

Chapter 24

Shade and Shine

"Shadow is not the opposite of Light. Dark is the opposite of Light. Shadow is itself, blending both of those great powers- and thus, of course, hated by both of those great powers."

-Renire Shadowborn, priestess of Shadow, arrested for heresy in the time of Queen Loriel.

Elary looked around, shivering. One moment Rior had been standing in front of her, arms spread as he invoked the shadows, and the next-

The next she was standing here.

It was very cold. That was what she noticed first, primarily because there was little else to notice about the place. Everything that surrounded her glistened a cold, pearly gray. Elary thought she could make out the shapes of walls, and sometimes of chairs and other furniture, but most of it was formless.

"Where am I?" she whispered.

"Within Shadow's domain."

Elary turned quickly at the voice. Rior stood behind her, and here he was solid, not a creature of mist. He looked probably as he had when he was alive, however long ago that had been, shaggy-haired and clad in finely-made though torn clothes. His eyes, though, were the same gray as the world around her, and filled with the same wild power.

"Where is that?" Elary asked, determined that he wouldn't throw her too far off course.

Rior gave her an amused glance. "You don't know?"

Elary shook her head, fighting the impulse to shout at him that she shouldn't have to know. He was the one in control here, wherever here was. Remembering Shadow's powers of shapeshifting and change, Elary had to wonder if she hadn't gone anywhere at all, and Rior had only cast a concealing mask over the walls. Surreptitiously she tried to reach for a wall, but encountered only mist.

"The domain of Shadow is in shadows everywhere, of course," said Rior softly. "In fog, and mist, and the paths of the mind. You might call this my mind, though in many ways it is different."

"And why have you brought me here?"

"To show you that not everything is clear."

Rior vanished abruptly, and then his voice came from behind her. Elary turned, startled, and saw him leaning against a stone that had not been there before; she knew it hadn't. "To show you that a large part of what lives in our minds, we create ourselves," Rior continued. He peered at Elary as if she had done some interesting trick. "That you don't know that already astounds me. You've lived longer than I have. It seems a shame that you don't know more."

Elary ground her teeth. "I have never been interested in the wars of Dark and Shadow and Light," she said. "But, by heritage and birth, Iantra is my country, and I want to see someone responsible on the throne."

"Then you don't want Mitherill."

Elary shook her head. "I don't want *this* Mitherill. She is still a child right now, and that means that she has childish traits. But she can be educated out of them, and made into a Queen of Iantra-Arvenna."

"I fear that you don't understand," said Rior. "I have spent the past few days looking into her mind as deeply as I can, parting the shadows there to see what lies beneath. And there is nothing beneath. She really is what she seems. Light and Destiny and self-righteousness."

"She can be trained-"

"Not while she is a vessel of Light," said Rior. "Shadow himself admitted as much to me. We will have to cut her off from Light's influence before she can begin to become human."

"You don't have the right to do that."

"Why not?"

"She's royal! She may not be a strong hope for Iantra-Arvenna, but she's all we have left!" Elary clenched her hands. "You look as if you should understand that. You're Iantran royalty, aren't you?"

"I was."

Elary ignored the amusement in his tone. "It doesn't matter how hard it will be to make her see certain things. We still have to train her to see them."

"Why? Why not give up a hopeless case and find a better one, or use Shadow to alter Mitherill until we can change her mind?"

"Because she's the last royal descendant of that line!"

"So?"

Elary opened her mouth, and found that she could say nothing. At last, she shook her head. "I don't know how to answer you," she said.

"Royalty is less important than having a good ruler," said Rior. "After seeing what happened to some of my cousins, I know that." He was silent for a few moments, and then said, "Shadow loves Iantra. He understands less about Arvenna and Doralissa, and the people there are being very stubborn. He would like to give them rulers of their own. The problem is, the two royal candidates are entirely unsuitable, and there are many people who won't believe that."

"Mitherill is not unsuitable."

"Yes, she is."

"She's royal!"

"That matters less than being a good ruler."

Elary shook her head. She had a feeling the argument was circular, somehow, but that didn't mean she had to listen. "They are the same thing. The Light will make her into a good ruler."

Rior looked at her in silence. Elary wanted to say something else, but the coldness that flowed from his eyes like a stream silenced her. She scowled at the floor, therefore, and said nothing instead.

Rior said at last, "I would not presume to say what kind of child, or ruler, Mitherill would be without Destiny looking over her shoulder all the time. I will say that with it looking over her shoulder, a possibly suitable ruler is made into an unsuitable one. We must rid her of the Light's control."

"I am determined to keep it and still see her become a good ruler," said Elary. "I have trained many young healers. I am not unused to teaching. Let me take over her teaching. She will listen to me."

"No," said Rior.

"Are you afraid of her slipping from your control?" Elary challenged.

Rior laughed. "When Shadow's domain is everywhere? No. But I don't want to set a bad ruler on the throne of Ilantra merely to gratify your conceit that you could teach. Light is fond of doing such things, of allowing bad things to happen just because that allows a servant to play out her false ideals. No."

"You can't do this."

"Yes, I can," said Rior. "The only question that remains is: Do I want to? Mitherill doesn't take any kind of instruction well. Destiny has assured her that she knows what is best, and so she doesn't see the need to listen to any adult advice at all."

"I know that she was coming into her power when I was forced away from her. That makes it seem a good thing to listen to her, does it not?"

"No," said Rior again. Elary was getting tired of that word, but didn't see how she could stop him from saying it. "Destiny and Light want what they want. They will lie and kill and do what they can to achieve that goal. It doesn't make them evil, not all the time, but it does mean that they cannot be trusted."

"Can Shadow?"

"In what way?"

"To know what is best for the world."

Rior laughed aloud. "Of course not! Shadow cares for Ilantra, and for those who have chosen to follow him, and for making sure that Light does not make what it falsely calls a 'paradise.' He can be trusted to know what is best for those people, but not for others."

"Then why are you holding Mitherill, an Heir of the Light, here?"

"Because she would also be an Heir of Ilantra. And because Shadow and I have looked into her mind, and seen what she would do to his people if she sat the throne. We will not simply let her go."

Elary licked her lips. She wasn't sure that she had the authority to bargain like this, but, on the other hand, it might show a trust in the Light and Destiny if she went as far as she could and let them handle the rest. "What if I told you that Mitherill would be Heir to Arvenna alone?"

Rior raised his eyebrows. "Do go on."

"There is a very dedicated group of Arvennese loyalists who also want a good Queen on the throne," said Elary. "And they would make sure that Mitherill would not take that throne as a pawn of Light, if indeed she truly is so." *Light, Destiny, forgive me. I do not believe his words, but they are convenient to use against him.* "They would train and educate her, and never give up. You're concerned about her as the Heir of Ilantra, but not of other countries. What if I agreed to have Mitherill renounce her claim to Ilantra, and we handed her over to the Arvennese for training?"

"She would not renounce her claim."

"Then I would, as her guardian," said Elary. *Light, Destiny, may this fit your plans. I hope in the future you will be able to reclaim Mitherill's Kingdom for her, but this is the only way I can think of to get her out of here.* "I will not let her go back to Ilantra as long as she travels with me. She will have to stay in Arvenna and learn the Court ways the Serpents will insist she know. And she will learn to love this land and its people."

Besides, the Diamond of Ezudlos was here. Elary knew no reason that Mitherill couldn't complete her Quest by staying in Arvenna. And when she had the Diamond and enough power, she could claim Ilantra by force if there was no other way.

Rior studied her for a long moment. Then he said, "Do you think that you can hide your thoughts from Shadow?"

Elary stared at him in chagrin. That he might have heard her thoughts about the Diamond and fooling Shadow had not occurred to her.

Rior laughed, though, and waved a hand. "This is a decision that I do have to make," he said, "since Shadow put Mitherill's education in my hands. I've discovered that I can do nothing for her. I need Shadow and his power to change her mind, but he doesn't want to change it. So, we were at an impasse. I am willing to let you take and train Mitherill if you think you can do it."

"So generous," Elary muttered.

"Isn't it?" asked Rior, who might not have noticed her sarcastic tone. "I do think that you should hurry with taking her away, though. There are some who disagree with me, like Luden, and would prefer that she stay here where Shadow can watch over her. Take her, now."

The shadows whirled away, and Elary found herself standing once more in the bedroom that Shadow had given Mitherill. She turned, and saw the little Princess standing not far from her, staring at her with dry eyes.

She flung herself forward with a shriek when Elary gestured, and hugged Elary tightly. "They were so horrible to me," she murmured. "So horrible, Elary. They ignored me when I asked for things, and they laughed at me."

Elary hugged Mitherill, and stroked her hair, and tried to hide her own dismay. This was not the strong girl just coming into her power whom she had left. This was a girl beaten down and forced back into some knowledge of her limits. Who could have done this to her?

Rior, of course.

Elary turned suspicious eyes on him.

Rior was talking quietly with Luden, though, and Luden was holding Silar immobilized in an easy grip. Elary didn't know why the woman couldn't move or talk, but it had to be Luden's hand on her arm that was the answer. When Luden dropped his hand, then she swung the illusory sword past him with a hissing sound.

"Very impressive, my lady," said Rior. "But we know it's an image now, which rather lessens the impression that it makes. Please, don't trouble yourself with standing here and swinging at us further. Your companion has the Princess, and you can depart in peace."

Silar stepped back to stand beside Elary, her eyes darting from face to face. "And you are letting us go?" she asked.

"I think I just said that," said Rior.

"I told you," said Luden, in a loud whisper that Elary had no doubt he meant for them to hear. "They're very stupid, even for Lightworkers. We would be making the contest more equal if we killed them now."

Rior grinned at Luden, though Elary couldn't see what was funny about that comment. "No, Luden, I think that we should let them go instead." He turned to look at Elary. "I know that you will take good care of Mitherill."

"Of course," said Elary, clutching her close. Mitherill might be crying because Rior hadn't spoken her title, but if so, it was buried in the general tears. "She is the Princess."

"Yes, she is," said Rior. "And you have agreed that you will renounce all her claims to the throne of Ilantra?"

"What?" Mitherill shrieked, attempting to turn her head. Her view was blocked by Elary's arm, though.

"I do renounce them," said Elary in a calm voice, though she could feel her heart beating hard, and could feel Silar staring at her, and knew they might both hate her forever after this. "I will train her as the Heir of Arvenna alone, and agree that Ilantra remains under Shadow's rule."

"You can't do that!" cried Mitherill, now struggling to be let go, probably so that she could attack Rior and Luden. "I'm the Princess of both countries, the last descendant of both royal bloodlines. You can't toss me aside as though I was nothing more than a- an ordinary girl!"

"We did," said Rior, his voice and face both tranquil. "And I assure you that an ordinary girl would make a far better ruler of Ilantra than you would." He nodded to Luden. "Will you see these ladies out?"

"No!"

Elary had to drag Mitherill with her to make her move. As the girl kicked and flailed and screamed, Elary shook her head. Of all the ways that Mitherill would leave Shadow's sanctuary, she had never imagined this way.

"Ouch!"

Elary let Mitherill go in startlement. The Princess had bitten her on the hand.

Mitherill ran at once back to the room, but Rior had melted into shade and Luden just shut the door in her face. Mitherill stood there, panting, for a long moment.

Then she buried her head in her arms and began to cry.

"Come with me, dear one," Elary murmured, walking forward to take her hand again. "They are only servants of Shadow, and I think that I have outwitted them. The Diamond of Ezudlos is hidden in Arvenna and not Iantra, after all. Once you have regained it, then you will have the power to go back to Iantra and claim your throne in that country, as well."

Mitherill turned her head. Elary fell back a little at the naked hatred in her eyes.

"You gave up my rights to the Iantran throne," she said, as if she were pronouncing the names of rape and murder. "There is no greater crime in the world, Elary, than to turn on your rightful ruler. This is treason."

"I think it's an excellent idea."

Elary glanced over her shoulder at Silar, wanting to tell the woman to hush. Mitherill was barely in the mood to hear comforting words right now, never mind the taunting that Silar seemed intent on.

Mitherill wiped her nose and turned to glare at Silar in turn. "And why would you think that?"

"Because Arvenna has suffered for years," said Silar, with passion like a white flame in her eyes. "Because the rulers have preferred to stay in Iantra, which is softer and warmer, and deal with our problems from a distance. That's not the way that we want our rulers to be, though. We want them to have courage and loyalty to our country as more than just a throne. We have charge of you now, and we have assurance that you will only be the ruler of Arvenna. We have what we came here to win." She glanced at Elary. "Your name shall resound among the Serpents for this, do not doubt."

"The Serpents?" Mitherill asked.

"Why, yes," said Silar, looking back at her. "Named for the slithering in and out of villages that we did, Your Highness."

"For me?"

"Yes."

Mitherill shook her head. Her eyes were still teary, but calm and cold behind the tears, and she stared at Silar with much the same kind of hatred she had given Elary.

"I will not have Darkworkers serve me," she said, enunciating every word. Elary shivered.

Silar laughed.

Elary blinked. Perhaps Silar wasn't going to be as affected by Mitherill as Elary had thought she would be. Mitherill was her Princess, of course, but that didn't seem to matter to Silar, who grinned at her pale face and said, "We will teach you better, my lady. Names don't matter. Allegiances do. If you are loyal to Arvenna, then you can call yourself Queen of Ilantra all you like. But you must be loyal to us, just as we are loyal to you."

"You are of the Light?"

"No, of you," said Silar, and grabbed her around the waist. "Come, Elary. Melior will carry you. I want to carry this brat."

"Put me down!" shrieked Mitherill.

"Scream like that again," said Silar, beginning to flex her wings as if to limber them up for the flight ahead, "and I *will* put you down. In mid-flight. Coming, Elary? Melior? I think it's time to get the Princess of Arvenna back to her adoring subjects."

Chapter 25

Intervention

"You cannot move through this world without making enemies. That is true. But you can be very careful about the sort of enemies you make, and run if you think that you are making too many."

-Yillos Goldfleet.

"I don't think that I can hold her off much longer."

Norianna spoke in a tone of utter exhaustion. Kymenos, seated in the middle of her shield with the sword gripped in his hand, closed his eyes in his own acknowledgment of that exhaustion.

They had been fighting the Dragon Queen for hours. The moon had long since set, and the eastern sky was beginning to pale. Kymenos didn't know where Cheyena or the horses were. He could only hope they had reached safety, or something like it.

He and Norianna, he conceded to the silent scorekeeper in his mind, were unlikely to be able to. He opened his eyes and looked at the Queen again, who circled overhead, her claws extended in the attack that Norianna had deflected three times now, her roar still strong and her breath full of fire. She seemed tireless.

Kymenos was not. He had called on all the Azure and the Gust that he could long ago, using it to fortify Norianna's shield and soak himself so that he might not burn immediately if the fire touched him. There was nothing more that he could do.

He was going to die.

Kymenos found the idea intensely annoying. Who would harvest his seeds? Who would set up a shop for him in Serian and taunt the members of the Star Circle? Who would handle Sykeen's wails of grief and make him see that calming down a little and being sensible was the way to live his life?

The Queen roared again. Kymenos thought that she didn't like too much time to pass before reminding them of her existence. He opened his eyes and glared at her, though he didn't know if she could read it through the shield.

"She can't," Norianna confirmed. "But she'll be able to in a little while. The shield is going to drop in three minutes."

Kymenos licked his lips. He knew that he could kill himself with Norianna before the dragon dropped on him, but he didn't know what would happen to the sword. "And what about you?"

"Her fire can melt me, if she breaths hot enough," said Norianna. "And even if she doesn't, I'll probably lie here on the stone for days before anyone finds me. I don't think your little coward will come back."

Kymenos shrugged. He would have protested that Cheyena was not a coward, except that he wasn't in the business of denying truth. "Someone will find you, eventually."

"That's only if she doesn't melt me. And you?"

"I'm annoyed," said Kymenos, staring at the circling dragon. Half of the time until Norianna's shield fell had already passed, and he was talking about this. Kymenos would have felt grimly amused, but it was more or less appropriate for the sort of life he had led. "I don't want to die yet."

"Most people don't."

"But I have things to do."

"Most people do."

Kymenos glared at her. "Don't say that again, or I will throw you out the shield and take my chances with the Queen's fire. At least it would kill me more quickly than this tiresome nagging."

Norianna said nothing at all. Kymenos supposed she realized there was nothing to say. He went back to staring at the Queen, who had so far voiced nothing save a few threats. She stared at him with golden eyes, and circled.

"What is that?" Norianna asked.

"What is what?" Kymenos looked through the shield, dreading to see Cheyena come running back in a fit of bravery. But he saw only the grass and stone and scrub trees under the growing light.

"That thing there."

By squinting, and following the slight pointing motion the sword made, Kymenos caught a glimpse of a winged creature. It seemed to be flying hard towards the Queen. He snorted. "A messenger, come to reinforce her?"

"It does not feel like it."

Kymenos shrugged. "I'm not a talking sword. I couldn't tell you what it feels like."

"It feels like something I have not seen in the world in thousands of years," Norianna whispered, and then was still. Kymenos stared at the approaching creature for want of something better to do, and found that it wasn't a dragon at all. The leathery wings looked like it, but there was no long neck sticking forward, or clawed hind feet folded behind, or stream of fire cutting the night.

"Kymenos," said Norianna, in a peculiar voice.

"What?" Kymenos asked, still gazing at the creature and wondering if he ever had seen anything like it before.

"I am going to put a shield over us, A last one. I will hold it for as long as I can. Will you put the last of your own strength behind it?"

"What kind of strength?"

"Azure."

Kymenos didn't question her. There wasn't time, and at least doing something like this would accomplish more than having fights with a nagging sword. He called on the Azure again and shaped it to match the new shield that Norianna placed over them, which was horizontal and made him lie flat on the ground. The shield glowed and flickered weakly, as strong as both of them could make it, which wasn't very.

"And now?" Kymenos asked, when the shield hid them.

"We wait."

The Queen roared again and circled as though she would begin a final dive. Kymenos closed his eyes, then opened them. He didn't want to face approaching death, but if the choice was face it or hide, then he would face it.

The dragon began her dive.

The winged creature hit her neck on.

Kymenos saw the dragon's head fly to the side, and imagined that he could hear the roar of outrage, though the pounding of his own heart had grown too loud for that. The creature, barely daunted by the impact, fastened its claws in the dragon's scales and clung there.

"Oh, bravely done!" Norianna whispered, or something like it. Kymenos still couldn't hear. It sounded like something she would say, though.

The Queen rose into the air, shaking her head a little as though she would rid herself of her unwelcome rider. In the growing light, Kymenos could see that it was a bat, a gray bat, but larger than any he had ever seen or heard of. Its wings fluttered fiercely as it clung. He wondered what it was doing, and whether it had come to help him or to settle another score.

The Queen reached up with one talon to scrape the bat loose.

It reared to the side, its claws still hooked in her neck, and hung upside down so that her first swipe missed. The Queen snarled and again moved her foot, this time to shred the bat's wings.

Whatever the bat had been planning, it finally did it. A sudden swirling cloud enveloped the battle, hiding it from Kymenos's sight. Norianna cried out at the same time, the way that she might have if she had seen a hope of their survival.

Kymenos, the echoes of the shout ringing in his ears, watched the cloud, and wondered if Norianna had wanted to strengthen the shield in case the dragon fell on top of them. He didn't think it would work, if that really was her goal. He didn't have enough strength left to hold off a dragon, and that little he did have was failing fast.

The cloud broke apart. For a moment, the Queen hung there, and Kymenos's heart almost stopped altogether to see her unwounded.

Then she broke apart.

Kymenos stared. Gray overcame the Queen's body as though she had found a way to become a thorn dragon instead of a fire dragon, and she fogged gently at the edges, like a cloud warped by the wind. In moments, as a southern wind that had no business being there picked up speed, she broke apart altogether. Small clouds drifted in all directions, lightening from gray to white as Kymenos watched, forming a serene and unhurried procession over the Mountains.

Norianna shouted again, and at that moment the shield failed. Kymenos let the last of his Azure strength close the conduit between him and the element of water.

It was very silent, suddenly.

The gray bat still circled in the air, but it was coming lower and lower. Kymenos watched it uneasily, not having the strength to rise from the ground at the moment. Even he could feel the power that throbbed around the bat, and he knew it was no natural creature. It wasn't until it landed awkwardly on the stones and formed itself into a shadow-shape, then into a man, that he knew it was divine, though.

"Who are you?" Kymenos asked, wondering if it was Destiny, and its way of handling the dragon a dramatic bid for his services once more.

The man smiled. "I am Shadow."

Kymenos shook his head. He knew least about Shadow of all the great powers, since it had never displayed any interest in Dalzna, but he didn't think even Shadow went around randomly rescuing people who were not worshippers. "And what are you doing here?"

"Address him by title!" hissed Norianna.

"My lord," Kymenos added unwillingly.

Shadow smiled as if that little byplay had amused him. "I came to save you from the dragon, of course. Unless you really think that you could have defeated her without my help?"

No doubt about it, his eyes *were* amused. Kymenos grasped Norianna's hilt and used her like a crutch to climb to his feet. "It is not that, my lord. But I do wonder why you think that saving me will make me worship you."

"That is not my purpose," said Shadow. "I know that Dark must have sent this dragon hunting for you. She won the Queenship under suspicious circumstances, and I always suspected Dark involvement. So I came and saved you, that you might continue to plague the world."

"Why?"

"Confusion of the Dark, and scattering of its power, is always good," said Shadow absently, tilting his head back as though he were looking for something in the sky. Kymenos followed his gaze, and saw what could have been the back and tail of a fleeing dragon. Shadow was looking at him again when he turned his head back downward. "And besides, would you rather that I had not saved you?"

Kymenos shook his head. "I am simply too used to great powers requiring something of me, and it is a condition that I will no longer accept. I don't want to serve you, or Dark, or Light."

"You won't have to," said Shadow. "I assume that you are going north to Dalzna?"

"Yes."

"And your ultimate destination?"

"Serian," said Kymenos.

"The Lake of the Northern Winds," said Norianna at the same moment.

Shadow smiled and looked back and forth between them. "There is some dissension, I take it?"

Kymenos glared at the sword. "If I go to the lake, I will toss you into it, and let you lie there for a hundred years or until some fool comes along."

"I would go to the Lake, Kymenos, were I you," said Shadow, and if he had said it in a condescending tone, Kymenos would have struck out at him, great power or no. But he spoke with amusement in his voice, and good-natured amusement at that. "You may learn something of value to you."

"And may not?" asked Kymenos. He considered himself wise in the ways of word-games and loopholes after the things Destiny had asked him, and he wasn't about to let this one slip by.

"You *will* learn something," said Shadow. "I could tell you, but you would not believe me. There is no law against diving powers lying, after all. But how you handle the knowledge is entirely up to you. You could decide that you will use it as a weapon, or you could decide to cast it away forever."

"And if I don't go to the Lake?"

Shadow's face went solemn. "I will do nothing to you, of course. But someone else could find out the secret you should know first, and use it to your disadvantage."

Kymenos chewed his lip. Shadow had saved his life and didn't seem to be asking anything in return. Besides, he had almost decided to go to the lake first to appease Norianna and get rid of her.

"Very well," he said.

Shadow smiled at him. "Cheyena and the horses are in a little dale three miles north of here," he said. "She will be relieved to learn that you are safe and well. Now, if you excuse me, I must be going. One of my servants made a decision that he's anxiously awaiting my scolding for. I must go back and see to it that he receives a scolding for expecting a scolding in the first place. The decision was a good one. This level of wavering is not."

He sprang upward, wings unfolding, becoming the bat again as he moved. He was flying hard to the north when Kymenos's blurring eyes made him out again.

Kymenos shook his head. "And you also think I will learn something at the Lake of the Northern Winds?" he asked Norianna.

"Yes. I know it."

"Then why not tell me?"

Norianna was silent.

"Out of pure spite, probably," Kymenos muttered, and after one last glance at the sky, he went to find Cheyena and the horses.

Chapter 26

Dance of the Filifernai

"I have never seen anyone dance as the filifernai do. They are wild and graceful and they bring tears to my eyes, and I know as I watch them that I have never seen anything more beautiful, nor more evil."

-Attributed to Opollonth, scholar-prince of Orlath.

Humans thought they had no speech.

But that was because they were humans, with no fey blood.

Olumer could hear them speaking, their voices whispering in time to the bone-clacks of the chains and the muffled drumbeats that came from nowhere, created by the dance-steps rather than creating them. He could hear their voices murmuring promises of destruction, promises of pleasure, and even promises of pain that didn't really matter; their victims would go to them anyway, drawn by the music.

They danced, their limbs writhing around their bodies. The one on the left had its arm coiling around its neck and then back down before its body turned around to catch up with the limb. The other jumped, interwove its legs like snakes, and then came back down and balanced on a heel.

Olumer felt a movement at his side and put a hand out. Being half-fey, he could not be as easily enchanted, though he found it hard to take his gaze from the dance. But he could try to prevent Lyli from going to the filifernai. He knew they would lash her throat out and eat her body if she went.

Cadona was similarly trying to move forward on the other side of him, he saw, but Silverheart stood in front of her and let out a rumbling growl that didn't stop no matter how long the music went on. His golden eyes locked with Olumer's, and for a moment Olumer thought he saw desperation there. Then the leopard turned his head away, as if he were ashamed for asking for help.

Olumer watched as his cougars slowed and then stopped, staring mesmerized at the dance. The filiferna who had jumped into the air and twined its legs danced close to one of them, swaying and beckoning.

Olumer tried to draw his magic back and deprive the spirit of a body, even though he knew it wouldn't be in time.

It wasn't. The cougar stepped forward, eyes on the filiferna's turning ones, and the chain lashed out once. In an instant, its throat was torn apart, and the filiferna had knelt and began to feed.

Even the death couldn't break the enchantment, which Olumer thought was the most horrible thing about the magic. Unless someone fey or half-fey was with the human victims, they would walk willingly forward to be devoured by the same dark fey who had eaten their kin.

The other cougars stepped forward, and Olumer tensed. There was something he could try. He wasn't sure it would work, and to have even a chance he would have to let the second filiferna kill another cougar, but he could try.

The cougar came near. The second chain lashed. The second filiferna knelt to feed from the cut.

Olumer exerted an enormous effort of will, and closed his eyes. It broke him from the dance, and for a moment he was himself again, free of any and all magic the dance had inspired in him, crawling with loathing and nausea for it.

"Cadona! Lyli!" he cried.

He could sense them swaying towards him, caught between the music that had not stopped and his voice.

Olumer took a breath and scooped Lyli up in his arms. He would have left her behind and taken Cadona if he could only save one of them, but he had to trust in Silverheart.

The snow leopard's growl reassured him, and Olumer opened his eyes, carefully looking directly at the leopard, to find that he had Cadona's arm in his mouth, not puncturing her skin with his teeth, but still managing to drag her along. Olumer nodded back, and then they turned and ran for it.

Olumer bounded up the slope beside the cave, carrying Lyli with him, hanging on though she squirmed and struggled. Cadona was screaming in outrage, sounding more like herself with every moment, and demanding that Silverheart let her go or face the consequences. Behind them, the drumbeats and the clacking of the chains continued, and Olumer dared to hope they would get away.

He glanced back, though, and saw that the filifernai had already risen from their meals and were gliding after them.

"Silverheart!" he called.

The snow leopard growled in response.

"Can you take the girls to a high place, a safe place, and guard them there?"

Another growl. Olumer blessed the compassion of the Light as he set Lyli down, and then stepped in front of her to keep her from running back to the dark fey. Someone loyal to Cadona alone would have left Lyli behind, or only taken her under protest, but Silverheart was good and kind and would not think of that.

"Then run!" he said. "I will hold them off."

Silverheart didn't waste time arguing the way a human would. He came up to Lyli, ducked between her legs as she took a step, and rose with her on his back. She screamed in outrage and pulled on his fur, which Silverheart ignored. He ducked his head to Olumer and then was gone, springing forward with Lyli clinging on, not daring to do anything else. Cadona, Olumer saw with amusement, didn't get pulled along for a bumpy ride; Silverheart had let her go, but she now ran beside him, shouting curses at him for maltreating her, and paid no attention to anything else.

The filifernai strode towards him.

Olumer turned back to face them, and let his smile fade.

The humans were aware, sometimes, of the enmity between silvereyes and filiferna, but they didn't know how to explain it. Why should they have? They spoke of a war long ago. They spoke of a treachery that one side or the other had played on the other. They murmured that the dark of the forests belonged to the filifernai, and the wild fey, the silvereyes, objected to that.

They didn't understand.

No war was necessary to make Olumer hate the filifernai. They were twisted mockeries of fey, and he was not. Even a half-blood had more of the pure magic in him than these did.

The nearest filiferna began to swing its chain, and then to dance. The other watched, calmly, ready to help if necessary. They wanted to enchant him and then rip his throat out. It was hard to do, but given his human blood, they could do it.

And Olumer was glad. The more time he won for Cadona, the greater the chance that Silverheart would actually escort her somewhere safe.

He didn't call on the spirits again; that would only have resulted in the deaths of still more of them, and when a spirit died in such a way, it was gone forever. Olumer stood, and watched them dance, and reached back for the first moment he had felt truly alive, in the forests when he was a child and his mother had told him of his silvereyes heritage. He had gone wandering in the snow, and he had seen the trees bending down around a small clearing. He had entered it.

Among all the memories of his life, this one was clearest. There was an elf dancing there, a Faerie elf, moving in homage to the cold and the winter. He never took notice of Olumer, but Olumer could still remember the long sweep of pale hair and the graceful movements of his limbs.

A true silvereyes could have called memories of winter down and frozen the filifernai in their tracks, or tried. A silvereyes pack might even have been able to down them. Olumer could

only slow them, and he would die. He knew he would. But still, he called on that memory and pulled it through him, spreading it around him in a pool like the magic he extended to call on the spirits. The last cougars who might have still been around faded from sight and existence, and the air filled with the memory of cold and the tang of snow.

The dancing filiferna hesitated. For a long moment, Olumer saw its faceted eyes take on an almost human emotion, and it looked at him as though it were considering sparing his life. The elf whirled in ghostly form on the stone between them, head thrown back, limbs full of life in the way that the filifernai's dance only pretended to be.

But then the dark fey shook his head, and the image vanished. The filiferna moved forward with his chain wrapped around his arm, aiming for Olumer's throat. Olumer fell back, exhausted, and lifted his head to accept his death with as much dignity as he could.

At least I bought some time for Cadona. Light grant that it be enough.

The Oath that had bound him had demanded that much of him, and he had fulfilled his duty. Olumer could feel it falling back into slumber, satisfied that he could have done nothing else to spare the Heir of Rivendon.

And then-

Something else woke up.

This didn't stir around him like a serpent, the way his Oath tended to when awakened. It rushed into him instead, laughing like a stream, bright and full of joyous life. Olumer shook his head in confusion. The filiferna stopped advancing and watched him in what might have been amusement, if the damn things had ever shown any emotion at all.

Olumer blinked, and between one blink and the next, he began to see the world differently. It was a little like the shining that had invaded the air and the dew in the elven world, and yet different. This was more powerful, something he could actually grasp and use. It didn't slip from his hand, and it didn't only gleam. It was there for the taking.

Olumer reached out and grasped it.

The filiferna was now standing completely still, head tilted as if he wondered what Olumer was doing. Olumer didn't know himself, but he smiled as if he did and threw the shining straight at the filiferna.

Any human, any fey, anything that was what it was supposed to be, would have escaped that net without trouble. But it caught and tangled on the parts of the filiferna's soul that were twisted mockeries of what was supposed to be, and turned and dug in pain like barbs.

The filiferna screamed.

Its companion at once began to dance again, but Olumer didn't have any trouble keeping his eyes on the snared filiferna. Fascinated, he watched as it staggered and then went to one knee, still screaming, its voice full of horror and pain.

The net closed in tighter and tighter. The shining kept trying to force the dark fey back into the normal pattern of what it once was, something like an elf, and the filiferna kept resisting.

The shining closed.

The filiferna dimmed to a single twinkling point and vanished with it.

Olumer laughed, the sound sweet and joyous as the river that had filled him. He looked at the other filiferna and found it sitting on the balls of its heels and watching him. The music and the words that had filled the air when it began the first dance had finally stopped.

Then it said, in the voice that humans couldn't hear, "You did not tell us that you meant to attack."

"You did not tell me, either."

The filiferna shrugged its shoulders. "You were traveling with humans. You had allied yourself with them. And the custom in such things is to strike without question." It paused. "We have misjudged you."

"You will not again?"

"No."

The filiferna turned to leave. Olumer called another net of light and said, "Why should I let you leave?"

The head turned smoothly back, the faceted eyes fastening on him. "Because I have disclaimed combat," said the creature. "I will no longer hunt you, or the humans you are protecting. I will tell others of you, but not face you in battle myself. That is enough, among the fey."

"I am half-fey."

The filiferna said nothing to this, perhaps because it felt there was nothing to say. It held his gaze and waited.

Olumer looked back for a moment longer, but already the joy was fading and old uncertainties were rising back to take its place. Could he kill an enemy who had decreed that it had no intention of attacking him? Perhaps to protect Cadona, but Cadona was not here, and the Oath was in slumber, along with the resolution that would have allowed him to kill the filiferna out of hand.

"Leave," he said at last.

The filiferna bowed to him, and then turned and strode down the path again, sparing not a glance for the patch of air where its comrade had faded.

Olumer watched it go, and then closed his eyes and fixed his attention on the shining. It was everywhere around him, no matter which direction he turned in. The filifernai could cause small ripples in it, but they couldn't break apart the patterns. They only turned and folded around the filifernai, then came back to someone who was silvereyes again, anxious to be used.

Or someone who was half-silvereyes.

Olumer shook his head. *I am not meant for this magic. I have no idea what I would do to control it. It's only luck that I haven't accidentally touched it before now, and unleashed a force that I couldn't hold back, and which would kill the Light knows how many.*

This could guard Cadona, but only if I really knew what I was doing. And I don't. I must think of her first. The Oath says so. And given that...

Carefully, Olumer folded the shining back into himself, or at least the part of the magic that allow him to reach such light. The net coiled in on him without a sound, not catching on any twisted part of his soul, and then faded. When Olumer opened his eyes again, he could see nothing to the air but the air, no glittering edge, no magic that he could form into nets.

He felt a sense of loss, but he shook his head and moved briskly along the trail that Silverheart had taken. He would mourn later, if mourn he must. For the moment, he had much to be thankful for, such as the filifernai leaving.

He really did have a lot to be thankful for.

That sense of loss would diminish once he saw Cadona again and knew that he really had kept her safe, he was sure.

"Where have you been?"

The question was voiced in almost eerie unison by the two little girls, but their tones were entirely different. Lyli almost shrieked the words, and flung herself down the slope to run to him, clasping Olumer around the waist so hard that he grunted in surprise. He picked her up and spun her in a circle, and she laughed for a moment, while the wind tangled in her hair.

Olumer did that to reassure her, of course, but also so that he could go another moment without stopping to look at Cadona. He had heard the tone in her voice before, and knew that nothing good could come of it. She was angry that he had lingered behind and put his life in danger.

At last, when he couldn't avoid it any longer, he put Lyli down and turned to look at his Princess.

She faced him with arms crossed and her eyes narrowed. "Come here," she said, in a snap, when she saw him looking at her.

Olumer bowed his head and walked a little nearer, already anticipating the slap that rose and caught him across the cheek.

"Why are you doing that?" Lyli cried, hurrying towards them.

"Olumer had no right to put his life in danger unless I told him to," said Cadona. "He had no right at all."

"But he did it to save our lives!" said Lyli, who clearly didn't understand.

"Yes, he did," said Cadona. "But, still, he is sworn to me, and to protect the Rivendonian royal line, and I didn't give him permission to stay behind and do that. He should have asked me first, or at least informed me about what he was going to do. I didn't know that he would take it on himself to just stay there."

Olumer stood there in silence for a few moments, but Cadona glared at him and said, "Did the filifernai steal your tongue as well as your loyalty? Speak to me, and tell me why you did that."

"It was the first thing I could think of."

"And you managed to entertain them enough that they let you go?" Cadona folded her arms and tapped her foot. "If you had managed to kill one of them, then I would count that as enough victory to deflect my anger, but I don't think that you did anything of the kind-"

"Then count it," said Olumer, an entirely unexpected anger rising in him. "I did manage to kill one of them."

Cadona blinked. Lyli just stared at him. Silverheart swished his tail back and forth and looked into air as if he had known all of this already.

"You did?" she asked. "How did you do that?"

"By calling on silvereyes magic," said Olumer. "I bound a net around the filiferna, and because they are not natural creatures, the net destroyed it as it would not have destroyed a human, or another fey, or an animal. That one is gone."

