them. It is something the Princess would do."

Elary eyed the Princess with new interest. Perhaps this could be an enjoyable journey after all. "As you say, my lady."

Mitherill promptly began to wail.

Chapter 15

The Paths of the South

"There is sometimes said to be magic about the Doralissan jungles- and not magic that the monarchs of Doralissa brought there, nor yet the elves. It was there before they were; it will be there when they have gone. I have walked through the jungles and sometimes heard the trees laughing at me, not at all concerned that a little human was walking through their midst and trying to discover their secrets. They knew that I would find out nothing."

-Tegan the Explorer, just before he went mad.

"We are not lost."

"But you said that you didn't remember this path."

Ternora turned her glare on the Prince. She was beginning to regret that she had ever accepted this Quest, Destiny or not. She had sometimes to mutter about the Court position that would come out of it to herself, since Prince Warcourage didn't provide much incentive in himself to keep him as a traveling companion.

"I don't remember this particular one," said Ternora. "The jungles of Culatharion like to change the paths. I'll remember where this one leads in a moment. I know I've seen it before; it's just been a few hundred years."

She turned back to the path, which was unusually broad, even broader than the paths that the jungles would sometimes open when they wanted a particular visitor gone. Ternora couldn't understand why the jungles would open like this. She hadn't thought they cared about human political struggles, either to take sides or to make any great effort to avoid them. The broad path would have made sense if it were a trap, but why would the jungles care about serving Shadow? They had never cared about serving Light.

The memory came to her then, floating to the surface of her mind. It would have been there much more quickly, Ternora thought, but she was somewhat dazed and dazzled by elf-fire still. She shook her head and began to walk, calling over her shoulder, "Come, Warcourage. I remember where this path leads now."

"To somewhere safe?" He began to follow her, but she could hear his footsteps hesitating now and then, as if he were pausing to look around at the trees. Ternora rolled her eyes. If he had spent his life in the jungles, then this was nothing that he hadn't seen before.

"To nowhere threatening," said Ternora. The memory that blazed in her mind was of a wide clearing where a small waterfall splashed down, forming a pool. There were wild fey in the pool, but they cared even less about humans than the trees did, vanishing whenever one approached. Ternora would be glad to rest and get some water inside her, as well as think about which port they should aim for. Kesista was closer to the Shining Isles, but further away from their present position, near the delta itself. Delatra was much closer to where they walked, almost straight down the Triaga River, but the sea-voyage would be longer.

"What are you thinking about?"

Ternora shook her head. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that she had someone else walking with her. She had spent so much time alone of late that she was more accustomed to

silence than other voices. "Nothing in particular, my Prince. Just which seaport we should use."

"Which seaport?"

Ternora blinked and glanced over her shoulder at him. "Yes. We must have a ship to sail to the Shining Isles. I may be the best of guides, but I cannot build a ship."

"But there are no seaports in the south."

Ternora snorted lightly. "The elves told you that, didn't they? They said that the only seaside city was Rizzon."

"Well, yes."

Ternora shook her head. "They forget to make distinctions, even the ones that would prove useful to them, when talking about peoples other than themselves. That is the only human seaside city, since the sea is so hostile to the Doralissan royal line- your line, my Prince- and the humans have no love of the sea. But there are new cities in the south that build ships and encourage sailing of the ocean. They aren't human or elven. That's all."

"Who builds the ships and sails them, then?"

"The People of the Blending. Undines, especially. They're a little frustrated about the elements in Doralissa. They say that Azure is out of balance, that not many Azure mages are born here, and that there should be more trust and love of the sea." Ternora glanced over her shoulder at him. "You aren't an Azure mage, either."

"No. I'm Gust."

Ternora nodded and faced forward again. "Then they may have a point. So we'll take ship from one of them. I think Kesista. The sea hates your line so much that I don't want to risk the longer voyage."

"I told you that I knew how to overcome that."

"How?"

"The sea-god grew annoyed at my ancestress for a crime she committed. I know what the crime was, and I know how to appease him. Really, someone should have done it long ago, but I suppose they might not have known how to do it." Prince Warcourage's voice was annoyed, but forgiving.

"I don't know why Shadow is seeking you," Ternora muttered. It would drive her mad to have to keep the boy cooped up for any length of time.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Can we rest? My feet are getting tired."

"Soon, now."

They stepped off the path at last. It ended in the large clearing that Ternora remembered, with the shafts of light stabbing through the trees. She eyed the waterfall approvingly, and then smiled as Warcourage hurried forward to drink. At the first touch of his shoes on the grass- unusually green here- there was a flicker as of frightened rainbows in the waterfall, and then it seemed somehow emptier.

"What was that?" Warcourage asked, sitting down by the pool and trailing his fingers in it.

"Dinai." Ternora herself sat down by the stream that ran away from the pool and aimed towards the south, where it would join with the Triaga. She sipped some of the water, and sighed as it seemed to break through her like the waves it would eventually join, crisp and cold and sweet. "Water-fey."

"I thought those were the undines?" Prince Warcourage was leaning forward and peering into the pool, she saw, as if he could catch a glimpse of the hiding dinai.

"The people of the Blending aren't fey," said Ternora, leaning back against a great baobob tree and closing her eyes. The birds were singing contentedly, and she heard no sound to suggest that a hunter was coming. The moment was as perfect to rest as it ever would be. "They're spirits whose bodily form is the elements. They make themselves bodies out of Azure, Scarlet, Gust, and Crop. They usually appear as elementals, but they don't have to."

"I thought they were fey."

"No."

"Then how do we know we can trust them?"

Ternora opened a lazy eye to look at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"They aren't fey, like the elves, and they aren't human, like my people who are hoping for a return of Light to the throne," said Warcourage, watching her intently. "How can we trust them?"

"Precisely because they don't care about this war, one way or the other," said Ternora, closing her eyes again. Her neck ached because of the way she had slept on it last night, and the hard surface of the tree was perfect for soothing it. "They'll take us to the Shining Isles, not turn us over to Shadow."

"But they won't take back the throne for us, either."

"No."

"I want to take a ship crewed by those I can trust, those who will protect me if something goes wrong," Warcourage declared.

"The undines would do that. I have more than enough coin in Kesista; I stored it there when I thought that I might want to take another sea voyage soon. They'll be happy to fight for us after being paid."

"I don't want to pay them."

"*You* don't have to," said Ternora sourly, thinking for a moment of how it would cut into her funds. Then she reminded herself that she might not have touched them again anyway.

Besides, will I need them when I'm in a Court position and being paid in bracelets that drip jewels?

"I meant that I don't want to travel surrounded by mercenaries. I want to travel surrounded by people whose hearts are given to Light."

Ternora opened an eye and stared at him. Unfortunately, that didn't lessen the stupidity of what he had said. "You're serious."

Warcourage looked at her with those oddly glowing eyes again. "Yes. I am. I don't want mercenaries fighting for me, or people who might as easily belong to Dark or Shadow setting me on the throne. I want to ascend the throne as Light, and that means doing things the right way."

Ternora shook her head slowly. "Are you going to be like this all the time?"

"Like what?"

"Insisting on things that I can't provide? Insisting on doing things in stupid ways? I thought that at least you would understand we can't afford to spend too much time hunting for people who will fight at our sides just out of a sense of loyalty-"

"We have all the time we need to find them, Ternora. I know that I will ascend the throne and win in the end. That means that we can wander around and recruit whomever we must."

Ternora shook her head firmly. "Shadow is intelligent, my Prince, and he will find some way to get around that, I am sure. We don't have the time, and I don't want to risk your life on the longer sea voyage, just in case it turns out that what you do to appease the sea-god doesn't work. I want to go south, and get on a ship as quietly as we can, and sail to the Shining Isles. Surrounded by undines, who can intercede with the sea-god, it has a chance of working, though not a large one. Isn't that better than spending your time wandering about and trying to find people who might serve you loyally, while Shadow crushes your people from the throne?"

She had thought that last appeal might work, and for a moment Warcourage did look tempted. Then he shook his head and folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not going anywhere with you, not if you don't want to find people who will serve Light and put me back on the throne."

"We'll find them when you have this weapon," said Ternora, "and when you've sailed on the sea and lived. We have to build the legend before we can use it to attract people, Warcourage."

"The legend of the rising Prince of Doralissa will be enough."

Ternora shook her head. "The people most angered by the rise of Shadow are in the north, my Prince, not the south."

"Then let's go there."

"We have to find the Pool of Siliyonete, you said," said Ternora, making a massive effort to control her temper. She thought whatever god protected Warcourage should reward her, since she succeeded so well. "And that is in the Shining Isles, you said. We have to go south."

"North!"

Warcourage actually stood and marched into the jungle. Ternora just watched him for a moment, blinking.

And then she realized that the sounds of the birds had changed, falling silent in some places, and that the monkeys had begun to screech. Some large predator was moving through the jungle, in their direction. Whether it was under Shadow's control or not, Ternora didn't know, but she knew it would almost certainly be hungry; it wouldn't be hunting if it wasn't.

"Damn," she muttered, and stood. Warcourage hadn't gone far. He shouldn't be hard to find.

Except that he was, and Ternora cast about in vain for his footprints; the grass here was too springy to hold them. She cursed again and closed her eyes, trying to find him by listening to the noise-patterns of the jungle. Warcourage would disturb them, too, though not as much as the hunting predator.

As it turned out, she didn't need to find him by listening for anything so subtle. She heard a roar, and then a cry from Warcourage. Opening her eyes, she ran quickly in that direction, keeping the picture of what she would look like in Court robes firmly in her mind to keep herself from running the other way.

She found them almost at once, along the path that she and Warcourage had followed to get here. The Prince of Doralissa was backing away from a great green head that thrust between the trees, his face pale and his eyes wide. Ternora nodded grimly. He would never have seen one; they didn't hunt around elves.

The green dragon saw her, and turned its head to snarl at her. Ternora stood her ground, while thinking of the knives in her belt and then discarding the idea. One of them wasn't sharp enough to punch through the dragon's scales, never mind do any more damage.

Warcourage had his eyes closed when Ternora looked at him. At first, she thought it was to stop the tears, but then she saw him gesture powerfully with one arm, and thought she understood.

The green dragon had just begun to move forward when the wind struck him. He screeched as it blew over the trees near him, and then stopped him in his tracks. His claws scabbled as he tried to push forward, digging long grooves in the soil and grass, but wind wasn't his element, and he slid steadily backward. Ternora felt herself begin to breathe again.

Then the green dragon opened his mouth and took a deep breath.

Ternora hurried forward, keeping behind Warcourage so that she would be out of the way of the wind, and snatched him around the waist. He cried out, and the Gust died, but that was of less concern to Ternora than getting out of the way. She dived behind a tree just as a blast of steam exploded past the place where they had been standing. She could hear the hissing as it withered the leaves in its path.

