

Chapter 27

Of Changing and of Shifting Shape

"There are some feats of magic that no mage in the Kingdoms can perform, outside of legend. Shapeshifting is one of those marvels, as is the calling of pure cold. If a magic is not elemental, then it cannot be performed, since the Cycle rules our world and is born in all humans."

--Attributed to Yeyon Starsinger, in his *Commentary on Magic in the Kingdoms*.

Rior cursed as Garden bit the snake that was lunging for him. He knew it wouldn't have been anything but a warning bite; the wolf had obviously chosen to interpret it as something different, though.

I am almost sure that she is a servant of Shadow, he thought grimly, as he grabbed Garden's ruff and dragged her back. *She seems to have a talent for embarrassing me.*

The wolf struggled and snarled and fought him, and Rior had almost to toss her behind him to get her to stop. He bowed to the woman who had almost bitten him. She stared at him with shocked eyes, then looked down at the mangled snake that was thrashing back and forth on the ground, head almost bitten off.

"Please, accept my apologies—"

She looked back up at him, and Rior faltered at the look in her eyes. This had changed from a struggle between Dark and Light to a personal vendetta. Before, the Women of the Snake had been distant, treating with him as they would if someone else stubborn and of the Light had taken the Regent's position. Now this one, at least, would regard him as an enemy.

"Traitor to the Dark!" she cried, and all three unwounded snakes wound around each other with a hiss that made Rior sure the next bites would be fatal.

His heart pounding, he held his hands out, trying to think of some way he could fend her off and continue to fulfill his Destiny. *Or is this it? Am I to die in a Dark quarrel before anything else happens to me, and be remembered as a Regent who betrayed the throne even though I didn't, really?*

That almost sounded better than really betraying the Light, and he might have paused to think about it if he had had the ability. But Garden jumped on him, pushing him to the side, and Rior was rolling on the dais before he had the chance to choose a quick death and poisoned remembrance. He regained his feet in a moment, but the damage had been done. The Woman of the Snake was hissing more loudly than ever, probably since her snakes had bit stone and bruised their mouths, and flowing up the dais towards him.

Garden backed up against him, snarling, but Rior wasn't aware of the human activity behind him until he heard Dorwen yell, "Save the Princess!"

Rior risked one quick look, and immediately wished he hadn't. Dorwen was pushing the Princess Loriel towards the back of the dais, standing between her and the Women of the Snake with a suitably brave expression on his face. He would probably be remembered as the hero of the hour, the way that he was managing to rule even though he didn't actually hold the Regent's position. The other nobles fanned in around him, more than brave enough to defend the Heir of the Light, though none of them were stepping forward to defend Rior.

What did I do to make them all hate me so?

But the question had no answer, and Rior turned forward to face the Woman of the Snake again. The vipers were snapping at the air and lashing back and forth, and Rior had no idea what the Dark he was supposed to do. The Woman of the Snake made it more complicated by looking him in the eye and hissing again, "You were supposed to serve the Dark."

To serve the Dark by the will of the Light...

Yet is this what the powers want? Am I supposed to die here? My Destiny is flaring no more strongly than it ever did, and I can't tell.

He spoke a swift prayer to Arran, since the Woman of the Snake seemed to have settled on the dramatic and slow approach. Garden snarled at his side, but didn't lunge; even she must know that an angry snake would be too fast for her.

No answer came, and Rior repeated the prayer. *My Lord of the River, is this what I'm supposed to do? Am I supposed to die here, or do something else? Will You, or the Light, advise me?*

No response.

Rior sighed. If it was truly his duty to die, he didn't know it. And if it was his choice, then he would not choose to die like this. Perhaps he was too much an Ilantran noble, and couldn't bear the idea of a death so undramatic. Or perhaps he was too much himself, and couldn't bear a death so stupid.

"I choose to call on the one power who has ever offered me an answer," he said, clearly enough that even his enemy paused and stared at him, and he heard the muttering of the nobles behind him stop. "To Shadow I turn, and ask what it thinks I should do."

The shadows in the hall stirred, as if they had only been waiting for such a call. Rior watched as the shadows of the snakes writhed and stirred and slid towards him, adding themselves to his own shadow. For the first time, he blessed whoever had hung the

Scarlet-fed lamps all over the hall, so that there were shadows stretched across the floor all over the place. If Shadow didn't have power in such a time, then it never would.

Flow with them. The voice in his head was heavy, and Rior staggered beneath the weight of it, but it was also calm. *Melt into them. Change with them.*

Rior nodded and closed his eyes, letting his shape flow and change. He wasn't sure what he would become, but he wasn't entirely surprised when he opened his eyes to find himself much closer to the ground, with a clamor of scents in his nostrils.

He snarled and took a step forward, nearly falling. He had, of course, played at running on all fours as a child, but managing a wolf's form was different from the way that he had managed hands and knees. His forelegs wobbled, and it felt as if his hind legs wanted to bend.

Garden snarled beside him, and Rior found himself moving towards her, leaning his shoulder against hers, giving a growl of his own that was in tune with hers. In some strange way, he thought he knew for the first time what pack was all about. It was growling in tune with your packmates, and being ready to spring when they did, simply because you were so aware of what they were doing at all times.

The Woman of the Snake looked close to backing off. Rior didn't think she was frightened by a pair of wolves, but seeing him shapeshift was something else again. But one of her companions hissed something in their own tongue, and she firmed her gaze and flowed forward again.

"I don't know if you can still understand me," she said. "But you are a traitor to the Dark, and that means I will kill you." One of her snakes lifted to look over Rior's and Garden's heads at the nobles huddled behind them. "If any of you want to surrender, then we shall consider this the Light's fault, and none of yours."

Rior sprang in that moment, because he felt Garden tensing beside him, and because it was the perfect moment, really. The woman's attention was elsewhere; she was looking through her snake's eyes. He reasoned that out later.

But, at the time, it was because he knew that Garden was getting ready to jump, and he wouldn't let her go alone.

They hit the Woman of the Snake somewhere around her knees, or near the end of the lower snakes' bodies. The angle was so awkward for the right viper that it couldn't get any immediate hold, and then its fangs caught in the thick fur that shielded Rior's body. He twisted to meet it, and bit the snake with great precision right behind the hood. It hissed and fought free of him, but a large portion of the head was missing, and the way it lashed on the ground then was mostly reflex.

The Woman of the Snake shrieked. Garden snarled. Rior turned to see Garden clenching her teeth around the woman's throat; she had fallen and was lying on the floor, almost blank-eyed with the pain.

The political mind he had taken up unwillingly stirred and fought its way to the surface, through the wolf's approval of killing an enemy of the pack.

"No! Leave her be!"

The words sounded mangled from his throat, but they did sound, and Rior gasped as color suddenly crashed back into the room in a great roaring tide. The scents faded, and for the first time he was aware of the sounds of human speech as something other than an irritating buzz. He shook his head and scrambled back to hands and knees, meeting Garden's glare with as much confidence as he could.

"Don't kill her. I know you can understand me," he added, when Garden's glare grew a little more stubborn.

Garden started to close her teeth.

Rior growled and reached out, grabbing the sides of her head so that she couldn't look away from him while she killed.

Garden growled again and let go. The Woman of the Snake shrank backwards, still wailing. Rior sat back, avoiding Garden's gaze now. He had done that for human reasons, and that felt strangely like a betrayal of what they had shared as wolves.

He stood up, carefully, aware that the shadows had detached themselves from their rightful owners and were gamboling about him. He lifted his gaze and met the stunned eyes of the nobles who huddled around Lorie. Lorie looked as disinterested as only an animal could be, but there was fear on Dorwen's face. Rior thought he could almost smell it.

"What are you?" his cousin demanded.

Rior met his gaze and thought, *I wish I knew.*

Chapter 28

Compromises

Here you are again. I will try to be gentler this time, and not bite your hands when you touch me.

Oh, you've brought a mug of ale? That's a step in the right direction, I can tell you that.

And your sword. Hello, my lady. I hope that you aren't too irritated with your human. He has tried his best to take care of you since our last meeting. I can see that your blade is agleam with oil.

The blood and rust appears to be entirely gone. May I say that I am impressed with you, Idessen? You appear to have understood just what it will take to get you back into my good graces, and done it.

Oh, of course you mutter that that was not your intention, that you only came to hear stories from me and nothing else. But you would say such things. I am coming to think that it is not only you who would say such things, but every human I have ever known. You have a pride that means you must be able to say you're better than talking swords, or talking stones, or talking rings. You must be better than everything that lives, except unicorns and elves. I don't think I've ever heard someone compare herself to them seriously, except Nightstone.

Who was she? Oh, someone particularly arrogant. I'll tell you her story if you like. It is long, and quite interesting.

No, you would rather hear the story that you came to hear, the story of Shadow and the Princess Loriel? Of course you would. Then you shall have that story, as soon as you put your lovely lady down beside me and offer me a drop of the ale.

Poured with a will, Idessen! Your manners have certainly improved.

Where did we leave off? The Lord of Disasters banished Shadow from the land with his decision, of course, and after that the darkness descended on the land. And I don't mean the Dark. I am sure you will tell me that Ilantra has been ruled by the Dark only once in its history, and then only for a few years. But that is not the kind of darkness that fell on the land. There was an extinguishing, a passing of light, from the mind and the heart.

What do I mean? I can only tell you what I know in the words that I heard it told in. I don't have that light myself, and so I can't know what it means. But I think it would be as if I were to suddenly lose the ability to see, and hear, and speak. The people who were left behind in Ilantra became like beasts, perhaps, though someone once told me it was more like being statues.

No, I don't know how long it endured. I was taken away from Ilantra by one of the last refugees, and I spent most of the next centuries in Doralissa, helping the Kings and Queens build their home. But when I next heard of Ilantra, they said it was settled by refugees come from the Breathing Lands.

Did I ever tell you that I've traveled through the Breathing Lands? Yes, I have, though in the hand of an elf and not a human. That should cut off all hopes about humans crossing

them. Yes, they are everything that the tales say of them: dangerous, inimical to human life, utterly impossible to cross without magic or the kind of protection I have. I do not breathe myself, and the elf who carried me didn't have to, and thus we moved across without trouble. But humans couldn't. So these humans who claimed they had settled Ilantra were lying.

But why? An owner of mine at last took me among them, and I could see no reason to lie. They were as brown of skin and flecked of eye as they always had been; that last was the ilzán blood in them. They were the same people I had left behind in the country so long ago.

Where are you going? I'm not lying. I'm telling you the truth as I heard it, and as I saw it. You must have heard about the speculations that the founders of Ilantra were lying. They didn't really cross the Breathing Lands because no one can who does breathe, and they did.

I'm not lying to you.

If you're leaving, will you at least pour the rest of the ale over my blade?

Well, then, leave it here?

I don't believe that, about the servants needing the mug back! You could leave it here.

Iron-damned humans. Tell them a wondrous lie, and they swallow it like ale; tell them the truth, and it might as well be poison.

Chapter 29

Dark and Starlight

"Truth emerges in starlight. It is of the Light, of course, as all forms of radiance are, but it is so gentle that it can coax out the creatures of the Dark and make them bow their heads to the Light for a time. If you want to hear a Darkworker tell the truth, catch him in the starlight."

--Telos Kinessi, Lord of Scarlet and Shadow.

Rior ate as fast as he could, sharing the scraps of meat with Garden when he had the strength to move the plate away from his mouth. He had never felt so hungry, and meat had never tasted so good. Usually, he wanted some fruit or bread to sweeten and soften the taste, but not this time.

"Rior. We must talk."

Rior glanced up, and met Dorwen's eyes. His cousin was pale, but stood firm before his gaze. Rior nodded and ate the last scrap he could manage, then gave the rest of the plate to Garden. She devoured it without taking her eyes off Dorwen.

"Where?" Rior asked.

"The Star Gardens," said Dorwen, and wheeled, striding away. A few of the nobles went with him, but most stayed to press Princess Lorie's hand and murmur pleasantries to her. Rior sighed and watched them, now and then glancing at the Women of the Snake. They had retreated to the door, dragging their wounded companion with them. They didn't quite dare to attack him again, but Rior didn't think the truce would last long. They would probably send a message to Queen Aloriadell, asking what they should do, and then try and make him regret that he had ever taken the Regency.

If that's their ambition, they won't be the first. Rior stood, carefully shaking out his legs. The shakiness that had invaded them when he first turned back to human was gone, and he could feel strength flowing through him like the shadows that flowed and twined about his limbs. He looked at Princess Lorie and found that she was staring at him, with fear, the first intelligent emotion he had seen from her, filling her gaze. Then she turned her head away, as though she was avoiding the eyes of an alpha.

Rior wondered how long he should wait to go to Dorwen and the others, then smiled. He was Regent, wasn't he? And he was responsible for feeding and training and protecting the Princess Lorie. If he said that she had had enough of bowing and greeting, then she had.

"My lords, my ladies." They turned at once to look at him, a few backing up. Rior didn't mind. In fact, he had to bite his lips to keep from laughing out loud. "I think that we should leave Her Highness alone for now. She quite obviously needs rest and food, and then long and peaceful sleep."

Brianna dared to ask, "When may we visit her during the day?"

"I was thinking that a presentation tomorrow wouldn't be a bad thing," said Rior, who had not been thinking that and had to make it up as he went along. "During the daylight hours, during the Court, so that those who come for judgments can see the woman who will one day judge them. Will you come to the Great Hall in the morning and join us there?"

There was a murmur of assent, though surprise was mixed in with it. They had not expected him to be so accommodating, Rior knew.

He rolled his eyes. They seemed to expect little of him at all, even though they had presumably put him in the position to do just this kind of thing. He wished they would make up their minds about what games they were playing, and leave him out of it.

The nobles shuffled to the door, now and then glancing back at the Princess. Under the cover of their departure, Rior bent close to the maid who had attended the Princess and said in a low voice, "What's your name, my lady?"

She glanced up at him, then away, cheeks flushing a bright pink. "Tellor, my lord."

"The decree that I made applies to you, too, Tellor. You don't need to call me by title if you don't want to."

"I wouldn't feel right else, my lord."

Rior nodded, accepting that. "Can you bring the Princess to the Great Hall tomorrow, Tellor, clothed in a fine gown and well-fed?"

The maid looked up, her face alight with hope. "You mean that I would become her personal attendant, my lord?"

Rior blinked. He had forgotten how prestigious the position of personal attendant could be for a servant, and how many of them risked and fought all their lives to get this close to the throne. Tellor watched him intently, as if hoping he wouldn't remember that there must be others with more seniority than she.

But to Rior, her youth was an advantage, given what he must tell her. An older woman, say Stream, would be suspicious.

"It will be work," he warned her after a moment's consideration. "You will have to clothe the Princess, feed her on scraps of meat, give her water, and bathe her. She is under an enchantment that presents her to the world as an ordinary child raised by wolves, without a mind, without any understanding of humans or the Court. You would have to tend her and not be impatient when the enchantment apparently makes her do animal things."

An older woman might have snorted at him. But Tellor followed his words with shining eyes, and nodded vigorously at the end of them. "I know it will be work, my lord, but I don't mind," she said, when Rior paused. "I've tended babies and dogs before, and they were far more work. I think that I'll do well with the Princess."

"You will answer to me."

"Yes, my Lord Regent," said Tellor, with a slight grin, as if to show him why she wasn't worried about that.

After a moment, Rior allowed in his mind that she didn't have much to be worried about. Servants weren't liable if they made mistakes, at least mistakes of national import; the blame lay with their masters. Tellor must be thinking that the trouble she would get into if the Princess's clothes weren't clean was nothing next to the trouble the Regent himself would get into, and being close to the throne would have benefits all by itself.

"Tend her well," he said. "For tonight, take her back to her room, undress and bathe her, and make sure she sleeps well, in the nest of blankets if need be. And get her dressed and down to the Great Hall in the morning, with some food inside her."

"Yes, my Lord Regent."

Rior nodded and turned towards the Star Gardens, hoping Tellor would lose her shyness soon. He didn't think that he could go very long hearing his title on her tongue. It sounded less natural every time.

Nails clicked behind him, and he glanced down in surprise to see Garden at his heels. She looked up, met his eyes calmly, and wagged her tail.

"You won't be welcome," Rior told her.

The same calm, implacable gaze, and wagging tail.

Rior shrugged, and resumed his walk. If he was right about the reason Dorwen wanted to see him in the Star Gardens, then Garden won't actually have to attack anyone. This was supposed to be the scene of a confession, where Rior would admit the error of his ways and receive comfort from his cousins.

But I have no confession for them.

"Welcome, Rior."

Rior smiled slightly and moved forward. The setting was just what he had thought it would be, what it was in all the history-tales. Dorwen and several other nobles, the ones who had followed him from the Hall, sat in a circle of thrones, the Judgment Seats that had been carried across the Breathing Lands. They were carved of crystal, or at least some milky white stone that trapped the starlight in itself. Rior nodded to all of them, though he stared at Therion, whom he had not known was that close to Dorwen.

I thought she wanted the throne for herself. Well. Perhaps I shall have to pay more attention to the political currents even than I thought I would.

He took his place on the black star carved into the dark marble before the thrones, but didn't immediately bow his head, as the ritual also called for. He looked up at the stars instead, and spoke a heartfelt prayer of his own, though he didn't know who would listen to him.

If there is Dark in my heart, let the legends be true and let starlight reveal it! I would like to know what allegiance I truly own, or if my allegiance is mine to choose, as it seemed to be in the moment of Shadow.

He had to admit that Shadow seemed far away now, as he stood before the thrones of Light, on the star that had seen the confessions of more criminals than he and all the other nobles combined had years. The weight of old legends seemed to settle on his shoulders, subtle and yet commanding. Rior drew his breath in and set himself.

"Rior. Son of Lady Wendira of the Ilantran royal line, grandson of Princess Aldira who was sister to King Elijor." Dorwen's voice swelled and sang on the words. "What do you think we have called you here to confess?"

"My involvement with the Dark."

Dorwen leaned forward, hands clenching into the crystal arms of his throne. "Then you are a Darkworker? Why did you not confess this before?"

"I do not know I am. If there is Dark in my heart, then it is hidden even from me." Rior looked up and met his cousin's eyes, though that was not ordinarily done in the middle of the ritual. But he thought that Dorwen probably wouldn't care, too caught up in the idea that Rior was about to confess—something. "But I would like to know what it is. I would like to see it revealed."

The nobles sat in a silence as thick as the night all around them. Something pale did flash off to the side, and Rior turned his head. It was Garden, working her way around to the far side of the circle, where she could sit and look directly at him. Rior looked away. He didn't want to meet her gaze, certain that he would see a lingering sense of betrayal there.

Dorwen said at last, "There is one way to tell if the Dark has you in its clutches, cousin."

Rior looked up. "What is that?"