Cadona let out a breath, then another. Then she rushed forward and embraced him hard.

"Well done!" she said. "Oh, Olumer, you have truly struck the first blow in this war."

Olumer held her close, while trying to think of some way that would explain the sudden spin.

"You have done well," Cadona went on, stepping away from him, "and we should have a feast to celebrate. Silverheart, will you hunt one of the *chigai* for us?"

The snow leopard dipped his head and slipped away. Olumer shook his head. "My lady, I am not deserving of such an honor-"

"But you are," said Cadona. "The first blood of the enemy has been spilled. The war to reclaim Rivendon has begun." She reached up and linked her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek in a way she had not since she had realized that he wasn't her real father. "And you have struck it, my loyal guardian."

Olumer rubbed his cheek, and wondered why she had changed her mind so suddenly. On the other hand, when he thought of some of the other Queens of Rivendon he had known, he could see that his training had not failed after all.

She is bloodthirsty and quick-tempered and harsh on those who would not give her their loyalty.

She will make a very good Queen of Rivendon.

Chapter 27

Half-Remembered Glories

"I never said that I knew all the secrets of the world after I became a priestess of Shara. But there was the possibility of answers now, gleaming around me, where I would not have seen them. That is what Shara does: She teaches Her novices to see, and begin to look for the answers instead of accepting that they are none and letting the questions go, as so many humans and half-fey do. Only when we have begun to look will we begin to see."

-Asendra, Priestess of Shara.

"You are certain that you want to do this?"

Ternora eyed Alira in amusement. "Since when have the priestesses of Shara asked questions like that, instead of seeking to answer them?" she asked.

"I wanted to know."

Ternora nodded. That was a good motive for questions, and the best she had heard in her whirlwind instruction over the past day. "Yes, I am sure that I want to do this. I want to make sure that all my questions are answered. And there are some I would never reply to otherwise."

Alira sighed and bound the blindfold over Ternora's eyes. "I do hope you are right," she said, as the world vanished from Ternora's sight; the faithful of Shara didn't use thin cloth or tie it loosely, in the way that Ternora had heard the priestesses of Elle did, to cheat at rites like this. Ternora would succeed on her own merits and with the goddess's help, or she would not succeed. "You will become aware of many other things, part of many other things, once you are a priestess of Shara. And I am afraid that you will not have the patience to bear them."

"You mean the negotiations?" Ternora asked.

Alira gasped.

"I have begun to look on my own, already," said Ternora, and smiled. She couldn't see it, but they could, and since they were her intended audience, they were the only ones who mattered.

Alira snorted and seized her arm. "You are going to be a very interesting novice to instruct," she said, leading her down a series of steps that she didn't slow on or otherwise try to make easier for Ternora. Ternora knew that would happen, and had carefully memorized the height of the steps beforehand, so that she could walk confidently now. "You already know how to look, and you are very old for a novice. And you want to become one for purposes of vengeance, of course."

"Of course." It would have been useless to try and hide that from a group of women trained to look for answers, and Ternora hadn't tried.

"You will find that harder than you think."

"I know," said Ternora patiently. That was what none of them understood, the priestesses who had given her the instruction and taught her the induction ritual with doubt in their eyes. She was willing to wait. She was willing to wait until Warcourage had taken his throne, if necessary, before she would strike at him.

"You might have to wait years before anything happens," said Alira.

"I know that."

"Oh."

There was silence for a little while after that, at least until they reached the bottom of the steps. Ternora had looked at the staircase yesterday, but hadn't dared to descend it. She had told herself that she didn't want to interrupt whatever ritual preparations the priestesses were making.

In truth, she had not been sure that what lay at the bottom of the stairs was still in the same world with what lay at the top.

She felt that way even now. She could sense walls, of course, but they were all behind her. A place in the earth ought to feel enclosed and dark, she was sure, especially to someone who was used to the open jungle and the sun. But it didn't feel enclosed or confining at all.

It just felt dark.

Alira's hand fell away from her, and Ternora resisted the temptation to grope for it. She stood in the darkness and the silence, and tried to ignore the feeling that wild dogs were circling around her, waiting for a chance to attack.

"Would you come before Shara?" asked Alira suddenly.

"Would you...would you...would you..."

Ternora shivered. The words were not repeated, but they echoed, as if they stood underground after all. Ternora almost wished she could see, just to get a better grasp on the strange nature of this place, but Alira had told her that the blindfold was there for her protection as well as the priestesses', and Ternora didn't think it was a good idea.

But they had told her what to do, and so she braced herself and said, "I would come before Shara."

"She would."

Only one repetition this time, which was somehow even more unnerving. Ternora clung to patience and courage with both hands, and again waited.

Then a voice said, "Take the blindfold off. You will not walk blindfolded through the world I show you. You would be a very poor priestess if you kept your eyes shielded through fear of what you might see."

Ternora pulled the blindfold from her eyes. The woman in front of her was Alira, she thought for a moment. At least, she was slender and clad in dark robes, and Ternora's eyes, struggling to adjust to what seemed dazzling light, thought that resemblance was enough.

Then she saw that the woman's face was- strange. It looked human, and elven, and not in the same way that Ternora's own half-elven face did. Shara shifted back and forth between them, but Ternora never caught the transition, and the change never seemed to blend the two races in a clashing manner. Shara smiled and stretched out a hand, and Ternora found herself reaching out and automatically clasping it.

"Now," said Shara softly, "I will lead you along a bridge. It would help if you think of the bridge as made of toothpicks."

"Is it?"

The Goddess of Mysteries smiled. "Very good. It is not. But it would help you if you think of that."

She turned and walked into the darkness of the vast space, wherever they were, and Ternora followed her.

In moments, the solid stone dropped away from beneath Ternora's feet. She felt something sharp prick her feet, and imagined toothpicks. Toothpicks would feel like this, pricking and stinging her feet.

"Very good," said Shara. "But what else would feel like that?"

"Teeth," said Ternora. The word seemed to glide off her tongue without ever having passed through her brain."

"Very good!" Shara said again. "Yes, we are walking in the jaws of the beast that holds the worlds."

"Beast?" Ternora asked, and heard her voice skirl up into a higher range.

"Oh, yes," said Shara, glancing back at her. "I didn't know if you had learned that or not, but I thought you knew something of it... No? There is a beast, a great one, that supports the universe. The worlds hang off its body. Off its neck, mostly. We are walking in its jaws, and in a moment, we will reach its eye. You must look directly into the eye, do you understand?"

"Can I be afraid?"

"Of course."

"Can I flinch?"

"Of course. Just don't look away."

Ternora thought miserably that that was just what she had been thinking of doing, and then she stepped off the last tooth and found herself looking into an eye that was vaster than her body.

The world exploded.

"Ternora?"

Ternora opened her eyes slowly. She was lying on the stone floor of a normal underground chamber again, and Alira knelt beside her, her arms cradling Ternora's head. Her eyes were terrified for a moment, but they lost their terror as she stared at Ternora. She sighed after a moment, and sat back.

"You survived," she said.

"I don't understand," said Ternora, and realized her tongue was thick and her mouth dry. "Water?"

"Of course," said Alira, and gestured. One of the priestesses came forward, holding a cup of water. She handed it to Alira, who tipped it into Ternora's lips. Ternora would have protested against being tended to like a child, but she caught a glimpse of her hand and saw how it was shaking. She shut up.

"You survived," said Alira softly. "And that is no small thing to have done. Even I was not sure I would survive when I went before the goddess for that final time, and She showed me the secrets of universes."

"The *final* time?" Ternora stared at Alira, not caring that she was letting water dribble down her chin. "I thought that was the induction ritual!"

"No," said Alira. "It wasn't. That was the test that a priestess faces when she is ready to take the cowl."

"And you subjected me to it?"

"Yes," said Alira, and held up the cup again. "Would you like some more water?"

"No, damn it!" Ternora fought her way free from the priestess's restraining arm and stood. Her legs were wobbly, as well, but they didn't spill her to the floor, and Ternora was pleased about that. She kept the pleasure off her face. "I want some answers."

Alira smiled at her, not seeming disconcerted at all. "Ah, a true devotee of the goddess already. Your mind is spinning with mysteries, isn't it? You saw that brief glimpse of knowledge, and you want more."

"I-"

Ternora stopped. What Alira said was true. Her mind did spin with half-remembered glimpses of the glories of things, of half-forgotten visions. She wanted to look on them again, and finding out the answers to many mysteries in the world was a quest that might help her do that.

But then she shook the realization away and went on with her anger. "Why would you do that to me?"

"Because," said Alira, "if you saw some things in us, we also saw things in you. We knew that you wanted to be part of the Dark, and protected from the manipulations of the Light. We knew that you wanted vengeance, and that you wanted a refuge from Warcourage if you didn't manage to destroy him. You would have used us."

"Then why not turn me away?"

"Why should we do that?" asked Alira, standing so that her dark robes fell slowly around her. "All quests are the Goddess's, though the quest for vengeance sometimes clashes with the quest for answers. We didn't want you to go away empty-handed. So we put you to our strongest test. If you had not survived, then we would have done everything we could to help you and still not failed. If you did survive, then you would have what you sought." Alira bowed her head slightly. "And that is what happened. You sought refuge and answers to combat the Light, and you shall have them, because you have proved that you deserve them."

Ternora closed her eyes. "I wonder if I really understand what I have allied myself with."

"Of course not," said Alira, her laughter delicate as spring leaves. "None of us understands the Lady of Mysteries. But we do our best. Come with me, and I'll give you some food and a place to sleep for the night. And then we can start discussing just how much you know, and should know, about our negotiations."

Chapter 28

Debts

"I've long since given up thinking of all the people I owe for one rescue or another. For one thing, they haven't come to collect their debts. For another, most of them are dead."

-Princess Twydon of Orlath.

"Run!"

Nightstone cried that as loudly as she could, to anyone in the vicinity, and then turned to the gray dragon, wondering if it was possible to strike a deal that would mean the dragon would carry her out of the castle.

But the dragon was already hovering in the air; he had somehow managed to take off so precisely that Nightstone hadn't felt him move. He hovered there a moment longer, just enough to wink at her, and then he rose to join the blue dragon. The pair wheeled around each other in congratulations.

Nightstone turned away. She had to do something. The sea was rising to take over the castle, and though it wasn't here yet, it couldn't take long.

"My lady?"

Nightstone turned sharply. Lord Caraban was walking towards her, his stride shortening with caution as he watched her. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"The Lilitha Ocean is rising," said Nightstone. "How many Azure mages are there among the nobles in the castle?"

"I am one," said Caraban, and glanced over his shoulder at someone who had just peeked around the wall. "And the Lady Akellia is another. We are the two strongest."

"Then can you do something about the ocean?" asked Nightstone, forcing her voice to be calm while every sense screamed at her to hurry.

Caraban closed his eyes for a moment. Then he said, "Not we two alone. We can hold it for a little while, but not forever."

Nightstone nodded. "A few minutes should be enough," she said, and began to run towards the dungeons.

Akellia called after her in a lonely voice, "You will be in your room tonight, my lady?"

Nightstone shook her head impatiently. *The woman has to play a part in saving the castle, and she's determined to play out her intrigue instead.* "If the ocean keeps rising, Akellia, that will not be a concern!" she shouted over her shoulder, and ducked into the dungeons.

Nightstone could have sworn that she heard Akellia gulp, and then that she felt an odd surge in her body that might have signified mages were pulling on the element that was her opposite. But that could also be her imagination, so she wasn't really inclined to trust it.

She reached the door she was looking for, and touched the stone in the right place. Again it slid away, and she ducked in and ran as hard as she could. The Dark wasn't supposed to get involved in fights between its lieutenants, but Nightstone could think of no one else to ask for help.

She arrived in the chamber where the Circle of Four was inscribed on the stone, and almost ran to the pool. But then she stopped, head tilted. Her heart pounded, her emotions screamed at her, but the mind that had allowed her to survive intrigues for so long had sensed something, and made her pause and consider it, overmastering even the screaming panic. It was one thing to die as the result of a stratagem by Artaen which she couldn't counter, but she didn't want a stupid, meaningless death that she could have avoided with a little caution.

She saw it after a moment. A line surrounded the pool, an Azure ward made of glittering blue light. The Dark alone knew what it would do to her, but Nightstone didn't want to find out.

She grasped the one chance she had, and turned and ran to the firepit. The conduit roared with warm air and grew brighter as Nightstone called on her own connection to Scarlet. She closed her eyes and spoke to the Dark that lay in a small black ball in the center of the element.

Help me. I know that my fire cannot turn all the ocean to steam, but a command from the Dark might send it back into its place. Help me.

The Dark heard her. Nightstone felt it surround her like the lapping ocean waves, felt it consider her plea, and felt it think about the fact that Artaen had called on this kind of magic for a dispute between lieutenants.

She felt it disapprove.

Hardly daring to hope, Nightstone opened her eyes and saw the Scarlet roar out of the firepit. It rose to the height of a wall, and then went on growing. Flame flooded the room, bathing her with warmth, filling her with hope. She turned and saw the wall become dim, falling away. Such things didn't exist in the sight of the elements or the Dark, and that was what she was sharing now.

The Ocean was rising. It was halfway up the cliffs, going slowly but steadily, like a plowhorse pulling against stiff ropes. It would get there, though. It would inundate the castle, and then Artaen's revenge would be complete. If the dragon didn't call it back, then it might even go on until it had flooded Orlath and Iantra and Doralissa. Who could tell when the Azure would tire of eating the land?

The Dark flung itself forward. Nightstone roared along with it, and found herself hovering on wings of flame above the cliffs where she had climbed so often as a child. They looked softer and more worn now than they had.

Nightstone didn't have much time for comparisons, though. The Dark roared forward again, plunging like a spear into the heart of the water. Nightstone felt a rush of heat and scalding

water pass her by, and knew this must be causing a cloud of steam in the physical world. But her mind and heart were engaged in riding the spear now, and she didn't have time to worry about what might happen to her people who were caught in the steam without warning.

The Dark struck downward, downward, and still further down, until they were in waters that had never known sunlight. Nightstone wondered if any Azure mage could bear to dive this far. She didn't think so. Humans were limited creatures.

The Dark was not.

A little farther down, and the Dark found it, the tiny ball of a conduit that the blue dragon had set in the water, further opening the natural link that the ocean had to the Azure. A simple but effective trick, Nightstone thought. Flood the ocean with still more water from the elemental world, and it might never stop lifting.

But the Dark reached out, striking the conduit with Scarlet, its natural enemy, and the force of its immortal will. The conduit closed in seconds, and the ocean surged around them, higher than it had been but no longer rising.

Then the Dark turned back. To rise through the waters again and explode into the sunlight made Nightstone for a moment envy Azure and Gust mages, who got to experience the water and the wind.

Then she remembered that she had nothing to be envious of, and much to be thankful for.

The Dark pulled back, through the wall, through her body, through the link with the Scarlet, into its own small ball, and then even further back. Nightstone opened her eyes and almost staggered. It was strange to have a body again, and one not capable of piercing through walls or diving such a distance.

Then she turned around to find that the Dark was still waiting for her, in mind if not in body, flooding her with its will and its strength.

I am displeased that you and Artaen are fighting such a war when there are other, more urgent matters at stake.

Nightstone bowed her head and said nothing. She didn't really know what she could say. She had asked the Dark's help, and now she was beholden to it, in the same way that she would be beholden to Caraban and Akellia. Of course, the debt there was smaller, and could be settled with a few gifts that such nobles might treasure. But the debt to the Dark...

I am grateful beyond words for what you did, she said.

Then you will pay the debt, said the Dark, its voice clear and merciless. Call back the People of the Blending. You may keep them with you, but they will not spy on Rivendon for you.

Nightstone nodded.

Then cease all preparations immediately for the war with Artaen.

"What!" Nightstone jerked her head up. "But that will mean that he is free to wage war on me, while I cannot wage war on him."

No. I will be carrying the same message to him.

Nightstone smiled a little to think of Artaen's dismay on receiving that message, but then frowned further. How was she to keep up the pretense of control over her nobles, and being on the Light side, if she suddenly announced that they would not be fighting Artaen after all?

That is something that you will have to figure out for yourself, said the Dark. And there is a final price that I would have you pay.

"Yes?" Nightstone asked aloud. Of course, she could have used telepathy, but just at the moment, she felt like using her voice. She had the feeling that it would be easier. Besides, her voice might shake when she said the words, and she didn't want to test that it didn't.

You will stop chasing Kymenos. You will not make any attempt to catch him, kill him, or bring him in.

He does know about Princess Alliana, said Nightstone, using telepathy this time. There could be someone listening at the door to the room, if anyone had seen where she went quickly enough. It was a silly supposition, but she had seen enough Dark lieutenants brought down by scorn of those same silly suppositions that she didn't scorn then anymore.

He has shown no sign of telling anyone, said the Dark. And I don't think that he wants to be more involved in the wars of Dark and Light than he has been.

Destiny seemed interested in him.

Destiny is interested in a great many things and people that are not interested in it, said Dark, and for a moment Nightstone wondered if that was the voice of experience. Then the Dark's voice changed, losing whatever trace of amusement it might have had. You will not pursue him, Nightstone. You have been warned. This is my price for my aid, and for your survival.

"I understand," said Nightstone, as politely as she could.

Good.

And then the Dark was gone, the power and the voice draining out of her mind like the floodwaters that that Dark had stopped.

Nightstone shook her head and shed the feeling of power as best she could. She had found that it didn't pay to go back among people who hadn't felt the touch of the Dark with divine power still clinging around her like a shroud. It could lead to- unfortunate results.

She made her way out of the room and back up to the courtyard where the gray dragon had landed. Of course, a glance upward revealed that the dragons were gone. Nightstone grimaced, then shrugged. *At least, if my ties with the dragons died with their Queen, then I don't think that Artaen will be able to use them any longer.*

She turned her gaze to Caraban and Akellia, who were crouching on shaky legs in the middle of the courtyard, their heads bowed.

"You did well," she said softly.

"What was that, my lady?" Akellia asked, lifting her head and revealing an unexpectedly strong face beneath the mussed silver hair. Nightstone put it away for later that the woman was much stronger than she liked, and smiled as soothingly as she could.

"A Dark attack," said Nightstone, with perfect truth. "Guided by dragons, but a strike from the Prince of Rivendon."

"And we must fight him?"

Nightstone breathed a little more easily when she noticed that the noblewoman's face was gray with fear. This might be easier than she'd thought.

"Not as such, no," said Nightstone. "I managed to turn the attack back, but I didn't realize that the Prince of Rivendon had the assistance of dragons. I think that a different course is better."

"A different course?" asked Lord Caraban, who looked up at last. Nightstone narrowed her eyes when she saw that his face was much paler than Akellia's. Had he done more, or was he not as strong?

I shall have to think about that.

"Yes. We shall seek to pursue the good of the Light, but not by war. The next time, he might strike in a different place, and I cannot be everywhere. We will try to exploit the division between Dark and Shadow instead, and get ready to fight a defensive war."

"The division between Dark and Shadow?" asked Caraban.

Nightstone bowed her head. "You know that I still stand high in the councils of the Dark. I have heard that Dark and Shadow, though allied for the past twelve years, have begun to wear down the link that keeps them together. I think it would be an excellent time for the Light to get ready. If they begin to fight, then their war might spill into Orlath, and we don't want that."

Akellia shook her head. "Surely not, my lady."

Caraban's assent was more thoughtful, longer in coming, but he gave it. "Surely not, my lady," he echoed.

Nightstone nodded. "Both of you may come and speak with me when you wish, about what you think I owe you for this day's work," she said.

Caraban managed to push himself back to his feet and bow. "You owe us nothing, my lady. We acted to save the castle and the land and all our people. How could we have let them die?"

Nightstone resisted the temptation to snarl. It was one thing when the lords of the Light genuinely felt like that, but Caraban knew how to play Court politics. She was sure that he was going to claim this as a debt later, and she didn't like the thought of him holding power over her, even from a distance.

"I think," she said, "that I will speak to you later, Lord Caraban." She glanced at Lady Akellia. "And when would you want to come to me?"

"Later tonight, my lady, if that is acceptable."

Nightstone nodded, and then turned and walked back to the castle. She was still shaking, and not looking forward to the amount of explanation she would have to do, both for the Orlathian nobles and the loyalists of the Dark.

But then, explaining has never been my forte. I was truly happiest when I was riding with the pegasi.

I would have been even happier if I had never met Kymenos, or if Destiny had chosen someone else as Alliana's guardian. Surely the Dark cannot really mean for me to give up pursuing Kymenos? It would be criminal to let him go, with as much as he knows.

No. I can still do this. It will take the use of power that does not belong to the Dark, but that is well enough.

"My lady?"

Nightstone turned when Akellia knocked on the door. She had prepared carefully for this moment. She didn't want to intimidate either the noblewoman or her mysterious guest, and so she had chosen a casual gown and left her hair down. The coronet was still on her head, binding back her hair from her face as a subtle reminder of her status, but Nightstone thought that was all the reminder she needed, really.

"Come in," she called.

Akellia stepped in, her face flushed and glowing. She curtsied to Nightstone, then turned and called softly to someone outside the door.

"You can come in, my lady."

Nightstone could only stare at her visitor when she stepped through the door. Though she looked considerably less harried than she ever had, still Nightstone knew her. She was the half-elven woman who had visited the room before and then run away into whatever secret passage she knew about and Nightstone didn't. It was no wonder she had wanted to meet in Nightstone's room. After all, she was comfortable here.

She met Nightstone's eyes now with a flinch in her face, but with calmness on the surface. "My Lady Nightstone," she said, with a bow.

"You should call me 'Princess,'" said Nightstone, walking towards the woman, wondering if she could hold back on the impulse to strike her. This woman had caused her trouble and worry already, when she had enough to deal with. "Who are you?"

"Your Highness..."

Nightstone turned her head, irritated to see that the half-elf also reacted to the title. Akellia was glancing anxiously from one face to the other, looking very intimidated, but also determined not to back down.

"She doesn't have to give you the title," said Akellia. "Technically."

"And why not?" Nightstone demanded.

The woman spoke then, her voice soft and singing with the strange music that always seemed to belong to those who were half-elven. "Because I bear the same title. I have the same rank as you."

"What?" Nightstone demanded.

"My Lady Nightstone," said Akellia, sounding as if she might strangle, "may I present Princess Tewilde, once Queen of Orlath, the daughter of Queen Vamoranion?"

Nightstone blinked. "You're dead," she said.

"No," said Tewilde. "I gave up the throne and left when my daughter Leilante was old enough to reign, of course, but that was only to follow the call in my elven blood. I am back now, and now that I know you are part of the Light instead of the Dark, then I will help you." Her eyes narrowed, and she added, "But, of course, I am the one who should rightfully be Queen of Orlath, and not you. And I hope you don't expect me to bow and scrape. There are some things that are simply beyond the pale for someone of royal blood, Aunt."

Chapter 29

The Teaching of Princess Mitherill

"Teaching flows both ways. Of course the student teaches the teacher much, but the teacher should make an effort to give the student a few lessons, as well."

-From The Five Ways To Teach a Royal.

"Elary."

"Hmmm?" Elary stirred. She didn't feel that she should be required to wake up yet. She had flown most of the night in Melior's arms, and fallen asleep in the chill air. She had reluctantly awakened to stumble into some cold, dark place they told her was a sanctuary, and then curled up and went back to sleep. She didn't want to get up again and face whatever trouble Melior and Silar had managed to create with Mitherill.

"Mitherill says she'll only talk to you."

Elary sat up, yawned, and said, "Oh, very well." Silar sat back looking relieved, and Elary frowned as she wrapped her robe more tightly around her. "What's the matter with the Princess?"

"She wants salt," said Silar.

"You gave her the little salt that you said you had?"

"Well, yes, of course." Silar fluttered her wings as if to say that she realized she was dealing with a fool here, but that Elary could do her the courtesy of trying to catch up. "But I also explained that we couldn't get more for her, that it wouldn't work. And she cried about that. Then she cried about wanting a white dog. Now it's salt again, and she says she'll only talk to you."

"Did she say why?" Elary asked, blowing on her hands. The cold that had invaded them really wouldn't respond to such simple measures, but the gesture made her feel a little bit better.

"You're half-*ilzán*. She said that reminds her of home."

Elary sighed. "Well, of course it would. They raised her. And that's the only language she knows, too."

"No Arvennese?"

"No," said Elary, standing and shivering as a blast of wind from the cave mouth cut right through her. This surely didn't look like any kind of sanctuary to her, no matter what anyone else said.

"No Ilantran?"

"No. No human tongues at all." Elary slanted a glare at Silar. "Was there something wrong with your ears when I said 'that's the only language she knows?'"

"But you speak Arvennese perfectly well," said Silar, rising to her feet with her wings rustling around her. "Why wouldn't you have taught her?"

"Because I wasn't with her long enough," said Elary. "Only a few days until she was snatched by Shadow, and then I was parted from her. And I couldn't get much teaching in while she was still getting used to me as her guardian, or while Shadow held us as prisoners."

Silar sighed. "There are so many things that she doesn't know."

"That's true."

"And one of them is that one shouldn't annoy Melior," said Silar. "Melior stung her with lightning when she tried."

Elary stopped in the middle of the passage that Silar had gestured her through. The woman walked into her back, and was glaring at her when Elary turned around. "Is something wrong?"

"You said that you wouldn't use pain to teach her," said Elary, with all the calm she could muster. "That's what Shadow tried. You must have seen that it didn't work."

"He didn't try the right kind of pain," said Silar. "That's all. The right kind of pain teaches a child everything. It's the wrong kind that makes her stubborn and unwilling to learn anything else."

"And what's the right kind of pain?"

"The kind we give her," said Silar calmly. "We want a Queen who will rule from the throne, Elary, and truly *rule*, not just dump justice on a few of her favorites, or go south to Ilantra and never come home again. You were right about that. It was the only reason we agreed to take her."

"I never thought you would hurt her."

"We're not hurting her much."

"What are you doing is bad enough."

"No," said Silar, and gently pushed Elary into the tunnel. Elary went. The push was not only enough to get her going along, she thought, but also to remind her of the strength in this

woman's arms. "We're just showing her a few things. She thought that she could destroy Melior. I think something like that is worthy of a quick lightning strike, if not more."

"Destroy her?" Elary asked weakly.

"Oh, yes, of course." Silar gave her an amused glance. "You didn't think that she was only crying and shrieking, did you?"

"She only did that with Shadow."

"She won't even do that much with us," said Silar. "Of course, sometimes a pupil doesn't want to learn the lessons, but we know how to deal with that."

Of course you do, Elary thought, and wondered if she wouldn't have been better off after all taking Mitherill back to Ilantra or the *ilzánai*. At least that way, she would be among people who were familiar to her, and she would be learning the customs and manners of one Kingdom in an agreeable way.

And then Shadow would still want to teach her, given that she was the Queen-to-be of Ilantra, and she might never learn anything at all.

Elary sighed. It seemed there was no satisfactory solution.

"Here we are."

Elary glanced up, wondering if Silar was saying that to her or Mitherill. It didn't really matter, though, because whomever she meant it for, Mitherill still took it as for her and covered the distance in two strides, flinging her arms around Elary's legs and beginning to howl.

Elary hugged her, and tried as best she could to scowl protectively at Silar and Melior.

But part of her was remembering the way that Mitherill had looked at her with hatred yesterday, and finding this turnaround almost amusing. The little Princess would seek to grab hold of anyone she thought she could manipulate, probably. And that was understandable in one way. She was a young girl trying to survive the grasp of a crushing Destiny.

But is offending all her allies really the way to go about it?

"Hush, Mitherill," she said softly, hugging the girl again. "It's all right."

"No, it's *not!*"

"Why not?" asked Elary, trying to stay as reasonable as she could. It was possible that reason and persuasion would work after all, and that Silar and Melior were at fault for not trying them.

"Because they stung me with lightning, and they told me that I have to sit the throne of Arvenna alone, and they want me to learn things that I have no interest in!" Mitherill screamed, and then started crying some more.

Elary knelt beside Mitherill and took her hands. "Mitherill, you remember Palant, don't you?"

Mitherill sniffled, and rubbed her eyes, and nodded.

"He's Arvennese," said Elary. "He could only speak the tongue of the *ilzánai* at all because he was an apprentice healer before he was your true love, and that's the kind of thing that it's considered good for an apprentice healer to know. But most of your people can't speak the tongue, and even Palant didn't know it from birth. Arvennese is your people's true language. It's his true language. Would you want to go through your life never knowing the true language of your Prince?"

Mitherill sniffled, peering up at her through eyes that were still bright with tears. "But it takes so much effort to learn!"

Elary kissed her forehead. "Not that much effort, little one. You will learn it, and then you will go on to your Quest, and to claim the Arvennese throne."

"And the Ilantran one?"

Elary smoothed her hair back from her forehead, wanting desperately to reassure her so that she didn't start crying again, but knowing that Silar and Melior were listening. "We will have to see."

Mitherill looked at her with thoughtful eyes. "So I *could* become Queen of both Kingdoms in time? I just have to wait?"

"Yes," said Elary, a little amazed and even suspicious that she was getting through to her, but willing to play the advantage while it lasted. "That's exactly right. Just a little waiting time. Just a few years. Or an even shorter time than that, if you can learn the languages and the other things you need to know faster," she added, as a sudden inspiration struck her. Perhaps the Arvennese wouldn't let Mitherill reign at all until she was sixteen, nor the Ilantrons, but the rules had been broken before for good child-Princesses or Princes with corrupt Regents. It was one of the oldest of the history-tales. The Regent would try to take the throne, and the child-ruler would turn out to be the savior everyone had been waiting for.

Elary hoped it would happen in this case. Mitherill was not yet a savior, she thought, but they needed her to be one.

And I only hope that I'm not forced into the role of the evil Regent.

Mitherill sniffled, and then turned and looked at Melior. "If you want to try teaching me Arvennese again, then I'll try to learn it," she said.

"Very well." Melior took a step forward, looking wary. If Mitherill really had tried to destroy her, then Elary could hardly blame her. She hoped that that wasn't it, though, and that Silar was only being melodramatic.

"I mean it," said Mitherill, and sat in the middle of the room, her arms folded as she gazed earnestly up at the half-liadra.

Melior nodded, and then sat down beside her and said, "What word would you like to learn first?"

"Queen," said Mitherill.

Elary heard a snort behind her, and looked around to see Silar rolling her eyes. Elary scowled. *If she ruins this now, after begging me to make it come about, then I will hurt her in return.*

"Ah, that's easy," said Melior. "*Teleth*. You see? Just roll your tongue a little. It sounds like a lot like the word you already know."

Mitherill obediently mimicked her, and Melior relaxed and settled into the lesson. Silar took Elary's arm and drew her away. Elary went willingly enough. She didn't think that anyone else should be in the room just now, in case she shattered the fragile bond between Mitherill and the half-liadra.

"I've never seen anything like that," said Silar quietly, when they were back in the tunnel. "We had tried the same thing, and we couldn't get her to listen. I think that you are really meant to be the child's guardian after all, Elary."

Elary leaned against the stone wall and sighed. She still wished it hadn't been necessary to bribe Mitherill- but it wasn't bribery, was it? she argued with herself. After all, Mitherill thought about thrones and crowns all the time. She didn't have much choice. She was to be the Queen of two Kingdoms. Elary was sure that Destiny would help her win Ilantra back again, however determined Shadow was to keep it. Shadow hadn't been a power in the world for a long time. He didn't understand how royalty worked. They only had to make him see that it was absolutely imperative that Ilantra and Arvenna have their designated royal ruler, and Elary was certain that he would give in and become supportive of Mitherill on the Ilantran throne.

Then Elary saw the contempt in Rior's eyes again, and frowned. *Shadow's been away from the world for a long time, but Rior hasn't. He was Ilantran royalty. Why doesn't he understand that the throne needs a Queen of the proper bloodline?*

It was another worry, but it was only one among so many. Elary tucked it away for the future, and looked up to see Silar studying her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I think that I can trust you now," said Silar slowly. "I wasn't sure before, but you really do care about Mitherill, and you care about the future of Arvenna. You would have tried to take Mitherill and run away with her, otherwise. Or you would have walked out of the duty when she grew difficult."

Elary shrugged. She still wasn't sure where her determination to do the right thing had come from, now that the cords of Destiny had snapped from her mind. Perhaps it came from not wanting to see Ilantra explode into war, though. Her beloved country had to have a Queen of the royal bloodline on the throne.

"So," Silar continued, snatching Elary's attention from her own thoughts at last, "I thought I would let you see what I truly looked like."

"I haven't been seeing it?"

Silar shook her head, and dropped the illusion.

Elary felt her throat go dry. Except for the wings, which folded neatly along Silar's back, Silar's true form was that of the woman she had seen in her dream, the dream that showed Silar taking the throne of Ilantra, and not Mitherill.

Elary shook her head sternly. *Just because you saw that doesn't mean it will come true. You were impatient and snappish with Mitherill in that dream, too, and you know that won't come true.*

"Elary? Is something wrong?"

Elary recalled where and when she stood, and tried to smile. "You have a regal face," she said, the first thing that came to her.

Silar flushed- with anger, though, Elary saw. "I don't look anything like Mitherill," she said.

"Regal- in general," said Elary hastily, waving a hand.

"Oh." Silar's flush died, and she nodded. "Yes, I suppose I do."

She turned away. Elary watched her back, and the intently fluttering wings, uneasily.

Is she hostile to Mitherill? Will she come to love her with time? Or is she, the Light help us, already a dangerous rival?

Chapter 30

Cowardice Is a Virtue

"I have heard some people argue that the vices of the Dark can never be virtues. When they run away before you with the intention of luring you into a trap, then I can assure you, cowardice is a virtue."

-Chantablan Grassmaster, on his imprisonment by the Dark.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos smiled a little as he came over the lip of the dale and saw Cheyena running towards him. Sykeen had torn up his line and was running towards him as well, and it seemed a nearly even race as to who would get to him first. It was Sykeen, burying his head in Kymenos's chest with a whicker, but Cheyena wasn't far behind. She ducked under the horse and hugged him.

"How did you escape?" she asked.

Kymenos hugged her back and said, "It was by chance, really. A great bat came to save me, and then introduced himself as Shadow and said that we should go to the Lake of the Northern Winds."

Cheyena stepped back from him, her eyes wide. "Shadow? And he came and saved you? And didn't demand a price for doing so? I thought they always wanted recompense for everything they did, Dark and Shadow."

"I think Light does, too," said Kymenos.

But why would he have spared you? Sykeen danced from hoof to hoof, his eyes intent on Kymenos's. Would he try to kill you later, or was he trying to lure you back into the game that Destiny played with you?

I don't think either of those things is true, said Kymenos. Or, at least, if he was trying to lure me back into the game, he gave me bait that would truly tempt me, and not just bait that he thought would tempt me. He told me that I would learn something important if I went to the Lake of the Northern Winds, and I'm inclined to listen to that. The knowledge could also become a weapon against me.

Sykeen snorted. *Then I will bear you to the Lake of the Northern Winds, of course.*

"Do I have to come as far as the Lake?" Cheyena asked, distracting Kymenos's attention from Sykeen.

He considered the woman for a long moment. Her eyes dropped under his sustained attention, her excitement fading. She scuffed a foot on the stone as if wondering why he was so interested in her.

"No," said Kymenos at last. "Protect me as far as Serian, and there I can buy the warm clothing that I didn't have time to buy when we rode out of Corlinth. And of course there are more trees on the lower slopes of the Dalorths, and by then it should be summer. Then you can go back to Corlinth, or stay in Serian."

"I think- I think that I might stay in Serian," said Cheyena, avoiding his eyes. "Just for a little while."

Kymenos stared at her, then shrugged. It was her decision, of course, but he had thought she would go home. Though she carried her ornaments with her, there was the matter of her house.

I think she might stay because of you, said Sykeen.

What?

She acts like a mare in heat when she's around you, said Sykeen calmly.

Kymenos blinked, then smiled. *I would not presume to doubt your judgment about such things, he said.*

Good. I am never wrong. Sykeen tilted his head into Kymenos's rubbing with a little sigh. Humans could guess such things for themselves, if you were born with keener noses.

Kymenos glanced at Cheyena, and almost caught her eye. Of course, she looked down again at once, blushing, and stammered, "I'm glad that you're well. Would you like to stay here for a while?"

"Please," said Kymenos. "Neither of us had much sleep."

"And no more dragons will come hunting us?"

Kymenos shook his head. "I don't think so. But just in case..." He held Norianna up and moved her through the air in a flashing pattern.

"Why did you do that?" Cheyena asked in surprise.

