

Chapter 79

Distraction

"I will have you know that many wars are won through the use of distraction- though it does tend to be hard on the limbs."

-Testimony of an armless man in a prisoners' hospital in Rivendon.

Rior knew from Garden's howl that she hadn't meant him to attack. But he didn't care. He had planned this, and he knew just what he was doing.

He thought.

He couldn't kill Prince Imor; he had only been able to bite a human at all because he had hurt Garden. He was inclined to talk and dither around, and that had not gone away when he transformed into a wolf. Therefore, he would be a distraction, and force Garden to go and kill Prince Imor because the attack would leave her no choice. It was a good plan.

At least, he thought it was until the first bolt of Scarlet came hammering towards him.

Rior yelped and dodged, and the bolt skidded past him and slammed into the trees. In moments, they were alight. Rior stared at them in dismay. He had told the alpha of alphas that they wouldn't bring damage to the forest-

And then he had something else to think about, as a spear nearly got him in the flank. He dodged, and ran right into a Gust mage's wind. Rior howled and tried to pull on the water beneath the earth, or the blood in the Gust mage's body.

Nothing happened. Rior remembered grimly that nothing had happened when he tried to heal Garden, either. His Azure magic seemed to be gone for good.

These thoughts raced through his head as he himself raced through the air, tumbling tail over paws and hitting a tree at the end. Rior lay there, dazed, for a moment, hearing branches crack and fall. This would damage the forest horribly. He couldn't count on keeping his promise to the alpha of alphas.

Then a spear rested on his throat. He looked up to see the human who had stabbed him once before standing there.

"Can you change back now?" the man sneered, and started to drive the spear-point home.

Rior tried to slip into shadow-form, but he hurt too much to do so. He stared at the man, wanting at least to see his own death.

"Help!"

The human whirled with a curse. Rior gave a gasp and dragged himself back up and away. His whole body ached, and reluctantly, he managed to slip into shadow-form. The pain stopped at once, as did the sensation of earth beneath his paws. He shook his head and looked at the sight that had made the human turn away from him.

Garden had Prince Imor by the leg again, and was slashing and tearing, opening the wound she had made there further. Imor was screaming and trying to stand, but Garden had a hold in both cloth and flesh, and kept him still as she bit him. In a moment she would tear something open that could not be healed.

Rior smiled, and then frowned, wondering where Dark was in all this.

As if the power had heard him, there came a great roar. Garden was flung from Prince Imor's body, though she came back in another moment, her eyes filled with the lust for blood. A dark cloud had risen and covered Prince Imor, though, shielding him from sight.

"Your Highness?" whispered one of the humans. Rior thought they hadn't expected this to happen either.

The cloud cleared, and then Prince Imor stood there, half-transfigured. His eyes had turned completely golden, the lightning bolt vanishing in the general color, and wings had burst through his back. He stared at Garden, and Rior shuddered. Though he couldn't feel the wind, he could feel the wave of hatred that the Prince felt as he looked at Garden.

He gestured, once.

Rior cried "No!" and drifted forward as fast he could, certain that in a moment Garden was going to fall dead.

But Garden stood there, panting, and it seemed that whatever magic Imor had used to strike at her had missed. She shook her coat and yelped at him, then bowed her head over her front legs, inviting him to play.

Rior slowed; his trembling, he noted distantly, showed only a slight distortion in the mist that made him. The idea that Garden could have died from that strike was so horrible that he had to shudder again, and again, and lower his head into his hands.

"What is this?"

Prince Imor's voice was distorted. Rior looked up and saw that his face had altered as well; he had grown fangs, and his cheeks looked oddly flattened, as though they were being pressed closer together by an enormous hand.

"What are you?"

Garden panted at the Prince, laughing in Dark's face.

Prince Imor shook his head. "I have let you escape questioning for too long. I do not know who controls you, and I do not know if I have a dangerous rival or not." He turned abruptly and faced the forest. "Come forth!" he bellowed. "Or I will find a way to kill your servant."

Rior snorted. He didn't think that anything would respond-

And then, to his immense surprise, he felt the trees stir. Again, it wasn't something that he could have felt even with a normal body, but still it was there. This wasn't like the wave of hatred that Imor had flung at Garden, though. This was a wave of solid power, with all the naturalness and cleanliness of a wolf's run. This was good, and Rior felt his heart thrill towards it. He turned his head, wondering if Shadow had come back from Rivendon to fight for them.

