

Chapter 49

The Recitation

"Arvenna has a tradition of art that is not common in the other Kingdoms. They see nothing wrong with using elemental magic, even the magic of the blended elements, to enhance their enjoyment of the history-tales. Most other Kingdoms think that magic is too important to be wasted on such trivialities. And they are right, of course.

"Still, when I think of some of the Recitations I have seen in Arvenna, I can't help wondering if her people aren't onto something..."

-Yillos Goldfleet.

"Are you all right, my lady?"

Elary shook her head, though not in answer to Naldeon's words; she was trying to wake herself up from the shock instead. The Great Hall looked like an entirely different place with the decorations from Mitherill's welcoming feast taken down. Instead, mirrors now hung on the walls, small curved mirrors that threw light from both the sun and the many unnecessary lamps that lit the room.

"Why do you need so much light?" Elary asked Naldeon, turning to face him as she did so. She thought she saw a gleam of amusement in his eyes for a moment, but if so, it faded quickly. He answered her with as much solemnity as though she were an ambassador of another Kingdom.

"The Recitation needs certain complexities, or it isn't on as high a level as others of the kind," he said. "We strive to make sure that the room is bright enough that the Illusion artist cannot hide any deficiencies in her art. Not even the blindest can look on a Recitation and mistake falsehood for art."

"Those are strict standards," Elary murmured.

"Very strict. That may be why they do not have Recitations in other places."

Elary opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. She wouldn't really have cared to defend any of the other Kingdoms but Iantra, and it was true there that history-tales were mostly a matter of words.

She sat on one of the curving benches that ran around the room, eventually. Naldeon wanted to persuade her to sit closer, but Elary was nervous about how much rank she actually had among the Serpents and refused. He didn't want to sit with her at the back, either, arguing quite rightly that she wouldn't be able to see some of the more marvelous and delicate details of the Illusion. At last they compromised on about the middle.

Elary watched as two Serpents, a woman and a man, walked forward to stand on either side of the dais in the middle of the room. They bowed to Naldeon without needing to look out over the crowd for him. Elary suspected they had known where he was from the moment he entered the Great Hall; all the Serpents seemed subtly tuned to him, and his every movement received some attention.

The woman spoke briefly to the man, in tones too low for Elary to hear, then turned towards the crowd. "We ask your permission to present the Recitation of Queen Amorielle," she said.

Naldeon nodded, and the rest of the crowd murmured in agreement. The woman had waited only for Naldeon, though, and she raised her hands and began to sketch the Illusions in the air while the murmuring continued.

Elary stared. She had never seen such images of clarity and complexity, though she had visited the Ilantran Court and seen Illusionists perform there. In seconds, she almost forgot she was watching people who had died long ago. A perfect replica of an Arvennese Queen walked across the room to the dais and mounted the steps. The only sign of unreality Elary saw about her was that she didn't glance to left or right or take notice of anyone else in the room, the way that a living person would have to.

When she sat upon the throne, Elary studied her intently. The woman did look like Mitherill, at least as far as features were concerned, but she had more liadra blood, as shown by the silver lightning bolts in her dark eyes. Her hair, too, was silvery, save for one black streak. Elary felt vaguely comforted to see that the streak was almost the same size and shape as the one in Mitherill's hair, or her own- which Naldeon still hadn't commented on, or even appeared to notice.

Elary frowned, and might have pursued that thought further, but the man began to sing then, and she lost track of it.

Sweet and high and clear the notes were. Elary had never heard such skill in wordless song before, either. Closing her eyes, she found no difference between the bard's performance and the birds singing outside the window.

"Oh, don't close your eyes, my lady," Naldeon whispered to her. "The temptation to feel overwhelmed is quite natural, but you'll miss the Illusions if you keep your eyes shut."

Sighing, Elary opened her eyes and stared at the Queen on her throne. Amorielle was smiling, her head rocking slightly from side to side as if she could hear the music. And then her face abruptly went grave, and she sat up.

The bard ceased to sing suddenly, leaving the last note to vibrate in the air. Then he said, "In the ancient days of this Kingdom, when Queen Amorielle sat the throne and we had not yet learned what Dark rule was, a messenger came to her with tidings of trouble in the land."

Elary followed the Queen's gaze, and blinked. The messenger walking towards her showed no sign of mistiness or being Illusion at all, and was clad in what Elary believed a reasonable approximation of Arvennese Court garb at the time. He knelt at the foot of the dais, and bowed his head.

"I bring grave news, Your Majesty."

Elary started. That was the bard's voice- she knew it, just having heard him sing- and yet it emerged faultlessly from the lips of the Illusion. She shook her head. She had never known magic to be raised to art like this.

Naldeon, she saw when she glanced at him from the corner of her eye, was beaming.

"Speak your news," said the Queen, in what Elary guessed was also the bard's voice, though altered to a higher and sweeter note.

"The Queen of Dragons, Rakendra, is still angry about your noble father's smashing of her eggs," said the messenger. "She is flying to punish all of Arvenna with her clouds of thorns."

Queen Amorielle took a deep breath, the chest of her gown lifting and falling as though she were gathering her strength. Elary shook her head. She was gazing right at the Illusion, knew just what was happening, and it still fooled her.

"I have had no experience fighting dragons," said the Queen. "But I thank you for telling me this. Withdraw, and as you do, please inform my Captain of the Guards that I should like to see him."

The messenger stood, bowed, and then turned and walked towards the doors of the Great Hall. Elary followed him with her gaze, expecting him to fade halfway there, but he opened the doors and slipped quietly through them instead.

"What the Queen said was the truth," the bard resumed in declamatory tones. "Her father had been a dragonslayer, and altogether more than forty of the evil beasts fell to his blade. She herself knew nothing of war, or the councils of war. She was a gentle and beloved Queen who remained within the palace and made wise decisions on behalf of her subjects."

Elary smothered a snort, remembering that Naldeon had told her that this Queen's decisions were left up to her advisers.

"She chose the best person for each task," the bard continued, "and placed it into his or her hands with ultimate trust. The Captain of the Guards was entrusted with matters military. The Lady Derussa, who was clever in farming, was trusted with coaxing crops out of Arvenna's rough and mountainous valleys. The Lord Milikant tended to the affairs of the peasants who wanted to worship other gods than Elle, and gently guided them back to the ways of the true Light. There were many people who did many things that Queen Amorielle knew she could not do for herself."

The Queen on the throne sighed, and shifted in place, and waited until a man who must represent her Captain of the Guard came in and knelt before the throne. She told him what the messenger had told her, repeating almost the exact same words. Elary idly wondered if that was part of the ritual of Recitation or just a lack of art on the part of the presenters, just as she wondered if it were coincidence or not that the Captain of the Guards looked so much like Naldeon.

"I depend upon you to turn back the Dragon Queen," said Amorielle, gazing steadily at the man who knelt before her. "I know that I am not a fighter, and would most likely falter when a delicate touch is required. But I also know that you rode beside my father, and fought dragons with him, and that you of all in the Kingdom of Arvenna know most about them. I trust in you."

The Captain looked up, and Elary dismissed the idea of coincidence. Save for a slight difference in the color of the eyes and some lines of the face, the Captain was Naldeon. Even the bard's voice had altered to sound a little more like the tones of the Serpent Lord. "You may depend upon me, Your Majesty. I will turn back the dread Dragon."

He, too, remained solid and in existence all the way across the floor, and the Illusionist once again created the picture of the doors opening and closing behind him.

"Queen Amorielle was wise in more ways than one," the bard went on. "She knew that her people might panic at the sight of a dragon so great in the sky, for the Dragon Queens have not only their own size to recommend them, but a special aura of power. She therefore went out and walked among her people, showing them that their Queen felt no fear."

The front of the Hall changed so abruptly that Elary could not restrain a yelp. Naldeon patted her hand and glanced at her in amusement. Elary closed her mouth and resolved to make no more sounds if she had to pinch her lips together to do it.

Since the Illusionist had added the dais and the doors into her images so far, Elary had assumed without thinking that her skill was precise but limited. Now she saw that she had been wrong, as the woman changed the whole of the front part of the Hall into a wide avenue in the sunlight. She even incorporated the real sunlight streaming through the windows, and made it look as though the avenue she created happened to be hosting a scene set at that time of the day.

The avenue was broad and paved with glittering blue stone, veined here and there with white. Elary thought it might be marble of some kind, but was not sure. Peasants in Arvennese clothing lined the way, now and then talking to each other in low voices, but mostly watching the Queen who walked

past them in rapturous silence. They bowed their heads as she smiled at them, and flung flowers of white and red and blue in her path. Here and there in the background were kneeling animals, horses and cattle and even a unicorn that Elary saw for only a moment before the scene moved on, following the pacing Queen.

"At last," said the bard, his voice seeming to blend with the murmurs and the soft sound of falling flowers, "the news that she had been waiting for came to Queen Amorielle."

A messenger hastened down the avenue towards the Queen, who stopped walking and looked gravely at him. He knelt and bowed his head, saying, "My lady, we have succeeded. The Dragon Queen has been driven back!"

The peasants cheered. The Queen reached down with glowing face and raised the messenger to his feet, kissing him on both cheeks. He seemed more pleased with that than with the words she spoke next, which Elary thought was a little silly.

"You have done a great and noble deed," she said, her voice husky. "All of you have, including the Captain of the Guards and those who fought with him. I will give you all lands and titles, and you shall live as nobles forever, as your character merits, swearing only loyalty to the throne."

"Your Majesty," said the messenger, kneeling again even though the Queen of Arvenna tried to hold him to his feet, "that is all we ask, all that anyone could ask when serving so gentle and virtuous a Queen."

Amorielle smiled and reached down to him again, and there, amid the cheering peasants and falling flowers, the scene froze and then vanished softly.

"So it was," said the bard, "and so the story remains in the minds and hearts of those who tell it. Queen Amorielle was not a dragonslayer herself, not such a fighter she could face the Queen of Dragons in battle, but she knew who was, and she sent him to finish the dragon. She herself remained in the midst of her people and showed them her own trust and faith in her Captain of Guards. They married in time, and with his strength and her virtue balancing each the other, ruled as one of the most beloved royal pairs in the memory of Arvenna.

"So ends the Recitation of Queen Amorielle."

Once again he broke into high and wordless song, though this time without the murmuring from the audience to fight. They watched in silence as thick as the peasants' in the scene until the bard ended and bowed his head.

Then they clapped and cheered. Elary, staring in every direction, saw nothing but approval on the Serpents' faces.

Anger grew in her gut like a cancer. *This is the kind of Queen they want, the kind of Queen they think Mitherill will be.*

"Do you see?"

Elary started and looked at Naldeon. "See what?"

Naldeon was beaming at her. "Monarchs can be strong as long as they know how to give the right tasks to the right people," he said, as pompous as any priestess of Elle Elary had ever heard reciting prayers. "We will train Mitherill in such giving, and she can easily be as remembered and treasured as Queen Amorielle."

"That Queen is remembered as one of the greatest in Arvenese history?" Elary asked, just to make sure.

"Of course she is."

Elary nodded, while keeping her eyes clear and her anger inside as much as possible.

I will have to turn to subterfuge- a thing I despise. But I cannot let them know my true feelings. Our goals are opposed, as I had hoped they might not be, and I must stand behind Mitherill and Destiny whatever they may do.

Chapter 50

Heart of the Night

"Sing to me, if you can,

All the secrets of night and of man,

Of the Heart of the Night deep in the stone,

And the song that it sings to itself all alone."

-Old riddle of Arvenna.

"Kymenos."

The whisper of his name wasn't a question. Whoever was speaking this knew exactly who he was, and what he was doing here.

Kymenos began to shiver. The coldness of night and of stone surrounded him, and he didn't remember what warmth felt like. If this went on long enough, he wouldn't remember that there was something called warmth.

"I cannot figure you out," said the voice, and there came the sense of someone walking around him and watching, though of course when he opened his own eyes Kymenos saw only blackness.

It took him a long while, but he managed to summon the words up his throat that he would have spoken if this had been anything like an ordinary situation. "That's a good thing, then. I would hate to oblige you."

There was a silence. Then the voice said, "You're going to die, and you dare to talk to me like that?"

"If you're going to kill me," said Kymenos, "why shouldn't I talk like this? It at least makes my last moments more fun."

There was a longer pause this time. Then the voice said, "What if I told you that you would have lived if you hadn't spoken those words?"

"You were going to kill me before that," said Kymenos, and then stopped in annoyance. His teeth were chattering so hard that he could hardly understand himself. He aligned his teeth as carefully as he

could so that they wouldn't interfere with his words, and went on. "Or you wouldn't have phrased your question about daring to talk to you in the way that you did."

"I sense anger in you," said the voice in wonder. "And not fear. It is strange. None but the Arvennese are not afraid of me."

"I don't even know what you *are*," said Kymenos. "You can understand why this would make it a little hard for me to be afraid of you."

There came cold laughter, too near his ear, and then the darkness parted. Kymenos caught a glimpse of a stony face, and eyes too old for comprehension, and then the darkness closed in again.

"Now do you understand?" the thing asked.

"You're a gnome," said Kymenos.

The cold voice laughed again. "Say, rather, I am what the earth spirits would have been if they had any cunning." There was silence again, and then it added, "I would not kill you, since you come in here with a sword and a horse that mark a hero, but you also come in here with a cowardly spirit. You pissed yourself just now, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid of you, of course." Kymenos closed his eyes again. At least with his eyes closed, he couldn't see the fiery sparks that clouded his vision as his sight tried frantically to bring light of some kind to the darkness. "I thought that was what you wanted me to be."

"You are very strange," the voice went on, as if he hadn't said anything for the last few minutes. "I would be willing to spare your life, but for that meanness in your soul that says you will try to betray my descendants." Another pause, and the voice had a new tone of wonder when it spoke again. "You betrayed a Princess once already, didn't you?"

"Yes." Kymenos wondered when the thing would stop talking at him and kill him. Then he tried to quell that thought, just in case the thing had heard it and decided to oblige him.

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to be a slave of Destiny. I want to be a healer, and live out my life in Serian."

"You could be so much more."

"But I don't want to be."

"Then you have no ambition."

Despite everything, Kymenos managed to snort at that. "There are better things to be without than ambition, given how much havoc it wreaks when the Light and Dark war on each other. Speaking of that, which side are you on?"

"I am older than such things," said the voice, and Kymenos felt what he thought was dusty breath on the back of his neck. "I take no sides in the war. I am above both Dark and Light."

"They would be surprised to hear that," muttered Kymenos. "They think nothing is above them."

The voice chuckled. Then it said, "I would spare your life, but my task is to judge, and you would hurt my descendants. I am afraid that I have no choice but to kill you."

It struck then, and hard. Kymenos could feel it drawing on the Crop, and knew he would be crushed flat, or else absorbed into the stone. He braced himself to fight, despite feeling sure that he wouldn't be ready before the fight was over.

Then the magic stopped rushing, and the voice said, "What is this?"

Kymenos blinked, only then realizing that he could see again. He looked down at his skin, and blinked again. Silvery light was welling through his arms, moving up to his shoulders and his neck as he watched, growing more and more fierce. One arm of it reached out and snapped in the direction of the voice like a hand closing on a fly.

"What are you doing?" the voice asked.

"I'm not doing anything!" said Kymenos defensively. "For all I know, this is the way that you're planning to kill me."

He was concentrating hard as he spoke, using all the senses that the Star Circle had ever taught him to exercise, and could still feel nothing elemental about the silver light. If it was Light magic or something else, the Master who used it drew on it so delicately that Kymenos couldn't locate the conduit.

"You are defying me," said the voice. "On purpose. My goal is to judge, and destroy those who might harm my descendants. But you are defying me." Oddly, it sounded like Princess Alliana now.

Kymenos smiled viciously in the direction of the voice and held up his hands. He could see the edge of the thing's stony body, but no hint of that ancient and horrifying face yet, for which he was grateful. "I didn't mean to defy you, but it seems as though something more powerful than you doesn't want me dead."

The voice spat at him, and abruptly the darkness was gone. Kymenos braced himself to see the stony figure, but found that he was standing in the center of the Heart of the Night, with all the others around him again. They had seemed strangely absent while he was talking to the guardian.

"You can't do that!" someone gasped.

Kymenos looked up and met Dolasson's gaze. She was shaking her head frantically even as she held her arm out to see him with the night-eyes, which Kymenos thought rather strange. "You can't bring light into the Heart of the Night!" she exclaimed. "There has been no light here in thousands of years."

"There is now," said Kymenos, though he did try to reach out and control the silvery radiance. It refused to listen to him. It now surrounded him like an aura, and was spreading out enough that Kymenos thought he could see the symbols carved on the walls if he looked up.

"You can't *do* this."

And Kymenos lost his temper violently, for only the third time in his life. The last time had been with Nightstone.

He flung the arm that didn't wear the night-eyes out towards Dolasson, who recoiled from him. His voice was a snarl, quite appropriate considering the volley of curses he spoke first, and then the words that came next.

"May the Darkness damn you and splinter your bones, drown you in shit and fill your mouth with your entrails! I don't know what this is, I don't know what's happening, and I don't give two jabs about light in your precious Heart of the Night. I don't *care* about Arvenna, or your war, or your silly, silly little ambition to have royals ruling from the thrones once more. I don't care about you, any of you." His eyes fell on Cheyena, and he saw her flinch; she could include herself in that if she liked, even though it wasn't precisely true. He looked back at Dolasson, who flinched herself and stepped away, even though she was almost to the wall of the Heart of the Night. "I don't know why I have a talking sword. I don't know why I have a telepathic horse. I don't know why I'm here. But I will tell you this. This is *not* a history-tale, and if you convince yourselves it is, then you're going to die. And I'll be there, laughing, to watch it happen. Try to keep me away."

"You hold nothing sacred, do you?" whispered Dolasson.

"Why should I?" Kymenos yelled. Damn, it felt good to yell like that. "None of *you* have anything I want. Natter, natter, about history-tales and thrones and crowns. I don't care. I'm never going to care again. I'm going home, and staying out of Light and Dark battles for the rest of my life." He turned for the far entrance of the Heart of the Night, the one they had come in by.

"Don't do this, Kymenos," said Dolasson, and Kymenos heard the sound of swords clearing their sheaths.

He halted. Of course, he was drawing his own weapon, but since none of them were Masters of the Star Circle or Light mages, none of them could feel that. He turned and looked back at Dolasson as kindly as he could, trying to force some caring past the rage and the indifference.

"Don't push me, Dolasson," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. I really don't want to. But I will."

"Kymenos, wait!"

Cheyena pushed through the others until she stood beside him, trembling. She bowed her head when he glared at her, but remained where she was. "I want to go with you," she whispered. "Please let me."

"Very well," said Kymenos.

"Kymenos!" Dolasson's voice was firm and commanding, and she took a step forward, her normal eyes fully fixed on him now. "You may not think it means something, all the things you have, but it does! You will be important to a history-tale. You will be a hero."

"No, I won't," said Kymenos, and lifted his hand.

"Yes, you will."

It was the stupid, damnable certainty in her voice that made him call down the Light, he thought later. He still might not have done it, but that pushed him right over the edge.

The Light filled the cavern, more than he had ever called on before, searing, tuned to both human eyes and night-eyes. Kymenos blinded all of them, and wound another ward of Light on top of that to make the blindness permanent unless they could find a Light mage more powerful than he was. Then he turned, grabbed Cheyena, and began to run up the passage. He didn't know if she was blind, but from her soft sobbing, he knew she might be.

He didn't care.

The crying and screaming behind him filled the cavern, and so did the click of crossbows. Kymenos smiled coldly and ducked one that went through his hair. They were literally shooting blind; they weren't going to hurt him.

They found Sykeen and Estia in the line of horses, not blinded any more than the rest were; Kymenos hadn't intended that calling for animals' eyes. They freed them easily and led them back up the tunnel. The sounds of hooves on the stone might have given them away, Kymenos thought, but no one could have heard anything else save their own yells of pain and panic.

"I notice that you didn't discard me," said Norianna, still swinging from his belt, in a vaguely surprised voice.

"You would only come back," said Kymenos, glancing over his shoulder. No one coming after them yet. In time, they would; he suspected Dolasson would be one of the first to force her way past the rest and up the entrance tunnel. "And I must admit that I'm a little curious to see what's at the Lake of the Northern Winds myself."

Norianna was silent. Kymenos thought she might have made a smug little comment, but she was likely remembering what had happened back in the Heart of the Night and wondering if Kymenos could blind a sword. Kymenos didn't know that himself, but he was willing to try.

They reached the cave entrance at last, and Kymenos swung Cheyena around and stared at her. Her eyes blinked at him, terrified, when he reached over as if to poke them out, and he nodded and stood back in satisfaction.

"All right, then. Mount Estia, Cheyena, and we should be ready to ride."

"Kymenos?"

Kymenos looked at her impatiently, expecting some weepy scene, and quite ready to leave her behind if it happened. But Cheyena only gave him a wobbly smile, and then turned to Estia.

Kymenos shook his head and mounted Sykeen; the cave was high enough for that. He rode smoothly to the entrance and patted Sykeen's neck.

Can you kick the blocking stone down for me? he asked.

Of course.

Sykeen turned out and kicked out, and the stones crumpled outward. Kymenos nodded. They hadn't had very powerful Crop mages with them, then.

Beyond, they found a ramp leading down to a trail below, as Kymenos had thought they might; if the cave was high on a cliff, then the Crownseekers wouldn't have managed to lead horses up to it. Kymenos gestured at Cheyena and rode down the ramp and towards the north again.

It was a cold, but beautiful, night. Kymenos searched the sky and smiled. No clouds in sight- not dragons, nor flying Shadow-bats, nor snowstorm clouds. The stars were high and free of any obstructions. It was a good night for riding.

"Why did you do that?"

Kymenos glanced at Cheyena. He had expected this, and he found that he was calmer than he had expected to be, as if blinding the rest of them had taken some of his anger away. "Blind them, you mean?"

Cheyena nodded. She sat Estia with less conviction than he sat Sykeen, but Kymenos thought she was probably less used to riding, and less confident than he that they could see in the dark with the night-eyes. Or perhaps she had forgotten that she wore the bracelet. Anything was possible.

"Because I was angry," said Kymenos, and set his heels in Sykeen's sides. The stallion started, then snorted and began trotting down the path. The trail was not steep, Kymenos saw, and even had slight walls on either side of it, as though the Crownseekers wanted to guide themselves in the dark, too. "I've rarely been that angry, but I was then. I sent Princess Nightstone after me with my fury once. And now I blinded them."

"But why?"

"They keep talking about me as if I were a hero," said Kymenos. "They keep wanting me to do heroic things based on too little information. I'm not a hero, and I can't do those things."

"It seems- well, it seems a strange reason to blind them all."

Kymenos knew that she feared his anger again. He kept riding, smiling back at her a little and surprising a sheepish smile on her face. She seemed to think that he wouldn't really punish her for saying that.

And he wouldn't, unless she somehow managed to enrage him as the Crownseekers had done.

"Come on," he said. "We'll reach Dalzna faster if we don't walk like this." He pushed Sykeen from a trot into a canter.

I wasn't walking, the stallion protested as he began to move faster. *And this trail is steep!*

Of course, of course. Kymenos waved a hand airily. He was feeling wonderful, for the first time since the Dragon Queen had appeared. He had a clear road to the north, and that was all he really wanted. He hadn't realized that he missed Dalzna so much until people started getting in his way of going back home.

"Kymenos?"

Kymenos almost glanced back at Cheyena, then realized the voice had come from his side. "What, Norianna?"

"You're not glowing any longer."

Kymenos glanced down at his arms, where the silvery light was indeed fading. He shrugged. "Perhaps it only happens when I'm in immediate danger, as I was in the Heart of the Night," he suggested.

"But you don't know what caused it in the first place?" Norianna asked.

"No."

"Hmmm."

Kymenos left Norianna to consider it. He had enough to think about, with the road home and the thoughts and memories of Serian dancing through his brain.

Chapter 51

A Contest of Queens

"If you think that someone not of royal blood can't rule the Kingdoms, then where did the royal families come from in the first places? They were often heroes, of course, but that didn't make them royal until they founded the Kingdoms and declared themselves so. Did they magically begin to be Kings and Queens then?"

-Attributed to the Mistaken Mage.

"My lady?"

Nightstone looked up. Darkrider stood on the balcony, scraping one hood on the stone and look anxiously at her.

"Yes, Darkrider, what is it?" she asked. She knew that the pegasus must bear news, and she was ready for the news to be bad. Almost everything except what Rior had told her was.

"I came to wish you a pleasant good night," said Darkrider. She hesitated, then added, "And to tell you that I hunted for that half-elven woman all over the castle today, but that I couldn't find her."