"Because," Kymenos explained, "now there's a ward of Light all around the camp, and that way, it will flash and explode in the eyes of any dragon who tries to see something down here."

"Oh!" Cheyena clasped her hands together, then seemed to wilt again. "But won't that mean that they realize something is here?"

"No," said Kymenos. "Light regularly flashes like that off lakes when they're in flight. They'll assume it's something like that and fly away. And even if they tried to dive, the blindness would grow worse as they neared. They wouldn't want to lose their eyes just for diving at a stubborn target."

"Oh," said Cheyena again, and then moved away and spread her blankets with what looked like far more happiness than she had been showing.

Norianna waited until Kymenos moved towards his own blankets, and then said, "That was a lie."

"Which part?" Kymenos asked, laying the sword on the grass and shaking a few rocks from under his blanket. The softness here was scanty, just a little plant matter on the gray stone, but he didn't care; right now he was tired enough to sleep through another dragon attack.

"Both parts," said Norianna. "You know that dragons would just wait until they noticed someone moving out of the dell, and then follow. They would know that there are no lakes in this part of the Mountains-"

"And a bad thing, too," said Kymenos. "I could use a wash."

"-and you drew nothing with me. No Light ward. Nothing. Neither of us could make a ward right now; we're both too tired."

"No reason she has to know that, is there?" asked Kymenos, lying down and closing his eyes. Already, he could feel sleep rising, swirling and coming in for him as if it were a great black dragon. "If we told her the truth, she would only fret about it, and that would keep us from getting the sleep we need. As long as she's reassured, then we can lie here, and sleep, and then we can have the strength to make the wards when we wake." Already his voice was blurring.

The last words he heard from Norianna before slumber claimed him were, "Perhaps you would do such a thing. Of course, long centuries have passed since the time when you might have been something different."

He might have questioned her about that, but he was too tired, and he really didn't care about a talking sword's games.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos opened his eyes and sat up at once, reaching out to Norianna. It annoyed him to realize that he had made the gesture instinctively, but he dismissed the worry from his head. Given the tiredness that still lay in his muscles and the panic in Cheyena's voice, he would have other things to worry about in a moment.

He ran to her side, and found her eyes fixed on the sky. "What is it?" he asked, looking up.

There was nothing there he could see, certainly not the dark and swift-flying bulk of a dragon. Kymenos frowned in perplexity, and wondered if his eyes were still blurring with tiredness. He rubbed at them and looked again, and still saw nothing that looked like a dragon.

"Well?" he asked, looking at Cheyena.

Her mouth trembling, her eyes welling with tears, she pointed upward again.

This time, Kymenos followed the line of her pointing finger exactly, and saw what had frightened her.

"It's a cloud," he said.

"It's shaped like a dragon!"

Kymenos stared more closely, since he had, after all, seen a red dragon turn into a cloud not too long before. But he had seen her become many clouds, and this cloud was warping as the wind touched it, anyway, so that it looked like a lizard, and then like a turtle, and then like nothing at all.

"Well?" Cheyena demanded.

Kymenos turned to look at her, feeling anger begin to burn in him. "Well, what?"

"It's a cloud that the dragons made to spy on us, isn't it?" Cheyena shuddered, and wrapped her arms around herself. "I just knew it. And it wasn't blinded. I don't think it was. I think they must have sent it, and now whatever they made it from is flying back to them and telling them just where we are."

Kymenos took a deep breath and counted to sixteen quietly. Ten would still leave him too angry, but usually by the time he reached sixteen, then he was ready to deal with something like this.

His voice was still full of rage, though, when he asked, "And for that, you woke me up?"

Cheyena stared at him, then lowered her eyes. "I thought- it might have been important, Kymenos. I don't know. I'm so frightened." She began to sob softly, and to shake.

Kymenos put his rage away in the back of his mind for later and dropped Norianna, ignoring both the clang and the sword's loud protest. He wrapped his arms around Cheyena and said, "It's all right. It might have been something important. But I don't think the dragons are spying on us. The wards around the camp, remember?" He stroked her hair, and felt her sobs lessen a little as she leaned against him. "It will be all right."

Cheyena pulled away so that she could look up into his face. "I'm sorry," she said. "You must think me a fool, now, and a coward."

"Sometimes even cowardice is a virtue," said Kymenos. "I've read so many history-tales of brave and stupid heroes. I'm glad to have you here."

"You are?"

"Of course!"

Cheyena stood staring up at him for another few minutes. Then she untucked her arms, which had been folded against her chest, and guided them around his neck. Kymenos held back a snort and kept the most patient and gentle expression he could on his face, wondering what was going to happen next.

Cheyena leaned closer, like a trembling rabbit, and kissed him once on the right cheek, once on the left, and once on the lips. Kymenos barely felt the touches; if he couldn't see her, he wouldn't have known that she was kissing him at all. Combined with his tiredness, it made the whole thing seem like a dream.

And then Cheyena broke the gentleness by scrambling away from him, shaking her head and babbling, "What must you think of me? I'm so sorry."

"I think that you're frightened, that's all," said Kymenos, keeping his voice gentle. "And we do many things when we're frightened. And you needed reassurance. That was all."

Cheyena blinked. She nodded. "Of course. That's all."

But she looked vaguely dissatisfied before she turned back to her blankets. Kymenos smiled at her back and picked up Norianna.

Why did you do that? Sykeen asked. She smells more like a mare in heat than ever.

This is the way of it, said Kymenos, ignoring the sword's complaining. She would probably complain all the way to the Lake. He had to get used to it. If I had pressed in, she would have found some excuse, or some regret after yielding. She's frightened. But when I pulled back and agreed that people do many things when they're frightened, she started to wonder if she had made any impression on me. She'll go on wondering. And then eventually she'll have to satisfy her vanity.

He felt the stallion considering that. Then Sykeen snorted. Mares are much less complicated. She swishes her tail when she's ready. That's all.

Kymenos laughed a little, and sensed Cheyena look in his direction. He turned and smiled at her, taking care to keep his smile gentle, and she blushed and looked away. But she didn't blush that hard.

I agree that mares are much less complicated. But I think that human women are more fun.

Sykeen snorted and rolled his head, then went back to cropping what little grass there was. Kymenos lay down once again and took the chance to resume his interrupted sleep.

He did wake up long enough to lose his grip on Norianna's hilt when the sword chimed in to remind him.

"There they are."

"What are?"

Kymenos turned to Cheyena, and remembered just in time to keep his smile gentle and reassuring. Ordinarily, he might have enjoyed her fear, since the idea of anyone being terrified

of mountains puzzled him. "The true Rashars. We've been in the foothills so far. Now, the true Mountains begin."

Cheyena's face paled as she stared past him at the rising peaks, and then she shook her head. Estia shied as she picked up her rider's nervousness. "I don't think that I can take them."

Kymenos settled for another reassuring smile and turned back to the Mountains. She would take them, of course. She would do it because she would come with him, and he was determined to face them.

This was the way home.

The Rashars looked soft and blue from Corlinth, and Kymenos thought that was probably part of the problem that Cheyena had with them. She thought they were gentle, more like hills than anything else, gleaming and crowned with snow that somehow wasn't cold. Kymenos knew the tales they sang in Corlinth, the ones that made it sound as though climbing the Rashars was simple. And it was, if you kept to the low passes or flew over them on the back of a dragon.

This wasn't simple. The road to Arvenna never was. But Kymenos would brave it, simply because he wanted to go home.

"What if Estia falls?" whispered Cheyena.

Kymenos shook his head. "She won't. She's bred for this kind of thing. She has the look of ponies that miners take into the mountains."

"What's that look?"

Kymenos managed to keep his face a pleasant, calm mask, though his eyes narrowed. There were some things that Cheyena should know better than he, having lived in Corlinth all her life, but didn't. He couldn't understand why.

"She's sure-footed, for one thing," he said, as he urged Sykeen forward. The stallion might have been nervous, but given that Kymenos had praised the pony, he stepped out with his neck curved and his tail flying like a banner. Kymenos smiled at the back of his neck. "And she's used to carrying heavy loads, for another. You're not going to be too heavy for her."

"But a gust of wind-"

"If we meet wind that bad, then we're taking shelter," said Kymenos. "I don't want any of us to die."

"The sooner we get to the Lake of the Northern Winds," said Norianna, even though no one had asked her, "the sooner that you can learn the knowledge that you were meant to have."

"Or you could just tell me," offered Kymenos.

"The time is not right," said Norianna. "You will never understand the implications of what I tell you until we reach the Lake."

"I might," said Kymenos, keeping his eyes on the trail ahead. This was one that might be too difficult for Sykeen, or at least he thought so. But the stallion kept going, and so Kymenos retained his silence on that for now.

I can feel your thoughts, you know. Sykeen gave his tail a sulky swing.

"You will not," said Norianna at the same time. "You have been given many clues already, but you didn't pay attention to them. So I will maintain my silence until such time as we reach a place where the evidence is overwhelming."

Kymenos blinked for a moment, sorting out the voices in his head, and then shrugged. "As you say. I think that we could learn much from each other, but keep your silence." *And I know that you can hear me, Sykeen. It doesn't mean that your eyes or your mind equal mine. I will keep a watch on the trail ahead in spite of you, because I can't trust that you always know what you're talking about.*

Sykeen put a little extra bounce into his step for a second. Kymenos brought knives to the forefront of his mind, and the bounce vanished.

"How long will it take us to cross Arvenna?" asked Cheyena.

"It depends almost entirely on the people we meet there," said Kymenos. "They can slow us down, or they can give us good directions. I met people of both kinds. Some of them don't like strangers. Others will think that we are spies with Shadow. And still others won't mind either way."

"What kind do you hope we meet?"

"People who don't mind either way," said Kymenos. "They take your money and give you maps. I like that."

"You've crossed Arvenna before?"

"I did."

"And you didn't keep your map?" There was a faint accusing tone in Cheyena's voice, as though an older map would be better than one bought recently from the villagers.

Kymenos rolled his eyes now. "It was taken from me in the dungeons by Princess Nightstone. I didn't get it back."

"Oh! So you *were* a prisoner of the Princess Nightstone!"

Kymenos eyed Cheyena, wondering what she was up to now, but found her beaming at him. Apparently, she thought that having angered Nightstone was somehow heroic and noble.

"Yes," he said. "I was."

"Then you must be one of the truest servants of Light who ever existed!"

Kymenos studied her glowing eyes and flushed face. At once, her glance turned shy and she dropped her head, but he had seen enough to know that it would be a good idea to play along.

"Well," he said, "I might call myself that, but I don't want to become too prideful." And he didn't. Pride made people like Nightstone play stupid games. Kymenos didn't want that happening to him.

"Kymenos, this is wonderful," Cheyena bubbled. "I didn't know that I was traveling with such a hero! Someone wonderful and courageous and handsome, yes, but-" And she cut herself off, flushing more deeply.

Kymenos hid his grin. *She knows how to play games of her own. Sykeen, I told you that human women were more fun.* "Thank you," he said. "I don't like to think such things of myself- being prideful, again- but it is very pleasant to know that you think like that."

Almost imperceptibly, Cheyena guided Estia towards him.

Kymenos basked in far more than the weak sunlight shining down from overhead.

Chapter 31

Celebration

"I have heard that when fires burn in celebration in the Rivendonian hills, then you are likely to have visitors coming to your fireside."

-Prince Ulon of Rivendon.

"This is wonderful, Silverheart."

At least, Olumer meant the compliment that way. Instead, he found his voice muffled as he munched on the *chiga* meat. A tender bubble in the meat burst and sent juice down his face.

The snow leopard loosed a soft growl from where he lay behind Cadona, making a pillow for both her elbows and her head. Cadona laughed.

"What does he say?" Olumer asked, biting yet again into the meat. He had gotten a whole haunch, as the guest of honor at the little impromptu feast, and yet he didn't know if it would be enough. There was nothing that tasted like the *chiga* meat when cooked, soft and sweet and full of a peppery dash from the bursting of the bubbles of oil on the skin.

"He says that he understands the intent, but that you are letting a good part of the meal escape down your chin, and perhaps should wait to compliment him until you finish eating," said Cadona, biting into her own meat.

"Ah." Olumer carefully licked his fingers and reached for the next piece, bowing his head to the leopard. "Thank you, Silverheart," he said, enunciating each word. "That was excellent hunting."

The leopard inclined his head gravely back, and said something else in Cadona's head that made her laugh, but which she didn't deign to share this time. Olumer watched her, her silver eyes glowing with laughter and reflected flame in the firelight, and marveled to see her like this. Her laughter had no trace of malice or spite in it, and he really couldn't remember when the last time was that he had seen that happen. She was just happy.

And it wasn't at someone else's expense. In fact, it was in his honor.

Olumer wondered if the elven magic that Pannerel had tried to use to change her could be lingering, but he didn't think so. Cadona had a right to rejoice after the death of a filiferna and

a successful bit of hunting. This was nothing more than that. The Queens of Rivendon had always been at home around bloodshed and war, and Cadona was only being true to her bloodline.

And so was Lyli.

Olumer cast her another glance of pity, and wished he knew what to say to comfort her. She seemed more intent on sitting back and sniffing, though. She had eaten a piece of *chiga* meat, unable to help herself when the sweet smell grew too intense, but she had seen the animal when Silverheart dragged it in. She had called the leopard a murderer, and sulked.

Now she stared into the darkness, her chin on her knees, shivering now and then. Olumer leaned over and tucked the warm cloak that the elves had given each of the girls before they left the world of the silver wood around her.

"There," he said. "You looked cold."

Lyli shivered again. "I still am. There's something in the night that's making it so cold, isn't there?"

Olumer looked at her thoughtfully. "It never gets truly cold in Orlath, does it?" he asked.

"Well...snow falls," said Lyli.

"But not for long?"

Lyli shook her head in silence.

Olumer nodded. "Then it's probably just a Rivendonian spring," he said, and tugged her nearer to the fire. "Come, sit nearer the flames and perhaps you won't tremble so much."

Cadona laughed at something else that Silverheart had said, her face hectic. Olumer smiled at her. She looked like a true silvereyes in that moment, and he always wondered, afterward, if that had been what drew them.

"Deep snow to you, sister."

Olumer turned immediately. Someone stood just beyond the firelight, looking at him. He wouldn't have known who it was, or at least would have taken it for human, if it hadn't been for the way the silver eyes lit up the darkness.

Lyli screamed and cuddled close to Olumer. Olumer put an arm around her, for once not moving to defend Cadona. He didn't believe that she needed defending, not now that she had Silverheart with her. Of course he would leap to protect her if the enemy was truly threatening, but he didn't think this one was.

Cadona stood, one hand on the hilt of her sword, but her face fearless. "Welcome," she said. "You're a silvereyes, aren't you?"

"Yes," said the figure, with a bow. "I am. And you bear some of our blood."

Cadona touched her silver hair. "I'm not surprised. You should know that I am Princess of Rivendon, and of course one of your kin bred with my ancestress Idona. And the silvereyes blood has flowed in my line from then on."

"Yes," said the silvereyes, and then turned to look at Olumer. He blinked. Olumer blinked back. Someone who could listen to the Princess of Rivendon without expressing surprise shouldn't be taken aback by a half-fey.

But, from the graceful way the silvereyes bowed in the next moment, he might have only been expressing an entirely human startlement. "Do forgive me. I didn't know that a brother was here."

Olumer inclined his head back, wishing the silvereyes would come more fully into the firelight, so that he could see him better. He had never seen a fullblood before, and was eager for the experience. "I am not completely a brother," he said. "My father was silvereyes, and left my mother before my birth."

He was startled when the dark face creased with anger, and the silvereyes bared his fangs in a hiss. "Do you know his name?"

Olumer shook his head. "My mother never told me."

"This should be punished," said the silvereyes, his voice mimicking the sound of the northern wind. "He should not have left a female who was carrying a child. It was wrongly done."

"Many silvereyes leave many humans," said Olumer.

"He's right," added Cadona, who seemed anxious to make sure that the silvereyes didn't ignore her. "He's taught me for most of my life, and he's half-fey. So he should know what he's talking about."

Olumer had to check another start of surprise. It was the first time he had ever heard Cadona praise his teaching. But in front of a stranger, she would want to be on her best manners. That was another thing he'd taught her.

The crouched silvereyes stared at him intently. Olumer stared back. This close, he could see the fey looked almost Rivendonian, with the same dark skin that so many humans of his Kingdom had. But the silver eyes, the fangs, and the shining silver hair all marked the fey as exotic, beautiful. It was no wonder that so many humans wanted to breed with them.

"We will stay here tonight," said the silvereyes abruptly. "I know that you have *chiga* meat. You killed a filiferna today, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Olumer.

"I ordered this feast in celebration," said Cadona, obviously determined not to lose her position at the center. "It is a rare thing for anyone to defeat a filiferna, let alone someone who is only half-fey."

The silvereyes nodded. "Yes, it is." There was amusement in the cold voice now, for some reason that Olumer didn't understand. He looked Olumer over again, and seemed to take note of Lyli for the first time. "What is that? Do you keep it as a pet?"

"Of course not!" said Olumer. "This is a girl named Lyli, whose parents are in the possession of the enemy."

"The enemy?"

"Princess Nightstone of Orlath," said Lyli, raising her face. Perhaps she had gotten tired of hiding, perhaps she didn't want to be thought of as a coward, but Olumer had to admit that she faced the silvereyes as bravely as could probably be expected. "She took my parents, and my siblings."

"You have been touched by a great Destiny," said the silvereyes, "and yet you have none now. Why is that?"

Lyli buried her face in Olumer's tunic.

"She doesn't want to talk about it," said Olumer.

"Then you tell us," said the silvereyes.

Olumer shook his head. That seemed to be one thing that most fey had in common, whether they were elves or the lesser kindred. They didn't understand human notions of politeness and appropriate subjects of talk at all. "No. I wouldn't betray her confidence. Let her tell you when she feels like it."

"And what about us?"

Olumer blinked as several other silvereyes melted out of the darkness- four others. A hunting pack of five, then. They sat down next to the fire and reached out for haunches of the *chiga* meat.

Silverheart growled.

The leader growled back at him, and the snow leopard looked startled. He didn't try to forbid them from taking the meat again, but he did watch intently, as if he were keeping track of just how much he was going to charge guests in an inn.

"You are welcome to the feast that celebrates our first battle won and my coming ascension to the throne," said Cadona, lifting her head as if the silvereyes' rudeness was a tribute to her. "And of course, I would like to hear what you are going to do help me win back the throne."

"The throne?"

Olumer felt a prickle of uneasiness. There was a smile in the voice of the woman who spoke that reminded him of the stargazer he had seen in the woods just before he and Cadona left. The stargazer had asked what he cared about someone who ruled in the south, who sat on a throne they would never see.

And that was the problem, of course. The fey never seemed to care about such human things. But they must. If Cadona was going to rule a united Rivendon, then they must.

The leader glanced at him just then. "And you have something to say about this, brother?" he asked, with a deference he hadn't shown Cadona.

Cadona glared at him. Olumer shook his head. "I have nothing to say about this, save that I serve the Rivendonian royal line, and your disdain for the throne is quite misplaced. The line that Cadona is heir to and reflects so well is the only group of people who could rule this land. You should be swearing allegiance to her, and not disdaining her because she is human."

The entire silvereyes pack was silent, glancing at each other. Olumer frowned uneasily. They *were* silent, true? He could hear a faint buzzing on the edges of his awareness, but when he tried to fix his thoughts on it, it slid away and refused to come back to him. It did make his head ache, though.

"I think," said the leader at last, "that you don't really understand why we couldn't serve the Rivendonian throne."

"No, I most certainly do not!" Olumer clenched his fists. The buzzing and the headache that it caused were getting worse. "I have sworn to serve Cadona, even though I am half-fey and must hibernate at times."

"*What?*"

It was the woman who had asked about the throne, the first one who had stepped out of the darkness. She was drawing herself up, her eyes shining so brightly that Olumer could actually see the light they cast on the snow. She was staring hard at him, and she repeated the question. "What?"

"You heard what I said." Olumer bowed his head, clenching his temples between his hands. "I must hibernate, and sleep for years at a time, but I do serve the Rivendonian royal line. I rescued Cadona twelve years ago, and raised her as my own daughter. If I can do such a thing, then you could, too. You're fullblooded fey. You must be able to do things that I could only dream of. Why don't you serve her?"

One of the silvereyes reached towards him, he thought, but the motion stopped when a ringing sound crossed the fire. Olumer managed to look up and saw Cadona standing with drawn sword.

"If any of you hurt my foster father any further," she said, "you will be punished."

The headache vanished. Olumer sighed in relief. *Were they using silvereyes magic on me? And why? I suppose the protection of the true Queen of Rivendon chased them off, though.*

"We wish to fight you," said the leader.

"What?" Cadona asked.

"We wish to fight you," said the leader, and rose to his feet. The rest of the pack fanned out on either side of him. "If we win, then you will release our brother of this Oath. And if you win, then we will go away and stop bothering you."

"No," said Cadona. "If I win, then you will serve me."

"We would never allow you to enslave us as you have our brother," said the leader, and raised his hand. Immediately the night filled with a flow of magic.

Olumer's Oath snarled at him. He stood and called on his own magic.

He *would* protect his Princess.

But part of him grieved at having to strike against his father's people, the first he had seen in all his fragmented life.

Chapter 32

The Serpent's Shelter

"I have found that it never pays to inquire too closely into the secrets of my country, my Lord. There are some things that the peasants must be allowed to keep to themselves, and others that we would be horrified to know. I think it's best to leave them alone, and round them up for wars when we need them."

-Queen Aloriadell of Arvenna.

"There it is."

Elary jerked awake. Since Melior had taken charge of teaching Mitherill Arvennese and Silar of instructing her in Arvennese history, there wasn't much that Elary had to do but sleep. That continued even when they were flying along, since she stayed in Melior's arms and Silar carried Mitherill to instruct her.

"Where is what?" she asked, staring ahead and seeing only mist. She frowned, wondering if they were higher than she had thought. There shouldn't really be clouds this low, should there?

"The sanctuary."

And then the mist blew apart, and Elary found herself gazing on a black stone building, shaped vaguely like a palace but still more like nothing she had ever seen. She blinked, thinking the place would fade like a dream when she looked more closely, but it was still there.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"The Serpent's Shelter," said Melior, and there was hope and relief in her voice. "As we call it, of course. It's one of the many places that Naldeon established when he realized that most of us were serious about setting the Princess of Arvenna back on the throne. And of course we are safe here. I'm glad to see it again."

"But how could no one notice it?"

Melior smiled. "The people who are meant to see it, do. If you had been playing us false, then you would only have seen mist for as long as you were here. And you would have required a guide to lead you around like someone who was blind, so I'm just as glad that you're on our side. I was assigned to guide the last guest we had who couldn't see the Shelter. It was boring work."

Elary looked up, suddenly wondering if Mitherill would be able to see the palace, but was reassured when Mitherill squealed, "What is *that*?"

Silar responded calmly, probably telling her some involved history of the fortress; Silar seemed to be able to hold more history in her head than Elary had ever heard of. Meanwhile, Melior swooped over the palace and then in close again, so that Elary could see it clearly.

It did have the walls and battlements that she would have expected of a castle, but the walls were fairly short, though thick. The battlements themselves had spikes on them, as though

they were meant to spear flying enemies. Inside the walls, Elary could see open cloisters and gardens, some of them just beginning to show a fuzz of green. She felt a stab of relief at that. At least the magic of the Serpents wasn't powerful enough to hurry the growing season.

Melior swirled once, as if to let the people who patrolled the walls know they had come back, and then settled into the middle of a long walkway of stone. Elary shook her arms out, and shivered. She had found that after she rode with Melior for a time, she needed to do that, or lightning would seem to pulse in her muscles and discomfit her for as long as it lasted.

"And there you are."

Elary looked up in shock. Naldeon was striding towards her, bowing when he got close enough. He even clasped her hand and drew it to his lips, a courtly gesture that Elary had not expected to find here.

"I'm so glad that you truly chose to join us," said Naldeon, "and that it wasn't the sham so many of my people thought it was."

Elary smiled a little. "And did you think it was a sham?"

"Yes."

Elary blinked and let the smile slip. "Oh."

The Serpent clapped his hands. "But let us put the past behind us. I see that you have brought the Princess." He turned to look as Silar landed with Mitherill, thrusting the Princess out in front of her so that her legs could take the jounce of the landing. "And I see that Silar is already loyal to her. That is a good sign."

"It is," said Elary. "Mitherill is amenable to instruction. That was a surprise."

Naldeon smiled at her, then walked towards Mitherill as she looked around the garden with wide eyes and mouth. "My lady," he said. "That is, Your Highness of Arvenna. You look well."

Mitherill looked towards him for the first time. Elary saw her golden eyes flare with some intense emotion, and wished she knew what it was. Naldeon was a Serpent, of course, one of the people she had been sure must serve the Dark, but she couldn't fail to recognize the power that moved with him.

Mitherill put out a hand to him. "A Princess is only as strong as the people she rules," she said, a proverb that Elary had heard Silar drilling into her. "And I thank you for the cordial welcome."

Naldeon smiled as he kissed her hand. "You are right," he said. "On both counts. Courtesy is very important here, my lady, and as long as you show it to everyone in sight, then we need never unhood our fangs."

Mitherill blinked, the mask slipping a little, and Elary saw a very frightened twelve-year-old girl looking out. Then she withdrew her hand and curtsied. "I am only a girl, a Princess and not a Queen yet," she said, "and I am largely ignorant of Arvennese Court customs. Will you tell me if I slip?"

"Yes," said Naldeon. "I should warn you, though, that many of us do not speak the tongue of the *ilzánai*. You will want to speak in Arvennese to many of those who will serve you here."

"I do not yet know that tongue fully," said Mitherill. "But Melior is teaching me the language."

Naldeon smiled, which puzzled Elary. Surely he would be angry that Mitherill didn't know certain essential things? But he only nodded as if that was to be expected, and then turned to Elary. "My lady, there are many things we must talk about. Melior, Silar, show Mitherill to her rooms, if you would?"

"Of course."

Elary looked at Silar closely. The fierce protectiveness in her voice, and the way her hand gripped Mitherill's shoulder, reassured her. Perhaps Silar really would take the throne from Mitherill someday, but at the moment, she hardly looked ready to snatch it. She would protect the Princess, and do it with her life.

Reassured, Elary nodded to Mitherill and then turned and followed Naldeon.

He didn't lead her inside at once, but down one of the cloisters of gleaming black stone. Elary walked in silence, noting the odd way that the stone seemed to absorb even the sound of her footsteps. She looked back only once, and it was useless in any case; Silar and Melior had already taken Mitherill inside.

"I wanted to say," said Naldeon suddenly, making her start, "that you are now part of the Serpents."

Elary let out a short breath and met those lightning-marked eyes. She couldn't quite stifle the wariness she felt, so she didn't, deciding that would be more honest anyway. Naldeon could entrance her with just a gaze, and she still wasn't sure how he had done it. "And why would you think that, my lord?"

"Only those who are part of the Serpents can stay here, of course," said Naldeon. "Why else would I let you come here?"

"I am loyal to Mitherill first," said Elary. "I will not abandon her or turn against her for any reason."

"And why is that?"

"I'm tired of war," said Elary, and she saw again the patients in the healers' camp that she had left behind. "I'm tired of the plagues it brings, and the deaths that *those* bring. I'm a healer first and foremost, and if I have a chance to heal the Kingdoms, then I'll take it. I don't want to see Arvenna rent by civil war, nor Ilantra. Mitherill is the only one who might gain enough of a following to heal the rift, instead of just putting a temporary patch over it. She must be the best choice. She has the royal blood she needs running in her veins, after all."

"You may rest easy," said Naldeon quietly. "All of us here are loyal to Mitherill."

"But you have other goals too, don't you?"

Naldeon shrugged a little. "Of course. We need to find the Light again."

"What?"

Naldeon showed her a smile that seemed pained. "We serve a Princess of the Light, but we have used tricks and even taken a name that are more of the Dark than of the Light. We must

make ourselves into what she needs, not only a strike force but a strike force that serves the Light and walks in righteousness."

"I know of no strike force that does that," said Elary before she thought.

Naldeon narrowed his eyes, then waved his hand. "Of course, you are a healer. You don't like war."

"It's not that," said Elary. "I have carried weapons myself when there was need." For a moment, she remembered the assault on the healers' camp that had taken place a few months ago, and shuddered. "But I know of no strike force that serves the Light. You have to use subterfuge, and that doesn't make for good Light tactics."

"You are saying that we cannot serve Mitherill?"

"I am saying that I don't know if your goals and your methods can be brought into accord," said Elary.

"And you think that we should do- what, then?"

By the tone of his voice, he was probably intending to humor her, but Elary took it seriously. "I think that you should serve the Princess of your country first, and worry about serving the Light later. It's not the Light that makes her what she is. Light isn't the reason that Destiny chose to hang about her so strongly. It's the royal blood in her veins. That is what we must present her as. The Princess of Arvenna, not the Princess of Light. The Darkworkers and those who worship Shadow will never turn to our side otherwise."

"And what about the Princess of Ilantra?" asked Naldeon.

"In order to get her out of Shadow's sanctuary, I renounced her claims to the throne of Ilantra," said Elary, lifting her chin. If Naldeon was going to kill her for that, better he do it now. Elary was very confident that he would not, though. "So for right now she is the Princess of Arvenna."

"With the promise of something more in the future?"

Elary grimaced. Neither Silar nor Melior has picked up on that, but then, they were more worried about making Mitherill into the Princess of Arvenna. "Yes, with more in the future, if she can become the Queen of Arvenna and find the Diamond of Ezudlos first," she said.

Naldeon walked in silence for a few moments. Then he said, "And did you think to keep this secret from me?"

"No."

"Then why not mention it right away?"

"I didn't know how you would react."

Naldeon spun to face her, so swiftly that Elary flinched. She knew it wasn't the right reaction- for one thing, it would grant him far too much satisfaction- but it was honest, and perhaps that was needed.

"That ends now," said Naldeon, with something that wasn't anger and yet wasn't happiness glowing in his eyes. "You may trust me. I am leader of the Serpents, or one of their leaders. In all of Arvenna, and in Ilantra, too, you will find no one more loyal to the Princess than I. You may trust me with all things concerning her." He leaned close. "And I, too, want to see her on the throne of Ilantra. I do not want to see her only there, though, as the last two rulers have been."

Elary nodded.

Naldeon rolled up his sleeve. Elary watched him closely, wondering if this was another trick, especially when he drew a knife. Elary backed to a safe distance and continued to watch him.

"It is not to be feared," said Naldeon sternly, as if that command would somehow make her feel better about seeing a man who had entranced her with a knife, and then he cut along his upper arm. Blood flowed quickly out of the cut, and Elary relaxed. He had the air of someone who had done this before, and that probably meant that it wasn't something bad.

Probably.

"This is the same oath that I have sworn with other Serpents," he said, "and they have all agreed to it."

"What does it entail?"

Naldeon snorted lightly. "Nothing on your own part, unless you plan to leave the Serpents or betray us. Then you would have to break the oath, and I would be free of its restrictions. But that is only reasonable, given that you would then be acting against me, isn't it?"

"What does the oath bind you to do?"

"To be fair," said Naldeon quietly. "To make sure that I listen to your side of the story- that you have a side of the story to tell. Sometimes people don't get listened to, and sometimes they are silenced. This oath will make sure that that doesn't happen to you. If you ever feel that I have not listened fully to your reasons for an action or that I am accusing you without proof, then you have only to think of this knife cutting my arm again. The cut will open at once."

He stroked the cut he had opened before Elary could say anymore, and whispered words that she couldn't hear but which she was certain were neither Arvennese nor in the tongue of the *ilzánai*. As she watched, the cut closed, and Naldeon nodded to her.

"Now. Make some statement."

Elary chose the first one she could think of. "It seems very strange that no one else has ever found out the Serpent's Shelter exists."

"That's ridiculous," said Naldeon at once.

"Why?"

"I don't have to explain it to you, because you're not part of the Serpents." Naldeon let a superior tone slip into his voice. "And I don't need to explain anything at all to you."

"That's unfair."

Naldeon nodded in encouragement. "Now think of the knife cutting me."

Elary, uncertain what to do, fixed her eyes on the knife that he still held and thought about a cut across his arm.

Naldeon winced, but did not cry out, as blood began to flow from his upper arm again, in the exact place where Elary had imagined a cut. Elary stared, and tried to think of a way that this could be a trick. But she couldn't come up with one. Of course, she had never heard of the magic that Naldeon had used to swear the oath or make the cut, and so this could be more of the same kind.

But Naldeon could not have imagined the exact shape and size and placement of the cut, which matched that in Elary's mind when he held his arm out to her. Elary nodded slowly. "Then I agree."

"And you know that the oath will fail upon the moment that you become a traitor?"

"I know."

Naldeon smiled as he cleaned the knife on his tunic and touched the wound again. This time, it closed more slowly, and Naldeon grimaced a little. "Yet another reason not to doubt the word of one of my loyalists," he murmured. "It hurts like a snowbird's peck, and doesn't heal as easily, either."

"I didn't mean to hurt-"

Naldeon smiled at her. "If I managed to convince you of our good intentions, then the wound was worth far more than what I paid. Do you have any doubts left about becoming part of the Serpents?"

"No," said Elary.

"Good." Naldeon sheathed the knife and turned away. "And the answers to your questions should be found at the welcoming feast that I have decided we should have tonight. In both the Princess's honor, and your own."

Elary followed him, wondering about the emphasis on the last words, and hoping fervently that it didn't mean something political. Even a healers' camp at the foot of the Dalorth Mountains couldn't escape some politics, but she hoped that she wouldn't be called upon to participate in any here. She had been terrible at them in the camp.

Chapter 33

The First Meeting

"Sometimes I wonder how many wars have ended or started because of information passed by the priestesses of Shara. Who would ever suspect them? They wander back and forth, making little pilgrimages to the most unlikely places, chattering as though they had not a care in the world, and of course always investigating the Mysteries their Goddess is known for. But they tell each other far more things than just half-forgotten stories or the current conditions of the roads."

-Erteros the Strange One.

"But I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," said Alira, who continued to drink her cup of coconut milk with what Ternora thought was quite unwarranted unconcern over Ternora's lack of understanding. "But that doesn't matter. You are only a novice priestess of Shara at the moment, for all that you have met the Lady in the divine flesh. You will have to learn many things yet before you fully understand."

"It shouldn't take this much to understand a simple negotiation."

Alira looked up with a little snort. "I assure you, Ternora, that this is anything but simple."

Ternora leaned back against the seat. Already, she was wondering if she had done the right thing in becoming a novice priestess of Shara. Of course, they would protect her, and her opportunities for revenge on Warcourage were now beyond number or price. But there were so many things they expected her to know.

And they no longer called her "Lady." Ternora hadn't realized how much losing the title would hurt. It was the only taste she would probably ever have of a Court position, and it was gone. She thought it was only right to be a little resentful of that.

But the priestesses didn't seem to care about her concerns, which Ternora thought was quite unfair. She had done what they wanted, hadn't she? And she hadn't killed them all for making her face the Goddess right away, had she? The least they could do was show some damn gratitude.

"So when do I get my first lesson in understanding the negotiations?" she asked, referring to what Alira had said this meeting was about earlier.

The High Priestess smiled and put down her cup. "You will learn right now," she said, and turned towards the outer door of the Temple, near the mosaic of Shara holding the world. Ternora followed her gaze, uncertain as to what she would see.

The door opened, and three women stepped inside. Ternora resisted the urge to flee from the room, or at least rise to a standing position where she would be able to better defend herself. These women wore the semblance of humans, but the heavy power that hung about them proclaimed them at the least fey, and probably divine.

The one on the far left stood tallest, with skin so pale that it looked as though she were made of glass. She carried a bow and arrows, both slung on her back at the moment, but looking ready for use in a moment. The one on the farthest right was even paler, and shed a faint light that made Ternora wonder just what kind of magic she had. Her hair was long and white and braided back from her face. For some reason, whenever she moved, the faint sound of hooves rang around her.

The woman in the middle was the one who looked most normal, but even then, Ternora knew she wasn't. Her face was almost elven, and it wore an expression of supernatural compassion. She noticed Ternora looking at her, and smiled. For no reason that Ternora could name, the smile got her back up.

She started to stand, but Alira reached out and gripped her arm. "Do forgive her," she said to the three women. "She's new, and she hasn't learned to control the feelings that your presence stirs up yet."

"She should soon," said the armed woman. "Or she won't last very long in these negotiations."

Ternora growled.