The alpha of alphas trotted forward from the trees and sat on his haunches, staring up at Prince Imor.

"What are you?" the Dark asked, speaking through him.

The alpha of alphas said nothing in the human tongue, but of course he wouldn't. Rior had come to think that he despised speaking aloud. He just sat there, an immense black wolf, but not threatening. Indeed, the power that radiated from him was compelling, magnetic. Rior had to fight down the need to go to him. That could wait. This was a confrontation of powers at the moment.

But that didn't end the draw.

"I will have an answer!" said the Dark. Prince Imor took a step forward, the fangs sprouting further out of his face, his wings twitching. "You know the patterns of Destiny, and you have never interfered in them before."

Rior felt a bolt of sweet amusement strike through him. The Dark didn't understand. The alpha of alphas was a wolf at heart. He would attack only when someone threatened his pack and his territory.

And it seemed that Garden was part of his pack.

Rior went to her. She panted up at him, and leaned towards his hand, stopping at a precise distance from it, so that his misty fingers could stroke her fur without sinking in. Rior leaned down closer to her, and watched.

The humans around Imor were edging closer to the alpha of alphas, as if they could feel the same pull that Rior could. And then one of them threw down his spear, cried out wordlessly, and started forward.

The alpha of alphas watched him come. When the man was only a few steps away from him, he abruptly threw back his head and howled.

Rior felt his skin prickle, even though he didn't have any skin to prickle. The sound was the call of the hunt, the call of green shadows in the forest, the call of the world as it should be. Birth and death were there, and hunting, and blood, and killing, and raising pups. Nothing at all of Destiny, or of anything more compelling than the call of instinct.

It traveled through the humans around Imor, and Rior saw them react. Their faces became dreamy. Their hands dropped the spears, and then they stood still, heads bowed, feet sinking into the earth.

Their skin darkened suddenly, and then turned hard. Rior stared as they lofted their arms, which suddenly multiplied, many arms stretching forth and becoming branches. Their fingers turned to twigs, and leaves burst forth from them in a sudden singing fulfillment of the season. The leaves shook themselves like billowing sails, and spread out hastily to their full span. The feet of the humans truly sank into the earth then, sank further and further, and extended into roots. Rior could feel the precise moment when they stopped being humans and became trees, and thought he could feel their joy at the same moment.

This is better. This is a better life than they would have as slaves of Destiny.

When he looked back towards the alpha of alphas, he found that only Prince Imor remained unchanged- at least by the alpha of alphas. The wings and fangs were gone, though the glowing golden eyes remained. He was staring at the alpha of alphas.

"You cannot win." There was fear in his voice, though. "Why do you try?"

The alpha of alphas took a step forward, past the ash tree who had been the man running towards him, and padded towards the Prince, looking unhurried.

The Prince flung up his arms and vanished.

The alpha of alphas halted, sniffed, and then seemed to dismiss the matter. He lowered his head and licked Garden, and then turned and looked at Rior expectantly.

Rior slipped back into wolf form, wincing at the return of pain, and the alpha of alphas licked him gently as well.

Then the alpha of alphas sang again, and for a moment Rior was caught up in the forest, part of the wind that swept through the leaves and the worms writhing underground.

The song faded, and when he looked again, the alpha of alphas was gone as well.

Rior panted. *I told them that the forest would rise against them. I did not know how right I was.*

Chapter 80

Forests Again

There. Aren't you miserable that you angered me before you took me out of the castle?

Where are we?

Of course. You would sit there and look smug, and not answer my questions. Would you like to know if I can make myself heavier as well as light enough to be taken along? I can. I think that you would have to tell me where we're going then.

Or leave me behind. Very well. Some friend you are.

But where are we?

I know these are forests. But I haven't seen houses built like that before. What is it made of, woven branches? I thought all the people of Ilantra built in stone or sod. There's just nothing else that will stand against a fire. And how does that branch-house keep the wind out?

Magic.

Where did you get the magic to do that? Or do you have a great many Gust mages living with you?

Shadow. I should have guessed. I really wish that I could chuckle. That will make a good joke on the powers in the castle who think they control the country. And how many people do you have living here? Did you really convince them to abandon their farms and come with you into the trees, or was it more a process of their having nowhere else to go?

Persuasion. Well. You can work wonders. I've always said so.