"Stay still," she whispered, when she felt Warcourage squirming in her arms.

"I have to kill it-"

"He's trying to kill *you*," said Ternora, and then ground her teeth as she heard the dragon moving towards them. Alone, with her small Destiny, she had sometimes evaded a dragon; they had the equivalent of near-sightedness when it came to her. But Warcourage's Destiny would make him visible like a flashing light, no matter how hard she tried to hide him.

She ground her teeth as the dragon slid closer, closer, closer. Then he was right behind the tree. She knew it, the dragon knew it, and everyone except the wildly struggling Prince Warcourage appeared to know it.

There was a long silence.

The dragon gave a low growl, and then said, "You're valiant in trying to protect him, half-elf, I'll grant you that. But nothing you could do would be enough. Why don't you come out, and we can settle this like rational dragons?"

"Dragons?"

"People, if you would prefer the term." The dragon gave a little huff of steam that served to singe the hairs on Ternora's arm. "I don't like hunting like this. I would prefer that you just faced me."

"What's the point, if you're going to kill us?" said Ternora, and then yelped as Warcourage bit her hand. He hopped out of her arms and ran around the tree.

"I will face you, dragon!" she could hear him declaring.

Ternora took the time to close her eyes and groan, then ran out after him. The dragon's head was swaying above Warcourage, but he looked amused.

"You don't understand what I want," said the dragon. "I heard something about the Pool of Siliyonete. I have sought the Pool myself for a long time, and never found it. I would like to go with you. In return for your guiding me to the Pool, I would protect you. I know that you have enemies. I saw them to the north when I was flying. The sky is thick with swans."

Ternora let out a harsh breath. This was luck of a most unexpected kind. She opened her mouth to tell the dragon she would accept his offer, but Warcourage said, "Why did you try to kill us?"

"A misunderstanding," said the dragon. "I was hungry, and I didn't know that you were the ones I had heard talking at first."

"You would have killed someone else?"

"My Prince-" Ternora began.

"You would have," said Warcourage. "You would cause suffering among my subjects, if I were to let you live." He closed his eyes, and an immense gust of wind tore past Ternora, ruffling her clothes. It slammed the dragon hard on the muzzle, and his head snapped back for a moment.

There was utter silence. Warcourage opened his eyes, as if he wanted to see the results of his strike. Ternora stared between him and the dragon, wondering if it was possible to pass this off as the antics of a child.

Then the dragon opened his eyes, and snarled, and let go with a blast of steam.

Burrows of the Heretics

"The Corlirin Plains have hidden many evils in their time. They have hidden fleeing criminals, Rennon Heretics, and Darkworkers plotting the downfall of the Kingdom. They have only managed to do some good by hiding those Lightworkers who would do good, as well."

-Elda, Priestess of Elle, in her introduction to *The Wars of Light and Dark in Orlath*.

And let that be a lesson to you. Touch the Princess Alliana again, and you will suffer worse from me.

"I understand."

Kymenos blinked, and opened his eyes. He had spoken the last words aloud, the first time in hours that his voice had worked. Destiny had muffled his voice so that he wouldn't disturb Alliana, or give away their location to the pegasi who swooped above them. He sat up and looked around.

Alliana lay sleeping against the wall of the cave-house they had found, not far away. She lay with her hair spread around her head, and her face looked delicate and innocent in sleep. It was probably meant to inspire her guardian with tender feelings. It only made Kymenos want to kill her all over again.

I did tell you not to think about things like that, said Destiny, and hit him again.

Kymenos winced and slowly stood. It felt as though a Gust mage had been pounding him with wind. His muscles ached, and he knew that he would have visible bruises by the time that they got out of the burrow- if he didn't already. He would have checked, but it hurt to twist in too many different directions, and the light coming in through the burrow mouth was strangely gray, even given that they were below the level of the ground.

Kymenos ducked out, and was nearly knocked down as Sykeen abruptly shouldered into him. Kymenos gasped as his shoulders hit the entrance of the cave, and looked down. The light was bright enough now to let him see that he had a bruise flowering over his ribs, turning an interesting shade of green-yellow. And it was raining.

And both the horses- Glory was crowding close behind Sykeen- were soaked, and still fully saddled and bridled.

"Gods damn it," said Kymenos with a hiss, unbuckling Sykeen's bridle. "Didn't Alliana even try to make you comfortable?"

No, said Sykeen, and moved his jaw up and down with joy as Kymenos removed the bridle and flung it into the burrow. *Just left us in the rain, ate half the food you'd bought, and then curled up and went to sleep.*

Kymenos shook his head in disgust as he managed to take off Sykeen's saddle. The weight was too much for him, and it slid to the ground at once, but he kicked it mostly into the cave and then led Sykeen inside. The smell of wet horse filled up the burrow at once, but the stallion's snort of gratitude was enough to make up for that. Besides, Kymenos rather liked the thought of Alliana waking up to the smell of wet horse.

Wait a moment, he told Sykeen, rubbing his nose. *I have to bring Glory in, and then I'll feed you and groom you.*

Sykeen turned his head. *It looks as though you could do with some feeding and grooming yourself.*

In a little while, Kymenos promised, and then went out to get Glory and free her from the tack, moving like an old man. Destiny had subjected him to a very thorough beating for smacking Alliana.

And, of course, that had increased his reluctance to play guardian to the little bitch.

Why me? he moaned to himself as he finally managed to get Glory's saddle off. She nudged him and then ducked into the cave, almost filling it full. Kymenos knelt, found the nosebags he had bought, and stood again; the whole procedure took him almost three minutes. *What do I have that makes me a good guardian? I hate children, I don't like Destiny, and I-*

I don't want to listen to this, said Destiny in his head. *I chose you, and that is all that you must know.*

Kymenos ground his teeth, and said nothing, instead hooking the nosebags over the horses' heads. They immediately dug in, the oats vanishing to crunches of their large teeth. Kymenos leaned against the wall and began to groom Sykeen, the stallion's wet, heavy fur slopping through the comb.

He looked around as soon as he settled into the rhythm of the task, and blinked. The place had been a good one to take shelter in after all. As they rode pell-mell down the gully and away from their pursuers from the town, he hadn't had the chance to judge. It looked to be one of the burrows that someone had carved long ago during one of the Heresies, the Rennon Heresy, perhaps. The walls were still supported with sturdy bars of metal, and the interior was large, even dry and snug, or had been until the horses came in and dripped all over.

What happened to you?

Kymenos looked back at Sykeen, and wondered how to explain. The horse didn't seem to understand the concept of Destiny very well, somewhat surprising for a telepathic animal. *I hit the Princess Alliana, so Destiny hit me back,* he said at last.

Why don't you just leave her and run away?

Destiny would only hit me harder and drag me back.

Sykeen's mane flopped as he bobbed his head up and down, crunching his oats loudly all the while. *The farmer used to do that to me. He would flog me with a whip when I tried to jump the fence. And after a while, I didn't try any more. Are you going to fight back?*

I have to.

Then you're acting stupidly.

It's different for humans than for horses, said Kymenos.

How? Except for being stronger, faster, and smarter, I'm really no different than you are.

Knives, Sykeen.

The horse gave his little whimper, and shut up. Kymenos finished grooming him, took the empty nosebag, and staggered over to Glory, who stepped sideways, flicking her tail and obviously wanting to play.

Kymenos closed his eyes. Someone fully trained in the magic of the Star Circle could have held the horse still with a simple pattern, perhaps weaving the earth around her ankles or corralling her with wind, but he didn't know many patterns at all. Most of them were better for killing than holding a horse still, anyway.

"Come here, Glory," he called.

The shuffling noise told him she had stepped back again.

Kymenos sighed and laid the comb down, then went about fetching himself some food from the spilled saddlebags. This was harder than it looked, since he had to stir some of his bruises into protesting aches to move, and since Alliana really did appear to have eaten most of the food he'd brought. He finally settled for a wedge of cheese that was probably too hard for her jaws, and some of the horses' oats. Raw, hard, but better than nothing.

Glory slid towards him, attracted by the sound of crunching oats. Kymenos ignored her, until she slid her nose over his shoulder and tried to lip the food out of his hand.

Then he reached up and grabbed her mane, using her to haul himself back to his feet. Glory snorted at him, but Kymenos kept a firm hold of her as he reached for the currycomb with the other hand, dumping a few of the oats on the floor. Glory reached for them, making Kymenos list for a moment, but he managed to recover his balance and then begin stroking her coat with the comb. He still thought she might attempt to break for it, but Glory seemed to have accepted that he had won, rolling her eyes at him but continuing to munch.

"You're troublesome," he told her as he finally finished rubbing her down with his sleeves, which were very slightly less wet than her coat.

She snorted at him, and steamed. The smell of wet horse was very noticeable now. Kymenos could ignore it, though Alliana was beginning to wake.

Where do we go after this? Sykeen asked him, staring out the burrow mouth at the steady drumming of the rain, as if it would let up or answer him.

"Corlinth," Kymenos answered, just for the sake of hearing his own voice. "It has to be. Destiny said so."

I heard the sour note in your voice.

"You'll hear a lot more."

Destiny hit him a sickening punch on the side, almost enough to make Kymenos vomit up what he'd just eaten. He coughed, and then said, "Destiny, how does weakening me and making me unable to ride protect your precious Princess?"

There was a listening silence.

"You can't destroy me," said Kymenos. "You need me. You said that. And I'll be less and less good to Alliana the more you hit me."

Destiny departed, but at least it went without hitting him again. Kymenos sighed and pulled off his rain-soaked tunic, throwing it into a corner of the cave. His hair still dripped, but at least it wasn't as annoying as it had been.

"What are you doing?"

Kymenos whirled around at the shriek. Alliana was sitting up in the back of the cave and staring at him. Her hands clutched her chest as if she were afraid of someone reaching in past her ribs and stealing her heart.

"Taking off my wet clothes," said Kymenos, and reached for his trousers.

"You can't!"

"Why not?"

"Girls and boys aren't supposed to take off their clothes in front of each other."

Kymenos rolled his eyes. *Orlathian peasant morals!* "Look to the other side of the cave, then. I have to get out of these wet clothes, or I'll get sick."

"Why are you wet?"

"It's raining."

Alliana looked out the cave mouth. Kymenos pulled off his trousers and knelt, with another groan, to find the set of robes he carried in case he had to imitate a Master of the Star Circle.