"Sit down," said Alira. "All of you. And Ternora, you are to keep your anger to yourself. I understand it. I wanted to do something to these three the first time I saw them. But you are to sit on your hands, or you will be removed from the room. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Ternora, and literally sat on her hands. Alira rolled her eyes, but turned back to the three women.

"If you would introduce yourselves, then I think things might go a little more smoothly," she said.

"Does she know-" the shining woman began.

"No," said Alira. "Not yet. So you might as well give her the names that you first used, and later she will understand them."

"I'm right here," said Ternora.

Alira glanced at her. "Yes, I know. What of it?"

"Don't talk about me as though I were on the other side of the Temple," said Ternora. "Talk to me."

"We can't afford the time that that would take," said Alira, and turned back to the three women. "I heard there was another attack."

The three women hesitated for a moment, then called silvery chairs into being from Shara knew where and sat down on them in unison. The shining woman inclined her head to Ternora. "My name is Plenilune."

"I am Irra," said the armed woman.

The one in the middle tried her compassionate smile on Ternora again. Ternora's feelings about it hadn't improved. She bristled at the woman, who looked startled and even stopped smiling for a moment. "I am Soligra," she said at last, as if that were some kind of concession.

Ternora bobbed her head at them.

"Yes," said Irra, turning back to Alira at last, "there was another attack. This time, the surge of madness didn't last as long, and only a few Faerie elves died. But they have almost gone entirely from this world."

Alira sighed. "They can't. We need them."

"I know," said Plenilune. "But we can't convince them to stay when she's slaughtering them everywhere they go."

"She?" asked Ternora, remembering the vision of the silvery woman slaughtering elves that she had seen a few days ago. "Do you mean the elf-killer?"

They glanced at her. "Very good," said Soligra, her voice soft and compassionate. "Very good."

Ternora ignored the praise, and the crawling feeling it gave her; she thought it was meant to make her feel warm, but it wasn't working. "What do you have to do with her? Are you negotiating with her?"

"At the moment," said Irra, "we're only trying to keep her from killing anyone else. It's unpredictable. She has bouts of wild rage that flare and then die. We're trying to keep her from ever feeling them, but it doesn't work."

"And the elves?"

"We need them to stay, of course," said Irra, as though she were talking to a simpleton. "For the defense to work."

"What defense?"

Irra snorted and looked at Alira. "How little did you teach her?"

"Ternora is indeed a novice priestess," said Alira calmly, "but she's here because she has important information. Until a short time ago, she was the guardian of the Doralissan Prince, Warcourage."

At once, the three women turned to face Ternora. Ternora shivered. They did even that in unison. She wondered what strange bond connected them, other than looking alike. Perhaps they were triplets?

"You were?" asked Plenilune.

Ternora nodded.

"That was well done," said Soligra.

Ternora's flesh crawled, but she managed to incline her head and murmur, "Thank you."

Soligra beamed at her. Ternora resisted the impulse to stand and hit her over the head with the chair.

"And what is he like?" Irra asked, leaning forward. "Ready for war, the way that his name indicates?"

"He wants to find the Pool of Siliyonete first," said Ternora. "Of course, his new guardian may have convinced him to change his mind."

"What new guardian?" asked Plenilune.

Ternora focused on her as the only one who felt slightly normal, even though she looked as though she were covered with smashed fireflies. "She calls herself Savior. I've never seen anything like her before, though I think she's some sort of fey. She had a world she had created herself, and white wings that always moved up and down except for one time when I made her extremely angry. She has Warcourage now, and she managed to convince him to send me back to this world. I had torn a few threads on the Destiny-web she took such pride in, so I imagine that she was a little angry."

To her surprise, the three women began to whisper to each other in excitement. Ternora narrowed her eyes. She sat so close to all three of them that she should have been able to make out *some* words, but there was only the steady sound of whispering. Then they sat back and nodded to each other.

"Very well," said Irra, "we are convinced that you struck a blow for us. We will have to fight Destiny in the end, and every small blow we can strike now will ready us for that confrontation."

"You are fighting Destiny?"

"Of course." Irra glanced at Alira, the implication obvious in her eyes and voice, though this time she didn't state it outright.

"But I thought you were part of the Light."

Irra smiled for the first time, a fierce smile that Ternora was actually glad she hadn't seen before. "That depends on whom you ask, these days," she murmured. "But we need to know about the Prince's new guardian. She could cause all sorts of trouble if she has stepped onto the stage and begun to act in the play without finding out what the roles are first."

"I don't know much about her," said Ternora, shrugging. "Just what I told you. She had the Destiny-web, and she had a world full of silver grass and distant mountains that she had managed to create for herself, and-

"What?"

This time, it was Plenilune who asked the question, and when Ternora glanced at her, she found the shining woman biting her lip as if she were struggling not to laugh.

"What I said," said Ternora, wishing they would tell her what was going on. *How can I make a good priestess of Shara if they never tell me anything?* "That was what the world looked like."

"Oh," said Plenilune. "And did you meet any elves while you were there?"

"She said that sometimes the Faerie elves worldwalked, and that she couldn't stop them, since her world wasn't in another universe," said Ternora, becoming more puzzled. Her anger was fading, but she did wish they would let her in on the amusement, whatever it was. She could use some. "Warcourage complained about their presence, since one had turned him into a dolphin-

"What?" That was Soligra, this time, her hands fluttering up to cover her heart. "But that is terrible!"

"I think," said Irra carefully, "that we should have the story from the beginning. From the time that you came to be the Prince's guardian, please."

"First tell me what you were laughing about," said Ternora, leaning forward and speaking directly to Plenilune, so that they couldn't pretend to not understand what she was talking about. "I want to know."

Plenilune smiled. "No one can create worlds but a god, and it's a power beyond even most of them," she said casually. "And what you describe sounds familiar. It's extremely likely that you didn't visit a new world at all, but only a part of Faerie. It was south of where the world

usually extends, and that probably explains why there weren't many Faerie elves there. But the woman you dealt with was fey, not divine."

Ternora sighed. She hadn't realized how much she wasn't looking forward to battling a goddess.

She told the story from the beginning, quickly learning that she had to tell the *whole* thing. Unless one day was exactly like the one before it, the three women wanted to hear everything. Irra wanted to know how she had kept Warcourage safe from the wild beasts of the jungle, and why the piranhas had been able to bite him, and why Viridian had joined them. Plenilune wanted to know all about Erlande's imprisonment of the Prince, and how his palace was laid out. And Soligra wanted to know how she could mistreat the poor Prince.

Ternora quickly decided that Soligra was the most annoying of the lot of them.

When she had finished with her decision to join the priestesses of Shara, Irra sat back and frowned, Plenilune shook her head slowly, and Soligra glared at Alira. "I don't think much of your decision to take her in," she asked.

"Why not?" The High Priestess had finished her coconut milk, called for more, and now glanced up with a mildly interested expression on her face.

"You know that she only wants vengeance, and only wanted a Court position at first, and you still took her in?"

Alira took another sip of the milk. "Yes. Why not? The Dark is more pragmatic than the Light. You must realize that."

"I don't need to realize anything," said Soligra, her voice trembling slightly. "You should not have taken in someone who didn't want to serve Shara, but only wanted vengeance on a poor boy."

"He's not a poor boy," said Irra. "He is a menace to our plans, unless we can get him on our side." She looked at Ternora. "What does he care for, beyond getting his throne back from Shadow?"

"Elle," said Ternora. "And finding the Pool of Siliyonete. And making sure that his people know he's coming back. Not much else."

Irra let out a breath and looked at Alira. "I would like to propose something I think we should have done long since. It's risky, but now might be our moment."

Alira looked at Ternora.

"Send her out," said Irra, "for now."

Alira stood and bowed, and so Ternora had not much choice but to stand and bow back.

And then, because the priestesses of Shara understood some things about their novices very well, she had no choice but to follow the polite woman who came and escorted her away from listening at the door.

Chapter 34

Sharing the Power

"I think that we have much to learn about sharing power. Of course, the Light does it all the time, but then, its rulers are weak enough on their own that they need someone else to shore them up. I can't imagine a Darkworker needing someone else to shore her up."

-Argument from the Second Dark's Lady.

"Princess Tewilde-

"Queen Tewilde."

Nightstone gritted her teeth, and tried to make believe that she really could speak the title without choking herself, as Akellia had assured her she could. "Queen Tewilde. You know that your people will be startled, perhaps even shocked, to see you emerge from what they thought was death?"

"I know." The half-elf lifted her head. "But that doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter, at least," she added, with a sudden flutter of what might have been doubt, but had vanished by the time Nightstone thought to lean in towards her eyes and look. "They should know that I will rule them wisely and well, no matter what happens."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. *Should they? Your reign was a few generations ago, my lady. I don't think that anyone without elven blood or my certain advantages remembers you.* "But how are you going to explain your absence?"

"My absence?"

"Not only from the throne, but also from life," said Nightstone sharply. "They don't know that you've been hiding in the castle-"

"That's a harsh way to refer to what I was doing," said Tewilde, lifting her head. "I hope that most would think better of me than that."

Dark, how did they ever tolerate her as Queen? "But what explanation will you give them?"

"It's up to you to come up with one," said Tewilde.

"What?" Nightstone asked. It wasn't her most eloquent moment in general, but it was very eloquent of her startlement.

"You're the ruler of the country, aren't you?" asked Tewilde. "And you can make them believe what you want?"

Nightstone shook her head. "It's not like that. They just got used to the idea that I serve the Light and not the Dark. I don't want to shock them with much else. And suddenly having a half-elven Queen on the throne would shock them, Your Majesty."

"It shouldn't," said Tewilde. She paused, as though thinking about something, and then made her voice gentle. "Listen, I know that most humans aren't used to monarchs suddenly appearing after a long stretch of time-"

"That isn't true, Your Majesty," said Akellia loyally. "We have all heard the history-tales about the exiled Princess or Prince coming back to claim her or his throne."

"It's simply," added Nightstone, "that most of those refer to someone who was believed to be alive."

Tewilde shook her head. "You make a great deal of the fact that I am supposed to be dead. I don't understand it."

Very well, then time to find out what she's thinking. "When you emerged from hiding, what did you think would happen?" Nightstone asked, sitting down on her bed. In a way, it was a concession, since she no longer stood as tall as Tewilde when she sat, but in another it would help put the woman off her guard, which was something that Nightstone badly needed right now. "Did you think that everyone would rush towards you with open arms?"

Tewilde tilted her head at her with a frown. "Not everyone, but I thought some people would."

"And what would you do about those who didn't?"

"Become Queen."

Nightstone sighed, and decided to be blunt. "Your Majesty, I don't know what it was like when you ruled, but-

"You don't?" Tewilde took a step forward. "But how could you not? You were alive, unless your immortality is a sham." Her eyes searched Nightstone's face, for a moment showing the keen elven gleam that Nightstone had seen in the eyes of the Faerie elves and hated so much. "And I can see it is not. How is that you don't know what Orlath was like then?"

"Because I spent my time in the north," said Nightstone patiently. "I had more to think about than a Kingdom that, at the time, was at peace with the Dark."

"They will accept me as Queen,"

"No, they won't," said Nightstone quietly. "Head of the Court now, and speaker for the nobles, is a Lord Caraban who's more subtle than to just swallow a history-tales whole." *They have to be flavored with subtle truth, like my story.* "He would give you trouble. And, of course, all the Dark loyalists in the castle would not trust you. They still believe in my sham of serving the Dark."

"Get rid of them."

Nightstone laughed. "I would make that announcement, and the next moment, I would hear the voice of the Dark denouncing me as a traitor, and inviting more Dark loyalists south to unseat me. No, thank you."

"There must be some simple way to get rid of them."

"Some way, perhaps," Nightstone agreed, "but it won't be simple. In fact, my lady, it would help most if you would stay hidden for a little while, and let the rumors of your coming spread."

"Wouldn't that be like a history-tale?" Tewilde frowned at her, shining elven face bewildered.

And just like that, Nightstone had her answer. Of course. She wanted to kick herself for not seeing it before. She kept her voice light and patient, though, both with herself and Tewilde, as she answered, "My lady, of course it would be. But there is another history-tale at work here. Have you forgotten it?"

Tewilde frowned at her.

"Your distant grandchild, my lady," said Nightstone. "Or perhaps not so distant," she added, as her mind worked for a moment to remember. Queen Tewilde had married late, she thought, because of the elven blood, and had her daughter late as well, which meant there were less generations between her and the current time than there would have been if she were human. "Your great-granddaughter, Princess Alliana."

Tewilde gave a little shudder. "But you killed her. I felt the explosion of Destiny. She is dead."

"She is?" Akellia scrambled to her feet, her voice rising. "I didn't know that! I didn't know-" Her eyes sped back and forth frantically between Nightstone's and Tewilde's faces.

Nightstone reached out and gripped the half-elf's hands, taking some pleasure in pressing them hard. "No, no, Your Majesty. We let some people think that so that we could save Alliana's life, and delay the pursuit a little. She did not die, but her foster sister, whom Destiny had guarded to shield her, did. And we have no idea where the Princess is right now. But we know that she is coming back to claim her throne."

Slowly, Tewilde's color came back to her. Her eyes searched Nightstone's. "Do you speak the truth?"

"I do," said Nightstone complacently. It was said that Faerie elves could know the truth with a glance, but Tewilde was no elf, despite sharing their blood. For one thing, she was far more literal and stubborn. "Alliana escaped, and when the time is right, she shall come back and claim her throne. That means that you would not have long to sit it, my lady. Would you bring one history-tale into conflict with another?"

Tewilde tugged her hands away, not answering, and began pacing up and down. Nightstone was aware of Akellia watching her anxiously. She shrugged, not knowing what to say. In the end, Tewilde would convince herself, or she would not.

At last, the woman turned to face her. "You said- you said that that not everyone would accept me back," she said.

"No," Nightstone agreed.

"And that you don't know where my great-granddaughter is?"

"No," said Nightstone again, and then added, because she thought it might need some reinforcement, "But she will come back someday. There is no doubt of that. The Light and the Destiny that hang about her are too strong to doubt it."

"Of course." Princess Tewilde turned away, running her hands through her pale hair. Nightstone noted that Akellia's gaze was now fixed exclusively on the half-elf, and sighed. It was probably personal loyalty, which meant that Akellia would need to be eliminated as soon as possible.

Tewilde turned towards her at last. "And couldn't I rule until the Princess Alliana comes back?"

Nightstone shook her head sorrowfully. "I'm sorry. But would you really want to yield the throne?"

Tewilde gasped and took a step away from her. "How dare you imply-"

"I'm only speaking from what I know of human nature," said Nightstone calmly. "You would get used to it, and so would some of your people, perhaps, though they might also be too busy fighting the war against the Dark to get used to it. Would you want to divide the Court into factions when the time came for Alliana to claim the throne? I don't think you would, and I also think that you wouldn't have much of a choice in the matter. Some in the Court would support you, and some would support her."

"I could say that I was ruling as Regent-"

Nightstone winced. "Also in the history-tales, Your Majesty. Regents turn evil and try to take the thrones from the rightful Heirs. They would distrust you even more if you gave that title to yourself."

Tewilde cursed. "I never realized that the history-tales were so frustrating!"

Nightstone smiled in spite of herself. "Sometimes they can be useful," she said. "I was a history-tale until I showed up again."

"Then why can't I do the same thing?" asked Tewilde.

"Because," said Nightstone, "the Dark never makes the claims that the Light needs to make, that you would need to make. I never claimed that I was ruling as Regent for the Princess Alliana. I simply took the throne. If you did that, your people would think of you as part of the Dark, and if you set yourself up as Regent, your people would think- well, pretty much the same thing. I'm afraid that you have no legitimate path back to the throne."

"And you do?"

Nightstone laughed. "I don't want to rule, my lady, only to stay alive in pretending to serve the Dark until Alliana comes back. I think that you do want to rule, or why would you insist on the title 'Queen?'"

"I was Queen once," said Tewilde, in what sounded like a sullen mutter.

"What we were once doesn't really matter," said Nightstone. "I call myself Princess because I exercise power over the Kingdom of Orlath, not because of my royal blood." She had said the exact opposite on some occasions, of course, but she doubted that Tewilde knew of those occasions. "I don't call myself Queen, and now I never will. I think that you need to remember that the Princess Alliana is going to rule because the Light, the Light you serve, wants her to."

Tewilde bowed her head. "I would have been a good Queen, once more," she whispered.

"I know," said Nightstone, who didn't know any such thing, but felt compelled to give that much to a defeated enemy.

Tewilde looked up at her. "Is there any way that I can be of value to the struggle?" she asked.

"Yes, you can," said Nightstone. "Become the history-tale that so many thought you were."

"What do you mean?"

"Show yourself around the castle," said Nightstone. "To more than a few people. Let them think the ghost of the Queen Tewilde is walking the halls. Pause long enough to give them a look at your eyes and ears. And when you have their attention, then speak of your approval for the Princess Alliana taking the throne. That will make them think that her ancestors, too, approve."

Tewilde blinked. Then she said, "That is a good plan, but it does smack of the Dark's subterfuge."

"Your hiding for decades does, too, my lady," said Nightstone coldly. "I think this is a way to make up for it, to use your deception to good purpose."

A faint blush touched Tewilde's cheeks. Nightstone raised her brows. That was another thing that was human, then. She couldn't imagine an elf blushing.

"I know," said Tewilde. "I know that. I will make up for it." She bowed her head. "Off I go, to become a history-tale again," she murmured, and there was such wryness in her voice that Nightstone almost liked her.

Then she looked up and said, "I do hope that I won't have to do this for long. Of course I'm happy to serve the Light in any way I can, but- well, there are some things that are more distasteful than others, and that's the truth."

Nightstone bit the inside of her cheek to keep from voicing a curse of her own, and dipped her head. "Of course, if you become a persuasive history-tale, and if the favor of the Light holds," she murmured, "than we might be able to bring the Princess Alliana back sooner."

Tewilde smiled at her. "Of course! I had forgotten that. Thank you." She bowed to Nightstone, and then turned and slipped out of the room.

Nightstone turned to Akellia. The woman looked at her apprehensively for a moment, then edged towards the door with a little mutter of, "I think that I should follow the Queen..."

"Just a moment, Akellia," said Nightstone.

The woman halted, her head bowed and her eyes fastened on the floor. Nightstone wondered if her strength came mostly from her Lady, or if she had simply used it all up. But she remembered that this woman was one of two Azure mages strong enough to hold the rising ocean back for a few minutes, and resolved to be careful with her.

"What do you want, my lady?" Akellia murmured after a short time.

Nightstone smiled. *Well, not all her strength went with her Lady, then. I suppose that is to the good.* "Tell me, Akellia," she said, "what do you hope to accomplish by serving Tewilde?"

"My lady?"

Nightstone waited until Akellia's suddenly lifted eyes fell back towards the floor, and said, "You must understand, Akellia, that I have little reason to think well of you. You brought me a woman who would usurp the Princess Alliana's place if she could, and there is no excuse for that."

"I wasn't thinking about that!" Akellia screamed in a voice like a rabbit dying under an owl's talons. "Truly, my lady, truly I wasn't. I would have counseled her to wait and have patience, but I knew that she had been looking forward to emerging from hiding for a long time, and to hear that you served the Light was grand news. I prompted her to come here. I didn't realize what would happen. I'm sorry. But if you have a certain displeasure with my loyalty or the way that I have performed my duties-" here Akellia's voice grew unexpectedly strong, and her shoulders straightened "-then of course you may punish me."

Nightstone studied her with narrowed eyes. Akellia shivered as if she expected to find a cold wind blasting the life from her at any second, but stood her ground.

I wish I knew what to make of her, Nightstone thought. Weak, yes, and frightened of many things that would never frighten anyone who knew better, but she is also loyal to the old Queen. And she is willing to fight for her, and even face the punishment that she so fears for her.

Why?

Nightstone smiled and reached out, bushing her fingers against Akellia's. The woman shivered for a moment more, then looked up when she realized that Nightstone's gesture was not frightening. She blinked. "My lady?"

"I am not angry at you," said Nightstone quietly. It had to be quietly, or she would scream out her frustration, and she didn't want to do that. "You did what you thought was best, and I am glad that I know the darting figure I had seen so often was not an enemy. That is good news. If nothing else, you have relieved me of the fear that we had someone hiding here in the castle who was reporting to the Dark, someone whom I could not find."

Akellia blinked a little, then smiled. "Thank you, my lady."

"You have done what you thought was best," Nightstone went on. "But if you have another impulse, and you're not sure what the right thing to do about it is, please feel free to come and ask me."

Akellia bowed to her. "Of course. Thank you, my lady."

Nightstone shook her head as she watched the woman hurry away. Akellia probably didn't even realize that she had just agreed to spy on her Lady for Nightstone's sake.

I wish I knew what made her so weak and stupid and timid, and yet so loyal. I suppose I will have to try to cultivate her to find out.

Nightstone turned for her bed, but stopped as the light coming through the window caught on a spark in midair. It tumbled and glowed, and then it became a fountain of water apparently springing up from the stone and tumbling back in a long, controlled loop. Nightstone sighed and leaned back against the door, watching it in resignation.

The water became Blackbird, who blinked around at the room and then turned to Nightstone with a slightly resentful expression. "Why did you call Anna and me back from spying on Prince Artaen?" she complained. "I think that we were close to catching the Princess of Rivendon, too."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. "The Princess of Rivendon?"

Blackbird nodded. "There were reports that she had been seen in the Western Crescent, and certainly Artaen sent his soldiers that way."

Nightstone felt a pang of regret. But if the People of the Blending had remained in the north, then the Dark might have taken that as a sign she didn't understand what it wanted of her, and struck more fiercely. "I have a different task for you," she said. "A more important one. You don't serve the Light or the Dark, do you?"

"Most certainly not."

Nightstone turned her head and saw Anna kneeling on top of a table. The sylph frowned a little and shook out her clear hair. "We are our own," said Anna. "Like the dragons."

Nightstone fought to keep from laughing. The thought of comparing the regal dragons to these mischievous creatures was an amusing one. But she redirected her thoughts to other matters. "Then you can pursue an enemy that the Dark has said I may not?"

"Of course," said Blackbird. "Who is this?"

"Kymenos," said Nightstone. "The mage who sent me to you. He has his own motives for doing what he does, and I want him found and stopped."

Blackbird nodded, her face serious. "We can do that. What do you want us to do?"

Nightstone hesitated. She might be better off if she ordered them to kill Kymenos, but...

"Bring him to me."

Blackbird nodded, and then she and Anna vanished in a sparkling of water and air. Nightstone smiled in contentment and walked towards the bed. Soon she would have Kymenos in her power, and the Dark couldn't say she'd wasted time or Dark loyalists pursuing him.

She would have felt a little better about it if her shoe hadn't landed in the wet patch Blackbird had left, soaking through to her foot.

Chapter 35

Loyalists

"Have I mentioned that in general I find loyalty an irritating burden?"

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

"Kymenos?"

"Yes?" Kymenos asked, keeping his eyes forward but his voice as calm as was possible under the circumstances. He wished that Cheyena would have chosen a different time to talk to him, but since they were fording a stream at the moment and had hard, rolling ground to go on the other side, probably no time in the next three miles would be that much better.

Sykeen snorted and flirited his tail, and Kymenos rolled his eyes and corrected himself. At least speaking to him while they were on solid ground would have insured that Sykeen wasn't dancing like a foal.

"I heard you muttering in your sleep last night. Who were you talking to?"

Kymenos did glance back at his this time, but kept his voice and face as innocent as he could. "Talking? You heard me using words?"

"Yes," said Cheyena, who was so intent on this that she didn't even look down to help guide Estia through the swirling waters. "You were laughing, and then you said that the threat of what someone was sending after you was nothing compared to what you would do to her when you met again."

Kymenos smiled a little. Nightstone had talked to him last night, for the first time since the dragon attack, threatening him with something new. Kymenos had laughed at her and assured her that his threats were more potent, while picturing a bed and Nightstone flushed with passion upon it. She had let out a shriek and vanished from his mind the moment he did that. Really, she was never going to get injured to that kind of thing if she ran away every time it came up.

But Kymenos hadn't known that Cheyena had heard him.

"Did I say 'her?'" he asked.

Cheyena blinked, and lost some of her intensity. "I- no. That is, I assumed-" And now her face flushed, and she looked away.

Kymenos clucked his tongue. "Then you shouldn't speak as if you were certain, my lady." Inwardly, he was laughing. *Could she have done anything that would have betrayed her interest in me more obviously?* "I was speaking to Sykeen, of course. He was threatening to bolt away and leave me all by myself in this desolate wilderness. And I told him that I would geld him."

"You threaten him with that?"

"Yes," said Kymenos, ignoring the horrified tone in her voice. This would serve as a nice test. "It's the only way I can get him to shut up. Can you imagine what it would be like to have a telepathic horse chattering in your head day and night?"

"Oh." Cheyena's anger faded a little. "I didn't know that. I suppose that it would be rather annoying."

Kymenos allowed himself another inner laugh. Yes, that had worked. She was interested enough in him to forgive what she thought of as horrors, or at least impolite things, if he phrased them in a more favorable light.

You're doing me no services.

Kymenos stroked Sykeen's neck and turned back forward again, to find that they were almost across the stream. *Of course I am. Did you notice that you didn't need my help fording the water this time?*

Sykeen swished his tail as if to say that was nothing, but his mental voice displayed wary interest. *So? What does that mean?*

It means that you're getting braver and better about attending to such things yourself, of course.

Sykeen snorted and made a little dancing step as he came up on the bank. *There is that.*

Kymenos smiled and patted his neck. Dealing with all of them, even the most annoying, was possible if you just understood what you were getting into and timed it carefully so that they heard what they wanted to hear and believed what they wanted to believe.

"Your smugness is disgusting," said Norianna from his side.

"You can think it so," said Kymenos in a mutter. He didn't think that anyone was going to hear them; Sykeen was prancing, and Cheyena was still fighting her way across the stream. "But it works."

"That doesn't mean that you should do it. And it is especially shameful and disgusting that someone like you, who is-" And then Norianna stopped, obviously hoping that he would ask her something about what she had meant.

Kymenos was too experienced in the game to ask. Besides, he knew that she would just refuse to tell him anything again. He laughed and ignored her, turning his head forward to look at the Mountains.

The Rashars still loomed ahead, and the next path they had to take was the highest yet, but soon enough they would cross that and into one of the main valleys that ran the length of Arvenna. Then he would be much closer to home.

I cannot wait to see it again.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos turned at once, grasping for Norianna and then wishing he hadn't done that. The sword would never let him hear the end of it. But he let her go at once. The problem before him wasn't one that a sword could do anything about.

Cheyena was trying to keep control of the plunging, rearing Estia. The horse screamed and then whinnied shrilly as the little waves of the river curled about her, trying to knock her down or wrench her rider from the saddle. Kymenos narrowed his eyes to make sure he wasn't imagining things, and then nodded grimly. The river really was reaching for her.

It happened sometimes. The Azure would attack Scarlet mages, not because they had done anything but because it hated the Scarlet.

Kymenos flung himself from Sykeen's back and onto the ground, dropping to his knees to absorb the impact, and held out a hand towards the water. As he opened his own conduit to the Azure, he could hear the water roaring in impatience and fury. It wanted Cheyena, wanted to kill her, and the hostility was more than that which naturally ran in the water.

Kymenos didn't know if he could calm it, but his fingers moved in Welfor's Pattern, and the water calmed enough to listen to him. Kymenos rocked his hand back and forth, and the river was soothed. Soon the waves that had risen to clutch at Cheyena's saddle and legs danced like snakes instead, listening to the soothing music that the Pattern reminded them of.

Kymenos clenched his hand once more, and the Azure reared, then settled back. Cheyena sobbed and kicked Estia the last few feet across the relatively smooth stones near the bank,

onto the solid earth. Then she dismounted the horse in what was nearly a fall and hurried towards Kymenos.

Kymenos embraced her, while keeping his eyes on the river. It seemed content to run now, not even lashing out with a tendril towards the shore as a reminder of what Cheyena had escaped.

"Are you all right?" he asked into her hair.

Cheyena sobbed, then nodded. "Why did it attack me?"

Kymenos waited a moment before he replied, even though she repeated the question with an impatient tone in her voice. He was following the river upstream in his mind. Possibly, something that was connected with Scarlet had happened to affect the river. If he could find out what it was, then he would know if they had to avoid any other waters in the area.

He followed the water for some time without seeing anything, and then abruptly slammed into a barrier so strong that it made him gasp.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos fell back into his body, glad that Cheyena was shaking him. It gave him an excuse to stay here and not reach out again. He shook, then licked his lips. "There is something upstream," he said carefully. "It feels as though someone has dammed the river, or poisoned it somehow. Or perhaps there are a group of Scarlet mages there who have been using the water for something."

"Does it have anything to do with us?" Cheyena asked, eyes wide.

"I don't know," said Kymenos. "Probably not. But it's the reason that the river attacked you. I think we should move."

Cheyena didn't need another reminder. She turned and remounted Estia, who was tossing her head as though she were unable to understand her rider's sudden dismount. Sykeen only tossed his head once when Kymenos climbed back up, but asked, *Should I be ready for battle?*

I don't know, said Kymenos, and glanced over his shoulder. Whatever that barrier meant, no sign of it could be seen this far downstream. *But we should at least try to move out of the way of a possible battle.*

Sykeen tossed his head once again in answer to that, and then turned and trotted up the slope. Kymenos posted in his saddle, still glancing back now and then, still trying to reassure himself that his uneasiness was silly. Even if one of the Scarlet mages had felt him brush against the barrier, why would they come after him? He was only one mage, and they probably had bigger targets.

At least, I hope they do.

"You could have used me after all, couldn't you?" asked Norianna.

"Shut up, sword," said Kymenos, and then decided that he wasn't going to see anything looking over his shoulder. He looked forward instead, though not without a tingling between his shoulders that made him feel he was turning his back on an enemy. "There was no one to fight."

"But now there is."

Following on the heels of her calm words, Kymenos saw a gleam of steel from the stone ahead of them. He pulled Sykeen up at once, and drew Norianna from her sheath. The talking sword chuckled. "Do you see?"

"Cheyena," said Kymenos, in a voice that he hardly recognized, "stay behind me, and out of the way."

"I could use my magic--"

"From a distance."

Cheyena didn't seem inclined to argue, instead hovering behind him. Kymenos heard the crackle of fire, and hoped that if she struck wildly in defense of her own life, then she wouldn't hit him or Sykeen.

"Welcome," said a voice in Arvennese.

Kymenos looked at the woman striding towards him down the stones with a raised brow. He had expected an immediate attack. But this woman was smiling, even though she wore the leather clothes of a fighter, and carried a bared sword. And she had a patch of some kind on her shoulder.

Kymenos leaned closer to study it, then groaned aloud. The patch was in the shape of a crown.

Damn it.

The woman laughed. "Some of my comrades would say that only enemies groan like that at the sight of us, but I am willing to give you a chance." She stopped a few feet away, and only then did Kymenos realize how tall she was; her head was almost at a level with his chest, even though he was mounted. Her eyes sparked at him, gray with a slight tinge of gold that probably indicated liadra blood. "Are you friends or enemies?"

The reasonable little voice of Kymenos's better self, which he hadn't heard in a long time, spoke up then. *Tell her friends, do what they want you to do, and then be on your way. You don't want to let anything delay you on the ride home.*

But she had a crown on her shoulder.

"I can't answer that until I know whom you serve," said Kymenos.

"Why, the rightful Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna, of course," said the woman. "Princess Mitherill Lightningborn. We are tired of Shadow controlling our country, and we are going to rule ourselves again."

"Ah," said Kymenos.

"And you?"

Be reasonable, said the little voice.

Kymenos smiled and spread his arms. "As you can see, I am Dalznan. I am on my way home." He nodded to Cheyena. "And my companion there is Orlathian. Neither of us have any part in this struggle."

What about me? asked Sykeen.

You're a horse-

I can talk!

You're Orlathian, then.

Oh. All right. Sykeen calmed, just barely swishing his tail. Kymenos rolled his eyes.

The woman said, "Well, if you are to cross Arvenna, then you will need to declare a loyalty one way or the other."

"He has a part to play in all of this," said Norianna. "He is indeed loyal to the Princess of Iantra-Arvenna, and he will-"

"I am not," said Kymenos. "If she's like the Princess Alliana, then she can be raped and killed for all I care."

The woman stepped back and leveled her sword. Norianna gave a little moan. Strangely, both of them said the same thing at the same time. "Now you've done it."

Chapter 36

The Shining Nets

"Do you know the way the silvereyes fight? Could you take them down if they attacked you? Or, at least, if this particular one attacked you?"

"Neither do I, or could I."

-Prince Ulon of Rivendon, during the coup that unseated his mother.

Olumer twisted a little to the side as one of the silvereyes flung a shining net at him. It flared as it fell into the slushy snow, and then twisted itself, trying to get up and fling itself at him.

Olumer danced to the side again, calling on the magic that he was most familiar with. The spirits boiled towards him-

For a moment. Then they sensed the other silvereyes in the area, and hesitated. Olumer cursed silently. They were weighing what opportunity would give them the most blood to feed on, and they might also be deciding to honor the command of a fullblooded fey rather than a half-fey.

Olumer imagined the most destructive creature he could, one of the lizard-hounds he had sometimes seen hunting the very uppermost peaks of the Dalorth Mountains. They had long

legs, muscled and covered with scales, and jaws like a crocodile's. They were such feared hunters that even the silvereyes would keep away from them.

The spirits rushed forward at once, and after that, Olumer's only difficulty was in keeping them all from trying to take lizard-hound form at once.

Cadona was beside him, swinging her sword and smirking at the silvereyes. Silverheart stood behind her, his tail lashing and his eyes alight with battle-rage. Olumer felt another surge of calmness as he studied Silverheart. If he fell, the snow leopard would see to it that Cadona made it to safety. He knew it.

"Who will be first?" Cadona challenged. "I know that you have magic to fight me with, but who's first?"

The tall woman who had spoken contemptuously of thrones stepped forward. "I will face you, Princess of Rivendon, if you really insist on facing the first of us," she said, with a quicksilver amusement in her voice.

Cadona fell into a fighting crouch. "That will do nicely."

And then Olumer's gaze was jerked away from Cadona, because the lizard-hounds he had sent hurtling at the other silvereyes had run into trouble. The leader had called spirits in the form of-

Olumer breathed out. Wolves! He had not known that any silvereyes had command of that form, even for spirits, since wolves were so opposed to the forest fey. The wolves were acting in concert, while the lizard-hounds acted alone, and driving his spirits back. Olumer winced as teeth tore into the scales of the lizard-hounds, and so tore into him.

"Brother."

Olumer looked up, blinking away something that felt like blood but probably wasn't from his eyes, and saw the leader standing with one hand held out to him.

"You need not do this," said the leader. "You are only fighting because your Oath tells you that you should."

"Cadona is my Princess," said Olumer, "and the one hope for a united Rivendon." He made a silent suggestion to one of the lizard-hounds, and it leaped at the same moment as another one did, finally managing to down one of the leader's wolves. The silvereyes flinched, but kept his hand extended.

"You need not care about that," he said. "We never do. We have the forests of the north, and that is all we need. You could come with us, and we would teach you the way of life in the forests."

"I already know it," said Olumer shortly, moving a little to the side, while still wincing from the destruction of the lizard-hounds, so that he could see how Cadona's battle was going. Her sword was slashing apart the shining nets that the woman created and threw at her, and Silverheart, rearing on his hind legs, was clawing apart still others. A bolt of joy flew to Olumer's heart, and he looked back at the leader with new confidence. "I have spent the last twenty years in the northern forests, and the last twelve of those raising Cadona."

"Then you have never been truly free," said the leader at once. "No one could be who had to take care of her for years. Come with us, and we will show you your heritage."

"I have the magic, and the knowledge that I am half-silvereyes," said Olumer. "That is all I need."

The leader snarled, flashing his fangs, and called back his wolves so suddenly that some of the lizard-hounds floundered. "Don't you understand?" he shouted. "That is just another piece of the nonsense that the Rivendonian royal line has fed you. You're not a halfbreed. You're a fullblooded silvereyes, and we are fighting to free you from your bonds as we would fight to free any of our kin!"

Olumer stared at him, and for a moment, the defense of the lizard-hounds faltered.

The leader gestured sharply. The wolves bounded past the lizard-hounds, forming up in a circle around Olumer. No matter where he turned, sharp teeth and glaring eyes looked back at him.

"You cannot flee now," said the leader, panting as he trotted forward. Olumer was glad to see that much. Yes, the silvereyes had the victory, but he had made him pant for it. "Princess!" he shouted. "We have your servant. Will you give up this pretense of a fight now, and tell us what you plan to do to free him?"