Nightstone sighed. "That's all right, Darkrider. She's my problem. Go to sleep, now, and have a good night."

The gray pegasus inclined her head, then spread her wings and flew towards the stables. Nightstone had several servants hard at work rebuilding them.

She returned to rubbing her head. Speaking with Prince Artaen's envoy, as well as the messengers from the nobles who spoke their messages with almost too polite a wording, had given her a headache.

All of them had said the same thing. They were all impressed with her vengeance, understood the reasons behind it, but they were her enemies now. They had murmured polite phrases about Queens protecting their countries from traitors, smiling, but Nightstone had seen the hatred in their eyes. Save for a very few nobles who were the last of their lines and had not yet married, there was no one who had not lost a relative. And Akellia's relatives believed she was dead, since the Lady had not been seen since those first moments of rebellion.

Nightstone knew she would have to find her. She knew that she would have to deal with Tewilde, and contemplate the new and bewildering game that Rior had opened up for her. Rebel against the Light's attempt to control the world by defending herself but doing nothing else? It sounded like a good plan if she didn't die before the reasons for the defense became obvious.

But right now, she had a headache.

She knew it wasn't only the envoys who had given it to her. She had always gotten a headache when storms rolled across the ocean, and one was coming in now. Nightstone could hear the thunder talking to itself in the far corners of the sky, and felt a faint twinge whenever lightning cut through the air;

Lightning magic was kin to fire, the blending of the Scarlet and Gust. Neither of those by themselves was enough to give her a headache, though. It was the combination of the storm, the east wind, and the thick, hot heaviness in the air, a heaviness that Nightstone would have thought more appropriate to a summer thunderstorm than one of early spring.

Something was going to happen.

The conviction settled itself as easily and naturally into her mind as if it had always been there. Nightstone blinked and raised her head to look out the window. Nothing out there but the walls and courtyard and the swaying Plains, of course, since her window looked west and north.

But still...

Something was coming.

Nightstone dropped her hands from rubbing her head and listened. If another rebellion was gathering, then she would just call on the Dark and let it deal with the traitors however it liked. It would not be as merciful as she had been; Nightstone knew that for certain.

But there was no sound in the corridors outside her room. Even the liadra guards seemed wary of making any noise or attracting any attention since last night. And the rebels were probably holding secret, hushed meetings in hidden rooms, anyway.

Nightstone went back to rubbing her head and chasing down an elusive memory. In seconds, she had it, and opened her eyes to stare into the darkness.

The last time she had felt like this, her brother King Kyern had abruptly decided to arrest her and confine her in the Temple of Elle. There had been a thunderstorm coming in then, too, and the same feeling of ominous activity advancing along with the rain.

Nightstone stood up, went to her door, and quietly locked it. She wouldn't have to open it to anyone; the servant who brought her evening meal would leave it on the stone outside the door, and no one else would dare touch it, not even zeyr kittens.

Nightstone walked back and looked out her window again. Still nothing but the usual view, though the sky had darkened somewhat with clouds racing ahead of the storm and the wind. She shook her head and tightened her fingers on the stone, thinking of what might happen, trying to remember all the studying she had done in the Dark's libraries about thunderstorms.

She had made and discarded half a dozen possible explanations for the feeling- no one was coming back from the dead for her, and the Masters of the Star Circle were not going to kill her, and so on- by the time she hit what she thought was the true answer. She smiled grimly, and turned to look around her room. She had never found the secret entrance into her chambers that Tewilde used, but she didn't worry about that right now. The half-elf was more than welcome to show up.

Such storms sometimes rise when those of royal blood contend against each other, and the sky will sing to welcome the victor, the true ruler of the land. This should be interesting.

And Nightstone thought it would be, too. She and Tewilde were both, equally, of Queen Aneron's bloodline; the half-elf had no advantage there. Tewilde had once been Queen, while Nightstone never had, but she had abdicated the throne to her daughter and convinced everyone else she had died. The land might welcome her back, but Nightstone thought it a slim chance.

And then part of the wall slid back, and Tewilde stepped into the room with her pale hair flying behind her. She seemed shocked to find Nightstone calmly standing and waiting for her.

She recovered herself quickly, though, and tilted her chin at an arrogant angle. "So you know," she said.

"Know that you mean to take the throne from me?" Nightstone asked. "If you mean that, then yes, I'm quite well-aware of it."

Tewilde blinked. "Good."

Nightstone smiled at the flicker of uncertainty. In every way, they were almost matched. Tewilde had the strange powers and magic of her Faerie blood, but Nightstone was the one who had lived longer-longer than most half-elves managed before their madness claimed them- and knew more tricks. Nightstone felt a pounding excitement rise in her, overcoming the headache.

"Shall we begin?" she asked.

Tewilde did, throwing back her head and beginning to sing a sweet and wordless song. It would have been enough to put someone unguarded to sleep, and Nightstone did indeed feel her eyelids droop. But the Scarlet was roaring inside her now, and the sensation of heat beneath her skin stung her when she began to succumb to the magic, making her stand upright.

"Enough of that, I think," she said, and sent a flare of fire to burn out Tewilde's vocal chords as she had burned out Glow's.

Tewilde dodged, but it meant that her song ended in a squawk, and the last vestiges of its power faded. Nightstone smiled and wreathed herself in the Scarlet. Perhaps she had rested long enough, perhaps it was the anticipation of the contest and the odd, old magic that came into play when two members of a royal line faced each other, but she felt no trace of the exhaustion that should have been hers after last night and prevented her from calling on the fire. Her magic was ready, and so was she.

She began to move in a slow circle, the dueling circle, and Tewilde hesitated, then copied her. Her right hand was holding a small, glowing ball of light now. Nightstone was impressed. Not many half-breeds would have managed to call that.

Of course, she is half a Faerie elf, and not half a Light elf. That may mean she has abilities I don't know about.

But this one she did, and when Tewilde lobbed the ball of light at her, Nightstone knew enough to burn it apart before it could touch her. She stepped back and smiled at Tewilde, who looked befuddled.

"You are clever," she admitted, and then began to sing again.

This must have been a song of greater power. Nightstone woke up only when the stone beneath her cheek hit her. Then she sat up and cloaked herself in flames again just when Tewilde would have plunged forward with another of those little light-balls and killed her- or perhaps sucked out her soul, given that those balls healed mental wounds on elves. Tewilde fell back, looking disappointed.

"It is time to see if I can still pass the test of a true Queen," she said, and then reached downward, into the earth.

Nightstone could sense her doing it, faintly. Normally she couldn't feel Crop magic, but this wasn't precisely Crop magic; it was calling on the earth of the Kingdom, the earth that was bound to the Orlathian royal line. If the land accepted Tewilde, then she would be a true Queen, and she would fling Nightstone away like a horse brushing off a fly.

Nightstone reached with her, grimacing when she felt how weak the connection was. She still had the royal blood in her veins, of course, but she hadn't married or fulfilled a Destiny or taken the throne, any of the usual things that were done to bind a monarch to the Kingdom. She hadn't thought she would need to, and she had aspired to be the Dark's lieutenant ruling in Orlath, not the Queen of Orlath.

"Accept me!" she heard Tewilde shout.

That made it easier. The land hesitated, suspicious of the half-elf's demand, and turned towards Nightstone in wordless question to see what she knew of the other woman. Nightstone had the chance to make her own offer to the land, to the Plains and the Elfwood and even the Lilitha Ocean, though she grimaced as she made that last. She would rule it if it would accept her.

The land shook them both off, and then the spirit of the Kingdom dived back into the earth. Nightstone let out a breath, not entirely surprised. Neither of them were traditional Queens; they shouldn't even be alive, according to the natural way of things. The land took a dim view of anyone who wasn't natural.

She turned to Tewilde to say as much, and found the half-elf looking tragic, staring at the floor as if she could see the spirit of the Kingdom through it.

"It rejected me," Tewilde whispered. "I ruled it for decades, and when the time came to prove its old loyalties, it rejected me."

Nightstone would have liked to say something again, but again she was prevented. The heavy feeling in the air, the ominous feeling, was still with her, and the headache abruptly flared so fiercely that it tossed her to the floor. She rolled over, trying to stand, sure that Tewilde would finish her in a moment.

And Tewilde began to sing, and Nightstone felt her eyelids fall. She was done for, if this kept up.

Then Tewilde was interrupted. She screamed, and Nightstone rolled back over, wondering if one of her people had knocked the door down and joined in the fight to save Orlath's Lady.

There was nothing in the room, though, and Tewilde was clutching her own temples now. The pain of the headache had probably caught her unawares, Nightstone thought. At least this meant that it probably came from something unrelated to either one of them. She sat up cautiously and looked out the window.

She stared. The sky had darkened, far more swiftly than it should have done given how little time she and Tewilde had battled. And the rushing clouds were banking and gathering in what looked like a battle formation of pegasi, sweeping back towards the castle. For a crazed moment, Nightstone thought they *were* pegasi, come to get revenge on her for not doing enough to save their kin last night.

But then the clouds parted, and a garish red light stormed down over the castle. A symbol was written in the sky in the red light, and it took Nightstone a long time to remember in what old book she had seen that.

A bird, it would have looked like, an eagle from the clawed talons and wide wings, but with a unicorn's head.

She had it a moment later, and narrowed her eyes, trying to fight back fear with anger. *Why is Change showing forth its power over the castle now?*

And then she felt the world shift weirdly sideways, and cried out aloud, trying to reach the dark thread that bound her to other creatures of Dark and Shadow, to send the warning.

Change, more powerful than any of the gods, more powerful than Dark or Light, was moving.

Chapter 52

A Council of Powers

"I have never trusted Shadow. But then, I have never trusted Dark or Light either, so I suppose that one power has hardly fixed my enmity."

-Queen Sioleth of Ilantra.

"Take your seats!"

The cry rang over and over again as Ternora emerged from the boiling light- it felt like stepping through a wall would, she imagined, the solidity suddenly parting and stretching around her- and looked into the Council Ring. She winced as a shout of it sounded next to her ear. "Do they think we're all deaf?" she asked Shara.

"Not paying attention, perhaps." It was Alira who answered, her color high and her eyes curious as she stared around the Ring. It looked to be a high stone room, encircled with tiers of benches. Ternora didn't find it all that fascinating, but it was clear that Alira did. "And the Lady can't pay attention to you right now, either. She's busy. We'll find a place to sit down."

Ternora glanced at Shara, about to ask if she was really busy, and saw that her face was locked into an expression of intense concentration. Perhaps she was in silent communion with the other gods. Since Ternora couldn't hear it, of course, she chose to close her mouth and follow Alira to a seat about midway in the tiers.

The circular center of the room already had both its eager audience watching from the benches and its actors, Ternora saw as she settled herself carefully on the cold stone. Shadow stood there, his arms folded, listening patiently to a woman who looked as if she were bleeding. Ternora swallowed and looked away from the woman; the sight made her a little queasy.

"Can you believe we are here?"

Ternora started, and looked at Alira. The High Priestess's eyes were shining, and she smiled at Ternora as if expecting the half-elf to share in her strange excitement.

"Where *is* here?" Ternora asked, hoping the priestess could tell her. She'd never heard of a place like this even while she was still young enough or polite enough to listen regularly to legends of the gods.

"The Deciding Place," said Alira, her voice throbbing with significance.

Ternora snorted and spoke before she thought. "That doesn't sound like a very mystical name to me."

Alira sniffed at her. "That is because you don't know the kinds of decisions that were made here. Dark and Light decided to exile Shadow from the world here, and Elle came to meet with Queen Aneron, and Shara decided to offer Her sanctuary to the godlings..." Alira looked around the room again. She was actually squirming in her seat like a child now, as though she barely kept herself from running up

and throwing her arms around any of the numerous people in the room. "This place is full of history. I never thought I would see it."

"Shara didn't invite you along?" asked Ternora, half-standing so that she could see the Lady of Night. Shara was striding towards the ring of stone where Shadow and the bleeding woman stood, determination in every movement.

"I would not ask the goddess to invite me along to something so sacred," said Alira. "I am only grateful that I was able to have this chance at all. And please sit down, Ternora. You will make the others think that the Lady of Night has unsophisticated mortal companions."

Ternora didn't sit down until she was satisfied that Shara was speaking with Shadow, though. The Lady of Night seemed perfectly calm and composed, though Ternora was sure she had said something to Elle about not wanting to destroy Light. Perhaps she had changed her mind, or lied to the Lady of Light, or was only waiting to see what side would win so she could join it. Ternora was in favor of that last. A winning side would be the one most poised to crush Warcourage.

"The Council will begin now."

Ternora winced. The sound of that cry throbbed in her ears, more penetrating even than the several calls for people to take their seats. When she looked back into the stone ring, she saw Shadow standing with his hands cupped around his mouth, calling apparently several more times in another language; Ternora heard only whistles and sharp sounds like the edge of birdsong.

The gods and powers settled into their seats. The only ones who remained standing were Shadow and, of course, Shara. Ternora scowled. She hoped that no gods saw two mortal women without protection and decided to kill them.

"You know that we have two choices," said Shadow in that ringing voice when the noise had mostly subsided. "We can destroy Light and Destiny- we have the power to do that- or we can try to compromise with them, by persuading Elle and other gods to abandon them and join us."

A swelling murmur traveled the length of the room, broken at last by a great figure on the other end of Ternora's tier who stood and said, "For what Light, and Elle, have done to me, I can never forgive them. I am for destroying them."

Ternora looked, and then looked again. The figure resembled nothing so much as a giant black hound, but blood dripped from its fur and it seemed to fill the air in the Ring with a choking smell of decay. As Ternora watched, a maggot, sized to fit the hound, crawled out of one nostril and then back in. Ternora shivered in disgust, resisting an urge to scratch.

"We all know your feelings, Death," said Shadow. "But the conquest of Dalzna happened long ago-"

"Not to me."

"In mortal terms," said Shadow. "It is in mortal terms we must think, since mortals will be the ones affected by what we do here today. In mortal terms, no one remembers that you once ruled Dalzna. Do not let this stand in the way of trying to compromise."

"You were the one who called this meeting to destroy them," said Death, and the wheezing breath from his jaws made Ternora wince. It smelled of dust and rotting leaves and other, less pleasant things.

"I am willing to be persuaded," said Shadow. "Some of the powers and gods have labored like mortal heroes to speak with Light and Destiny and turn their course. I am willing to listen to them." He turned with a bow to Shara. "And we have here the Lady of the Night, who has led that effort."

Shara stepped forward, nodding to them. Ternora found that she had to listen to the goddess's voice without trying to look at her face. It was shifting back and forth between not just human and elf but many other races; trying to focus on anything in the maze was a torment. "Elle has almost agreed to stop her attacks on the Faerie elves and join with the Dark," she said. "Just a few more tries at persuasion should do it. She knows that Destiny does not consider her essential, and she is ready to join a side that would welcome her."

"Destiny does not consider her essential," said Koroth's deep, musical voice. "And how do we know that?"

"Because Destiny has established the four Light-Destined royal Heirs, and then broken Elle from having any say in what happens to them," said Shara, as easily as if she had anticipated the question. For all Ternora knew, of course, she had. "That can be seen from the interference in the fate of Prince Warcourage of Doralissa, who now has a woman called 'Savior' watching over him."

"Who told you this?" asked Death, his voice a wheeze that nevertheless conveyed eagerness.

"Ternora."

Ternora sat as still as she could. Gaze after gaze was turning to her, and she felt as if she would melt or crumple beneath them. *Can't they look at someone else? I'm a messenger, not a herald.*

"Have her come forward and repeat this story," said Death. "I have heard of no one called 'Savior,' and I would like to know who she is and why she is interfering in the fates of the Heirs." A growl that would have matched the giant hound he looked to be rolled forth from his throat. "I have had enough of Destiny's games. If there is a way to turn back the game on Destiny, then I would like to know what it is."

"Ternora," said Shara, with no expression visible on her face in the midst of all the shifting features, "come forward, please."

Ternora swallowed and stood. Luckily, it seemed that most of the people she had to brush by on her way down the tiers were mortal, but that didn't stop her from touching tentacles and feet, hooves and fins and wings. She closed her eyes on some steps, and opened them for good only when she reached the Ring. Shara reached out and grasped her hand. The tightness of the hold might have been meant for reassurance, but it reminded Ternora of the way that Viridian had held some animals before he snapped their necks. She shuddered and let Shara turn her to face the powers, hoping sincerely that she was presenting herself at least as well as Alira had presented herself in front of Elle.

"This is Ternora," said Shara, "who should have been guardian to Prince Warcourage of Doralissa, according to the plans of Light. She should have served out of loyalty and love. Instead, he had to bribe her with a Court position to get her to go along, and she rarely felt anything but irritation towards him. Then a woman called Savior, in rescuing them from the god Erlande, cast her back into the world. She became one of my priestesses, and swore vengeance against the Prince."

"I don't understand," said a buzzing voice that Ternora took care not to look towards. She thought it was probably some god of insects, and she felt itchy enough watching the maggot lower itself out of Death's nostril. "Why would Destiny choose a guardian who would not serve out of loyalty and love? It must have laid its plans better than that."

"Why indeed," said Shara, with no expression in her voice, and gave Ternora a little push. Ternora stumbled forward, thinking it a dismissal back to her seat, and would have started climbing the tiers again if Shara hadn't added, "Let Ternora tell you about Savior. See if any of you recognize her. It could be a servant gone rogue."

Ternora looked at Shara, licked her lips, and began once again the recitation that she had given so many times she could have repeated it by rote. "She had pale skin, and she looked fey, though she had none of the aura that would have confirmed her as such in my eyes. She took us to a country that she claimed she had created, a world of her own, but Elle's aspects have assured me that it was more likely only a part of Faerie. There were Faerie elves there in small numbers, though we saw none, and Savior confirmed that they could worldwalk through her land. She played up to Warcourage, trying to make him trust and like her, and to that end showed him a web of Destiny that she had in her possession. I tore two strands of that web when I escaped."

She looked up, but from what she could see, none of her words were provoking recognition from the gods thus far. Ternora breathed out. She had feared that one of them would lash out and destroy her at any moment for maligning a trusted servant. "She had the power to send a shaft of light into Erlande's realm and free us from his hold, and also to send me a dream in which she told me she was going to do this. She had the cries of birds surrounding her at one time, and white wings that ever moved up and down-

"What!"

The cry came from behind her. Ternora spun to look up at the tiers that ran along that side of the room, but they were staring over her head as well. Ternora at last turned to face the one who had cried out, using the gods' gazes as a compass.

It was Shadow. He was staring at her with a face nearly as pale as Savior's, though there Ternora expected it came from the thinning of the mist that made him up. "What did you say?" he asked.

"Wings that always moved up and down," said Ternora uneasily.

"White wings?"

"Yes."

Shadow closed his eyes for a moment. Then he opened them, and Ternora stepped back. There was a golden glow in them that she didn't think she had seen before, but which she instinctively didn't like.

"I see," said Shadow. "It is no wonder that I could not find Prince Warcourage. I was trying to peer into the domains of gods and other powers-

"Yes," said Death, "and I resented it."

Shadow ignored him and went right on. "-and I never thought to look into my own domain and see if the Prince was there." He let out a sigh. "I wonder how many other unexplained little incidents are the result of her interference?"

"Who is she?" asked Ternora.

"Her name, or at least the last name she preferred, was Alami," said Shadow. "One of my children, a shapeshifter to whom I gave the gift of swan-shape. She fled my side once before during the battle that locked me away from the world, but when I returned, she seemed repentant and joined me in taking Ilantra back. I forgave her." For a moment, despite everything, he smiled. "Well, I forgave her

at the pushing of my lieutenant." Then his smile faded. "But perhaps I should have simply damned her back to non-existence, as I originally thought of doing."

"She is fey?" Ternora asked, eager to satisfy her own curiosity.

"Oh, yes," said Shadow. "But of a kindred that no longer much flies the heavens of your world. They made a bid for power long ago, and the elves drove them back, so they hid themselves in deep holes or ran to other powers, like me, for sanctuary. Alami has never seemed anxious to take power herself. I think this is more likely to be the result of boredom in my service and a bid for excitement. Alami has always tried to amuse herself, even in the most inappropriate ways. But..."

"Yes?" said Ternora, wondering if she should have chosen Shadow instead of the Lady of Night to serve. There was that golden glow in Shadow's eyes that promised revenge on Alami.

"I have to wonder if she is really trying to gain power for the sake of her driven kin," said Shadow. "In fact-"

It amazed Ternora that all the other gods and powers in the room had been silent for so long, and remained silent while Shadow stared into space. But perhaps they were deferential to him as the one who had called the Council, or perhaps because he was the mightiest power in the room. At any rate, they did remain silent, until Shadow said softly, "Yes, I thought so. I thought something was strange, and indeed it is. The winged fey are moving again. That would explain so many things that puzzled me."

He looked up at the powers and gods. "My lords and ladies-" he began.

"And those of us who can be either, or animals," Death added.

Once again, Shadow seemed not to take note of the interruption, though Ternora wondered about that, given the way his eyes turned towards the hound. "There is another force at play," he said. "I put forth the proposition that the Serpents of Arvenna are serving themselves, and not Light as we all thought."

"But they are Lightworkers," said a woman who looked like a snake would look if it had breasts. "They have said so, again and again, and they won't work with you or with Dark. They have to be Lightworkers."

For a moment, Shadow smiled. "And when I first came back to the world, many people thought that my servants had to be Darkworkers, since they didn't serve the Light," he said. "There are sometimes other choices about what to serve. But we may have to stop them."

"And what does that mean?"

"And our compromise with the Light?"

"And the Prince?"

Ternora stared around, seeing they had all forgotten her and wondering what to do next, at least until Shara took her arm and drew her away with a smile.

"I think that this is a place for gods and powers now," she said, and gently shoved Ternora back to her seat.

Chapter 53

Cruel and Fair

"Does anyone ever ask where the Silver Stair led, or who the Dark-Eyed Warder of the North is, or where the cities of old Rivendon went when they vanished? No, of course not. They never think of it. But when you find yourself in the middle of a living legend, then someone has to think of it."

-Queen Hassiena of Orlath.

"Cadona?"

"Olumer."

Olumer struggled to focus his eyes. The bump on his head had hurt, and he thought at first that was what made her voice sound so strange in his ears. But when he managed to look at her, he felt his heart give one very hard thump. His great-great-granddaughter had changed.

It was the look in her eyes, more than anything. She looked as if she had seen horror between the time he left her and the time he found her again. Olumer remembered feeling the same way himself when Idona held the knife to their son's throat. He shivered a little, and then looked around. To his relief, Silverheart lay not far behind Cadona, his tail lashing.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"It needs to wait for a moment," said Cadona. "Olumer, did you know that a place like this existed?"

Olumer looked around, but couldn't see much. They lay inside what seemed to be a hut, with a fire burning on the air between them. Of course, given Cadona's Scarlet magic, that wasn't so unusual. Beyond the walls of the hut, he could see gleaming drifts that might be snow.

"I don't know what this place is, Cadona," he said. "But if you mean, did I know what lay on the other side of the Silver Stair, then no, I didn't."

Cadona nodded. "Then it will take a little explaining," she said. "Or I could just show you, if you feel well enough to walk."

Olumer flexed his limbs. They moved well enough under him, he thought, and his eyes had stopped blurring. Without thinking, he flexed his fingers in much the same way, and curved claws sprang out of them. When Olumer hooked them in the floor to help him get to his feet, they cut loose shaves of wood.

"Where did you get those?" Cadona asked curiously, leaning forward as if to make sure they were really claws and not knives attached to his fingers.

"Pannerel grew them for me," said Olumer, and then glanced around sharply. "Have you seen him?"

"Pannerel? No." Cadona shook her head, and sat back, though not without giving the claws one more longing glance. "You came through the Star alone. Silverheart found you, and dragged you here."

Olumer shrugged. Then he paused, aware now of something he should have realized earlier. "Where's Lyli?"

Cadona's face went cool at once, so much like Idona's that Olumer flinched and stepped back from her. Cadona didn't seem to notice a reaction that must have looked odd to her, though. "She's not here. Not right now."

Olumer narrowed his eyes. "Dead? Did she get left behind or die when you came up the Silver Stair?"

"It will be easier just to show you," said Cadona, and opened the door of the hut. "Are you coming?"

Olumer reluctantly followed her out into the snow, looking around the hut as they went for signs that someone else had been here with Cadona and Silverheart. He found nothing, however, and only the signs of the one fire, as if Cadona and Silverheart themselves hadn't been here until they decided to use the hut to shelter him.

Silverheart passed him then. Oddly enough, the leopard's golden eyes only met his once, and then dropped to the ground.