Yes, I have. I'm sure that I can distinctly remember saying so on more than one occasion during all the years you've visited me. And you didn't listen. What is the point of calling me friend if you're only going to listen to the bad things I say about you? That's what enemies are for. Friends are for praise.

Yes, it's a simple way of looking at the world, but it's one that's always worked for me.

Is this your home? Very snug, I see, not that you would feel the wind. And there are benches. What do you do, drift above them and look contemplative?

And what is that?

Oh, my lord.

What? I can manage a tender tone as well as any human. No chuckle, of course, but I think I already told you that my creator didn't build that in. And no need to roll your eyes and mutter. I know that I tell the tale often. Lacking laughter has been one of the sorrows of my long life.

Very well, hair-splitter. Existence, if you must.

But I was saying-

They are beautiful. I am sorry that I do not have more eloquent words, but that is what they are.

How can I tell they are yours? Because they have that look in their eyes, of course. They look at me, and I can almost hear all the complaints they are mustering against me. They don't like that you're sitting here and holding me, I think. Or do they usually glare like that?

Very well. Place me here for a while, and play with your children. I will lie on the bench and watch.

I am happy again.

Chapter 81

Into Ilantra

"The Kingdoms have all seen many strange armies march across them in their time. I would be surprised if Arvenna, for example, had never seen an army composed entirely of liadra. And perhaps Ilantra has never seen a strange army, say one composed of ilzán, but again I would be surprised."

-The Casual Historian.

Rior nodded slowly. Garden was right to stand here, growling and urging him out onto the Corlirin Plains. Prince Imor had escaped, and even the shapeshifters, who swooped across the sky on swan-wings and could see far, had been unable to find him. They couldn't track him. They should just move forward, and trust the shapeshifters to spot the Dark if it came back.

He was only reluctant to leave the shelter of the trees.

Well, and reluctant to run. Alami had tended his wounds and Garden's with a salve that smelled like chives, but the ache had not faded from his muscles. Rior wasn't sure what running would do to it.

He shook his head slightly, heard Garden growl again, and then threw back his head and howled.

"Pick me up."

Rior bowed his head and picked up Luden, gripping him in his jaws. He knew that his teeth would ache in a little while, but they didn't yet, and he felt a sudden surge of excitement. Had Ilantra ever seen a pack like this before, wolves driving deer before them and accompanied by swans flying above them, led by a wolf who had been born human and was holding a sword in his teeth?

Probably not, though Ilantra's history was so strange that it was hard to say for sure.

Rior wagged his tail and trotted forward. The others spread out around him, and for a long moment Rior didn't even think about leaving the trees behind. The sweetness of the grass as he crushed it beneath his paws, and the company of the wolves all around him, were more than enough to ease his fear and keep him moving.

Of course, when he did come back to himself with a jolt, it was all the stranger. He stared around at the pack and wondered if they were making the right decision, after all.

He saw Lorie riding with head bowed on the back of the black unicorn, and sincerely hoped so.

Then he faced forward again, and felt his fear melt into wonder. He had never realized just how different the Plains looked from this level, until he was rushing along with the grass in his nostrils. The Plains opened ahead of him, singing and probably green and golden in the light, though of course he couldn't see that in this form. Garden panted beside him, and then began abruptly to howl, a joyous sound. Rior matched her stride for stride and sound for sound, though he had to keep shifting Luden around in his mouth in order to howl.

The countryside ahead of them remained flat and virgin for some miles, then abruptly turned to mud and slotted ground. Rior halted and sniffed, fighting the urge to growl when he smelled humans. There was the scent of horse, too, so heavy that Rior thought he was in a stable.

"The Arvenese army," said Luden. "It must be. They are going towards the castle, and I know no others who would ride horses as openly and arrogantly across the country."

Rior sniffed the ground carefully, laying Luden next to the tracks. What Luden said made sense, and yet-

There was a strangeness to these scents, as though the creatures the humans rode were not quite horses. Rior had not smelled anything like it before, but he did feel as if the scent should be known to him.