Cadona turned to look at him, and Olumer was horrified to see that her glowing eyes had filled with uncertainty.

"No!" he shouted. "Cadona, you can't care about me! Keep going, keep running! You have to get- where you're going!" For the first time, he was glad that Cadona hadn't told him her destination. "Take Lyli and Silverheart and run. Silverheart will provide for you. Go!"

Cadona hesitated for a long moment. Then she turned and made a sharp whistling sound. Silverheart whirled only to grab Lyli's arm, and then they turned and flew into the hills. Olumer clenched his hands, fighting back the fear that the silvereyes would simply go after them and overtake them.

Instead, the silvereyes woman whom Cadona had been fighting laughed and turned back towards him. Olumer frowned as he saw that her eyes were shining with high good humor, and she even made a gesture that was an imitation of the Princess fleeing. Hissing laughter came back.

Olumer glared at them, his head back and his chest heaving. "You can try to make me tell you about Cadona," he said, "but you'll never wring anything from me that I don't want to give you."

The laughter stopped at once, and the silvereyes pack turned and looked at him. Olumer's courage struggled to keep up appearances under those combined gazes. He would have sent the lizard-hounds forward then, but the leader gestured, and the spirits were suddenly ripped from their bodies and sent back into the half-world where they spent most of their time floating.

Olumer swallowed. He had never heard of any silvereyes with that power, either. Of course, until a few days ago, he hadn't known that the silvereyes had any such magic as the shining nets.

"What do you want from me?" he asked.

"I think you know that," said the leader, moving forward with a grace that might have caused Olumer to weep if he were not so frightened. "You are a fullblooded silvereyes, not a

halfbreed, and we have made it our duty to rip you free of the Oath that binds you. It is a complicated thing, but what secures it in place is no more than a simple shining net, and we can take that apart." He shook his head. "Who was the traitor one of our kind who bound you like that?"

Olumer shook his head. "No one did. You are mistaken. I remember being a child. I remember having a mother who sang to me, and taught me the human language, and wept sometimes because I looked so much like the silvereyes pack leader who abandoned her. That's what I remember."

"And all of it is false." It was the tall woman who spoke now, and her voice was the note of the winter wind screaming around the eaves of a house, without a trace of the amusement she had shown earlier. "Such shining nets are carriers of such memories. You would remember only what the silvereyes who wove the net wished you to remember, and even that is imperfect. You have gaps in your memory, don't you?"

Olumer stiffened, wanting to ask them how they knew that. But perhaps they really did know other half-silvereyes with those traits. It didn't have to be that he was really bound in a shining net.

"It comes after and before the hibernation," he said. "I need much sleep, and I sometimes can't remember that much of what happened in the months before I went to ground, or in the twilight when I first awaken."

"That is what told me that you were fullblooded," said the leader softly. "No half-fey sleeps like that. You are fullblooded silvereyes, and you should be able to remember both your actions when you were awake and your dreams when you hibernate clearly." He shook his head. "No, this is the action of someone else, someone who could not risk his treachery becoming known."

"You are correct, but not in the way you think."

Olumer turned his head in hope. He knew that voice, and there was some hope that the silvereyes would listen to it.

Pannerel stepped out of the darkness as if he had always been there, and over the dying fire. He nodded to the silvereyes leader, then looked back at Olumer with his eyes narrowed. "There is a net upon him, but you will have a very hard time in breaking it," he said. "It is not the act of some random treacherous silvereyes." He studied Olumer again.

Olumer was glad to see slightly baffled expressions on the faces of the silvereyes pack. Apparently they had expected Pannerel to continue and tell them whose web it was. At last, the leader coughed and said, "And who wove the web, then?"

"Olumer himself."

Olumer let out his breath as their stares swung back to him. "There, do you see? There is no doubt that I chose the Oath to serve the Rivendonian royal line, not if I wove the web that binds me. You can let me go. I desire nothing more than to follow the Princess." That was literally true. The Oath filled his head with a noise like buzzing bees. He knew that Silverheart would take care of her, but it was possible that he could do more. He wanted to go to her side.

"Why?" the leader whispered. "What silvereyes would choose to confine himself like this?"

"Not choose," said Pannerel, his eyes still narrowed but his voice light, as if they were discussing what they should have for breakfast in the morning. "I don't think he had a choice. That, too, sings in the web." He blinked and looked up, meeting Olumer's gaze. "Something forced him to do this."

"Nothing could have forced me," said Olumer. "Not if I were as proud and arrogant as my friend here." He gestured at the leader, who flashed his fangs and hissed in what could have been anger or agreement. Olumer didn't really care. "I think that you're lying, Pannerel, or at least not telling the whole truth."

"What would I do that?" the elf asked.

His voice held no inflection but curiosity, but something in the very way he stood reminded Olumer that he was dealing with an immortal. His voice lost only a little of its bite, however. "Because you don't want me to serve my Princess. Because you called her a bitch-"

"Did he?" asked the tall woman. "Well-named!"

Olumer glared at her. She just bared her teeth back. Olumer turned at once to Pannerel; the silvereyes were not going to listen to him, but there was at least the chance the elf might. He had once before. "You think I'm trapped, for whatever reason, and you want to free me. I suppose that's commendable. But what I am now is what matters to me, and not what I was. Can you understand the desire to stay 'enslaved,' if you must use such a word, to the royal line of Rivendon?"

"No," said Pannerel.

Olumer shook his head. "Then I will not try to reason with you again," he said, "but you cannot expect me to stand still and passive when you try to remove the shining net. I want to stay with Cadona, and I will resist you if you try to take it from me."

"We can't do that," said Pannerel patiently. "Don't you understand? If you put the shining net on yourself- and I am convinced now that that is the case- then we cannot remove it. We must trust, instead, that you will remove it. We can only explain to you the advantages of freedom."

"There are none," Olumer insisted, "not if having that freedom would mean giving up my service to the royal line."

Pannerel shook his head and opened his mouth, and then stopped, turning his head. To the leader of the silvereyes pack, he said, "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked the leader.

"I thought not," said Pannerel, and then sighed. "Annalithiel did tell me not to come back to this world, that it was too dangerous. But I didn't listen to her, and now I imagine that the peril is coming for me."

"What peril?" asked Olumer.

"The thing that kills Faerie elves wherever they walk in this world now," said Pannerel, gazing into the distance as though he could see something invisible to the rest of them. "A flash of silvery light, it seems like most of the time. One of our kin came upon a site of the slaughter, and said that he could hear a buzzing song in his ears, like a swarm of large bees. And now I hear it."

"Then move through the gate into another world," said the leader of the silvereyes pack. Olumer grimaced. Fear in a fey voice sounded no more musical than fear in a human voice, and much more unnerving. "My lord, you must! You cannot stand here and wait for it to slaughter you."

"Yes, I can," said Pannerel, and reached out into the air. His arm vanished up to the shoulder, and then slid back again. Olumer, concentrating, thought he could hear a sliding click, as though the elf's arm had just bumped off a smooth wall. "It has closed the gateways between the worlds, you see," Pannerel continued, with nothing more urgent than curiosity in his voice. "I thought it might. There is no way that I can get through."

"You cannot-"

"I can." And Pannerel lifted his gaze to the skies as though he were waiting for the silvery thing, whatever it was, to swoop down and destroy him.

The pack leader turned to Olumer. "You're the reason he's here," he said. "You owe him a debt of honor. Help him."

"What do you think *I* can do?" Olumer asked. "Against something that slaughters Faerie elves?"

The pack leader screamed at him in something that sounded like the silvereyes tongue. Pannerel started and roused from his reverie enough to turn his head. "That was extremely bad language."

The pack leader snarled.

"There it is," Pannerel said, lifting his eyes to the sky again, as if that had really been just a minor interruption.

Olumer followed his gaze. A flash of silvery light was indeed falling from the sky, and he had no idea what it was or how to face it.

"We will do what we can," said the pack leader, and then threw back his head and drew.

Olumer gasped. He had never felt anything like what the pack leader did. It was as if the silvereyes were gathering up the pool of magic that normally extended outward from Olumer's body. He gathered it into his own, and then threw it forward, acting with all his might to create a barrier that extended around the silvereyes pack and the elf.

The silvery flash of light went on falling.

Olumer, who had dropped to his knees, closed his eyes as memories burst like the light in his mind.

Chapter 37

War on the Threshold

"Not for nothing is the serpent named an evil creature, and a Dark one."

-Attributed to Queen Selissa of Ilantra.

"My lady!"

Nightstone started out of sleep. That was the deepest slumber she had attained in some time, and she was prepared to kill whoever had roused her out of it if the matter was not truly important.

When she opened the door and saw the liadra on the threshold of her room, however, all doubts vanished. The liadrai never showed any distress unless the situation was indeed serious, and this one was fretting and tossing her head like a horse on a short lead rope, the silver hair flying around her.

"My lady," said the liadra, kneeling at once and bowing her head, "we are under attack."

Artaen again? I will kill him, if so, or perhaps summon the Dark and let him attend to it. "From Rivendon?" she asked.

"No, my lady," the liadra said, looking up at her. "These riders have horses, and they are attacking from across the Plains. I believe that the forces of Rivendon would arrive on drakes, or attack from the air."

Mystified, Nightstone nodded crisply and said, "Have your people assumed their battle-stations?"

"Yes, my lady. Should I tell the filifernai?"

"Yes."

The liadra sprang to her feet and ran off. Nightstone was just as glad to let her go. Since the night when she had first met the People of the Blending, summoning the filifernai had made her feel strange. They looked at her with their faceted eyes as if they didn't trust her, as if they were thinking of eating her, and it wasn't conducive to keeping her mind where it should be.

But her people had trained long and hard for this, and so Nightstone was not truly worried. She opened her conduit to the Scarlet and stepped out onto the balcony. She would show the signal forth that would tell everyone to assume battle-stations who was not already there, and they would be ready to repel the attack.

She lifted her hands to let the ball of flame go, and a blast of water struck her full in the face. Spluttering, Nightstone stepped back. The flame in her hands turned to steam, which would have been a warning in itself if anyone was looking, but was hardly sufficient to light up the dark sky.

Nightstone tried to regain her vision, and felt someone slip behind her. In seconds, the edge of a fine cord pressed against her neck, and she felt a pair of arms secure it in place. Then she coughed as the cord went deeper. It was a garotte, she knew, and the tension in it said that whoever stood behind her was looking forward to pulling it in further.

To make it worse, the one who stood behind her was an Azure mage. Nightstone could still call on the Scarlet, but it was hardly going to be as effective against someone who had control of the opposite element.

And there was another Azure mage in front of her.

Nightstone shifted to look forward, at least as much as the cord allowed her, and felt a spasm of shock. Lord Caraban stood there, smiling a little as his eyes met hers, even giving her a small bow.

"What-" Nightstone began, but the cord pressed in hard enough that she couldn't talk anymore.

"Silence, please, my Lady Nightstone," said Caraban, and turned to the courtyard beneath the balcony. "What better way to see the failure of all your plans, and the success of mine?"

Nightstone squinted through watering eyes. There was fire in the courtyard, she thought, and for a moment dared to hope that some Scarlet mage of the Dark was out there.

Then she heard screaming, and smelled the stink of burning fur and feathers. Her heart gave one loud thump, then seemed to quiet altogether. They had locked the pegasi in the stables and were letting them burn, the bastards.

She tried to put all the hatred she felt in her gaze, and for a moment, Lord Caraban blinked, looking less confident.

Then he shook his head and chuckled. "You are indeed a formidable opponent, Lady Nightstone- but I think I have won this round."

Nightstone fell a little back towards the mage behind her, forcing him to loosen his grip long enough to ask, "Why?"

"I knew that you were a traitor to the Light, and always had been," said Caraban, with a slight smile. The firelight from the courtyard shone in his eyes, making him look like a Master of the Star Circle Nightstone had faced and killed once, one of the ones who had gone mad from the weight of the universe. "I had only to read the Chronicle of the Monarchs to be reminded of that. You turned to the Dark, and you have never turned back. You could not fool me."

Nightstone closed his eyes. She didn't want him to see the frustration in her gaze.

"Yes," said Caraban. "You were potting to betray us all. But the Light has moved first. We are rising against Dark and Shadow all over the Kingdoms, and we will at last throw off twelve years of slavery. And then we will bring the Destined royal Heirs back and let them sit their thrones. There will indeed be times when we have prosperity and peace again, just as the prophecies speak of."

Nightstone formed the word "prophecies" with her lips, since she couldn't get air behind the word to speak it.

"Ah, yes," said Caraban, sounding happy. "Indeed. You would not know about that one, since it was carefully kept hidden even from the Dark. But this is the Prophecy of the Four Heirs:

"She who sings sees now a great vision;

The cry of ravens she hears, who deride

The attempt to reclaim those who have died.

*The great ones of Light come to a decision,
And influence the birth of four Heirs of Light
Who shall make the world forever bright,
And turn the Kingdoms into a deep paradise,
Though only with blood and fire's sacrifice.
But they must be the true and four royal Heirs,
Or else this paradise shall never come to pass.
This prophecy is as fragile as glass."
Before the advent of the black stone's cares."*

Nightstone listened as well as she could with a cord pressing into her neck and the screams of her dying people in her ears. She was sure that this was the prophecy that Kymenos had heard and refused to tell her about. She was going to kill the bastard for that, and many other things, when she had him at last.

She opened her eyes and met Caraban's gaze. She again tried to form words with her lips.

"Let her go enough to speak," said Caraban to the man who stood behind her. Nightstone still had not seen him.

The cord loosened. Nightstone got her breath and whistled, a shrill, piercing sound that trailed off into a high note at the end.

Caraban laughed. "Calling for your pegasi, my lady? They cannot help you. They are either in the stables, dying in the flames, or far away on scouting missions. We made sure of that."

Nightstone ignored him. She had known it would be useless calling to the pegasi. But there were other allies, her last, truest allies, who had never left her even when she dedicated herself to the Dark, and she could hope that Caraban didn't know about them or hadn't taken any precautions against them.

There came the thump of hooves, and a quick curse from Caraban. "How did they get-"

Nightstone opened her eyes to watch the charge that ended Caraban's life. The foolish man had forgotten that no space was barred to the pure and mystical of heart, and her allies were that.

The unicorn's horn went through Caraban, and he fell to the balcony, already spilling enough blood to soak the stone. His ally, behind Nightstone, began to tighten the garotte in response.

The unicorn spun towards her.

Nightstone watched it in trust and faith. She didn't have to, she could close her eyes if she wanted, but she preferred to watch what she had won with her chastity.

The unicorn charged her. Nightstone sagged back towards the man behind her, her sight dimming as he choked her, but all the power of vision she had left fixed on the unicorn.

The horn stabbed through her, and Nightstone felt no pain. It passed through her as if she were mist, in fact, and stabbed into the man behind her. He uttered a choking cry, and his hands on the garotte were suddenly slack. Nightstone wriggled quickly free before his falling weight could start choking her again, all the while slipping through the horn as if she were a ghost.

Then she turned around to gaze at the messy damage, and to comfort the trembling unicorn. It had come to her aid, as it would have come to the aid of anyone whom its people loved so well, but unicorns didn't like killing, and now it turned and buried its horn in the crook of her arm.

Nightstone stroked it gently, wiping off the blood with her arm, and then murmured, "You should go."

The unicorn didn't hesitate, instead bolting towards the door and passing into the same Light that it had come from. This was going to be slaughter, and that was no place for a unicorn.

Nightstone arranged her robe for a long moment, despite the flickering of the flames and the screams of the pegasi.

Slaughter.

It was going to be that way because she was angry enough to make it so.

She closed her eyes, and her mind reached out, hovering for just a moment before it sped around the castle. She knew the layout as well as anyone alive, having spent so much time there as a child, and then studying it again as the centuries passed and the nobles and monarchs made new additions. And she had studied it again and again during the last twelve years, preparing herself in case something like this ever happened.

She hadn't thought it ever would, and perhaps that was her fault, but she had something bigger to worry about now. From outside came the first shouts of battle, and she didn't worry about that, either. The filifernai and the liadrai, at least, were in their battle-positions, and they were meeting the enemy that had come charging across the Plains. It was up to her to do something about the enemy already in the castle.

Her mind curled into the nobles' bedchambers. Some of them were occupied, and some were not.

In the ones that had nobles sleeping in them, Nightstone set glittering lines of Scarlet wards. Those wards would only burn them if they tried to leave their rooms and join in the fighting. Those nobles might not be traitors to the Dark.

The ones that were empty received fire-wards across the door, and those wards would explode if anyone tried to come back in.

No questions asked.

Nightstone quelled the flames on the stables, though they almost at once tried to spring back up. She grimaced. So. The Light had at least one Scarlet mage working for it, then.

She lashed out, using the attack that most Scarlet mages were trained to make, but few ever did, and was certain that she heard a distant scream as she burned out that fire mage's gift. Then she turned her attention to the fighting in the castle corridors. She could hear the clashes of swords and the screams of the *zeyri*. They were loyal, then, at least.

Good. She would have hated to have to destroy them.

Nightstone wheeled her mind towards the Plains. She knew that grass of old. It was a good place to hide in. Doubtless, it had hidden the armies of the nobles as they moved closer and closer to the castle, getting ready for the Light attack they thought would reclaim the castle.

Good for hiding, except when they were afire.

She set them burning with a touch of her mind, and could feel the Scarlet leaping eagerly through her. It had always wanted to burn the Plains, probably because it loathed the thought of so much kindling going to waste. Nightstone didn't like the thought of burning tender young crops, but she could find enough food for the loyalists in the castle. And the crops of anyone else were suspect.

That done, she opened her eyes and stepped out onto the balcony again, sending the fire-signal skyward just in case anyone cared.

She had turned around again by the time the door opened. Nightstone called flames and almost scorched off Akellia's hair. The woman dropped to her knees, panting, and said, "My lady, what is it?"

"Tell me that you knew about the attack," said Nightstone.

"My lady?"

"Did you know that the Lord Caraban was plotting treachery against me, to take over the castle and fill it with his own people?" Nightstone asked smoothly, walking forward until she stood in front of the woman. It was probably unnecessary- Akellia looked far too frightened to plan anything- but she had been wrong about Caraban. She wasn't going to take the risk of being wrong about anyone else.

"No, my lady! No!"

"But you serve the Light?"

Akellia nodded.

"Too bad," Nightstone sighed, and struck hard. She could kill Azure mages, if they weren't ready for it.

Strangely, it seemed that Akellia was ready. Nightstone's flames bounced off her shields, and then she turned and rushed out of the room.

Nightstone cursed and turned back to the battle. The Light was rising, against the Dark- and against Shadow?

Nightstone's eyes narrowed. It seemed that Shadow not in league with the Light after all.

A regrettable mistake.

Nightstone had one more thing to do before she could join her people and help in turning the Light back. She closed her eyes and grasped the black thread that linked her to the Dark. It was always there, but almost no one used it, since any message sent along it was beyond urgent.

Nightstone spoke along that thread to anyone who could hear her, lieutenants of the Dark, the Dark itself, and even Shadow if he was listening.

The next war has begun. They are rising against us in Orlath, and almost certainly in Arvenna as well, she added, remembering that Caraban had bragged of contacts in Arvenna. The other Kingdoms are in danger. Look to your defenses, and to your own safety.

She dropped back from the thread, panting, and shook her head. She should go now.

And so she did, filled with a burning anger for the Light.

Once before, in Amorier, when yet another rebellion against the Dark was brewing, Nightstone had unleashed the full power of her flame. They sang of her there as the Burning Stone.

Nightstone didn't think those legends had come south to Orlath, but they might as well have done so. The Orlathians would see the truth of them tonight.

Chapter 38

Walking the Stars

"There are worlds beyond the one we know, of course. Every wise man or woman I have known has always acknowledged that. The problem becomes in persuading people to care about the implications."

-Rusien of Panolth.

"Ternora?"

Ternora looked up in gratitude. She had been kneeling before the mosaic of Shara, since it was the proper thing for a novice priestess to do, and praying, but she hadn't been fixing her attention on her prayers. She had wanted to hear what the women in the main room with Alira were saying, and thank the goddess, it appeared that she was going to get that chance now.

"You are to come with me," said Alira, and her face was so solemn that Ternora's joy at being freed from prayer wavered a little. It seemed that something high and serious was happening after all, and she had to wonder if perhaps she wouldn't like being involved in it. "Irra has suggested that we all take a journey."

"And you will obey her?" Ternora asked, speaking before she thought. She was used to thinking of Alira as the High Priestess already, she realized. She had seen no one disobey her. That Alira was thinking of doing something at Irra's suggestion showed the woman must be powerful.

Alira smiled then. "Of course I will. In this matter, at least, my goddess has directed that I do so."

"Oh-"

And then Ternora paused. There suddenly seemed to be a voice in her head, speaking words that she understood, though she was sure they were not only in a different language but mingled with a twanging sound that should have made them impossible to understand.

The next war has begun. They are rising against us in Orlath, and almost certainly in Arvenna as well. The other Kingdoms are in danger. Look to your defenses, and to your own safety.

Ternora gasped, and then the words were gone. She shook her head a little, dazed, and looked up at Alira. "What was that?"

The High Priestess had been standing with her head on one side, frowning intently, but now she started and stared at Ternora. "You heard that?"

"Yes. Of course." Ternora licked her lips a little when she saw Alira's stare. "Was I not supposed to?"

"I am surprised, at the least," said Alira shortly, and then reached down and tugged on Ternora's arm. "Come with me. Irra is right. There is no way that we can leave you out of this journey."

She pulled Ternora back towards the room where they had met with the three women. Ternora glanced out the Temple door as they passed it, and blinked. She had indeed been kneeling in prayer before the mosaic longer than she thought. The orange light of sunset looked through the door.

"What was that?" she asked Alira, determined not to be put off long enough to make her forget the question.

Alira gave her a quick, resigned glance. "You are a true priestess of Shara," she murmured, "asking even questions that you must suspect you should not be asking."

"But what is it?"

This time, Alira smiled, though Ternora had the impression that the smile was reluctant. "That was a message from the Dark," she said. "It has its ways of passing messages along, though people rarely do it."

"Why not?" Ternora could think of many advantages for such a system. Certainly the Light had nothing like as swift.

"Because if you disturb the Dark, and it turns out that you made a mistake or the message wasn't that urgent, the Dark will *makil* you."

"What's that?"

"Not pleasant," said Alira, as if that were an answer, and went on again before Ternora could ask the inevitable question. "It's rare for anyone to use it, but that was a message that makes me think the Dark is more likely to start sending aid to Orlath than to *makil* Princess Nightstone."

"That was her voice?"

"Yes," said Alira. "An uprising in Orlath and Arvenna at the least, then, and I don't doubt that she's right about it not being confined to those Kingdoms." She flung open the door of the little room, interrupting the three women in the midst of a conversation. "Trouble."

"What trouble?" Irra was on her feet, one hand clutching her bow. Her eyes swept the room, and settled on Ternora. "Trouble that she has caused?" In an instant, she had strung her bow and was pointing an arrow at Ternora.

"No," said Alira. "You didn't hear the message?"

They shook their heads. Soligra leaned forward. "What is it? Has something happened that affects our negotiations?"

"You could say that," said Alira, all but dumping Ternora into a chair. "The Light is rising against the Dark in Orlath, and almost certainly against Shadow in Arvenna. The other Kingdoms will probably see their own rebellions."

"The idiots!" Irra cried, and then went off into a string of curses that made no sense to Ternora but carried a great deal of force. She listened with interest, trying to remember the ones that seemed especially choice.

Soligra shook her head. "They're probably tired of seeing their Kingdoms conquered and the Light put down, and-"

"Maybe so," Plenilune interrupted her, so sharply that Ternora liked her for a moment. "But it couldn't have come at a worse time for our negotiations. We were so close." She shook her head. "I would think that-"

Abruptly she, too, was interrupted. She gasped, and sagged towards the floor, one hand over her heart. Irra had just taken a step towards her when she was similarly stricken. Soligra looked sick.

"What is it?" Ternora asked Alira, who was staring at everyone else with a grim but knowing expression.

"She is loose in the world again," said Alira quietly. "The one who killed the Faerie elves." She closed her eyes. "No choice now," she whispered, and began to chant the name of Shara over and over again.

Wondering if it would help, Ternora closed her eyes and did the same thing.

And then the goddess's presence was in her mind, strong, moving, a wild thing, an unbridled horse. Her voice gleamed like dust in sunlight, shot through with fear and fury. *This is the last time that she does something this stupid. If I must abandon the negotiations and turn my strength to confining her, then I will.*

Then a great pulse of strength shot outward and to the north and west. Ternora shuddered. She felt as if it pulled a great deal of her own strength along with it, and when she opened her eyes, she was staring at the floor.

Someone gripped her shoulder and pulled her up. Alira smiled into her face, taking the time to brush a strand of hair from Ternora's eyes. "That was well-done," she said quietly. "Brave, and you showed endurance that a fully-trained priestess would have envied."

"What- what will happen now?" Ternora asked, irritated that she could hardly muster the breath to speak when Alira was standing already. She looked around the room, and saw that Irra was back on her feet as well, though the others were more slowly fighting their way there. *Well, perhaps they're more used to this kind of thing*, she thought, although that didn't really help to soothe her irritation. "What does the message mean?"

"It means that we are at war," said Alira. "It is fortunate that we did not pursue our original plan to try and stop that war, or we would have no choice but to fight. As it is, we still have a chance. If we can conclude the negotiations now, then we may be able to tip the balance of power, and deprive the Light of some help that it would have to have to win the struggle."

"Will- will Light let you do that?" Ternora asked.

"It would not if it knew what might happen," muttered Alira. "And it is only a chance, nothing more than that." She turned to Irra, who still looked the sturdiest of the three women. "What think you? Do you think that we can conclude the negotiations and persuade her to swing her strength?"

"I don't think that you can persuade her to help you," said Irra. "She will be angrier than ever after this. If she was angry enough to go after one Faerie elf, then she is far gone in rage."

"I don't want to persuade her to help us," said Alira. "I know well how futile that is. But I do want to persuade her to back away from the war altogether. Her private war with the Faerie elves is one thing, but her war with us is something different."

"I understand. And I think that might work."

Alira nodded, and turned to Ternora. "Will you come with us? That you heard Nightstone's message proves that you are loyal to the Dark. And I think that you could tell our opposite number enough to interest her."

"Who is it that you're negotiating with, exactly?" Ternora asked. At last some strength was returning to her, enough that she could stand, with the help of the chair. Her legs still trembled, though, and she seemed to have a palsy in her hands.

Alira shook her head. "We don't quite dare to speak the name aloud yet. That would alert our enemies, and those who are not our enemies but still have their own reasons for wanting the negotiation to fail. Will you come with us, even not knowing that? I know it is a sacrifice to ask of anyone as dedicated to knowing answers as you are, but I still ask it."

Ternora gazed up at her. "You could order me, as High Priestess. Why aren't you ordering me?"

Alira bared her teeth. "Because I am not of the Light."

That made sense to Ternora, though she thought it probably shouldn't. She considered it for a moment longer, and then nodded. "I will come with you and tell this person, whoever she is, what I can."

Alira smiled a little. "Not precisely a person," she said, and clasped Ternora's hand. "Thank you. You will be needed." She turned to look at Irra. "What about you? Can you open the gate now?"

Irra shook her head. "I cannot. It would need slaughter and bloodshed. And Soligra would need evidence that we were going out of compassion, which I don't think we are, unless preserving sanity is compassion." She looked at Plenilune.

"Actually, I think that we could say-" Soligra began.

"Shut up," said Irra, quietly but intensely. "Plenilune, could you open the gate for us?"

Plenilune shook her head. "If it were full moon, yes, but the moon is still too close to new. We will have to rely on the power of the stars, and of your goddess." She grimaced a little as she looked at Alira.

Ternora glanced at the High Priestess and realized that her mouth was curved in a faint smile. She had probably anticipated this from the beginning, Ternora realized, but liked seeing women she obviously didn't care for much being made to admit it.

"Yes," said Alira. "When full dark falls, then we can go. And Shara will cradle all of you. She will not let you fall."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Plenilune, in a little mutter. Ternora wasn't sure she had actually heard her say that until she saw Alira's grin.

Ternora grinned back, understanding the High Priestess perfectly, and anxious to learn more. *I chose the right goddess to serve, indeed.*

"Here we are."

Ternora tilted her head back obediently, and found herself looking at the stars with new eyes. She blinked. They had always been little silvery dots, hadn't they? They shouldn't look back at her with faint sparkles of blue and red and white and even one faint spark of green.

"Shara!"

There was a power in Alira's voice that made Ternora's hair stand on end. She glanced at the High Priestess and saw her standing with her arms lifted, her dark robe falling back from her limbs, her eyes closed. Her feet just barely tapped the ground as she began to shuffle in a pattern. Ternora thought she was moving in a circle at first, but Alira shuffled back to the center instead, after making a single track, and then moved out to another point. A star, Ternora realized, and then felt foolish. Of course. The circle was a symbol of the Light, the circle of the sun or the full moon. It would make sense to have a star as a symbol of a goddess of the stars.

"Shara!" cried Alira again, and then exploded into a dance along the star-pattern again. "Take us between, my lady!"

And then the world opened up.

Ternora stared. She thought she could see a silvery whirlwind with one end planted firmly in the ground, and see it opening, too, into a gate that sparked at the edges with black and silver and gold. But at the same time, she was seeing a rushing tunnel that sprang out and towards her from the center of the whirlwind, swept her up, and pulled her into somewhere else.

The twin sensations fought for control of her senses, and Ternora fought for balance. She was standing, but she was riding; she was still, but she was moving; she was watching, but she was participating. She opened her mouth to scream-

And Shara caught her.

Ternora knew it was Shara at once. No other divine presence could feel both so tender and so smug, protecting her children but knowing all the while that she knew more than they did.

Ternora felt herself caught by a pair of enormous arms and swung into the air. She gasped as she seemed to come down for a moment in another place, on a soft cushion, and then the arms came back around her, and she flew forward. The sensations settled at last into one common one. Her body and her mind now definitely agreed that she was flying, and that she could trust the sensation that she was about to vomit up what little food she'd eaten that day.

They sped forward, and behind them came Irra and Soligra and Plenilune- or so Ternora assumed. When she turned her head, she couldn't actually see anything but flashing silver and gold that made her sick to look at, so she turned her head forward again and kept her gaze fixed on the opening tunnel.

The tunnel opened wider and wider, and the wind, or whatever it was that mimicked the feeling of wind, grew faster and faster. Then Ternora spun abruptly out of the comforting arms.

She only had time for a squeak of fear, however, and then the motion ceased altogether. Ternora found herself kneeling on soft grass. She closed her eyes as light welled up from the grass and tried to blind her, and then she lifted her head and looked around at the world.

The first thing that struck her was how soft and undefined it looked. Like a dream, almost, she thought as she studied the way the grass and the hills ran into watery traces, and the way the light glowed as if it were trying to keep Ternora from actually looking at individual grass blades. The whole thing was very pretty, but insubstantial.

"There."

Ternora looked back at Alira, who dropped her arms and smiled at her. "I wasn't sure that would work," she said, "but it did."

"You weren't sure?" Ternora asked, feeling nearly as sick as she had before, but this time for a different reason.

"Oh, I knew the Lady would catch us, of course," said Alira, with a little flicker of her fingers. "But I didn't know if She would consent to bring the other three along." She turned to look at Irra, Soligra, and Plenilune, who were all sprawled on the grass and looking worse off than Ternora felt. "She did bring them, as you see. But She exacted a price from them for traveling Her roads."

Ternora shook her head. "I don't understand why. What would She want with them?" She looked again at the countryside full of glowing Light. "And what is this place?"

Alira smiled at her. "You do not recognize it? I thought that every child who was reared in the Light had the benefit of such instruction as would enable them to recognize this place."

"I was reared among elves," said Ternora gloomily. "They don't think their children need to learn any human things."

Alira smiled more broadly, and indicated the country around them with a sweeping wave of her hand. "This is the land of the one we have come to negotiate with," she said. "This is the land of the Goddess Elle."

Chapter 39

The Welcoming Feast

"I have never found anyone who feasts his guests like a Darkworker. Of course, he may be planning to kill them all in the morning, but he seems determined that they should have at least one more thing to look forward to."

-Tollan of Amorier.

"Elary!"

Elary blinked and tried not to start as Mitherill rustled towards her. "Your Highness," she said, with a bow. "You look- stunning."

"Thank you." Mitherill turned in a circle, as if to let Elary see the back of her gown. "They said that I should wear this."

"They?" Elary narrowed her eyes a little.

"Melior. And Silar."

Elary nodded. "And they helped you into it, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes." Mitherill gave a breathy little laugh, which was so much like the laughter that Elary had heard during her time in the Courts that she blinked and wondered if Silar had been teaching her that as well. "I'm not used to this kind of thing. I wasn't used to it even when I was with the *ilzánai*." She turned around again. "And I couldn't have put on something I wasn't familiar with."

Elary studied the gown again in silence. It was a deep blue, shining here and there with traces of silver and gold. It made the white streak in Mitherill's long black hair glisten like the blood of snow, and her golden eyes appear even brighter than they normally did. If Elary squinted, she could see that the gold even complemented the aura of Destiny around the Princess. She shook her head. They were certainly clever. This gown made Mitherill look as if she were going to assume the throne at any moment.

And that was what Elary didn't like about it. Mitherill wasn't the Princess of Arvenna, or so she had been made to understand from the Serpents. She had much to learn before she became worthy to sit the throne. Silar would have been particularly insistent about that.

And yet, here she was, attired by the hands of the Serpents themselves as if she were about to become the ruler.

Elary didn't know what to make of it, and she trailed behind Mitherill in silent confusion. When they got into the room that doubled as a meeting place and a dining hall, though, her confusion turned to astonishment. She had rarely seen such a spectacle even in the Court of Arvenna before the Dark came and destroyed the royal family.

It swarmed with lights. Some of those were ordinary lamps hanging from chains on the ceilings, but most of them were small, darting things, the elfglobes that were more common in Orlath and Doralissa than here. Elary didn't know what they cost, but knew it must be expensive. Here and there, small winged creatures- sylphs?- bore lights as well. And all of them turned when Mitherill entered the room and bowed at once, as if they had been drilled to do it.

"Ah, Your Highness!"

Elary looked at Naldeon, and swallowed a little. He had changed into shimmering sea-colored clothes that could easily have cloaked the highest Lord in the Arvenese Court, or even the Iantran, where they were more fussy about such things. He came forward and clasped Mitherill's hands, bowing over them first, then kissing them, and then lifting them so that the other Serpents who crowded into the hall could see them.

"Here are the hands that will shape the future of our country!" he cried, and the roar that answered him came back from several hundred throats. "Here are the hands that cradle our loyalty and our lives!" He turned back to Mitherill and swept a bow that ended with him kneeling on the floor, still holding her hands. He gazed up at her with something that was either true devotion or the best mimicry that Elary had ever seen. "My lady, pardon me for not greeting you properly before, but I thought you should be in the company of your subjects."

Mitherill inclined her head. "It will do," she said. "It will do very well." She paused, and then said, slowly, in Arvenese, "*Teleth donazoi.*" The Queen forgives, that meant, and was one of the sanctioned Court phrases.

The Serpents broke into still more cheering. Elary stared around, and saw Silar and Melior beaming from the back of the room, both of them clapping.

Elary shook her head. She hoped it was her imagination that Silar was smiling complacently, as if this weren't Court ritual unfolding for its own sake, but something that she had planned, and which was unfolding for her own benefit and that of no one else.

"You are wonderful," said Naldeon, still gazing at Mitherill with what looked like fanatical loyalty. "And we are lucky to have such a beautiful, spirited Princess to rule us." He kissed her hands again, and then rose to his feet. "Come and sit your throne, my lady, and tell us what you would have of us."

They did have a throne for her, Elary noticed then, a small chair set upon a dais that rose just three steps from the floor. It was still enough to delight Mitherill, who flushed at the sight of it, and then looked at Naldeon with shining eyes.

"You did all this for me?"

"Yes."

Mitherill reached up and brushed her hand across Naldeon's shoulder, which was as high as she could reach. "Then I bless you indeed, and will see that you have all the rewards that you should have for your faithful and loyal service."

Naldeon bowed his head. "To have served, my lady. That is all I ask. But I know that you will grant me that."

"Of course," said Mitherill, and kissed his hand in return, then ran lightly forward and ascended the steps to the throne. By the way she moved, she might have been waiting all her

life to do just that. Elary thought it was possible that she had been waiting all her life to do just that. After all, she didn't think that the *ilzánai*, as much as they adored her, would have regularly set up thrones and put crowns on her head. They were fey, and rarely cared for such human trappings.