"Cadona?" asked Olumer, a feeling of dread more hollow than the hut filling him. "What happened? Where's Lyli?"

"Come with me."

Cadona set out across the snow, and Olumer followed her, looking around for some signs of Lyli. Footprints would have helped, or even a set of mingled footprints, two human and one the great soft pawprints that Silverheart left. But everywhere were only smooth rounded drifts of white, with perhaps a suggestion of gray-black mountains in the distance.

"Olumer," said Cadona. "You won't find her here. You have to come and see what we found to understand."

Olumer looked at her face, and found that it was less human than Vander's. She stared at him with those cool silver eyes and waited, neither glad nor sorry about the worry she was causing him. Even the temper and concern for her dignity that had marked her since her childhood seemed to have left her.

"Answer one question for me," he said.

"Yes," said Cadona, with a short inclination of her head that should have made her silver hair fall forward around her face. It didn't, though, just swaying forward and then back again, as if it were much heavier than it looked.

"Was Lyli with you when you climbed the Silver Stair and came forth into this world, wherever it is?"

"Yes," said Cadona, and then turned and led him forward again, picking her confident way across the snow, even though Olumer couldn't see any sign of a path. He stared at Cadona's straight back and forced his feet to move, suddenly dreading to see what lay at the end of their walk.

He saw, soon enough. They came around a curve in the drifts, and Olumer saw a long hall of black stone built ahead. It was tall, and the columns that lined it gleamed as though they were falls of black water. Olumer studied it carefully, but could find no place where the stones met awkwardly, saw no joints of construction. There was only black stone, every shape perfect, as if it really had been poured and not built, in the way that the liquid columns suggested.

"This way," said Cadona, and stepped inside the nearest row of columns, walking easily along the wide porch there. Since it was roofed, little snow had fallen. Olumer stepped onto the porch after her and at once halted, snarling.

"Olumer?" Cadona halted and glanced back at him. "What is it?"

"Something's wrong," said Olumer, and snarled in every direction, just in case something was trying to creep up on him and didn't know his feelings about that. "It's not just magic that surrounds this place, it's *evil* magic. This is the kind of magic that Idona used to bind me."

"What?" Cadona moved back, and when Olumer glanced back at her, her silver eyes shone with the interest that she had always reserved for stories about Queen Idona. "What about her?"

"I was her husband," said Olumer. "The father of her children, the silvereyes who lent his blood to make her line part of Rivendon again. And she repaid me for it by binding me to serve her line until it died out, and making me weave a shining net around my memory so that I would think I'm half-silvereyes."

"You're not?" Cadona whispered. "You're full-blooded fey?"

"Yes, of course." Olumer held up his left hand and flexed it again, watching the claws shoot out with a *ting* that made Cadona spring backward. "Why else would I be growing claws like this?"

"You said something about Pannerel- I thought that elven magic-" Cadona was backing away from him. "And if you didn't have to keep your Oath anymore, why did you come after me?"

"Because you're my great-great-granddaughter," said Olumer. "The only pack- the only blood- I have left. But I don't like this place." He raised his head and sniffed, and knew again why silvereyes usually relied on their noses to tell them when a place was wrong. The scent that filled his nostrils was like very old blood spread on poisoned meat. He backed away down the porch. "I don't know what this place is, Cadona, but I know that we shouldn't be here. Come with me. Run. We'll find a way back to Rivendon, by asking Pannerel, if we have to."

"No, Olumer."

Olumer looked back at Cadona. Her eyes were wide, shining with something that he thought might be regret, but she did not follow him.

"I can't go back," she said. "I'm sorry. Really, I am." For a moment, tears gleamed in her eyes along with the regret, and Olumer thought she might even have shed them if something greater, rage or determination, hadn't held them back. "I should never have done this. I should have listened to Silverheart, or to the voice that I carry in my head, which is always yours. But I didn't listen, and now I have to fulfill the terms of the bargain I made. I'm sorry." She turned and walked up the porch again, towards what Olumer had thought was a shadow and now realized was an open door.

Silverheart made a spitting, snarling sound and sprang up the porch after her, coming even with her just as she entered the door.

Olumer trembled. He didn't want to go into that room. It frightened him more than a whole ring of dancing filifernai.

But he had followed Cadona this far, and reared her like his own child, and she was the last of his blood. And while she couldn't see a way out of whatever bargain she had made, there was a chance that he could.

He forced himself to walk up the porch and duck through the door. It was a good thing it was already open, since he knew that he couldn't have forced himself to touch the stone.

Inside, he found a single room, exactly as long and wide as the hall. No upper stories, as he had thought there might be, just a ceiling that soared impossibly high overhead. There were no windows, but chains looped along the walls, held up by hooks he couldn't see, and bore strange lumpy lamps that shed a silver light.

Along the walls stood chairs, hundreds of them, extending up to and past the door on either side. Olumer looked closely, for a moment thinking that statues filled the chairs. And then he realized what they were carved to resemble, and stumbled back, shuddering.

All the chairs were thrones. Each one held a carved King or Queen of Rivendon, most of them with the silver eyes that indicated the blood of his kind, though here and there were ones with golden or blue-green eyes. And all of them had crowns on their heads, and silver swords at their sides, and all of them clutched the arms of their thrones with fingers that looked strong enough to draw those swords single-handed. They stared straight ahead, but Olumer no longer thought they were statues. He could feel the throbbing life in them, down beneath the surface where not many could touch it, but there. It stirred hungrily as the monarchs of Rivendon gazed on him, and Olumer wondered whether they could sense that he was kin and would still feast on him. They probably would, he thought.

He turned towards the left of the door, where Cadona must have gone, since he didn't see her anywhere towards the far right end.

In what was probably the exact center of the room stood a large block of black stone. It might have been an altar, though most of the altars Olumer had ever seen were lower, and smaller. It was big enough for someone to climb upon it and lie down, even someone as big as a full-grown silvereyes.

Olumer knew what he would find, then, and it was only courage and not devotion to Cadona that kept him moving forward. He halted by the block of stone and stared in silence, never looking up at Cadona, although he could feel her standing and staring at him from the other end of the block.

Through the center of the block was a silver sword, the hilt alone bigger than Olumer's head. It jutted up at an angle, and stabbed at that angle downward into the block. Olumer suspected that it normally pierced the stone, and that no ordinary hands could draw the blade free.

It didn't pierce the stone now, though. Or it pierced two things: the stone, and the chest of the little girl who lay silent upon it. Lyli's eyes were open, and her mouth as well, as though she had been screaming when the sword cleft her. A pool of blood was spread around her, still trickling onto the ground, as though her heart were beating even now. If Olumer listened closely enough, he thought he could hear her screams ringing in the air.

"What have you done?" he whispered, and looked up at Cadona.

She was clothed in a mantle of silver light, which spread out around her as he watched and touched the monarchs on their thrones. Olumer hoped it was his imagination that a few of them seemed to stir.

"I had to have blood to raise the army," said Cadona. "My ancestors will fight for me, but only if they have living blood and strength to draw upon. It had to be blood that was not royal, but had been in close association with royalty for some time."

"My blood would have done as well, wouldn't it?" asked Olumer.

"I thought of using you," said Cadona, and her face was nearly gray with what Olumer both hoped and feared was sorrow. "But I didn't know if you would come, and I didn't know if I could drive the sword all the way through you." She paused. "And I had some reluctance about doing it, too."

"Why would you do it at all?" Olumer croaked. The sense of rising power was everywhere in the room, but he could not take his eyes from Cadona. He thought her the most horrible thing in the hall.

"I must have an army to take back my Kingdom," said Cadona. "I figured it out thinking about the Tale of Queen Haedra and the Silver Stair. It says that the power of the royal line fought beside her to defeat her evil advisers. And that must mean these." She gestured around the room. "I heard their voices. They told me what had to be done to wake them, and I did it."

"Hello, Olumer."

And then something else replaced Cadona as the most horrible thing in the hall, as Queen Idona stepped off her throne and smiled at him with living blue-green eyes.

Chapter 54

The Hidden Serpents

"The association of Serpent and Dark is very old. Some say that the snake was the first animal to turn to the Dark when it came into the world and corrupted what the Light had built. There are even a few who say that our world was born from the egg of a Serpent, and that the Dark came forth from it. But that is a blasphemy."

-From Accounts of Early Religious Heresies in the Kingdoms.

"Elary!"

Elary opened her eyes. She would have sat up, but Mitherill, who had her hand over her mouth, prevented her from doing so with surprising strength. The Princess glanced over her shoulder and then back at Elary with wide eyes. Even in the dim moonlight coming through the windows, Elary could see the frightened look on her face.

Elary lay still until Mitherill let her go and then whispered, "Princess, what is it? Did something frighten you?"

"Yes," said Mitherill, "but not in the way you think. Something is wrong with the Serpents. A winged messenger brought something to Naldeon's rooms earlier tonight, and since then they've been stirring and buzzing. People have been running and flying up and down the corridors." She shook her head. "I never realized just how many of them have wings. Most of them keep them hidden with Illusion, it seems."

Elary dismissed that with a little wave of her hand. "And do you know what the message was about?"

"I do not know," said Mitherill, and then the power and the old knowledge came into her golden eyes, making them formidable once more. "But Destiny does."

Elary bowed her head. "And what does Destiny say?" she asked softly.

"Many things," said Mitherill, staring into the distance as though her gaze could pierce the stone. Elary shivered. For all she knew, that could happen. "That the Serpents have never really served me, but only served themselves, and now they are afraid of that being found out. But by whom? Destiny does not care, as long as they also manage to fulfill its plans, whether they are serving it willingly or not. And-"

Abruptly Mitherill cried out and slumped to the floor. Elary stooped over her, one hand on her shoulder, tears running down her face. What if something fatal had happened to her Princess, and she would never get her back?

Elary thought, later, that that was the first time she had ever realized how intensely she loved Mitherill.

But the Princess stirred under her hand a moment later, and when she opened her eyes, they were clear and sane, though full of fear. She stood, gripping Elary's hand. "We must go back to bed, and pretend that we know nothing of what passed in the night," she whispered. "It would be safest."

Elary held her hand. "Why? Wouldn't it be safest to run, if they really aren't serving you? Wouldn't it be best?"

Mitherill shook her head. "They have just suffered a great loss. Some place of power in the south was just ravaged. And there are- other powers abroad in the night that I do not understand." She shuddered, for a moment just an intensely frightened twelve-year-old girl. "It's best to stay here, where we can at least be assured they aren't attacking us right now, until we know more about it."

Elary nodded, pressed Mitherill's hand once more, and let her go. The Princess crept to the door, looked around it, and then fled into the hall and down it, out of sight.

Elary lay back on the bed, frowning at nothing in particular. *What was that all about? Who do the Serpents really serve, and why do they want Mitherill on the throne of Arvenna if they aren't serving her? It would seem contradictory to want that if it didn't mean something. But what?*

She might even have gone on chasing the thoughts around her head longer had not something else happened. Suddenly a shifting and a warping touched the air outside her window, and then Elary saw, as easily as if it had been there all along, the garish symbol of a red eagle with a unicorn's head.

She sat up, staring. That was the symbol of one of the powers, she thought, and her mind reached after it without success until she remembered Change. But then she was only more befuddled, of course. What could have possessed Change to show its power forth now, where it hadn't done it in long years?

The Serpent's Shelter suddenly rocked. Elary braced herself with one hand on the stone, closing her eyes and praying to Anakora, the goddess of healing. Anakora hadn't been answering lately, but the gesture made her feel better.

The Shelter stopped rocking, but loud cries continued to sound. Elary decided that it would be safer to stay here, but it would look strange if she wasn't investigating this at all, and so she stood and went to the door.

When she opened it, Serpents were running up and down the hall, shouting to each other. Elary didn't recognize most of them. Perhaps that had something to do with the speed at which they ran, but she thought it also had something to do with the many faces and wings that she was seeing unmasked by Illusion for the first time.

A shape whirred to a stop in front of her, and Silar alighted, her face so pale that Elary feared she would fall over. "Elary? Have you seen Mitherill?"

"She's not in her rooms?"

Silar shook her head.

Elary's own fear made her throat dry. "Have you searched the halls?" she asked, beginning to hurry down them in the direction of Mitherill's private chambers herself. "Perhaps she got attracted by the noise and came out."

"If so, then she somehow did it before the commotion began," said Silar grimly. "I was very near her rooms when I saw the symbol of Change, and I flew into them as soon as I could trust my wings. She wasn't there."

Elary could feel her heart lurch at that. Had Mitherill not made it back from Elary's rooms in time? Had she been taken prisoner? Had something else more frightening and permanent happened? "Then I don't know where she is," she said tightly, which was no less than a truth.

They rounded the corner nearest Mitherill's rooms almost before Elary was aware; she had been too busy worrying to pay attention to their progress. Silar halted suddenly and said, "What are they doing here?"

Elary looked up, and blinked. Ahead of her stood several tall, pale women with white wings fanning constantly up and down. They were peering at the door of Mitherill's room and talking among themselves, though so far they had made no attempt to open the door or touch it.

"Who are they?" Elary asked Silar softly. She could feel a trace of the connection with them that she shared with all fey, but it was muted, distant in a way she had never sensed before.

"Trouble," said Silar succinctly, and gripped her arm. "Listen to me. If I go up to them and they strike out at me, run. Find Mitherill and get her out of the Shelter."

"Why?"

"Will you do it?"

Elary licked her lips. She didn't know if she could trust the word of a Serpent, and especially not a woman whom her dream had shown sitting on the throne of Ilantra-Arvenna, but the muted connection with the pale women was scaring her. "All right. I will do whatever I must to insure Mitherill's safety."

"This will insure her safety," said Silar grimly, "far more than it would if they captured her and took her to their own country. They would present themselves as saviors, but that is not what they are." She strode forward, her wings flapping and flaring around her.

Elary watched, now nearly as frightened for Silar as she was for Mitherill. Silar stopped and spoke with one of the women, who spoke back in what seemed to Elary to be a pleasant fashion. At least, she wasn't making any gestures that would indicate violence, and she was smiling.

But then her hand moved sharply, and even though it halted a few feet from Silar's head, Silar still fell.

Elary turned and hurried away into a side corridor, trying to make as little sound as possible.

She had an advantage that the winged fey did not, at least, unless they also had an *ilzán's* abilities. She reached out and felt the diseases that lived in the Serpent's Shelter, most of them harmless sneezing fits, with some harsher lung diseases. But there was only one case of roughlung, even though the sickness had not seemed to trouble Mitherill since they took her from Shadow. And it wasn't far from here, at a place where the corridor she was traveling intersected with another.

Elary halted when she reached the intersection and bent down. Mitherill's terrified eyes peered back at her from between the legs of a carved statue. Elary noticed distantly that the statue was of a winged woman, her arms spread and a look of kindness on her face. She would have taken it for a representation of some aspect of Elle yesterday. Now, she was not as sure.

"Elary?" Mitherill whispered, and then hurtled into her arms.

Elary cradled her close and let her cry. At last she seemed to cry out, and Elary was glad it hadn't taken long; footsteps were approaching, and she thought that anyone cradling a child would be the target of many gazes.

"Come with me," she whispered to Mitherill, and they began hurrying away from the footsteps, back in the direction she had come.

Someone stepped around the corner, someone who had been waiting for them instead of walking, so that he made no sound. Naldeon smiled at them with lightning bolts in his eyes and held out his hand.

"Where are you taking Mitherill, Elary?" he asked pleasantly. "I would hate to think that our bargain no longer holds, and you are betraying the Serpents you trusted to educate your Princess."

"Silar said there was danger," said Elary. "A winged woman knocked her down, and she told me to get Mitherill out." She was almost babbling, wondering if there was a way past the Serpent Lord without injuring him and invoking the wrath of his people.

"A winged woman?" Naldeon's face twisted for a moment. Then he smiled. "But many of us are winged. What you saw was probably a private quarrel."

"I trust Silar," said Elary quietly, and firmed her grip on Mitherill's hand.

Naldeon sighed. "It is true that we have suffered somewhat of a defeat tonight," he said. "You know that we would like to bring Mitherill back to her throne and see her reigning as a monarch who cares about her country."

Elary nodded, while inwardly wondering if they had time to stop and listen to this. But Naldeon wasn't attacking them, and he didn't seem inclined to reach out and snatch Mitherill from Elary, which probably made him different than most of the Serpents running about the Shelter right now.

"We would like to do that in all the Kingdoms," said Naldeon. "Our fighting arm, the Crownseekers, can act more openly and have the support of the Arvenese peasants, but we would like them to fight in other Kingdoms, too. Orlath has a few in it. We are reaching towards Rivendon and Dalzna. We have spoken with rebels against Shadow in Doralissa."

"And Ilantra?" Elary asked, terrible visions of war overcoming her mind. Had she done everything she could to keep her Kingdom safe, including renouncing the claims of its rightful Heir, only to see war happen anyway?

Naldeon hissed softly, and for a moment he made a motion as if he were going to strike. Elary stepped back, holding Mitherill against her, and he relaxed. "We have not yet been able to do anything about Ilantra," he admitted. "And that is less because of desire on our part or lack of rebels than because of Shadow's power there. But we will take the country from him, never fear, and in time there will be a good monarch on the throne of Ilantra, too."

Elary had to admit it sounded wonderful, but he had distracted her from her first point without answering any questions about it. "And who are these winged fey? What do they want with the thrones and the Heirs to the thrones?"

"They are the best guardians for them," said Naldeon. "Shadow and Dark and even powers like Chance are resisting us. But the winged fey have fought many wars against such oppressive powers, and they know the best means of resisting them back. They will take the Heirs and prepare them. We are searching for Princess Cadona. We have Prince Warcourage."

"And Dalzna?" asked Elary. "I thought you said you were working there, but the royal line died out centuries ago."

"Not so," said Naldeon. "We have found records that indicate a Prince was once given into the care of peasants and raised by them, though the Lightworkers who placed him with his parents were destroyed by the Dark before they could retrieve him. We know that an heir lives somewhere, and there are tests that will reveal a Prince or Princess. We are practicing on candidates that we think are likely."

Elary nodded slowly. "And what do you mean about the winged fey becoming the Heirs' guardians?"

"They would take Mitherill to a safe place, and there they would teach her more than we ever could."

"So I would be parted from her."

"Only until she was ready to become Queen," said Naldeon soothingly. "She would come forth with an army at her back. Isn't that something that you would like to see happen?"

"No," said Elary grimly. "I gave her over to you in the first place, and renounced her claims to the throne of Ilantra-"

"I'm still angry about that-" Mitherill began.

Elary gave the Princess a little shake to tell her to hush. To Elary's private amazement, she did. "I did all that to avoid war," said Elary. "I don't want her marching forth with an army at her back. I want her to take her throne in peace, beloved by her people. And why do you want to give her over to these winged fey now, when before you were content to teach her yourselves?"

"Things have altered," said Naldeon. "Change is rising, and we have suffered a setback in the south that deprived us of some of our most trusted Crownseekers. Mitherill is not safe here. We fear that Change means to war on us. The winged fey will take her to Faerie, where time does not pass and Change does not come save at the will of the Faerie elves. They have their own reasons for sheltering the royal Heirs, and she would be safest there."

Elary sighed. "Could I go with her?"

"No."

Elary narrowed her eyes. "Then I will not let the Princess go," she said, and once again firmed her grip on Mitherill's hand.

"You may not have much choice," said Naldeon, and nodded to someone behind her.

Elary felt hands work for a moment at her grip on Mitherill's wrist, tearing her fingers loose, and then she cried out as she suddenly lost the Princess's hand. She turned, but Mitherill was already bowling down the corridor, clutched in the arms of one of the winged women.

Another one hovered between her and Elary, as if she thought that she could turn Mitherill's guardian back with her simple presence.

Elary didn't pause. She didn't like using this kind of magic, but no other weapon was to hand. She held out her fingers, just brushing the winged woman's shoulder as she darted forward.

The immediate sores made the winged woman flutter back. The way she coughed up blood seemed to surprise her. And the way that she fell dead of blood plague a moment later would, Elary hoped, convince anyone who thought they could simply take Elary of their folly.

She sprinted down the hall, hearing Naldeon shout something that was intent on ignoring. She ducked beneath a reaching arm, and stood up straight again to see the winged woman flying with Mitherill up a twisting stair.

Elary ran. The robe flapping around her hindered her, but she didn't dare discard it; she was thinking of another flight into cold air, and knew that she could never survive if she was naked. She hauled the robe up instead, and ran as fast as she could up the stairs and out onto the roof.

She had just burst free of the confines of the staircase when she saw the winged woman preparing to leap into the wind. "Stop!" Elary cried, and held out her hand, wondering if she could fling disease from this distance.

The woman looked back at her once and laughed.

That roused something else, something more than Elary's anger. She saw Mitherill stir under the woman's arm, and then a voice spoke in her ear that Elary doubted anyone else could hear.

Down.

Elary ducked, and then she felt the power as Destiny began to rise from the form of the captive Princess.

Chapter 55

Mastering the Elements

"The Masters of the Star Circle are not the Masters of all the elements, though they like to call themselves that and think they are. My sisters and I may yet have a few tricks to show them."

-Attributed to the Calocee, during her reign of terror in Dalzna.

"Should we be having snow now?"

Kymenos glanced over his shoulder at Cheyena, who huddled on Estia as if hoping that the snow would mistake her for a log and not bother to coat her. "Of course!" he called. "We aren't really out of winter yet, not in Arvenna, and certainly not in Dalzna. You're not cold with your fire to warm you, are you?"

Cheyena only huddled a little more firmly on Estia and didn't bother to reply to him.

Kymenos laughed and looked up at the drifting snow. It would only be a small fall, he knew, not enough to even bury the stone, but he welcomed it. It was another sign of home. None of the

Kingdoms south of Dalzna had much snow in spring; even for Arvenna it was unusual, despite what he had said to Cheyena. This was like his country reaching out to embrace him, like a mother welcoming her son home.

Kymenos snorted. *I am getting sentimental. That last comparison would never have occurred to me ordinarily.*

I think I like it when you're sentimental, said Sykeen, picking his way carefully over a bed of wet, round stones. *At least that way you're thinking and feeling and less likely to shock me by doing something wildly inappropriate.*

Wildly inappropriate to what? Kymenos shook his head as snow starred his hair, and put out his tongue to lap it from the air. *I hope that you are not taking up Dolasson's idea of my being a hero.*

No. But I am the kind of horse who would usually have a hero as his rider, and it does make me feel strange when I know I carry someone who outraged every concern of propriety by doing what he did.

Kymenos snorted, and said nothing. If the stallion felt like that, then nothing Kymenos could say would soothe him.

Besides, said Sykeen, twitching his tail as they mounted a small ridge and looked down into a valley and village behind, *I'm glad that you feel so comfortable. There are fears riding the wind that make me less comfortable.*

The wind?

Kymenos turned his mind to the Gust. It might not have been as amenable to him as Light and Azure were, but he could sometimes still read its moods. And Sykeen was right. There was a hostility to it that didn't feel like ice. The ice didn't hate anyone; it just howled across the mountains and froze the flesh that it found unprotected by walls or furs or fire. This felt like something directed at him.

Kymenos grinned. Perhaps he shouldn't, but after the defeat of Dolasson, he was feeling defiant.

He turned back to Cheyena. "How would you feel about an early camp?" he called.

"To get out of this wind?" Cheyena nodded, though the movement was slight; she barely managed to lift her head from the saddle at all. "I would welcome a shelter inside a bear at this point."

"There's a village ahead," said Kymenos. "I'll see you settled there with the horses, and then Norianna and I have a task to complete."

"I'm glad to see that you include me now, instead of trying to lay me aside," the sword said nastily.

"Wouldn't work," said Kymenos. "Besides, there are People of the Blending after me, or I'm no Master of the Star Circle. They probably created this snow thinking to force me into shelter."

"And you need my help to defeat them," said Norianna, with a resignation as flat as her blade in her tone.

Kymenos simpered. "Would you be so kind?"

"You know that I have to be," said Norianna. "We are going north together, and you are someone I have some stake in protecting."

Kymenos smiled. He had accepted that he wasn't going to get Norianna to talk about what made him so special and why she took such risks for him, but he could pick up clues and put them together as well as the next human- probably better, since few people were so clever as he was. And this was another clue. He tucked it carefully away in his store.

He heard Cheyena make a small noise, and turned to look at her. "Yes, Cheyena, what is it?"

"What do you have to do?" she asked, lifting her head enough that he could see her pale face and frightened eyes.

"A few more enemies are after me," he said. "I just want to make sure that they don't trouble us excessively."

Cheyena said nothing, but went back to her shivering, as much with fear as with cold, Kymenos thought. He sighed. Sometimes he could almost see the point of Dolasson's contention that a cowardly woman was not an attractive one.