"Take my hand." Dorwen lifted his right hand from the arm of the throne. It shone with captured radiance itself, and Rior realized, with a start, how high his cousin must stand in the favor of the Light to manage such a feat. "If you have Dark in your heart, then the Light will scour it out."

Rior didn't hesitate, even though Garden growled as he stepped forward and gripped Dorwen's hand. He had to know, one way or the other. Any knowledge, even knowledge that led to destruction, was better than this endless wondering.

Chapter 30

Garden In the Shadows

Garden can feel the rising power in the garden. In truth, she has felt it since she arrived, but only now can she identify the source. It's coming from Smug-Scent, and the glowing hand that he extends towards Meat-Giver.

She bounds forward, not sure what is happening, but intent on stopping it.

Meat-Giver takes Smug-Scent's hand before she can get there, and abruptly makes a loud sound. Garden isn't sure what it is, only that it's full of stifled pain. She jumps, slamming her jaws shut on Smug-Scent's leg to get his attention.

He pulls away from Meat-Giver with a howl of his own, but Meat-Giver is still glowing with light. Garden lets go of Smug-Scent and jumps at him, wondering if this is fire and if she can smother it. She once saw dust fall on an alpha who died by a *terikon*'s fire and put the flames out.

The light reaches out, and surrounds her. Garden feels her paws leave the ground. She struggles and snaps, but the lifting continues. She has time for one more snarl before the world fades around her.

She opens her eyes to find that she has been taken back to the forest. The grass is cool beneath her paws, and the trees around her are healthier than she has ever seen them. Garden sniffs, the scents of flowing water and flowers filling her nostrils, and looks around for Meat-Giver.

She can't see him, but she can see a great wolf lying on the grass, who rises and comes towards her.

Garden flattens her ears and wags her tail. She doesn't want any trouble with this wolf. If he is not an alpha, then he is a lone killer. He stands twice her size, and he doesn't have any trouble meeting her eyes.

He comes to a halt in front of her, and stares down at her. Garden rolls on her back, baring her belly. The wolf sniffs her, once and deeply, and then abruptly speaks in Meat-Giver's words.

"Who are you?"

Garden rolls back to her feet once she sees that the wolf is not attacking. But when she wags her tail and lifts her tail to let him sniff her, he doesn't seem to understand. He doesn't sniff her, just repeats the question in the human language that Garden doesn't know how to answer. If her scent is not the right answer to the question, then how can anything be?

"Wait."

Garden turns to look back at him. The wolf has let his eyes widen in a gesture that seems very human. Garden wonders if he is like Meat-Giver briefly was, a human who assumed the guise of a wolf. Garden wishes that Meat-Giver would go back to being a wolf. It was much easier to understand him then.

"I know what you are," says the wolf. "You are a child of Chance, the intervening force."

Garden doesn't know what he means, and so goes back to scratching her ear. It has itched since she came into the human-place. She fears that she may have picked up fleas from the dogs, or from Human-Scent.

"It will not leave me alone," says the wolf. "I have tried and tried to establish a foothold in this world, and Light and Dark have attacked me. But Chance has been the most persistent. It would like to see me fail, because it knows I will have the victory once I persuade the hearts of the Ilantran people to return to their old allegiance." He stares at the ground for a moment. "And now it has sent you, one of the kind that should serve me. You have an intelligence shining in your eyes that I have not seen before, and you are interfering with he who should be my champion."

Garden doesn't know what he is talking about, and is bored. She looks around, sees a butterfly dancing above one of the flowers, and decides that it might be good exercise to chase it, so she does.

"A child of Chance would act like this," the wolf adds to her back, while Garden rolls and jumps and dodges in pursuit of the butterfly. "It would seem as though she were only an ordinary wolf, or possibly even a tool of the Light. But in truth, she serves the power that fights Destiny, the power that would be master of the world if it could." He snarls.

Garden lands on her paws and spins alertly around to look at the wolf. But he is no longer looking at her, only staring away into the air and baring his teeth at nothing Garden can smell. She looks in that direction as well, cautiously inflating her nostrils to their widest extent, but can smell nothing. The wolf is strange, as crazy in his own way as Human-Scent or Smug-Scent.

The wolf snarls abruptly, and crashes away into the forest. Garden starts to follow, wondering if he is going to hunt, but the forest shimmers around her. Garden snarls and braces her paws, unsure what is happening.

The forest flows and shifts, and then becomes the dark place where the humans were gathered around Meat-Giver again. Garden sees Meat-Giver kneeling on the ground, gasping, twined with shadows. Smug-Scent is still holding his leg. Garden can smell the blood from here. He gives an angry howl at the sight of her, and waves a hand. His dog, whom Garden challenged earlier, bounds out from behind his throne and bears down on her.

Garden throws her weight into the battle, yelping for Meat-Giver, certain that he will join her soon.

Chapter 31

Moments of Knowledge

"I have told you the truth! If you want more, I shall have to start telling you lies."

-Supposed words of King Pheron of Orlath in negotiations with the Queen of Dalzna.

"Rior."

Rior trembled as the Light infused his body, certain that he would know in a moment just what Light and what Dark lived in his soul—

But a shape obscured the Light, and a voice called his name, and a hand clamped, powerfully, on his shoulder.

Rior turned his head, wondering if Dorwen had relented and come to free him of the need to confess. But it was a mass of shadow that he looked into, and then a pair of golden eyes that formed out of it.

"Why do you need to know what punishment the Light intends to inflict on you?" the voice asked, echoing as though they stood in the middle of a vault. "You can serve me, and still live and have what you desire."

Shadow, Rior thought with a sigh. *It must be more persistent than most of the powers that have courted me.*

"If the Light rejects me, then I may turn to you," he said, and tried to push Shadow aside. It was, though, like reaching into a mass of shadows, or soft and yielding cloth. He found nothing where his hands tried to push. He sighed and gave up. "Let me see what the Light's will is."

"You have already bound yourself to me."

"In desperation," said Rior coldly, "and because you are the only one who offers me answers of any kind. But now you are trying to prevent me from learning if there are answers to be had. Move, or I shall start thinking that you are the one who has prevented the Light or Arran from reaching towards me."

"I have no need," said Shadow's voice, even as the shadows melted aside. "You shall see that they have no regard for you at all."

Light broke on him, brilliant and blinding. Rior dropped to his knees. The hard surface beneath him could have been the stone star on which he had stood, but he didn't know. He could see nothing but the Light, and the afterimages that had begun to burn across his eyes.

"Light," said Rior softly. "Tell me what to do." He clasped his hands together and stretched them out in front of him; that he could tell by the movement of his body, though he could still see nothing but the glorious golden-white brilliance. "Tell me if I am a fit servant of the Light."

No.

Rior caught his breath, aware that his heart was pounding so hard in his ears that he felt dizzy. "Why? Is it because I am Destined to be a servant of the Dark?"

The Light did not answer him in a voice this time. Perhaps it thought that was an inefficient way to answer, after all. The light swept within him, and Rior felt burning points contract just above his heart and his forehead. Then they sank, and he felt knowledge streaming to the surface of his mind. Humbly, he bowed his head and waited until it had arrived.

The Light showed him what one must have to be a good servant, by giving him brief glimpses of the powers that he would never possess. A clear mind was necessary, one that did not doubt, one that fixed on its target and flew there without turning aside. A certain ruthlessness was necessary. Dorwen was willing to sacrifice Rior, and any of their cousins, and even most of Ilantra, to the Light, if the Light demanded it. The country had been under the control of the Dark for the past eighteen years, and it was absolutely vital that that not continue. The Light had chosen a pattern that could evade the Dark and put Light back on the throne, in the person of Princess Lorie. Anyone who died on the way was to be regretted, but the pattern could not be changed now. It was tied in with Destiny and whether Ilantra would survive the Dark's rule.

Rior had been chosen as the sacrificial victim. It could have been any of his cousins, but he had been the closest, the most hostile to Dorwen, and the one most lacking in the clarity of mind and ruthlessness that Dorwen had. He had laughed when he saw Lorie naked and biting fleas off her skin, instead of worrying about what it meant, or being certain that this was part of her Destiny. He doubted, and wondered, and waited for answers, instead of just trusting in the edicts of the Light and moving ahead. He was dangerous in himself, and the sacrifice would rid the Light of his presence as well as giving it its key in the pattern.

The knowledge ended. Rior opened his eyes, and found that the brilliant light had gone, and he was crouching on the stone in the utter darkness. Shadows wrapped him, dancing around his limbs like snakes, now and then creeping across his eyes like blindfolds. Slowly, Rior stood, shaking.

As if it had been banished until that moment, the sound of yelping came to his ears. Rior turned his head, and saw Garden rolling on the ground with Dorwen's dog. The hound had more of an upper tooth at the moment, and there were growls coming from elsewhere in the audience. A mass charge would overwhelm Garden, though she would give them wounds to remember her by before she died.

Rior took a deep breath. The Light hadn't said anything about Garden, about whether she was a servant of Dark or Shadow or itself, and therefore Rior was inclined to try and spare her life, if only because she could be Princess Loriel's companion later.

He stepped forward and launched his mind at the dogs, opening a conduit to the Azure as he went. The dogs' blood flowed through his mind in bright, living patterns. He could congeal it or chill it, if he wished.

He stopped it from moving, instead.

The silence was sudden and eerie. The loudest sound in it was Garden shaking the bulk of the dead dog off and shuddering her coat as if to get rid of fleas. Then she padded towards him, toenails clicking on the stone. She did pause to sniff at a few of the dead dogs, but came and sat next to him, opening her mouth just long enough to growl at Dorwen.

Rior turned, and noticed for the first time that Dorwen was bleeding from a wound high on his leg. *When did that happen?*

"Why did you do that?" Dorwen asked, sounding shocked. "You love dogs, Rior. You would never do something like that. You would never kill so easily and so heartlessly. And many of those were dogs that you had raised and trained from puppies, yourself. Why would you hurt them?"

Rior took a deep breath and lifted his eyes to Dorwen's. "The Light has shown me the truth. I don't have the qualities that it needs in a servant if Princess Loriel is to take the throne, and that means that I have only one part to play. I have to be its sacrifice, its pawn—" The words stuck in his throat, and he shook his head. *This pride of mine is only another reason that I have to play this part.* "You were right. I am Dark, Dorwen, not because I am serving the Dark, but because I am not Light."

"Rior—"

Rior overrode whatever his cousin was about to say. There was pity in his eyes, and Rior didn't want that. This would be hard enough, bearing what he had to bear, without things he didn't have to bear added in. "So I killed the dogs. It's something a Darkworker would do, killing without remorse like that. And if I must play the part of a Darkworker, then I will play it. I can make the motions in body, though making them in heart is beyond me."

"Rior," Dorwen whispered again. "The Light would never ask such a sacrifice of you."

Rior shrugged. "Then maybe I will serve the Dark in time. It would be easier." Almost anything would be easier, he thought, than the pain tearing at his heart right now. This felt like having to mercy-kill a friend, like having to choose between children. He didn't want to do this, but if a greater good would be served by it, then how could he complain?

Dorwen glanced away from him. Rior had seen a shadow in them that he prayed was not a shadow of doubt. The Light's game was in play. It shouldn't have to choose another champion this late.

"Do not doubt, Dorwen," he said. "You made me Regent for a reason, and you didn't take the throne for yourself for a reason. Princess Loriel must rule. It is up to both of us to see that she does. Your task is in readying the country for her, in encouraging sympathy for her and spreading her tale."

"And yours?"

"In teaching her, and making sure that I am a bad example by contrast. When I fall from the throne, then her people must be overjoyed to receive her. I think I can do that."

"It is not fair," said Dorwen.

"It is," said Rior quietly. "It is fair in some greater way that we cannot understand. May I go now, Dorwen? I would like to pray to Arran, say a farewell to Him."

Dorwen only waved a hand limply, though usually any mention of a god other than Elle was enough to send him into a lecture. Rior bowed and left the stone star, Garden padding at his heels.

He could feel her gaze, and the softness of the shadows that still draped themselves around him, and he tried to ignore them both. They would only complicate things.

I can't have the ruthlessness that the Light demands, but I can have something like it. I can resist the temptation to turn aside from my Destiny.

Chapter 32

Covering Tracks

So you're back again, are you? I hope that you can listen to the story without the impulse to run off this time. I didn't mean to make you run last time, and I think you know it. Did you realize that—

No, you are not Idessen. I should have realized it at once. No one else could have such piercingly clear gray eyes. Of course, my lord. I will not tell the details of your story if

you don't want me to. Of course you should have peace and solitude, if that is what you want. Though I hope that you are not completely alone in your new home?

No, no, of course not, it was presumptuous of me to ask, and I won't again. I never would have asked if I was not curious, if I didn't have a bond to you that I think justifies it.

What bond? I rode at your hip. Is that not enough?

Well, it is true that we served different masters in those days, and that we worked at cross-purposes, but that doesn't mean that we should be enemies forever. Given how everything ended, do you really still hate me?

Ah, you are more thoughtful than Idessen, I see. A slow headshake. I am glad, my lord. I would have been unhappy to have you angry with me.

Why? Because it's possible that you could have destroyed me, of course. Even when we met for the first time, I knew that.

You laugh. You never did believe me when I told you that. But I'm not talking about anything as simple as melting my blade, or even breaking my hilt off. I could survive that. I have had it done before, and still clung to the magic that makes me who I am, Luden. But I could not have survived what you would have done to me. You would have destroyed me if I lay in your way. The way is less important than the fact that you would have managed.

Yes, let us talk about something else. How is she, our dear friend? Still as lively and as beautiful as ever?

I am glad to hear it.

I don't know if anyone else ever thanked you for what you did for Ilantra, but thank you. You served as the conduit for the powers to return that needed to, and I think you served the balance between those powers better than any outright champion of either would have done.

Yes, I do include myself and the Queen in that tally.

I shouldn't embarrass you? Of course. Some things have not changed. You are still the man you have always been, at least where pride and praise are concerned. You think that you don't deserve either. But I can assure you that you do. What happened would have been much worse if not for you.

You blush, my lord. It is a strange thing to see in one such as you, but I will accept it. You would not be my lord if you were not who you were, and you would not be who you are if you did not blush.

Footsteps! Someone comes. Yes, Idessen visits me at about this time every day, though I thought he wouldn't come back after yesterday. Perhaps you should hide, or at least leave. I understand your not wanting to meet anyone.

Good luck on your visit to the Queen, my lord. Farewell.

Ah, Idessen! Are you going to listen to me resume the story, or are you going to throw another tantrum?

Listen to me? I am glad.

Why do I sound smug? No reason. But I realize now that I have been approaching the story from the wrong angle, and it is no wonder that you are bored. I was looking at it from my particular place in the tale. But that is not how history-tales are told. They are seen from a distant gaze, one that recounts both Dark and Light and tells unflinchingly of faults in the participants. That is the way that you would rather hear this story, isn't it?

Of course it is. My apologies, Idessen. I can only start telling the tale from the beginning, though not quite as far back as the Lord of Disasters. I will begin it close to my target and hope that helps.

Let me know if it does not. Anything that I can tell you, I will.

Chapter 33

What An Evil Regent Would Do

"The history-tales of the various Kingdoms hold almost every example of Dark behavior, Dark creatures, and ways of fighting the Dark to be had. That they also hold such things of the Light is often not as acknowledged."

-Rinla Yasta of the Star Circle, compiler of the *Jetadibosmorio*, or The Joy-Tale of the World.

Rior stared at the ceiling and tried to marshal his memories of the history-tales. They wouldn't come to him, though, and at last he sighed and slipped out of bed, to go to the bookshelf that he had rarely used of late. All his time seemed to be occupied with plotting conspiracies and avoiding the notice of King Delian and Queen Aloriadell, and then, for the past few days, with Loriel and trying to avoid the Regency.

He drew forth a battered copy of *The History of Ilantra*, and flipped through the pages until he arrived at the history-tale he wanted. It was just a scrap from an earlier age, an age when his ancestors had lived far away across the Breathing Lands, but Rior thought it

would work admirably well for his purposes. Surely the behavior there was Dark enough for him to emulate.

The Lord of Disasters was so called because all his Regency and reign was filled with bad decisions and the worse consequences of them. He decided that all the water in the country should be brought to feed his own gardens, and did not think about the farms that would die because of lack of water, meaning there would be no delicate crops to grace his own table. He tried to kill most of the royal family, even though that would mean no heir for himself, because he distrusted all of them and thought they were concocting conspiracies. He tried to slay his best friend because that friend had suggested he step down from the throne. He caused so much harm that his people at last brought him down, along with the consequences of his last decision, and fled their old home for the Breathing Lands.

Rior nodded and sat down on the bed to more thoroughly study the history-tale. Something heavy hit the bed beside him, though, and he looked up into Garden's eyes before he could truly start reading.

Once he was looking at her, he found that he could not look away. He sat still as Garden moved towards him, his heart beginning to sing in his ears with fear.

Is she a servant of the Light, sent to kill me? Or perhaps Shadow doesn't like the way I rejected it and is already plotting revenge. That would make sense, since wolves are its creatures.

Garden only stopped in front of him and stood staring at him, though. The stare was grave; her tail was not wagging, and Rior could almost smell her displeasure. But she wasn't attacking him.

"I don't know what you want," he said at last, helplessly, and was startled to hear the tiredness of his own voice. Had it been that long since he slept? It didn't seem like it, but it was late at night, the candles in his room burning to fight back the darkness. He supposed he would have to get used to the night in time, though how he was supposed to read without light he wasn't sure.

Garden tilted her head to the side and gave a questioning little growl that could have meant everything or nothing. It could even have been Rior's imagination that put the questioning twist into the growl, though he didn't think so. With Garden, he thought it was best to assume she always knew what she meant, and that all her expressions and sounds were guided by an intelligence as sound as any human's.

"I don't know what you want," Rior repeated. "I can't speak with you the way I did as a wolf—"

He stopped as Garden growled in approval, and as the shadows in the corners of the room flexed and crept towards him.

"You want me to change again?" he asked, staring at Garden.

She licked his face, something even the wolf-bred dogs usually didn't do, and then jumped to the floor. She ignored the shadows, or perhaps she was so utterly comfortable around them that it didn't occur to her to pay them attention. Rior wished he knew what to believe around her, and looked back at the shadows.

"I can't," he said. "I should be thinking about the best way to serve the Light, by serving the Dark."

Garden whined. Rior grinned before he could stop himself. The whine sounded almost like a contemptuous sniff from a human.

"I suppose it does sound strange when spoken aloud," he admitted, and reached out to stroke the pale fawn fur. Garden backed up from him, though, watching his face, and then stepped around a shadow that was streaking towards him. Rior watched it, narrow-eyed, trying to decide if shapeshifting was something that a Darkworker would do, and then decided that he couldn't know. He couldn't know if he was shapeshifting because he wanted to, or because it really was true to his duty. And surely indulging his own desires was staying true to his duty to the Light, in a way.