Mitherill sat on the throne for a moment, gazing out over the Court, and then smiled. "I have a command," she said.

"Yes, my lady?" asked a tall woman, rising to her feet. Elary heard the silence that followed her words broken by the rushing murmurs of soft voices, and realized that those who spoke the tongue of the *ilzánai* were translating for their companions who only spoke Arvennese. That only made her all the more uneasy. It was becoming more and more obvious how carefully planned this was.

"I would command all of you to eat of the feast, and have a wonderful time!" cried Mitherill.

Two waves of laughter moved through the hall, one from the people who understood at once, and another from those who did a few moments later. The tall woman at once bowed to Mitherill, and then set about placing fruit and vegetables on a platter for her. All of those fruits and vegetables looked fresh, Elary thought, not dried. She clenched her fists.

"My Lady Elary! But you have no cup."

Elary turned and met Naldeon's gaze. He gave her a glass of wine at once, and bowed to her, drinking from his own. Elary took an automatic sip, and then grimaced. It was summerwine, and she had gotten drunk on that once, so long ago that she could hardly remember what it tasted like. She did remember that it caused all sorts of havoc in her brain, though. She lowered the cup to her side.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Naldeon beamed at her over the top of his cup, but his eyes showed the laughter that he barely kept from his face. Elary frowned.

"You promised that I would have my questions answered here," she said, "but this is only giving me more questions. Why would you set up something like this? All of it seems aimed at controlling Mitherill."

Naldeon bowed. "Very good."

"I- what?"

Naldeon smiled. "We don't know yet what kind of monarch she will be," he said, as if he were explaining something perfectly reasonable and aboveboard. "Sometimes the monarchs don't need such handling. Some of them are capable Kings and Queens on their own, and the trappings of Court life become just that, trappings. Then we can move on to dealing with them as we would other humans."

"But sometimes?" Elary asked, voice tight.

"Sometimes, these trappings become the only way to channel their impulses into something useful," said Naldeon, and took another sip of his wine as though he needed it to wet his throat. "They become involved in the honors done them, and so long as they remain involved in that, they remain useful. They can still sit prettily in Court functions, where they're needed,

and meanwhile we can move around them, doing the real business of the Kingdom with a minimum of fuss."

Elary stared at him, then took a gulp of her wine. She felt as though she needed it suddenly, no matter how much it might upset her.

"What?" she whispered.

"You heard me." Naldeon was gazing meditatively at Mitherill. "She might be the kind of Queen yet who doesn't need to be kissed and proclaimed and set up above everyone else. I can't tell. But so far she seems to be a rather silly little Princess who still needs to learn better." He looked back at Elary, and blinked. "I'm sorry, did I say something shocking?"

"She must be Queen," said Elary. "A real Queen. She's the only heir of the royal line left."

Naldeon laughed a little. "And she is fulfilling the best traditions of her ancestors, of course. Let me reassure you of that. Some of the best Kings and Queens in Arvenese history were those who had enough wits to realize that they were better off staying out of the way. They stayed out of the way, and waded when they needed to, and sat the throne and dispensed judgments that others had carefully thought out. And that was the way it should be."

"But now?"

Naldeon shrugged. "What, now?"

"Mitherill has to be the true ruler," said Elary. "She is Destined to be, and if we don't fulfill the dictates of Destiny, who knows what will happen? Do you really want to treat her as less than the Queen she is?"

Naldeon sighed. "My lady, you are most unfortunate. You have come to think that Destiny promises a throne and power with it."

"This prophecy does!"

Naldeon shook his head. "It need not. It might seem to promise power, but that doesn't mean it will come to pass. I promise you, when I first realized that we would have a Princess out of a history-tale, I studied the history-tales carefully. Yes, some of them do rather promise that the Queens and Kings will have power, but that doesn't mean they achieve it."

"But-"

"Yes?"

"If you care about the future of Arvenna, wouldn't you strive to mold her into someone who would really rule?"

Naldeon bowed a little. "You are more unschooled in the history of Arvenna, doubtless, than most of us here. But you must realize that Arvenna will survive even if Mitherill doesn't take her throne in quite the same way that you think she should. If she can be molded, then yes, we will try. This was as much a test as anything else, to see how she would react. Some of the Princesses in the history-tales would have refused to put on a gown they couldn't put on themselves, and they would have walked in and sat at the tables instead of the throne."

Elary looked at Mitherill. Mitherill was blushing as someone else knelt before her and asked her for a favor. She looked as though she were enjoying herself, and it would never cross her mind to worry about anything else.

"I think that you should give her a chance," said Elary.

"We still will," said Naldeon. "Silar and Melior will teach her all they can. Only if those things fail will I think her unteachable."

"But-"

"Yes?"

"Don't you want to treat her as if she were teachable and go from there?"

"We will," said Naldeon. "Or we wouldn't have bothered even trying to teach her the Arvennese tongue. Some of our Kings and Queens in the past have grown up not knowing Arvennese all that well. She could have been one of them. We are trying, my lady, but whether we achieve anything will depend on Mitherill herself."

Elary stared into her summerwine and said nothing.

She couldn't help feeling that something was wrong, that Mitherill was a shining jewel waiting to be polished, and no one else would see it because they wouldn't polish hard enough. But she also feared that Rior had been right, and that there was nothing there to polish.

She took a deep breath and lifted her eyes back to Mitherill. *Well, if she is a diamond in the rough, and no one else will make her into what she should be, then I will do it myself.*

Chapter 40

More Loyalists

"Of course loyalty is a good trait. But you can appreciate that I find loyalty to my enemies less than commendable."

-The Dark's First Lord, after killing the First Traitor.

"You can't do things like that."

Kymenos opened his eyes, then blinked. He was staring at stone, and he was almost sure that he shouldn't have been. He rolled over and found himself looking up at a stone ceiling.

"I don't like having to hit you," said the voice, the voice of the woman he had faced who had the long sword and the crown patch on her shoulder, the one who had spoken about serving the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna. "But you were being unreasonable. You tried to kill one of my soldiers. I don't like that."

Kymenos said nothing, at least not until he realized that the intense pain on his jaw was just the result of being hit with something, probably the hilt of a sword or a punch, and his jaw wasn't broken. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm not going to tell you *that*." The woman came over and knelt beside him, having to duck her head so that she could fit under the overhang where they'd put him. "Besides, I'm sure that you can guess that well enough for yourself."

Kymenos glanced around. They were in a cave, he knew that much; he could see the darkness and the stars glittering beyond the entrance. And he could hear the movements of a number of people, and sometimes the murmurs that might have been anything from a simple conversation to a war council.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking back at the woman.

She smiled and reached out her hand to clasp his. Those gray-golden eyes glinted at him, and Kymenos had the feeling that she was trying to gain a true picture of who he was. He snorted a little as he clasped her hand back. If she managed to figure out a way to have him serve her side, he would be almost glad to do it.

"My name is Dolasson," she said. "I appreciate that you are a Master of the Star Circle, but I would ask that you not try to turn me to dust."

Kymenos shook his head. He was going to correct all the misconceptions, this time, before they could start. "I'm not a Master of the Star Circle."

"But your robes-"

Kymenos shrugged. "I trained with them at one time. I think the robes are comfortable. I copied them for my own clothes. But I never completed the formal training, and I never attained complete mastery of the elements. Sorry. I'm afraid that I can't be of use to you."

Dolasson blinked at him, then sat back on her heels. She was pretty, Kymenos noticed for the first time, with silver hair that brushed her shoulders, an even stronger indication that she had liadra blood. But he wasn't tempted or attracted. Nightstone looked much the same way; she had that hardness in her eyes that promised battle, and so did Dolasson, even if she wasn't staring at him in hatred yet.

"I don't understand," the woman said. "You travel with a telepathic horse and a talking sword."

"Yes."

"But you say that you are not part of any Quest, or any Destiny."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Destiny tried to make me serve the Princess Alliana," said Kymenos, and shifted position. He winced as pain exploded across his shoulder. He'd probably hit the ground hard when he fell off Sykeen's back. "I didn't want to serve her, and I finally managed to break free, after *far* too long a time of dealing with elves, being held in dungeons, and listening to the Princess's whining. I'm not about to go back."

"But you wouldn't have the sword and the horse if you didn't have some part in Destiny," Dolasson protested. "Normal people don't just pick those sorts of things up."

"Norianna brought herself to me," said Kymenos, eyeing the cave over Dolasson's shoulder now. He had no idea how high off the ground they were, more was the pity, or where Cheyena and the others were. "And I bought Sykeen thinking he was an ordinary horse. He didn't reveal his abilities to me until we were too far away from the farm to go back."

"And the woman who travels with you?" asked Dolasson.

"She owed me a favor," said Kymenos. "I'm going home, and I needed someone who could create fires and defend me."

Dolasson shook her head. "I don't understand," she said at last. "By all rights, you should be in the midst of Destiny; it hovers around people like you all the time in the history-tales. But you aren't."

"I think I managed to slip the leash, then," said Kymenos, as cheered by the thought of that as he could be by anything while he was a prisoner. "I prayed to Chaos, and it did what it promised me, and freed me from bondage."

"Chaos?" Dolasson pushed herself away from him at once, so hard that she nearly banged her head into the low part of the ceiling. Her hand groped for her sword, and she stared at him as if he might turn into formlessness and swallow her.

"Yes, Chaos," said Kymenos. "You might have heard of it. It opposes Destiny, and its works-

"I know what Chaos is." Slowly, as if she were arguing with herself, Dolasson loosened her hold on the sword's hilt. "I'm simply amazed that you would openly admit to serving it."

"Not serving it," said Kymenos. "I made a bargain with it, because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life following a whiny Princess around."

"You would have been a hero."

"I didn't want to be."

Dolasson clasped her hands in front of her- it seemed to be the only way she wouldn't draw a weapon right away- and tilted her head to one side as she considered him. "And now you're going home?"

"Yes," said Kymenos, and didn't care if she heard the longing in his voice. Let her know this for the truth. He didn't have any reason to lie to her out of spite, the way he'd done for Nightstone. "Dalzna. I haven't been there for twelve years, and I want to walk the streets of Serian again."

"And what will you do there?"

"I'm a healer. I breed plants with Light magic that function to cure most illnesses, even magical ones." Kymenos let the bragging tone slip into his voice, too. He knew what he was doing. Dolasson believed the history-tales; that much was obvious from her talk about Norianna and Sykeen. He could convince her that he wasn't a hero, that he bragged and was stupid and lecherous and small-minded, if he tried, because all of that was the truth. "And I'm going to show the Star Circle that just because they couldn't teach me doesn't mean I never learned anything."

Dolasson closed her eyes. Then she said, "It would be very dangerous for you to try and cross Arvenna just now."

"And why is that?"

"All of us are rising," said Dolasson, opening her eyes and looking at him intently. "All the loyalists to Princess Mitherill and Princess Alliana-"

"Princess Alliana is dead."

This time, she drew her sword and pressed it against his neck. "And was that your doing?" she asked in a tight voice, nearly as tight as Kymenos's throat felt with a sword pressed against it.

"No," said Kymenos. "I was there when it happened, though. Princess Nightstone and Prince Artaen of Rivendon meant to kill her, but, as it turned out, Destiny had made a mistake. Princess Alliana looked so like the peasant girl she was raised with that Destiny had protected the peasant girl instead. It tried to save the Princess, but the beast that came for her blood and wound up killing her moved faster."

Dolasson's sword slid slowly from his neck. Kymenos looked at her with wide and innocent eyes. If she never made the connection between his service of Chaos and the death of the Princess, that was hardly his fault.

Dolasson sheathed her weapon again, and stared out into the cave. Kymenos followed her gaze, but so far as he could see, she was only looking at the stars. Her kneeling in front of him still prevented him from seeing most of the cave. "Heavy news you bear," she said at last.

"I know," said Kymenos, and tried to make his voice calm and soothing, not impatient or mocking. The loss of the Princess Alliana was no great thing, not to someone who had been dragged into this mess through no will of his own, but he was with people who thought it was. He would survive best by mimicking them for a little while. "Why are you rising now?"

"It's time," said Dolasson. "The Serpent Lord is right. The Dark and Shadow have ruled for long enough-" And then she looked at him and shook her head. "Why am I telling you this? You can't know this."

"But I told you everything about me," said Kymenos.

Dolasson blinked for a moment. Strangely, Kymenos thought she was fighting back an impulse to smile. "That's not the way it works, I'm afraid," she said at last. "No trades."

"Where are the others?"

"Not far," said Dolasson. "Safe. The sword has been most talkative, of course, telling us to let you go so that you can continue your journey to the Lake of the Northern Winds. She said," Dolasson added, "nothing about Serian."

Kymenos grunted. "That's because she doesn't want to go to Serian. She wants to go to the Lake of the Northern Winds, and she speaks as though I would stay there. I'm going to throw her into the water and come back instead."

Dolasson laughed, he was sure of it, before she managed to stifle the sound. "I would like to see that," she said. "Wait a moment, and I will bring you your companion and some food."

She stood and slipped away into the cave, and Kymenos took the chance to lean forward and look.

He only got a glimpse, though, before the stones that had been lying around him rose from the ground and arranged themselves into a neat wall that blocked Kymenos's view, as well as sealing off the cove where he lay from the rest of the cave. Dolasson's voice came back. "Did I mention that I'm a Crop mage?"

Kymenos snorted and lay back, waiting for the food. He felt much better about their captivity now. He thought that Dolasson was a reasonable woman, for a Lightworker. She would believe him, and she would let them go and let them continue their interrupted journey to the north.

In some moments, she was back. The stones arranged themselves on the floor again, and she held out a bowl of dried meat and fruit to him with one hand. With the other, she drew Cheyena along.

Kymenos really wanted the food first, but he knew that Dolasson would probably think less of him if he didn't greet Cheyena, so he put one arm around her and asked her how she was.

"It was frightening," she said, burying her head against his chest. "You were nowhere around, and I didn't know what was happening, and they were taking me prisoner and marching me away-"

"It's all right now," Kymenos soothed her, stroking her hair. "In a short time, we'll be gone from here."

He looked up to see if Dolasson would contradict this. She didn't appear inclined to, but she wear a strange expression on her face. Kymenos took a moment to identify it as disgust.

Kymenos snorted, though only inwardly. *Perhaps she's one of those- what do they call them again? The Unbroken?* The Unbroken were said to remain virgins all their life, the better to concentrate on their swordsmanship. In case that was it, Kymenos gave Cheyena a little kiss on the head before he let her go.

He picked up the bowl and began to eat, while Cheyena sat against his shoulder and Dolasson sat in place to block the cave from view. Kymenos found that interesting. She could have simply moved the stone wall back a short distance and built it again, but that would have required more rocks, since the roof rose steeply outside this little cove. A possible explanation for why she didn't could be that she was a weak Crop mage, and the stones in the wall were at the very limit of what earth she could call or control.

"My lady," said Kymenos when he was done, "are you going to let us go?"

Dolasson studied him for a moment, then said, "There are things we should discuss in connection with that." She turned and held out her hand to Cheyena. "Come back to your part of the cave, my lady."

Cheyena turned for a final kiss, and Kymenos knew he didn't mistake the expression on Dolasson's face this time. It was disgust. He lingered over the kiss until he heard Dolasson make a noise of impatience, and then sat back and grinned while the wall rebuilt itself.

Dolasson returned just as he was starting to think about sleep, and unexpectedly said, "How can you stand her?"

Kymenos grinned. "Well, she's rather pretty-"

"But she's a coward."

Kymenos blinked. *Perhaps she's not Unbroken after all.* "That is true. She's frightened that someone will steal her ornaments, or harm her. But we're all allowed those little fears."

"Yes, but most people don't bed those who have them."

Kymenos blinked again, slowly. Then he sighed. "You're still convinced that I'm some kind of damn hero in disguise, aren't you?"

"You *have* to be."

Kymenos shook his head. "I'm the victim of chance. I have a talking sword and a talking horse, but that's not by choice. I'm going home, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life being an obscure healer. That's the way I want it."

"But you could be so much more."

Kymenos held her eyes, and thought he understood. He sighed. *Glory-blind.* In some ways, it was worse than having her be an Unbroken. The woman thought that he should go after the kind of glory she wanted, the kind she couldn't imagine anyone not taking.

"I could not be much more," he said. "You mistake me for someone who is a hero, someone who could be part of a history-tale without even trying. But I don't breathe that kind of air."

Dolasson shook her head. "You seem so much like someone who must be a hero. And a hero would lie and try to confuse me and throw me off his trail, if he thought that I was an enemy."

"I don't think that," said Kymenos patiently. *I only think that you're an idiot, for following a crown and never asking what kind of woman she is who would sit the throne.* "But I do think that you're mistaking me for someone else, and your lord and your followers wouldn't forgive you for that. Best for you to let us go in the morning, and then we can ride out of your lives."

"You would not make it through Arvenna alive," said Dolasson quietly. "This is our country, and we mean to have it back. And some of the Crownseekers are not so reasonable as I am. They would kill you."

"I have Norianna."

"The sword cannot defend you at all times. She didn't defend you from my punch on the jaw, did she?" Dolasson laughed when Kymenos scowled at her. "You are too quick to take offense to jokes, my lord. I am trying to do something that would save you a great deal of time and trouble."

"And what is that?"

"Travel with us for a while," said Dolasson, with an expansive gesture. "You will go unbothered by the other Crownseekers who roam the country, and if our Lord should happen to find you interesting- well, then, you'll pass in absolute safety. It's best if you agree of your own free will."

"You'll drag us otherwise?"

Dolasson couldn't control the spasm of disgust on her face. "Well, I would let Cheyena go, if I had the chance."

"Why?"

"She is a coward, unworthy of the magic she bears, and obviously unwilling to muster defiance," said Dolasson in a flat voice.

"And that makes her unworthy in your eyes?"

Dolasson gave him a stare as flat as the voice.

Kymenos shook his head. Those were the very things that made Cheyena so attractive to him. Bedding should be bedding, not a battle. But a warrior might feel differently. "And what happens if we travel with you?"

"I told you. You'll have safe conduct-"

"Oh, I know. I heard that part. But what happens in return? What do we have to do?"

"Just travel with us."

Kymenos narrowed his eyes. There was a small smirk playing at the edges of Dolasson's mouth, however hard she tried to hide it. Why would she think-

And then it hit him, and he groaned. Oh. Of *course*. She thought that she could encourage his inner hero to come out or some such. She thought that watching him for a long enough period of time meant that he would forget himself and act heroically.

On the other hand, it was safety and a means of getting the loyalists to trust him so that he could escape more easily when the time came.

"Very well," he said.

Dolasson smiled and reached out to clasp his hand. "I'll get you a pair of night-eyes soon enough," she said.

"Night-eyes?"

Dolasson nodded. "We travel underground."

Kymenos raised his brows. "And what of Sykeen?"

"Your horse? We will send him by tunnels that can accommodate horses. There are not many, but sometimes we find it useful to have mounted raiding parties."

"He won't like being separated from me."

Dolasson shrugged, and then turned and slipped away, rebuilding the alcove wall behind her. "Good night, Kymenos," her voice came from behind the stone. "And remember that you have a telepathic horse and a talking sword."

Kymenos snorted and lay back on the stone. That was probably to remind him that she "knew his secret" or some such.

He went to sleep easily enough. This wasn't a history-tale, and if Dolasson and her people had to find that out the hard way- well, then he was more than willing to teach them.

Chapter 41

The Light of Memory

"All that ever was is contained in the memory of an elf. I think that is what makes them so strange."

-Elf-scholar Ganard Talyon.

He could remember.

He could remember all of it.

The first time he had come to Court was over a hundred years ago, and that, at least, had never changed, either in the false memories or the true ones. He had walked in the gardens, and stared at the human nobles who stared back at him with wide and wondering eyes, and puzzled as to why the new Queen of Rivendon would have sent a message to the silvereyes forests. She wanted a silvereyes to come to her Court, the message said, but not why.

And, looking at the faces around him, Olumer couldn't see why. There was not a trace of silvereyes heritage left in them, not the true blood. Of course, it was said that the last Light Queen of Rivendon, the dead Haedra, had had silver eyes, but she hadn't had the magic or the love of the northern forests. The nobles of Rivendon rarely stirred out of their palace now.

There was nothing here for him.

Olumer had made up his mind and turned to go when he heard a voice behind him say, "Greetings, my lord. I am so glad that you could come. Will you tell me your name, and what pack you lead?"

He had turned, and seen the Queen of Rivendon striding towards him across the grass, her head lifted and her long dark hair flowing down her back. She was Queen Idona, and everyone knew the story, how she had traveled with the armies of the Dark and fought in the front lines. She was said to have some part in destroying the dominion of the Light in the world, and also in befriending the new King of Orlath. Olumer wasn't sure that he believed that last part. Why would anyone, especially someone who had Rivendon to rule, go that far south? Everything that she needed could be found in her own Kingdom.

But she was impressive, he had to grant, with shining blue-green eyes that made him stare in fascination. He was so fascinated that he didn't notice the silver wolf at her side until she growled. Then he knelt down and gave the wolf the same stare, until she bared her teeth and drew back from him, unnerved.

Queen Idona laughed. "You must forgive Nightsinger," she said, stroking the wolf's head. "She has forgotten that most of your kind are not intimidated by wolves. She can conquer everyone else here by force of will."

"But not me," said Olumer, and straightened. There was something in the wolf that he didn't like, something that went far beyond the usual hostility that her kind showed him. He would

have called it evil in the human tongue, but he had never been really sure what that word meant, and so he wasn't sure it was evil.

"But you never answered my questions," Idona went on, holding her hand out. Olumer clasped her hand, and blinked in surprise. If it had borne sheathed claws, then he might have mistaken it for a silvereyes hand. She was firm and strong and greeted him with an unbending back, like one of his own kind. He studied her again, avidly. Not silvereyes, but of the royal line, and she might have more of the fey spirit than her cousin, even if she had not inherited her eyes.

"I am Olumer," he said at last. "And I do not lead a pack at the moment. They are scattered, raising their children."

"Ah. Of course." Idona smiled, a little wistfully. "A Rivendonian spring. If there is anything more suiting to the birth of children, then I do not know what it is." Her smile deepened, and so did her voice as she took a step towards him. "And there is nothing more fitting for the conception of children, either."

It was not hard to figure out what she wanted, and Olumer had never been one to refuse such an offer. He stepped forward and kissed her, and her slender arms came up around him.

That was the first memory. There were others.

He remembered lying in the garden beside Idona, laughing fit to challenge the laughter of the stream nearby, and tracing the soft swell of her belly over and over when she told him that she would bear his child.

He remembered promising to stay and take care of her. Of course he would. What kind of male would he be, what kind of pack leader, if he abandoned his mate and child? Only the most despicable silvereyes did that, even the ones who didn't intend to take a human mate. Some of his people held that it was only honorable to go back to the forests and let the humans rear the half-fey children in their own manner, but Olumer would never have considered it. Of course he would stay, and even go through the strange ceremony that Idona called a wedding, if she insisted. And he was happy, and dreamt long thoughts of teaching their child to hunt in the northern woods, and to control his or her magic.

Then, when Idona asked him to swear an Oath, and told him it was like the vow that a pack leader swore to the members of his pack, his happiness was complete. He had never taken a permanent mate himself in the northern woods; there had been couplings, of course, but those produced no children, because he had never cared enough for the silvereyes involved to contemplate such a thing. And there had never been such love. Now there was, and there was their son Ulon with his shining eyes, and he would have his true pack. The one he led in the forests was made of friends, not relatives. Olumer had longed, as did most silvereyes, for the bonds of blood.

Idona had him chant the simple words, and Olumer had felt the Oath settle around him with no uneasiness. He would guard his children, both little Ulon and the one that Idona bore in her belly now. What else would one do with a pack, unless one was a merciless deserter? And he was not.

And then Idona suggested that he weave a shining net that would obscure all memory of what he had been, would make him think that he had always been half-fey and in service to the Rivendonian royal line. She said that it would make him more faithful, that otherwise he might go back to hibernation and then wake up not knowing anything more about them.

And Olumer had refused.

And Idona had taken him, and held a knife to Ulon's throat to make him weave the net, and then she had called on the Dark and bound the net around his memory.

And from that day forward Olumer had believed he was half-fey and no relation to the Rivendonian royal line at all, not knowing that he served his own children and grandchildren. It was given out that Idona's silvereys mate had gone back to the forests, as they were known to do, and of course none of Olumer's pack came looking for him, thinking that he stayed of his own free choice.

That was most of it.

Olumer snapped his eyes open and tried to sit up. The last thing that he remembered of this particular awakening was a silvery flash of light driving towards them, and the resigned expression on Pannerel's face, as though the elf were going to stand there and watch the light devour him.

"Olumer?"

Olumer felt a hand on his shoulder, and then he glanced up to see the pack leader standing there, staring down at him.

"You do remember," said the man softly. "I can see it in your eyes. You remember." He knelt, one hand still lightly touching Olumer's shoulder. "And the awakening was hard."

Olumer tried to speak and couldn't. He shook his head. At last he managed to say, "At least, when I was guarding Cadona and pretending to be her father, the pretense was more appropriate than I knew."

The pack leader laughed softly. "It's good to speak the words of your own language again, isn't it?"

Olumer started. He hadn't even realized they were speaking in Illasia, the silvereys tongue. He nodded.

"My name is Vander," said the silvereys, with a slight incline of his head. "Of course, I already know yours."

"Yes," said Olumer. He looked around, and saw Pannerel sitting on the other side of the fire, staring into the flames. "The light did not destroy him, then. Was it not the enemy he feared?"

Vander shook his head and settled back into a crouching position on his heels that Olumer found achingly familiar. His father had sat like that to impart some piece of wisdom, and his friend Aer when he was devouring a kill. "It was the strangest thing. Some power came from the south and drove back the light before it reached us. I thought I heard voices speaking, one of them angry and one simply furious. But they were gone before I could understand them."

Olumer nodded. "And what happens now?"

"I suppose that Pannerel will go back to his own world," said Vander, with a shrug of his shoulders. "He came to make sure that you were free, and now you will leave again."

"And you?"

"We," Vander corrected firmly. "We are going to go hunt in the high snows and teach you the proper way of being a silvereyes again."

Olumer shook his head. "I have to go after Cadona, have to protect her."

"What? But your Oath-"

"Is gone," said Olumer, with a placating gesture of his hand. He stared down at his fingers for a moment, remembering that they had been clawed in his vision, and then grimaced as he remembered Idona pulling the claws from his hands during one of the binding ceremonies. She had filed his fangs, too, but those might yet grow back again. "But she is the only pack I have left, the only one still alive who bears any of my blood. And she should sit the throne of Rivendon."

"To rule?" Vander asked, his voice thick with disapproval. "Do you really still care about those human things?"

Olumer shook his head. "If I aid her, then she might feel grateful and leave the silvereyes alone. Queen Idona felt the need to bind me, and insure that silvereyes blood would flow in her children, because she didn't see any other way to forge a link with us. I don't want Cadona to get the idea of doing the same thing. If she's grateful to a silvereyes, she won't have reason to."

Vander shook his head. "But why should they want anything to do with us? What do humans care about silvereyes?"

Olumer shook his head back. He had thought himself partly human so recently that he could still touch many of the human thoughts he'd had. "I'll try to explain it to you."

"Olumer."

Olumer looked up sharply, and saw Pannerel striding towards him. The elf knelt before him for a moment, then reached out and took his hand, turning it slowly over and over. A moment later, he tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

Olumer blinked as a silvery bubble formed over his fingers, growing until it encompassed the whole of his hand. Then Pannerel clasped his other hand and did the same trick. Olumer flexed his fingers back and forth, feeling an odd tingle.

"The claws are growing back," said Pannerel quietly. Olumer looked up to see that he had a soft, proud smile on his face. "We can dream like fire to change something into something else, and your fingers still remember what it was like to belong to a silvereyes. They will grow back."

"How can I thank you?" Olumer asked helplessly.

"You need not," said Pannerel. "A fey is free. That is enough."

And then, abruptly, he rose to his feet and began to sing.

Olumer closed his eyes and lost himself in the magic of the music, which he did by choice, being fey. He would have to go after Cadona and make sure that she didn't find out what her ancestress had done. She aspired to be like Queen Idona in all ways. He would have to get used to the memories. He would have to decide what to do about Vander, who seemed insistent that he join the pack.

But for right now, he could rejoice in being fully fey again, and hear in the elf's voice all the implications of what being fey meant.

Chapter 42

Flame and Fire

"There's a difference between flame and fire, at least in the tongue of Amorier. 'Flame' just means fire, the ordinary burning kind, and sometimes the desire that you might feel when you're looking at a diamond. 'Fire'- fire is evil. Fire burns, destroys, takes and doesn't give back except in charred land and corpses."

-The Stranger from Amorier.

"There, my lady."

Nightstone nodded. In this state, she was actually better to bear the filifernai's strangeness. It was a liadra who spoke, of course, but a filiferna who had stood close to her and pointed out the riders.

Oh, she saw them.

They were coming straight for the castle, racing ahead of the flames she had loosed- flames that were already dying down as the Scarlet mages in their ranks combined to calm them. The horses were all fine and noble beasts, and that would have given the riders away even if their banners hadn't. Nightstone eyed them. There was the three crowns symbol of Lord Caraban, of course, and the swan of Lady Suria, and the black horse of Lord Curoc. And other symbols, all of them conveniently telling her which nobles had turned traitor and which had not.

She might have found it encouraging that the number was smaller than she expected, but she was too angry to feel much of anything except the rage. She glanced at the liadra. "And you beat them back twice before?"

"Yes, my lady."

Nightstone nodded. She knew the Dark's belief, the way that the Dark had handled things for centuries in the Kingdoms it conquered. Don't kill the nobles or even the peasants if you can help it. Teach them. Let them learn that most of their lives won't be very much different under the Dark. A little freer, maybe, but not more different than that. They would do the rest, and eventually their children would come to believe in the Dark as much as their parents believed in the Light. They would adapt. Humans mostly did. Fey were harder, but then the Dark rarely conquered the fey, just letting them withdraw into their private lands instead.

But this was different. This was a rebellion in a land that had always been stubbornly loyal to the Light, the last Kingdom, besides Doralissa, not to have at least one monarch who was sworn to the Dark or Shadow on its throne at some point in its history. And this had happened once before.

Nightstone remembered Amorier. Sometimes the memory made her stomach tighten with guilt.

Not tonight.

She said quietly to the liadra, "And are our people out there now?"

The liadra shook her head. "All inside. We tried to go outside the castle and fight back, but without mounts it's hard. And they can melt back into the grass that they know better than we do."

Nightstone nodded, hoping the movement looked calm. She wanted to look calm if she could, even or especially in the eyes of the attackers. That would make her all the more impressive when she finally unleashed.

"Very well," she said, and stood and moved forward out of the gatehouse.

"My lady!" cried the liadra. "Where are you going?"

"To kill the rebels," said Nightstone, without looking over her shoulder. "If they don't scream as loudly as the pegasi, then I am not doing enough. Let me know if you think they need to scream more loudly."

"My lady-"

But the liadra said nothing more that Nightstone heard, and that might not have been because she stopped speaking. Nightstone had descended into the middle of her own rage and was hovering there now, her wings scraping the walls.

They think they can kill Darkworkers?

They are wrong.

She stepped through the gate and stood awaiting the rebels. The anger still sang and hummed in her like a kicked hornets' nest, but it could wait for a moment. Not for long, but for now, yes.

The rebels stopped in front of her in a long line, the nobles pulling up their horses so that they pranced, the soldiers halting off to the side in neat formation. Nightstone smiled. That would make it easier, and more dramatic when she began to burn them.

"Surrender."

Nightstone blinked away the red in front of her, and looked up at Lord Curoc. A fool, he was, who hadn't even tried to bargain with her or hide his hatred of the Dark. Nightstone had banished him some months ago, when he had drunk too much and begun to swear that the Princess of Rivendon would be better off wearing the crown of Orlath than Nightstone, even if she was dead.

And now he was back again, and stared down at her from the back of his prancing white stallion- of *course* it was white, and a stallion- with wide eyes and laughing face.

"You have to surrender," he said. "Isn't that what you told us, when you came to us? We had to surrender, or you would destroy us all."

"I remember that," said Nightstone quietly, serenely. She did, though since Lord Curoc was cowering and drunk and shitting his pants when Nightstone took his keep, she didn't know if he did. "And I say to you now that you would be better off obeying your own words."

A few of the rebels laughed. Lord Curoc did. The laughter was almost a scream. He reached down and drew his sword. "Let's see if having a sword against your neck makes you more agreeable," he said, and leaned over the neck of his stallion to touch the blade to her throat.

Nightstone stared up at him, doing nothing to prevent the blade from coming to rest above her pulse. She could feel the point, lightly scraping on the skin. She was somewhat surprised that the blood didn't boil out of her and melt the steel, but one couldn't have everything. She would have to call on more of her fire to melt the steel, and at the moment she was saving that for something else.

"Go back," she said, even though she knew what he would say. Almost the same words had been spoken in Amorier, so long ago that it was legend, so short a time ago that she could remember them, with her mind never designed to be immortal.

Lord Curoc laughed again, spraying spit. Some of the rebels looked worried, but then, not all of them were in this for love of the Light. Some of them would want Court positions, or better trade deals, or more Court mages to work on their lands. Nightstone knew that some of them would be going along with the rebellion for reasons that the Dark would approve of. Even in Amorier, it had been so.

She didn't care.

"You tell us to go back!" Lord Curoc said, and then turned and yelled at the others. "She tells us to go back!"

There came laughter, but it had an uneasy tinge now. Nightstone noted that here and there a man or woman was looking around. Each one rubbed his or her arms, and now and then winced as if a small insect were flying and biting. Those would be the Scarlet mages, Nightstone knew. They could feel the way that she drew on her power.

Not that they could do anything about it. Nightstone probably wasn't as strong as some of them were, but that didn't matter. She had learned more, because of her lifespan, than they were likely ever to know. And one of those things was what she did now. The Scarlet mages couldn't stop her, not unless they could suddenly create an extra century to study in.

"You will not go back?" she asked, and felt the sword nick into her throat, making the blood flow.

"No!" said Curoc, holding his head high.

Nightstone struck. To make it more dramatic, she moved her hand in a lazy, elegant gesture that indicated the convenient lines of horses and soldiers they had formed themselves into.

The first noble exploded. Fire ripped out from the middle of her body, then turned inward again and consumed her. The horse bolted, screaming, mane and tail aflame, but didn't have

long to run or scream. The fire boiled it from the inside out, too, and feasted until nothing was left, not even ash.

Where Nightstone's hand passed, the rebels exploded. Flame after flame sprang into the sky, pyre after burning pyre, and then died again quickly. None had a chance to flee. None had a chance to live.

Nightstone reached the end of the line, watching in pleasure as Lord Curoc died, and then paused. For a moment, the pyres glowed in her mind, memories of what had passed, linking her to the fires that had burned and the people that had burned within them.

Memories...

Those bonds were faint and fragile, but they were there. And the strongest memories of almost anyone had to do with the family he loved and lived with.

Nightstone struck along those lines of memory that bound her to her victims, and bound her victims to those they most loved. She gestured, and again fire traveled in a long line, though this time she began from the opposite end, with Lord Curoc. His keep was far out on the Plains, and she couldn't see it burning, but she knew that his wife and sons would have exploded into fire in that instant, as well as his parents if they were still alive. And so it went, all down the line, the Scarlet roaring in joy as it poured through her. It loved the world, but it also desired the world, and desired to consume and reshape and melt. That longing was so rarely granted that it would come most eagerly to the call of anyone who offered even the slightest chance of that kind.

And then Nightstone moved one more time, from the end of the line she had originally started with. She was almost at the limits of her power; this would be the last time she could do this. But she didn't care. She thought three sets of bonfires would be enough.

She struck from the pyres of those who just died to those who had loved them. Curoc's wife's family would die, and perhaps the nurse who had reared his little boys, and those soldiers who were most loyal to his wife alone. Everyone who could most reasonably take vengeance was dying, exploding, burning in flames.

Nightstone reached the end of the arc, and let her hand drop. For a long moment, she stood there, panting and trembling. She wondered if they would realize the full extent of what she had done immediately. Probably not, she decided. In Amorier, the rebels had brought their families with them, to witness what they thought would be their triumph over the Dark. Their spouses and children had seen them die, and then died themselves, and those few who had no kind of connection to the dying had seen those deaths. Nightstone had walked out of that battlefield as one of perhaps ten survivors, and Amorier had surrendered unconditionally the next day.

Nightstone looked at her hands, wincing a little. Her palms were burned. The Scarlet had gotten out of control, and lashed even her. Nightstone smiled a little.