But only some of the time. The rest of the time, Cheyena's frightened expression only increased the attraction he had started feeling when he first realized that she admired him.

"Come on," he said, and touched his heels to Sykeen's sides. "I don't think that we'll get much further just sitting here."

Cheyena giggled as if he had made some grand jest. Kymenos frowned at nothing in particular, and kept riding. No, she wasn't that intelligent, and she relied a little too much on her simpering to get her into any particular man's favor, but he could still enjoy her.

They came down the slope to the village slowly and in plain sight, so it was no surprise that the peasants were waiting for them when they reached the valley floor. Kymenos studied the nearest expressions or lack of expressions, then smiled. They didn't look hostile, only blank. That was the best expression for an Arvennese peasant to wear, he'd found. The curious ones wanted to know too much about his business; the hostile ones wanted to turn him out.

"I require shelter for the night," he said in Arvennese. "For myself, my companion, and two horses."

"Where are you from?" asked the woman who stepped forward to meet him. Her hair was cut short, which might have indicated that it went under a helmet and she therefore fought, but Kymenos could see that her hands were bare of sword-calluses. It was probably just easier to take care of that way. It was her hollow eyes more than her cropped hair that intrigued him, though. She didn't really care about the questions she was asking; she just did it by rote. "You look Dalznan, but you speak our tongue with an accent out of Orlath."

"I learned it from someone who came from Orlath," said Kymenos easily. "If you want to fetch someone who speaks Dalznan, then I would be happy to prove my native command of that."

The woman only stared at him, as if not understanding what he said, and then turned and whispered to someone else. Kymenos rolled his eyes but sat still. They always had to verify everything.

Soon enough they escorted a man towards him. The man tottered, and what few hairs he had left were more white than black. Kymenos snorted impatiently to himself. If the man proved too deaf to hear, then he would just tell the villagers they could have his coin and custom or not.

"You speak Dalznan, you said," said the man then, in such a musical voice that Kymenos blinked and looked more closely. Yes, the dark brown eyes and those lines of the face bespoke a fellow countryman.

"Yes," said Kymenos. "I am a native of that country, and only passing through Arvenna. You come from that land as well, don't you?"

The old man smiled. "It is all right," he said to the villagers in Arvennese. "He is who he claims to be." He went back to Dalznan. "It has been so long since I have heard that language. What is your name?"

"Kymenos."

The man sighed longingly. "And even longer since I have heard a name that does not pain my ears," he said. "I wish that I had more time to stand and talk with you, but the cold bites into my bones, so I must leave you with only one warning."

"What is that?" Kymenos asked politely, eyeing the villagers. They didn't look all that threatening, but he knew that sometimes the meekest and most inoffensive people could provide the most surprises.

"Stay as short a time as you can," said the man. "There are sometimes strangers who visit the villages, strangers who are fey and bear the patch of a crown on their shoulders." He restrained himself from spitting when he mentioned the crown, but only with difficulty, Kymenos saw. He was Dalznan, and freeborn, and needed no monarch to rule over his heart and will.

"I understand," said Kymenos, and then started haggling with the hollow-eyed woman for a room in the inn and food and stabling for the horses. She was willing enough to provide it, once she heard that he didn't come from Orlath and was passing to the north. Kymenos wondered at that, but shrugged. He was going to stay out of politics unless they touched him directly.

Cheyena stayed behind, though she touched Kymenos's arm when he made ready to walk out of the village with Norianna. "Be careful, Kymenos. I will be waiting for you when you get back."

Kymenos kissed her softly and left her smiling. He wondered if she knew the implication of a man and woman in an Arvennese inn sharing the same room. Probably not.

And probably if she did, she would find the implication entirely agreeable.

Kymenos looked around. He stood on a ridge, well-exposed to the wind and well away from the village and the inn. Sykeen was out of the way, and Cheyena. He had with him only Norianna, who was blazing with a cold pale light that Kymenos thought of as the fire of battle.

"I'm ready," he called into the air, and settled himself. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

They appeared in front of him, both sylphs, though the one on the left had a shine to her that suggested she would rather have been an undine. They glared at him. Kymenos grinned at them.

"Let me guess," he said. "You were sent by Nightstone?"

"Yes," said the one on the left. "And if you don't put up a fight, then we don't even have to mistreat you."

"No," said Kymenos. "I had a few days of her tender hospitality. I'm not going back to her." He set his feet and lifted his sword. "I'm so glad to see that you and she suited each other."

"Anyone of the Orlathian royal blood would suit us," said the one on the right. The one on the left began to fly around him, the buzz of her wings a dangerous sound, or at least one she was trying to

make dangerous. "She is of the royal blood, and we know that you were supposed to serve the royal Princess and betrayed her. So bringing you in is a double pleasure."

Kymenos laughed. "I am surprised that you confine your enmity to me." Norianna moved in his hand, lashing out behind him, and he heard a little cry. When he brought the sword back in front of him, he saw that a tiny piece of what looked like clear cloth, and was probably sylph-wing, clung to the blade. "After all, you know that she wanted to kill the Princess Alliana."

"What?"

Kymenos laughed again. He was feeling good about this, perhaps because of Norianna, perhaps because he was looking forward to something special and particular happening when he went back to the inn in Arvenna tonight. "Oh, she didn't tell you that part? Yes, she chained Alliana in the cells and wanted to perform a certain ritual on her, one that would destroy her by her ties to her foster sister. It didn't happen quite that way, but the Princess did die."

"How?"

Kymenos wondered at the intensity in their eyes. They had known about this- they had to have known- and had chosen to serve Nightstone anyway. "A thiria came and killed her."

The one who had been buzzing said, "It is a lie, sister. Surely it must be. He would do anything to defend himself against our power, and so he is laying accusations against the Princess we have sworn to serve."

"But I have heard some murmurs of this before," said the one who had asked Kymenos those questions. She hovered towards him. "I know that a thiria was roused in Rivendon, and flew south. I don't know what became of it after that, but I do know that one was roused. And you say that you saw it kill the Princess Alliana?"

Kymenos nodded.

"Then Nightstone is absolved of blame," said the sylph, though there was some uncertainty in her voice. "Of course she must be. There was no chance that she could have done something like that, and now we know that her hands did not shed the Princess Alliana's blood."

"But she bound her to a cell, and would have slaughtered her had not the thiria come," said Kymenos. Had they really not known? *This is too rich.* "Doesn't that count as wanting to kill her?"

The sylphs buzzed at each other for a moment. Then the one who had asked him those questions said, "We have to ask Nightstone. Stay in that village," and flew to the south. The other flew after her.

Kymenos was left, blinking and holding Norianna, alone in the snowstorm. Then he lowered the sword and laughed again.

"You persist in talking your way out of trouble, and into it," said Norianna. "You remind me greatly of someone I once knew."

"Who?"

But the sword refused to answer him, which didn't surprise Kymenos. He turned and went loping back to the village, whistling cheerfully all the way. His stride got longer as he neared the houses.

Cheyena would be waiting.

Chapter 56

Change's Purpose

"Many have tried to sound the purposes of Change- not simply the force, but the power, the intelligence that waits behind all the small changes in the world and works towards its unfathomable goals. As should be clear from my use of words like 'unfathomable,' and the fact that I have not presented any firm conclusions, you may reasonably conclude that all of those sounders have failed."

-Derrent of Dalzna.

"My lady?"

Nightstone opened her eyes slowly. She was lying on the floor of her room, or so she thought at first. But when she lifted her head, she found that she lay in a place that was a good deal lighter than her own chamber, not least because the walls were white.

She groaned.

"Is something wrong?" said the voice.

"It's been years since something snatched me away from my world and dumped me in another one," said Nightstone blurrily, trying to remember if she had ever heard the voice before. She didn't think so, but the bump she had taken to the head could be confusing her memory. She hoped that she didn't have a concussion. She'd had enough of them. "And now I'm trying to work out who you are."

"Of course, you would," said the voice, and then the speaker stepped forward and slipped its hands under her elbows, helping her up. "That better?"

Nightstone regained her balance, then nearly vomited as she nodded too hard. Blearily, she looked at the figure in front of her.

Her sight cleared quickly. The figure was human until the head, but the neck was feathered, and the head was a unicorn's, and both of them were shining with red light. She stood facing an avatar of Change itself.

If it hadn't been for her head, she might have fallen, or knelt, or bowed. But instead, she stood in front of Change and asked, "I'm sorry, since I don't know, but what gesture of abasement do you expect?"

Change laughed merrily. "None! Did you really think that I would demand something from you, in the way that a lesser power might?"

"I haven't met many powers," said Nightstone. "But all of the ones I did wanted me to bow or kneel, if not more. And you're said to be the mightiest of the powers."

"That is true," said Change, dashing Nightstone's faint hope that he would contradict her. He gestured with his horn towards the chairs at the far end of the room. "I have prepared wine. Would you like to sit down and have some?"

Nightstone stared at the figure. He stared back at her, seeing faintly concerned. "Is it this form that makes you so silent?" he asked. "I could change it, if you like." For a moment, he rippled, and then

someone who looked almost exactly like Nightstone herself except for the brown eyes stood facing her. "Or this." And there was a female half-elf, prettier than Tewilde but otherwise almost her twin. "Or this." And the figure swelled into a dragon.

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. "Are you doing this to impress me? If so, it seems strange that you don't want a bow or some other kind of gesture of respect."

The figure changed back into a man, this time with a human head instead of a unicorn one, though there were still feathers on his neck that might have come from an eagle. "I wasn't doing it to impress you," he said, sounding honestly surprised. "I thought you might be more comfortable with someone who looked more human, but first that you wouldn't know who I really was without a sight of the symbol which is most commonly decreed mine."

"You are strange," said Nightstone.

"For a power? I think so. For myself? I don't think so." The figure gestured to the chairs and the wine again. "Would you please sit? If the vintage does not please you, then I can make it into something else."

"You can, can't you, with your power," Nightstone muttered even as she sat down in the nearest of the chairs. It was comfortable against her back. Nightstone tried to ignore the sensation that it was molding itself around her as she sat there, making itself even more comfortable.

"Well, of course," said Change, and sat down in his own chair. He gestured, and one of the winecups rose and skimmed across the table until it landed neatly in Nightstone's hand. Even the few telekinetics Nightstone had met could not have done that so smoothly. She swallowed, and then swallowed a sip of the wine. It was very good, of a vintage that she remembered from somewhere back before her swearing to the Dark but had forgotten the name of.

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked, meeting Change's eyes. They were brown again, though there was a gleam of red in them if she concentrated hard enough.

"Because I wanted to give you a warning," said Change. "Of course, you're not the only one I'm giving the warning to, but I wanted to make sure that the present ruler of Orlath was one of those who received one."

"Are you going to tell me not to war with the Light?" Nightstone asked.

Change smiled a little. "Why would I? The great wars of Dark and Light are over. Surely you know that."

"That is what Dark has often said," said Nightstone, "but I know that a messenger came to me in the last day who brought the news that perhaps Light may be destroyed. The Dark would not refrain from such a war."

Change sighed and sipped his own wine again. "I know. That is one of the reasons I woke. I have been trying to find a balance between bettering the world and not actually destroying any of the powers or gods, and I thought I had found a sure path. But then Light insisted on creating these royal Heirs."

"You could just change them into fish and have done with them, surely?" Nightstone asked, finally working out one thing that had been bothering her. Change could have made the table float above lava and fed her hemlock; he could have sat in a throne and made her cower before him, the way that other powers who had summoned Nightstone had done. Instead he was doing this, which was so ordinary that it made Nightstone think he must have some obscure motive.

"I could," said Change. "But I don't wish to do that."

"Why not? It would save everyone a good deal of trouble." Nightstone sneaked another sip of her wine when she didn't think he was looking. She wished she could remember the name of the vintage. It truly was excellent.

"I know," said Change. "But I can't just kill people in the name of saving them trouble."

Nightstone looked up. That was familiar. "You sound like Shadow."

Change smiled. "Do I? Or rather, does he sound like me? That is good, then. Then that means that I might have one ally, sometimes. Of course, he has his own silly notions and goes off to pursue them at the expense of the world and even his own people. But he has been a good ally. And he created the fey. I think that was well-done."

Nightstone sighed. "What is the real purpose of this visit? Do you mean to convert me to serving you or Shadow?" A moment later, she cursed her tongue. Now he might get the idea to do it, and he could make that change in her soul. There was no power in the world for whom it would be so easy.

Change blinked. "You have very strange ideas. Why would I want to do that? Of course I wish that you would reconsider some of the stupider and more impulsive things you've done, but it's not my business to tell you what you should do. I can only show you what will happen now that I have woken and come rising."

"And what will happen?" Nightstone was shivering. She didn't like being here with Change, a power that she could hardly fathom. The fact that she wasn't the first one to fail to comprehend him didn't reassure her. After all, she was the one who sat in front of Change right now.

"I will change things," said Change, and then smiled a little. "It is the thing I do best, after all, the thing I was formed for."

"But-"

"Yes?"

"What will you change them to?"

"The way that I think will work best," said Change. "The way that I think will strike the best balance between a happy world and a world where the gods and powers and mortals are still free to act."

"But who are you to decide that?" Nightstone asked, setting her empty cup down. Later, she thought she must have been drunk to argue with Change like that. But it had been very good wine, and Change just sat there and looked at her, not striking her dead, so she went on. "Dark and Light have fought for years to decide that, and then Shadow came back and wanted a share in the choice. And then there are many mortals who would like to have a part in it. Why should you make these arbitrary decisions? Will you tell me you have some grand plan for the world like Destiny does?"

Change laughed. "No, of course not! Destiny wants to use me, but doesn't want it to go further than its own choices. It wants to make a specific series of changes and then lock them in place forever, so that its chosen Heirs and their descendants always rule. I couldn't allow that."

"Then why are you making the decisions?"

"Because I alone have the power."

"You could share it," said Nightstone, a sentence that would make her cringe later. "Why don't you think of that?"

"Because I can't share it," said Change, his eyes dimming for a moment. "No power can diminish itself. Shadow could not lend control of Iantra to someone else for a day just because he felt like it. The Light could not claim the night from the Dark. I can't make changes in others' names. That's just the way it is."

"But you could change that, couldn't you?"

"Perhaps. I don't wish to."

"You're just as bad as Dark and Light and all the rest of them, then!" said Nightstone triumphantly. There was a slur in her voice, and she had the feeling that she had gone through some complicated mental dancing to arrive at this point, but she didn't care. She was making the point she wanted to make, of that she was sure. "You want to rule the world."

"No, I don't," said Change. "I have borne the rule for longer than you can imagine, and it's not really that fun."

"Then what do you want?"

"I did tell you," said Change. "To make certain transformations in the world that will help make it better."

"How can you decide what's better?"

Change shrugged. "I can't know that for certain."

"Then how dare you act?" Nightstone slammed a hand down on the table. "How dare you think that you have more right to decide for the world than a mortal or another god or power does?"

Change watched her in fascination. "Is this the way all mortals argue?" he asked. "With declamations and many claims of truth that they cannot prove?"

"I could prove it."

"Really."

"Yes. Change things in the favor of the Dark. The Dark wants what is best for the world. The Heirs will be dead, and no one will be ruled by royals. I'd give up my throne instantly if I thought anything more would happen than some damn Orlathian noble trying to take it. Change things in the favor of the Dark."

Change shook his head. "I have to try to change things in favor of everybody. As far as I can achieve that."

"You make no sense," said Nightstone, slumping back against the table. The wine was beginning to affect her, she thought, and she blinked as if she could no longer see, though she was sure that she could see Change bending towards her, an expression of concern on his face.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I suppose that you thought you would get the chance to talk me out of my changes. You don't. I just thought it was a matter of courtesy to inform you of them. Perhaps not." He

sighed. "It is very hard for me to comprehend something that is supposed to be the same every time, such as etiquette and manners. And of course I have a few hearts to go change now, so I must fly."

The white room turned into darkness around Nightstone, but she clung to consciousness long enough to say, "Are you going to change my heart? Are you going to convert me from the service of the Dark?"

"No," said Change gently. "You have made your decision. But there will be a few changes made in Orlath itself."

Nightstone wanted to open her eyes and ask what those were, but she found that she was already slipping into sleep.

The wailing woke her up first.

Nightstone sat up cautiously, but she had no headache, either from a hangover or from hitting her head on the stone. She supposed that Change had been kind enough to heal those for her. She sat up and looked around, touching her head every now and then.

The wailing came from outside in the courtyard, she thought, and walked to the balcony to look out into it.

A woman stood there, staring at her hands. Nightstone knew her vaguely; she was a noblewoman who ruled a small cluster of villages far to the west, and would have been too frightened to rebel. Now she held up her hands and called a small spurt of fire. It built into a good burning, and then died suddenly. The woman let out another wail that made Nightstone blink and wince.

Someone pounded at her door.

Nightstone turned to it, half-expecting it to be Tewilde. "Come in," she called.

"I can't," said the muffled voice on the other side. "It's locked."

Nightstone blinked. That was almost the last voice she would have expected to hear here. "I'll open it, then," she said, walking over and unlocking the door. "Though I would have thought you could have walked through the wall."

"Not now." Prince Artaen of Rivendon stepped into the room and looked around. Then he nodded, as if he were seeing something that was invisible to Nightstone. "I see that it's happened here, too."

"What's happened?"

Artaen looked at her. "Touch the Scarlet, and then call it and tell it to burn."

Puzzled, Nightstone did as he instructed. The Scarlet opened to her, and burned in her hands. She looked at Artaen, who was staring fixedly at her fire. He didn't look as though he had seen anything unexpected, though.

He met her eyes. "Call more on the fire," he said. "Try to make a flame that could destroy the castle."

Nightstone shrugged and did as he instructed. She would have enough flame to destroy him if something happened.

She reached a certain level, just below where she knew she could destroy the castle, and the conduit snapped shut.

Nightstone opened her eyes and stared dazedly at her hand. She knew that had never happened before. The Scarlet liked her for those rare times when she would truly let it rage and burn. It wouldn't need to do something like this to her, merely to prove how free it could be.

"What has happened?" she whispered, turning to Artaen, since he seemed to know something about it. "Did you do something?"

The Prince of Rivendon snorted. "I was about to ask you that. I thought that perhaps you knew something about the symbol of Change appearing above your castle." He leaned forward. "This is greater than our petty rivalries, Nightstone, greater than any plan that you might have made in the service of the Dark. This is something that affects all Darkworkers, from what I have seen, all elemental mages. Tell me what you did, and I will help you find a way to reverse it, without speaking a word of blame."

Nightstone laughed sharply. "You have already spoken words of blame, and none of them are justified. This is not something that I did. This is something that Change did."

Artaen paled so suddenly that he looked as if he might faint. "What? But- how in the world could it do that?"

"I don't know," said Nightstone. "Perhaps it has something to do with being the mightiest power in the world?" But her voice sounded tired and bitter, not snappish, the way she had meant it to sound. She held out her hand, staring at it as she turned it back and forth. "So we can't call on the elements?"

"We can- up to a certain point," said Artaen. "But when we try for a dazzling display of power, like destroying the castle, then the conduit breaks. We can't rise past that level, not even the most powerful of us." His voice grew taut with frustration, telling Nightstone what she had long suspected, that Artaen was at least as strong in his elements as she was in hers. "Your spectacular revenge on the rebels of a few nights ago would now be impossible."

Nightstone nodded. "I see." And she thought she did. Change had done something that it thought would make the contest more equal, by depriving the strongest mages in the Kingdoms of much of their terror. Nightstone even had to wonder if everyone was at the same level now, if the weakest mages had been granted the ability to call as much of the elements as the strongest.

Almost at once, she snorted. *Of course they have. That would be the kind of thing that Change would see as fair.*

"Do you know why this happened?" Artaen asked.

"Didn't Change speak to you?"

The Prince of Rivendon blinked. "Yes, it did, but I couldn't really understand a word of what it said."

Nightstone smiled grimly. "I think that we should try to understand, and as soon as possible. I think it has limited our access to the elements to be fair."

Artaen blinked, opened his mouth, then closed it again. Nightstone was glad to see that he was thinking. Then he said, "But why would it do such a thing?"

"That is what we must try to understand," said Nightstone, and turned towards the door. "It is a good thing that I have spent so long in study. I can persuade my people that I have tricks that they don't, because I still do. Only the level of strength was affected, and not finesse."

"Tricks?"

Nightstone smiled at Artaen, or more precisely, at the worried expression in Artaen's eyes. *Let him worry. We are allies, but he was not gracious about it, and he would have destroyed me for causing this if I had not convinced him that Change was to blame. We are not friends.*

"Yes, tricks," she murmured, and then swept out the door ahead of him.

Chapter 57

The Long-Gone Dead

"Queen Idona was something I have never seen before. Beautiful and fair to those she liked, but harsh as stone and winter to those she didn't. There was no risk she would not take, nothing she would not do, to make sure that the grip of her hand and her line was secure on the Rivendonian throne."

-Prince Elssone of Orlath, describing his first visit to Rivendon.

"It is good to see you again, Olumer."

Olumer opened his eyes and stared into the snow. It was better to lie like this, he thought, with his back to the hall and his face to the drifts. There was less chance that he would see something that might upset him.

"I said, it is good to see you again, Olumer."

If he had not seen her come to life, that voice would have convinced him. He had known her for many years. He knew the impatience that came into her tone when she thought that someone was ignoring her, and not for a good reason.

Slowly, Olumer rolled over to face her.

Queen Idona of Rivendon smiled at him. Olumer studied her closely, and then shook his head. The illusion of life was perfect. The dark stone of her arms and legs gleamed and moved and flexed like living flesh and muscle. It took the gleam of light on her arms, or the realization that her skin smelled of dust and not sweat, to tell an observer what he was looking at.

"Look into my eyes."

Olumer looked up. Her eyes were not blue-green stone, but living, and even in the midst of his loathing, Olumer was forced to admire the magic that had made this possible. He had never known that a statue could look so like the woman he had loved and hated and wed. Of course, he hadn't remembered until a short time ago that he had ever loved or hated or wed with her at all.

"You look just as you always did," said Idona, and for a moment there was a touch of envy in her voice. "You were hibernating when age took me. Your skin doesn't get wrinkled, does it? And you've never felt the hand of age on you, slowing your movements, holding you back when you know that just a few years ago you could walk as smoothly as any of them."

"Your skin won't get wrinkled now, either," said Olumer, and then regretted it. He should be denouncing her, not making jokes.

But Idona's smile showed she was pleased. The skill of the carving, or whatever had really made her, extended to her lips; they bent apart to show perfectly formed teeth, which from their shine might be diamonds. "That's true." She held up one arm and studied it complacently. "I'll move more ponderously in this body, not skip over the snow like you, but I won't get tired. And of course we might find out whether the carver's skill has extended between my legs." She reached for him with one arm.

Olumer didn't want that arm to go around his neck. He rolled aside, and her hand fell heavily into the snow where he had been.

"Olumer," said Idona gently, as if chiding. "It must have been so long. You thought you were half-fey, and you would have slept in between protecting our brood. Don't you want to share the bed that we once did?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I remember how you compelled me to weave the shining net around my memory," said Olumer. "You held a knife to our son's throat, and you would have killed him if I hadn't done it."

Idona lowered her head. Her carved dark hair didn't sway forward around her face, but she still managed to make the gesture penitent. "I wouldn't really have killed Ulon, Olumer. You can't believe that."

"Yes, you would have."

Idona looked up, smiling again. "Yes, I would have," she agreed. "You always did know me too well." She eyed him and sighed wistfully. "But surely, Olumer, one frolic couldn't hurt. Cadona is in there instructing the older ones, the ones who barely remember living, in what they have to do. We'll have nothing else to occupy us for a few hours."

"I will not bed with you again."

"One day," said Idona, "you will. It will take some time, that's all."

Olumer stared at her. She stared back at him, lazy and unselfconscious as a cat. And he knew it was true, that she would believe he just "needed some time" until the end of both their existences if she wanted.

"No," he said. "I mean it. I despise you, Idona, for what you have done, and most of all for what you have made Cadona do. You were the one who whispered that idea of killing Lyli to her, weren't you?"

"You were always so clever," said Idona. "And you know me so well. Yes, of course I was. But we really did need blood that was associated with royalty to wake, and I would have hated to use you. I really loved you, Olumer. You believe that, right?" Her look became coquettish.

"No."

Idona frowned for the first time. "You have changed. Gotten colder, less interesting." She tossed her head at the hall. "Has taking care of our great-great-granddaughter gotten that trying?"

"She is a reflection of you, Idona."