He had the chance to look at his bruises now, and he grimaced. It looked as though several very large men had taken turns hitting him; it was worse than the time that some jealous fellow student had accused Kymenos of stealing, and the Serian Watch had caught him as he ran. Bruises flowered everywhere, yellow and green and purple and blue. Kymenos grinned sourly. *The Flower Festival's in a few days. I'll fit right in.*

"Are you decent?"

"Never," said Kymenos, looking up. Alliana still had her face turned away from him.

"I meant, do you have your clothes on?"

"Yes." Kymenos wrapped the robe around him, and ignored the stupid feelings that wanted to overwhelm him. It was silly to be homesick just because he had put on a robe.

"Good." Alliana turned around and sighed in relief as she saw that he really was wrapped up. "I was thinking about where to go."

"Really?" Kymenos asked in the calmest voice he could muster.

The Princess nodded. "We have to go to Corlinth, you said. Why not just go in a straight line? I think we should."

"The Dark is hunting us," said Kymenos. "It might not have been, but you had to make your little dramatic declaration, and it knows that you're alive now. It would be stupid to ride right across the country."

"But we're cowards if we hide."

"We're living cowards, at least."

Alliana shook her head. "How can my people be inspired by a cowardly Princess? How would it sound in the songs? No, we need to ride straight across the country and show as many people as possible that we're not afraid."

Kymenos lay back and stretched his arms and legs out. It was the only way that he felt comfortable. Alliana's argument was so ignorant that he felt no need to respond to it. They would ride through the gullies and keep out of sight of the pegasi as much as they could. It helped that the flying horses probably didn't know the country, nor the best ways to keep out of sight in it. After years of riding back and forth across it as he tried to find some way to stop Destiny, Kymenos did.

"So that's what we'll do, Kymenos, right?"

Kymenos grunted and closed his eyes.

Alliana scabbled in their saddlebags for a long time. Then she said, "And where's the rest of the food?"

"You ate most of it," said Kymenos. "We'll have to go slowly and hunt until we reach Corlinth. Try to eat as little as you can."

"I was hungry. I *am* hungry."

"Eat the bread."

"There's not much. And it's stale. At home, I had fresh bread."

"Eat it."

"I want more food."

"Do you want to go out and get it in this storm?"

Alliana said nothing for a long moment. Then she began to make a soft sound. Kymenos strained his ears, not sure what it was but not wanting to open his eyes, and finally realized that she was crying.

Soothed by the sound, Kymenos drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 17

The First Village

"The people of the Arvennese mountains are always good, kind, obedient, helpful. Even though Dark has ruled their country for generations, they are embodiments of the traits that the Light most prizes. And yet, sometimes, there is something beyond their eyes that I do not trust. I feel they are hiding some great secret from me, and I must desire to know what it is."

Edalona, Priestess of Elle.

"Here we are."

Elary nodded tensely. She wished she could walk with the confidence of either of the children beside her. Of course, Mitherill hadn't been around humans much, and Palant hadn't been around many but the healers. They had no reason to expect that everything wouldn't arrange itself in the patterns that they desired. Mitherill was even walking with her hood down, showing off the distinctive white streak in her hair, her golden eyes shining as they made their way into the village.

Elary glanced around. The villagers had come to their doors and were watching in silence, probably because they couldn't immediately tell what the travelers were. Then the woman who stood in the doorway of the largest stone house they had yet seen smiled suddenly and descended the steps towards them.

"You're a healer, aren't you?" she asked Elary.

Elary nodded, glad to see that it might go smoothly after all. "My name is Elary. I am here with Palant and Mitherill-"

"Princess Mitherill," said Palant quickly.

Elary glared at him. He glared back at her. The woman glanced at the girl, then back and forth between them.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I feel as if I were missing something. I am quite sure that you said 'Princess.'"

"We did," said Elary. There was nothing for it now, but to go on and hope for the best. "This is the Princess Mitherill of Iantra-Arvenna, the last remaining True Heir of Queen Aloriadell's line."

The woman turned to look at Mitherill, then shook her head. "She looks old enough to speak for herself. Why doesn't she speak?"

"She doesn't speak Arvennese," said Elary, while Mitherill looked at them all dumbly and the woman's gaze grew harder and more suspicious. "She was raised among the *ilzánai* all her life, and doesn't have the words of any human language."

"Then how can she rule us?"

Elary winced, and glanced at Mitherill, changing languages as she did so. "This might be a good time to show them your healing skills, Princess Mitherill."

The Princess dipped her head, then spoke in the tongue of the *ilzánai* to the woman. "Are you sick? Or is anyone around you sick?"

"What?" the woman asked.

Elary sighed and translated.

"My son has a slight lung problem," said the woman. "But it's nothing he hasn't recovered from before. And I would prefer that a healer who has some idea of what she's doing treat him."

"The Princess does know what she's doing!" said Palant hotly. "She knows better than anyone else."

"Why?" the woman asked. Other villagers were leaning out of their houses now, and their faces were caught somewhere between curious and unfriendly. Elary glanced around, wondering how long it would be before word of their presence reached Shadow. Even if everyone in the village served the Light, which was a silly thing to hope, they would make a fuss and stir about it, and Shadow was certain to come investigate the reports of anything strange.

"Because she's the Princess," said Palant. "She can feel the suffering of her people, and she knows instinctively how to help them."

"But she had to be told that my son was sick," said the woman. "How can that make her instinctively knowing about pain?"

Mitherill made a little sobbing sound, and Elary turned to her to see tears standing in her golden eyes. "I can't understand!" she whimpered, when Elary knelt beside her.

Elary translated as quickly as she could, only to have Mitherill glance at the woman in utter astonishment, and then nod sharply. "Very well, then," she said. "I think that I shall go in and heal her son."

She took a step forward. The woman stepped back so that she was blocking the door of the house. "Where is the Princess going?" she asked.

"To heal your son," said Elary.

The woman gave her a hard stare. "You go with her, and make sure that you supervise her. I don't want her making him more sick than he already is. Do you understand that?"

"I understand that," said Elary, and then followed the Princess inside the house.

She heard the sound of coughing at once, and grimaced. *Roughlung*. The Princess would be gifted indeed if she could tend that. Even most half-*ilzánai* Elary knew had trouble with it, and the Princess herself carried significantly less disease-fey blood than that.

"Hanever?" asked Mitherill.

Elary glanced at her. She was sure that the woman hadn't mentioned her son's name. But the boy turned his head, and blinked when he saw two strangers and not his mother standing above the divan where he lay.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Mitherill said nothing, probably not understanding the question, but came to the divan and laid her hand on the boy's head. Hanever closed his eyes and seemed to shiver as her magic traveled through him. Elary closed her eyes and fell into the light trance that let her see the

disease, reaching out and touching Hanever's arm so that she could actually sense his sickness instead of someone else's.

The roughlung glowed in his chest, a sickening dark green in this vision, something embedded so deeply in his lungs that his mother must have despaired of his ever getting rid of it. Mitherill's magic glided towards it, a rope of golden light, and flung itself around the roughlung. In seconds, the disease had been strangled to death, and then it was drawn up and out of the body.

Into Mitherill.

Elary opened her eyes in horror. Normal *ilzán* healers, and she herself, had to have a disease before they could cure it. But Mitherill was able to draw the disease into herself, even though she had never experienced it before.

And she was therefore going to get it.

Elary turned to look at Mitherill just in time to see the girl begin to cough. Green liquid leaked out of her mouth and decorated Hanever's pillow. The boy pulled his head out of the way, then touched his chest and glanced at the Princess in wonder.

"Mother!" he yelled, and his voice was a little hoarse, but without the sharpness that would have characterized someone who still had roughlung.

His mother came hurrying in and swept him close. "What is it? Did they hurt you?"

Hanever struggled and kicked to get free, then glanced at Mitherill. "No, Mother. She saved me! But it sounds as though she has the roughlung now." He reached out and laid his hand on Mitherill's arm.

Mitherill looked at him and smiled, then coughed on another mouthful of golden-green bile. Elary picked her up, noting that she had a fever. She shook her head.

"Thank you," said Hanever.

Mitherill dipped her head as if she could understand that, or at least make a good guess as to what it meant, and then slumped in Elary's arms. Elary had to bend close to hear the rasping of her breath and make sure that she was still alive.

"Will she be all right?" Hanever asked, sounding frightened.

Elary glanced at him. "Yes, she will be." The words were more hope than truth. She had never heard of healing magic that worked this way, and she didn't know what the consequences for Mitherill would be. She herself had spent a large part of her childhood sick, but she had had the *ilzán* affinity for disease to protect her even as it afflicted her. She didn't know what would happen to Mitherill.

"You must stay," said the mother. "Nothing is too good for the Princess who managed to heal my son." She bustled off, probably to get a bed and blankets and warm water for Mitherill.

Palant burst into the room. "What happened?" he asked. "Did she-" Then he stopped as he saw Mitherill lying in Elary's arms. For a long moment he stared. Then he burst into tears.

"She will be well!" said Elary fiercely, though it was more force of will than hope that kept her clutching the girl's body.

She could be the greatest healer that any of us have ever seen. Perhaps she really could ease any pain that the people of her Kingdoms are feeling. But that's only if she can survive the roughlung.

Elary whispered to the Princess, hoping that Mitherill could hear her somehow, "We will rescue you, Princess. We will make sure that you live. We will make sure that you do not die for the sake of a brave sacrifice."

Mitherill slept on in her arms, beautiful and tragic. Palant sobbed. Hanever's mother, who had introduced herself as Lorianna, continued searching for blankets and other essential tools that would be used to try and ease the pain of the roughlung.

Elary did not miss the joy and the devotion that burned in Hanever's gaze whenever he looked at Mitherill, or even Lorianna's eyes.

It is a beginning.

Chapter 18

Among the Blazes

"The Dark has an odd way of choosing its leaders. They must pass various tests, and the ones who pass the most tests become lieutenants of the Dark. But they never give up responsibility, and the tests never cease. If something happens to them, or if something happens to someone under their care, it is seen as entirely their own fault."

-Queen Vamoranon of Orlath.

"And that, my lady, is why I should win this case."

For a moment, Nightstone almost did not realize that those presenting their petition before her had come to an end of their case at last. Then she jerked herself back up from her slump on the throne, and tried her best to look dignified and grave.

"And that is all that either of you have to say?" she asked.

The two nobles, who were arguing about which one of them had title to a particular room in the castle, bowed to her.

Nightstone considered for a long moment. There were advantages to deciding either way. Lord Cabrion had promised her that he would turn to worshipping Shara and not Elle if she decided for him, and the Lady of the Night could use greater prominence and patronage here in Orlath; it would be a step forward for the Dark. But Lady Suria had said that she would stop all her little rebellions against the Dark. She had funded the rebels who lived on the Plains and sometimes attacked caravans rolling across them. She had taken a risk admitting that to Nightstone, but that was the kind of daring that the Dark, and the Princess herself, liked.