They might not realize what had happened right away, no, but they would when the first messages came back from the keeps, and when the nobles in the castle rode home.

Nightstone shook back her hair and then turned to the gates. The liadrai and the filifernai were staring at her avidly. The liadrai, probably, would feel much the same fear and shock that the humans would. The filifernai were interested in the way that she had killed so efficiently.

Nightstone felt her feet try to collapse from beneath her. She forbade them to. They would need to bear her for at least a little longer. She said in a high, cold voice, "Are there any other rebels?"

The liadrai stirred, and the woman who had told her of the first danger came forward and said, "No, my lady."

"And the pegasi?"

"Most of them are dead, my lady," said the liadra, with a little bow of her head.

"Not all."

Nightstone looked up and saw a familiar shape descending. Darkrider, her name was, though her coat was dapple gray. She landed unsteadily before Nightstone and then dropped to her knees.

"Some of our people escaped," she said. "And we saw the mighty vengeance that you took for the Dark, my lady."

Nightstone inclined her head, curious about the glow in the pegasus's eyes. "Thank you."

"You did that for us, partly," said Darkrider. "And we want to give our service back, my lady. From this day forward, my blaze, at least, will swear absolute loyalty to you, and carry you wherever you want to go."

Nightstone nodded. "Thank you. That is very kind of you. And now I will make my first request, and ask that you carry me to my chambers." She nearly collapsed as she tried to climb on Darkrider's back, but luckily, since the pegasus was already kneeling, she simply looked as if she were in a hurry to mount.

The gray pegasus waited until she was aboard, and then flapped almost tenderly into the air. Nightstone leaned her head on the mare's neck and closed her eyes.

"The room with the balcony?" asked Darkrider.

"Mmmumph," said Nightstone.

Darkrider seemed to understand, and a moment later, her hooves clicked delicately on stone. Nightstone sat up and looked into her room, staring particularly at the bed. She would lie down and sleep more deeply than she had done in months or even years. She could feel sleep calling to her as the Scarlet had, just as gentle and alluring.

"You lied."

Nightstone lifted her head sharply. Darkrider hadn't gone yet, thank the Dark, because there was someone in the room, and Nightstone wasn't sure that she would have the strength to handle the intruder by herself.

The intruder was Tewilde, she saw, her pale hair glowing oddly as if lit by the rising moon. Nightstone would have glanced at the sky, but she knew well enough that there was no moon in the sky tonight.

"Tewilde," she said. "What brings you here?"

"You lied," said Tewilde, moving towards her in a way that made Darkrider snort and lift her wings as if she would circle forward and kick the former Queen in the head. "You said that you were of the Light. And now I come here to find out that it was all a deception. You are still of the Dark. And you have just killed many of my own people in horrible ways."

"Yes," said Nightstone. "They were rebelling against the Dark, and that is the reason why I killed them- the only reason. They could have gone on living profitable lives, but they chose not to."

"You shouldn't have done it!" Tewilde screamed, actually shaking her fists at her. It was a gesture that Nightstone had never seen anyone make, one that she didn't think existed outside history-tales.

"Darkrider?" Nightstone asked wearily, slipping off the pegasus's back to lean on the balcony railing.

Darkrider bolted forward, but Tewilde was already moving, slipping to the side, away from the charge. Her eyes stayed fixed on Nightstone's face as if she couldn't look away, though, and now they glistened with something more ferocious than anger. Hatred, probably. Nightstone stared back, then yawned. She was too tired to deal with this madness tonight.

"I will come back," said Tewilde. "To think that I almost agreed to your evil plan, and let you continue ruling the country! I will come back."

"Good," said Nightstone, supposing it deserved more response than that, but not able to think of one for right now. "I'll face you then. For now, get out and let me sleep."

Tewilde stood there, her eyes glinting with that fierce anger and hatred, and then turned and ran out of the room.

"Should I summon the blaze to fly after her?" asked Darkrider, dancing in place. Nightstone realized that the mare was enjoying herself. Well, if she hadn't found anything lately during her scouting missions, she might well be enjoying herself.

"No," said Nightstone. "She knows the corridors of the castle very well, and she would only slip away and take refuge in some other place."

The mare nodded, and then turned to Nightstone, her enjoyment fading. "My lady, if she invades your chamber, then you should have protection."

Nightstone smiled. "You can arrange for it," she said, and then walked to the bed and tumbled into sleep.

Strangely, she dreamed of Kymenos that night. He wasn't bowing before her, the way that he did in her fondest daydreams. He wasn't really doing anything other than gazing at her steadily.

And that terrified Nightstone. She supposed there must be something else in the dream that made her feel that way, but when she awakened, she couldn't remember it.

And besides, by the time she woke up, she had other problems than a half-glimpsed image of Kymenos.

Chapter 43

A Queen and All the Trappings

"If you would know a Queen of Arvenna, then look for the caparisoned horses, the shining jewels and cloth, and the woman in the middle of it who is the only one really enjoying the show."

-Proverb of the Star Circle.

"Princess."

Mitherill looked up at Elary. "Elary! You are more than welcome here." She held out her hand, palm down.

It took Elary a moment to realize that she wanted her hand kissed. The realization came as a cold shock, though she wasn't sure why. Surely Mitherill was allowed to act in a way that was in accord with the teaching that Silar and Melior must have been given her by now?

It still made Elary uneasy. She kissed Mitherill's hand, then looked around. This room appeared private, though who knew what kinds of passages the Serpent's Shelter might hold? Elary decided to trust to appearances for once, though. Silar would be here any moment to begin the Princess's morning instruction, and Elary knew that she might not have that much time.

Especially given that she would have to dissuade Mitherill from believing something that she now believed true.

"May I talk to you for a moment, Your Highness?"

Mitherill, her golden eyes shining with curiosity, nodded. Elary sat down on the dais beside her- and when had Mitherill started sitting on a throne for her lessons?- and tried to approach the subject as reasonably as she could.

"Do you understand what the Serpents are doing here, Mitherill?"

"Of course," said Mitherill confidently. "Naldeon told me all about it."

Elary blinked. "He did?"

Mitherill nodded. "They want me to become Queen of Arvenna because they don't want someone who doesn't understand the country. But they can see the goodness in me, and the sweetness, and the intelligence. They know that I will learn to understand Arvenna." Her smile was complacent. "It takes some instruction first, of course, but in time I shall learn to master all the knowledge they want me to have."

"I didn't mean that."

Mitherill blinked, the smile fading from her face. "Then what do you mean?"

"The Serpents want a captive Queen, Princess," said Elary quietly. "They want someone who will bow obediently to their whims and let them do whatever they want. They're focusing on you as the last of the royal line, but they don't intend to let you rule on your own. They want you to give them the Court positions and the real power, while you wave from the throne."

Mitherill blinked, once. Again. Elary held her breath, fearing either a tantrum or a look of confusion.

But Mitherill just waved her hand and said, "Oh, yes, I knew about that. Anything else?"

It was Elary's turn to blink. "Your Highness-"

"Elary."

Elary bowed her head, shivering. She had heard that voice only once before, during the time she and Mitherill had almost escaped from Shadow, and she knew it meant that Destiny was filling Mitherill with its power.

"I know the truth about the Serpents," said Mitherill, or Destiny using the voice of the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna. "They would take over the countries if they could. They think they have a right to it after years of creeping around and trying to serve me from the cover of deception.

"And they have a right to some things, but not that much. I would never allow them to rule my country. Did you really think I would?"

"Naldeon sounded so persuasive," Elary whispered. "And I know that you enjoy things like thrones and crowns-"

"I enjoy power more," said the cold voice. "I will take my throne as a Queen who is beholden to no one. They may think they own me, but there is nothing irreplaceable, save me and the other royal Heirs. I will rule in my own right. To do that, I need only the fullness of my power and the Diamond of Ezudlos."

"And when will you have those, Your Majesty?" Elary managed to look up and hold those glowing golden eyes, though it was hard.

"Soon," said Mitherill. Her face looked adult in that moment, the last vestige of childhood burned away. "I would have had them by now, but Shadow decided to interfere. That means that I need a little more time of growing into my power, and a little more time to locate the Diamond exactly. But soon enough I will have both of those. At this point, it is really only a matter of months."

"I am glad, Your Highness," said Elary, trying to keep a formal tone in her voice. It was the only way she might keep it from shaking. "And is there anything I can do to help you in this Quest?"

Mitherill smiled at her and lifted one long hand. Elary shivered as that hand stroked her hair, and spread a chill through her scalp.

"You are doing a great deal already," said Mitherill. "You have proved your loyalty, by worrying more about my power than my education, which is just as it should be."

"And what about the Diamond of Ezudlos? Is there any way that I can help you search for information on that? I have noticed that the Serpents have a vast library, truly greater than they need."

Mitherill laughed softly. "I thank you for the offer. It is worth more than you know. But I think the Serpents would suspect what you were doing, no matter how well you managed to hide it. I do not want you caught and stopped before you can truly be of use to me. No, wait until the

moment when I might need you to steal a certain book from the library. I will try asking Silar for it first."

"Your Highness."

Elary glanced up in terror. Silar stood in the door of the room, her eyes going from Mitherill to Elary. Her smile was fading, and a suspicious look was growing on her face.

"Is something wrong?" she asked. She was speaking to Elary, or so the healer thought, but her eyes were on the Princess.

"Nothing wrong," said Mitherill, in her usual cheery voice, without a hint of the power that had just infused her. "Elary came to visit me this morning, and to tell me of a book that I might find interesting."

"What book is this?" asked Silar, gliding closer. Even though she wore her true appearance, Elary saw a ripple at her back, as though Illusion were moving there. Perhaps Silar was trying to keep her wings from flapping and betraying her agitation.

"Oh, it turned out that we were already using it," said Mitherill, with a careless flip of her hand. "*A Treatise on Court Politics in Arvenna*. I love Elary, truly I do, but sometimes she does not think far enough ahead." She gave Elary a look that did indeed mingle love and pity.

For a moment, Elary was hurt, and then she realized what Mitherill was doing. If the Serpents didn't believe her very intelligent or far-thinking, then Elary could move around and find information on the Diamond of Ezudlos even more easily.

"Oh." The suspicion faded from Silar's face, and she smiled. "Very well, then. I can hardly blame her for thinking of something so useful, though in this case the thought itself wasn't useful." She turned her smile on Elary. Elary wondered if it was her imagination that added to the words the implication that Silar could blame her for other things.

Elary stood and bowed to both of them. "Well, my ladies, since I cannot be of help here, I beg that you will excuse me."

"Of course," said Silar, still watching her too closely, too intently.

Elary bowed again, kissed the hand that Mitherill extended one last time, and then left the room.

She hastened to a mirror the moment she was in the hall. The Serpents had them hanging everywhere, and she wanted to see if the cold chill that ran through her scalp when Mitherill touched her had changed her in any physical way.

It had. There was now a long streak of black in her white hair. Elary touched it, and it felt cold, as Mitherill's often was. She couldn't be sure, but she thought it was also the same size and shape as the streak in the Princess's hair.

Elary took a deep breath. *I don't need to worry, then. She knows that I serve her. She's marked me as belonging to her. I would be foolish to think that the Serpents will corrupt her with the trappings of the Court. They are merely teaching her things she finds useful. When the time comes, she will shed those trappings like a butterfly spreading its wings through the cocoon...*

Or like a dragon hatching through the egg.

The second image was the more appropriate, Elary decided, remembering the power that had shone around Mitherill for a moment when Destiny came to claim its own. She sighed and shook out her shoulders, and then made her way back to the room the Serpents had assigned her.

It was a fine room. She had to admit that. It was on what was probably the second floor of the Serpent's Shelter, though given the number of ramps and short staircases that filled the place it was impossible to tell, and looked out over the courtyards and cloisters of the inner castle. Elary liked to stand there and watch the trees shifting and shining in the sunlight.

But there were no books in the room, nothing at all but a bed and a chamberpot. There was no pattern on the bedclothes; no paintings, no mosaics, and no carved initials relieved the boredom of the blank black walls. Elary didn't know why, but suspected the Serpents didn't want her to know anything about them, not even as much as a carefully embroidered pattern could reveal.

She stared out the window, but no one was walking in the gardens. Elary sighed, and decided to read in the library again. She wouldn't really look for information on the Diamond of Ezudlos, she reassured herself. She would just read, and if she happened to brush up against information on the Diamond- well, then she could hardly be blamed for reading it.

But as she turned towards the door, it opened. Elary stepped back and watched it suspiciously, retreating further when she saw who stood there.

"My lady," said Lord Naldeon, with a bow. "Were you busy? If not, there is something that I wish to discuss with you."

Elary nodded.

"Good." Naldeon closed the door and sat down on the bed without waiting for an invitation. Such a thing was crass in Ilantra, but Elary reminded herself that they stood in Arvenna and fixed on his words instead of the temptation to shriek at him. "I suspect that you are a little out of place here."

"Ah- well," said Elary, wondering what would happen when he noticed the black streak in her hair, "I have very little to do with Mitherill's instruction, that is true, and I would prefer to have little to do with the politics of the Serpents."

Naldeon nodded. "I thought you might like to come to the Recitation we are holding in the great hall."

"A what?"

Naldeon blinked, but if he was really surprised, then Elary would carry a live snake next to her heart. "Oh, that is right. I forget sometimes that they are only an Arvennese custom, so much a part of my life are they. A poet or a bard comes in and sings, and an Illusion mage stands beside him to make the history-tales come to life with images. You have not seen anything like this?"

Elary shook her head. "And that is it, my lord? You came only to make me an invitation?"

"Yes."

Elary stared into Naldeon's lightning-marked eyes. She knew there had to be more to it than that, but she didn't know what it was.

Then Naldeon unexpectedly solved the mystery for her.

"I think," he said, "that you didn't understand the words I spoke the other day. You seem to think that we would take Mitherill's throne away from her if we could. That is what expression on your face said to me, at least. Am I mistaken?" He paused and gazed into Elary's face.

Elary shook her head. Her head had begun to pound in time with her heart. *How much does he know?*

"Things are different in Arvenna," said Naldeon, and stood, holding out his arm to her. "The Recitation they plan to give this afternoon is about one of the Queens of Arvenna who ruled only from within her trappings, and yet is still remembered as one of our greatest monarchs. I thought it might help you to understand better what we mean when we speak of helping Mitherill to rule. Will you come with me, and watch the Recitation? At the least, it will be a harmless day of entertainment. At best, it will show you some of what we mean."

Elary hesitated. She didn't think that he was telling the truth about not taking the rule from Mitherill, and no pretty spectacle was going to change her mind. But perhaps he was right.

And she couldn't pull back from it without causing suspicion.

She reached out and put her hand on Naldeon's arm.

Chapter 44

In the Country of the Goddess

"Have you named and numbered the stars?

Have you seen the grass of Elle's country

Sway in the high moonlight?

Or the trees of Shara's

Glow with the dark presence of the Lady?"

-Verse from a song of Amorier.

Ternora stared at Alira for a moment. "We're going to negotiate with Elle?" she said, trying to remember every blasphemy she had ever uttered in her life, at least against the Goddess of Light, and all the nuances of the way she had treated Warcourage, Elle's chosen.

"That perhaps is not entirely accurate," said a voice like a trumpet from behind her. "You have already been speaking with Her. We are going to speak to the one aspect of Her who keeps most fiercely resisting the notion of abandoning the Light."

Ternora turned around. Behind her stood a figure so full of light that Ternora found her harder to look at than even the grass. She radiated the shine, though it had no warmth to it as the light crawling up through Ternora's knees did. She swallowed and lowered her eyes.

"I am she who was Plenilune in your world," the shining figure went on, "but you would probably know me better as the Fair One, that aspect of Elle that is worshipped when the moon is full."

Ternora swallowed again. "I know the name," she said, and finally managed to raise her eyes; the Fair One was dimming her shine, as if she knew that Ternora couldn't look directly at her. "I have been present at some of her- your- rituals. But I didn't know I was talking to a goddess."

The Fair One shook her head. Her hair moved around her like a woven net of light, and Ternora couldn't help admiring it. "I am not precisely a goddess, not in the way that Shara is. We were separate at one point long ago, all of us, until Elle made of us Her aspects. And we are all joined together." She looked at the woman beside her, impossibly strong and clean and long of limb, whom Ternora knew from the weapons was Irra. "Is that not so, Huntress?"

The Huntress nodded. "All of us have agreed that we must join Shara and the Dark and Shadow, to stop Destiny," she said, in a voice that sang like the hiss of arrows flying through the air. "It is only the central aspect of Elle, She who absorbed the rest of us, She who is most afraid of and most furious at the Dark, who still resists." She looked towards the figure who was just climbing up from the grass. "And to some extent the Forgiver of All Wrongs, but we have her on our side now, I think."

It was Soligra, Ternora saw, but the compassion on her face no longer irritated the half-elf. It seemed to belong in this world, just as the softly warm and radiantly shining light did. She smiled at Ternora, and Ternora fought the impulse to kneel before her and have her head touched in blessing. "We have done what we could," said the Forgiver. "If there must be war now, at least I know that it is because of Elle's stubbornness, and the Light's as well. It is nothing we did."

The Huntress rolled her eyes as if disdaining the Forgiver's attempts to excuse herself of blame, then turned and beckoned to Alira. "Come. We arrived as close to Elle as we could, but there is still a distance to cross."

The High Priestess nodded, as if that were no surprise, and began to follow the Huntress. It was the only thing that gave Ternora the courage to rise to her feet and take her own steps after them.

It was a strange place to walk through. The ground was solid beneath Ternora's feet, but she had the constant feeling that if she had run instead of walked, her boots would sometimes have come down on mist. The hills and streams at the edges continued to blur and run when Ternora wasn't looking directly at them. At one point the light seemed to attempt to form itself into mountains, but they tattered and poured away under Ternora's stare.

The warmth and the radiance continued, increasing in what seemed like regular pulsebeats until Ternora was dizzy and squinting. None of the others seemed bothered, though, and she kept on walking.

Then, after one last great flare of both warmth and light, the radiance died out altogether. Ternora lifted her head cautiously and saw that they stood in a place dim as twilight, with a black wall directly ahead.

The Fair One said softly, "This is the place where Elle judges the souls of Her worshippers. Those who cannot pass through the wall, who do not trust to the Light beyond the Darkness, will perish, or wander lost in the darkness forever. I can shine through it, but only with difficulty. Follow me, and do not turn aside, whatever you may see or hear."

She lifted her head and walked towards the black wall, vanishing almost the moment she touched it. Ternora looked in terror at Alira, and was comforted to see the High Priestess smiling slightly, as though this were all a children's game. Ternora fixed her gaze on the black wall and waited as the Forgiver and the Huntress followed the Fair One. Then Alira stepped forward, Ternora moving at her side.

Entering the wall caused a flare of cold much like the flares of warmth that had inundated them as they walked through Elle's country, and Ternora fought down instinctive panic. She hated the cold. She was used to jungle heat. But the chill was everywhere here, and ahead was the faint shining of the Fair One, like the moon through clouds. She had no choice but to ignore the snow-like air and follow.

Alira walked beside her in absolute silence, so that sometimes Ternora reached out to grasp her hand and make sure she was still there. The High Priestess always returned the clasp firmly, then dropped Ternora's hand again and walked ahead. Ternora hurried to catch up, trying not to think about what kind of solid ground she was treading over. It felt like absolutely level grass, or possibly stone, but was so smooth that Ternora feared she was in danger of sliding.

At last the darkness began to ease, and the Fair One once again blazed brightly. But she paused, looking back at them, and Ternora saw that another wall, this one with a single dark door, stood in front of them.

"We have to cross through this door," said the moon goddess, "into Elle's throne room. And I don't know what She will do when She sees the two of you, servants of Her most hated enemy."

"It is for this we came," said Alira, with a calm pride in her voice that Ternora envied. "Open the door."

The Fair One stared hard at the High Priestess for a moment, and then Ternora thought she saw her smile.

"As you will have it," she said, and turned to the door, running a hand gently over the black stone.

There came a loud hiss that reminded Ternora oddly of the hiss of a giant serpent- oddly, because most priestesses of Elle hated snakes and thought of them as a symbol of evil- and then the door split into three pieces and vanished. The Fair One passed through first, then the Huntress, then the Forgiver. Alira walked forward into the light that poured from beyond the door and then paused, gazing back at Ternora in inquiry.

"You are coming, are you not, my daughter?"

Ternora shivered as she walked forward. The cold had lessened, but not the fear. "I'm terrified," she whispered to Alira.

The High Priestess startled her by smiling. "Then you are truly sensible," she said, "and I am glad that we have such a one in Shara's service." This time, she took Ternora's hand and did

not let go as she paced forward, leaving Ternora little choice but to follow, and also to receive some measure of comfort.

The light grew and swelled until it obscured vision for the first time since Ternora had first arrived in this country. The silence continued for a few moments more, and then abruptly exploded in song.

Ternora winced and stepped back, clutching one ear with her free hand; Alira was still refusing to let the other go. When she looked up, the light was dimming, enough that she could see an impossibly high dais with an impossibly large throne on it looming over her.

"Is that-" she asked Alira.

"It is," said the High Priestess, and walked towards it. Ternora stumbled along behind her before she could recover her balance, still staring fearfully at the throne.

The figure on the throne was growing more and more clear as the clouds of light parted and died. Ternora found herself staring at a woman more beautiful than she had ever seen before in her life, at least wearing a human form. The Faerie elves were more beautiful, but then, they weren't human.

All of Elle's features were perfectly in balance, and shining as if they had a stronger light behind them than the Fair One could produce. She had long pale hair that coiled around her shoulders, down to her ankles, and yet managed to look luxurious in the way that heavy folds of silk could. Her gown was simple, gray like the gowns of her priestesses, but far more lovely. She looked like a mourning dove instead of a shadow, Ternora thought, which was probably her intention. She had eyes that had looked on the beginning and end of Light, and had probably seen so many things that she couldn't ever relate them all.

It was really a pity that she wore a scowl at the moment, marring Ternora's first sight of her beauty.

She didn't speak until all five of them had assembled at the foot of her dais, which was so large that Ternora shouldn't have been able to make out the facets of her crystalline throne, let alone the expression on her face. Yet, somehow, Ternora could. The goddess conquered distance.

And so did her voice, when the music had died at last and Elle abruptly began to whine like a child.

"I *told* you, I won't make peace with the Dark! It has always been My enemy, and it will stay that way! You can capitulate and make noisy little gestures of peace, but I am staying the way I always did!" Elle folded her arms and stared straight ahead into the light-filled room.

"My lady," said the Fair One, with a bow and a politeness in her voice that Ternora couldn't have managed under the circumstances, "we have brought someone who has a tale that may change Your mind."

"Nothing can change My mind," Elle decreed. "I am a rock, untouched by the moving river."

Alira nudged Ternora.

Ternora stared at the High Priestess for a moment, but found no help in her face, no reprieve from what she was apparently expected to do. Clearing her throat, she felt the goddess's attention turn to her. It felt as if the sun were only a few inches away, and Ternora winced.

She had an idea, now, what the Fair One had meant when she said the lesser aspects weren't really goddesses.

"My lady," she said, "I bring tidings of something that, after all, You may want to hear."

"What is that?"

"I understand that You have long watched over the royal line of Doralissa," said Ternora, embroidering frantically from half-remembered history-tales and boasts of the Doralissan Kings and Queens as she went along. "I assume that the Prince Warcourage, who is the current Heir to the throne, is of interest to You?"

"Of course," said Elle, appearing to sit up a little straighter. "Doralissa has always been the most devoted to the Light of any of the Kingdoms. It is My proper country when I walk your small world."

Ternora bowed to conceal her opinion of the goddess's opinion about her world. "Then You should know that he has been parted from the guardian Destiny decreed for him, me," she said, "and taken up by a woman named Savior who appears intent on doing what she likes with him."

"What?"

Ternora looked up with a small smile. That had been a surprise, and from Elle's expression, she didn't like being surprised.

"You will tell me how this happened," said Elle. "From the beginning."

Ternora sighed, since the shifting streams of light were the only water she had seen here, and she knew her throat would get dry from reciting the whole story over again. But she began.

Quickly, she found that her throat didn't get dry, and that her words seemed to linger in the air instead of dying away. Perhaps no time passed here, or passed in a strange way. It was the best explanation Ternora could come up with, so she didn't waste her time thinking about it; she just remembered every trivial thing she could and dumped it into the story.

Elle was a better listener than the Fair One, the Huntress, or the Forgiver of All Wrongs. She didn't interrupt at all, simply sat and listened until Ternora finished the story and looked up at her.

Then Elle said, "And you think that he will give up praying to Me?"

Ternora shrugged. "He has not heard from You in a long time, my Lady. And Savior- Savior is a different kind of being. A fey, I think, but one who knows far more than a fey should. I think Warcourage will listen to her, and not to the promptings of Destiny or Light that might try to reach him."

Elle nodded distractedly. Ternora raised her eyebrows. That was proof, then, that Savior was not of Destiny or the Light. That might be worth knowing.

It probably is worth knowing. I just haven't figured out how yet.

"Describe her again," the goddess said.

Ternora did so, concentrating especially on the way that her wings always seemed to move up and down. She thought that was significant; at least, it was the only thing that had kept her from identifying Savior's race right away, as she had never heard of any winged fey whose wings did that. She finished with the web of Destiny whose strands she had snapped, and then stood back and watched the goddess for some sign of yielding.

Elle blinked for a long time. Then she said, "I don't think that you should have snapped the strands of the web. That could be very bad."

"Yes, it could be," said Ternora.

"Then why did you do it?"

Ternora shrugged. "I was angry." She found that she was almost angry now, watching Elle take everything so calmly. "I wanted to do something to take revenge on Savior for what she was denying me, but that was the only thing I could think of doing at the time. And it did seem to upset her. She had Warcourage fling me back to this world."

"How did he do that?"

"I don't know, my lady. He used some combination of Gust and Light, I think. It felt- it felt as though it were searching for something in me to catch on, and when it couldn't find anything, it just went straight through."

"I must think," Elle whispered unexpectedly, and then stood from her throne. A moment later, her human form changing into that of a white bird. She flew off into the shifting Light, which for a moment exploded with song again. Ternora winced and covered her ears. The song faded as the bird faded into the Light, though, and Ternora let out her breath and turned to look at the others, almost fearing to see condemnation in their eyes.

But the Huntress was smiling, and the Fair One nodded to her. "You've gotten the most response out of Her that anyone has since we started these negotiations. Now She just has to think about it, and hopefully do something more than think about it this time."

"You shouldn't be so hard on Her," said the Forgiver of All Wrongs in a motherly voice. "She can hardly help-"

In spite of her fear and anger and uncertainty about what was going to happen next, Ternora managed to smile when the others turned on the Forgiver and castigated her for having a little too much compassion.

Chapter 45

In the Caverns of the Night

"Yes, the Caverns of the Night is a somewhat pretentious name. I don't really care. After all, who cares whether it's pretentious or not? I found the Caverns, and so I get to name them, in the way that history will ring with the echo of my own name."

-The First Explorer of Arvenna, whose name has been lost to history.

"What is this?"

"Your night-eyes."

Kymenos eyed the bracelet dubiously. It looked exactly like the kind of cheap toy that the students of the Star Circle sometimes sold in the markets of Serian to make a little money. They weren't supposed to sell them, since the people who were inclined to pay for such weak toys were those who could ill afford them, but the trade happened anyway.

This was a bracelet of what looked like tin, with a carving of two stylized dark eyes etched on it with some kind of acid. It would fit about his forearm and not about his lower arm, Kymenos judged, from its size.

He looked up at Dolasson again. She shook her head at him. "We should get going. There haven't been many raids from either Shadow or Dark in this part of the mountains lately, but a strange request has been made of some of the Crownseekers. We should hurry. Safety lies in motion."

"I don't know about that," Kymenos muttered, still looking suspiciously at the night-eyes. "After all, I was moving when I met you."

Dolasson laughed, but there was a sharp edge to her laughter that made Kymenos look up at her again, wondering if something had happened that she wasn't telling him about. "Funny man. Now put on the night-eyes, and get ready to move. I will blame you if you delay." She turned away.

Kymenos shrugged, and clasped the night-eyes around his upper forearm.

There came an odd sensation, as though he were falling through a space that was dark and light at once. Before he could get used to the sensation, it faded, leaving Kymenos with a high reluctance to experience it again. He reached up to take the night-eyes off.

He just barely stifled a scream. He had seen his own hand looming up before his eyes. He let it fall back limply to his side, and could see that, too.

He was seeing through the carved eyes on the bracelet, he realized, and he was seeing with more clarity and precision than he usually did in the light. There were colors all around him that he had never known existed, shifting and flowing and altering, and he could see a bright glow encircling a Crop mage who was shifting stone across the main entrance to the cave.

"Better?"

Kymenos found it awkward to turn his arm so that he could see directly in front of him, and besides, he wanted to learn if he could look through his own eyes, as well. He made a distinct attempt to use his eyes, and found himself opening them. The view was much dimmer and less enthralling than what he had seen through the night-eyes, but he was relieved to find out that he still had vision.

Dolasson stood in front of him, smiling, her arm extended and her eyes closed. It was an odd sight to see the bracelet glowing with life, and to see the eyes blink when Kymenos made a gesture towards it with his hand.

"You could have warned me," he said.

"What fun would that have been?" asked Dolasson, and then turned away at a question from someone behind her.

Kymenos stared at her back for a moment, and then found himself reluctantly smiling. Yes, he could see the purpose of such a joke, and if it hadn't been played on himself, he might even have found it rather funny.

Chaos, it's still funny, isn't it?

Feeling more cheerful, he shifted his sight back to the night-eyes, and gathered up Norianna. The sword was silent for all of a moment before she began to complain, loudly and volubly, of the treatment she had received since the Crownseekers captured them.

"One half thinks that I'm a sign you're a hero, and the other half of them think it's funny to talk about melting me down and destroying me. I ask you. When they should be praying for a chance to bear a sword like me someday, they instead laugh at me, or won't talk to me because they think it would be irreverent. I ask you. They want to talk about you, and I don't want to tell them the truth, and yet I can't lie either. I ask you. They want to know what we're doing on the road to the Lake of the Northern Winds, when they should know perfectly well that I can't tell them. I ask-

"Norianna."

"What?"

"If you say that annoying phrase one more time, then I'll get Cheyena to melt you. I'm sure she'll be happy to help."

"I would."

Kymenos turned and smiled as he saw Cheyena coming towards him. She was also wearing a night-eyes, he saw, and already seemed to be used to it. She was picking her way expertly around tumbled stones that would have tripped her and made her frightened if she had tried to negotiate the way in the dark, Kymenos didn't doubt. Her face wore an expression of unalloyed happiness, the first one he had seen since they began this journey.

"Oh, Kymenos, aren't the night-eyes *wonderful!*"

Kymenos concealed a smile of his own. He should have known that Cheyena, who loved trinkets like this, would adore the night-eyes. "Of course," he said. "Though it is rather disconcerting learning to see from your arm instead of your face. Everything is so much lower." He tilted his arm so that he could see the floor below him and took a cautious step.

"But clear," said Cheyena, coming up beside him. "And if you became lost in the Caverns of the Night, of course I would guide you."

Kymenos smiled at her slowly, to let her know what the offer meant to him, and then blinked. That caused a most odd sensation, as though his eyelashes were brushing against a metal mask. "The Caverns of the Night? Do they really call them that?"

"I think so," said Cheyena. "Arvennese!"

Kymenos smiled more widely. Yes, Cheyena was the woman for him. Dolasson was just too busy being blinded by the cowardice, but then, she was too much a warrior. He linked his arm around Cheyena's, so that their night-eyes were abruptly staring at each other. Cheyena let out a little squeal of surprise, and then something that might have been a blush touched the cheeks of the bracelet. It was a small glow, like fire, but Kymenos knew what it meant as if

she had shouted it out to him. He had always been very good at reading a certain kind of woman.

"We will guide each other, my lady," he said. "And be ready if either of us stumbles."

"Yes," said Cheyena, the stylized eyes rapidly blinking. "Of course."

Kymenos fluttered his eyes back, and then they turned to picking their way over the cave floor to the back.

Sykeen was waiting there, lowering his head abruptly from on high to nudge at Kymenos's shoulder. *How can you see with your eyes shut?* he wanted to know.

Magic, Kymenos told him.

Oh. That seemed to content the stallion, perhaps because he had other things that he wanted to complain about. *They told me that I can't stay with you for long, that the tunnels won't permit the passage of a horse and they'll have to take me down another set.*

I'm sorry, said Kymenos, while doing his best to make it seem as if he really was.

Sykeen looked sadly at him. *I really do love you, Kymenos, though you seem pleased to make a joke out of it.*

Kymenos shook his head. Perhaps he could speak seriously once, though he had a feeling it would be wasted. The stallion simply refused to listen. *Sykeen, in one thing Dolasson is right. You should belong to a hero. You should bear someone to the Lake of the Northern Winds who actually cares about this ancient lost secret, whatever it is. You don't belong down here with me.*

I belong with you wherever you are. Another rider, hero or not, would never suit me.

Kymenos sighed. He had tried. He patted Sykeen's nose with his free hand, and then turned as Dolasson coughed loudly.

"I know that most of you know where we're going," said Dolasson. "For those of you who don't, we'll be following the Obsidian Route to the north. When the tunnels can't accommodate horses anymore, then those I've assigned to go Home will use the Basalt Trail. The rest of us will take the Black Stair."

There were nods all around him. Kymenos listened in interest. Now that he thought about it, he was almost sure that he remembered hearing of the Black Stair before. Those Arvenese peasants who talked about it would always deny knowledge of it the moment they heard a Dalznan listening.

"Let's move," said Dolasson softly. She turned and walked towards the back of the cave. Kymenos followed as close to her heels as he could; he was still not really sure about his reception among the rest of the Crownseekers. Cheyena walked beside him, her head up and her lips, when Kymenos twisted his arm to see, alight with a smile of confidence.

The cave began to slope gently downward, but the ceiling remained a comfortable distance above either human or equine heads. The darkness was increasing, Kymenos supposed, but the night-eyes made no note of it. They only saw the glowing, glittering reflections of magic, which grew brighter the farther down the tunnel they went. Kymenos wondered if someone

had used magic in the making of the Obsidian Route. It wouldn't surprise him. The floor beneath his feet and the walls around him felt too smooth to be natural.

"Kymenos."

Kymenos looked over in surprise. He had expected Dolasson to walk at the head of the group, as she was the leader, but given the way her people forged confidently forward, they presumably knew as much about the Obsidian as she did.

"We will come in a few moments to the Heart of the Night," said Dolasson. "And there, I must ask a favor of you. We will all be taking off the night-eyes for a moment, or at least looking through our natural eyes. There is a ceremony we will perform. It has no meaning to the Dalznans, but it is very important to the Arvennese. I would ask that you look through your natural eyes, and that you not mock what we do."

"It would be easier if you didn't name the caves things like the Heart of the Night," grumbled Kymenos.

Dolasson smiled. "Well, there is that. But we cannot change the names, not now. Will you promise me?"

"I promise."

Dolasson nodded, and moved ahead. Kymenos peered ahead into the glittering play of magic, trying to locate the Heart of the Night, and then pulled back his sight, blinking. Somewhere not too far ahead was a blazing bonfire of light, which blocked his attempts to see through it.

"Do you think they're really Darkworkers?"

Kymenos started in surprise and twisted his arm to look at Cheyena. He had almost forgotten she was there, so light and silent was she. But she sounded serious now, and he would have to soothe her fears, if not share them. "What do you mean, Cheyena? I think they're Lightworkers. They serve the Light and the Princess that the Light wants on the throne."

"But they hold ceremonies in places with names like the Heart of the Night," said Cheyena.

"They probably didn't name them," said Kymenos soothingly. "They can't really help what follies their ancestors may have fallen into." Not that he thought worshipping the Dark was necessarily a folly, but he had to allay Cheyena's fears and play into her beliefs if he wanted to bed her.

"But to continue the ceremonies..."

"We'll see in a little while," said Kymenos. "Perhaps the ceremony isn't really Dark at all."

Cheyena didn't look convinced. In truth, Kymenos wasn't, either. Both the older Dark and Light- and to some extent, the newer Light- had often named things grandly pretentious names like the Heart of the Night and expected them to be taken seriously, but they hadn't used each other's symbols. The Dark wouldn't have named anything after the sun or the moon, and the Light wouldn't have named anything after the stars and the darkness.

Yet it seemed that it had.

The bonfire of magic drew closer and closer, and then they stepped through the shifting veils and into the Heart of the Night. Kymenos blinked and twisted his arm to confirm that his initial impression was not off.