He laid Luden down and sniffed at Garden. She knew what he wanted, and turned to yelp authoritatively at the packs. One alpha came forward to scoop up the softly protesting sound, and then turned and barked at his pack. They swerved along the straight groove that Luden had carved in the ground. The rest of the pack followed them, though some of the shapeshifters remained, hovering, and the black unicorn that bore Lorie looked torn for a moment. Eventually, it followed the packs, which Rior thought was a wise decision. Let Lorie's people look upon her and see that she was the best alpha-

He shook his head. *I am truly beginning to think like a wolf. The best Queen, of course. Let them see that she is the best Queen.*

With them on their way, Rior lowered his nose to the ground and tracked the strange scent. After a while the track grew so broad that he could follow it just by sight alone, and did, with Garden running at his side. Rior marveled over the way they ran together so easily, their movements shifting as if to complement each other's. Having a packmate was different from having just a comrade or friend; he seemed to know instinctively where she was at all times, for one thing.

Before he could marvel at it more, though, they ran straight into the camp of those who had left the trail.

Rior halted, his ears lifted, hearing the dogs in the camp begin to bark as they caught their scent. These were the tents of humans, of course, the kind of thing that soldiers would use when they wanted to move fast and light. And yet, the same strange non-horse scent hung about their picket lines, and it had been joined by another scent that was even stranger, like a human's but more delicate.

Then Rior saw a flag snapping from the roof of one tent, and understood. It did not bear the lightning bolt of Arvenna, but the striking hawk of Doralissa.

That explained the strange scents. The horses that the Doralissans rode were in all likelihood not pure horses, but crossed with unicorns. That would make them more graceful and faster.

And the strange delicate scent was explained in seconds, as an elf appeared around the corner of a tent and strode towards them.

Rior trembled. The other fey might look less impressive through lupine eyes than human, but the elf looked the same, or even more awe-inspiring. There was a delicacy about his movements that Rior had never seen before, and a fire seemed to edge his body, dancing and moving with him. Rior had never seen that before, either. He had to fight the urge to abase himself and whine as he would have done before the alpha of alphas.

The elf knelt before them, bringing his face down to Rior's level. He didn't look surprised at all.

"You are human, I know," he said. "A shapeshifter, such as I have heard of but never seen. Who are you, and who is your lord?"

There was nothing for it. Rior shifted back to shadowy human-form, even though Garden snarled at him savagely. And for the first time, he got to see wonder in an elf's eyes. The elf stood up before him and considered him carefully. Rior was glad to see that his skin was a dark brown-gold, and his hair pale. The elves of the Light, who wore golden skin, were more touchy and harder to deal with.

"My name is Reweren," said the elf.

Rior stared. The elf he spoke to was Prince Consort of Doralissa then, or something like it, the lover of Queen Joydancer and the father of her children. It gave him status as great as Loriel's, even though he would never marry Joydancer, being immortal.

And he said that with a modesty and casualness that a human could never have achieved, as though it didn't really matter.

"My name was Rior," said Rior at last, when he could recover from his shock.

Reweren eyed him in interest. "The Queen received messages from the Ilantran Court saying that you had become Regent in the name of Princess Loriel. You are not what I would have expected."

Rior shook his head. "It is a long tale, my lord, but it has to do with the power of Shadow. I have become this way because I chose to serve him."

Reweren looked delighted. "I have not heard of Shadow in a long time. It has returned to the world, then?"

Rior nodded. "Why are you going to the Court, my lord?"

"We thought that we might be able to talk some sense into the Queen, the Princess, and the Prince," said Reweren, with a sigh, as if he were speaking about squabbling children instead of warring royals. "Or the Queen thought that. I wanted to turn them into birds, but she wouldn't let me."

Rior decided not to react to that for right now. "We are also on our way to the Court. We mean to put Princess Loriel onto the throne."

"We?"

Rior debated, but only for a short time. "A great pack of wolves and shapeshifters are on the move, my lord," he said. "We have the approval of Shadow and the alpha of alphas. Both the Dark and the Light have said they will oppose us, but they have not yet managed to do more than slow us down a little."

"This is truly remarkable," said Reweren, and his eyes were shining now. "I did not know that anything like this had happened. My lady made it sound like a matter of diplomacy alone, and not choosing sides in a war."

"We do not ask you to choose sides," said Rior hastily, shuddering to think of what would happen should an elf join the war. Things were confused enough already. "All we ask is that you stand back, and then accept the new monarch of Ilantra as the new monarch. Let Ilantra settle her own wars."

"Will that new monarch be Loriel?"

"It could be. It could also be Prince Imor, or even Queen Aloriadell."

Reweren shook his head slowly. "I would be willing to do as you ask, but my lady knows that Prince Imor is the avatar of the Dark, and she wants him dead. She is afraid that he will stir up war. And Pheron has sent a messenger of his own." The elves rarely addressed King Pheron of Orlath by his title.