Nightstone nodded. "Lady Suria, you shall have the room."

Lord Cabrion frowned at her, while Lady Suria bowed her head in a parody of humility. "I promise, my lady, that you shall not have cause to regret your decision," she said. "I feel that my having a room in the castle is vital to the protection of the Kingdom."

Smoothly done, Nightstone thought. The woman would be a good addition to the Dark, as long as she didn't think that she could betray the Dark in the same way and go back to the Light. The Dark didn't tolerate that.

Lord Cabrion stamped out of the room. Lady Suria lingered, talking, for a time, and then finally left. Nightstone settled back on the throne, and waited patiently for someone else to enter.

No one did.

Hardly daring to hope, Nightstone stood and crept down the Great Hall towards the doors, certain that someone would come in at any moment and she would then look extremely silly.

But when she reached them and looked out through them, she realized the great courtyard was empty. The petitioners had either given up and gone away, or she had finally dealt with the last of them.

Nightstone sighed and stretched her arms luxuriously, feeling like an unchained dragon. *I could sleep for a month.*

But I don't really want to sleep. I only wake up after a few hours feeling groggy, anyway. I want-

I want to find Black Rose.

Nightstone set off across the courtyard. The rain pounded steadily around her- not actually on her, because a little well-used Scarlet magic turned the drops to steam before they came too close. Nightstone paused outside the stables and tilted her head back to study the sky.

The clouds are clearing. The blazes should be able to fly soon. That would be good news for Black Rose as well as Nightstone's plan, and the Dark itself. The wind had been fierce enough, and the clouds thick enough, to keep the pegasi out of the air, and the hunt for the Princess Alliana had been delayed. Black Rose had blamed herself and needed more reassurance this morning, before Nightstone went into the throne room to deal with the endless line of petitioners.

She opened the door of the stable. The smell of pegasi, sharper and sweeter than that of horses, filled her nose at once. A few of the winged horses turned their heads and snorted greetings.

Black Rose was in a stall near the middle of the stable. She raised her head as Nightstone came to her, and looked at her with eyes wild with hope.

"The rain is clearing?"

"It is," Nightstone told her quietly, and scratched her chin. "You really should not worry so much about not doing your best. You did your best, and we know it."

"But I want to be aloft and searching for the Princess again." The pegasus beat her wings hard. "I want to make sure that she doesn't escape because of any error on my part, at least."

"I know." Nightstone glanced at the door of the stables, wishing she had the gift of telling how long it would rain, and was startled to hear the heavy fall of drops slowing already. "It sounds as though you can go up soon, Black Rose."

The pegasus snorted and danced in excitement. Nightstone stroked her neck and clucked, then said, "Take me with you."

"What?" Black Rose's head slewed around.

"I'm tired of dealing with petitioners. Besides, I don't have any more petitioners at the moment. I want to recapture the feeling of riding in the blazes and hunting for Lightworkers again, if only for a little while."

"We could not risk your life, my lady."

"You risk your own lives every time you fly," Nightstone argued. "Why is this so different?"

"My lady-" But now, Black Rose looked tempted. Nightstone suspected she was thinking that showing off her efforts to the ruler of Orlath would mean that the Dark wouldn't blame her for anything.

Nightstone stroked her neck firmly, and said nothing. One advantage of being around pegasi so much was that she had learned to read their emotions in a way few humans ever did. Black Rose was in the throes of making up her own mind, and needed to be left to do it by herself.

At last the pegasus said, "I will carry you myself. And we must hope that you remember how to fly."

"Of course," said Nightstone solemnly, while her heart sang, and went to fetch the tack that she would need.

"Hunnnhha!"

Or, at least, that was what the command to fly sounded like in Nightstone's ears. The pegasus blaze began to beat their wings, and then to trot forward in formation, following Black Rose at their head.

Nightstone smiled and clutched Black Rose's mane. It wasn't really necessary, but it felt natural, since it was the posture that she used when riding a unicorn. The saddle had straps for her legs, though, and leather straps were wrapped around her waist to keep her upright and in the saddle as well. It was unlikely she would fall off.

But not impossible. And that tiny bit of danger was what Nightstone craved.

Black Rose beat her wings hard, and then broke into a gallop. Behind her, the rest of the blaze began galloping as well, those humans in the way getting swiftly *out* of the way. Black Rose sprang into the air, wings unfolding as they went, and then the speed and the wind caught her up and swept her high.

Nightstone's lungs strained for air almost at once. They were not that high yet, but the wind was whistling in her face, still fierce from the aftermath of the rain, and she couldn't get a

breath. She finally had to turn her face slightly aside, and look at the grass that passed below instead of the sky ahead.

The castle dropped away in seconds, and the walls that seemed so high when she was inside them passed under them. Now there was only rolling grass, blending into a cloud to Nightstone's eyes. The pegasi would be more keen-sighted, of course, yet another reason they made the best scouts.

Black Rose's wings beat down, obscuring her view, and Nightstone looked up and ahead again. The sky shone a pale blue in between the parting gray clouds, and she caught a brief glimpse of a watery rainbow. She cheered.

"Hold tight, my lady," said Black Rose. "Very tight. I don't want to be the one responsible for your plunging off."

Nightstone rolled her eyes, but wound her hands in the mane obediently. Never mind that the straps around her waist were so tight she could hardly move. The pegasi never seemed to think that someone without wings could be safe in the air.

The blaze formed around Black Rose, some of them falling into line behind her, some to the sides, others under. They would watch the Plains for signs of what their leader might miss, but would alert her before they dived, and let her go in front. Black Rose would be the best flyer in the blaze, and the fastest one. There was no other way she could lead.

Nightstone looked around contentedly, while bracing herself for a dive at any moment. This was the place she belonged, really, the place she had come to know very well while still a minor lieutenant for the Dark and riding every mission. High above the earth, she didn't think about her loneliness without any other humans around, or her chastity, or the other things that troubled her. High above the earth, there were the sky, and the pegasi, and sometimes enemies who came out of nowhere on wings nearly as fast and tried to kill them. There was nothing else.

"That is the village."

Nightstone looked down as they passed over the cluster of houses, and shook her head. The Princess had been so close, and they couldn't snatch her!

But they would find her soon enough, wherever she was. The pegasi were in full flight now, and leaving the village behind like a scudding cloud. They were the fastest flyers of the air. They would find Alliana.

Nightstone glanced down from time to time, but she couldn't see the hidden gullies that the Princess must have escaped into. She kept her gaze mostly on the sky, and sometimes on the birds they met, who almost all tumbled out of the way of the pegasus blaze at once.

"There!"

Nightstone looked down, blinking a little. She hadn't thought they would actually find anything; if the Princess had any sense at all, she would keep out of sight and take the gullies to wherever she was going.

But there something was, at least. It looked like a horse feeding on the grass. Near it stood a single human figure, leaning against the horse and apparently staring to the north.

"Has he seen us yet?" asked Nightstone intently.

"No, not yet."

Nightstone nodded, and kept her gaze on the figure. The blaze was dropping now, lower and lower, their feathers curved to muffle the sound of their wings beating. The sun still hid behind the clouds, and so they cast no shadow. It was as perfect an ambush as a blaze of pegasi could get.

And then the figure looked up.

Nightstone screamed in frustration. There was no reason for him to do that, and no reason at all for him to decide that a descending blaze of pegasi were foes. He could have thought they were friends. He couldn't have known that pegasi were hunting the Princess; that, Nightstone refused to countenance.

But he moved, springing onto the horse's back and yelling something that Nightstone couldn't make out. The horse at once began to run. The blaze followed.

"Do you think he's leading us back to the Princess?" asked Nightstone, glancing over her shoulder.

"He must be," said Black Rose.

Nightstone narrowed her eyes skeptically. She had seen killdeers and other birds try to lure a predator away from their nests with the old broken-wing trick. And the man had to know that a blaze of pegasi would catch the horse in no time at all.

"Turn back," she said. "I think he's leading us away from the Princess, not towards her."

But if Black Rose could even hear her over the rush of the wind, the pegasus had obviously decided to pay no attention. She was settled into the chase, and Nightstone had little choice but to go along.

She sighed and glanced over her shoulder, but if there was a gully or other place where the Princess was hiding, then it was long out of sight. She glared at the man who rode ahead of them.

When we catch him, then I shall wish to express my displeasure personally.

Chapter 19

Viridian

"Never kick an angry dragon in the snout."

-The Mistaken Mage.

Ternora closed her eyes and rolled to the side. She didn't think that she could save Prince Warcourage, so she might as well save herself.

But the Prince shouted something in a strangely shrill voice, and the next moment a powerful wind stormed past Ternora, whipping the steam aside. Ternora sighed and opened her eyes. *I should have known that he would do that.*

The dragon snarled. "My name is Viridian, and I can be as rational as you are, or more so," he said. "I do not wish to hurt you."

"You would say that," said the Prince, who was dancing in place, his eyes blazing. "Of course you would."

"Because it is true!" Viridian's tail twitched, and he glanced at Ternora. "Is there anything you can use to restrain him?"

"My Prince," said Ternora, turning to Warcourage with the title burning like bile in her mouth, "we could use his help to complete the Quest. He might be able to fly us on his back to the Shining Isles."

"No," said Viridian at once.

Ternora glared at him. "You're not helping your own cause."

Viridian silently turned. Ternora saw the corner of one wing, tattered and scraped to shreds. "I wasn't careful on my last landing," said the dragon, looking back at them. "It will heal eventually, but until then, I am confined to land or sea."

"He can walk with us or swim with us, then," said Ternora to Warcourage, who just glared at her. "Surely a dragon would be a valuable addition to our party, my Prince. No one would dare to trouble us then."

"Dragons are not of the Light at heart," said Warcourage.

Ternora blinked and looked at Viridian. "I suppose that's true."

"I am not of the Light," Viridian agreed. "But that does not mean that I am useless."

"I would hardly deny your use," said Warcourage. "But you must see that a ruler who wishes to be of the Light can hardly rise to that status while accompanied by those of Dark or Shadow."

"I am not of either," said Viridian. "I am free, like all dragons. If I go with you, it is because I wish to see the Pool of Siliyonete, as I told you. I am not going with you to become part of the Light or to spy for Shadow." He turned to look at Ternora, as if he thought that she would make the final decision. "What say you? Will you trust me to accompany you and not betray you?"

"No!"

Ternora put a hand on Warcourage's shoulder and drew him away from the dragon a short distance. "He doesn't trust you," she said. "He doesn't trust anyone. But he also wants to wait until we have enough people around us who are of the Light to take the throne."