I will confuse myself before this is done, he thought, and stretched out his arms to receive the shadows. They coiled around him, and Rior thought he felt them reach into his heart and mind with cool fingers, in much the way that the Light had reached inside with scouring beams. He shrugged. *Let them reach as they like. They shall not find anything in me that they can use.*

But it seemed that he was wrong, for the shadows abruptly coiled more tightly, and then he dropped to all fours, shaking his head to get the hair out of his eyes. But the hair had turned to fur, and his face was stretching, his skin flowing over sudden new limbs, his tail sprouting from his backside as if it had always been there. He was braced for the pain that legends said always accompanied shapeshifting, either as a result of bones and muscles warping or because the act was unnatural, but it didn't come. Perhaps the shadows taking him in, instead of forcing him to change on his own, had something to do with it.

Once again, color washed out of the world, and scent washed in. Rior raised his head, sniffing the air. It sang a thousand stories to him, from Garden's warm and instantly understood presence nearby to mouse droppings in a corner. Rior turned his head towards the droppings. *I have mice in here?*

But Garden nipped him then and jumped away. Rior spun back towards her with a yelp, charging. His forelegs skidded out from under him, of course, and he wound up on his back, but he was wagging his tail as he fell. This was more equally than he had ever played with a wolf before.

Or dog.

Rior thought about that as he dragged himself back to his feet. Was his connection with Garden the reason the dogs avoided him, and not any change of heart towards the Dark? Declaring allegiance to Dark or Light didn't seem to matter to most animals, unless they were Destined to be companions of heroes of one or the other, but it might matter to a dog that he was aligning himself with wolves.

And really, why would I? I hunt wolves. I hunt rogues, anyway. Why should I become a wolf and not a dog?

It was probably the will of Shadow, but it still made Rior uneasy. He wondered if he should shift back

Garden nipped him again, though, and Rior forgot the thought in the delight of charging her, this time with some balance, and nipping her back. She flattened her ears at him, but her tail was wagging, and Rior realized he understood her. She was pretending to be angry at him, like two puppies playing on the grass in the spring, like two littermates, but she wasn't really mad.

Rior blinked as he caught a brief glimpse of tumbling pups, as close as if he'd been there. Perhaps he was sharing Garden's memories, or seeing memories that Shadow was lading his mind with. He hoped it was the first case, since that seemed as if he were more likely to keep control of his own mind that way.

She sniffed him, and Rior turned back to their play, catching her a good one under the jaw. She nipped him again and jumped away, though she stopped at the door and looked back at him.

Rior trotted up, studying the latch carefully. Yes, it could be pushed with a nose, if he aimed himself carefully and sat up at just the right angle.

It took him three tries, but in the end the latch fell down. With some careful maneuvering, Rior fitted a paw under the door and tugged it the rest of the way open, then turned to look at Garden.

She bolted past him, sending the door slamming against the wall. Rior winced at the thought of the noise, and then decided that, probably, no one would care. Most of the nobles were asleep by now, or plotting. At most they would stir slightly in their sleep, or duck beneath their chairs and wait until they were sure the noise wasn't Darkworkers coming to arrest them.

He followed her, bounding down the hall despite the loud clicks that his toenails raised. Garden was confident here, and he decided that he should be confident, too. This was a human-place, and it wasn't as if they were in the forest, where they would have to be quiet in hunting things.

Rior followed Garden's bobbing tail around corners and down stairs—those last gave him some trouble—so intent that at first he didn't realize where she was going. But when she paused near the door that led into the main courtyard and looked at him, he realized it. She was aiming for the bridge that led from the courtyard across the River to the eastern bank, and beyond that lay the forests. It was the way the pack had come, escorting Princess Lorie in.

Rior braced his feet and panted, half-longing, half-frightened. If he ran into those shadows, would he ever come back?

But, before he could make up his mind, a stray wind brought him a rich scent. Rior let his mouth fall open further as he sniffed. It was pine, and he had smelled pine before—the forests were thick with it—but not like this. He hadn't caught all the nuances, the freshness, the idea that these trees stood in the open and not in the enclosed spaces of the castle.

Garden watched him.

Rior lowered his head and bolted forward, following her out the door and into the courtyard. His toenails clicked on stone, on wood with rushing water beneath, and then his paws sank into soft earth. He didn't have time to pause and admire that, though.

Garden was howling, calling him, and Rior followed her.

Chapter 34

Garden In the Foothills

Garden is much happier now. Meat-Giver has assumed what she thinks must be his proper form and is running behind her, now and then pausing to sniff at a stone or log but mostly following her like an obedient pup. She can smell his awe and uncertainty, and knows that's all right. If he's a wolf, he must have grown up in a forest, and he will know the things she shows him.

It comes to her then that he might not be a wolf who's grown up in the wild, but in the human-place, like the dogs. That might be harder. For example, some of the dogs seem to have forgotten manners by being around humans, and Meat-Giver has done some things that she does not understand.

But Garden knows that she will just have to teach him better.

They come to a stream that leads down to the big one, and Meat-Giver pauses by it, panting. Garden wanders back towards him, and wags her tail slowly.

Meat-Giver stares at the water, and smells of confusion. He's panting, thirsty, but he won't drink.

Garden growls a little. She had known that she would have to show him many things, but she thought it would be things like hunting; she didn't know that she would have to show him how to lap water. But she lowers her head and sticks out her tongue to show him, then carefully goes through the motions. Meat-Giver watches her intently, and then copies her when she steps back, fur dripping. He makes a few awkward motions, the way he tripped when he was first playing, but soon he manages to drink without pause, indeed more gracefully than Human-Scent ever managed it.

Garden gives him a proud nip on the shoulder and then runs further into the forest, challenging him to follow her. He does, and this time without hesitation. In moments, he's running beside her, his head uplifted to draw in the scents of the forest. They seem to delight him. Garden can dimly remember being a pup and feeling the same way, so she understands, but she does hope that his inattention wears off before they begin a hunt.

Something moves off to the right, and then a powerful smell strikes Garden's nostrils. A hare, and it's running flat-out. They must have startled it. Of course, two wolves don't usually just bound through the night without a care in the world.

Garden angles left, and the hare zags in the other direction, towards Meat-Giver. He just watches it come for a moment. Garden growls and begins to run. Just like a pup, indeed! He's going to let it get away.

Then Meat-Giver leaps, and closes his jaws with a hard "snick" on the back of the hare's neck. It hangs drumming from his jaws for a moment, legs kicking at the air, and then he bites deeper and it dies. Meat-Giver drops the kill on the ground and backs away as if he doesn't know what to do with it.

Well, if he doesn't know, Garden certainly does. She stalks closer and rips into the kill, enjoying the sensation. Usually, anything she kills that's larger than mice needs to be fed to the pups, or she can't feed until after the alphas and Human-Scent do. This is a sharp, keen pleasure, and for the first time Garden fully understand why some of the weaker subordinates sometimes challenge the alphas with no chance of winning. If she'd had a taste of eating like this, she would, too.

She licks her jaws and looks up at Meat-Giver. He stands a little back, as if abashed, and Garden wags her tail. In the human-place, he is alpha, since he understands many things that she does not, like the moving walls. But here, in the forest, she is alpha. It is something she intimately understands, though Meat-Giver must be shown simpler lessons than even most pups.

She walks towards him, and Meat-Giver lowers his head, avoiding her eyes. Garden nips his nose in acknowledgment of his deference, then turns and shoves her head into the

flank, nudging him towards his kill. He should have the chance to feed, at least, even if he is the low-ranker here.

Meat-Giver stumbles forward, as if reluctant, and Garden snarls impatiently. Perhaps he really is a puppy. She bounds back to the hare, severs a chunk of the kill, and chews it thoroughly. Then she stalks back to him, and snarls at him until he opens his mouth meekly.

Garden leans closer, fitting her jaws over his. She remembers doing this with Human-Scent, who remained helpless much longer than the other pups. She coughs a little, contracting the muscles in her throat, and the regurgitated meat comes back up, falling into Meat-Giver's mouth.

He stumbles back, shaking his head and letting the meat fall on the ground. Garden snarls and bares her teeth. He should have a good reason for this, or she will bite him.

Meat-Giver then does an odd thing, bowing his head and scraping his mouth against the grass. Garden sits back on her haunches and watches him, anger subsiding into amusement. Even if he does irritate her, he entertains her, too.

He really does need to learn a lot about being a wolf, though.

Chapter 35

Moonlight and Shadows

"Name not to me the pride of the Courts, the stones in their castles, the beauties of mosaics and tapestries. I have been in the forests and mountains, and found there a treasure that surpasses all the Courts can offer me."

-Words of Prince Doldien of Ilantra, who was raised by mountain sheep, after learning to speak.

Rior scrubbed his mouth one more time, just to be sure that he was rid of the mushy taste. The softness of that meat--!

Perhaps eating raw meat by itself would be better than eating regurgitated raw meat, at that.

At last, the taste was gone, and he could look back up. Garden was gazing at him, tail thumping but gaze as implacable as it had been earlier. She seemed determined to teach him about even more than just running on four legs and how good the forest smelled. He would have to eat raw meat to remain with her, Rior thought, or she would only keep trying until he ate it perforce in mushy form.

He sighed and stepped forward, trying not to take in the hare's broken neck. He had hunted before, many times, and killed with bow and arrows and knives and once, when a cougar challenged him for his deer, with sword. Death was only part of what it meant to eat. He knew that. He also knew that wolves killed with much more blood than this, usually.

And even eat with it, he thought, staring at the ragged, open wound in the hare's side. He could see bits of severed muscles, shattered bones, and torn flesh there. He couldn't imagine finding it appetizing.

Then he paced close enough to smell it. The raw meat was disgusting on one level, but as the scent touched his nostrils, Rior found himself drooling helplessly. He felt the same hunger he had felt when he ate the meat scraps at the banquet, as if nothing else would do, as if he had to have it.

At least that was cooked meat, though. But he edged nearer, caught between the desire to eat and the disgust of the meal.

Garden growled encouragingly behind him. Rior glanced over his shoulder, though already he was coming to rely more on his nose and less on his eyes in this world of moonlight and shadows. She sat without moving from her spot, tail curved around her paws, head half-tilted. Rior could see nothing threatening in her; she looked like the mother wolf he had once seen from a distance, encouraging her pups to go tumbling after the mice in the bright spring grass. He knew that she would not stop him from eating, that she wanted him to do it.

Given that he still didn't know whose servant she was, that wasn't as reassuring as it might have been. Was eating raw meat something that would take him nearer the Dark? He knew many stories that said it was, but at the same time, Princes and Princesses of the royal line had lived in the forest and must have eaten raw meat, and it had done them no harm. They were still of the Light.

Then he shook his head.

You're supposed to be tilting towards the Dark, remember? Be thankful that you can tilt towards it by eating raw meat instead of murdering someone.

Yes, he should be thankful, and remember his Destiny. If it was his Destiny to turn over the throne to Princess Lorie, then the stranger that he rendered himself, the better. He bit into the meat and tore off a chunk, then swallowed it quickly, trying to do so without tasting it.

Of course, that was impossible, and the juices flooded his mouth the way that they sometimes did with a well-cooked piece of beef.

It was the most wonderful thing he had ever tasted in his life. Afterwards, Rior realized that it was probably because this body had keener senses; if the scent alone could draw him in and make him almost forget his moral objections, then the taste shouldn't be able to prevent him from enjoying it. But at the moment, all he knew was the richness in his mouth, and the tingling sense of satisfaction that filled him, as though he had done something incredibly right.

He lowered his head and bit again, and again, and soon he was eating, not just tearing loose and swallowing. He turned around at last, tail wagging, and Garden came to him and licked the side of his jaw.

Then she turned on, plunging further into the darkness, into the forest that lay away from the moonlight. Rior hesitated. Distrust of darkness that had been trained into him from his earliest childhood reared its head and screamed.

But you will be able to smell in there, he reassured himself. And it's different from actually going into the dark because you want to. You're going into the darkness to fulfill your Destiny, and that's all.

But what pulled him forward at last was neither of those. He might still have stood there, debating, if Garden hadn't howled.

The sound seemed to ring through Rior. He felt himself tremble, in a way that he never had when the barking and baying of the dogs in their kennels rose into the air. He had felt an echo of it, but only a very faint one, when the hounds were on the hunt after a rogue, and he seemed to be one of them, scouting forward on the scent, full of determination.

He ran forward, and the darkness closed around him. But he had been right; it was not as terrifying as it would have been to a human, blind and night-clumsy in a way that made Rior almost sick when he compared it to the ease with which he ran now. His body seemed to be controlling itself better, and the strength and speed that came to his call astonished him. The scents that filled his nostrils, and the ease with which he heard even the faintest wind in the leaves, guided him steadily through the shadow and out into the moonlight again.

There stood Garden, head tilted back and jaws parted, the song to the moon seeming to well up from her heart. Rior knew in the human part of his mind, of course, that she wasn't really singing to the moon; it was just another human thought that he had come up with and liked to apply to wolves. But he had to wonder now if he hadn't been closer than he always thought, because Garden's howl compelled him to join in, as some music compelled him to dance. He parted his jaws.

The first sound that came out of his mouth was high-pitched and embarrassing, a puppy's yip. He closed his mouth, ashamed.

Garden nudged him and went on howling. Rior perked his ears, listening for a few moments before he tried again. And then he heard replies to Garden, the ringing cry of a pack as it hunted, proclaiming its existence and its hunt and its territory.

He was howling before he realized it, making the transition just as he had from snatching to eating. His and Garden's voices seemed to naturally echo each other, and he heard the pack that howled back subtly change tone, as they realized that Garden wasn't a lone wolf. They were still warning the strangers away from intruding on their territory, but they didn't think that Garden would try to join them, and didn't think of her as a wolf driven from the pack for being a low-ranker no one could stand. She had a packmate, and that was all it took to change their perceptions.

Rior would have thought it was shallow, among humans, but here it seemed natural and simple, the way that an alpha ruling his pack was not doing so out of ambition, like a human King. It was just what happened. When Garden finished her howl and stood panting in the moonlight, shining very faintly, Rior found that he could think of her as just a wolf, no different than the many who ran in the forests, no servant of Dark or Light or Shadow. She was just herself.

But then she turned to look at him with those human eyes, and Rior shook his head. *No, she's not. She can't be. Or she wouldn't look at me like that, and understand what I say, and she wouldn't have stayed in the castle when the others left. She has to be a companion of some sort to Princess Loriel. I don't know if she's judging me, but—*

He gasped as the shadows suddenly unbound from his limbs, leaving him trembling and naked on the floor of the forest. He'd hardly been aware of tearing out of his clothes when it happened, but only scraps clung to him now. He shivered, wind cutting at him as it had not when he wore fur, and the blood on his face beginning to itch. He started to stand.

Garden growled at him. Rior suppressed the urge to snarl back. "I didn't decide to change back," he said. "It just happened."

"It happened because you started thinking like a human."

Rior jerked his head up. Shadow sat on a branch above his head, this time in the form of a gray jay. It cocked its head at him, burning golden eyes looking unnatural on a bird as they had not on a wolf.

"Garden is not the servant of any power. She is just a wolf."

"Why is she in the castle?"

"Because she is."

Rior shook his head. "Those answers work for a wolf, but not for a human."

The jay gave a harsh cry. "You'll have to walk naked back to the castle, or resume the form of a wolf and run. To take on that form, you'll have to think like a wolf." It spread its wings and flew into the forest before Rior could object.

Rior stared at Garden, who stared back at him. He wasn't entirely sure he believed the jay, but he had other problems to worry about right now. The sun would be rising soon, and the jay was right. He couldn't walk back in naked, and hours after he had promised he would be there. He would have to allow the rumors of his evil to build, not the rumors of his madness.

He sighed and reached out to the shadows, thinking of the simple life he had always wanted. The shadows wrapped themselves around him and changed his shape again, while Rior glanced wistfully around. It seemed that that life lay here in the forest after all, and not in the castle. Perhaps he had been a fool ever to hope for it.

Garden whined at his side, but Rior turned his back firmly on her. *I was born a human noble. I must go back to that now. If Shadow is right and Garden is just a wolf, then she should stay here.*

But he heard the thump of paws, and knew she was following him.

Rior bared his teeth, and surged into the ground-eating trot he had always admired when watching the packs. *I don't think she is just a wolf. But then, I've always known that Shadow wanted something from me. I can do nothing but use its gifts for my own purposes, and try to disbelieve its words.*

Chapter 36

Shapeshifters and Echoes of Magic

Ah, good day to you, Idessen. Did you want me to take up the story where I had left it off?

No, you want to hear of something else? I see that you have brought two mugs of ale with you. I do appreciate it—

Oh, one is for you, and one for me. I understand. But that does mean that you expect to be here for some time. What is it that you want to hear of? I can only think of a few things that would occupy my voice or your ears for so long.

Shapeshifting and shapeshifters. You would hear of them.

Ah.

What? No, I will speak to you of them. I was only gathering my thoughts. There is so much to say of shapeshifting, and some of it will be legends and stories, and not the kind of thing that you want to hear about. You want to know about history and what really happened, don't you?

Yes. Nothing else would look good in a book.

I was only muttering to myself, Idessen, not casting disparagement on you. And if you want facts about shapeshifters, then we must turn aside from the path of the tale for a while. The last true shapeshifters I know about ran the world so long ago that Doralissa didn't exist.

What were they like? It depends on who you ask. I know many who feared them, and there are still a few people who tell legends of shapeshifters as part of the Dark when they think they've already told their children all about the filifernai and the others. But there are many others who understood that shapeshifters were most often their neighbors, their children, their friends. The gift came to those who were open to it, as silently and unpredictably as great Scarlet magic can sometimes come to a child born into a family of weak Azure mages.

"Open to it" is strange phrasing, you say. Perhaps it is. But it is nonetheless true. I know of no one who was a shapeshifter from birth. I think their bodies probably couldn't have stood it. I heard one of them, who became a drake, say that one had to know about the human body, its limits and its wonders, before one could shed that body for another one, and that usually took years of experience. He was rather strange, though. He maintained that shapeshifting was only a celebration of the animal form, not an escape from the human. I know many who thought differently.

I'm digressing again. Of course I am. It's the way I talk. Hadn't you realized that by now?

How common were shapeshifters of the various breeds? I do not think that you could call them breeds. I knew packs of werewolves who were unrelated to each other, and never knew each other outside the full moon's light. I knew a pair of wereleopards who were so devoted to each other they hunted and defended and died without parting from each other. There were shifters who became bears, and snow leopards, and cougars, and deer, and drakes, and butterflies, and birds of all kinds. From the other side of the Rashars came legends of those who embraced the forms of tigers and elephants and king cobras, though I never knew one like that myself. I don't think that you could call them kinds, and there was no rhyme or reason that I ever saw to the way that the gift chose a particular person. There was a young man who told me that all his life he admired and loved leopards, and then when his gift came upon him he became a wolf. It is something in the soul and in the mind, I think. Nothing else.