"Who is that?"

Reweren pointed up. Rior tilted back his head, and then flinched as an enormous shadow swept across him. A red dragon was circling in the air, his neck bent so that he could watch those on the ground beneath him. Even as Rior watched, he breathed out a long spray of fire that cleaved the air with impressive speed.

Rior understood much then. These weren't just messengers, just diplomats. They were meant to intimidate, and make the will of the southern Kingdoms known. They would show up suddenly, from an unexpected direction, and as impressively as they could. Rior shuddered a little at the thought. It explained why Queen Joydancer had sent her consort and King Pheron the dragon Bloodsinger, the most well-known and powerful of the dragons who had chosen to serve him. They wanted to make sure that the Ilantran Court realized just how important this was.

Rior knew it now, too. And he didn't like it.

He fixed his eyes on Reweren. "My lord, will Bloodsinger listen to you?"

"I don't know." Reweren tilted his head. "It might be interesting to have a contest of magic and see-"

"I didn't mean that," said Rior quickly. One had to be so careful when dealing with elves; they were the least human of the fey, and prone to think strangely of everything that a human might understand at once. "I meant, will he listen to your advice, if you ask him to withdraw from Ilantra and leave us to decide our own war for the present?"

"I didn't say I would recommend that."

Rior stared straight at him and tried to sound as if he were pleading without abasing himself. "Please, my lord. Matters are more complicated than you know. Shadow has returned to the world, and Dark and Light might use this as an excuse to start another war. I fear that your presence here would help trigger the war. Would Bloodsinger listen to you?"

"Yes, he would."

"And will you withdraw?"

The elf frowned thoughtfully at him. Rior held his breath.

Chapter 82

Garden In the Camp

Garden glances around from face to face. There are humans coming forth to watch them now, and almost all of them have quiet scents and firm grips on their sharp sticks or long swords. Garden is impressed. These are dangerous humans, more dangerous than Meat-Giver's people. They know how to hunt and follow a pack leader.

If the man in front of Meat-Giver is their pack leader.

Garden looks back at him and tries to keep from whining. She knows he isn't a man, and yet she has no better word to refer to him. He burns the world where he walks, though it's a fire that doesn't sweep across the grass and kill anything. He changes things, though. Garden can smell the air turn sweeter where he has been, and the grass is fresher. His face is mild, and he speaks to Meat-Giver as though he would listen, but Garden doesn't trust him.

She names him Living-Fire in her mind, and continues to listen to the talk. Meat-Giver is trying to ask Living-Fire and his people to stay here, she gathers. And the great lizard circling in the sky is to stay with them.

Garden is glad of that. She doesn't like the lizard, either. She looks up at him as he sweeps by and bares her teeth.

He catches her gaze, and lets loose another stream of flame. Garden isn't frightened, though. It doesn't touch her. She howls, wanting him to come down and fight if he has the courage.

"Garden!" Meat-Giver sounds shocked, and he reaches out a hand. Garden feels the cool mist pass over her head. "Don't taunt Bloodsinger. He's not the calmest or least touchy of dragons."

But Garden pays no attention, because the dragon is descending, and she sits bolt upright, wagging her tail. Perhaps she can show Meat-Giver that, after all, fighting depends on courage, and not just on size. Meat-Giver is too afraid of most things. She will show him otherwise.

The humans draw back as the dragon lands, and the earth itself seems to quiver and tremble. Garden is not impressed by this. The dragon can make the earth do that, but can he defend himself against a wolf's teeth?

The dragon lowers his head towards her. Garden growls at him. His nose is only a few feet away from her, and if he comes closer, she will bite him.

"Please pardon her, my lord," Meat-Giver says, speaking very quickly. "I'm sure that she didn't mean to threaten you. She does things like this sometimes, in the spirit of play." Again, his misty hand brushes her head. "Garden," he whispers. "Back towards me, slowly, eyes on the ground."

Garden doesn't feel like it. She takes a step forward, her fur bristling, staring into the dragon's eyes. He stares back at her.

And blinks.

Then he turns his head and regards Living-Fire. "This is not a wolf, not even an overly bold wolf," he says in a voice that nearly flings Garden from her feet. She considers this a dirty trick, and growls louder. The dragon ignores her in favor of speaking to Living-Fire. "The light that shines in her mind and that looks out through her eyes is human."