Viridian hissed in something that was probably amusement. "You will have a long wait. King Steadythrone ignored the south, and so they ignored him. You will have to go north to find those who care about you."

"We shall go north, then," said Prince Warcourage.

"But you told me that we had to go in search of the Pool," said Ternora.

The Prince hesitated.

"Go south, my Prince," said Viridian, with a humility in his voice so utterly false that Ternora gagged. But the dragon bowed his head to the ground, and apparently the pretense was enough to convince Prince Warcourage.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you will need the Pool and whatever you find there to free your people from the domination of Shadow," Viridian asked. "I would be willing to follow you into the Light, now that I see what a great lord you are."

The Prince stared at him with those eerie green eyes, then shook his head. "I must think," he muttered, and walked towards the pool again, his head bowed and his feet scuffing slowly at the grass.

"Is that true?" Ternora asked the dragon.

"Of course not. But when I hunt gryphons, I pretend to seek redemption, no matter how humiliating it is. And I think that humiliation works well with this Prince, unless it's his own." Viridian laid his head on the ground and studied Ternora with amused green eyes.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Ternora sighed. "I could wish a better King for Doralissa, but a better King might not promise me the Court position he has."

"You want one?"

"Yes. I don't want to wander the jungles forever. I always meant to do something else. I never got around to it. Serving the Prince is probably the last something else I'll have, and I'm grasping it." Ternora looked at Viridian. "And what are you seeking, at the Pool of Siliyonete?"

The dragon shrugged, his torn wings coming into sight for a moment. "I prefer to keep that to myself for now."

"As you will." Ternora turned her head as she heard Warcourage's feet scuffing on the moss again. "And here is our Prodigal Prince come back!"

Warcourage glared at her, then said, "I have decided, dragon. You shall accompany us to the Pool."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Viridian made a truly elegant bow that Ternora envied and wished she could imitate. It was probably the effect of that snake-like neck.

"But you must obey our rules," said Warcourage.

"What rules are those?" asked Ternora.

Warcourage barely glanced at her. "You know them."

"But I can never hear them enough," said Ternora, while fighting to keep a straight face. Viridian gave a soft, hissing snort of steam. Warcourage looked suspiciously from face to face, but seemed incapable of thinking they would really mock him. He nodded and started to recite.

"We will not harm innocents. We will attack none save the forces of Shadow or Dark. We will not do anything that causes heart-pain to others if we can help it. We will all seek the Pool of Siliyonete as comrades, without seeking to get ahead of each other or claim precedence over the others. We will know that the end of the journey is worth more than any tiny insults on the way."

Unless those insults are directed at you, of course, Ternora thought. She nodded, and looked at Viridian to see him inclining his head, his eyes still burning with something that Warcourage was probably too young to recognize as amusement.

"This I swear," said Warcourage, "in the name of the Light."

"This I swear," said Ternora, "in the name of the Light." *And the money that I will get out of this when the time comes.*

"This I swear," said Viridian, "in the name of Erlande."

Ternora blinked. Erlande was a name for the sea-god that she had heard when she visited the Shining Isles before. Was he reaching out to try and stop Warcourage before he could even get to the ocean? But she had never heard of his malice pursuing someone of the Doralissan royal line onto land.

"Erlande is your god?" Warcourage asked Viridian.

The dragon inclined his head again.

"Then you must help me," said Warcourage. "I want to appease him, and make amends for whatever crime Queen Rizzeros committed. I will need you to intercede with him for me, and get him to listen to my prayers and appeasement, instead of just destroying me at once."

"I thought you knew everything to do already?" Ternora asked.

"This is just making sure," said Warcourage. "Will you do that for me, Viridian?"

The dragon studied him for a long moment. Then he nodded. "As long as you guide me faithfully to the Pool of Siliyonete, and do not falter."

"We will not!" Warcourage turned to Ternora with his head held high. "And now we have company on the journey, and someone to hunt for us. Is that not grand, Ternora?"

"Of course," said Ternora, but she wondered why Warcourage hadn't mentioned needing someone to intercede with Erlande before.

"I've always dreamed of riding a dragon," said Warcourage then. "If I could find one who was devoted to the Light, of course. I want to ride on your back, Viridian."

"I'm sorry, my Prince, but we go through wild country from here, where the branches are so low they would sweep you from my back," said the dragon, with mock regret thick in his voice. "I have to snake along myself."

"Don't mention serpents," said Warcourage. "It's a bad omen." And off he marched into the jungle.

"What does he think I am akin to?" murmured Viridian, and slid after him.

Ternora walked at the dragon's shoulder, all the while wondering if this was a bad idea, all the while knowing it was. They would eventually try to kill each other, and one of them would win. She would lose out either way.

It seems as though I must make myself the peacemaker, a difficult and thankless task. She sighed. Keep thinking of the jewels, Ternora. It's the only way to make it through.

Chapter 20

The Western Crescent

"If you don't agree with a decision that a Princess or Queen of Rivendon makes, be prepared to run."

-Attributed to Prince Ulon, son of Queen Idona.

"Must she keep screaming like that?"

Olumer glanced at Renne with a slight, weary smile. "She has done that since she was a child, whenever she was caged up or kept from doing something that she wanted to do. And by taking her to the Western Crescent, then I presume we have severely disappointed her."

Renne shook her head. "I have never heard screams like that from someone sane."

"You said that she was sick," said Olumer carefully. He had to wonder, from the distant expression on Renne's face, if she was reconsidering that sickness.

Renne nodded at him. "There is no doubt that this is a delusion, since she will not break from it and will not listen to any suggestions at all that she might not be the Princess of Rivendon. But she screams and acts like a child."

"I am afraid that that is my fault."

"I thought it might be."

Olumer narrowed his eyes. He had been hoping that Renne would just laugh it off, the way that she seemed to laugh off so much else, even when one of the carriage-horses lost a shoe or one of their drivers threatened to leave because of Cadona's screaming. "I did try my best."

Renne shook her head. "Not your best, or you would have known that giving her weapons was not something one should do with a sick patient."

"How was I to know she was sick?"

"You were the one who claimed she was."

Olumer turned his head in the other direction, as much to avoid Renne's suspicious stare as anything else. *I am not good at this. Playing Court games always leaves me dazed and confused.* "Of course. My apologies, my lady."

Renne still regarded him skeptically when he turned to look at her again, but a moment later she turned her gaze ahead, and Olumer did the same.

They were walking along the broad road that led straight into the middle of the Western Crescent, at the moment passing between walls of forest that seemed to swallow Cadona's screams and give forth no sound in response. Olumer eyed the thick, dark trees uneasily. The forests of Rivendon were dangerous places, and he dared to live in the middle of one only because he had been living and hunting there for so many years. He knew the native dangers and how to calm them. These woods, he did not know, and he couldn't quite share Renne's blithe confidence that nothing would happen to them on the journey.

The pines, which came down to the very edge of the road in some places, only encouraged that impression. The locked carriage that contained Cadona, and even the high seat where the driver sat guiding the horses, seemed a very small thing next to one of those massive trees. Olumer studied the one they were passing under at the moment, and could have sworn that he saw a pair of large eyes, as dark green as the pine needles, peering back at him. He gripped the knife that rested at his belt and watched until the eyes blinked and the creature retreated.

"You are nervous?"

Olumer looked back at Renne. "Yes, my lady. I have too much respect for the dangers of the forests to be easy."

Renne only smiled at him and paced ahead. "None of the creatures of the woods would dare harm someone who is half-*ilzán*," she said. "And that protection will extend to you. You should know that."

She might be right, but Olumer wondered if that kind of truce, whatever it might be based on, would extend to someone who was half-silvereyes. His father's kindred had hunted these forests time out of mind, and had their wars with the forest fey and even the wild animals. Neither were likely to forgive or forget.

A sharp chatter off to the side let him know that something was there, though when Olumer looked in that direction, he saw nothing so harmless as a squirrel. It had only been a warning. Instead, a great forest wolf, nearly three feet tall at the shoulder, stood glaring at him from between two pale trunks. It was just shedding the winter coat for the spring one, thick with clusters of paler hair over the gray. It lifted its lips at him, making no sound but showing its teeth.

"Go away," said Olumer quietly, and turned his head to the side, letting the westering sun catch in them in turn. That made his eyes flash metallic. The wolf shrank back into the shelter of the trees, but snarled at him before it bounded away. Olumer knew where there was one wolf, there would be more. He sighed.

"Is there something that you wanted to tell me?"

Olumer turned his head in startlement to see Renne walking not far away from him again. Her gaze was direct.

"The animals of the forest do not always like those who are part silvereyes," Olumer said. He gazed into the forest again, but saw no sign of the wolves. Of course, his vision in the dark, or even the mitigated shade of the trees, was not as good as it should be if he were full fey. He had inherited the feuds of the silvereyes, but not all their gifts.

"Silvereyes," said Renne, sounding pleased. "I thought that was it. And I suppose Cadona has their blood as well?"

"I would suppose so," said Olumer, this time thinking before he was tripped into a lie that would contradict a lie he had already spoken. "But, as I told you, I could never discover where she came from."

Renne bowed her head, smiling, and then turned and walked ahead again. Sometimes she spent hours beside the carriage, talking quietly to Cadona, trying to make herself heard in between the screams. Olumer suspected that was wasted effort, but he wasn't about to tell her so. Anything that distracted her from prying into his lies was welcome.

Do not think that she will be so fooled forever.

Olumer's heart leaped into the air, though he managed to keep his body from doing the same thing. He turned his head and saw Mourn pacing beside him, long legs making the jolting trot look smooth and flowing. He still hadn't gotten used to the black unicorn's telepathy, and he retorted sharply.

I know she won't. Of course, if Cadona was willing to conceal her status, we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. And speaking of the Dark, why haven't you revealed what we are?

Mourn snorted softly, as though to chide Olumer for not being able to see the answer to such a simple problem, and then bounded ahead to walk beside the carriage. Cadona's screams abruptly stopped. Olumer sighed in relief. Perhaps they would have some silence for a while.

"The unicorn seems to have a bond with her," said Renne, dropping back beside him again.

"It seems so."

"Why is that, I wonder?"

"Unicorns love virgins," said Olumer, "and Cadona seems to- disdain affection." That was a sentence that covered a multitude of scratches and bites whenever someone tried to hug Cadona or even restrain her. "I thought that it might be simply that Mourn ran into Cadona first of any virgin, and decided to stay with her."

"Mourn?"

"So Cadona named him." *Damn it, I am not clever enough to keep ahead of her, and she is too clever.*

"Interesting," said Renne. "And you, my lord, are you quite sure that you are not Cadona's father?"