And now I have wondered far afield indeed. I see by the impatient expression on your face that you are tired of this. But what would you have me speak of? Would you have me return to the story?

Oh, a question. Of course. Pour a little more of that ale over my blade and my speech is yours.

But wasn't Rior a shapeshifter?

Ah.

Well, you know, there were many strange stories. So many of them that I find it hard to recall them here. I hung at his hip for a while, and yet he never took me into the woods where he was said to go for his strange rituals, so I think it's impossible to know the truth.

But I was right there throughout all the business with the taking of the throne?

Yes, of course. I was. But. Well. I told you that I'm not just like a human; I digress and I wander when I talk, and sometimes I say things that don't make that much sense. And sometimes I don't understand all the things humans do. I never understood the fuss over the throne.

I'm not lying! Stalk out of the room if you like, but I'm not.

All right. Farewell, Idessen. I will see you later.

His footsteps are gone now.

I'm not lying. I'm protecting. That's not the same thing.

Chapter 37

The Advantages of Having Slept

"It is only the heroes of legend who can keep walking forever and a day. I cannot. I must have a bed or at least a wall at my back in the night, and a fire to keep me warm, and food in my stomach."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

Rior blinked and then closed his eyes. He only needed a moment, just a moment. He could rest, and still—

"My Lord Regent?"

Rior's eyes snapped open again. He found himself staring at Therion, who stared back with a tightening of her lips before leaning over to whisper in his ear.

"These poor people have come expecting justice, and you are showing them the Princess Lorie in the worst light. You look as if you don't care about how they compare you to her. Say something evil."

Rior eyed her sourly before he turned back to the crowd of people in front of the dais, some of them clad in fine silks, others in robes, others in rough cloth. They had all come to see the Princess, who so far had sat on the throne and drooled and tugged at her clothes. Tellor, standing vigilant at her side, kept her from actually tugging them off, but it wasn't a very prepossessing picture. During the moments when he could keep his eyes open, or stop from thinking about the way his muscles ached after running all night, Rior saw the people in front of the dais staring at him, as if thinking he would explain the Princess's behavior.

He tried. Sitting up sternly, he said, "Have you come for justice? It shall come from the hands of your future Queen. You cannot trust me for that."

They just stared at him.

"Too simplistic," Therion whispered in his ear. "Try something else."

"Ah. Right," said Rior, saying that aloud before he thought. If the words weren't working, then perhaps he could do something. He looked down at Garden, who sat at his side as if the long run hadn't affected her at all. Of course, she could curl up and go to sleep whenever she wanted, while he had to remain alert on the dais. "Garden, go into the crowd and bring me a golden necklace from one of the ladies here."

Garden panted at him. Rior grimaced. She did seem to understand words like wall and door and meat, but perhaps she didn't know what gold was, or a necklace.

There was a rustle and a murmur among the guests now, which abruptly soared to a crescendo. Rior looked at the Princess, and found that she had managed to tear her shift, so that it was showing under her dress. She shook her head and made a little snarling noise when Tellor tried to help her adjust, then nipped at the maid's hand and ran behind the throne.

Tellor chased her, while Rior cleared his throat loudly. He hoped Shadow wouldn't be adverse to a little demonstration.

"Behold," he said, and called on the shadows.

They flowed around him, which made some of the people in the front row take a step back but made others press forward, craning their necks to see what was going on. Rior tried to call on the shadows to shapeshift. If he suddenly fell below the level of the dais, then even those in the back rows should know that something was wrong. And if he leaped among them in the form of a wolf, snapping at them and snatching at their children, they would have no choice but to acknowledge that something unusual had happened.

However, only one arm shifted before an overwhelming flow of tiredness hit him. Rior blinked, and watched the fur on his arm shrink back into the skin. He tried one more time, and this time the shadows only flowed about him like obedient snakes. He scowled.

The muttering in the crowd grew louder.

The door broke open then, and the guests that Rior had been half-expecting ever since last night stepped in: two Women of the Snake, and behind them a filiferna. The murmuring turned silent at once, and the crowd opened a path before the Dark creatures as if someone had commanded it. They had almost grown used to the People of the Snake, who were King Delian's favored servants. But the filifernai were different, strange and uncanny.

In the silence, Rior did become aware of one sound. Garden was standing at his side, fur bristling as she stared at the filiferna, and she was growling.

He put a hand on her shoulder, and heard another growl join hers. Princess Loriel stepped out from behind the throne, her hands planted on her hips in the most human-like gesture that Rior had seen from her, her eyes narrowed. It occurred to him that she was standing on two legs for the first time without help.

Rior fought back the urge to growl himself, and summoned his voice from the top of his lungs, where it had tried to hide. "Good day, my ladies, *al*." That was the title that the Darkworkers applied to the filifernai, and the only one that Rior knew how to speak, since the filifernai had no genitals of any kind, and no breasts. "Is there something I can do for you?"

One of the Women of the Snake hissed as if she would speak, but Rior's attention was distracted by the filiferna as it stepped forward, staring into his face all the while.

Rior stared back. It was hard not to, even after years of sharing the castle with these things; one rarely saw them so close. The filiferna's face was dark, sharp, with edges that only seemed to show up when Rior wasn't looking for them. Its hair shone like silver wire, and sometimes a strand would wander out from the head, or a whole clump, only to wander back after a few seconds or minutes, or perhaps even an hour later. The faceted eyes flashed strangely, silver and then gold and then white. But the look in those eyes were utterly unhuman.

And Garden and Lorie! would not stop growling.

Rior tried to speak, then coughed and resumed his words. "Did you want something, *al*?"

The fey creature moved, turning those brilliant eyes away from him and towards the Princess.

"You can't have her," said Rior, and then winced as he heard Therion hiss behind him. Other people had always been more politically aware than he was. He should have told the creature it could have her, and then the people would have started learning to see him as a villain.

The filiferna looked back at him, a single hard glance. If it ever had emotions so human as frustration, Rior imagined that it was wondering why he dared to interfere. He was supposed to be serving the Dark.

He coughed. "The Princess shall have to go with you," he said.

The fey creature turned back.

And then Princess Lorie! lifted her hands and made up for all of Rior's mistakes.

Her Destiny, which he had been hardly aware of before, flared around her body in a sudden aura of dazzling power. Rior could see sparkles of golden and silver light dancing there, as if they would answer the colors that turned and spun in the filiferna's eyes. The creature made a snarling sound, and its silver hair lashed about like the Women's snakes. It came a step forward, one limb twisting as if it had no elbow, and reached out for her.

Princess Lorie! shook her head. Though Rior didn't think she knew the words, he wondered in that moment if she wasn't intelligent enough to learn the negative gestures and what they meant. Certainly her eyes were fixed and glowing with a glare that would have done credit to a warrior who had won many battles against the Dark. The silver lightning bolts against the dark background of her eyes were particularly striking.

The filiferna stilled. Its eyes turned dark blue, which Rior had never seen them do before.

And the Dark filled the room.

It was nothing so obvious, or even so oppressive, as a black cloud. Rior felt it more as a sudden absence, a place around the filiferna's body where the Light couldn't reach. It rose, and then it did take form, in the form of a pair of spread wings around the filiferna's shoulders.

Princess Lorie! held out her hands. Lightning bolts glowed in her palms for a moment, as if they were echoing her eyes, before they turned into flames. Rior thought it was

probably the first time in her life that she had ever called upon her Scarlet magic with the knowledge of what it did.

The filiferna hissed, and the Dark diminished. It backed down the steps from the dais, still watching the Princess carefully, then hurried out the door. The Women of the Snake stared after it, then swiftly followed.

Princess Loriel lowered her hands, and half-sagged. Tellor came forward to support her, eyes awed, and Loriel snapped at her. Her face had gone dumb and lupine again.

But Rior no longer believed that she would remain that way for the rest of her life, and his soul was singing in relief. The Light had chosen its champion, and she was beautiful in Destiny and worthy to be served. He sighed and sank back to his seat on the dais, only to find that Therion was staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You could have made that worse, by cursing the Princess," she said, above the cheers of the crowd. "And you didn't."

Rior narrowed his eyes and spoke words that his tiredness had to have some part in fueling. "If you know so much about Dark and evil, why didn't the Light choose you to play this part?"

Therion swept away from him and out the door. Looking out over the sea of faces, Rior doubted that anyone would miss her.

He smiled and looked back at the Princess, reaching out with his Azure magic in profound content.

But the cloud of darkness was still moving through her blood, and Rior felt his smile falter. She still had the disease.

Why? The pretense about only being lupine is obviously just a pretense. But why retain this illusion of a disease? What does it gain her?

Chapter 38

Garden In the Chase

Garden watches the retreat of the strange creatures with smug pride in her heart. Her pack defeated them. If she still counts Human-Scent as part of the pack.

Garden looks at Human-Scent, and sniffs. She smells as she always had, and she's biting and snapping at the human female next to her again. Garden thinks this is stupid. She has gotten what she wants from Meat-Giver without resorting to bites, most of the time, and Human-Scent could do the same thing, if she wanted.

Garden paces over to Meat-Giver, who is frowning at Human-Scent as if there is something he doesn't understand, and nudges him. When he looks down at her, she wags her tail and fixes him with a sharp gaze, hoping that he will understand that as a command to return to his own form. It worked before, and she doesn't see any reason that it shouldn't work now.

But he shakes his head at her, and almost stumbles down the steps, lifting his voice so that the other humans in the room can hear him, Garden supposes. Humans seem to think that the louder the howl, the farther it travels and the more it means. "This audience is over."

The human pack snarls, but Meat-Giver ignores all of them, and trots out of the room. Garden follows him, wondering what is wrong, and sees that some of the humans are staring at her. They probably don't think to see a wolf as alpha here. She puts up her head and crosses the room under their disapproving gazes. She was a low-ranker in the forest, but here she is alpha female. She doesn't intend to let them forget it.

Eventually, most of them stop looking at her and look back at Human-Scent. Garden is glad, since she is worried about Meat-Giver. Barely are they outside when he sags against the wall, breathing hard.

Garden nudges him, whining. Meat-Giver opens his eyes and shows his teeth, but his scent is friendly, so Garden lets it pass. Then he reaches out and puts a hand on her head. She holds still as he rises to his feet, eyes fixed on him, wondering what is wrong.

"I don't know what this is," says Meat-Giver, and then gets a surprised look on his face. Garden jumps back just in time as he vomits on the floor of the hall. He goes to his knees, vomiting again and again, and Garden comes near to him, nudging him with her shoulder. Perhaps the hare he ate was too diseased for him; Garden knows it was sick, but she is used to that kind of thing. Perhaps Meat-Giver isn't.

He continues vomiting until at last he stops. Garden backs away from the vomit on the floor. Meat-Giver staggers to his feet, smelling even more tired than he did in the room with Human-Scent but more grimly determined. Garden watches uneasily. She has seen this before, in an alpha who thought he could last past his time and combat a younger and stronger challenger. It didn't work.

"I know what this is," says Meat-Giver. "I thought that I was recovering from that last bout of sickness rather fast. It was almost time for me to suffer another disease." He sighed. "As much as it helps us in healing, I sometimes wish that my ancestors had not interbred with the *ilzán*."

Garden doesn't know what he is talking about, but she can wag her tail, and she follows him as he sets out along the hall towards stairs that she hasn't seen yet. Then she sees a flash of pallor off to the side, and turns her head.

The cat from before is sitting in a cross-corridor. He's crouched on the floor, tail lashing.

Garden bristles, but decides that she can't leave her sick packmate just to chase a cat. If he leaves Meat-Giver alone, then she won't chase him.

But cats aren't that sensible, and this one bolts out and tries to bite Meat-Giver. He pulls back, and hesitates further when he sees what cat it is. Garden has noticed before that he has a sort of unusual hesitancy about this cat, as if he thinks something bad will happen if he bites it.

Luckily for her packmate, Garden has no such hesitancy, and she bounds forward. The cat doesn't seem to have seen her, or perhaps he's too intent on harming Meat-Giver. He strikes out with claws this time, and Meat-Giver yelps, as a trail of blood opens along his leg.

Garden unleashes the speed that she usually only uses in the final deer-charge. She hits the cat with her shoulder and tumbles him several paces. He jumps back up, squalling, but he's been hurt. Garden can smell blood on his fur, and she knows that, since he is so much smaller than she is, that she stands a good chance of hurting him.

Meat-Giver calls her name, but Garden flattens her ears and ignores him. He doesn't understand that this cat is a menace. He keeps trying to hurt members of their pack. Garden has helped to hunt down a human who was doing that. She will help to hunt down this cat.

This cat is evidently used to dumb dogs. He dodges as if he would run, and then comes back towards her. Garden never varies her charge, and she dips her head, turning her shoulder to him.

The cat tries to rake her, but her thick fur defeats his claws. Garden twists her head back, and this time her jaws close on something more substantial than fur. She bites, and then grips the cat firmly and shakes.

"Garden, no!"

Meat-Giver can sound intimidating when he wants to, but Garden doesn't listen to him. Besides, on his way to her he's slipped and started vomiting again. She thinks that he can wait.

But this cat can't. He's still alive and snapping in her jaws, and would claw her eyes out if she let him. Garden pins him to the ground with her forepaws and braces herself. The cat hisses at her, and in his eyes is something that Garden has never seen in the eyes of

any creature in the forest, something evil and snarl-inducing like the strange creatures in the hall.

She braces herself even more firmly and rips, removing most of the cat's chest. He fountains blood for a moment, and then stops moving. Garden lowers her head and begins to eat.

"Garden, no!"

Meat-Giver has recovered enough to tackle her around the middle, and Garden goes rolling away from her meal. That would be worthy of a bite in the pack, especially if a low-ranker attacked an alpha, but Meat-Giver is sick, and can't tumble her far. Besides, Garden knows that he doesn't understand. She doesn't quite know what Human-Scent did to stop the creatures in the hall, and Meat-Giver isn't sure why she had to stop the cat. He will deal with things in the human world, and she will deal with things in the lupine. It's the best that can happen until Meat-Giver sees sense and becomes a wolf again.

They roll only a short distance, and then Garden turns around and licks Meat-Giver's face. He sighs and lets a hand fall over her shoulder, then lies back and stares at the ceiling. Garden watches him curiously. His grimly determined scent has faded; now he seems to be waiting for something.

Footsteps come around the corner. Then a voice yells, "What have you done to the Prince's cat?"

Garden doesn't know what a Prince is, but she recognizes anger when she smells it. She nudges Meat-Giver, trying to get him to get up and run.

Chapter 39

Confrontation With the Dark

"At times I try to imagine what the world would be like without quarrels between the Ilantran nobles. There are two answers, and both are equally true: it would be more peaceful, and it would be more boring."

--Eriande, Lady of Ilantra.

Rior slowly lifted his head. Garden was nudging him as if he should run, or get up, or do something. But he saw no reason to do anything save sit here and look at Stream. He had known, the moment Garden killed Prince Imor's cat, that someone of the Dark would come around the corner and see what had happened. That was what happened in moments like these, and he wasn't even sure if it was Destiny or just the result of a really bad sense of humor on the universe's part.

Stream stared at him, and her eyes shone with a fire that made Rior blink, then bow his head in respect. She had maintained herself in the disguise of someone complacent and competent, and therefore harmless, for quite a long time. That was a feat at the Ilantran court, where everyone looked for such deceptions. She was a good actor, to have hidden the fire in her soul until now.

"I suppose I know which side you serve now," he said, as he at last rose to his feet. His clothes were drenched with blood and vomit, and he knew he would have to change again. Then he quieted his thoughts. He would have to survive this first, before he worried about trivial matters like changing clothes.

Stream glared at him. "When the Dark claims the throne again, you will be forced to pay for this crime," she said.

"I know."

"How can you stand there so calmly?" Stream took a step towards him. "You are supposed to serve the Dark. It is your Destiny. You should have defended the cat of the Dark's Heir to the death before you allowed him to be ripped apart."

Rior opened his mouth to try and explain his somewhat complicated position, but a growl interrupted him. Garden stepped in front of him, looking as if she were trying to stand every piece of fur on her body on end, and show every tooth in her head. Rior sighed and snatched at her neck.

But her growl only rose, and she bounded a step away from him, to make sure he couldn't reach her. She stood facing Stream, and her growl was soaring like a song. Rior blinked. He hadn't even known that wolves could make sounds that loud, at least not for that long.

Stream glanced at Garden and dismissed her, looking at Rior. "And they said that you called shadows to you in the throne room," she whispered, advancing a pace. "What are you? Why aren't you serving the Dark the way you're supposed to?"

Rior frowned. *Does she not know the details of my Destiny?* "It's rather complicated," he said. "No one will explain evil to me, and Light keeps telling me to do this and that, and Shadow is offering me gifts that pretend to have no price, but probably have the highest price of all."

"Shadow?" Stream paused, her eyes darting to the shadows that stuck out from Rior's and Garden's bodies. "What are you speaking of? There is no power that has claimed the name of Shadow in countless generations."

"There is one now," said Rior, aware that the shadows were stretching. He watched them mildly. He was sick enough, with a pounding headache and the first beginnings of a fever, that he thought it would be interesting to watch Shadow confront the Dark as it had

already confronted the Light. "Perhaps you can reason with it. It keeps telling me to shapeshift and sending wolves and jays to talk to me."

One of the shadows took the form of a snake, and reared up in front of Stream. Rior blinked. It was rather a strange thing, to see a shadow suddenly pull free of the floor like that.

"Begone," said Stream, though the force of the threat was rather lessened by the bewilderment in her voice.

The shadow-snake continued swaying, showing no sign of being begone.

"I don't think it's working," Rior observed.

Stream shot him an angry glance, then said something in a language that Rior didn't know. It sounded all spitting and hissing, though. The snake continued to sway, and then a voice from it responded in the same language. Stream took a step back, looking shocked.

Then her eyes sought out Rior, and now she looked murderous.

Rior's training took over. Once he had had to face pretended Darkworkers every few days, whether sick or healthy, when the nobles had dreamed of the Dark finding out what they were plotting. He stepped back, and struck with his Azure magic. Azure rushed along a conduit to him, and a blast of water sprang from his palm and hit Stream in the chest, knocking her back against the wall.

She recovered almost at once, of course, and said something else in the spitting language. A blast of what looked like black light struck from her hand. Rior blocked it with a shield of water, and it divided, going around him. He shuddered when it struck the walls and he saw them crumble, solid stone though they were. He didn't know what that was, but he didn't want it to touch him.

"I shall age you until you are begging me for death," said Stream, and came after him with one hand shining darkly.