Garden growls in disapproval. She is not human. She is a wolf. And she is the alpha of a pack, and she hasn't seen the dragon fight yet. She wants to know why he speaks like that, when he might be a low-ranker.

Living-Fire comes forward and stoops then, and Garden backs away, unnerved. She doesn't want to fight Living-Fire, even though he's smaller than the dragon. There is something fearful about him.

Living-Fire reaches out a hand and puts it on her hand, and Garden finds herself standing still, even as he peers hard into her eyes. Then he stands and takes his hand away. Garden shakes her head. She feels as if the fire had cut in through in her eyes and scoured the

inside of her head. Meat-Giver slips back into lupine form and leans against her, and Garden turns to lick him. His worry is strange. She will survive, and he is only her packmate, not her mother. Why would he worry so about her?

"What you say is true," says Living-Fire. "And more, I think that I know what put the light in her mind. It has a familiar feeling to it."

"It does?" said the dragon. "That, I did not know."

Living-Fire nods. "I noticed it the first time I met Pheron. His magic was strange, not merely the opposite of the Cycle but something in itself. And yet no power claimed him, no force made itself known through him, and he was never announced as the fulfillment of any prophecy. I don't know if I have a name for it, but it was something that made things happen for the sake of them happening. And that is what this is. The light in Garden's mind is an accident."

"And you are willing to trust it?" the dragon asks. Garden wonders how he knows that. She smelled nothing like that in Living-Fire's scent- but his smell is so strange that she could have missed something.

"I am," says Living-Fire, and turns to look directly at Meat-Giver. "You shall have your respite. Two days. I am willing to trust that whatever power this is knows what it is doing. What Pheron did was the best thing he could have done. And perhaps this power is acting again to stop the wars of Dark and Light. I do not know. But you must hurry. Two days only."

Meat-Giver bows his head, and then turns and trots out of the camp. Garden trots beside him, glancing over her shoulder at the dragon once or twice. He smells amused, and she doesn't know how he dares. After all, he didn't win against her in single combat.

She suddenly realizes that Meat-Giver is trembling, and glances at him in curiosity. Did Living-Fire and the dragon actually manage to frighten him? She would not have thought it.

Chapter 83

Risks

"I know a man who loved gambling. It was all that he would do, if given the chance, even in preference to working his fields or making love to his wife. And then he found that he had won a great amount of money one day, and he was so happy that his heart stopped suddenly.

"No, there's no moral. It's just what happened."

-Kymenos Starshard.

Rior was shaking as they trotted back towards the pack. Already he was thinking about their chances of reaching the castle in two days, and he didn't think they could make it. Perhaps the unicorn bearing Loriel could, and wolves that ran fast and never slowed down, and certainly Luden if one of them carried him. Perhaps even the shapeshifters, but they seemed to have to rest their wings just like the birds they resembled.

But still, two days was a grace period. And they might have longer than that, if the armies really remained where they were. They would still have some ground to cover to the castle, in that case.

Rior took a deep breath and shook his head. He knew who should go ahead, as if some god had spoken the names into his mind: himself, Garden, the unicorn with Loriel on his back, Luden. That was all. And yet he didn't know if anyone else would even be able to keep up, so perhaps it was only reasonable.

He glanced at Garden. He could run that far because he would have to, and Garden would run that far because she would keep up with him. He wondered if he could convince the unicorn to bear Loriel and Luden both. His teeth were beginning to ache from carrying the great sword.

Garden glanced back at him, and growled as if to say that she would bite him if he tried to leave her behind. Rior panted, and then looked ahead. Already they were almost up with the packs again, and the black unicorn turned his head towards them as if they had called his name, even though Rior didn't know his name.

He shifted back into shadowy form and called, "Alami!"

A white swan descended before him, and shifted back into the fey. "What is the news?" she asked, the teasing smile she usually wore gone from her face. She must know that he had met with an elf.

"Doralissa and Orlath have sent messengers to show their displeasure over all this. I have convinced them to wait for two days, but they will move quickly after that. I think that we must hurry."

Alami nodded, her eyes depthless and serene. "And you came to ask me to open the Gates?"

Rior stared at her. "I- what?" He had only meant to ask her how many of the fey and shapeshifters she thought could keep up.

Alami smiled slightly then. "The Gates. I thought you knew about them, and had come to ask me to open them."