That startled Olumer into laughter. A jay cried harshly from back in the trees, as if to say that the forest didn't appreciate any merriment from an enemy, and he calmed himself as best he could. "Of course I am sure! I never married, my lady, and Cadona was found a long, long way from any woman I might possibly have sired a child with."

"But she could have been coming north to give the child to you, and fallen afoul to the beasts of the woods."

Olumer blinked. *Why does this line of thought seem to intrigue her so much?* "Of course, I suppose that is possible, but I think that Cadona would show more signs of silvereyes heritage if that were so. Her eyes are the only ones that I have ever noted."

"Hmmm." Renne didn't appear to like losing this line of thought. "But silvereyes look very human."

"It's said."

"You have never seen one?"

"Not a full-blooded one, my lady. My father left, following his pack, while my mother still carried me in the womb."

"You have bitterness in your voice at this."

Olumer blinked at her. "I suppose I might have. I wished I had a father, that I had known him. But I think I managed to surmount the bitterness long ago."

Renne gave him a frustrated look and once again walked up beside the carriage. The wails started again as soon as she did.

Olumer went back to studying the forest. Gray, flickering shadows paced the carriage, and now he was almost sure they walked in the midst of a wolf pack. Olumer hoped the wolves would be content with escorting the carriage out of their territory, and wouldn't turn and attack. He had walked between the great hunters many times, and most of those times he hadn't had to fight. They were only intent on keeping him away from their dens and pups.

If they did have to fight, though, he would make sure the fire was built high and strong. Wolves feared fire as they feared few other things. Perhaps Cadona could even be persuaded to use her Scarlet magic to help.

Yet another outraged scream arose from the carriage. Olumer flinched. *On the other hand, maybe not.*

Chapter 21

Killdeer

"To lure the enemy away from the child is the pursuit of the killdeer, and even of many human parents who love their children and would not see them come to harm."

-Shella, in her study of human and animal behavior in Orlath.

I can't go much faster, I would have you note.

I know that.

Kymenos could have known that without Sykeen telling him. He could hear the horse's labored breathing and the slower thumps of his hooves, as well as the wings of the pegasi beating closer and closer behind them. He glanced over his shoulder, then ducked forward as the wings scraped the air and the flying horse wheeled around, coming back for another strike.

It was a black pegasus, he saw, and it had a rider. The rider was a tall woman with flying black hair, and an extremely fixed gaze. Kymenos ground his teeth. It was probably Princess Nightstone. Of course it was.

We should be far enough away now that Princess Alliana is safe. Shouldn't we stop?

No, Kymenos replied. They'll torture me if they take me, to learn where she is, and I can't stand torture.

You could.

Kymenos didn't bother to reply. The horse's faith in him was almost touching, but it wasn't the kind of thing that he needed at the moment. At the moment, he really needed a rescuer of some kind.

But Destiny was silent. It was probably expending what energy it had on the Princess, Kymenos thought, and making sure that she didn't reveal her position or become revealed. He was on his own.

I think I could run a little further-

No good.

The pegasus blaze was all around him now, wings hammering, axe-sharp hooves slicing the air with speed that made Kymenos wince as he thought about one of those hooves slamming into him or Sykeen. He slowed the horse with a jerk of the reins. Sykeen stumbled to a stop, his head down and his neck glowing with foam.

The pegasus hovering in front of them overshot, and had to turn around and come back. Nightstone, or whoever the rider was, leaped off the mare's back looking very displeased and strode towards Kymenos with a snap instead of a spring in her step. Kymenos sat still and waited for her, while trying to make up a plausible story for running the moment he sighted a blaze of pegasi in the air.

Nothing was coming to mind.

"You should know," said Nightstone, halting in front of him, "that I am the ruler of Orlath."

"I know."

Nightstone considered him. She had extremely hard blue eyes, as if she would like to bore Kymenos's own eyes out of his head with her gaze. Her hair was long and black and curly. She might even have been beautiful if she had had a little more of the downcast, compromising manner in her. Kymenos liked women he wouldn't have to fight a constant battle with, both in and out of bed.

"And how did you know this? I can't ever remember having seen you before, or someone like you," she said.

"I have never been in the Orlathian Court, my lady. But I knew that you rode among the pegasi at one time." That was something that he would know, luckily. It was a part of Nightstone's legend.

The woman just stared at him harder. "And why did you run when you saw the pegasi in the air?"

Thumbscrew time.

Kymenos licked his lips. "I was frightened."

"Why? If you are not in rebellion against the Orlathian throne, or against Prince Artaen in Rivendon, then you have nothing to fear from the Dark."

"I don't serve the Dark, either," said Kymenos. "And you were swooping down on me as if you meant to take me to the dungeons. I ran- or rode, rather. I prefer the open air to dungeons. It smells better."

Nightstone smiled very slightly. "I think that you would find my dungeons, when I must use them, are different." Then the smile faded. "We swooped down on you because we suspected you of consorting with the Princess Alliana of Orlath."

"Consorting?"

"Helping her to escape at least one Dark patrol that was hunting her," said Nightstone. "And of course you cannot be ignorant of the events of twelve years ago, even if you are Dalznan. You know that Destiny caused the birth of a royal Princess who would become a champion of the Light."

"I had heard that. But I thought she had died."

"She did not. She lives, and she is abroad in the land, and you are the best clue we have found to her whereabouts." Nightstone leaned towards him. "Where is she?"

"My lady! You think that I have something to do with this?"

"I do. You are wearing the robe of a Master of the Star Circle, and we know that Falto's Pattern was used in the village from which the Princess fled. I know no other Masters who are visiting Orlath."

It's not fair, Kymenos thought morosely. Do I have to have an enemy who would recognize the clothes and the pattern? Do I? "I am not a Master of the Star Circle, my lady. I kept these clothes for convenience's sake, when my others were soaked in the storm that swept through here."

"But you were with the Princess Alliana."

"No!"

"I can always tell when someone is lying," said Nightstone pleasantly. "They roll their eyes up very slightly. Which you just did. You were with her. You do know exactly whom I am talking about. And I would be honored if you would stop trying to lie and pretend that you don't. We might yet talk this out like rational people, though I am beginning to think that you don't have a trace of rationality. *Where is she?*"

Kymenos shook his head. "I won't tell you."

"You have no loyalty to the Dark, you said. Does that mean that you are in rebellion against the Dark, after all?"

"I have no loyalty to the Light, either."

Nightstone eyed him for a moment, then shrugged. "You know something about the Princess, and that is enough, by itself, to make sure that you are taken to the dungeons that you fear so much."

Sykeen abruptly snored. Kymenos looked at him, and the horse tugged the reins out of his hand. Then he turned, nearly unseating his rider, and stared back to the south.

Sykeen, what are you doing? Kymenos demanded in his head.

You said that you would break anyway. And you don't like Destiny. I don't like it. Reveal the Princess to them. They can't plan much that's bad for her.

They would kill her!

And why would you oppose that? She's the reason that you're here and suffering from the blows of Destiny, isn't it? If she dies, I think that you'll be set free of this Destiny.

Kymenos thought about that.

"Your horse," said Nightstone. "Why is he staring to the south? That was the direction you came from, I think?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Kymenos opened his mouth, having made the decision to betray the Princess, and felt an immense punch slam into his ribs just below the many other bruises there. He sagged, the breath driven out of him. The next punch knocked him into the grass, and he writhed as the punches showered down on him.

"Who is doing that?" Nightstone demanded, turning around as if she thought it was a Gust mage who would back away from her. "Stop it at once!"

But the punches didn't stop, and Kymenos could feel the aches he already had complaining from the fall. He closed his eyes, deciding he was too tired to deal with this *ketza*, and let the darkness take him.

When he woke up, he was in Nightstone's dungeons, of course.

The Beginning of the Storm

"When a snowstorm falls in the Arvennese Mountains, one must move to shelter extremely quickly. It is better not to go into the Mountains at all if there's a storm threatening, of course. But one cannot always choose the time of one's travel, and if that is the case, one must plan shelter. Too much exposure to the howling winds of northern Arvenna could slay the hardiest traveler."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

"And we shall stay as long as we need?"

"As long as you need," Lorianna was promising Palant. "You shall have all the care for Mitherill I can provide, and I shall shelter you if agents of Shadow come hunting."

"Thank you, Lady Lorianna. I am sure that the Princess will want to thank you personally when she comes to the throne."

Elary heard their voices behind her as she stood gazing out the window of Lorianna's house. The house sat slightly higher than most of the others in the village, and there was a good view of the suddenly descending slopes and broken, rough places just beyond the village's plateau. But it wasn't the mountains that Elary was interested in. She was watching, instead, the first white flake that spun from the sky, or at least the first one that had been big enough for her to notice.

The flake spun lazily, tossed here by the wind, then tossed there, and finally landing on the ground in front of the house, where it melted. Elary looked at the little wet patch for a moment, only to have another snowflake land as she watched. When she glanced up again, a small army of flakes was descending, hurrying past the wind. Or perhaps the wind had died. Elary wasn't really sure.

If it has died, there will not be a blizzard, at least, she thought, as she turned back to Mitherill's divan-bed. I suppose we should feel thankful for that much.

She was thankful for the snug house as well, of course, but the last storm of the Arvennese winter always made her uneasy, even when she had the stoutest walls around her. She had gone through that snow, once, when she first traveled to Arvenna from Dalzna to see if anyone would hire a half-*ilzán* healer. The noise of the wind could still wake her, with memories of the cold biting into her hands. She hadn't lost any fingers up there, more through Anakora's intervention than anything she could do, but she had come close to losing several. She flexed and opened her hands several times, mostly in memory.

"Elary?"

"Yes, Palant?" Elary had to control the urge to turn around and watch the snow again. It wasn't coming in here. That much, she could repeat to herself.

"I think Mitherill's about to have a bad spell again."

Elary sighed, and hurried towards the divan. Hanever was there, as he had been since Mitherill saved his life, hovering above the Princess and generally getting in the way. Elary had learned long ago not to try and reason with people like this. She just picked up Hanever and moved him aside instead, then crouched next to the divan and turned Mitherill's face towards her, massaging her throat.

The Princess coughed, and brought up another gob of golden-green bile. Elary sighed and mopped it up. Then she waited for more. But Mitherill had gone back to sleep again, her breathing regular, though light, and rough if one listened closely.

Both the boys tended to do this.

"Out of the way, Hanever! It's my turn to tend to Mitherill."

"But she saved my life! I owe her a debt."

"I'm going to be her Prince!"

Elary shook her head. She had never developed the tolerance for argument in general that she had for argument from someone who had to watch a beloved friend die. "Hanever, Palant, if you're going to argue, please go somewhere else. You'll disturb Mitherill if you keep this up." *And me.*

The boys turned and trotted out of the room at once, arguing in lowered voices. Elary looked back at Mitherill.