Rior turned and began to run, hoping that Garden would take the hint and follow. Stream's element, or one of them, was Time. He had not the slightest idea how to fight that, since according to the Light it wasn't supposed to exist.

Of course, he had only gotten a few steps down the hall before the cramps once more seized his belly, and he crumpled to his knees, vomiting so hard that it felt as if he had torn the lining of his throat. *Damn ilzán blood*, he thought, when he could manage to think in between the jerks of his head. *I think this a rather high price to pay for being part fey.*

He heard Stream's footsteps behind him, and braced himself. He had once accidentally stumbled on a gathering of Darkworkers punishing someone by aging in him in a wine cellar. Age spots were about to be the least of his worries.

Then there came a scream, and a bitter snapping sound, and silence.

Rior continued to kneel there for a long moment, until the cramps faded. Then he turned his head, slowly, wary of what he would see. Perhaps Stream had decided to kill him with a different weapon.

So expectant was he about that that it took his eyes a long time to convince him that he was really seeing something different. Stream lay on the ground, eyes staring at the ceiling. There appeared to be quite a lot of blood streaming out of her smashed head, more than she could possibly survive. Her neck was at an odd angle, too, and he knew it was broken. He had seen a cousin fall to his death like that.

Rior jerked his eyes away, and looked over Stream's body, searching for the cause.

Garden sat there, and panted at him.

"What happened?" Rior asked, but he could see it well enough. Garden had simply darted in front of Stream as she was running, as any dog or cat might have done. Stream had tripped over her and gone down, at the right angle to break her neck and smash her head open.

The difference was that Rior was quite sure Garden had done it on purpose.

She had killed a human. It was the definition of a rogue wolf, like the ones he had hunted in the mountain forests for more than a decade.

"Garden, Light damn it," he said softly.

Chapter 40

Where I Came In

No, I'm not going to tell you more about shapeshifters.

Why not? Because I've exhausted the reach of my knowledge. All I can tell you about them now are the usual wild stories that get repeated around the fire when everyone has had far, far too much to drink. Most of the people in Ilantra don't believe in shapeshifters any more, Idessen. You must know that, or you would have gone and listened to their stories and not come pestering me with questions. Why are you so interested in them?

Because Rior was one, of course, and you are writing a history of the events that surrounded his Regency. Of course. I should have known. You would want to know all that you could about the most 'exciting' aspects of it.

No, I don't think it's particularly exciting that he was a shapeshifter, if ever he was. After all, he did other things that were more exciting and dramatic and just as evil, once he learned how.

What? Oh, that last was more of my mumbling, more of my digression. You must be used to that by now. How long as you have listened to me talk, and not said that much about my getting back to the story?

How well did I know Rior? Much less well than some of my other owners, I can tell you that. He didn't have me long, and he was always hanging me on the wall and then leaving to do something or other. He never confessed his plans to me. He had Garden for that.

Of course he talked to the wolf. You believe all the other stories about him, and deny that?

Ah. You think of it as a sign of madness, and you think that he was clever, cunning, crafty, but not mad. No need to deny it. I've seen that look in human eyes before, when they're sniffing, half-fascinated and half-guilty, after signs of insanity. No, in this case. There have been many, many mad men and women sitting on the throne of Ilantra, but I don't think that Rior was one of them.

And why not? Well, why would he be?

He really did speak to Garden, and she really did answer him back. I know that much at least. I can hear the voices of swords that don't even have voices; what makes you think that I would scruple at hearing the voices of wolves who do have voices and understand perfectly well what's said to them?

So. Rior was strange, and cunning, and of course evil, if you think of him that way, but not a madman. And as to whether he was a shapeshifter, I can't speak as well to that. I think he may have been, but I don't know for certain, and I am unwilling to speak anything that I don't know the truth of from my own memories or my own knowledge.

Of course that sounds pretentious. Do you have any idea how pretentious it sounds to say that you're going to write down the history of an event not ten years in the past?

Oh, Idessen, don't look pouty at me! You must know it, or sense it, or you wouldn't be hesitating and asking me all the time if I think you're doing it right. You would have remained with the human historians and their records and tales, if you didn't need validation.

So. Peace? I can't promise to satisfy all your longing for rumors that are entirely unfounded, but I can promise to try and give you the truth as I understand it. And I won't say that your history's pretentious any more, if you don't go around acting as if it were the best thing ever scribbled.

Truce, then. And now I can continue on, telling you my favorite part of the story: where I came in.

Chapter 41

All In the Presentation

"I wouldn't object so strenuously to your being Queen if I knew that you had the slightest idea how to go about it."

-Princess Nightstone to Princess Desidera.

Rior lowered his eyes to the floor. "I understand, Therion."

Therion sighed. "You have created a dilemma for us, Rior," she said, her voice modifying at last from the tone that she had used to scold him. "You were supposed to collaborate with the Dark. And this won't look good, when the Darkworkers find out that you killed her."

"Garden killed her," said Rior. He didn't intend to accept the blame for this, at least, when he knew that the killing had been deliberate, a murder. He flashed a glance at Garden, who sat beside him and panted as if all of this was very uninteresting. Then she turned and began to bite at fleas on the backside, and the impression solidified. Rior snorted and looked away.

"And do you think that we can tell the Dark that?"

Rior blinked and looked back at Therion. "I thought they had ways of distinguishing truth from lie. What would be the point of lying to them about who killed Stream?"

Therion smiled at him. Rior tried to pretend that he didn't see the contempt in her eyes. "You just aren't very good at this kind of intrigue, Rior, or at knowing what the Light wants, for all that you have surrendered and accepted your Destiny," she said. "We must protect Garden's life because she is the companion of the future Queen of Ilantra. If you don't think that she is, then we must shoo her out of the castle at once, since I think she's Dark. But otherwise, we should protect her life any way we can. And you are the sacrifice already in place." Therion shrugged.

Rior looked at Garden. Garden panted at him. The people who had found him in the corridor beside Garden and Stream's body had assumed without even asking that Stream had killed the Prince's cat. He wondered what Therion would say if she knew the truth. Even though they didn't want Prince Imor on the throne of Ilantra, many of the nobles believed that he was of the Light.

Therion sighed and leaned back against her bed. She was standing in front of it, Rior sitting on a stool before her, and the move made her look casual and intimidating at once. Rior disliked that. "What do you say, Rior? Will you present yourself as the killer to the Dark?"

"Won't that mean that they won't accept me as part of them?" Rior asked. "Stream asked me before she died what I thought was doing, turning against the Dark and not serving it. I thought that was your dilemma"

"It all lies in how you present yourself," said Therion, and strode towards the bookshelves. Rior watched in confusion as she slid out a book, and the whole shelf rotated, showing a secret space behind. *I knew that she was traditional, but I didn't think she was as traditional as all that.* "Present yourself the right way, and the other Darkworkers will think that you killed her in a struggle over precedence, or something similar." She turned around, holding a sword in her hands. "And I think that this will help you, from now on."

"What is it?" Rior asked. The blade was a fine one, with the shine that meant it was made of *ofiron*. The hilt was not as fine, but he knew it was some material that was no doubt worth a great deal.

"His name is Luden," said Therion, sheathing the sword and pressing it into his hands, even though Rior didn't want to take it. "He has existed for a long time, and seen much of both Light and Dark. He will tell you what you can do to show yourself as more of a Darkworker, and keep anyone from knowing what actually happened in Stream's death."

Rior caressed Luden's hilt, thinking. All of this made sense if Therion was only concerned about political expediency, but-

He looked up. "Why do you think I am doing this, Therion?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Therion, who had sunk back onto her bed and was looking over a number of formal invitations spread before her. Probably to secret Councils and meetings of secret societies, Rior thought.

"Do you think that I can really serve the Light by playing the sacrificial victim? Or are you just glad that you're not the one who was picked to try and serve both Light and Dark at once?"

Therion's hands stilled. Then she looked up at him with a terrible expression on her face, shaking her head.

"Never ask me that again, Rior."

That was usually enough to make him quail, but Rior answered back this time. Why shouldn't he? He was beyond any vengeance that Therion could weak on him, if the Dark really was going to destroy him, and he had a sword in his hand and a wolf by his side.

"Do you think these pretenses will work?" he asked. "Or will the Dark see through them easily?"

"Does it matter if they do or not?"

"If I die before it comes to fulfilling my Destiny, then I would say it does matter," said Rior. "After all, do you want someone who's supposed to die when a successful rebellion rises against him to die of a knife in the back before the war even gets properly started?"

"You have too little faith in the power of Destiny," said Therion, rising from the bed and coming towards him. "What happens is what is supposed to happen."

"But how can you be sure of that?" Rior asked. "I never even knew what my Destiny was until the Light and Arran told me. I still don't know the finer details; I'm only guessing. If I die of a knife in the back, will you still say that that's what must happen?"

"Get out, Rior."

Rior stood. "I just wish that one of you would answer the question," he muttered. "I'm not serving Light right, I'm not serving Dark believably; I just wish one of you would tell me what would help."

"Luden will help." Therion's voice was sharp, and she was glaring at him as if she would like to bore a hole in his side with her teeth and eat his organs out through it, as Rior and Garden had done with the hare. "Just take him and that wolf and go."

"Frightened, Therion?"

Therion shook her head. "I could kill you here and now, and no one would care, Rior. They would all assume it was Destiny."

"You would know it wasn't."

Therion just turned away from him. Rior sighed and stepped through the door, hearing it slam behind him when he was halfway down the hall. He wondered if Therion had been watching to see which direction he went, then dismissed that. She would know what

direction he was going, or, if she didn't, convince herself that she did through powers of inner persuasion.

He had walked about halfway back to his own room—he needed some sleep and time to finally swallow some of the herbs the healer had given him for his vomiting and fever—when Luden spoke.

"You're my new owner?"

Rior started. Most of the "talking swords" he had met used telepathy, and not living voices. That was an old magic, one that he had never thought existed outside of the history-tales, or at best was a marvel that had deserted the world long ago.

Like shapeshifting? Like Shadow?

Rior pushed the thoughts away and spoke as calmly as he could. "Not really, seeing that I'm a sacrifice to the Dark and the Light for the good of Ilantra. But I'm hoping you can teach me how to be a good sacrifice."

"You're committed to your duty. I can feel that. What does it matter, other than that? What can I teach you?"

"I'm not doing it believably, according to everyone else. You've seen how the greatest villains do it. Give me some stories, some clues."

"They're thick with Destiny," said Luden, his voice suddenly rich with contempt, "and they don't think about this? Whatever happens is what should happen, so if you act as though you're true to your duty, why should it matter whether they find it believable? It's still what should happen, and Destiny will still be fulfilled."

Perplexed, Rior stopped and drew the sword out of its sheath for the first time since Therion had originally showed it to him. Luden gleamed, and the shine was just as strong as Rior had thought it was in Therion's rooms. This was a sword that had been made for a king, or at least a noble. "Do you really think it would work that way?"

"Of course it would."

Rior thought about that. "Whatever I do is justified," he murmured, draping the ideas like skeins of fine cloth over the chaos in his mind. "Whatever I do is Destiny."

"Yes, that's it. And now, I think we've done enough together. Why don't you pour ale over my blade?"

"Why?"

"I like the feel of it .It brings back memories of old comrades I once had, and I think I'll need them, if you plan to shut me up in another dull place like that spot behind Her Ladyship's books again."

Rior shook his head, confident the sword could see the gesture, or he would already have said something about it. "I don't plan to shut you away at all. Powers know I'm having enough trouble thinking of ideas. Let me know what are some suitably evil things I can do."

"You don't really believe that bit about everything being Destiny, do you?"

Rior shook his head again.

"Then why do you listen to your cousins? Why do you think that they're right when they tell you that your Destiny is to sacrifice yourself for the good of the country, and the Light, and whatever other cause they may have drummed up and convinced you to accept?"

"It is for the good of the country. I've been appointed Regent. If they can convince the people to hate me, then the country will rise for Princess Loriel and the Light."

"I was there the night Princess Loriel was born," said Luden. "Nothing that remarkable about her, I thought. But she was strongly Destined for Light. Does that mean she was Destined to rule?"

"Make sense."

"I've been able to hear most of those secret meetings that Therion holds in her rooms. I just think that you should think a little more closely about all these implications your cousins are forcing onto you, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"I really shouldn't betray Her Ladyship."

Rior ground his teeth. "Very well," he said. "I think that everyone who says he's on my side is only determined to cause me trouble." He slid the sword back into its sheath. "And that includes you," he added to Garden, who panted at him as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Ale?" asked Luden.

"I should sleep."

"If you do, I'll only wake you up again, prating on about ale and how much I love it. I'm *good* at that."

Rior cursed under his breath. "Fine," he said, and bent his steps towards the kitchen, with Garden padding along behind.

Later, he always wondered what would have happened if he hadn't done that.

Chapter 42

Garden In the Kitchens

Garden's mouth begins to water as they walk into the center of steam and delicious smells they visited briefly once before. That visit was not long enough, as far as she was concerned, and now she bounds into the steam and towards the smells of meat before Meat-Giver can stop her.

"Garden!" she hears him call, but softly, as if he doesn't want the rest of his pack to know she's there. She glances over her shoulder and wags her tail, trying to lure him further in. It's her idea that he should change back to his proper form and feast here. Perhaps the meat here is cleaner, even though it is burned, and he won't get any diseases as he did from the hare.

Garden pads under a table, and then sees the best gift in the world hanging from a thing on the wall. A huge hunk of meat, still raw and unburned. She doesn't know what kind of meat it is, since the smell is unfamiliar, but her mouth waters anyway, and she pads forward, thinking about the leap she will need to reach it.

"Garden, for Light's sake-"

But then Meat-Giver stops speaking, and Garden is glad. She doesn't understand why he keeps referring to night and day, and why everyone around him seems as concerned with it as they should be with a pregnant mother and finding a lair. The quieter he is about it, the more she thinks that one day he will simply forget to refer to them ever again.

And now for the meat.

Garden has just tamped her legs down when something else catches her attention, and she turns her head, snarling. There is a wrong smell in the kitchen, and the only thing that has smelled more wrong since she came to the human-place is a stink of spoiled meat in the hall and the creature that came into the hall and was driven away by Human-Scent. She will find out what this is, and drive it away before it can cause harm. It might be after Meat-Giver, or perhaps even the meat.

She starts to stalk in its direction, and then a hand grabs her and drags her back under the table.

Garden starts to snap and snarl, and then stops in confusion. It's Meat-Giver who tugged her under here, and he stinks of fear. She falls silent, and looks around, trying to see what could make him smell this way.

The strange scent comes nearer and nearer, and then halts in front of the table. Garden bristles, though Meat-Giver's hand on her ruff and her own good sense keep her from joining it to a growl. There is something so wrong about the scent that she thinks she wants to remain still and listen and see if she can figure out what it is. She can always attack later.

Meat-Giver puts his cheek to hers and whispers, "Don't growl, please don't growl."

Garden is still, though she has stiffened her tail and her fur. That's impossible not to do. But Meat-Giver seems to understand that she won't growl, and the hold of his hand on her ruff eases a little.

"My lord," says the voice of a human female. Garden looks forward curiously and sees her legs right there. Strange that she didn't hear them approaching before, but then, she was occupied by the strange scent. "I regret that circumstances have required you to reveal yourself so suddenly and powerfully."

"I regret it as well."

Garden almost snarls before she can help herself, but Meat-Giver's desperation keeps her silent. The voice is wrong. It is a human male's voice, but it should not be that high. She is certain of that. It reminds her of the sounds that puppies make when they are trying to imitate their elders. This is a puppy that has somehow managed it. But she doesn't know what it means.

And she doesn't understand why she can smell and hear this human male, but not see him.

"Do you know how soon you will reach us?" the human female asks. Garden sniffs delicately, and under the wrong scent, thinks she can almost recognize her. This was one of the human females who met them before, though Garden doesn't think she knows the human word that marks her out.

"In a few days, at most," says the wrong voice. "We are riding hard, and have just crossed the last pass of the Rashars."

"That is good. At least, if you have been forced to reveal yourself before time, you can take the throne quickly."

"Yes." Abruptly the human male's voice alters towards something that Garden does not like. It is almost a growl of his own, but it sounds even more threatening than that. "Are we being listened to?"

The woman's voice sounds surprised. "I didn't think so, my lord. I ordered the kitchens cleared so that we might prepare a special feast for the Princess Lorie. But someone could have remained behind."

"They are quite close."

The human female moves a few steps forward. "How close, my lord?"

"Under the table, perhaps."

The human female begins to bend down. Meat-Giver tightens his fingers on Garden's ruff again, most annoyingly. Garden thinks about pulling free and snarling at him, but senses that now is not the time. She sits still, instead, and waits for the human female to bend down. Then she can bite her in the face.

But something strange happens just as the woman looks under the table. A blur seems to pass between them. Garden blinks, and then looks down at the floor, expecting to see whatever small winged thing flew in front of her eyes. But she sees nothing there but the shadow of the table itself.

"Nothing, my lord," says the woman, straightening.

"Search the kitchen and make sure." The wrong voice turns mocking. "I have to return to my protectors now."

"Of course, my lord."

The wrong scent suddenly vanishes. Garden looks over her shoulder, certain that he has jumped the table and is coming in from behind her. But he is not there. He is just gone.

The woman begins to search the kitchen, though Garden is not sure what she is looking for. She ignores the raw meat, though, and Garden licks her lips hungrily, looking back at that.

"Get us some food, Garden," says Meat-Giver behind her, and his voice is almost a growl itself. "I'll find her."

Garden looks up at him, but he is slipping out from under the table. She pants and aims for the meat again. As if a blurring were gone from her eyes altogether, she can see it better than she originally did, and it's even bigger than she thought. They will eat well tonight!

Masks Set Aside

"It's strange, but in the history-tales it seems that every member of the Ilantran nobility is gifted with the ability to see beneath the surface, to know which tales are false and which are true, and that no one is ever surprised. In history itself, we of course know that this is an absurdity."

-Yillos Goldfleet.

Rior was trembling with rage as he slipped from beneath the table and stood. He had recognized both of the voices, and they revealed one reason that his cousins had wanted him in the Regency: he obviously had no idea about what was really going on.

"Greetings, Brianna."

His aunt spun to face him, moving more gracefully than he had seen her move in a long time. Then she relaxed and smiled at him, obviously not knowing that he had just come from under the table. "Hello, Rior. Is there something I can help you with, some comfort I can add to the Princess Lorie's bed or table? I am always anxious to help."

"Even though you're of the Dark?"

For just a moment, Brianna looked as if she might pale, but she never actually did. She stood straight and tossed her dark hair over her shoulder instead. "It really doesn't matter that you know. You can't stop us from moving forward."

"There are other things I want to know."

"Such as?"

"Was that voice I heard really Prince Imor's?"