"Not in everything," said Idona. "She is determined never to share her throne, did you know that? Not to marry or have a lover. She thinks that she will weaken if she does. I will have to explain the succession to her and the advantages of having someone at her side she can trust absolutely. But that will also come in time."

"If she binds some other silvereyes male to her-"

"Oh, she will," said Idona. "Of course, she has silvereyes blood, so she should have your kin behind her. Perhaps she will bind some other fey male. She will do what she has to do to rule Rivendon."

Olumer turned away. He and she didn't intend the words the same way, but he could hear in hers the echo of his own declaration to Vander, fervent appeals about uniting the whole of Rivendon behind Cadona.

No rule is worth it, he thought, heartsick. Not if she becomes what Idona is.

But does she have to?

It was very hard to crush hope, he'd found. It continued blooming even when he knew it should have died long since. Right now, it was blooming in the shadow of what Cadona had done. Perhaps she had only done it since she was so intent on ruling Rivendon, and with Idona's voice whispering in her ear, she had no choice. Perhaps there was a chance he could save her.

He turned back to Idona. "I didn't get much chance to speak with our granddaughter before I ran out. Do you think that she would make time in her instruction of the older ones to see me?"

"Oh, yes," said Idona. "She knows that she owes you so much. Go in and speak with her at any moment."

"I will do it now."

Olumer rose and entered the hall, conscious of Idona's eyes on his back, conscious of hating them. But his hope had outgrown his hatred, and filled the whole of his blackened conscience with light. There was a chance. There had to be one, however small.

"Cadona?"

She glanced up at him, and at once waved a hand. The black statues before her sank back in their seats, and she ran forward to meet him, throwing her arms around his waist the way she had done when she killed her very first cougar. When the pride had faded, the blood had gotten to her, and the realization of how easily she could have died under its claws.

"Oh, Olumer!"

Olumer held her fiercely back, heart thrumming. Just possibly he might do this. Just possibly he might win her back.

"Cadona," he said softly. "You know what you have done?"

"Yes."

Cadona leaned back from him, staring into his face. Olumer saw her haunted silver eyes, and flashed into another memory: that of his son, Prince Ulon, who had one day overheard Olumer cursing Idona for what she had done to him, and what Ulon had been too young to remember. His eyes had gotten wide and shadow-filled just like this, and from that day forward he had hated his mother, bringing her down at last in a bloody coup. He had not reigned long after that, but from what Olumer remembered of his son, he wouldn't have cared. Killing that hated woman would have been all that he wanted.

He hoped that all Cadona wanted was to put the old royalty of Rivendon back to sleep and save Lyli, if it could still be done- or at least leave this hall and never look back again.

His heart full, he opened his mouth to tell her he would help her do it.

And then Cadona said, "I know that I have raised the army that will take back Rivendon, and I know what a great thing that is. I'm on my way to becoming a Queen, Olumer, and I thought I was ready, but I'm not!" And she buried her head in his chest and began to sob again.

Olumer held her, and stared at the royalty of Rivendon. They looked back at him with impassive faces. Some of them whispered and murmured in a language so old that he couldn't understand it; he had never had any association with humans until the modern form of Rivendonian was spoken.

He held her, and realized that she wasn't sorry, or that she was but that it would not be enough to stop her.

He looked at Lyli, and accepted from those staring eyes and the lingering echoes of her scream that she was still alive.

The hope died. Cadona was the last of his kin, the only pack he had left, and she was a monster beyond any filiferna.

Olumer closed his eyes. Once he had committed himself to raising a young Princess in silence and secret, and he had done it for twelve years. Surely he could swear another oath, one that would not take him near as long.

He would stop Cadona. No matter what it took, if he must slaughter her and free Lyli and stand against the army of royals all at once. He would find some way to do all those things.

"Olumer? Are you all right?"

Olumer looked back at Cadona and smiled. "Of course I am," he said.

"Then come help me," said Cadona, tugging on his hand. "Some of my ancestors want to meet you."

And, of course, waiting until I can stop them will mean pretending to be one of them for a while.

Olumer fixed his eyes on the old monarchs, and managed to smile as politely as he could. They probably weren't familiar enough with silvereyes to know the difference between a grin and the tooth-baring that preceded a challenge for pack leadership.

Whatever it takes. By the cold I swear it.

A Turning of Powers

"The councils of the gods are many things, but they are rarely, if ever, boring."

-Attributed to the Black Brotherhood of the Night.

Ternora didn't remember exactly when she had dozed off amidst all the arguing, but she knew what woke her up.

The Deciding Place rotated what felt like half a turn to the right. Ternora was awake at once, gripping the edge of her seat and listening to the cries of startled mortals. None of the gods or powers seemed startled, but they were standing and regarding the ceiling of the Deciding Place with grave expressions that Ternora didn't like.

"What is it?" she asked, turning to Alira as someone who would probably know.

But the High Priestess had her head bowed and was murmuring prayers in a tongue that Ternora didn't know. Ternora sighed and turned away. It seemed that most of the people around her had a tendency to become incomprehensible just when she most needed them to tell her what was going on.

"It's change," said someone next to her.

Ternora glanced up and found herself staring at a tall woman with red skin, eyes, and hair. Small flames played around her hands, and her gaze was fixed on the center of the Ring. Ternora followed it, and saw Shadow standing there, his head up and a smile on his face.

"What do you mean?" Ternora asked her.

The red woman glanced at her. "Change has woken," she said. "The power called Change. It just did something to the Cycle. And to a few of the gods' hearts, I think," she added, tilting her head as if she could hear voices that Ternora was oblivious to.

"What did it do to the Cycle?" Ternora asked in interest. It wouldn't affect her, whatever it was, since half-fey didn't have elemental magic, but it could affect her vengeance against Warcourage.

"Cut it off at a certain point," said the red woman. "The Scarlet- and the other elements, of course, but the Scarlet is the most important- can no longer touch the world as strongly as they used to. The mages can only call a certain level of power. And it seems to be the same in all the mages the world over. That is interesting."

Ternora blinked. "Why would it want to do that?"

The woman shrugged and smiled a little. "I have never understood Change, but I think only a power could, and I serve a god."

"Whom do you serve?"

"Rennon, Lord of Fire," said the woman. "I wonder why Shadow is looking so happy?"

"You don't seem very upset about the Scarlet not touching the world strongly anymore," Ternora observed.

The woman glanced at her. "And whom do you serve?"

"Shara, Lady of the Night."

"Who has never suffered a real reduction in Her power, and even enjoyed some growth of it," said the woman. There was a hint of an old, old bitterness in her voice, but she didn't let it out fully. "Rennon has been hounded and driven from the Kingdoms He should rule, even the ones where His worship was once strong. This may mean that no one can threaten my Lord any longer, that He will have the chance to come back without being driven by the other elements. I hope so."

Ternora didn't know what to say in reply to that, so she looked back to the Ring. Shadow had lifted his hands, and every light in the Deciding Place, whether it came from flames or starlight or just the gods and mortals themselves, flickered abruptly. That made most of the screaming mortals stop screaming in order to figure out what had happened, and most of the gods and powers look toward Shadow.

"Thank you," said Shadow, lowering his hands. "Now. We had almost made a decision in any case, but it seems that Change has made one for us." His smile remained in place, Ternora saw. She wondered if he was using Illusion- or whatever a power's equivalent of it must be- to present that smiling face, or if what Change had done really fit into his plans.

"We had *not* decided what to do," said Death. "We have the chance to destroy the Light. I say we take it."

"I think that you will not find that easy to do," said Shadow. "The Cycle has been pulled back a little from the world, and most of our magic will be affected, as will the magic of our worshippers. And Change does not want us warring on and destroying the Light completely."

"Why should we listen to it?" the red woman asked, standing. "Change was also the one who decreed that the worship of Rennon should fade and the worship of Elle should stay intact. There is no need to listen to it!"

"All of us have some reason to be angry at Change," said Shadow soothingly. "It was Change who helped my locking out of the world for centuries, or at least did not oppose it. But things are different now."

"Just because Change has arisen?" the red woman continued stubbornly. "There is no reason to let it influence everything we do."

"But it does," said Shadow quietly. "Every breath we take changes the air. Every decision we make changes the course of the future. We could not act at all if not for Change. Even attacking the Light would further his power, though it might not be what he hopes we will do. And I think that we would be better off accepting his decree on the elements and moving further along in the direction of reconciliation with Light."

"That is impossible," said the red woman. "My Lord will never love Light again, for what its goddess did to Him."

"The Light and Elle are not one and the same," said Shadow, his smile growing. Ternora shivered. *There is something a little frightening about that smile of his.* "And I can prove that to you. Do you think Light will come to this Council?"

There came a series of snorts, growls, and laughs from the grouped gods. Ternora looked around for anyone who would disagree, and found a few hesitant looks, but no one said anything in opposition to Shadow.

"No," said Shadow. "It will admit of no compromise. It is the power that wants to change the world only to a certain point and then stop. But we have with us one who has gone further than that, even though She knows what it will mean when Light and Destiny learn of Her defection."

He gestured, and a shaft of light stabbed down from no direction in particular, reminding Ternora of Savior's shaft of light beneath the ocean. It formed into golden steps.

Down the steps came a woman clad in gray robes, her eyes uncertain, her steps faltering. Her aura of divine power was hardly there, though the welling light around her proclaimed well enough who she was.

"Sister."

It was Shara who said that, and stepped forward holding her hands out. Elle looked at her, licked her lips nervously, and then came forward and accepted Shara's hands.

"Sister," she said back.

The gods were staring as the two goddesses clasped hands. Ternora looked at the red woman who represented Rennon and had to clasp her own hand over her mouth at once. The woman looked stunned enough that a feather-touch could knock her over. Ternora struggled with temptation a moment, then reached out to see if it would work.

"Enough!"

That roar came from Death, who was growing. In seconds, the massive black hound's head brushed the roof of the Deciding Place, and the maggot that squirmed out of his nose was as big as Ternora.

"You will not take my vengeance from me," said Death. "I was promised a war on the Light, and a war I will have."

"You should not," said Shadow, who was almost the only power not paying attention to the reunion of Shara and Elle. Since he had known about it, Ternora supposed, it didn't hold all that much interest for him. "Change is struggling to make the world into a place that will not need such wars. Of course, Light and Destiny will fight us, but we should only hold our places and fight a defensive war."

"You called this Council to destroy Light, you told us," said Death, and his growl was echoed by the growls from several other powers and gods.

"That was before Change arose," said Shadow, not sounding at all abashed. "What Change wishes, it will have. And the world has spun past the point where Light and Destiny could control it, as Change has reminded me and as I should have listened to. One of the four royal Heirs is dead. The Light's Prophecy cannot work. And it will be weaker than ever, with Elle come to our side. We have only to hold our places, and the Light will burn out."

"We cannot trust Elle!"

That was from the red woman, also growing and changing as Ternora watched. Flames billowed out of her and overran her robe from crown to toe, wrapping her in what looked like wings of fire. In seconds, she glowed like the sun, heat and light almost too bright to bear, and a male voice spoke from the female face. "I will not stand for what She did to Me. I will not stand having Her as an ally."

"Rennon," said Shadow, still not sounding surprised. Ternora was beginning to wonder if he plotted each breath in advance. "You came in the guise of a servant. Still You fear that we might hunt You down and harm You?"

"I know My own strength," said Rennon. "And it will increase with the restriction of Azure to a reasonable level. If I stand against you and want to fight the war against Light or Dark or Death or any force I please, then you cannot stop Me."

"That is true enough," said Shadow. "But neither can we aid You, as we might if You joined us in fighting a defensive war."

Rennon laughed. In that laughter was the burning of forests and racing wildfires on the Plains. "I will do only what I choose," he said. "Even Change cannot make the decisions for Me. And I will find allies where you least expect them."

"I have no doubt of that," said Shadow.

Rennon turned to look around the Deciding Place. The inspection was very slow and showy, and Ternora had no doubt whatsoever that Shadow was letting the Lord of Flame do it. "Any power who wishes to join Me," he said, "may do so. I am not choosy about allies."

"Except me."

Ternora recognized Elle's voice, though how she didn't really know. It was stripped of that arrogance which had been so much its defining characteristic, and turned into a thing of humility. Ternora glanced down to see Elle stepping forward, her head bowed so that she hid her face almost as well as the hood on her robe would have.

"I know that you have no reason to trust me, Rennon," said Elle softly. "I have been a tormentor, and not a sister. But I say to you that I have repented, and that I will become what I once was- a goddess of the earth and fields, of creation and judgment. Not the goddess of Light I set myself up to be. You can fight Light, but you will not be fighting me. I am not your foe."

"You are," said Rennon. "For a priestess broken. For My people scattered and driven from Orlath. For the dead and the dying, and the way that your priestesses have hunted down and obscured even the last traces of their magic and their lore. I will hunt them down in turn, and laugh as they die in the flames."

Elle bowed her head further and said nothing.

Rennon turned to look around the Deciding Place. "All of you have heard Shadow say that we must yield to Change!" he cried. "This talk of defensive wars and waiting and watching bores Me. Flame does not wait and watch, or burn only in guarded firepits that never are opened. Flame burns everything!"

A chorus of cries answered him. Ternora felt someone shift next to her and glanced at Alira. The High Priestess's face was pale.

"Damn Him," she said, so softly that Ternora could hardly hear her. "Does He want to start a war that He cannot win?"

Someone stood up beyond Alira. Ternora was not entirely surprised to see that it was Koroth. He bowed to Rennon.

"The Lord of Fire is entirely right," he said. "None of the gods was meant to cower before Light and Destiny, and certainly not at the bidding of another power." He turned and met Shadow's eyes.

Shadow, Ternora saw, had lost his smile for the first time. He gazed back at Koroth without speaking, and then said to Rennon, "Remember only that it is the Lord of Murder who says this."

Koroth laughed. "That is a mortal name, Shadow. I was Lord of Battle before I was anything else, and still am." He turned to Rennon. "I offer You my services, Lord!" he cried. "Fire and blood shall sweep the Kingdoms. Let them learn to fear the Lords of Flame and Battle running side by side!"

Other excited cries came back, and other gods and powers swore themselves to the war. Ternora was sure that she saw Death join in as well, or perhaps that was Death's maggot. She looked back into the Ring, wondering if this was something that Shadow had also foreseen, and if not, how he would work it into his plans.

But Shadow was smiling again, and beyond him, Shara and Elle were speaking softly together, as if they really were sisters reunited after a long time apart. Ternora shook her head. None of the gods were mortal, but sometimes she managed to forget that, if they wore a mortal semblance.

"Let us go to Her," said Alira, standing up suddenly.

Ternora blinked. "What?"

"Shara. She has won a grand victory this day, convincing Elle to come to our side at last. Let us go to Her." Alira began to pick her way down from the tiers towards the Ring.

Ternora hesitated, glancing around. The gods and powers went on swearing themselves to a war that might be suicidal for all Ternora knew, not seeming that concerned about it. Shadow still smiled. Shara and Elle talked, and made room for Alira when she came down though neither of them glanced at her.

Ternora stood up, and felt eyes on her.

She stared into Koroth's face when she turned her head, and was certain she saw the desire for her own death reflected in his eyes. Of course, it was probably nothing personal. He wished death to almost the whole world, if the legends she had read of him were true.

But it *felt* personal.

And, after a moment, the silver eyes turned away from her, and Koroth hurried towards Rennon, speaking words in a tongue that Ternora couldn't understand.

She shook her head and came down the tiers after Alira, in time to see Shara turn away from Elle and smile at her High Priestess. The smile fell in turn on Ternora as she joined them, and Shara said, "I am particularly glad that you have joined my ranks now, Ternora. If I didn't know that it was against every design of Destiny, I would be tempted to call it fate."

"My lady?" Ternora asked, not sure what she was talking about.

Shara smiled. "Shadow wants mainly a defensive war," she said. "But we may strike at the heart of other forces and still call it a defense, because of what they would do to us if we did not."

Ternora smiled. She liked the sound of that, though she still wasn't sure what Shara was leading up to. "Yes, my lady?"

"And Prince Warcourage, in the hands of a force who may be of the Light but may not be, could be a weapon."

Ternora inclined her head. "Certainly I would rest more easily if he was dead, my lady."

Shara laughed. "You shall get your chance. I was one of the warriors against the winged fey long ago, and I still remember some of the roads to their country. You could go there and kill Prince Warcourage."

Ternora swallowed. She truly had been prepared to wait years, she told herself. This excess of excitement was silly. "I could go today?"

Shara shook her head. "No. It will take some training. But it would take you less time than the training of a novice priestess in my service."

"I will do it, my lady."

"Shara."

Ternora glanced up in surprise. She had never heard Alira speak to their goddess by name before, nor the sharp, worried note in the High Priestess's voice.

Alira was staring at Shara as if the Lady of Night had decreed she were joining Destiny. "You would bring back the Starwalkers?" she asked, with the sharp note turning into something that resembled panic.

"I would," said Shara, looking at Alira in interest, as if the High Priestess had done something new and fascinating. "What is wrong with that?"

"My lady, it is your decision, of course," said Alira, while sounding as if she had a bit of bun stuck in her throat. "But I thought you banished the Starwalkers because they grew too wild for you to control."

"Those did," said Shara. "They became consumed with thoughts other than vengeance. But Ternora will keep her mind on the task." She turned and looked at the half-elf. "Won't you, Ternora?"

Ternora bowed her head, already playing with thoughts of the ways that she would kill Warcourage. Of course, Shara might have even more frightening and devious tricks to use. "Of course, my lady. I want nothing more than to see the Prince of Doralissa lying dead in front of me."

"Good," said Shara. "Then we will begin your training the moment we return to the world. I still have one thing to do first, though."

"What?" Ternora asked, but Shara gave her no answer. She lifted her head just in time to see the goddess walking towards Elle.

Chapter 59

Gates Into Faerie

"Do not step through a gate into Faerie. The chances are thousands to one that you will ever look at beauty the same way again."

-Proverb of Orlath.

Elary felt the stone shift beneath her hands, and wondered how safe she would be lying flat after all.

She found out a moment later as the Serpent's Shelter shrugged like a true serpent in response to the call of Mitherill's Crop magic. Mitherill flung her head back and cried aloud; that much Elary could see from the corner of her eye. Golden light spat like lightning across the air. Earth magic surged everywhere.

And then red light struck the tower, and the strength of Destiny and the Crop faded abruptly.

Elary lifted her head, gasping, to see Mitherill still struggling in the grip of the winged woman. The woman looked frightened, but determined. She spread her wings and sprang to the battlements.

Elary stood and lurched forward.

"Come no nearer, *ilzán*, or I will drop her," said the winged woman, in a voice like bells and ice.

Elary stopped. For a long moment, she could hear nothing but the surge of her own blood and her own panting breath. The woman paced back and forth, her wings fluttering, her eyes straying back and forth from the drop in front of her to Elary.

"Elary, help," Mitherill sobbed. "I can't get free- I don't know what's wrong-"

"Be quiet," said the winged woman, and Mitherill's voice stopped as though the woman had stuffed her hand down her throat. The fey smiled at her, and then at Elary. "It comes in useful, sometimes, having the magic of silence," she said.

"Why do you want her?" Elary asked.

The winged woman laughed. "Surely Naldeon told you about our purpose of keeping the heirs safe? Of making sure they have armies at their backs when they come forth into the world again?"

The mocking tone in her voice would have told Elary the truth even if she hadn't already guessed it. "That's a lie," she said. "You mean to do more than keep them safe, or you could take their guardians with them. In fact, you would take their guardians with them, to make sure that the designs of Destiny were fulfilled."

The winged woman bowed to her. "You are clever beyond measure," she said. "The first clever guardian any of my kind have met. One abandoned his position, and one tried to destroy the web of Destiny, and one has-" Abruptly she broke off, and turned her head to look to the east, her wings fluttering.

"What has he done?" she asked a moment later, though Elary wasn't sure what she meant.

Elary followed her gaze and saw nothing but a stain of red light. Surely that was sunrise?

Not unless sunrise is coming early, she realized. The red light was in the approximate place on the horizon for a sunrise, but by the stars, it would be another few hours before it was supposed to be there.

"Change is moving," said the winged fey, and looked back at Elary with what was almost accusation in her eyes. "Did you cause this?"

"How could I have?" demanded Elary. "You were telling me that you will not take the guardians with the Heirs."

"No. We mean to make sure they will fight for us, and not for the Light," said the winged woman, taking another step back so that she was almost hovering on air. "Taking the thrones is well, and good. But our kin are dying, and we need the powers these Heirs possess to preserve them."

"You could always just ask," said Elary angrily. "I am a healer, and Mitherill has something of the same desire to make her people better in her heart. They might give you what you want without all this abduction."

"Too much chance that Light or Destiny would interfere," said the woman. "They made these Heirs for themselves. Of course, what power is made can also be taken advantage of."

A flicker of silver light touched the air behind her. Elary didn't miss her look of relief. She hadn't been expecting the gate to open, then, Elary thought. Or perhaps she didn't know if it would with Change moving about.

"Our conversation has been interesting," said the woman. "At the least, it has proven that even the most intelligent of the guardians has far too little intelligence to comprehend our purposes. Farewell." And she turned and jumped through the gate.

Elary was already moving. This time, she didn't plan to be separated from Mitherill, no matter what happened. She hurtled through the silver light and into the winged woman, who gave a loud whooshing sound and dropped to a solid surface. The grip of her arms around Mitherill was still grimly tight, though.

Elary pried at her hands, and, when that didn't work, touched her shoulder, calling on the blood plague.

The woman hit Elary hard with a wing before she could muster up the necessary concentration. Elary shook her head, dazed, and the woman rolled away from her and got to her feet.

A few running steps, Elary knew, added to those madly flapping wings, would see her safe in the sky.

Elary launched herself forward and grabbed the woman's ankles. Again she went down, this time on top of Mitherill, who gave a cry of pain.

Elary abandoned the thought of using disease-magic. It required concentration, and the way the woman was thrashing about, she wouldn't get the chance for that. Instead, she used another weapon that her *ilzán* heritage had given her and bit down very hard on the ankle she held.

The woman screamed. Elary grinned and bit down harder, chewing at the flesh in the way her *ilzán* mother would have chewed at an antelope.

The woman cried out, and Mitherill said, "Elary, she's dropped me! Come get me!"

Elary sprang up, spat out a bit of skin that had gotten caught in her teeth, and seized Mitherill in her arms. Then she backed towards the gate, while looking around at the country that the winged woman had brought them too.

She felt her mind slip, strangely, sideways into a blanket of drowsiness. The country was too beautiful.

That was the only explanation Elary could give afterwards for her trance. Mountains that were a purple-blue one saw in her world only on the most exquisite of clear days loomed in the distance, on the other side of a plain of short silvery grass. The sky was a stunning color, liquid, poured blue, shining as if it had been painted on. A herd of silver antelope in the distance lifted their heads and regarded Elary without a trace of fear. A few of the younger ones even ambled towards her.

"Elary!"

Even Mitherill's cry didn't wake her, but the flailing the Princess made when the winged woman tried to pull her from Elary's arms did. Elary woke, blinking, and staggered backwards, pulling them all through the gate.

She came down hard, slamming her back and head on the stone of the battlements. Her legs kicked in the air, since the gate had been a short distance beyond the Shelter. Mitherill was sobbing, and the winged woman was hitting her with hands and wings both at once, trying to get the Princess away.

Elary sat up, found that she was almost looking straight through the gate into Faerie- it could only be Faerie- and averted her eyes at once. She hauled Mitherill back towards the entrance into the Serpent's Shelter, watching the winged woman warily. The woman now hovered in the air. Her wings appeared to work, still, which was a pity. And her face was twisted in hatred, which was even more of a pity. Elary, breathing shallowly, the cut on the side of her head bleeding, knew she didn't have much of a chance of surviving the next few moments.

"Mitherill," she whispered, "can you do anything?"

The Princess whimpered fretfully in her arms. "No," she whispered back. "I've been trying and trying to call on the Crop, and nothing happens! I get to a certain point and then get cut off!" She sounded as if she were on the verge of tears.

Elary watched the winged woman advance towards them. "Can you make the stone beneath her reach up and pull her down? Not destroy her, but hold her off long enough for us to escape?"

Mitherill's whimpering quieted. Then she said, "I could try that," and the stone beneath the winged woman's feet lashed up and grabbed them. The woman let out a startled squawk.

Elary paused only long enough to make sure that the fey woman's first struggles weren't enough to break her free, then jumped up and ran back towards the stairs, staggering and half-dragging Mitherill.

"You're hurting me!"

Elary paused then only to set her on her feet and grab her hand. The Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna bounced behind her like a toy as they fled down the stairs-

And straight into Silar's ambush.