She listened intently. The boys had indeed gone into the other room, and Lorianna was in the bedroom, shaking out the blankets. Elary was alone, and could speak aloud what she really wanted to say to Mitherill.

"You aren't going to get better, are you?" she asked softly.

The Princess didn't respond. She hadn't said anything for three days. Everyone else thought that was a good sign, thought it meant that she was getting the rest she needed. Only Elary had enough experience with roughlung to know that Mitherill should have recovered from the first attack by now.

But the disease hadn't affected the girl the way Elary thought it would. The girl hadn't healed the disease in the way that Elary thought she should. Nothing was going right.

Elary stroked the long black hair- the white streak felt slightly cooler than the rest- and wondered what would happen if Mitherill died. She would have to watch Palant closely, of course. The boy was so in love with the girl that he might actually try to do away with himself.

Elary was not sure what she felt, herself. This wasn't supposed to be happening, or at least she thought so. Mitherill should have recovered, and accepted the devotion her skills had won her. Lorianna and Hanever would do something for them, Elary wasn't sure what, and they would go on and find the Diamond of Ezudlos and regain the throne. That was the way things went in the history-tales.

This wasn't a history-tale, not now. Elary had finally realized that. She wasn't sure that any of the others had yet.

"She's tragic, isn't she?"

Elary turned her head. Lorianna stood behind her. "Yes, she is," said Elary. "Her parents were murdered when she was very young, and now she begins a Quest, only to be felled by disease in the middle of it."

Lorianna gave her an odd look. "That is not what I meant. I meant her beauty. Look at her face, the way she sleeps. Is it not tragic?"

Elary looked obediently, though she wasn't sure what she was supposed to be seeing. Lorianna hadn't specified. Mitherill lay with her eyes tightly shut, her cheeks flushed with fever, her hair sometimes stirring with her breath. Given that she vomited the vile liquid of the roughlung up regularly, Elary was surprised that her hair was so clean, but that was the only things that made Mitherill different from any other patient she had ever seen on first glance. One had to know she was a Princess before one began seeing tragic beauty there.

"I would be glad to have her stay forever," Lorianna continued quietly, "but I know that she must leave us and make her Quest through the mountains."

"Yes," said Elary. "And what about your son?"

"What about him? He is cured. It's a miracle. I wish that I could already have given my thanks to the Princess, but that must wait until her awakening."

"Not that," said Elary. "What if he insists on Mitherill staying here, or coming with us? I am afraid that he might run after us, so devoted is he."

Lorianna laughed softly. "You are mistaken, my lady. Of course he is devoted to her; anyone seeing her tragic, suffering beauty would be." Elary glanced back at Mitherill's face, and still couldn't see the tragic, suffering beauty. She decided that she would have to look harder. "But he also knows that she is above him, and that she has Palant to be her Prince. He wouldn't follow her."

Elary nodded, while privately deciding to make arrangements. Perhaps she could lock Hanever in his room when they left. That would slow him down a little.

"Not that you will be leaving for some time," said Lorianna, rousing her from her thoughts again. "It's snowing."

Elary turned her head, and watched the snow falling. It was coming down sideways now, the wind had picked up after all, and whipped sprays of flakes through the street like the blankets Lorianna had been shaking. Elary smiled. "I am glad that you have offered us shelter through the storm, my lady. I would hate to be out in this snow."

"It is only the beginning of the storm," said Lorianna. "It will last three days, at least. Might I offer you some gloves?"

"Some gloves?" Elary looked at her blankly.

"You were clenching and unclenching your fingers. I thought they might be cold. It happens, sometimes. My feet get cold of me when no other part of me does."

Elary shook her head and looked at the snow again. "No, I am well." *Though Anakora shield me from ever having to be out in such snow again.*

That night, she dreamed the snow had formed into a beast that had come inside and was stalking her about the halls. It was an odd dream. She knew it was real and not real at the same time, but the snow-beast didn't seem inclined to vanish, even though Elary faced it and

doubted it with all the power in her. It laid cold claws on her instead, smirking and snarling through a mouthful of very sharp teeth, like icicles.

Then a cold hand gripped her shoulder and shook her hard. Elary opened her eyes, expecting to look into the snow-beast's face.

It was Lorianna. "My lady!" she whispered. "The Princess is awake, and asking for you."

Elary stood at once, hurrying into a robe Lorianna had lent her. She rounded the corner to the divan-bed, and saw Mitherill sitting up, staring out the window at the snow with a trembling lip and wide eyes.

"What is that?" she asked, the moment that Elary came up beside her. Her voice was hoarse from the roughlung, but understandable.

"A blizzard." Elary looked out the window, and could see no sign that the snow had calmed, though the sun had long set. The roar and the skitter of snow along the glass told her that the wind was still blowing as fiercely as ever. "We're well out of it, believe me."

"I'm frightened."

"I'll sit with you." Elary nudged the Princess with her hip. "Move to the side."

Mitherill moved to the side, but kept her eyes fixed on the window. Elary curved an arm around her, and was startled when Mitherill embraced her waist and held on fiercely. She stroked the Princess's dark hair back from her brow, hugging her back as strongly. She would have felt bad, after all, if the Princess had died from the bad case of roughlung afflicting her. But she had healed, and soon the blizzard would calm and they would be out of the house.

Something smashed through the window.

Mitherill screamed and cowered backwards. Elary stood up, but the wind came through the broken glass and knocked her back before she could do any of the half-formed actions in her mind. Then the cold hit her, and she stopped moving, for a moment back in the snow-filled shelter from which only the grace of Anakora had rescued her.

"Elary! Princess! What-"

Lorianna's voice stopped, and she gagged with fear. Elary did much the same thing, seeing the creature that lay on the floor and was now unfolding its wings.

It looked like a giant bat, but it was pure white, down to its eyes, which looked at Elary without pupil or anything else to distinguish them. Yet she knew the thing saw her. It turned its head when Palant and Hanever hurried into the room, surveyed them slowly, and looked at Mitherill.

The Princess stood, but her legs were shaky. And then she began coughing, and the bile of the roughlung trickled down the front of her dress as she had another attack.

The white thing sprang into the air, its wings spreading as it moved, and landed on Mitherill. The boys yelled war-cries and charged forward.

The bat-thing rose and turned for the window. Elary saw that it had a pair of shockingly red clawed legs, which held the Princess firmly to its breast. It beat its wings hard and created a wind strong enough to topple the boys from their feet. The bat-thing made a chuckling sound.

Elary lunged forward. The bat-thing didn't see her coming, evidently, and she made no sound until she leaped. Then she shouted, even as her hands slammed deep into the cold, wet fur that covered the thing's shoulders.

The creature squealed. Elary braced herself for a shake, a shiver, or any other attempt to make her let go, all the while determined that she would not. She would ride the bat into the heart of the storm if she had to.

A moment later, her vow was tested. The creature leaped out the window. The wings beat with a motion like the rippling waves of snow, and then they rose higher and higher into the air, Mitherill clutched to the bat's chest, Elary clutching its back, riding into the heart of the storm.

Chapter 23

Night With the Wolves

"Wolves are not as dangerous as many people like to think they are. Of course, when they come after you in the season of deep hunger, or when there are many of them and a human stands between them and their kill- they may menace at the very least, or actually attack."

-Halderos, servant of Shadow and wolf shapeshifter.

"What are you doing?"

Olumer looked up. "Gathering wood, of course, my lady," he said. "What did it look like I was doing?"

Renne narrowed her eyes at him, as if to say that she didn't find him funny. "Why would we want such a large fire?"

"Have you heard the wolves' howls? They will come close tonight, or I don't know anything about northern Rivendon. They don't like someone who is part silvereyes traveling through their territory."

Renne laughed. "I lived much of my life in Ilantra, my lord, and while that is a country of Shadow and as such somewhat irritating, I don't think that the animals lie. Wolves do not attack humans, and most especially not a large and well-armed party of humans. And they know what would happen if they attacked someone who was part *ilzán*. Even wolves would be wise to fear the diseases that I could lay upon them."

"But they hate the silvereyes, and that might be enough to overcome their fear." Olumer looked up as he felt eyes on him, and his own gazed locked on a gray shape near the edge of the woods. "There. Do you see?"

Renne looked up, as if to humor him, and then blinked. The wolf stood in full sight, glaring at them and snarling. All its fur stood on end, and now and then it trembled as if it were fighting with the impulse to run away. But it did not run away. In a few moments, several other

wolves, mostly gray but one black, slipped out of the trees to join it, and they stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at Olumer and snarling at him. Olumer nodded and continued gathering wood.

"I think they will attack," he said.

"But this is surely just a pack response," said Renne.

"To what?"

"You did something to provoke them, perhaps. Intruded on a den? Took one of their pups?" But Renne's words came more and more slowly, and she was staring at the wolves as if her eyes had finally managed to get past her defenses.

"I don't know these woods," said Olumer. "I've never been here in my life. But it took me years before I was able to convince the wolves in the north that I meant no harm. They won't be as trusting, here." He slung the bundle of firewood over his shoulder, and straightened up, meeting the eyes of the first wolf who had come forth from the trees. He would be their alpha, since he was the biggest and the bravest.

The gray snarled and took a step forward. Olumer copied him, and this time the pack turned and melted into the trees. They were not yet ready to face him. They would probably not be until night had fallen and more wolves had gathered. Howls rang even as he thought that, though, and Olumer nodded. The attack might come before nightfall. He had to expect that it might.

He turned around to find Renne gathering firewood of her own. "Have you fought wolves before?" he asked her.

"No, but I have heard stories. I always thought they were from people who had fought wolf shapeshifters, or some other creature."

Olumer shook his head. "Sometimes they come. And fire is still the best weapon against them, the thing they fear most." He glanced to the side, but the wolves had truly vanished, and even the howls were diminishing for the moment.

"Will Cadona help us?"

Olumer sighed. "I don't know. Why don't you see if you can convince her that it's really for the best that she do this?"

"No!"

"Just for the one night, my lady. You might even find it useful. It would be a chance to test your magic and your skills-"

"No!"

Olumer shook his head and dumped the wood he had gathered next to the growing pile. Renne wasn't having any more luck with Cadona than he might have, though at least Cadona hadn't kicked her in the head yet, which was something that she had tried with Olumer often enough.

Cadona turned around then, and saw him. "Olumer!" she called, voice peremptory. "You know who I am. Tell this woman who I am, and make her understand that she can't hinder me."

"Princess, I can't," said Olumer. "She is convinced that you are sick, and you might be."

"I am not sick!" Cadona yelled in a rage. "I am the real Princess of Rivendon."