Brianna regarded him steadily. "Surely that was not such a surprise? You have known all his life that he was Destined to take the throne and rule in the name of the Dark. Why should you be shocked that he is fulfilling his Destiny?"

"What was wrong with him?"

"He can send his voice great distances, of course," said Brianna, as if explaining to a child. "What did you think he was doing? He certainly wasn't here in the kitchens, physically. He's still riding over the Kingdom with his mother, but he should be here soon." She raised her brows. "You have until then to change sides. I understand that you were resisting and thinking twice out of instinctive loyalty to the Light, but your Destiny will grant you an advantage now. You have only to reach out and grasp that advantage, you know. Then you will have that power that so far Dorwen has only pretended to let you have."

"I don't want it," said Rior. "And that's not what I meant. He sounded wrong, Brianna, like an adult. And he smelled wrong." He hadn't realized that he was going to say the last words until they popped free.

Brianna shrugged. "I suppose that you are strongly of the Light if you still care about that. But really, Rior, give over. Did you ever think you would be allowed to complete the Regency and then just hand the throne on to Princess Loriel?"

"I knew I was a sacrifice. But she cannot be one as well."

"Why not? Destiny is seeking many paths back to dominance, and it can use both Light and Dark to achieve that dominance, just as it always did in the days before King Pheron's temper tantrum. One path would be to have Light rule Ilantra, and have you sacrifice yourself so that Loriel will sit securely on the throne. But surely you must see that another path could be having a dark monarch on the thrones of both Ilantra and Arvenna. The Prince Imor has been Destined all his life to rule both countries. He is just coming to claim the one currently in danger."

"No," said Rior. "I won't permit it."

Brianna shook her head, looking bored. "You won't permit what? The battle? It's going to happen, Rior, unless the Lightworkers see sense and surrender by the time the Queen and the Prince get here. No one likes or understands Loriel well enough yet to battle for her; it's the Light they would be fighting for. And if they win, it will be only at great cost. I think that the Dark will claim control of Ilantra for at least another generation. It will fight well, at least."

"You don't care, do you?"

"About what?"

"About the lives to be lost in this."

Brianna shrugged. "How many lives were lost when the other powers first came flooding back into the world and people found their futures weren't certain any more, or that the Dark had claimed some of the Kingdoms and would have to live in balance with the Light? There were suicides, here as well as in the south." Her eyes narrowed, something like serious enmity appearing on her face for the first time. "Truly unfortunate decisions have been made, and they must be reversed. The Dark will not tolerate King Pheron and Queen Joydancer on the thrones of the south much longer. Assassins will fly after them soon, and I think that we will see the Dark reigning as it should have done after a climactic battle eighteen years ago. The fate of the world should have been decided then, and it descended into *politics*. No more compromises, though. This is only the first step."

She came back to herself then, and looked at Rior. "So, you see, you can either choose to suicidally align yourself against the might of the Dark, or fight a desperate battle for the

Light. But you aren't going to be the sacrifice that you planned, either way, unless you die on the altars of a god." She laughed as if the thought amused her.

Rior closed his eyes, trying to remember what his mage-teacher had told him, during those first scattered years while the scholars worked feverishly to understand what had happened to the world. What was it?

Ah, yes.

Destiny has lost control of the world forever, Rior, he could still hear his tutor saying in tones of awe. There are other powers contending with it now. It might form alliances with some of them, but never enough to take control of the world back forever. Chance, at least, will always oppose it, and that means that our world is a seat of struggle, not stasis.

Rior opened his eyes. "I don't think Destiny will win."

Brianna's smile vanished. "You don't want to align yourself against Destiny," she said. "The battle will be terrible, Rior, and we could use you. You are reasonable enough to make some of the other nobles who aren't yet with us see sense. And you have been chosen as Regent to Princess Lorie. It would make a nice continuity if you could hand over the country to Queen Aloriadell and Prince Imor, a smooth political transition."

"I will never do that."

Brianna shrugged. "It would be nice, but it is not absolutely essential," she said, and drew a dagger she had had concealed in her sleeve.

Rior drew Luden. He didn't know if the sword would fight for him, but he knew that he didn't want to try his magic right now. He was exhausted, and vomiting affected the balance of Azure magic in his body since it consisted mostly of liquid.

As a matter of fact, he didn't want to fight at all right now. He was tired, and sick, and his stomach was still empty. But he had no choice.

Then a shape hurtled past him, and Garden leaped on Brianna before the stunned woman could react. Rior saw her teeth flash, and knew what would happen even as his aunt went down beneath the wolf.

"Garden, no!"

But his voice was a croaking sound, and he knew she didn't care. In seconds, it was over. Garden backed away from Brianna and the spreading pool of blood, and then stood there, wagging her tail and looking up at him.

Rior shook his head, and then another bout of nausea took him. He crumpled to the floor, Luden falling from his hand.

"Pick me up," the sword was insisting, when Rior had finished vomiting. "We have to go. I can feel them stirring. They will be coming already, the People of the Snake and worse things."

"I- don't know if I can run," said Rior. He had never felt so exhausted in his life.

"Pick me up."

Rior grimaced, and grasped the hilt. It felt hot and crisp in his hand, and he wondered if that was a sign of his growing fever.

"Hold on."

A flash of heat struck from the hilt, and seemed to irradiate his body. Rior shook as Scarlet seemed to dance in his empty stomach, his aching muscles, his pounding head. And then the fire faded, and with it the pain and the sickness.

"What did you do?"

"My hilt is dragonbone," said Luden, words flying along at great speed. "Some of the fire of the dragons lives in me still. I can use it at great need, though it will not last long. We shouldn't waste time. Don't you think they'll be going after the Princess soon, if they know the Prince is coming?"

"Yes."

"Then *move!* I serve the Light, and I don't know who you serve, but it doesn't matter right now. We both oppose the Dark's madness. Move."

Rior began to run, hearing Garden pick up the meat and run behind him, and trying not to think about dead Brianna. Garden was a rogue now. She liked the taste of human blood and perhaps even human flesh. Would she turn on him next?

Do I have a duty to kill her?

His thoughts changed abruptly as he slammed into someone outside the kitchens. He jumped back, waving Luden, and then saw it was Tellow. Her eyes were aglow with tears, and she grabbed him, hanging on so tightly that Rior thought she would pinch his arms off.

"Terrible, my lord!" she wailed.

"What is it?" Rior snatched her arms and tried to steady her, though the way she was wobbling made him fear he couldn't. Her clothes were torn and ripped, but the soul looking out through her eyes was worse.

"They have the Princess."

Rior's mind streamed in a new direction. "Where did they take her?" he asked quietly.

Chapter 44

Rushing

I don't think that you quite know what it's like, Idessen, rushing along a hall towards some grand Destiny or adventure. You know what the history-tales are like, of course, and I assume that you must favor them, or you wouldn't have chosen to become a historian. But of course those history-tales are nothing compared to the feeling of being there, rushing along on a journey that could end in glory or disaster. You know that your life is quiet and peaceful compared to what went on then-

Oh, it won't be? I don't think that you understand how determined and sensible some of the Council is now. They don't want the exciting times to return, and they'll make sure that they don't, one way or the other.

What can they do?

Think about the story I'm telling you, Idessen, and you should see what a few people can do, even against the march of Destiny.

But Destiny was really for the Princess Lorie? I don't think you understand. Destiny favored both Prince Imor and Princess Lorie, the way that it favored the Princes of Orlath and the Lord Carleon both in the last great war. Destiny just wants what must happen to happen. It doesn't really care that much about whether Light or Dark wins, but about whether it wins.

But Destiny and the Light are the same thing?

You have had a deficient education.

No, truly, I am not saying that to anger you. But sometimes, the partisans of the Light show an almost magical skill in putting what they don't want to think about or see out of their minds. It's like a seventeenth element, that of Ignorance.

Of course the thoughts of the Lightworkers aren't the same as the reality of the world. No one sees the world as it really is but the elves.

Are we going to argue about this, or are we going to continue with the story that we were discussing?

All right, then.

Of course I was just as excited as Rior, and probably more so, because I had some idea of what it might actually mean if we didn't get the Princess Loriel back from her captors. He was seeing his own part of the story, but I was seeing the grand sweep. And I sensed the presence of Shadow almost the moment I came forth from the hole where the Lady Therion had put me. It had returned to the world, a power I hadn't felt there in thousands of years. I was excited and frightened. I knew that things wouldn't be as simple as Rior or his cousins thought them.

Yes, of course, the Princess was a champion of Light, and the Prince Imor a champion of Dark. But Rior wasn't a champion of Shadow. I told you that already, and some of it you must know. Why recount it now?

Oh. You think that things wouldn't be simple because there would be three powers struggling for dominance, three champions in play against each other. But I assure you, it wasn't even that simple. Shadow has never fought in the same way as Dark or Light.

Why? Why should it? Light and Dark were seduced by Destiny long ago, and they've fought in the way that Destiny fights since, with prophecies and champions and direct confrontations. Shadow has never been part of Destiny, and it's always chosen the subtler way. I think that's the one that's more likely to work, myself, but of course, what do I know? I'm just a talking sword.

Do you want to hear more of the story, or do you want to start rhapsodizing about the Light and why it must always win?

Of course not. I would never deny you the right to babble on, Idessen. But if you're talking, I'm being silent, and that's a problem if I'm really the only one who will tell you this story.

Ready to listen now?

Good.

Chapter 45

The Princess's Captors

"Never assume that the Dark fights in the same way as the Light. You must beware of deceptions, intrigues, and double-crosses from the Dark. This is because the Dark is

interested, most of all, in attaining power, while the Light is interested in attaining peace for everyone who lives under it."

--From the Sisterhood of Radiance's *Canticles*.

Rior reached the stairway that led to the Princess's tower, and then paused to listen. No betraying sounds, yet, but he trusted what Tellor had told him. The people who had taken the Princess wouldn't be very far from here yet. They didn't want an alarm to rise. And if they could just keep the Princess quiet and out of sight for a few days, until the Prince Imor and the Queen Aloriadell arrived, then no alarm would rise. Then the Dark would have won.

Rior would have to make them uneasy.

He heard nothing, and after a moment set his foot on the bottommost stair.

A rumble warned him just in time. He jumped back, and the stair yawned, as an unseen Crop mage opened a crack in the stone. It gaped for a moment, and then closed with the same sharp noise as it had opened.

They could see him, then.

Rior tilted his head back. The most sensible place would be at the head of the staircase, and looking around the corner, but there was one place that he thought they might be which wasn't as obvious. Luxuriant windows looked out on the gardens on one side and the River Isiluin on the other here; it was as if the royals had thought that no assassin would ever hide in the gardens and try to shoot through a window. One of them was almost directly above the staircase, and a Crop mage crouching on the broad sill could see him easily enough.

Rior spoke to Luden as softly as he could. "What do you think? Windowsill?"

"Of course."

"What do you suggest?"

"Send a shadow to look. I think you're still too weak to use your magic, and you should stab someone with me, not throw me. I'm not well-balanced for throwing."

Rior blinked. "You think I should call on Shadow?"

"Yes."

Rior licked his lips, then called. The shadows flickered and danced all around him, and the shadow of the sword itself coiled up at him as if asking what he wanted.

"Look on the windowsills, please," he said, still hardly believing he was doing this. It felt strange, foreign, the worst kind of thing that someone who was of the Light could do.

But the shadow didn't seem to find anything particularly strange about it. It turned and ran away from him, snaking up the wall. It paused near the windowsill, becoming part of the shadow just beneath the ledge so effectively that Rior wasn't sure it was still moving at all.

Then it detached itself and came back to him, and Rior knew by the nodding gesture it made that, yes, there was someone up there. He couldn't be sure if it was a Crop mage or an archer; he would have put an archer there. But either way, he had been spotted.

Nothing for it. There was always the hope that they would be amenable to compromise.

He raised his voice, aware of an abrupt move from the windowsill that halted almost as soon as it began. "Who leads you? Does he or she want to speak to me and tell me your demands?"

"It's me, Rior."

Rior started. That was Therion's voice. A good many things that hadn't made sense came together in his head, and he cursed under his breath. "And what is it that you want with the Princess, Therion?"

"You should know, Rior, if you've come this far," said Therion, her voice rich with scorn. "Just to make sure that she doesn't take the throne from her brother. A few days, that's all we ask." Her voice was mocking, and Rior knew why. A few days would see the Dark's victory in Ilantra, one way or the other. And if enough people were convinced that Princess Loriei wasn't missing, only resting, or even were uncertain about what had happened to her, there might not be a battle at all.

"Are you going to hurt her?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On how you and Dorwen act," said Therion. "Be too hasty, and we might think you're trying to lead a Light rebellion against us. And if you make any proclamations in Loriei's name, then, well, that could lead to nasty consequences. Inciting people to rise against the Dark might mean an amputated limb, you know. Or a cut throat."

Rior almost gagged, to think of all the Light's hope for the future bleeding on the floor in the tower. "So Dorwen and I stay quiet for a few days, and don't tell anyone you have the Princess, and you'll give her back unharmed?" he asked.

Therion's voice turned almost gentle. "You know better than that, Rior. As long as the Princess lives, she'll be dangerous to Prince Imor's claim to the throne. He will order her killed, or his mother if he doesn't see that it must be done. I imagine that he will order it, though. He's a sensible young man."

"Then why be quiet and not attempt to rescue the Princess?"

"Quietude will win her a few more days of life. And if the Prince orders her executed, the responsibility won't rest with you. It will just be politics. I think you'd prefer that, Rior. You don't want your life to be complicated, do you? This is very simple. The Dark will rule Ilantra for another generation, and perhaps someday you can think about having an Heir of the Light on the throne. There's nothing to say that Prince Imor's son wouldn't be of the Light. You'll get your chance, just not with this Heir."

Rior frowned into space. He would have accepted that not too long ago, accepted that and been glad.

"Do you think that you can keep this from coming to battle?" he asked.

Therion's voice was confident. "Unless you or Dorwen begin the battle, then there will be none, Rior. We'll keep her safe and the population passive until the Queen and the Prince arrive. And the only blood spilled will be Lorie's. Isn't that a good thing? A Princess dying for the sake of her country?"

Part of Rior wanted to agree that it was a good thing. Princess Lorie was sick; at the most she might see twenty-five years of life. And Dorwen was arrogant and wouldn't make a good ruler. And Rior knew he didn't make a good Regent. A few days, and he could hand this over to people who would make decisions that had to be good, since they were of the royal line. It would cost only the blood of one girl, better than the blood it would cost from many thousands of soldiers.

It had to be good. It had to be right.

But the rest of him didn't agree. And from the way Garden was snarling at his side, and Luden trembling in his hand, he thought they didn't agree, either. He had accepted responsibility as Lorie's Regent. What happened to her was his concern. And he couldn't stand by and let her die. He had taken up one duty, and he couldn't lay it down and accept another one that quickly.

More than that, he had already accepted his position as sacrifice. He would go against his deepest convictions for Lorie. He knew that. So what was the difference between sacrificing himself to Ilantra's people so that Lorie could rise dramatically to the throne and sacrificing himself to the one power that might help him so that Lorie could live? He couldn't see a difference. He had had to abandon all that he had ever held dear already. The name the priest had didn't matter, so long as he collected the sacrifice and then insured that Lorie could live.

Do you? he asked, closing his eyes and voicing something as close to a prayer as he'd gotten in a day. *Do you accept the terms of the bargain? If I serve you, then Loriel can live.*

I agree.

The voice was so hungry that Rior shuddered. And yet there remained the glimpse of understanding he still retained, the thought of what it would be like, locked away from the world in a remote corner of the universe.

He opened his eyes. "I won't start a rebellion of Light, Therion," he called up the stairs. *What do I have to do?*

"That's good, Rior. I'm glad you see sense. I didn't like deceiving you, and I would hate killing you."

Do no more than call upon my name. Issue me an invitation.

"But I might raise a rebellion of Shadow."

"What?"

Rior closed his eyes and called as hard as he could, flinging all his emotion into his voice. "Come to me, Shadow! I speak my allegiance to you, and I give you the place in the world that you wanted-"

His words trailed off into a pained gasp. Shapeshifting hadn't hurt, but this did, this power filling him until he overflowed like a goblet. He opened his eyes, and realized he couldn't see very well. His sight was obscured by dancing shadows, which ran together in a whirlpool in the center of the corridor and then formed the great gray wolf with the burning golden eyes. It turned its head to look at him, and those eyes were tender for all their flame.

"I shall not forget this," it said quietly. "You asked nothing for yourself, but you shall have what you most desire, when all is done."

Then it bounded past him and up the stairs. The stone opened beneath its paws, but it floated over the cracks. Arrows pinged down from the windowsill and from the stairway, but they passed through the shadows, striking nothing solid. Rior dodged a few of them, eyes on the wolf. Then it rounded the corner and he could see it no more.

Garden threw back her head and gave what sounded like an ecstatic howl.

"Not quite what I had in mind," said Luden, "but it will work."

Rior nodded, dazed. He didn't understand the feeling that poured through him, as though he had opened a conduit to his element and more was joyously flooding through than he could possibly control. Shadow wasn't an element.

At least, I don't think so.

But before he could decide on that, Songs the Shadows Sing came back down the stairs, with Loriel floating just above his back. She was surrounded by a sheen of Light, and she blinked and looked straight at Rior as her strange mount touched the bottom stair.

"What are you doing, Rior?" she asked.

Rior bowed, concealing his shock. This was no time to be astonished. "We should escape, Your Highness. The Dark is coming, and it will take you if it can."

The Princess nodded, and then Songs the Shadows Sing stepped towards the wall and she fell dumb and silent again. When Rior caught a glimpse of her eyes, they were blank, even the silver lightning bolts staring into nothing.

He frowned. *Why assume her disguise again?*

"Come with me," said the shadow-wolf, and then bounded forward. Rior ran after it, not sure what else to do. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Garden running at his heels.

"What are you doing?" Luden cried. "We're going to crash right into the stone!"

Rior whipped back, and saw the rock rushing towards him. He would have stopped if he could, but his legs propelled him forward. He braced for the collision as much as he could.

And then it fogged and passed around him like mist, or shadow, and he found himself standing in one of the castle courtyards. He looked around in shock.

That was a mistake.

Arrows stabbed the ground to either side of him, and then Dorwen stepped forward and said, "Where are you going with the Princess? And what is that thing?" he added, gesturing to the shadow-wolf.

Garden hurtled forward, eyes locked on Dorwen's throat.

Chapter 46

Garden In the Midst of Magic

Garden runs as hard as she can, eyes fastened on the prey in front of her. And that is what Smug-Scent is: just prey, not a male human, not someone that Meat-Giver will probably be very unhappy with her for killing, the way he smelled after she killed the cat and the two human women. This isn't a potential packmate. Smug-Scent is stopping them from escaping to the forest, which is what Garden wants to do. Too many strange things are happening here.