No, it wasn't. Carved all around the cavern, in a ring just beneath the ceiling, were the symbols of the Twenty Wonders that the Star Circle studied- the Circle of Four; the blended elements formed from those four; Light and Time; and the secondary blended elements formed from Light, Time, and the Circle of Four. All the symbols were the same as the ones he knew, though all the wonders beyond the Thirteenth had come to be known only in the last century.

And this place was old. He would have known that without Dolasson's reference to older names. He could feel the magic that pulsed in the symbols, that filled the cave itself, and knew it had cooled from the glittering lights that still played in the air. Some of the ceremonies were more recent, and the cave could remember them. The memory of stone was ancient. But there had been other ceremonies here, so antique that it could not remember them.

Kymenos shivered.

Dolasson spoke then, in Arvenese that had a trace of the formal Court accent Kymenos had heard only once or twice in his former crossing of the country. "Shift your sight from night-eyes to natural eyes, please."

"What?" Cheyena whispered at his side.

Kymenos translated for her, still studying the old memories as long as he dared. Then he took a deep breath and shifted his sight to his natural eyes.

And the Heart of the Night began to beat.

Chapter 46

Placeholding

"I did not say that politics would be easy. But I think that many mistook my words for 'politics is something you can leave up to the Queen,' and therefore many of my people have ignored them- to the great profit of the nobles, of course."

-Queen Aneron of Orlath.

"My lady."

Nightstone grumbled. She still felt as if she could sleep for hours, and the fact that this person was not letting her do so irritated her. She reached up to pull the pillow over her head, and found herself latching onto a handful of hair.

"Ouch!"

Nightstone blinked and sat up, and not just because someone was in her room and bending over her. She didn't think that she had ever heard one of the fey say something as human as "Ouch!" before.

The liadra who bent over the bed, her silver hair clutched in Nightstone's hand, managed to look up at her with watering eyes. "My lady, there are several delegates here to see you."

"Delegates?" Nightstone tightened her hold.

"Yes, my lady." The liadra flinched and blinked, more tears pouring from her eyes. Nightstone was fascinated. She had never realized how sensitive the lightning-fey's hair must be, to provoke this kind of reaction. Of course, she had never gone around yanking on their hair, either. "One is from Prince Artaen of Rivendon, a few from Orlathian nobles, and one from Shadow."

That last bit of news cleared the drowsiness from Nightstone's mind. "One from Shadow? Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, my lady," said the liadra. "He said that it was rather urgent that he see you, and he had traveled far over both Arvenna and Orlath to do so. He appears important," she added. "At least, he is made of mist, in the way that I think only the avatars of Shadow are."

Nightstone relaxed fractionally. She thought she knew who the man was, and while he was no avatar of Shadow, he was sufficiently important to assure her that Shadow meant business by sending him. "I will see him first, then. Send him up to me in twenty minutes."

"My lady." The liadra bowed, then waited until Nightstone loosed her hair before she backed away.

Nightstone gave a small smile at nothing in particular as she set about combing her fingers through her hair and choosing a new gown. She would have to remember that tactic the next time she wanted to get a liadra's attention.

"Lady Nightstone, the Lord Rior of Ilantra."

Nightstone nodded slightly as she rose to her feet. This was indeed the man she had been expecting, the man who had once been Ilantran royalty until he became so strangely involved in Shadow's return just over a hundred years ago. He was Shadow's most trusted lieutenant, and a patient, mild man who understood the intricacies of diplomacy well. Before Dark and Shadow had allied, Nightstone had marked him down as one of those she must find a way to kill before going to war with Shadow.

Somehow.

Killing him would not have been easy, Nightstone thought, watching Rior float towards her. He did have a solid form, but only as a wolf; as a human, he was made entirely of gray mist, and could only see and hear, not touch or taste or smell. That might be useful to his enemies in some ways, but on the other hand, no one could touch him to kill him either. Nightstone found that annoying.

"My Lord Rior," she said, inclining her head to him. "I am glad that you have come."

"You might not be," said Rior, settling himself so that he floated just above a chair that Nightstone kept for the comfort of visitors more than her own. "I bring grave news."

"Do you?" Nightstone felt her smile grow a little fixed, and strove to keep it looking as calm and polite as she could. Perhaps Shadow really was going to declare war, and had just chosen this courteous way of showing it.

"Yes." Rior leaned back in the seat. One of his arms went through the armrest, and he sighed and folded it into his lap. "You may know that there are rebellions rising throughout Arvenna and Orlath."

"Yes," said Nightstone, in the same tones. "I dealt with one myself. You may have seen the remains outside."

"Yes," said Rior, and Nightstone wondered when either of them would become sick enough of the word to stop using it. "Impressive. But I wonder if you know that all of these rebellions have a single source?"

Nightstone narrowed her eyes, knowing in that instant that she had spoiled any chance of lying and pretending that she had already heard the news. On the other hand, it would have been a complete lie, and she thought that hearing the news was more important than maintaining a minor advantage. "What?"

Rior nodded. "There is a group of people in Arvenna who have been- rather nerve-grating for the past twelve years. They manage more successful raids than anyone else, and they leave their signs carved on windows and doors so that anyone who notices them will know who caused the havoc."

"What are they called?"

"The Serpents."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes further. "They are Darkworkers who have turned against Shadow?"

Rior shook his head. "They are Lightworkers. They leave the symbol of a snake twined around a crown. They have managed to raise a vast army called the Crownseekers, who sometimes fight the Crownkillers come down from Dalzna, but have been moving south in vast numbers lately. They fight for the Princess Mitherill, and her return to the throne of Ilantra-Arvenna."

"And you can't stop them?"

"They are using underground caverns to move about." Rior sighed. "My lord cannot enter those; they are ancient, filled with a power that has no allegiance or tie to Shadow, and Arvenna was never his country." For a moment, his gray eyes glowed with the odd golden light Nightstone had seen in them at times when Shadow and Dark were arranging their alliance. "If they come onto the soil of Ilantra," he murmured, "then we shall see what happens." He shook his head and fixed his eyes on Nightstone again. "But we have heard enough to know that the Lord of the Serpents, a man called Naldeon, is funding the rebellions in Orlath as well. We also think that he is sending people into Rivendon. He hasn't tried to come south into Doralissa yet, but he may have been in contact with the rebels who have never stopped fighting there."

Nightstone nodded. "But why does it matter to him who sits the thrones in the other Kingdoms?"

"We think he stands for royalty in general, and not just the royalty of his own country," said Rior. "We thought that we had destroyed the Heirs for a time, as you know-"

"You did. I never did."

Rior inclined his head, but his eyes had gone as hard as eyes made of mist and shadow could look. "But you didn't manage to recapture the Princess Alliana before she grew to the age of twelve, did you?"

Nightstone shook her head. "I still have prisoners who might prove useful in taking her, though."

Rior laughed. Nightstone blinked. The sound was so unexpected and so loud that it shocked her a little. Rior finished laughing soon enough, though, and bowed from his seat.

"We know that Princess Alliana is dead," he said. "The girl who escaped was a peasant, her foster sister. We know that you achieved, if by accident, what we wanted to achieve- the end of the royal line."

"How do you know this?" Nightstone demanded, before she could think better of showing her fear.

Rior smiled a little. "Shadows are everywhere, my lady, and my lord can see out of them," he said softly. "And, true, my lord met someone who knew the truth, traveling through the mountains of southern Arvenna."

"Kymenos?" Nightstone knew the answer before she spoke the question, though. Who else could it be but Kymenos, still curving through events like a comet of ill omen through the skies, and ruining all her plans?

Rior smiled, and said nothing.

Nightstone sat back in her chair, maintaining her own smile, but frantically cursing within her head. That mention had been a test, she thought, to see what would happen to her when they mentioned it. They had some idea, now, of how badly she wanted Kymenos.

Rior went on after the silence had become uncomfortable for Nightstone- and Nightstone was sure that that pause was deliberate, too. "Naldeen is a danger to all of us. I believe that he means to start trouble even in Dalzna, if he can. The Crownkillers reported a large detachment of Serpents crossing the borders secretly. They went after them, but the Serpents flew away."

"Flew away?"

Rior nodded. "They include among their number several winged fey, who can carry the others."

Nightstone clenched her hands on the arms of her own chair. "He means to try and free the northern Kingdoms from the 'dominion' of the Dark, doesn't he?"

The laughter was gone from Rior's eyes now. "That is our fear. We caught and destroyed some of the agents he was trying to send into Gazania, but we fear that others may have escaped our notice. Shadow is annoyed with him, but so long as his people mostly move in those caverns, we can't touch them. And killing has never been Shadow's way, if you know."

Nightstone nodded. She thought it a little silly. There were reports that Shadow had tried to talk Light out of creating the Light-Destined Heirs of Doralissa and Ilantra-Arvenna, and their families out of keeping the children, and wept when they couldn't be persuaded. Shadow was strange, too human-hearted to be really reliable and too powerful to be ignored.

"We don't want him to succeed," Rior went on. "We are slowly getting our people in Ilantra and Doralissa used to the idea of not having a monarch. We thought we were making progress in Arvenna, too. But the appearance of Princess Mitherill and the activities of the Serpents are undermining our work."

"And what of Princess Mitherill? Where is she?"

"In the care of the Serpents," said Rior.

"What!" Nightstone stood. "Haven't you given them just what they want?"

Rior laughed. "In the case of any other royal Heir, perhaps we would have. But we had her first, and I looked into her mind while I was trying to train her in Court manners and the other things that Shadow thought she should know. There is nothing there but pride and arrogance."

"Are you sure? I felt the same way about Princess Alliana, but the strength of the Destiny protecting her-"

"Not even Destiny will persuade the Serpents to give up their dream," said Rior. "They want a good Queen, a Queen who cares first and foremost for their country, on the throne of Arvenna. And Mitherill's guardian voluntarily gave up her claim to the throne of Ilantra. Without a good Queen, the Serpents' plans can't move ahead. They're educating her right now."

"Do you think they'll succeed?"

Rior shook his head. "Again, with most other royal Heirs, they might- even with Prince Warcourage of Doralissa. But not with her."

"Where is Prince Warcourage?"

Rior shook his head again. "Shadow knows not."

"And Princess Cadona of Rivendon?"

Rior smiled. "Ask Prince Artaen about her. Perhaps that is why his envoy has come. Shadow is not concerned about Rivendon." He leaned forward. "That is the essence of my message to you, beyond the news about Naldeon. Hold your place. Don't dream of conquering Rivendon, or of subduing Orlath utterly just yet. Hold your place, and turn back the attacks that come against you. The last thing we want is to be working against each other. Shadow is meeting with Shara and some of the other gods to try to make sure they see the importance of not fulfilling personal ambitions right now."

"Will you tell that to Prince Artaen, and the Dark's other lieutenants, and the Serpents?" asked Nightstone.

"You have set the Serpents back a bit," said Rior. "The news of their adherents' defeat in Orlath will ride fast and hard to the north. They will be frightened to try anything against you for a while. And they have not yet dared Ilantra." For a moment, the golden spark glowed in his eyes again. "When they do, they shall have something else frightening to think about for a while."

"And you can offer me nothing else?"

"Shadow has always trusted to individual humans- at least since he returned to the world," said Rior, with an expression on his face that Nightstone couldn't quite recognize. "He has said a few things at the right time to some people who could be important. They are making their way across the land now. Shadow will not rely on them alone, but there are some hopes that the Light cannot interfere with because it does not know that they are hopes."

"Can you tell me who they are?"

Rior shook his head. "My lady, you have done a fine job here, but you have traitors running in the walls. Some of the nobles will not be frightened at what you did, but angry, and think of resisting you. And then there is the problem of Akellia and Tewilde, of course."

"You knew about them?"

Rior nodded. "When Shadow was last here, he felt a fourth person of royal blood in the castle, and went to investigate. We had thought she was dead," he added thoughtfully. "I would give much to know what kind of deception or Illusion magic she used that was enough to feign her own death."

"What are you going to do about her?"

Rior looked at her curiously. "Why should we do anything about her? I thought that you wanted revenge on her. Or was it that she wanted revenge on you? I'm sorry. There are so many things to think about, so many grudges to keep track of, that sometimes I mistake what I'm dealing with."

Nightstone ground her teeth. Rior smiled blandly at her, and said nothing.

"I am trying to rule a Kingdom," said Nightstone. "That doesn't stop because you tell me to sit here and defend. Why should I listen to you? It could all be a plot of Shadow against the Dark."

"It could be," Rior agreed, "but it isn't."

"Why should I trust anything you say?" Nightstone asked with weary impatience. *I know the man- shadow-creature, shapeshifter, whatever he is- isn't stupid. Why does he have to act like it?*

"Because," said Rior, "you still have not realized what is going on. This is more than just another war of Dark against Light, or even all three of the great powers against each other. Didn't you realize that? Those truly have ended forever. Why do you think that Destiny and Light put forth so much effort to create the Heirs and then put them on their thrones?"

"I don't know," said Nightstone. "So they could rule the world. The same thing they've always wanted- the world as a playground for them, the way they think it should be, without rivals to plague them. What other reason would they have?" She was tired, and her head hurt just thinking about speaking to Prince Artaen's envoy or those of the Orlathian nobles. She didn't want to have to deal with this, too, though thanks to Shadow she was going to have to.

"Exactly," said Rior. "But they could have had all of what they wanted much more easily, and with much less effort, if they simply sought to return the world to what it was a hundred years ago. They're trying something else."

"What is it?" Nightstone rubbed her eyes.

"You are tired," said Rior solicitously, standing. "Of course you would be, on the morning after turning back a rebellion. I will go."

"No, damn it. You're here, and you might as well tell me the real news you came to tell," said Nightstone. "Just don't expect me to be gracious about listening to it."

Rior smiled coldly. "Of course not. I would not expect that. No, my lady, they meant to see the last of us, forever."

"What...?"

"You heard me. They thought they could create a prophecy so powerful, by focusing on four royal families, that they would destroy Dark and Shadow forever."

"They couldn't do that."

"They thought they could," said Rior, and leaned forward. "That is the important thing, my lady. They put forth all their strength, Destiny and Light, to create the Heirs and the prophecy. They thought they would win, and so they didn't bother holding anything back."

Nightstone found that she couldn't look away from his eyes. Even as just gray mist, without a golden spark to glow in the middle of them, they were oddly compelling. "What are you saying?" she whispered.

"I'm saying that if we destroy them, they have nothing left to fall back on," said Rior. "We could just as easily be free of them forever."

Nightstone closed her eyes. The vision of a world without Light to struggle against was a strange one.

And yet, it was with Dark had been working for all along. Nightstone stood high in the councils of the Dark as few did, and she knew how it loathed the Light and all the self-important postures it struck. Chase that from the world forever, and the Kingdoms would be cleaner and better places.

"And will you help-?" she began to ask Rior, opening her eyes.

Rior was nowhere to be seen. There was a flitting shadow in the corner that might have been him, but perhaps not.

Nightstone sat pondering for a moment, then shook her head. "Tell Prince Artaen's envoy that I will see him now," she called to the liadra who was certainly standing outside the door.

I have many important things to tell him. Or at least tease him with my knowledge of, she added more honestly in her head.

And if the Light is destroyed, then Dark and Shadow will rule everything. Then I can easily enough hunt down Kymenos.

Silvereyes and Elf

"Who knows why elves do anything?"

-Sometimes attributed to Queen Joydancer of Doralissa.

"You could so easily be running with a pack, Olumer, even the leader of one. It's the way you move."

Olumer nodded distractedly to Vander's comment, studying the slope intently. He knew that Silverheart had come this way with the girls, and it wasn't anything so vulgar as a track that told him so. There was a *sense* of the snow leopard's presence spread just above the stone, in the way that Olumer had sometimes felt it when he hunted an animal who turned out to be telepathic. If Vander would just keep quiet, then he could follow it well enough.

But the silvereyes pack leader didn't seem intent on keeping quiet.

"Wait until you see some of the forests near the tops of the mountains. That's the prime hunting ground, the ground that no humans ever disturb. We can run there for days and never see any other silvereyes or hear anything that's not an animal. I think we should take you hunting there."

"Will you be quiet?" Olumer snarled.

"What did you say?"

Olumer glanced up slowly. Vander's eyes were narrowed, and he had shot his claws so that they gleamed as well in the chill morning.

"Are you challenging me?" Vander asked, and now he bared his fangs as well, in a gesture that Olumer thought even a human would never mistake as a smile. "Do you think that you can lead the pack better than I can?"

Olumer grimaced. That was another thing he had forgotten, after having been among the humans for so long. An offhand remark among the silvereyes were never just an offhand remark, unless made to someone lower in rank. He should never have said something like that to Vander unless he meant to challenge him.

"I'm sorry," he said, lowering his eyes and turning back to the trail. "But when you speak like that, you distract me from finding Silverheart and the girls."

"That's what he's trying to do."

Vander snarled. Olumer looked up to see Pannerel leaping down the rocks towards them, moving so lightly that Olumer knew he had no fear of slipping on the snow-slick stone.

"He thinks that your life would be easier without having to take care of Cadona," Pannerel went on, skipping easily down to within a few feet of them. He had his eyes half-closed, and from the spark in them, Olumer thought he was feeling joyful, which might or might not be a good thing for the rest of them. "And I think the same thing. But I know that you feel you have to go after her, so I won't interfere." He glanced at Vander. "Let him hunt- that's what he's doing- and track, and feel the snow in the air all around him and the wind blowing past him. Then he might remember what it's like to be a silvereyes."

"I do remember what it's like to be a silvereyes!" Olumer said, and then realized that he had spoken in Rivendonian, entirely undercutting his point.

Pannerel laughed, and touched his shoulder with a quick gesture that Olumer knew was only his version of a pat, and yet brought tears to his eyes. "Of course you do," he said. "So much so that you don't even speak your own language all the time. I'll scout ahead and look for Cadona, if that would ease your mind."

Olumer hesitated. "It would ease my mind if you promised that you won't use elven magic on her," he said at last.

"Would I do that?"

Olumer looked at his own hands, where the silver bubbles of elven magic had almost faded. "Yes."

Pannerel laughed at him, and darted up the slope again, moving so quickly and gracefully that Olumer felt a twinge of envy. That kind of motion would be perfect for a hunter, though Pannerel's laughter would give him away before he could catch anything.

"Damn elves," said Vander from behind him. "I almost agree with humans who think they're mad."

"I felt at home around him when he was singing last night," said Olumer, this time trying to sniff for Silverheart's trail. That seemed to work, or at least be an improvement over what he had been doing before. The scent gusted in his nostrils, and Olumer moved unerringly up the slope. "But since then, he seems to have changed back into this laughing- thing that will warn away our prey."

"Exactly."

Olumer glanced back at Vander, and saw that the silvereyes leader was still watching the path that Pannerel had taken with no very great liking in his face. Olumer worked his nostrils and sniffed delicately, and was sure that he caught the scent of uneasiness. "You're afraid of him?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes," said Vander. "All of my pack are. Why do you think they're trailing us at so great a distance?"

"But he helped me, a Brother. He saved my life." From what he was remembering, Olumer knew it would have been disastrous if the pack had tried to untangle the shining net that bound his mind, or indeed if anyone but him had tried to do it.

"Yes," said Vander, "and he sang. But that was last night. The elves weren't meant to be around- others. Even other fey. It does make us uneasy. He should have gone back to Faerie."

"Why didn't he?"

Vander bared his teeth, though this time Olumer knew it wasn't at him. He was already learning to distinguish such signs again. "He's interested in you. The cold knows why. He doesn't seem to want to use elven magic on you, but he makes a lot of strange decisions for someone who doesn't want to."

Olumer didn't know what to say to that. Even among the returning memories, he couldn't find anything about elves; he didn't think he had met any except for his wind-swept vision of one dancing in the forest, until Pannerel and the others. He bent back to the trail again.

A moment later he had to pause, baffled. The trail of Silverheart's scent and substance had vanished. He sat back and bared his teeth at the empty stone, wishing there was a better way of letting it know how much it had displeased him rather than simply marking it with his claws.

The stone abruptly twisted like a small black whirlpool, and let out a little cry. Olumer blinked, and leaned closer. But it hadn't been his imagination; it was repeated as he watched.

"Vander?"

The other silvereyes came up beside him at once. Olumer appreciated that. He could tell the difference between a complaint and something that alarmed Olumer, and he responded to the alarms.

"What?" he asked when he saw the whirlpool. "The stone's just reacting to an ill-wish you directed against it."

"We can curse stone?"

"Stone, trees, snow, roots, streams," said Vander, with a small shrug. "If it's natural and not human or fey, we can curse it."

"The filifernai?"

Vander's lips writhed back from his teeth. "Do not speak the name too loudly," he said, and Olumer noticed that the shining in the air had darkened a little. "They will hear you, and come hunting. They would be curious as to why a silvereyes was speaking of them without fear."

"What are they?"

Vander shook his head. "That is a tale best told when we're among the cold of the heights and guarded from them. Now. What were you cursing the stone for? I can't imagine that it fell on your head, lying there like that."

"Silverheart's trail vanished."

"Ask the wind to show you where he went."

"Why would the wind know?"

"Because the stone isn't telling you, and there's no water or fire nearby," said Vander, as if that made perfect sense, and then made a sweet, low sound. It was almost like a flute, Olumer thought, but Vander had pursed his lips the way a human might have when whistling.

The wind shimmered slightly, and then a sylph formed out of it. Olumer stared. Sylphs usually only came to the call of powerful elemental mages, or else they were the transformed People of the Blending.

But this seemed to be a true sylph, and she fluttered and said anxiously, "Yes, my lord, how can I help you?"

"We know that a snow leopard and two humans came by not long ago," said Vander. "The stone isn't being helpful. Did you see where they went?"

"Oh, yes, my lord." The sylph pointed into the air at a rising angle. "That way."

Olumer opened his mouth to object that that didn't help, but Vander said, "Thank you," and the sylph vanished.

Vander turned to him. "They must have found some passage into the air. I don't know what it is, though. Oh, well, we followed your Princess this far. No one can say that you didn't do your duty. Time to go home and teach you what it means to run and hunt in the snow again."

"I've been doing that since my last hibernation," said Olumer. "Isn't there someone who can give us more specific direction?"

"I can!"

Olumer whipped his head around, giving a growl that Vander echoed. Neither of them liked it that Pannerel had come so easily out of the air just a few feet away. He smiled at them, and then turned and studied the sky in the direction that the sylph had indicated. Almost at once, his face kindled with curiosity.

"I haven't seen this in a long time, and not only because I haven't been in Rivendon for a long time," he said, and glanced at Olumer. "Did you tell her the story of the Silver Stair, my lord?"

"Many times."

"She found it."

Olumer stared at the blank air, and tried to make himself comprehend that here was the magical ladder of the ancient Queen Haedra. "But no one knows where she hung the Silver Stair at the last," he said.

"No one did," said Pannerel, and reached up and tapped a hand against the air. A silvery rope ladder unrolled in the next moment, leading down from nothing to hang a few feet above the stone. "Now they do."

Olumer shook his head slightly and looked closely at the ladder. He saw no way for Silverheart to climb up it, but he doubted that the snow leopard would have let Cadona and Lyli go unescorted to whatever place the silver ladder led. "Do you know where this goes?" he asked Pannerel.

The elf nodded firmly, and Olumer reached out and wrapped one hand around the Silver Stair. The new claws in his fingers wanted to shoot, but he restrained them. Cold knew what he would do to the ladder if he touched it.

"Olumer!"

Olumer glanced over his shoulder to see Vander frowning. "What is it?"

"I don't know if my pack can follow you, on the word of an elf alone," said Vander reluctantly, and gestured back down the slope. Olumer could just see the shapes of the other silvereyes, watching him with those eyes that showed so much less than they should have. "They're

already keeping their distance and, well- you're kin, but not pack. We would be happy to show you how to hunt in the snows again, but this is something different. Dangerous."

Olumer nodded, understanding. The pack had kept its distance throughout the day, not liking either Pannerel or the tension between their pack leader and the Brother who could possibly challenge for pack leadership. "I don't expect you to come with me. I expect to find Cadona and Lyli and Silverheart, wherever they are, and continue, just the four of us-

"Five."

Olumer frowned at Pannerel, and tried to think of a diplomatic way of phrasing this, then realized it didn't matter. Pannerel would only think the phrasing a grand joke. "I don't want you to come," he said.

"Why not?" Pannerel's face was innocent.

"You would use elven magic on Cadona." *Among other reasons.*

"Can't catch me!" said Pannerel abruptly, and darted past him, moving towards the ladder. He scrambled up before Olumer could catch him, indeed, and vanished.

Olumer cursed and scrambled for the ladder himself. Vander caught him by the shoulder for a moment, holding him back.

"Good luck, Brother."

Olumer was hideously impatient, but managed to incline his head to the courteous salute. "Cold watch over you," he said, and scrambled up the ladder until he reached the place where it vanished from the air of his own world.

Almost at once, he felt himself falling. The Silver Stair evidently came out upside down.

He was also certain, before he hit the stone and fainted, that he could hear Pannerel laughing somewhere in the background.

Chapter 48

A Coalescing of Powers

"I do not think that any mortal has ever had a chance to be part of the gods' and the powers' Council. You should be honored."

-Tiessa, Goddess of Leeches, to one of her worshippers.

"Here She comes."

Ternora looked up. Now that the Forgiver of All Wrongs mentioned it, she could feel Elle coming, as though the Light that shone all around them were stirred by the beats of the goddess's wings. Subtle ripples battered against Ternora and then fell back again as the white bird landed on the throne, and then changed once more into the woman just slightly too beautiful to be human.

Ternora's gut tightened at once, though. Something was wrong. Elle looked angry, not peaceful or determined or anything else that Ternora had hoped she would look like if she was going to accept or refuse their offer.

"You have come here riding on the wings of treachery," she said, her eyes moving back and forth from Ternora to Alira, as if she didn't know which one of them she could blame for this.

"I don't know what you mean, my lady." Alira spoke the words with what Ternora thought was remarkable calm, no matter how she was trembling inside. Ternora was sure that she herself couldn't have managed it. But then, that was why Alira was High Priestess and she wasn't.

"There is a call going out across all the worlds," said Elle tightly. "I have heard it. It bids the gods and powers of the Dark and Shadow to come to a council, and decide there what to do about the Light. They seem to think that this is their chance to destroy My children and Me once and for all." Her hands tightened on the arms of the throne, and she leaned forward. "What do you know about this?"

"Nothing, sister. They know nothing."

Elle jerked her head up, and Ternora had the unusual experience of seeing spittle fly from a goddess's mouth as she cried, "Shara, you are not welcome here! How did you get in?"

"I walked through the protections that you were too tired to strengthen, of course," Shara replied as she strode forward. Ternora found it as hard to look at her as she did at Elle, though for different reasons. The Lady of Mysteries had no intense beauty or light, but she radiated a sense of pure strength that seemed designed to keep mortal eyes on the floor. "And this council is none of their doing, and none of mine. We knew nothing about it."

"You must have!" Elle shook her head. "You are the only one who would have the power to issue a call like that."

Shara smiled faintly. "If I had done it, I would certainly not have let you hear it," she said. "And I would not have wasted all this time and effort bargaining with you, if I only meant to destroy you in the end. No, Shadow is the one calling for this Council. He is tired of the Light interfering in the world and would see you dead if he could. But I do not agree with him, and thus I will not travel to the council."

Elle blinked as if she were having trouble understanding. Ternora bit her lip firmly, since a giggle at the goddess's expense wouldn't be a good idea right now, and watched closely. Perhaps she could make good money in her later years by telling people of the time she had seen the Lady of the Light and the Lady of the Darkness argue.

"But why does Shadow want to destroy us?" Elle asked at last, in the voice of a lost little girl.

Shara laughed. Ternora thrilled to the sound of her laughter. It was high and keen as the stars on a midwinter night. "Oh, Elle, do you really not know that? The Light wants to destroy him, so of course he wants to destroy it. And he is newer to the wars of the great powers than we are. The Light and the Dark are settled in enmity. Shadow cannot forget that we locked him out of the world, though, and so he snaps back in destruction at those who want to destroy him."

"But Light was meant to rule the world," said Elle, still in the lost voice, staring at her hands.

Shara's laughter slowly died, and she looked at the other goddess with something that might have been pity, though Ternora wasn't really sure. "If I thought you still believed that, Elle," she said, "then I would walk out of this room, since all our negotiating would be for nothing."

"But I-" Elle looked up. "I know that I was meant to order the world as it should be, for the sake of all My children there. I know that Light was meant to win all the great wars. Why should I have this conviction in My blood if it was not so?"

Shara glanced at the five people seated on the floor; for a moment, it seemed to Ternora that the Lady of Mysteries particularly sought out her. "I do not think that mortals should hear this, or even your other aspects."

Elle looked up, blinked, and then waved a hand. The Fair One stood up and bowed at once, retreating to the door. The Huntress gave the goddesses a long, cool glance before following.

The Forgive of All Wrongs lingered, smiling in what she probably thought was a motherly fashion. "Are You sure I shouldn't stay, my dear? Are You sure that You don't want me to-"

"Yes," said Elle, in a clipped voice that made Ternora admire her for a moment.

"Oh." The Forgive blinked. "Very well, then." She bowed and turned towards the door, though she walked slowly and frequently looked over her shoulder.

Alira drew Ternora after her, and the door shut the moment they stood in the darkness beyond it again. This time, however, the darkness only remained for a moment. Then it lifted, and Ternora found herself in a garden with scalloped paths and shining flowers. Rivers laughed somewhere just out of sight, birds sang, and chimes of what sounded like silver made pleasant shivery sounds. A table and five chairs stood in front of them, laden with food that made Ternora's stomach rumble. She didn't think she'd eaten since that morning at the Temple, and who knew how long ago that had been, given the strange way time passed in this world?

"Can we trust the food?" Alira asked, even as she slipped into a chair and reached for a meat pie.

The Fair One glanced at her oddly. "Of course you can. What would be the point of bringing you here and then poisoning you?" She scooped up a handful of fruit pieces and bit into one, making the juice run down her chin.

That was enough for Ternora, who tasted that pink fruit first. It really was good, though the flesh was thick and soft like bread. Then came a meat pie, and then a slice of roasted peccary. And then she really got down to eating.

When she looked up at last, only Alira still sat at the table, sipping a glass of milk and watching her in some amusement. The Fair One stood not far away, her head bowed and the moon-like shine that came through her skin growing brighter and brighter. The Huntress and the Forgive were nowhere in sight, probably lost somewhere in the garden's maze of paths.

Alira stood up, setting her glass on the table. "Will you come with me, Ternora? There is something we should speak of."

Ternora, though wondering what it could be, nodded and followed her away from the table willingly enough. Her stomach groaned like an overlaid ship, and though it almost never happened to her, Ternora feared she had eaten too much. It had all been so good, and it was so long since she ate...

Alira abruptly stopped and stooped. When she rose, she held a red flower in her hand. Ternora blinked. It would have been bright even for the jungle; she had never seen such a shade of red before.

"The *belbel*, this is called," said Alira, staring at the flower as if in fascination. "Do you know why it's so bright?"

Ternora opened her mouth to say that she didn't, but wound up burping instead. Alira gave her an amused glance. Ternora shut her mouth and settled for shaking her head.

"It must be that bright, to attract the magical creatures that feed on it and pollinate it," said Alira, stroking the flower's petals. "They are nearly blind, and respond only to the most brilliant colors."

Ternora waited for a long moment, expecting the High Priestess to explain what that had to do with their conversation. At last she said, "And why did you tell me that, my lady?"

Alira blinked at her. "You don't find it useful to increase the store of your knowledge?"

Ternora flushed. Of course, as a priestess of Shara, she should find it useful. But she hadn't become a priestess for the sake of knowledge, as she knew that Alira knew. She tried again. "Did you show me the *belbel* because it has something to do with the goddess, my lady?"

"Ah! Yes." Alira lowered the hand holding the flower to her side, her face suddenly grave, as if she had really just remembered what she was about to say. Ternora didn't trust that, but she didn't have the basis to challenge her on it. "I wanted to say that you have had a very unusual experience for a novice priestess. You should not have faced the final test before the Lady so early--"

"I didn't know--"

"And you should have entered the priestesshood for different reasons, and you should not have seen Shara so close a second time, let alone another goddess and three lesser deities."

"You brought me along, my lady," said Ternora, angry and bewildered. *Am I to be blamed for things that are not even my fault?* "I would not have come had I known that it would concern the politics of the gods."

"I did not mean to imply that," said Alira, and now there was no trace of distant, scholarly dreaminess in her gaze. Ternora was sure that there need never have been. "I meant that you could easily become god-stricken, and I don't want that to happen to you."

"God-stricken? I have heard of elf-stricken, where mortals fall in love with elves, but never this."

Alira nodded. "It does not mean that you will fall in love with the Lady. It *does* mean that you could come to have an inflated sense of your own importance, that you will come to have an idea about always walking in the company of gods."

"I don't *want* to walk in the company of gods," said Ternora. "I want to have my vengeance on Warcourage, and then go back to doing whatever it is that novice priestesses of Shara do."

Alira smiled a little. "We shall have to train you in that, as well." Another close study. "I believe you mean it."

"Of course I do," said Ternora. "This is something I have to do along the path to my vengeance, not my idea of a pleasure trip."

Alira opened her mouth as if she were going to say something more about that, but just then the air shimmered near them and seemed to implode. Ternora immediately took a cautious step backwards. She wasn't going to take anything for granted in Elle's realm. Who knew what the goddess might decide to send after them, for no better reason than her own pique? She was apparently attacking and slaughtering Faerie elves already.

But it was Shara, her face shifting back and forth between human and elf in slow, constant motion. She glanced at Alira and said, "Both of you must come with me."

"Where are we going, my Lady?" asked Alira, with not much show of surprise.

"The council of the gods and powers," said Shara, and then reached out and grabbed their hands in hers.

Ternora thought about objecting, but since the air was already turning silver and gold around them, she didn't have much of a chance.

They emerged in a room so high that Ternora's mind refused at first to comprehend it. Any mortal hall would have tumbled down long before it reached this height, but, of course, Ternora didn't think that such limitations bound the gods.

Or the powers, or whoever this hall really belongs to.

When she got used to seeing it, she realized the walls met in a ceiling at what would have to be a height of several thousand feet. The walls themselves were dark blue, the color of the sky at sunset, though here and there studded with dots of silver like stars and dots of gold like suns. Those glittering dots sometimes formed patterns, but they would split apart and retreat to separate corners of the walls before Ternora could really wrap her mind around them.

"Hurry."

Ternora dropped her gaze back to the floor, which was made of dark blue flagstones, and saw Shara running ahead. She glanced at Alira, who was softly glowing with wonder, and shrugged. Shara was the only god or power she knew here, and they might as well follow.

Of course, Alira might be following her Lady out of real devotion or some such thing. Ternora supposed that she couldn't trust a real priestess to act out of sane motives such as self-preservation.

They crossed what had to be a good expanse of the hall, though the far wall never seemed to get any nearer, and came towards a great boiling ball of light. Ternora eyed it curiously. She could see small shapes moving it, dark and green and blue, though they always vanished like images in the fire when she tried to see them more closely.

"Shara."

Ternora turned swiftly. That voice was deep and musical, the voice of a god, and

it was one she had heard before.

He wore the form of a silveryeyes man, dark skin and gleaming claws and teeth and all, and turned to look at her as she looked at him. His eyes were roaring vortices, and Ternora looked away quickly before they could claim her. Her mind dinned with memories. She had seen him, or something like him, on a battlefield that she hoped she would never see matched in slaughter, and heard him roaring and laughing.

"Koroth," said Shara distractedly, peering into the boil of light. "Have the others arrived yet?"

"Won't you introduce me to your mortal friends?" Koroth seemed to be performing an odd trick with his face that meant he was smiling directly at both Ternora and Alira. Ternora found it disconcerting.

"Oh, yes, of course," said Shara, with a wave of her hand, still looking ahead. "Ternora, Alira, this is Koroth, Lord of Murder."

Ternora stared at Koroth, and could think of nothing to say. He looked back at her, calm, almost smiling now, but with a light growing in his eyes that she did not like.

"Shara! I did not expect to see you here."

And here was yet another figure Ternora had seen before, though this time she had no doubt of his identity. Shadow was unmistakable, made of gray mist as he was. He nodded to Ternora and then fixed his eyes on Shara.

"I thought you would believe this a waste of time," he said. "After all, you have told me often enough that we should learn to compromise with the Light instead of seeking to destroy it."

Shara narrowed her eyes a little, but said only, "I have come to listen to you, not that I expect many wise words."

That only seemed to amuse Shadow, who bowed from the waist and then turned towards the boiling light, calling, "Take your seats! The Council is about to begin."