Silar rose off the ground as she crashed into them, but held steady a moment later, her wings fanning furiously. Then she landed and glared at Elary. "And what do you mean by this, dragging Her Highness all over the Shelter?"

"One of the winged fey is after us," Elary gasped. She didn't know if Silar would help them, thought it extremely likely that the winged woman and Silar were on the same side, but she couldn't keep quiet any longer. "I have to get Mitherill to a place where she'll be safe. Excuse me."

She tried to get past. Silar blocked the path with arms and wings, still staring intently up the stairway.

"One of them chasing you?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Elary fought the temptation to scream in hysteria. "Because she was trying to get Mitherill to Faerie and I pursued her and bit her ankle, and then I took Mitherill back and now she's chasing us and-"

"So."

Even with the mood she was in, Elary fell silent then. There was a light in Silar's eyes that she hadn't seen before.

"Naldeon really did mean to give the Princess to them," said Silar. "I wondered. I thought that he would keep her with us, but I wondered."

"Yes. Now *please* get out of the way."

"I'll go with you," said Silar. "I assume that you always meant to seek the Diamond of Ezudlos and make sure that Mitherill has her heritage?"

Elary opened her mouth. Elary closed her mouth when Mitherill said, "That is my Destiny as well as my heritage. Yes, we will go seek it."

Silar nodded, looking completely unsurprised. "Then find Melior. She should be in her rooms. She was on guard duty all yesterday, and not even this would wake her up. But you have to wake her up now. Tell her that Silar bids her remember the white flowers. After that, she should be able to get you out of the Shelter and on your way to the Caves Radiancia. I will catch up with you if I can, and if you do not see me again, then know that I wish you the best of luck."

"What are you going to do?" Elary asked her.

"Stop the winged fey, of course," said Silar, with a mild glance in her direction, and unsheathed a long, curved blade that Elary hadn't seen before from the middle of her back.

"But you're one of them."

"No, I'm not," said Silar. "I'm devoted to the rightful future of the Princess of Iantra-Arvenna, and that includes making sure she stays with the guardian Destiny chose for her."

"But-"

Mitherill was tugging on Elary's wrist, though. "If she wants to stay and sacrifice her life for us, I have no objection," she said in far too loud a whisper. "Come on! Let's find Melior and fly away from here."

Silar smiled, even though she must have heard Mitherill's words, and turned back to the stair. The winged woman came into sight, but flew more slowly when she saw Silar standing ready.

Elary took a deep breath, conquered the urge to say something noble and stupid to Silar, and let Mitherill guide her to Melior's room.

She hoped their grand escape would help take her mind off the purple-blue mountains of Faerie, which for some reason still blazed in front of her eyes.

Chapter 60

The Gifts of a Night

"The gifts of a morning may be recalled in the night,

But the gifts in the darkness, given away from the light,

Can never be recalled while the world endures.

Will you give her your gifts? Will you take hers?"

-Rivendonian wedding song.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos shut his eyes and clasped Cheyena close. He had thought about how good this would feel, to have her arms around him and her head leaning freely on his shoulder, but he thought he had underestimated it now. Nothing could compare to the feeling of actually standing there.

"You defeated the enemies who were following us?" she asked at last, pulling back and staring up at his face.

"Not defeated, but persuaded them to fly away," said Kymenos, and pulled back to smile down at her. "I think that you are glad to see me, my lady."

Cheyena giggled, and then ducked her head as her giggling stopped. The light in her eyes told Kymenos the truth of what would happen that night, and he struggled to control his breathing, turning to the Arvennese innkeeper who had watched their reunion without expression.

"I will want sassorte wine," said Kymenos. "And dermi cheese, and plagion meat if you have any."

The innkeeper blinked, his expression appearing now. It looked as if it were caught somewhere between surprise and avarice. "You do realize that that will be very expensive."

Kymenos winked and drew one of the golden chains that had been a gift from a grateful patient over his head. There were other memories bound to that chain, too, including a pleasant night. He thought it fitting that it should now help pay for another pleasant night. "Will this be enough?" he asked, tossing it to the innkeeper.

The man caught it and examined it. When he looked up, the avarice had won the battle. "Yes, my lord, it will."

Kymenos did not miss the way the man eyed his neck now, eager as a bloodfeeding bat. Kymenos snorted. If the innkeeper tried to rob him, then he would find out why Kymenos had managed to protect his plants and his home from intruders for so long.

"Send it up to our room when it is ready," he said, and curved an arm around Cheyena's waist, guiding her up the stairs.

Cheyena preceded him into the room, and turned to look at him. "Do we really need to wait for the food?" she asked.

"We do," said Kymenos firmly. "I'm tired, and I could use a good meal. Besides, you'll like this one, especially the cheese and wine."

Cheyena shook her head with a slight frown. "I don't think I've ever heard of them before. The wine, maybe, but the cheese and the meat? Dermi and plagion?"

Kymenos nodded. "The cheese is made with the help of flowers, and the plagion meat comes from a beast akin to the unicorns." He stepped forward and kissed her on the cheeks, then the lips, then the throat before continuing. "The meat is sweet and tender, and you'll remember the taste of it for the rest of your life. I've only had it once, but I know well enough to ask for it again."

Cheyena blinked slightly glazed eyes and managed to come back to herself. "You are treating me well," she said.

"I should," said Kymenos. "You have put up with much from me in this ride across Arvenna. And I know that you would never have left Corlinth at all if you had the choice."

"I- well, perhaps not quite in the way that we left it," said Cheyena, lowering her eyes as if she were self-conscious about speaking a lie. "But if I had known that you were leaving, I might have chosen to follow you."

"You like me that much?"

"You don't understand yet, do you?" Cheyena asked, retreating before him and sitting down on the bed.

Kymenos took the one chair in the room, trying to keep his mind on their conversation instead of the comfortable way the chair was molded for his back, and hoping this wasn't about to turn into an argument. "I don't understand many things. What about this one in particular might I not understand?"

Cheyena linked her hands behind her head and studied him with narrowed eyes. "You don't understand that I love you."

Kymenos blinked. Some women had said those words to him before, but none had ever said them so earnestly. "I didn't know that," he said. "I thought you hated me for the hold I had over your life and your magic."

Cheyena sighed and lowered her eyes. "All my life, my magic has been the only wealth I had, the only thing that distinguished me from anyone else, the only gift that might suffice to win me the silver I wanted," she said softly. "I do hate the thought of anyone being able to take it away from me. But the fever might have stolen it from me, too, and you prevented that. I owe you a debt that I cannot repay. I owe you my life, yes, but my magic more than that."

"It still shouldn't make you love me," said Kymenos in fascination.

"Yes, it should," said Cheyena. "You were the one who saw how important my magic is to me. Everyone else thinks I'm a coward."

Kymenos nodded, thinking of the way that Dolasson had stared at Cheyena with an expression of disgust on her face.

"You know that I'm just being sensible," said Cheyena. "You're the most sensible person I know. You saw what really mattered to me, and you valued it, which no one else ever has. Tell me why I should *not* love you."

Kymenos smiled at her. Of course, he didn't really think that that was true, or at least not enough to bind her to his side in any situation where she had a choice, but it was an admirable way to phrase it, and it painted him in an agreeable light.

He stood and walked behind Cheyena, leaning across the bed to unhook her hands from behind her head. She was trembling as she turned and looked up at him between her strands of dusty red hair. Kymenos stroked her face with the backs of his fingers, using a gesture that almost always worked well on any woman, no matter how sophisticated they were. It was a shame that he had never had a chance to use it on Nightstone, he thought, as he gazed into Cheyena's wide, tear-filled eyes.

"My lady," he whispered, "I did not know that you felt this way about me. I would have done some things differently had I known."

"Such as what?" Cheyena asked, her voice trembling on the edge of a breath.

"Like this."

Kymenos kissed her this time with passion behind the kiss. The others had been light and practiced, mostly because they were *for* practice, or so he thought. He had never expected to bed Cheyena this soon; he hadn't been sure that he would bed her at all. But he kissed her now with just the right combination of pressure and gentleness, and felt her fall back before him.

"Kymenos," she whispered.

Kymenos smiled. "I think we have enough time before the food arrives, after all," he said, and began to shed his robes.

They did have enough time, just barely, and because Cheyena would have fainted at the thought of going to the room's door the way she looked, Kymenos draped his robes around his shoulder and went to fetch the food from the startled, blushing servant. He winked at her and then came back into the room to lay the steaming, fragrant tray on the table, kicking the door behind him shut.

"Your meal is here, my lady."

Cheyena lay back on the bed, still panting. Kymenos smiled. Bedding had given her a flush to her skin that made her look like someone who regularly raced around the mountains, and not like a coward at all. He felt desire stir again, but fought it back. He was hungry, and Cheyena needed some time.

"I don't know if I can get up and go to it," Cheyena moaned.

"That is easily fixed," said Kymenos, and picked up the table, guiding it carefully across the room until it stood next to the bed. Then he went back for the chair and set it down with a flourish on the other side of the table, taking his own seat with the same kind of flourish.

Cheyena laughed. "And I don't know if I can open the wine bottle, either," she said, gazing at him from beneath lowered lashes.

This time, Kymenos knew that she was only acting coquettish, but he didn't mind showing off the way he had learned to open a wine bottle. He picked it up and reached easily into the sassage. It wasn't water, but Azure had some kinship with all liquids, and he easily managed to make the wine rise and push the cork out of the neck. The wine hovered just at the lip so that it wouldn't spill, and then rose in two neat streams, spilling into the glasses the innkeeper had provided.

Kymenos bowed to Cheyena and held out her cup to her. Cheyena had to sit up to take it, but she didn't seem to mind that much exertion. Indeed, she took it with another eye-lowered glance that made Kymenos have to concentrate firmly on the food.

"Here you are," he said, cutting a slice of the cheese wheel and passing it across the bed to her.

Cheyena bit into it, her teeth just barely grazing his fingers.

Kymenos winked at her, and watched her face. Within one bite, her eyes lit up; within another, she was all but glowing, as though passion had come upon her again. It was just the passion for good food this time, though, which simultaneously pleased and disappointed Kymenos.

"How do they make this?" she asked.

"Flowers, I said," said Kymenos calmly, cutting his own slice and biting into it. Smooth and soft for a moment, just like many other cheeses he'd tasted, and then the sweetness burst into his mouth, much like candied fruit but not as piercingly full of sugar. He sighed and licked his lips, then turned to the pligion. "And would my lady like to try the meat?"

Cheyena struggled for a moment, he saw with amusement, pausing between the known sweetness of the dermi cheese and the desire to try something unknown that might prove to be even sweeter. At last she nodded, and leaned forward. Kymenos cut her a small slice of the meat and held it out.

Cheyena licked his hand this time as she took the meat from his fingers. Kymenos smiled and just pulled his hand back in time.

Cheyena let out a small scream.

Kymenos started to stand, and then realized that she was only overcome with the flavor. He smiled and bit into his own piece. Yes, as sweet as he'd remembered, though this was a deeper and darker sweetness than came from the dermi cheese. The pligion this came from had hardly run or jumped at all, he thought, only spent its days trotting tamely along the bottom of a valley and eating well.

"If I didn't love you before, I would now," said Cheyena, sipping at her wine and sighing.

Kymenos smiled, reassured. He had actually thought for a little while that she was serious, that she was really in love with him. But he knew that tone. Cheyena knew how to play the game, the way that all of the women he had bedded did. She would stay with him as long as she wished to, or as long as they both wished to share each other's company and bed. Then she would be on her way, with no hard feelings and no demands for something else attached.

Cheyena rolled over and looked at him then, and Kymenos's certainty faltered for a moment. The look in her eyes could mean many things, but almost none of them were good, whatever they were.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, smiling at him.

"I'm thinking about you," he said honestly, and took another sip of his wine and another bite of the pligion meat. "Which do you want next, my lady- more cheese or more meat?"

Cheyena ducked her head, giggling.

Kymenos raised his eyebrows. He hadn't expected that. "Is something wrong, my lady?"

"It's the title," said Cheyena shyly. "I never thought that someday I would have someone calling me that."

"Are you truly that modest?" Kymenos asked, leaning across the table so that he could caress her cheek. "You must know that you are beautiful, my lady, and an accomplished Scarlet mage. I don't know why you want to keep your eyes on the ground at all times."

Cheyena flushed and looked at the bed. "You don't need to say those things, you know," she said softly. "I said that I was in love with you. I know that you're in love with me." Kymenos was glad that she was looking down and couldn't see the way he nearly choked. "You don't need to keep paying me compliments."

"But it's true," said Kymenos, confused. *I've never met a woman who didn't like*

to hear things like that. "You are beautiful, and an accomplished Scarlet mage. Why wouldn't you like to hear that?"

"I- I know that I'm not attractive to many people," said Cheyena, speaking the words as reluctantly as if they were blood that she was emptying from her veins. "I know that many men look at me and think of me as a coward. I've been told again and again that I'm pale, that I might be nice for a bedding but that no one would want me for marriage and children."

Kymenos kept his thoughts to himself- that she probably was better-suited to marriage and children than this kind of casual bedding- and smiled kindly at her instead. "You've been listening to the wrong people, my lady," he said, and this time Cheyena flushed deeply instead of giggling. He stood and came around the table, kneeling so that he could stroke her fingers and look up into her eyes. "You have done yourself a disservice by doing that, and I would ask that you stop. No woman I love should do that to herself." Which was perfectly true, even though he didn't love Cheyena and didn't think he really knew what the emotion meant.

"You mean this," said Cheyena in a slightly dazed fashion. "You really do mean it."

Kymenos kissed her fingers again. "Of course I mean it, my lady. How could you look at yourself in the mirror and not see a woman who deserves to hear those kinds of words spoken all the time?"

Cheyena blinked, and then looked at him as if she thought he would vanish in the next moment. "I was going to suggest that we try the dermi and plagion both at once," she murmured.

Kymenos nodded, and started to pull back.

"But I think that can wait," said Cheyena, and then drew him back into the bed with her.

Kymenos blinked for a moment, then grinned and went along with it. He could forgive Cheyena many things, even for being cowardly and thinking that he meant to marry her, as long as she was willing to bed him.

Of course, that was what he thought before he woke up tied in bonds of fire and with Cheyena standing over him, staring at him with a pale face.

"I want to know," she said, before Kymenos could even open his mouth to ask what she was doing, "if you serve the Dark or the Light."

Chapter 61

The Conquering Army of Rivendon

"I have never listened closely to the history-tales of Rivendon. I learned all I needed to know of them with the first one I heard. Did you know that the monarchs have been forced, again and again, to conquer their own Kingdom? The population is always in rebellion, and the monarchs always crush them. Not what I call a rich and varied literature."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

"Here we are. The way back to my Kingdom."

Olumer stood at Cadona's shoulder and nodded. It was what she expected him to do, and therefore what he had to do for right now. But that didn't mean that he would have to do it forever. He used that thought to content the part of himself that screamed at him to strangle Cadona and get it over with.

"And then I shall be Queen."

Olumer tried to think of something to refute that, and came up, surprisingly, with the prophecy that he had heard Cadona recite on the last day before they left home. "Really, Princess? Then you've found the treasure that you came to the Western Crescent to find?"

Cadona smiled at him. "I think so, Olumer. I can challenge Prince Artaen now. My Quest is complete. And can you think of a better Quest Object than this?" She gestured at the black stone army that stood behind her.

Olumer could think of several, starting with a freshly-killed deer to eat. He was hungry. The army didn't need to eat, of course, and Cadona hadn't seemed hungry since they arrived in this place. "No, Princess," he said. "Will you excuse me for a moment? There is something that I need to do."

"Of course." Cadona was practicing being gracious lately, so that she actually sounded as if she meant it.

Olumer turned and went back to the hall where the army had sat before they awakened. Of course, it was an evil place, and he didn't like to go there, but there was something that he needed to do, even if he didn't want to. His words to Cadona had been entirely accurate.

He entered the hall, and forced himself to walk to the stone block, to the sword, and to Lyli. Her blank eyes stared past him, but Olumer knew that she was still alive. The expression of pain on her face, and the way the blood always seemed to trickle around her, told him that.

He knelt beside her and clasped her hand. He had the feeling that her eyes turned to look at him, though the motion was so slow that he couldn't actually see it happen.

He bowed his head. "I promise that I will claim vengeance for you," he whispered. "I *promise* it. No matter what I have to do. No matter who stands in my way. I will claim it."

"Bidding farewell to her, Olumer?"

Olumer stood up, dropping Lyli's hand quickly. It banged against the stone, and he winced. Of course, it was only one very small pain in a world of them, nothing next to the sword that pinned her to the rock, but he couldn't help regretting it anyway.

"Yes," he said to Idona. "I still feel bad about what happened to her, as you know very well."

The Queen of Rivendon laughed. Her face was as cruel and fair as it had always been. The memories had returned more and more often to Olumer over the last few days they had spent in this place- at least, he thought time here was measured in days- and he found himself remembering that Idona was in a dangerously playful mood when she smiled like that.

"You are sorry," she said. "You are so serious, Olumer! You would never see that some things just had to happen."

"Destiny doesn't take notice of silvereyes in the same way that it takes notice of humans," said Olumer, beginning to breathe more easily. He had feared that she would guess what he was doing, or perhaps that she had heard his last words to Lyli, and it seemed that she hadn't. It would be the kind of thing that Idona would have to mention right away, if only because she was certain to find it hilarious.

"No," said Idona. "That's because you almost never *do* anything, unless an army of filifernai invades your land." She gave a toss of her head. Olumer thought that she still hadn't gotten used to the heavy motionless hair she now wore. "You are very boring, sometimes, your kind. You hunt in the forests, and you raise your children, and you sleep. What kind of a life is that?"

"A life I wish I could go back to."

Idona shook her head and clucked her tongue. Olumer found himself wishing that her unknown sculptor had not been so skillful. Even a little difference in her voice would have made what she said easier to bear. "You are part of Destiny now, Olumer, and the royal family. Of course, that has been true for generations, but you've only recently remembered it." She winked at him and hooked her arm through his. "You're the great-great-grandfather of a Queen, and the mate of one. How does that make you feel?"

Olumer bared his fangs. It made him feel awful. Now that Idona was alive again, at least in a sense, he couldn't run away and leave the army even if he hadn't sworn his vow of vengeance. He had a living mate. He had a living descendant, his child by blood if not by birth. He had a pack. The silvereyes would not be accepting of him if he abandoned them.

Of course, there was always the possibility that silvereyes pack law, which was made for very clear reasons and very clear situations, wouldn't apply in an extraordinary time like this. But Olumer couldn't be sure about that. And the very idea that he was in a place and time when the pack law might not apply at all nearly drove him into a frenzy. He was meant to be running in the hills, not participating in royal struggles.

But his bout of self-pity was cut off by Idona saying, "You aren't happy to be back with me, are you?"

Olumer stared at her in amazement, tried to say something, and choked it back down. It might warn her immediately that he was contemplating something as suicidal as vengeance. At last he said, "Where did you get the idea that I would be happy to be back here at all? That I *could* be happy?"

Idona sighed. "I know that you loved me once, Olumer. You were so happy when I told you about Ulon. You agreed to the marriage long before I thought of my other plans. I thought that you would be more accommodating, now that I'm awake and we're mates again."

"I ceased to love you the moment that you held a knife to our son's throat," said Olumer. "How could you think it would be otherwise?"

Idona laughed. "Is that all? Olumer, you think far too much about what must have been a small portion of your own history, if you add in the hibernations and the long years of life!" Envy glowed in her eyes and voice for a moment, and then died like an ember. "Why do you insist on remembering that one moment of what was otherwise a long and happy marriage?"

Olumer shook his head. "There is no way to explain it so that you will understand it," he said.

"That may indeed be true," said Idona. "But I do think that you should think more about your living great-great-grandchild and not the dead son. She has a country to conquer, and she will need your help."

"As a guardian?"

"That, too, since Destiny has decreed it so. But as a symbol! Think of what a history-tale this will make. Her ancestor riding beside her, protecting her, and drawing the other silvereyes after him."

Olumer said nothing, but gave silent thanks that Vander, at least, seemed resistant to that kind of thing. Perhaps Vander's response would be typical of all the other silvereyes responses, and he could take pleasure in the fact that his kindred, at least, would live freely.

They traveled back through the hall, and then through the ranks of the army, until they reached Cadona at the gate by the Silver Stair. She nodded regally to Olumer. "I have decided that you should be the first one through."

Olumer nodded shortly to her, and then hurled himself at the gate, remembering to flip as he went through.

It worked. He ended up on the ladder, gripping it firmly, with his head pointed the right way up, towards the gate. He no longer worried about what his claws would do to the Silver Stair as he scrambled down it. The magical ladder had suffered worse, and it would host worse in a moment or two.

He found that the air of Rivendon, though as cold as the air in the place they had just left, seemed fresher and more natural. He took a long breath, and then stepped out of the way as Idona fell down the Silver Stair.

Olumer had to turn and look into the mountains. He was going to start laughing if he didn't.

"No one told me," said Idona, from her position sprawled in the snow, "that that gate came out upside down."

"I don't think that anyone knew," said Olumer.

"You didn't fall."

"I didn't think to warn you, then."

Her hand caught his arm and spun him around. Olumer stood there and smiled at her as innocently as he could.

"If you make fun of me for the sake of mocking me," said Idona, face taking on a tint that might be as red as stone could flush, "then I will hurt you. I can still do that, Olumer. I haven't forgotten the pain that I caused you when alive, and none of it took much effort. I could do much worse."

Olumer only stared back at her with wide eyes and said nothing. There was no one Idona could hurt whom they had in common, except Cadona, and she had every stake in keeping the little Princess alive while he had every stake in making sure she died. It was hard to see how Idona's threats could work.

But, just in case, they could, Olumer decided that he would keep silent for a little while. It couldn't hurt, at least.

"It is good to be back in my own country."

Olumer glanced up in time to see Cadona come down the Stair. Of course, she had climbed the ladder before and remembered. Olumer told himself it was unworthy to want to have seen her end up on her face in the snow. He had more important things to make sure happened to her.

"I have made my first strategic decision," Cadona went on in majestic tones, moving out of the way so that the rest of her army could fall down the ladder. "We must let my people know that the monarchs of Rivendon have come back, and that we are here to conquer only the Dark, not right-thinking Lightworkers. We will march south. We will show off our strength to the Western Crescent, and let rumors run east before we turn to the castle."

"There is one concern, Your Majesty," Idona murmured. "We must not let the Darkworkers retreat into the deep forests near the Rashar Mountains. That happened with my enemies in the first years of my reign, and I was foolish enough to let them go. They plagued me for months after that. We must work to make sure that our enemies are frightened of us, but not frightened enough to retreat."

Cadona nodded wisely, though Olumer doubted that she would have thought of that on her own. "Then I shall let any hunters in the mountains know that I have returned," she said. "And when they come, I will destroy only a few of them. Let some run back with tales. It will make Prince Artaen angry, but also make him think that I didn't have the strength to kill all of them."

She held up a hand, and a burst of Scarlet rose into the air.

For a moment.

Then it ended abruptly, and Olumer blinked in the afterimages, wondering if Cadona had changed her mind about the plan. He hoped so. It didn't sound very sensible to him.

But when he could see again, it was to see Cadona gazing at her hand, her face almost gray. In seconds, she turned to Olumer. "Do you know what it means that I can only call Scarlet to a certain level?" she asked, voice shaking. "I am not nearly as powerful as I used to be. Is that a price that I paid for ascending the Silver Stair?"

Olumer wished he could lie well enough to convince her that it was. But he only shook his head, mystified. He knew that Cadona was a powerful Scarlet mage, and she ought to be stronger than ever now, since she was starting to fulfill her Destiny. What could have stopped her?

Cadona stared around at the mountains, and then abruptly stiffened and sniffed the air. "Something is wrong," she said softly. "Something has changed."

"Of course something has."

Olumer had the great satisfaction of seeing the entire stone army spin around in startlement. Pannerel, who had just stepped from behind a boulder, blinked at them all and then shrugged.

"Change has roused itself," he said. "It has cut off the Cycle so that no mages can perform magic above a certain level."

"What?"

Olumer winced. He recognized the screech in Cadona's voice. She was in a temper when she sounded like that, and it would only get worse the more time it had to build up.

He spoke quickly to cut her off. "Then we might as well start marching south, putting the first part of Her Majesty's plan into effect."

Idona, who didn't look as if she wanted a tantrum any more than he did, agreed quickly. Cadona calmed down enough to walk at the head of the army with Silverheart beside her and Idona just behind, though she still looked upset.

Pannerel walked on the outskirts of the army, and motioned Olumer to join him. Olumer went, though he expected Cadona to call him to her side so that she would have someone to brag to any moment.