Something strikes her across the muzzle, and she snarls and drops to the ground. Then she turns her head. The blow wasn't very hard, and she thinks that Meat-Giver would hit her as hard as he could, if he was in a position to hit her at all.

Meat-Giver is staring at his arm. Garden looks, too, and then blinks. It seems as if a shadow is replacing Meat-Giver's arm. She has never seen anything like it, save for sometimes in the early morning when the mist rises from the earth and forms strange shapes before the sun burns it away.

Meat-Giver makes an odd noise, not growl and not yelp of pain, but somehow both of them at once, and hops around with his arm held out in front of him, as if there was a snake there that would crawl up and bite him. Garden turns around and fixes her eyes again on Smug-Scent, who still hasn't run.

"What are you doing?" he asks, and then he locks eyes with her. He snarls. Garden snarls back. He has never liked her; he has tried to drive her from this place, and she is fairly certain that he has tried to hurt Meat-Giver. He is an enemy of the pack, and he smells bad, and he should die.

Garden tamps her legs down. She knows how easy it is to kill humans now, how their flesh tears and rips no differently than a deer's, and how their blood tastes almost the same. They can kill from a distance with many impressive weapons, but they can't do much up close.

Meat-Giver cries something. If it's a word that Garden can understand, then she doesn't understand it, because she's too focused.

But then something taps her very hard on the back, and she again has to snarl and whirl around. This time, the thing is solid enough to hurt. Meat-Giver has tapped her with the claw he holds.

Garden bares her teeth at the claw. She doesn't like it. It hangs in Meat-Giver's hand like one of her own claws hanging from her paw, but it isn't the same. She can feel it looking at her, even though it has no eyes. And she has heard a voice come from it, speaking Meat-Giver's words. She doesn't think it fair, that something with no throat should be able to speak that language and she can't.

"Run," says the claw.

Garden doesn't feel inclined to run. Yes, she wants to go back to the forest, but Smug-Scent is still in the way.

"Garden."

That's Meat-Giver, and Garden knows that he's still alpha, at least while they're still in the human-place and not in the forest. She turns her head, reluctantly, to look at him.

His mouth is open, baring his teeth. His eyes are wide and looking straight at her, and a growl is welling from the back of his throat, and he smells half-crazed. He takes a step forward, and suddenly Garden doesn't care about whether he can hit her with the talking claw or his shadowy arm again in time. All she can see are those threatening eyes, the same eyes she once saw when she bit one of the alpha female's pups for nipping her too hard. She whines and drops to the ground, prepared to roll over on her back in the next moment.

"Out the gates." Meat-Giver speaks distinctly, and then motions towards the opening that the great wolf and Human-Scent have already passed through.

Garden bows her head and springs forward. The claw shouts after her, "Keep running! Find a safe place for us to lie up!"

Garden doesn't need to be told that, and she thinks of protesting. But then she remembers Meat-Giver's growl, and his crazed scent, and decides that she can just keep running and find a safe place for them to lie up.

It's probably her responsibility, anyway. She lifts her ears and wags her tail as she thinks about that. The others will be helpless in the forest; all the claw could do was speak words, and what are words next to finding safe dens and clean hares to eat? Garden yips and springs jauntily over the strange wood thing that leads to the far bank, and then sprints into the woods. The great wolf went this way; its scent is perfectly clear to her, though not to the others, probably. So Garden makes sure to piss a few times, so that the others can find her.

At last she comes to a clearing with a cave in the air. Garden has never seen such a thing, but she thinks it must be safe. She springs through, and finds herself in the glorious country she visited once before, when the great wolf tugged her through some blackness. The great wolf and Human-Scent are both there, and they look at her. Human-Scent's eyes are shining in a strange way.

"What news?" she asks in Meat-Giver's words.

But Garden can't respond in a way that she would understand, and so settles for turning and watching the cave opening. Meat-Giver and the claw will come through, sooner or later. The alpha always keeps his promises; if he leaves the den, hunting food for the pups in a lean spring, he always comes back. That has been Garden's experience, at least.

She will just wait.

Chapter 47

Sudden Blood

"Trials in the Court of Ilantra require at least two witnesses, both of whose stories agree, and a decision on the part of the reigning monarch- unless the crime is treason, or collusion with the Dark. Then the trial is held as quickly as possible, and the victim given to the executioner, so that he may not remain alive and taint the world with his presence much longer."

--The Laws of Ilantra.

"What the Dark was that all about?"

Rior shook his head. He had a Princess and wolves to find, and his arm was turning into shadow, and he could feel the weakness coming back upon him. Luden had warned him that the blast of fiery strength wouldn't last very long, and he had been right. Already Rior could feel the exhaustion and the sickness and a thousand other worries hanging above him like a dark wave in the River, getting ready to overwhelm him.

"Therion and Brianna and many others are in league with the Dark, Dorwen," he said. "They always were. They want Prince Imor on the throne, and they wanted to kill Princess Loriel. I'm taking her into the woods. She should be safe there, and I'll find a way to get her back on the throne."

"Do you think I believe that? What was that shadow-wolf thing?"

"The incarnation of Shadow."

"There is no such thing as Shadow."

Rior lost his temper. He felt bad about it later, considering what happened, but he shouted into Dorwen's face, "You were the leader of the Council, idiot! Did you really think that no one else was meeting in secret, separate, apart from you-"

His voice was interrupted by a thick, phlegmy cough. He went to his knees, and felt Dorwen gripping his shoulder.

"You'll tell me what's going on," his cousin said, his voice full of the deadly calm that Rior knew well from their childhood together. It was the calm that meant he was crossing the line from laughing and being angry in play to being truly angry. "I don't care how long it takes you."

"I don't have the time-"

"He doesn't."

Rior sighed in relief. Luden was speaking now. Perhaps that would be enough to persuade Dorwen that this was serious and to get him to let Rior and the rest go.

But, instead, Dorwen only backed up a little and looked more stubborn and suspicious than he ever had. He reminded Rior of one of the peasants who didn't believe that anyone with strong magic could come and get training from the nobles. It could take hours, days, to persuade them, and Rior didn't have hours or days.

"There's no such thing as Shadow, and the rest of them can't be in league with the Dark," Dorwen said. "They sat in the Star Garden with me, and watched as I subjected you to the Light. I think that the Light would have killed them if they were pretending."

"You think, you think," said Rior impatiently. His head was swimming with fever, and the ache was creeping back into his muscles like a small rodent. He was as helpless to prevent it as someone dying would be. "But you don't know. And Destiny just wants a path back to the throne. It doesn't care if the path comes through the Dark or the Light."

"No."

"Gods damn you, Dorwen, shut up!" screamed Rior. "Stand aside and let me get through, and I don't care if Destiny rapes you and throws your corpse into the woods for the ravens. Just *stand aside!*"

Dorwen stared at him, too shocked to respond to the insult for a moment, but hurt. Luden made a little sound that could have been a growl, and then abruptly lunged forward, carrying Rior's hand with him.

He opened Dorwen's belly from hip to hip, and in the spill of blood and the intestines that fell out, in the paling of Dorwen's face and the greening of his guard escort, Rior saw only disaster.

He flung the sword in front of him with a clatter, ignoring its shouting, and made for the gates, staggering and coughing. He fell to his knees halfway there, hearing the shouting behind him. The guards had recovered from their shock and were dividing, some of them to stay with the dying Dorwen, some to come after him. He knew he wouldn't make the gate.

"Pick me up."

Rior managed to shake his head in refusal. He would be taken into the dungeons and executed for the sake of murder and colluding with the Dark, but that much, that ignoble excuse, he could refuse.

"You are a sacrifice for the Light, Rior. You have to escape. Pick me up." The sword's voice was low and calm, the kind of voice that Rior would have liked to manage with Dorwen before the last moments. "It doesn't matter if you don't like it." Now he was talking faster as the guards came on, though cautiously, not sure that Rior's weakness wasn't a trick. "You have no choice."

Rior closed his eyes. But he knew that what Luden said was true enough. Even murder could be countenanced, in the end, if it fulfilled the duty that he had sworn himself to. He reached out, groping for the hilt.

"Wrong hand."

Rior popped open his eyes, wondering how it could be the wrong hand, and then saw what Luden meant. The hand he was trying with was now mostly shadow, or maybe mist, a glittering flesh-colored cloud wrapped around a core that might or might not be solid. And that was just one more thing to worry about, so he swung onto his side and groped for the sword with his left hand.

"Hurry."

Rior didn't need the sword to tell him that. The guards were running as they saw him reaching for the sword. They didn't know if he had pretended with his coughing in order to lure them closer, but they knew that holding a sword that talked and had killed their leader, he could be trouble.

"Hold onto me."

Rior was about to ask what the sword was doing- he had thought it would just give him another jolt of strength- and then he felt it. Luden seemed to take a deep breath, even though there was nothing on the blade or hilt that suggested he had nostrils. The air tightened, and then it heated. And then it cooled so abruptly that Rior thought he could hear stones crack like trees in the forest snapping in frost.

Shivery silver light filled the air. Rior could hear a voice chanting, though he didn't recognize the language. It might have been Elven, or what Elven would be like if one took it out and stomped it flat.

Then ordinary firelight cut the silver light, and Rior started to lift his head and look, thinking that maybe one of the guards was a Scarlet mage. But Luden's voice said to him, almost gently, "Don't look."

Rior closed his eyes. He heard a pair of shuffling footsteps coming towards him, and then the voice speaking cracked Elven again.

And then the guards who had been chasing him began to scream, scream and scream as Rior imagined someone could not scream even when they were dying. They weren't

dying, though, or he didn't think so. They were going mad. Rior had heard a sound like it when the Dark caged some of those folk of the Light who couldn't stand a Dark King on the throne. They screamed for days, then banged their brains out on the bars or hanged themselves.

Luden's voice spoke, almost in his ear, and as calm as Rior knew the guards should have been. "Crawl forward. I don't care how you do it, how sick it makes you. Go."

"What did you do?" Rior asked, as he squirmed forward on his belly. Concentrating on Luden's voice made him think less about what he was actually doing- not only leaving Lightworkers behind to die, but also somehow crawling when his stomach trembled with nausea and his head swam with fever. He had never felt worse.

"Took them back to the moment of my forging," said Luden.

"How?"

"I have the moment inside me," said Luden, as if that made sense. "Mind you don't scrape my hilt on the stones. It might break, and I don't know where we'd find dragonbone here."

"You connect to the element of Time?" Rior put his hand down on a splinter, and though he swore, it made him feel like cheering. He was off stone, and onto wood. He was on the bridge.

"No. I have the moment inside me, and I breathed it out at them."

Rior thought about whether he would really understand that, decided not, and asked the next question in the litany. "Why did they scream?"

Luden was silent.

"Luden?"

"What made me was- fey."

"We know fey. We have their blood, and sometimes a King or Queen still marries a full *ilzán*."

"Those are tame fey. All the fey that run around you now are. You haven't met anything that would gouge your brain out just by existing, and what made me was such a thing."

"Was it an elf?"

"Wilder than an elf."

Rior shut up to think about that, and about crawling. His knees thudded on wood. His ears were open to the shouts behind him. From the sound of it, he would be blamed for the dead Lightworkers in the courtyard, and the Dark would use that to their political advantage. But that was the way it always went, and so he just crawled and groaned and opened his eyes to look around when he was absolutely sure that he had to see where he was going.

He was surprised that he was so close to the opposite bank. He crawled off the bridge and onto the grass with a final burst of energy, and then his arm wouldn't support him any more. He rolled over, and looked up. The arm that held Luden was fogging into shadow, and then the sword dropped to the ground.

"Pick me up. In your teeth if you have to. You have to get to shelter, Rior!"

"I don't think it'll matter, when the change that's happening to me takes its course," said Rior, and closed his eyes, preparing to hurt worse than he ever had in his life.

Chapter 48

Worries

What? Of course I was worried. What do you think I am, that I would not be worried over what was happening to Rior?

Because I am of the Light. It is in the Light to care about what happens to those who try to serve it. I won't try to say that the Light alone of the great powers expresses such concern, but of course I have often felt and expressed such compassion, and so that is the compassion that I think of first.

But Rior was not of the Light? I had seen him swear himself to Shadow in front of me?

Of course I had. And that didn't matter, at the time. He wasn't in the service of the Light, but at the same time he was. He had sworn himself to Shadow in order to do Light a service. The Princess Lorie would not have lived if not for him, and his calling on Shadow. Sometimes the Dark serves the Light. Why should not Shadow serve the Light, at times?

It has to do with the complexities of Destiny, Idessen. Only in human eyes is the world a simple place.

No, I'm not insulting you. I'm only saying something that you should have learned by now, and if you haven't, then it's time you heard it. The simple things about Destiny are part of the history-tales, and most of the history-tales are not the way it really happened. I listen to what the bards sing about the Lord of Disasters now, those who sing of him at

all, and I am horrified and amused at once. A talking sword who has hung at the hips of the people in the history-tales knows things about them that never make it into the songs.

Oh, for instance, I hung at the hip of Queen Doimedea when she went to look at the Breathing Lands in the Riders' War. The bard songs say that she was so brave that she never flinched, that she looked at the Breathing Lands and turned away from their horror without pause. But I was hanging there, and I know that her breath checked and her fists clenched. I know that she was, for a moment, nothing more than a woman who had a difficult and disgusting job to do. She had to send some of her people into the Breathing Lands so that the Dark would follow them and die there. She knew her people would die, too. But she made the decision, even though she wept herself to sleep that night.

It's truth. I thought you loved and wanted truth, Idessen; you certainly didn't want me to lie to you. I've heard humans scream those words at me before- "Shut up!" is the usual variation- with red in their faces and tears in their eyes, but at least I know they came to me hoping to hear only the kinds of tales that you would find in the bards, even though they said they wanted truth. But you said you were writing a history. You said that you wanted what really happened. And I am telling you what really happened. Are there things you think I should disguise?

Go if you must. Come back when you think that you can bear what I have to say without flinching. I don't mind if you take it hard, but don't flinch and don't cry at me to shut up. Don't try to pretend it never happened. It did.

He's gone now, my lord.

How did I know you were there? I've always been able to tell. Maybe it's because I felt the presence of your magic against my own.

No, it's not essential that I explain that. I think that you wouldn't understand, anyway. You never truly had what I would call an extensive education.

Poor Idessen. He really does want to write a history, and he sees himself as a servant of unflinching truth. But when he entered this, he didn't think he would find anything different from the bard tales. He should have been a singer. He has a fine voice, and then he could swim in heroics to his heart's content and never be asked to explain or defend them. But he wanted to be a historian, and write things down instead of singing them, and a historian is more responsible to truth.

No, they're not? Well, all right, then. Historians are *supposed* to be more responsible to truth. How do you know they're not?

Ah. You've read some of the histories. Yes. I wish that I could make an excuse for them, my lord, but I can't. It was only ten years ago, and they shouldn't have changed their minds so quickly. They shouldn't have decided that they heard words that couldn't possibly exist and written new ones in.

You have one of them with you! Good. I have never actually heard a human read from one. Read me what it says of those last moments.

Oh, my.

If I had a mouth- and I don't; you may have noticed- it would be hanging open. That is not the way it happened at all. I was there, and I remember. A talking sword has no factions to serve, no human vision of reality to love. You would think they would have come and talked to me before they wrote such- *ahmesten*. But perhaps if they had, it would only have ended as I fear it will end with Idessen. They would only have withdrawn and written what they wanted to write.

Don't be so discouraged, my lord. However much I shall have to hide, I shall tell the truth about the end. And you're still repeating it for anyone who cares to hear. The ones who must know will hear you, and feel an answer in their souls. The power of Destiny is broken forever, and the other powers of the world are losing ground as well. Do not fear. You will win in the end.

Ah. I had forgotten that you do not count victories in numbers of converts won. If the ones who need to hear you hear you, then you will have won what you needed to. I am glad of that, my lord, more glad than you can know.

I think I hear Idessen returning. He does seem to get over his tantrums more quickly of late. Perhaps it would be best for you to go into hiding again now.

The ending?

I will tell him the truth, of course. He will hear it. He may not choose to write it, but he will always hear it, echoing through his head for the rest of his life. I will make certain of that.

Chapter 49

At the Center

"Have you ever been at the center of warring powers? I have. There is nothing more fearful. They strike at each other with no regard for the humans caught in between, because, after all, humans are not immortal and breed many children in a few years; they can always get another. None of them are human, and none of them have much regard for humans. Love and serve them as you must, but always remember that."

-Enander, Rogue of Ilantra.

Rior had been right about the pain.

It slammed into him and rolled him over and over, in mind if not in body. Rior could barely hear his own panting. He could hear, much more clearly, the screams in his own head.

Shadow was trying to absorb him and transform him into something else. Rior could feel his arms fogging, and the rest of his body became mist, too, for short periods. It was the natural consequence of his calling upon Shadow, and Shadow was furious that it wasn't happening.

But Destiny also had hold of him, and was shaking him like a wet rag, tugging him back towards the castle. He was the catalyst, the one that would set off the next war of Dark and Light. The Darkworkers would execute him, but that would not pacify the common folk as they thought it would. The common folk didn't hate Rior yet, and they would think of him as an innocent caught up in trying to protect the Princess Loriel. They would attack, and win for a little while, and then the Dark would strike back, and the war would start and sweep across the Kingdoms. Destiny wanted the war that would have arisen by this time if it still controlled the world.

Rior knew all this because the powers were too occupied in contending with each other to hide their minds from him. Besides, they could easily destroy anything that they didn't want him to know.

Rior closed his eyes and hoped it would soon be over. Tearing pains shot through his muscles, but after a short while he couldn't care much about anything but the possible end. He still shook with agony, but the pains were beginning to run into each other. What else should be happening?

"Rior."

That was a real voice, and not the silent voices of the powers shouting in his head, speaking a name that he still vaguely remembered was his own. Rior opened his eyes and turned his head in its direction. Pain had not yet dulled his ears, and the blending meant that he could concentrate on the sound instead of just it.

He thought it was Luden, though the sword was glowing with shadow and the flickering aura of Destiny himself, and Rior wasn't entirely certain that he still looked as he had.

"What?" he whispered, during a moment when his throat had reformed from shadows.

"If you choose one of them, then the other will go away and leave you alone," said Luden.

"I had already chosen Shadow."

"Not with all your heart, or Destiny would not still be able to hold on to you so strongly." The sword trembled, in the way that a human might shake his head. "You must choose Shadow with all your heart."

Rior ground his teeth, and then his gums fogged into shadows and he lost that. That just made him angrier. He had changed his mind again and again, and nothing had changed with it. It didn't appear to matter what decision he made. Still the powers would contend, and still there would be someone who insisted that if he just made a deeper decision- however he did that- then everything would solve itself.