Renne began to talk to her in a low voice again. Cadona promptly screamed, so Olumer couldn't hear what the healer said. He was willing to bet that it was good advice, and that it would be ignored, which seemed to be the fate of so much good advice.

He turned back to arranging the wood. He had built up a long pile that circled the camp, including the carriage and the horses. If the wolves became bold enough to attack at all, they wouldn't hesitate to eat the horses.

"What's our strategy?"

Olumer glanced to the side. One of their drivers, Issendan, crouched beside him. He was the one who hadn't threatened to leave when Cadona's screams got too loud, and thus Olumer thought he was steady. He might as well trust him with the details of the plan, too, in case something happened to him but the wolves didn't stop the attack.

"A large ring of wood around the camp," said Olumer. "Partially a barrier of wood, partially a barrier of fire. We'll light it when the wolves get bold enough to approach. And a bonfire in the center, so that if the wolves do get past the outer ring, we'll have weapons aplenty."

"I'm a pretty good shot with a bow."

Olumer nodded silently towards his own gear, where his bow lay unstrung. Issendan stared at him curiously. "You won't be using it yourself?"

Olumer shook his head. "The wolves would go mad if I came close enough to shoot them. I'll have to stay back near the bonfire, and if they come across the barrier, then they'll have a run to get to me. I'll fight better with brands than with bow and arrows then, anyway."

"It also keeps you out of harm's way."

Olumer smiled at Issendan. "So would walking out the barrier and letting the wolves have me, but I'm not about to do that. And unless you're going to give me to them, then you're involved in protecting my life as well as your own."

Issendan made an abrupt gesture. "I didn't mean it like that. Of course I'll help protect you. I was just startled. Where will the rest of us be?"

"Along the barrier, ready to shoot the wolves with bows or any magic that you might have at your disposal."

Issendan answered his unspoken question by holding up a hand and letting a wind stir his hair. "I'm Gust. Not very well-trained, I'm afraid."

Olumer nodded, pleased. "If you can call winds to fan the flames, that will be more than enough."

"And the- ah- supposed Princess?" Issendan lowered his voice as if he thought that Cadona would hear him and turn on him, which wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility. "Will she help at all?"

"I don't know," said Olumer, glancing at Cadona, who was standing now with her back turned to Renne and her arms folded across her chest. "She has Scarlet magic, which could prove helpful, but she may be angry enough to actually aid the wolves. She's very upset with me right now." The glare that Cadona sent his way confirmed this.

"Then we knock her out before the fight begins."

Olumer glanced at Issendan. "What do you mean?"

"We can't afford to have her get in the way," said Issendan, and paused to listen to a howl rising from the woods, which seemed to confirm his words. "She might, and if she aids the wolves, they might win. I don't want to see anyone die to suit some spoiled child's whim."

"Sick child."

"Even if she's insane, she's still spoiled," said Issendan firmly. "I want her out of the way. If you don't want to hit her, I understand, but she should still be out of the way."

"Will you do it, then?"

Issendan nodded and stood, walking casually towards the Princess. She had turned her back on him and was yelling at Renne. She didn't glance at Issendan, having decided that the drivers didn't exist, and he hit her over the head without pausing and without trouble from her. Cadona slumped. Issendan gathered her body up and began to drag her away to the carriage.

"What was that all about?" Renne yelled.

Olumer gestured to her. She came over to him and crouched beside him, still fuming. "That blow on the head could damage her," she told him. "She might fall back into the delusions the more easily, or start believing that she is the Princess of Rivendon all the more firmly."

"She might also aid the wolves with their Scarlet magic, when they come tonight. I believe that she is angry enough to do so."

"Would she really do that?"

"Yes," said Olumer quietly, as he thought of a memory that he hadn't touched in long years. Cadona had only been ten then, and how much fiercer would she be now, when she was fourteen and had more control of her gift? "She would. So I think it's best that she be out of the way." He glanced sideways at Renne. "I understand if you want to keep watch over her."

"I'll be in the fight," said Renne. "I can use knives. And my magic."

"I know that you have disease magic, but do you have magic that would be useful in battle?"

Renne nodded. "Yes, I do. I used sometimes to complain about being born without elemental magic, but then I discovered what I could do, and I had no more complaints." She smiled grimly. "And what about you? Do you have magic that would be useful in battle?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Silvereyes magic."

"And what does it do?"

"You'll see." Olumer didn't want to think about it right now, and he certainly didn't want to call it forth. The last time he had called it forth was four years ago, after the regrettable incident with Cadona's temper, and he would inevitably be reminded of that when he had to use it again.

He lifted his eyes, looking beyond the barrier in time to see a sleek gray shape staring at him from the trees. He bared his teeth, and the wolf bared its teeth back and faded. But the gray daylight was fading as well, and Olumer knew now that they would attack, driven half-mad by a silvereyes in their territory. More, he was a silvereyes who had used his magic to kill and not eat.

I will have to call them forth again tonight.

"Now, Olumer?"

Olumer nodded. Issendan and the other driver, Calortas, hurried forward, flinging their torches onto the barrier. The wood caught at once, and flared into a dazzling ring of fire. Issendan held his hands up, and Olumer felt his hair stir as the winds hurtled past him, fanning the flames busily.

Olumer turned to the huge bonfire flaring beside him, and felt a measure of comfort. If few enough wolves came, or if they only stood outside the barrier and didn't try to climb it, then he could depend on the fire. He wouldn't have to use his magic.

"Here they come."

Olumer glanced up. Renne had keener sight in the dark than any of them, and she stood at the point of the barrier that was closest to the forest, staring into the darkness. "How many?" Olumer asked softly.

"I count at least ten pairs of eyes."

Olumer nodded tensely. One big pack- or a few packs joining together to make sure their enemy was dead.

"Fifteen," said Renne.

"They're coming from this direction, too," Calortas called, his voice shaking. Olumer could hardly blame him. The man would have to rely on his knives and torches; he had Azure magic, but it was too weak to congeal the blood in an opponent's veins or do anything else damaging unless he was touching his foe. "Five of them at least. Probably more."

Olumer opened his mouth to say something, but the howls exploded then, meant to terrify and succeeding. Calortas yelped and stumbled back from the barrier, leaving that point unguarded.

At once, the gray alpha Olumer had seen earlier that day rose into view above the flames, hurtling so close to them that this coat caught fire. He dropped into the snow on the other side of the barrier, rolled a moment to extinguish the flames, and then bounced to his feet and came straight for Olumer.

Olumer flung the torch he held. The beast dodged with skill and grace. Olumer nodded grimly. The wolf had fought humans before, or else was faster and more graceful than most of his kind, which would fit with his being alpha. Either way, he now had no choice, though the use of his magic would make the wolves more frenzied and more determined to kill him.

He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the hurtling wolf, and spoke to the small creatures that flitted around the world at all times, seeking some physical existence. *Come. I have need of you.*

They heard him, and swarmed him at once. Not many silvereyes called them forth except to aid in a hunt, driving them back before they got a taste of blood. They could already sense that this would be different.

Small bodies. Many.

The magic flowed out of him in a thickening stream, and became many small black bodies, large rats. The spirits flowed into them, and when Olumer opened his eyes, they turned identical silver gazes on him.

The gray wolf had slowed, but still stood there, snarling. Olumer managed to hold the silver-eyed rats back for a moment. If the wolf retreated, the pack would probably retreat, and he would let them go.

But then Renne cried out, and Olumer saw a dark shape land on her, and then there came the sounds of ripping flesh.

He let the rats go.

They ran in a swam, leaping on the gray wolf and slashing him into pieces in less than a minute. Olumer let out a sigh of relief as their mouths filled with the wolf's blood. Now, so long as he didn't have the need to call forth another swam, this one would know and seek the taste of the first blood they had drunk. They would attack the wolves, but harm no one else, either horse or human.

The rats divided, some of them flowing after the dark wolf who pinned Renne down, others heading for the barrier, where they could smell more wolves. Another jumped through the flames, and then went down as the rats met it. In seconds, it was no more than another blood-smear on the snow.

Olumer turned his head as he heard a low snarl there, beyond the flames, on the other side of the circle. Another black wolf jumped the barrier and came streaking towards him. Some of the rats whipped around at once, but they couldn't move swiftly enough to save him.

Olumer grabbed and flung another brand, almost scorching himself, even through the thick leather gloves he wore, in the process. The black wolf wasn't as graceful as the gray alpha,

luckily. He caught the brand full in the face, and went down roaring, the flames eating his muzzle and eyes and catching in his fur.

The rats came and ate him after that, and Olumer snatched a brand and walked to the barrier, to peer beyond at the wolves there.

Seeing him, they went mad. One howled and sprang forward, body sleek, fast, graceful, reaching and reaching-

And then the rats came around the other side of the barrier and fell on the wolves. In seconds, they were howling, howls that sounded more like screams than ordinary hunting howls, and fleeing back to the forest. Olumer drew in a deep breath. He had made the wolves' territory unsafe for any silvereyes for a long time to come, but most of the purebloods would probably travel in packs anyway, which would make it much harder for the wolves to hunt them.

He called the rats back when they started to follow the wolves into the forest. Left alone, the swarm might easily depopulate the woods. Olumer didn't want that to happen.

They came, sprinting from every side, all of them sleek with the blood and well-satisfied, their silver eyes glowing like earthbound stars. They surrounded him, tails hitting the ground, silver eyes meeting his.

They wanted to stay here. They would form an escort around him, and tear any wolves that showed themselves to pieces. Olumer knew it, could feel their soft pleading in his head.

This was always the temptation. The rats promised security, and even a chance to strike back at those who hated Olumer for no reason that he could control. Part of him always wanted to keep them.

But they would become too accustomed to their bodies if they stayed, and in time break free and run wild. A full-blooded silvereyes could control a swarm for as long as he wished, but Olumer had learned the hard way just how soon his control weakened.

He shook his head, and pulled his magic back into himself, taking the bodies from the spirits. They faded back into the air, complaining slightly, but too well-fed to mean it. He had given them the blood they most liked. They couldn't whine too much, though they could, and did, brag to their kindred who hovered around Olumer and hadn't gotten the chance to take a body.

Olumer crashed to his knees in the snow, panting. His head spun, and the magic he had pulled back into himself felt like nothing so much as a broken limb. He looked up when footsteps crunched in the snow, and saw Renne standing there, a bandage already wrapped around her ripped arm.

She stared at him.

Olumer shrugged. "It is something that I can do if I really must. But the wolves hate it, and they will hate me the more for turning the magic on them. We should move on as soon as possible in the morning."

"And will the wolves come back?"

"Keep the fires burning," said Olumer, "but I don't think they will."

He fell asleep there, in the snow, next to the dying fire.