"I know that you've sworn to stop her," said Pannerel quietly, when no one else was paying any attention to them.

Olumer blinked. But elves had strange magic. They could probably read minds. And he was fey, closer to the elves than a human.

"That's right," he said, looking at Pannerel defiantly. He would resist even Pannerel if he had to, though of course the elf would kill him before long. A vow by the cold was worth that.

Pannerel looked at him. The Faerie elf's eyes were glittering, swimming gold, and his expression was unfathomable.

"Good," said Pannerel. "She should be stopped."

Olumer blinked. Then, for the first time since he had seen Lyli pinned to the stone block, he managed a genuine smile.

Chapter 62

Changes to Come

"Of course there is never just one change that happens and then stops. A pebble does not cause a landslide and then stop rolling. A change that happened a hundred years ago may still have echoes rolling today, and so might a change that happened a thousand years ago, or the changes they birthed."

-From the files of the Historian Heresy.

"So that's settled, then?"

"I think so." Nightstone sat back in her chair and sighed, wrapping her hand firmly around the stem of her wineglass. "At least, all my people understand what will happen if they challenge me, and they have learned that I'm more powerful than they are. Or they may think that I wasn't affected by Change's cutting the Cycle off from the world."

"Actually," Artaen began, "I don't think that's exactly what it did. I've been considering it all day, and I think-"

Nightstone ignored him, gazing thoughtfully into her wineglass. She would drink these final few swallows of wine, and then go to bed. Surely no one else could ask anything of her. It had been a tiring day.

If I had known when I began to serve the Dark that it would be this tiring, I wonder if I would have continued?

Nightstone snorted and swallowed her wine. Of course she would have. Quite apart from her love of the Dark, there was her hatred of her brother, and the fact that decreeing loyalty to the Dark had been the only way to get out of the chains that bound her in the Temple of Elle.

"Nightstone, are you listening to me?"

Nightstone glanced up at Artaen, eyes narrowed. He had no right to speak to her like that, his voice sharp with displeasure, as if she were a student who could be scolded for not paying attention. "Yes. I am. You're speculating on things that you can't pretend to understand, and that you're probably never going to find out."

Artaen flushed. "You could be more cooperative. After all, this concerns you, too. Don't you want to find out how to defeat Change and break the barrier on the Cycle?"

"Of course," said Nightstone, "if it's possible. But I'm more concerned with what I know is possible, and at the moment reassuring my people that I still firmly control them is. Are you sure that you shouldn't be in Rivendon doing the same thing?" It would be better than having him here, looking over her shoulder and criticizing whatever she did in a sharp whining voice.

Artaen waved a hand. "I left my Kingdom in the hands of a woman I trust, a healer named Renne."

"And does that mean that she's good at ruling?" Nightstone asked. "Does she do as good a job as you could if you were there?"

Artaen scowled and looked away from her. "I think the Dark is in danger," he said, after a moment of silence.

"Why?"

"Because too much is happening at once!" Artaen leaped to his feet and began to pace the room. "The Dark laid plans for years in advance. There are things happening now in Dalzna that took centuries to plan."

"Of course," said Nightstone, remembering the pegasus that she herself had sent flying to the shores of the Lake of the Northern Winds. "There are many things that will not happen at once. But I don't see how you conclude from that that the Dark is in danger. The Dark is a power of the world, and I think it probably has more servants than the Light. Its power cannot be challenged."

"It can always be challenged," said Artaen, turning towards her as if she had said something that offended him personally. "Perhaps no one who challenges it will succeed, but it can always be challenged."

"What is your point?"

"That I don't like this."

Nightstone laughed and drank some more of her wine. "Of course. I knew that. But you don't need to proclaim that just because you don't like it means the Dark is in danger. The world doesn't revolve around your conceptions, you know."

"If you would pay attention-"

Abruptly, a spray of water broke out in the center of the room. Nightstone sat up, smiling. If it was Blackbird come back, then she would have Kymenos with her. Nightstone had faith in the People of the Blending's loyalty, based on her blood. Torturing Kymenos would make the perfect end to a busy day, and actually the perfect end to many busy days to come.

But Blackbird formed herself into the shape of a woman as tall as Nightstone, not an undine, and she was scowling, her arms folded across her breast in a gesture that would have caused her discomfort if she hadn't been made of water. Nightstone blinked. She hadn't known that Blackbird could be so tall; she was used to thinking of her as small. It made a difference. Not a large one, but it was worthwhile to be reminded that the People of the Blending really were shapeshifters.

"Have you failed your mission?" Nightstone asked. "Did you not find Kymenos?"

"No, we found him," said another voice behind her. Nightstone turned to see Anna forming out of the air, this time as a winged woman nearly as tall as she was. Nightstone felt another little stir of uneasiness, and fought it down. "But he told us some things about you that made us question whether we should serve you. No doubt you will be able to explain this to our satisfaction, but it does mean that we wanted to ask you some questions."

Nightstone shook her head. "Didn't I tell you that Kymenos was a liar, a madman, not to be trusted? Why would you think that you could ever believe a word he says?"

"I say," said Artaen, "that's a little strong, don't you think?"

Nightstone turned, glaring furiously at the Prince of Rivendon. Of course, that only made Artaen smile, and think that he should continue speaking. "I didn't know Kymenos long, but I'm sure that he's a little more trustworthy than you think he is. You can't blame him for being angry at you."

"Why should he be angry?" asked Blackbird.

"Why," said Prince Artaen, "because Nightstone held him prisoner, and tortured him, and tortured several others, which seemed to bother him more than his own pain. One little girl in particular. I think her name was Alliana."

"What?"

That was Anna's voice, and before Nightstone could even scream at Artaen for being a bastard, then Anna's arms were around her, and lifting her off her feet. Nightstone felt the air around her throat flee from her, and suddenly she was choking, suffocating. She tried to scream, and no sound came out. She tried to struggle, and found herself rapidly weakening.

"What did you do to her?" Anna hissed in her ear.

The air came back, probably so that she could answer Anna, but Nightstone used it to ease the pain in her lunge first and then to cry at Artaen, "I thought you said that the Dark was in danger. Why are you doing this now, betraying one of its best lieutenants to torture and murder?"

Artaen's face went as cool as stone. "I should tell you, Princess," he said, using her title without a twist of mockery, "that the Dark is a little displeased with you."

"What? Why?"

Nightstone found the air fleeing the moment she asked the question, and she slumped again, but she managed to concentrate and hear Artaen's answer, since it was so important.

"The Dark has made its decision in the war of the powers. It is going to fight the Light, as well as the traitor Shadow, who is compromising with the goddess Elle, if you can believe that. He has also somehow persuaded Shara to his side. You spoke with an envoy of Shadow, and you are a worshipper of Shara. Thus, you are not to be trusted." Through the black film that was creeping over her eyes, Nightstone thought she saw Artaen make a mocking bow. "So the Dark bids you farewell, and hopes that your afterlife is pleasant."

Nightstone let her head fall. Despair and shock thundered so thickly in her that, just then, she thought she would not mind dying.

But the air came rushing back before she could do it, of course, and she found her lungs flexing and greedily grabbing at it. Trying to stop herself from breathing wouldn't work, so Nightstone let them do it, and then tried to attend to Anna's questions.

"Why did you want to kill Princess Alliana?"

"Because," said Nightstone, too tired to use anything other than the truth, "she was in the way of the Dark's path to the throne. And the Light and Destiny had created her as a tool."

"Destiny?"

"Yes," said Nightstone, aware that the grip on her had relaxed, and that Blackbird was asking the questions now, but not aware of why either of those things had happened. "It wanted to come back to power. Surely you must know all this. It birthed four royal Heirs, and Princess Alliana was one of them. If she ruled in Orlath, then it would lead to the fulfillment of a certain prophecy, and neither I nor the Dark wanted that."

She slumped again, too busy sucking in air to appreciate all the ramifications of the conversation happening above her head, though she still heard it.

"The Princess Alliana was a member of the royal blood. We can't condemn her for anything she did."

"But you know that our friendship was forged with a monarch who resisted Destiny. I think that we should think about this some more. It might be more complicated than it looks."

"Well, you know that there's another member of the royal blood alive."

"The Queen Tewilde."

"Right."

"But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Nightstone raised her hand against the Princess who should have taken the throne- and probably other members, too. I saw images in her mind. She killed Princess Alliana's mother, at least. So we can kill her for that, and bring her to justice, and that means that we can still go and serve Queen Tewilde."

"This prophecy-"

"Never mind about the prophecy right now. I want to serve someone who didn't have anything to do with it. And the Queen Tewilde couldn't have anything to do with it, since it was after her time."

"All right."

"Nightstone."

Nightstone managed to focus her eyes, and saw Anna hovering in front of her, once more in the form of a sylph. The Person of the Blending's face was full of condemnation, and she lifted a hand when Nightstone drew breath once more into her lungs and tried to reply.

"You think that you were justified in doing what you did. But the truth is that you weren't- or, at least, you can't justify enough of what you did to convince us to keep you alive. So we are going to kill you now."

Nightstone reached for the Scarlet. But of course she couldn't call enough of it now to resist the People of the Blending, and she wasn't surprised when the conduit shut itself.

Anna laughed pityingly. "Did you really think that would work, even if Change hadn't moved the Cycle? No. We are of the elements, the same as them, but with more intelligence. We would have prevented you from using elemental magic against us. But we will grant you a chance for the farewell speeches that so many royals seem to like. Is there anything you have to say before we kill you?"

"Kymenos was part of this, too," said Nightstone. Her throat was raw and sore, and her voiced sounded like something scraping along stone. "He was Princess Alliana's guardian, and he abandoned her and ran off as soon as he could. He didn't even stay to help her foster sister."

"He shall suffer for that," said Anna. "I promise you. But he wasn't a member of the royal line, only someone pulled in by Destiny. He didn't commit nearly the same crime that you did. We are going to destroy you, and then go in search of him and punish him. He'll probably live."

Nightstone closed her eyes. *Damn it. Even my final vengeance won't get a chance to shine.*

"You shall not harm her."

Nightstone had no trouble concentrating on that voice, since it was so unexpected. She turned and stared at the door, only to find that the speaker was already past it. Of course she was. No door could have stopped her, if she wanted in.

The Faerie elf Nightstone knew was called Annalithiel stepped forward, her hands out and her eyes filled with a hectic glitter that looked far more human than Nightstone would have thought an elf could manage. She was smiling, but that expression wasn't pleasant, either. For a moment, Nightstone caught a glimpse of a being who could step from world to world, and for whom nothing was a barrier, someone with limitless gifts. That kind of being would have this kind of smile.

"I have come for Nightstone," said Annalithiel, "who is, no matter what she has done, still a member of the royal line of Orlath, which I am sworn to defend. Alliana is dead. There is no sense in taking vengeance."

"But I am still alive."

And here was Tewilde, come through the passage in the wall. Nightstone would have chuckled if it hadn't hurt her throat so much. Of course Tewilde would come out and claim her heritage, and the brief hope that Nightstone had felt would have to die. After all, Annalithiel and Tewilde shared blood. The Faerie elf would turn to the half-elf, and help her-

But maybe not.

Nightstone had the thought because of the way that Annalithiel turned her head to look at Tewilde, and the hasty defensive step backwards that Tewilde took. Her face had suddenly gone a pale gold with dread, and she was shaking her head so hard that her pale hair blurred around her shoulders.

"You couldn't," said Tewilde. "I'm blood of your blood. I have elven blood, and royal Orlathian blood. You couldn't."

"I could," said Annalithiel, and Nightstone shuddered. Her voice was horrid, but beautiful at the same time. "You have not lived up to the obligations of either half of your blood. You know the call we sent you, the call that you chose to resist. And you ran away from your throne, which would have been the only legitimate reason for continuing to stay. You have failed."

"You can't-"

Annalithiel began to sing. At the same time, she gestured, her hands flying in patterns that Nightstone couldn't comprehend.

A bubble of silvery light grew around Tewilde, and then she abruptly began to cry out. She shrank, her arms lengthening strangely, and when the bubble vanished, a long-legged cat, a cheetah, stood there instead. It stared at Annalithiel for a moment, then turned and bolted to the closed door. It stood there, scratching and swinging its tail madly.

Annalithiel turned to the People of the Blending. "I am going to take Nightstone now," she said. "Unless you want me to destroy you."

Blackbird and Anna vanished. Nightstone sank to the stone and began to sob.

A moment later, strong arms were around her, scooping her up. "No need to cry," said Annalithiel. "I am not going to change my mind. There have been enough betrayals now. We thought that Shara was our ally, but she changed her mind and decided to coddle Elle, though the goddess has slaughtered a hundred of our kin. So we are going to form our own side."

"And why do you need me?" Nightstone asked, as she was slung over the elf's shoulder like a child. She was too weak and shocky to object, though.

"Because," said Annalithiel, as she stepped sideways and into another world, "powerful humans betrayed by one or the other of the ruling powers are our best allies at the moment."

It was all too complicated for Nightstone to think about right then. She let her eyes close and her begging consciousness at last slip away.

Chapter 63

The Quest Begins Again

"There is no such thing as a Quest that goes wrong. After all, Destiny insures that such things can't happen when it makes its plans. But even more than that, the things that happen along the Quest are part of it. They are the journeys that the hero has to make, and that none of us would ever make if Destiny didn't kick us out of our comfortable houses."

-Attributed to the Lord of the Star Circle in the time of Klessa of the Nine Wonders.

"Someone's coming."

Elary woke up quickly. Mitherill stirred in her arms as she sat up and peered out the cave mouth, but didn't wake up. They had had a long and tiring flight, wrapped in Melior's lightning, and Elary didn't think that she would be awake herself if there hadn't been something in Melior's voice that warned her.

"Someone?" she asked.

"A winged fey."

Elary closed her eyes, and wearily got ready to move again. Mitherill did stir heavily this time, and then woke up, crying at once.

"I didn't want to wake up! What time is it?"

"I don't know, Your Highness," said Elary, and then glanced out at the sky, which was turning slowly blue, and revised her words. "That is, I don't know exactly what hour it is, but I can tell you that it's near dawn."

"I don't want to be up so early!" Mitherill sat up, rubbing at the white streak in her hair. "Do you really think that you should have woken me up so early? There are things that I would do better on if I got a little more sleep-"

"It wasn't my choice, Princess," said Elary, staring into the sky and trying to figure out where Melior had seen the winged fey. She could see nothing but fading stars and some clouds so far. "I would have let you sleep, but one of the winged women could be coming after us, and we need to move quickly." She blinked and touched her head. "And they may be attacking already. I'm seeing visions of things that I shouldn't be seeing visions of."

"What?" Melior asked urgently. "They could be attacking with Illusion."

"Mountains," said Elary. "And a plain of silver grass. It looks like a picture of the Faerie landscape."

Melior sounded baffled. "I've never known them to attack with anything like that. Are you sure that's what you're seeing?"

Elary nodded, but she couldn't look at Melior, or continue the conversation, since the images pressed her so thickly. She could see the plain of silver grass and the mountains and the antelope, clear enough, but beyond them was something else, as though she was looking at something that lay closer to the mountains at the same time. She could see a city, filled with fountains and arches and

delicately carved walls. It was also full of broken stone and dead leaves, but it must have been beautiful once. And floating through it were lithe, graceful shapes who made the winged fey look blocky and clumsy, though they themselves had no wings. It was just something about the way they moved, Elary thought, staring at them in fascination.

One of them turned to look at her, and Elary found herself bracing for the moment when their eyes met. She didn't know what would happen, but she knew it would be spectacular-

"Elary!"

Elary blinked, snatched rudely back to herself. She found Mitherill staring at her as though she had gone mad, and touched her face. There was nothing there but the remnant of an idiotic smile, though, and she sighed. She would have to be careful about indulging in visions of Faerie.

"Sorry, Your Highness," she said. "I got a bit distracted by my memories of Faerie. You were saying?"

"You saw into Faerie?" asked Melior.

"Yes."

"That's bad."

"Why?"

Melior shook her head. "We felt it, all the fey, at the same moment that Change altered the Cycle. The Faerie elves are very angry about something. Not everyone who sees into Faerie is affected like that, normally, but when the elves will it so, then the beauty lingers in a mortal mind and gives them access to it."

"What are they angry about?"

"I don't think I-"

Before Melior could finish, though, Elary glanced past her and saw the winged woman rapidly approaching. She noticed the woman also bore a long, dawn blade, and sighed. "I don't think that she has peaceful intentions," she told Melior, "so even though I really want to know why I'm seeing a place that I've only visited once, it'll have to wait. Can you fly us out of here?"

"Not right now," said Melior, "but I can use lightning to blast her from the sky." She lifted a hand, and then abruptly lowered it, frowning. "No, wait, something's wrong here."

"Of course something's wrong," said Elary. "Someone is coming to kill the Princess of Arvenna! Aren't you going to defend her?"

"Wait."

Melior's voice was so intense that Elary subsided, but she didn't like standing there and just watching the winged woman come closer and closer. Now Elary could almost see the grim expression on her face, and of course she had been able to make out that gleaming blade for a minute now.

Then she saw who wore the grim expression and carried that gleaming blade, and she felt very foolish.

"We almost blasted you out of the sky," said Melior to Silar, as the winged woman landed beside them on the floor of the cave, her wings beating once before folding in to her back. "I suppose there was no way that you could have called out and declared yourself to us."

"What?" asked Silar, who looked over her shoulder at her wings as if to make sure that they were settled into place. Elary wondered why. It was as though she was reluctant to look at Elary and Mitherill. "Should I have said 'I'm a friend, please don't hurt me?' And you would have believed that?"

"Well-"

"I didn't think so," said Silar, turning around slowly. "And I think that Elary and Mitherill should thank me for the precautions I took." She faced them at last, and from the expression of enormous relief on her face, she hadn't been looking because she was afraid that Mitherill wouldn't be there. "Melior is probably the only one in the whole of the Serpent's Shelter that you could trust."

"What do you mean?" Elary asked. "The Serpents wanted to see Mitherill back on the throne, didn't they?"

"Oh, yes," said Silar quietly. "They did. And they wanted to see monarchs on the thrones of the other Kingdoms as well."

"What's so wrong with that?" Mitherill asked. "Some of the other Heirs are my cousins, you know. Not directly, but by blood a few generations back. And I'm sure that I'm linked to Prince Warcourage by an even closer tie than that. Why shouldn't they sit their thrones?"

"The Serpents were doing it wrongly," said Silar flatly. "It's one thing to put a monarch on the throne of Arvenna. They know and love that country, and they've- we've- fought strongly for her in the past twelve years. But they didn't have a right to interfere in the other countries they didn't know as well, and try to put monarchs on those thrones too."

"They would have broken the bargain, wouldn't they?" Elary asked. "They would have tried to make sure that Mitherill took the throne of Ilantra, as well."

"Oh, yes," said Silar. "They would have invaded Ilantra. And then there would have been a sea of flowing blood."

"Well," said Mitherill, "of course I don't want to kill my own people, but if some of them fight against my coming to the throne, then they've abandoned their rightful loyalties in any case, and probably nothing can save them. If some of them have to die so that I can take the throne, then that's what must happen."

Elary blinked at the look that Silar gave the Princess. For just a moment, it seemed that Silar really hated Mitherill.

"You don't understand," said Silar. "It wouldn't have been your people's blood. It would have been our blood, and the blood of any Ilantrians who joined us. Ilantra is Shadow's country. He would tear us apart before he would allow us to harm anyone in his country, human or fey or wolf or any other race. And I wasn't willing to risk that. I thought that I could persuade Naldeon out of that, but I see now that I can't. And there are winged fey in the castle! Winged fey! They tried to rule the Kingdoms once before, and they might succeed if they took all the Heirs away, corrupted them, and then put them on the thrones."

"But why aren't you joining them?" Elary asked.

Silar turned to face her at once. "Are you suggesting that I bear so little love for my Princess that I would let that happen?" she asked in a dangerous voice.

Elary, baffled, gestured to her shoulders. "You have the wings. I thought you were a winged fey."

Silar hesitated. Then she said, "I should have used their proper name, but I thought that you wouldn't know what I meant. Yes, we are both winged fey, my people and theirs, but there our similarity ends. I am part of the *kinessi*, the ones who chose to break away from Faerie and live in the mortal world. They are part of the *alnessi*, who chose Faerie."

"What is the difference?" Elary asked. "And will any of the *alnessi* come after us if we stay here?"

"They'll be afraid for a little while," said Silar with some satisfaction. "They didn't expect a *kiness* there. I killed two of them, and gave a few others something to think about. But if we stay here, then yes, they'll find us. The only chance is for us to get Mitherill into the Caves Radiancia, and find the Diamond of Ezudlos.

"And the difference is that we can't stay in Faerie- they can't stay in Faerie, I mean- and still survive. Fewer and fewer children are born there, since the Faerie elves started walking from world to world again, and using more magic. The children have to be able to stand the magic, or they just die in their mothers' wombs. And very few *alness* children could survive even a fraction of the level of magic there. Now that the Faerie elves are angry and using the beauty of Faerie as a weapon again, there will be even fewer."

"Why don't they just come and live in our world, then?" Elary asked.

"Because," said Silar, her voice taking on a hissing tone, "they don't want to think of sharing a world with *humans*. The humans in Faerie just pass through, or don't live very long. But they're everywhere here, and they have powerful magic. The *alnessi* want to be able to think of themselves as superior, but they can't do it if they live in this world. But they can't continue to survive in Faerie. They want some great magic to save them and let them go on living where they want to, separately."

"Ah," said Elary, who had a feeling that she was missing quite a lot of it, but at least understood it better than she had a few minutes ago. "And you really think that if they took Mitherill into Faerie, then they could corrupt her and turn her to serving them instead of Destiny?"

Silar smiled grimly. "You don't understand much about the magic of Faerie, do you?"

The word made the purple-blue mountains and silver grass glow in Elary's mind again. She blinked hard and managed to see Silar's face instead of the visions. "I don't," she said. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"The humans who go to Faerie don't stay human long," said Silar. "Most of them die or come back to their own world. But you must have heard the legends of those who just vanish."

Elary nodded. It was getting hard to concentrate past the flickering vision, but she could manage long enough to hear this explanation.

"Some of them change," said Silar softly. "There are a few who become elves. Others change into different kinds of fey. And the others become different enough in mind and body to at least live in Faerie. That is what would happen to Mitherill and the other Heirs, if they manage to take them through. And it is what cannot happen. It is not a question of strength. It is a question of being too human to stand Faerie. It can even affect half-fey. You can't imagine what it would do to someone who was mostly human."

"I have *ilzán* blood," said Mitherill proudly. "That is almost the same as being half-fey, isn't it?"

Silar shook her head. "No, little one. You would have to have more than half to stand a chance, and even then- I wonder if it would work, given that your ancestors were fey of Ilantra and not Faerie. You would be in danger, and so would the other Heirs. I think one has some elven blood, but generations back, and another has silvereys blood even more distant. They would all be in danger." Silar's eyes rose and came to rest on Elary. "For that matter, so would you. Are you all right?"

"I'm seeing visions of Faerie," Elary whispered, and stared out of the cave, hoping the different view might help to soothe her. Instead, the mountains only turned blue-purple, and she thought she could see a sky full of many different colors and hear a voice calling.

"Ah," said Silar. "Then we should get underground as soon as we can, so that you can see a different landscape. That should help. I don't know if anything can heal the wounds that Faerie's beauty leaves on the soul, but some things can scab them."

"And, of course, we should get underground as soon as possible so that we can begin my Quest," said Mitherill importantly.

Elary couldn't see the look Silar gave Mitherill, but there was a very strange tone in her voice as she said, "Yes. That, too, of course."

Chapter 64

Answering Cheyena's Questions

"There is not a satisfactory answer to many questions in the world, and that is the fault of the world rather than the questioners."

-The Dark's Lord, Serais, in the time of Queen Silla of Orlath.

Kymenos gingerly tested his hands against the bonds of fire that held them, and grimaced as he felt them singe his skin and hair. No, he couldn't break free of them. If he was a Master of the Star Circle, then perhaps so, but he had never had any control over fire. He didn't think that he would have that much now.

"I want to know," said Cheyena.

"It would help if you would tell me what you want to know again," said Kymenos, straining at the bonds. "I was a little distracted the first time that you spoke."

"I want to know if you serve Dark or Light." Cheyena paced in front of the bed, turning sharply back every time she reached the end. "I realized yesterday that I had never heard you express fear of the Dark, or reverence for Elle, or anything else that would mark you as of the Light. And it disturbs me, Kymenos. It disturbs me that I could have fallen in love with someone who serves the Dark, or at least, someone who does not serve the Light in the same way I do."