"I choose to serve Shadow," he said. "And I choose to serve it in such a way that it will never become like Dark and Light."

There came a loud, sharp sound from just above his head, and then Destiny abruptly let go of him. Rior sat up, staring at himself. He was solid again, except for his left arm.

He picked up Luden with his right hand and resumed his staggering towards the forest. The sword was silent until they found the first traces of Garden's passage.

"Do you know what it means, that you chose as you did?"

"No."

"It means that Shadow will have complete control of your life, in the way that Destiny did before."

Rior ducked a branch. "We'll see about that."

"You don't have a choice. You already made your decision, and you'll have to live with the consequences."

"Didn't Light and Dark always say that?"

"Well, yes."

"And I chose not to serve Shadow if it would become like Dark and Light."

Luden vibrated in his hand. "Do you really think that Shadow will let you go just because you decide that you don't want to serve it?"

"You misunderstand me."

"Then help me understand."

"Not just yet."

The sword lapsed into frustrated silence.

Rior found the gate near the end of his strength. He staggered forward, hearing Garden yelp just beyond, and finally felt the brush of shadows or cool mist against his ankles. Then he fell, leaning on the grass, and heard Princess Loriel immediately begin to address him.

"You have come to serve me, haven't you? Give me the sword. We have much to do, if we are to take the throne back for the Light."

Rior lifted his head, blinking at her. "Why did you decide to reveal yourself now, my Princess?"

The Princess tossed her stringy hair. "I didn't come out of an enchantment. My wits were stolen from me, and they have only just come back to me." She glared past Rior for a moment, but he didn't know why; when he looked over his shoulder, the gate had closed, so that no enemy could follow him through. "Someone didn't want me on the throne. I think the Dark isn't my only enemy, and once I have my throne I intend to seek out the other enemy and destroy him."

"I think you will have a hard time doing that, Princess."

Rior turned his head and saw the great wolf walking towards him. The golden eyes burned into his, as though Songs the Shadows Sing was fully aware of what Rior would demand, and then they turned to Loriel. "I think that you should walk apart from us for a little while, Princess, while we discuss things that can be of no interest to such a strongly Destined young lady."

Loriel shook her head. "I can't go far, or my wits will disappear again." She darted another glare that seemed to go, strangely, past Rior. "I should have known the truth at once, but I didn't. And my wits won't come back permanently until I can take them from the one who has stolen them."

"Not far."

Loriel looked at Songs the Shadows Sing as if she was thinking about arguing, but in the end she turned and walked a few dozen feet away across the grass. Since she began to pace determinedly back and forth, head bowed and lips moving, Rior took it to mean that distance was great enough for her to keep her wits.

He looked back at the wolf. "What was she talking about?"

"Someone did take her wits," said the shadow-wolf, laying himself on the grass and extending his paws. "It wasn't on purpose, or at least not the choice of the one who

received them. The Princess might be right about having another enemy." He nodded abruptly past Rior. "But that is the one who has them."

Rior looked over his shoulder and met Garden's eyes. She wagged her tail at him, looking at him with human intelligence in her gaze, and more patience than Princess Loriel had displayed.

"Garden seems human because she is that way," said Songs the Shadows Sing.
"Something gave her Loriel's wits, and Loriel has lived as a wolf for most of her life."

Rior shook the distracting information away. "I came to bargain with you," he said.

"How can you bargain with me, when you swore to serve me?"

"I said that I would not serve you if you became like Dark and Light, enslaved to Destiny. I won't put Princess Loriel on the throne only to see her slaughter Prince Imor and Queen Aloriadell."

The shadow-wolf blinked. "Why not?"

"Because I think the original plan is still the best. Princess Loriel can rule Ilantra, and Prince Imor can rule Arvenna. He was mostly raised there, and it's the country he knows best. Perhaps, at some distant time, they can be united again, but for now they should be separate."

"You don't want either Light or Dark to win."

"No. I don't. I didn't want a complicated life- I never did- but that doesn't mean I never learned the lessons." Rior paused to breathe around a blast of pain from his empty stomach, and then went on. "The other Kingdoms will get involved in this if it goes on too long. I think my cousin Therion believes that she can just have an Ilantran civil war between Dark and Light, and no one else will notice. But Prince Imor can bring in the Arvennese armies, and then Orlath and Doralissa might start feeling threatened and set up border guards. And Rivendon will watch all this with great interest, since it's between Ilantra and Arvenna. Things are very complicated right now, but they're about to become far more complicated."

"What do you suggest, then? The terms of your bargain?"

"I will become your champion," said Rior. "Change into shadow, or a wolf, or whatever else is needed. In return, you will promise me not to fight this war as if you were Dark or Light. We get Loriel back on the throne, but not with the same stupid intrigues that Dark and Light are using."

"How do you suggest doing it, then?"

"I don't know."

"You do know that Lorie has a disease that could kill her." The wolf paused, waited until Rior had nodded, and then said, "How do you plan to get around that?"

"I don't know."

"How much do you know?"

"I don't know."

The wolf snapped his head down. "I will help you."

Chapter 50

Garden In Confrontation

Garden yawns and shakes her head. The wolf and Meat-Giver sent Human-Scent away, but allowed her to remain. Garden thinks she should probably feel honored, but their council is boring and mostly involves ideas that she doesn't understand. She decides that it might be more interesting after all to go and pace up and down as Human-Scent is doing. Perhaps this is a new game.

She bounds over to Human-Scent, who is muttering to herself in the human words. Garden is glad. Human-Scent was never very good at talking to other wolves, since she lacks a tail and ears that can fold back. She falls into step beside Human-Scent, now and then glancing up at the trees or further into the woods. The wind fills her nostrils with scents of strong, free, proud game, and her mouth waters. But she's not entirely sure if she should leave Meat-Giver alone here. He smells nervous, and tired, and still sick, and he might eat something that's not good for him if she lets him stay with the great wolf and talk too long.

"It was you."

Garden looks up at Human-Scent. She is looking down, and her eyes are narrowed, teeth half-bared. Garden flattens her ears and snarls back, and Human-Scent recoils.

"What are you?" she asks. "Why did you take my wits?"

Garden doesn't know what she's babbling about. She's never stolen anything from Human-Scent, not the slightest scrap of food. The pack, which treated her like some odd alpha, made sure of that. Garden just stares back, and snaps her teeth when Human-Scent reaches out.

Human-Scent pays no attention, and takes Garden's ear, giving it a sharp tug. "Talk to me! Why did you-"

Garden need not take this, not when she's an alpha now. She snaps, and Human-Scent wails and stumbles back with blood running from her hand.

"Garden!"

Garden turns towards Meat-Giver, wagging her tail. There's anger in his voice again, but by now she knows how that goes. He'll sigh and look at her, and try to intimidate her, and then he'll forgive her. Alphas are like that. So long as their subordinates are penitent, then they forgive them.

But this time, he smells very angry. He stands up as if he would stride towards her, then falls to his knees.

"You're very weak still," says the great wolf quietly. "I'll hunt for you." He turns and bounds into the forest, and for a moment Garden wishes that she were going with him. But she probably does need to stay here and make sure that Meat-Giver doesn't hurt himself. He doesn't have the sense that pups do.

She trots towards him and sits down in front of him. He glares at her, weakly, then coughs so hard that Garden thinks he'll break something. Blood trails out of his mouth.

Garden snarls. That shouldn't be happening. She lies down beside Meat-Giver and licks his face, hoping that will help. The antler of a healthy buck gored the alpha male once, and the alpha female lay beside him throughout the night and licked the wound. He recovered.

Where is Meat-Giver's wound, though, so that she can lick it?

Garden sniffs him closely, but can't find any trace of a wound. But perhaps there is one on the inside, where she can't see it. That would make sense. The blood is coming from inside, so the wound could be inside, as well.

"Garden."

His voice is weak, but Garden hears him. Her ears are always tuned to the voices of her packmates. She looks up to find Meat-Giver staring back at her with glazed eyes, panting like a wolf.

"If I die, I want to make sure that you will tend to the Princess Loriei," he gasps, using the human words that Garden is fairly sure refer to Human-Scent. "Guard her, and train her in the ways of the pack."

Garden whines, protesting the task. She doesn't think it's fair, really. Why should she have to care for someone who's so arrogant and doesn't even understand a normal language?

"Garden. Promise me."

Garden licks his face. She can't speak the human words, and thus a lick is the best kind of promise that she can give.

Meat-Giver bares his teeth in the friendly way and reaches out a hand to stroke her fur. Garden closes her eyes. She forgets just how intensely pleasurable that is when he isn't doing it.

"I know that you'll do it," he whispers. "You may not understand the ways of Light and Dark-" Garden flattens her ears to hear him talking about night and day as if they were intelligent again "-but you understand the ways of the pack, and if Lorie has someone to teach her that, she may do better than anyone else who takes the throne because it's her Destiny to do so could."

Meat-Giver closes his eyes. His hand continues scratching on Garden's ruff for a moment, then falls still. Garden nudges him, wanting him to wake up and tell her what the last part of his words meant, but he just lies there.

Garden sniffs. She has hunted, and she has lived long years almost untouched by time while her pack members perished around her. She knows death.

She tosses back her head and howls, part ringing lament for an alpha, part summons to the great wolf that brought them to this strange woods. He should be able to do something about this, if anyone can.

Chapter 51

Death, And Beyond

"Death can come as a welcome awakening, a release. That may not seem to be something that needs to be emphasized, but you would be surprised how many people don't think of it that way, and make it their business to struggle against death in all places. They are the priestesses of Elle, and the Lightworkers who will not try to compromise with the Dark, and all others who let fear of death outweigh love of life."

-Queen Leilante of Orlath.

Rior was dead. He knew that he was dead.

So why could he still feel his heartbeat, and a cool breeze on his face?

He opened his eyes, and found himself staring into a pair of golden eyes bigger than his head. They were the eyes of the great wolf, and at the same time, they were not. When he looked around, Rior could see no signs of the forest where Songs the Shadows Sing had brought them, just a swirling world of mists and shadows.

"Aren't I dead?" he asked, the first question that came to mind. He had been so sure. He had felt himself die, felt the cold well that opened to receive him. He wasn't entirely sure what he had expected to happen. Perhaps he would join Arran in the water of the River Isiluin- though given the way the God had rejected him, perhaps not- or perhaps he would go into the blackness that the priestesses of Elle were always saying, darkly, awaited those who worshipped any other god. Or perhaps he would just wake up in another human body, the way that some of the most ancient beliefs that thought no soul ever left the world held.

"No," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "Not yet. Though if the howling of your companion had not alerted me, you might be."

Rior nodded, not entirely surprised that Garden had saved his life. She seemed inclined to it. "Then where am I?"

"In a place between life and death," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "Finding and making such places is my specialty." He lolled his tongue, smiling, but his eyes were anxious. "Finding places between life and death is not hard for one who stands between Light and Dark."

"No, I suppose not," muttered Rior, and rubbed his head, which seemed to be aching for some reason. "But what happens now?"

Songs the Shadows Sing paused. "You are indeed serious about putting Princess Lorie back on the throne, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Rior irritably. "Don't tell me you're trying to renege on your bargain now."

"Not on the bargain, but on some of the exact terms." The wolf looked at him moodily. "Do you know what it will cost you to keep your side of the bargain, if you don't accept my help? You would have to return as a ghost, or try to get someone to help you from beyond the world. It wouldn't work very well, and it could take years, even until the Princess dies."

"Then I accept your help."

"Just like that? Without hearing what it would be?"

"I made one decision. I swore to one duty. I can't flinch from that just because I would like things to be different."

Songs the Shadows Sing dipped his head, and there was something in his golden eyes that might have been admiration, though Rior had never seen admiration in a wolf's eyes and didn't really know if that was it or not. "Then, my lord, I will help you. You must change bodies now. You are dying because your body has been too badly wounded to keep your spirit in. If you will accept a new body, then you might still stay in the world and accomplish your purpose."

"What kind of body would it be?"

"Not an ordinary human one," said Songs the Shadows Sing quietly. "I see no point in lying to you about that. It would be shadow, the way that your body was becoming before you entered my world."

"Or?"

"A wolf's. You could flow back and forth between forms, solid lupine and misty human. But you will never be a solid human being again. I'm sorry." Songs the Shadows Sing bobbed his head, almost as if he thought that Rior would refuse what he was offering.

Rior closed his eyes and allowed himself one intense instant of self-pity. He would never taste human food again, never make love with a human woman again, never sniff the scents of wildflowers with a human nose again.

Of course, the wildflowers probably smell more intense to a wolf, anyway.

Rior was shocked to find himself smiling. He had the feeling that he wasn't supposed to find this funny, but he did. He shrugged and opened his eyes to look at Songs the Shadows Sing. "I have accepted it. Do what you must."

The great wolf looked at him a moment more, then said, "Do you remember what it was like to be a wolf?"

"Of course."

"I don't think you do," he said, with something that was almost a croon in his voice. Rior hadn't thought a wolf could sound like that. Of course, he hadn't thought that a wolf could sing, either, until he heard Garden that night in the forest. "But reach out towards your memories, and perhaps you will begin to recall."

Rior shrugged and closed his eyes. There were the memories of dappled moonlight striking through the trees, and soft earth under his paws, and branches dipping above him.

But that wasn't really the way it should be, should it? He knew that being a wolf meant being inside those things, the same way that being a human meant being used to walking on two legs and wearing a hairless skin. It wasn't something one thought about or did. It was something one was.

And as if that had been the key, scents flooded his nostrils again, and his legs bent as easily as though he had no knees or elbows left. Rior opened his eyes and found the world washed in gray, his face far closer to the ground.

He sniffed. The scents that welled and filled his nostrils were beyond description, even in this cloudy place. He could smell the blood running in Songs the Shadows Sing, and was a little surprised to realize that the great power actually had an avatar that was a solid wolf, instead of an illusion. He could smell grass, and somewhere, close at hand, Garden. He turned his head towards her scent instinctively, wagging his tail, and stopped when he was confronted by a barrier of solid shadow.

"Just a moment, Rior," said Songs the Shadows Sing, his voice amused. "I have to make sure that you can assume your other form before I let you go back into even the world I have created. This is going to be very different. You are, in essence, another of my avatars, a focus of my power. Think of being human, now, but think only of the sights you would see and the sounds you would hear." For a moment, sadness touched his voice. "Those are the only senses left to you now."

Rior focused on one of his most intense and private memories, sitting in the gardens at sunrise and watching the sun come up. He had been out hunting a rogue wolf he had finally brought down, and he knew the hills were safe for trappers and hunters again. He was intensely happy, and the happiness seemed to echo in the world around him, giving a preternatural clarity to the songs of the birds and the colors of the sunrise.

"That will do."

Rior opened his eyes and looked down at himself. He looked as he had been, clothes and all, but everything was colored in soft gray and made of shadow. He tried to lay a hand on his chest and couldn't feel himself at all.

He gritted his teeth. The loss pounded in his head like an ache, and it probably wasn't nearly as keen as he would feel in a short time. But he would have to get used to it. He had chosen it, after all.

"You have a dedication that would do honor to either Dark or Light. I think them frightfully blind for not choosing you."

Rior blinked and looked up at Songs the Shadows Sing. "Thank you," he said. "May I return to the form of a wolf now?"

"I think so. I have created shadow-bodies before, though never ones that lasted so long. And if you spend most of your time in the form of a wolf-

"I intend to."

"-then it won't be for very long, anyway."

Rior slipped back, and was delighted to realize just how natural it felt, to be enclosed by fur and scents. He shook his fur, and then the shadows melted away and he stood in front of Garden again.

She gave a yelp that was almost a bark in her delight, and bowed to him, head stretched over her forelegs and tongue lolling. Rior yelped back, and chased her in a circle. He could smell her joy.

He could smell something else, too.

He turned around and found himself face-to-face with his own body. It already smelled bad. He winced and stepped away from it, growling and bristling in spite of himself.

Garden nipped him gently on the flank. Rior turned away and leaned against her, letting the wind of her wagging tail pass over his fur and cool him.

"How will he help me get back on the throne now?"

Rior looked up. Lorie was glaring at him with her hands on her hips.

"He will just have to do it in lupine form," said Songs the Shadows Sing. His tone was only intended to be soothing, Rior thought, and not inspirational.

But it gave Rior the most wonderful idea. He let his tongue loll.

Songs the Shadows Sing looked at him. "What is it?"

Rior whined smugly and leaned against Garden, who kept wagging her tail. He needed a little more time to think about it, but yes, if he was careful and spent some time understanding the world he lived in now, it could work.

The Darkworkers would arrive soon, of course, but there was no one who said they couldn't be driven loose from the castle even if they possessed it.

Or attacked from behind.

Luden Lying

So, you see, Idessen, I can't answer you as to whether Rior was a shapeshifter or not, because I never really saw him shapeshift. He came back into the castle and plotted a way to take over the throne for the Princess, and he left me on the castle wall. I was there, enough to tell you about some of the story, but I wasn't at the heart of it, except at the very end. The end is very important.

Why? Because that is where many of your fellow historians fail. They say they are telling the truth, but they are not; they are leaving out large chunks in order to placate themselves and their patrons. They are-

Ah, very well, I will calm down. But what I am saying is something you will never hear anywhere else, Idessen, unless you start to listen in corners and at doors, and I know that you don't do that. You're too much of the Light.

That was a compliment, not an insult. Can you take it as such?

You're leaving again? But coming back in a little while. That's good. I'll be waiting here.

Light damn it, I hate lying.

Oh, there you are, my lord. Yes, I know the lie is necessary. I don't want anyone getting the idea that you're still alive and they can hurt you. But I do wish that I could tell Idessen the truth.

Thank you. That does mean a lot, to have you look at me like that and say that I am a friend. It doesn't quite ease the pain of lying, but it helps. And I never knew that it meant so much to you. I had some idea, but not this much.

Very well, then. A lie is a small part to play to preserve such peace. I will continue telling the story that he wants to hear. Except for the end? You won't deny me the right to tell the end, I hope.

No. Thank you.

You had best glide, my lord. Here he comes again.

Ah, Idessen. What do you want to hear about now? The nobles in the castle? Well, some of them had been Darkworkers for quite some time. The Lady Therion, Rior's cousin, had been plotting for years, pretending to be part of the Council of Light while really part of the Council of Dark. In fact, I don't think that she knew herself where her ultimate loyalty lay. Her taking over the castle for the Dark may have just been due to the impression that the Dark was about to win.

No, of course I shouldn't say things like that. How shameful of me. I know that Lady Therion died repentant, and that should mean something, shouldn't it? Just as the Lord Dorwen's heroic death should mean that I shouldn't reveal him for the total and utter bastard he was.

Did I say something to offend you, Idessen? I will tell you the truth, and I will tell it in the language that I want to use. Will you listen?

That is good.