"You are quite right about the last," said Kymenos, who was close to losing his temper. He didn't want to do it with Cheyena, who was very good in bed when she let her inhibitions fall, but he would do it if he must. "I don't serve the Light in the same way as you do, since I don't really serve the Light at all."

Cheyena halted in her pacing at once and turned a tragic face towards him. "You are a Darkworker, then?"

Kymenos shook his head impatiently. "I don't serve any of the great powers, Cheyena, except perhaps Chaos. I called to it to get me free of Destiny, and it did so. I haven't heard from it since. So perhaps I would need to obey it if it showed up, and perhaps not. But I have not served Dark or Light willingly in all my life."

"Why?" Cheyena whispered, her voice tragic, too.

"There are more important things, of course," said Kymenos, a little surprised. He had thought that Cheyena believed there were more important things, the way she clung to her silver. "I would like to become a great healer. I would like to live in Serian again, and walk the streets of the city I love without fear. I would like to gaze on the Dalorth Mountains and watch the sun rise over them. What did you think I was going to answer? You know what I am."

"I never did," said Cheyena, and sank onto the edge of the bed as if she were overcome. "I never knew."

"Well, now you know," said Kymenos. "And I understand completely if you can't love me." *This is an easier way to get rid of her than many I could have adopted*, he congratulated himself. "You are of the Light, more strongly than I thought you were, and you can go back to Orlath with my thanks."

Cheyena shook her head. "Everyone serves Destiny and the great powers, even if they don't think they do," she murmured. "Even the Dark turns at last to the purposes of the Light. But someone who doesn't know that he's serving the Dark can do a great deal of damage in the meantime." She turned and leaned over him so that she was staring directly into his eyes. "I think that I might have to kill you. I don't want to. But such sacrifices are made sometimes in the history-tales."

"Cheyena." Kymenos hoped that he was keeping the snap of irritation out of his voice. "Life is not a history-tale. You know that."

"Why did the ghioutlin come after you in Corlinth?" Cheyena went on. "Why did the Dragon Queen? And why did you leave the village, and why were you so comfortable in the Heart of the Night? You are a Darkworker, Kymenos, and perhaps not even an unwitting one."

"The ghioutlin are creatures of the Dark," said Kymenos, still unwilling to believe that she was convincing herself of this. "Why would they be hunting me, if I really do serve the Dark as you say I do?"

"Perhaps you betrayed them." Cheyena sat back, her eyes unfathomable. "Perhaps you double-crossed them. I have heard that the Dark has a great problem with that happening among its servants."

"You don't understand, do you?" Kymenos asked, so upset that he struggled against the Scarlet bonds again. The smell of cooking flesh reminded him not to do that. He lay still, panting, but still he couldn't keep himself from staring at Cheyena. "You are determined to believe what you want to believe, and you will bend all the stories to fit those facts."

"I would be careful about angering me, Kymenos," said Cheyena. "I hold the power here."

"You're mad," said Kymenos. "I accept that now. You wouldn't have believed me even if I proclaimed that I was a Lightworker."

"I know," said Cheyena, and her eyes began to water, though Kymenos didn't know if she was actually crying or not; she made no sobs, nor any sounds that could be interpreted as any. "I would have known that you were lying. I would have seen the truth in your eyes. But this way is better. At least I have your admission that you're a Darkworker, and there is no fooling myself."

"I'm not admitting-"

"You don't have to say it." Cheyena turned away, bowing her head into the crook of her arm. "You are telling the truth now. You think that you serve no great power, but you serve the Dark. I can't stay with a man who does that. I'm going back to Orlath."

"Good," said Kymenos. *How could I ever have found her fascinating?* "Then take Estia and go."

"No," said Cheyena. "Not just like that. I think I would need money, and you have some readily available." She stood and reached out to his neck, where the chains that were gifts from grateful patients still hung.

Kymenos stared up at her for long moments. Then he said, "You had to think up all this as an excuse for robbing me?"

"I never-"

"You did," said Kymenos, unsure whether he should start laughing or screaming in frustration. "You've probably longed for the necklaces and jewels I had all the way up here, but you couldn't come up with a reason that would justify you in taking them. And now you have one."

"That's not true," said Cheyena, though she was hotly flushing as she tried to take one necklace off over his head. Kymenos laid his head back on the pillow, suddenly almost enjoying himself, and wouldn't let her take it off.

"Yes, it is," he said. "I know you, Cheyena. You've always loved the metal that you could win with your magic, probably more than you love your magic itself. And now you have the chance to get more valuable metal than you've ever had, and all you have to do is lie to yourself, and probably the Light if it's listening, about my allegiance."

"No-"

"Oh, yes."

Cheyena slapped him. Kymenos blinked, and would have touched his cheek if he could have moved his hand. The slap didn't really sting, but it was unique in another way.

"That is the first blow that a coward has ever dared to give me," he said. "And I have met many cowards. Congratulations, Cheyena."

"What do you think *you* are, if I'm a petty thief?" Cheyena's hair was flying around her, and with her wide eyes and flushed cheeks, she looked half-crazed. "You declared that you loved me when you didn't, and you played tricks on me to get me to sleep with you."

"Yes," said Kymenos. "But I knew all along what I was doing. I never pretended to myself that getting you to sleep with me was serving the Light." He studied her, deeply fascinated. "You really do think it is, don't you? You're not too sure; you don't want to hear my words about your robbery, in case they convince you otherwise. But you think, for right now, that you're justified in doing this to me. After all, I'm just a petty Darkworker, who was hunted by ghioutlin for some reason, and then saved you when we were both hunted by a dragon, and then-"

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up!*"

Kymenos started laughing, and she slapped him again. This time, the blow was hard enough to make Kymenos roll his head to one side, dazed, and Cheyena quickly took the chains off him, stuffing them into her pockets. She was panting, but her eyes were triumphant.

"There," she said. "It's done. Now all I need to do is go down into the inn and tell the villagers that I've captured a Darkworker up here."

"Do you think that they'll listen to you?" Kymenos asked, remembering the blank eyes of the woman who had greeted them, and, more, the speech that the old Dalznan man had given him about people coming into the village after nightfall. "Arvenna is under the rule of the Dark."

"I saw symbols in the inn's common room that you wouldn't have noticed, of course, not being a devotee of Elle yourself," said Cheyena coolly, concealing the last chain. "They're Elle worshippers, here. They'll listen to me, and they'll burn you alive for your stake in this."

She turned to the door, and opened it.

A moment later, she came back into the room, backing away from Norianna, who floated in front of her.

"How are you doing that?" Cheyena demanded of Kymenos, glancing back at him very quickly and then forward again, as if she feared to let the talking sword go unwatched for too long. "You must be a telekinetic, but I've never known that. How are you doing that?"

"I'm not 'doing that,'" said Kymenos, very glad now that he hadn't tried to throw Norianna away lately. "I'm not doing anything. That's all Norianna, and the magic that's forged into her blade."

"Yes," said Norianna's voice. It was the flattest that Kymenos had ever heard from her. "And now you will unbind him."

"He's a Darkworker," said Cheyena, but with a questioning tone in her voice, as if she wasn't sure how well this would work.

"I don't care," said Norianna. "I don't serve Dark or Light. I only serve Destiny, and he is the one chance that Destiny might have to repair the shattered prophecy."

"What?" asked Kymenos. *If this is of Destiny after all, then I won't have any part of it.*

"I didn't want to tell you until we reached the shores of the Lake of the Northern Winds, and I could prove it to you," said the sword. "But it seems that I must tell you now. Perhaps if you know, you will be more cooperative. I believe that you are the heir to the Dalznan royal line, Kymenos, and thus to the Dalznan throne."

For a moment, Kymenos felt as if he had fallen from a high ledge, with ground nowhere in sight. Then he felt a smack as if the ground had been right behind him, and his breathing jolted into life again, though it was far too fast.

He shook his head. "I am sure that I am not of the royal line," he said.

"Why?" Norianna asked, sounding calm.

"Because," said Kymenos, "even I have heard the legends. You must have heard them, too, sword. A babe placed with peasants and raised with them, right?"

"Yes."

"A prince of the royal line?"

"Yes."

Kymenos nodded. "And his family would have passed a silver ring on to him as heirloom?"

Norianna gave a little bobble. "What?"

Relief poured over Kymenos. *She doesn't know.* "Of course there would have to be some token of royalty," he said, almost babbling. "Otherwise, how would you tell the royal Heir from a hundred thousand other peasants? He supposedly grew up never knowing his heritage. He would have to have a token, though perhaps not one that he would recognize himself."

"Yes," said Norianna, slowly, warily.

"I've heard the legends," Kymenos repeated. "A silver ring was the sign of royalty in the Dalznan royal line, which only the Crown Prince or Princess wore, and gave to their heirs when they assumed the throne in turn. It wasn't found among the treasures when the Dark took the palace. It must have vanished, and it must have been given to the rightful Heir of Dalzna. Some stories have Queen Bel herself placing the ring on the finger of her cousin's son."

"So?" asked Norianna.

"So," said Kymenos, "I have no ring like that. Nor does anyone in my family. I am not royal, Norianna."

The sword hovered for a long moment in silence. The loudest sound in the room was Cheyena's panting breath. Kymenos entertained himself by watching the way that Cheyena's eyes followed the sword blade.

"You must be the heir of Dalzna," said Norianna, but uncertainly. "Of course you must be. Why do you have a telepathic horse, if you aren't? Why were you chosen to be Princess Alliana's guardian, if you aren't?"

Kymenos smiled. "You were depending on this, weren't you? You thought that an Heir of Dalzna would still make four royals, now that the Princess Alliana is dead, and let Destiny fulfill its purpose?"

"Yes," murmured Norianna.

"No," said Kymenos. "I am sorry to disappoint you. Destiny chose me for it knows what reason, and Sykeen chose me on his own. There is no royal blood in my veins, and no grand Destiny about me, I'm sorry to say. And if there were, I would hasten to shed the blood and defy the Destiny."

Norianna continued hovering there. Then she said, "I suppose that there is no need for you to accompany me to the Lake of the Northern Winds- no, wait, there still is. For one thing, I don't think that you will survive for very long if you stay here. Besides your friend here-" the sword made a motion towards Cheyena, and she gulped and backed away further "-Dolasson and her Crownseekers have found a mage to open their eyes again, and are coming after you with all speed."

Kymenos hissed. "Then I would ask your protection."

"Yes," said Norianna. "And you will come with me to the Lake of the Northern Winds. Only there can we make the final test, the one that I planned in the first place to make sure that you were the Heir of Dalzna."

Kymenos nodded. "Then, in exchange for your protection, I will come with you to the Lake." He paused, then added as gently as he could, "But I am afraid that the test will reveal nothing."

"We have to try it."

Kymenos nodded again.

The sword flew forward and cleft the bonds of fire that Cheyena had put around his wrists and ankles as neatly as if they were made of air. Then she swung and pointed at Cheyena, who had started edging towards the door. "And what do you want to do with this one?"

Kymenos smiled. "She tried to rob me, didn't she?" he said, and then began shouting. "Thief! Thief! Help!"

Cheyena stared at him. Norianna said, "Very amusing, I admit, but what good did that do?"

"You'll see," said Kymenos, listening to the pounding feet on the stairs.

"That was- clever."

Kymenos smiled. He knew what it had cost Norianna to admit that.

"Thank you," he said, glancing back into the village as he rode Sykeen up the far side of the valley. He could still see the torches that the villagers had lit, gathered in a ring. "Cheyena will wish she hadn't done that. They will make her work until she earns back the value of every chain."

"Even though they were your chains?"

Kymenos patted the gold coiled in his pocket. "Of course. The Arvenese have some- unique- ideas about the punishment of thieves. They have to work until they make up the value of what they took, even if the wealth is returned to the original owners."

"You did leave Estia, though."

"Oh, yes, of course. It was a noble gesture of mine, to make up some of her costs so that she need not work for the rest of her life. And she would have slowed us down. Dolasson and her Crownseekers may well be looking for two riders."

"Not when they see Cheyena, they won't be."

Kymenos laughed aloud. "If they see her at all. But yes, I agree, the deception won't last long. It will last long enough to amuse me, though."

"And you will go to the Lake of the Northern Winds?"

Kymenos nodded, and locked the thought he had next in the deepest part of his mind, where Norianna would never see or touch it.

In Serian, I should have little need of her, and can slip away. Hopefully before she learns that there was never such a thing as the legend of a silver ring identifying the Dalznan royal line.

Chapters 65

The Loosing

"Many are Her natures and many are Her names,

Lady of the cool light and of the roaring flames."

-From a hymn to Elle.

"Ternora."

Ternora glanced up at Alira. "Is it nearly time to leave?" she asked. Many of the gods and powers had already left the Deciding Place, but it seemed that Shara was content to linger, talking with Elle and Shadow and those other gods and powers who had joined them.

"Not yet," said Alira, and the quiver in her voice caused Ternora to study her more closely. She was flushed, and her eyes shone with something that seemed to waver between hope and fear.

"Are you all right?" Ternora asked.

"Oh, yes," said Alira. "I cannot believe what Shara has persuaded Elle to do."

"What?" Ternora asked, her interest rising. She had thought that nothing could interest her until her Starwalker training began but dreaming about her vengeance on Warcourage, but it seemed that she was wrong.

"Come and listen!"

Alira pulled her to her feet and hurried her across the Ring until they stood not far away from Shara and Shadow. Ternora winced. For some reason, she hadn't noticed the pressure of divine power when there were many divine beings gathered in the room, but as they departed, the power of those who were left seemed to intensify. Now it seemed as if she were standing near three suns.

Shara glanced at Ternora, and smiled. "It is fitting that you should stand here now," she said. "You were one of the original guardians chosen by Destiny, and you don't trust that Elle has completely joined our side, do you?"

"I would feel better if I knew who all the sides were," said Ternora, walking forward to stand beside Shara. She stared at Elle, who still wore the form of a humble woman in gray robes, and now looked more tired and run down than ever. "There is us, and the side of Death-

"Which is also the side of Dark," said Shadow quietly, as he came to stand beside them. "None of them think that peace with the Light and Destiny is possible, or desirable. They will fight." He smiled. "But they will have to do it without us."

"Yes," said Shara. "We will try to hold the middle, to hold the Dark and the Light and Shadow and anyone else who wants to listen to us together. Dark and Death and Rennon and the other gods and powers who have joined them will fight. The Dark has repudiated me already, did you know? I am quite shocked."

There was a tone in her voice that made Ternora look at her more closely. "My lady," she said hesitantly after a moment, "are you not angry as well?"

"Oh, yes," said Shara. "Some of the Darkworkers thought it would be a good idea to slaughter my priestesses. They will be learning better, and very shortly. But you were asking for an accounting of the sides."

"And then there is Light and Destiny, of course," said Shadow. "I feel sorry for them. They will be fighting a lonely battle all alone. I don't think that any powers or gods will join with them."

"And there are the Faerie elves, who are a side of their own. What they want, I am not completely sure. And there are the winged fey, who want to come back to power and preserve their race. They have the same goals as Light and Destiny, though, so they could be considered as part of the same side."

Ternora swallowed. "And what side is Change on?"

"Ours," said Shadow. "It thinks that I have done some things wrong." He laughed. "I don't know why. But my goals still lie closest to its, and so it will join us and try to use its power to effect change in the world without crushing anyone."

"That's not going to work, is it?" Ternora asked, watching Elle again and wondering what any of this had to do with the quiet goddess. Elle glanced up as if she had heard the thought, and then looked back at her hands again. Ternora almost could have ignored her, had they passed on the street. But what Shara said was true. She still didn't trust Elle, or think that she had really joined Shadow and Shara.

"No," said Shadow. "It won't. But we will try to do all we can, and perhaps it will be enough."

"Will we win, because Change is on our side?"

Shadow shook his head. "No. If Change was the kind of ruthless power that the Dark is, or the kind of god that Rennon is, maybe. But Change tries to arrange things equally, instead of just striking. There is no guarantee that we will win." He smiled. "And the best movement in such times is always to unsettle things, to give our enemies a little something to think about."

"You are not the only one who has doubts about my loyalty," said Elle in a soft voice, looking up at Ternora. "The Light still thinks that it will win me back, and of course I was a large factor in the split between these powers and Death and Dark. So I think that I must do something to prove my loyalty."

"It would have to be something very large," said Ternora, with a frankness that she wouldn't have thought possible in front of this goddess only a short time ago- perhaps a few days or hours, though without a sun she couldn't be sure how long the days or hours might be.

"I know," said Elle quietly. "And that is why I have decided on the course that Shara recommended to me. Everyone who sees this will know that I have changed." She shivered then, as if she were cold.

Shara moved forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "Sister," she said quietly. "We came forth as sisters before the birth of anything else but Time. We are not most powerful, but we are oldest, and I know you best. I have confidence in you. I know that you can do this."

Elle smiled slightly. "You never approved of my taking other goddesses into myself, did you?" she murmured. "You thought that I should have stayed the spirit of goodness and creation that I was."

"We can argue about the definitions of those words," said Shara, "but in essence, yes. That is what I thought. And when your priestesses began to claim the shrines and worshippers of other goddesses for you, I learned to fear and then hate you. I don't fear or hate you now."

"It will be so hard," whispered Elle.

"But it will be worthwhile," said Shara, with another touch on her shoulder.

"What is going on?" Ternora asked, who was beginning to feel as though they had left her in ignorance deliberately.

"Elle is not just one goddess, as you know," said Shara quietly. "She has many aspects, the Fair One and the Huntress and the Forgiver of All Wrongs among them. Any large Temple has many shrines."

Ternora nodded impatiently. "But what can she do about that? Tell her worshippers not to worship those aspects anymore?"

"No," said Elle, and spread her hands. A white light began to surround her, and Ternora felt the first tremble of what felt like a rising groundswell of power. "Those aspects were goddesses in their own right, once. I mean to let them go from myself, to make them goddesses in their own right again."

Ternora tried to think of something intelligent to say, and couldn't come up with anything. She just stood and stared as the white light poured forth from Elle and reached out to touch one of the Deciding Place's walls.

"It will mean breaking my promise to the Orlathian royal line," said Elle, her voice faint with something that in a mortal Ternora would have called strain. "And that will mean changes for Orlath. I am not entirely confident that I know what they will be, nor that I can hold the country in its present form as only myself. But I will try, for the sake of a promise I made a mortal I loved."

And then the white light bored a tunnel in the wall of the Deciding Place, and Ternora saw beyond it into something else.

She thought the something else was dark green, but she was not sure. It seemed to have stars in it, like a forest touched by the faint ripples of moonlight on a full moon night, but she wasn't sure about that, either. She did know that Elle's white light was stirring something in the dark green, something that moved and boiled and leaped in agitation like hot water.

As Ternora watched, the boiling increased, and then broke forth into the shapes of women. Some of them looked bewildered, and others of them looked joyful, and most had no expression of mortal emotion that Ternora could recognize. She looked back towards Elle, and found that the white light had abated enough for her to see that the goddess was smiling, though not happily.

"I release you," said Elle. "Some of you were deities in the northern Kingdoms, once upon a thousand years gone. Others of you were goddesses of the fey, or goddesses of the villagers in the southern Kingdoms, or of the Green Isles. I took all of you over, and for that, I am sorry. Nothing can redeem what I have done to you, but something might redeem any harm that I do to you in the future, and for that I am letting you go. Fly forth, my sisters, and take the places in the world that were denied to you for so long."

She dropped her head and shuddered. The female forms who had come forth from the dark green began to move. Some of them lingered beside each other, talking in low voices, but most of them flew

forward and up, in a direction that Ternora would have never seen until the white light of Elle followed and pointed it out to her. She could see them crowding along the neck of a huge dark beast, towards the gleaming jewel of what she thought was her own world.

Then the vision ceased, and the wall of the Deciding Place came back into being. Elle swayed on her feet, her head still bowed. Her hair, which had shone with Light before, was now as gray as an old mortal woman's.

Shara caught her. "Sister," she said, with more respect and love in her voice than Ternora had ever heard before, "are you all right?"

"I'd forgotten," Elle whispered, and her voice was different, simpler and more human. "I had forgotten how much of my strength was theirs, and not mine." She laughed, a cracked little sound. "And I'd forgotten how much some of them hated me, before I set them into the darkness that birthed us, and then used them instead of letting them roam the world."

"I know," said Shara. "But you have done what others in the distant future will call the right thing. That is all that matters."

Elle snorted. "I would like some reassurance that it was the right thing *now*," she said.

"I know," said Shara, stroking her hair. "And I am afraid that I can only promise you reassurance from me and the others who already agree with me. Will that be enough?"

"It will have to be."

Shara sighed, stroked her sister's hair again, and then turned to Ternora, who had now decided that she had something to say.

"Won't that cause even more chaos and change in the world?" she said. "Religious chaos, as the priestesses of Elle suddenly find that most of their prayers are now heard by other goddesses?"

"Yes," said Shara, whose eyes were shining slightly. Ternora caught a glimpse of stars and the dark green place in them, and looked hastily away. "It will. That is the point of it, of course. It is a strike against Destiny, which wants the world to remain the same always. It is a strike against the Dark and its allies, who want changes- but only the ones they ordain, and only proceeding at the pace they imagine to be right. And it will give the winged fey and the Faerie elves something to think about, too, since some of the released goddesses are fey."

Ternora shook her head. "Do you think it will cause deaths?"

"Some," said Shadow quietly, and Ternora turned to him. "But more deaths than a war? No. And I think Change is limited, to imagine that it can wheel the world in circles and cause no deaths at all."

"So," said Shara, as if nothing had happened. "You have witnessed a change in history, Ternora. And it is time to take you to a place where you can begin to become the kind of person who makes changes in history herself."

And she seized Ternora's hand and Alira's hand at once, and whirled them into golden and silver light.

Ternora did think she said one thing more, to Elle.

But Ternora didn't think it her duty to remember or report those words. They were too tender for such things, anyway.

Epilogue

Three Views

Basalt came down at last with a snort and a kick. He had flown the distance that his Lady Nightstone, commanding through his blaze leader Chive, asked him to, and reached the contacts in Rivendon. They hurried forward to take the message from around his neck, while he looked around and stretched his wings. Rivendon was a cold and northern country, he'd heard, with little grazing for a pegasus, but this seemed to be a place where spring had come, and the contacts were tending gardens. He could graze there if he couldn't find any grass.

Of course, then the army of stone people rushed down upon them without a warning except cries of "Darkworkers!" and Basalt abruptly found that he had other things to worry about. Foremost of them was that his hooves and teeth didn't seem to have any effect on the living stone.

Sage sniffed as she came to rest at last on a ledge, on the mountain that Lady Nightstone had carefully imagined for her. She didn't like the smell of this place. Of course, it was absolutely essential that she come here, but she still didn't like it. The mountain was cracked so that it resembled a three-headed serpent, and there was no one waiting to take her written message.

The other one, then.

Concentrating, Sage tapped with her hoof on the ledge, a pattern of three quick taps and then one long one. Then she neighed aloud the word that Nightstone had carefully given to her: "*Ezudlos*."

There was a rolling cacophony beneath her that seemed to go on for a long time, as though she had knocked a rock down a shaft into the heart of the mountain. And then she felt the stirring of old, strong presences.

Sage snorted and fled into the air. The guardians of the Caves Radiancia were aroused. She didn't know what they were guarding, but she did pity the poor fools who would walk into their clutches.

Leaf shivered as she came down on the shore of the Lake of the Northern Winds. The snow still scattered in the valley personally offended her. She didn't think that it should be there, with spring advanced enough to produce flowers in the south.

But she was here, and someone came forward to receive her message, a small, dark-haired, neat-handed woman who wore the badge that the Lady Nightstone had told her to look for: a crown shattered into three pieces. This woman was a Crownkiller, one of those dedicated to making sure that no one sat the Dalznan throne ever again, even if an heir was found.

Leaf let the woman take the message from around her neck, shivering all the while. The lake was still half-frozen, and the air threatened to freeze her cramping muscles, and the stares of the Crownkillers who lounged on the lake's banks were no warmer.

She almost forgot about the cold for a moment as she saw the vision that the Lake was famed for lift out of it, but the woman gave her a quick response then- that she thanked the Lady Nightstone for

the warning, and would pass on the same warning to the Crownkillers to the north and south- and Leaf was free to go.

She looked back as she flew gratefully to the south, at the gleaming vision of the silver crown that hung in the air for a moment before it sank back into the lake waters. It was said that the crown would come only to the hand of the true heir of Dalzna.

Leaf looked down at the humans on the shores of the lake.

Not if they cut off that hand first, of course. Or the head.

Leaf snorted and beat her wings, climbing into the sky where she could fly free from cold and crowns and such strange human matters.