"I don't even know what they are."

Alami shrugged. "A means of traveling fast across Ilantra, though I think my kin are the only ones who use them now. Some royal dreamed them up, some royal with *ilzán* blood. We can move fast if we go through them, but most of us will probably die along the way, when we emerge into the world again."

Rior recoiled at the thought. "Why would we do such a thing?"

"The Gates interfere with the nature of time. When we emerge, some of us will be aged, and some will have gone elsewhere in time, and some of us will be so young that we will be either children or have gone back to some point in time before our births." The fey explained all this calmly, as though it was a normal and acceptable risk. "It does not affect the fey. After all, we are immortal, and we began long ago. But I cannot tell what it may do to the wolves, or to your human friend." She nodded at Loriel.

"Or to Garden?"

"Or to Garden," Alami agreed.

Rior took a deep breath. "How quickly would we move, if we went through the Gates?"

"We would be at the castle in a few hours."

Rior closed his eyes and lowered his head. "I must think about this," he muttered, and Alami stood back and let him do it.

Rior fought the urge to simply say, "No," and not use the Gates. After all, there would be civil war in Ilantra if they arrived too late, and the other Kingdoms would make it bloodier if they entered the war. And, thinking rationally about it, he knew they couldn't reach the castle in two days from here, even running day and night. It had been hope and desperation that had made him think they could.

But could he condemn the wolves to death, even for the sake of Ilantra and Loriel's claim to the throne?

No, he could not.

Rior took a deep breath, and looked up at Alami. It hadn't taken so long to make that decision, after all. "I will enter the Gates, along with the rest of the fey. But Loriel and Garden and the rest must take the normal route. I believe that Luden can show them the way, and they will follow him."

Alami bowed to him. "Then I will open them." She turned and held her hands out to the sky, and white light began to shine in the air, like the edges of mist. Rior took a deep breath and looked down at Garden.

"You have to stay here," he said.

She showed her teeth at him.

Rior shook his head. "You must. I don't know what exploding time would do to you, even though you are not an ordinary wolf. And I am not willing to lose you." He knelt down and put his hand beneath her chin when she would have turned her head away. She stared at him, and her eyes shone with rage, but she kept up the gaze. Rior was encouraged by that. "Do you want to die suddenly, or perhaps turn into a pup? Or do you want to live for many years longer?"

Garden bowed her head, and then turned and slunk towards the packs. Rior sighed as he watched her go. She would understand, he hoped.

Always providing that he came back from the Gates himself, and they didn't change time dramatically for him as well.

He looked back, and then paused. Alami apparently had the Gate almost open; she was singing a high and wordless song that reminded Rior of nightingales on a clear night. She held out her hands further, and gestured once with them, and then the Gates flew open.

Rior found himself gazing at a series of steps beyond, seemingly formed of pure white light, though it looked as solid as marble after a few moments. The steps led down, but Rior thought he could glimpse a point where they led up again. He took a deep breath and looked at Alami.

"Will you go through first?"

She ducked her head, and stepped through. Rior braced himself to see her age or vanish, but she didn't change, instead just walking down the stairs and vanishing into the blaze of white light.

"I will go next."

Rior glanced over his shoulder and saw Neretsa standing there, her eyes fixed on the gate. She glanced briefly at him, added, "Do not delay too long, my lord," and then stepped through the gate, following Alami.

The other shapeshifters flew through, or began to alight and change into their fey forms, which perhaps were more comfortable when crossing the Gates. Rior turned and went to Lorient, who was staring at the Gates with an expression of mingled longing and confusion on her face.

"I can't go through, can I?" she asked, when he approached her.

Rior shook his head. "You can't, Your Highness. I don't know what time might do to you, what change it might work. And if for some reason you aged past the point where the disease in your blood would have killed you, you might arrive at the castle only to die."

Loriel nodded solemnly. Rior was startled to see real feeling in her eyes, blazing more brightly even than the silver lightning bolts. She looked adult for the first time, not just a spoiled child.

"Be careful, Rior."

Rior smiled at her. "I will, of course, Your Highness. But I do think this is an acceptable risk to take."

"Take me with you."

Rior glanced at Luden, irritated with the sword for interrupting. "Why? You're needed here to guide the others."

"I carved the groove in the ground. They can follow that. And Loriel is intelligent enough to guide them, I think." The sword ignored the Princess's outraged little squawk. "I want to see the Gates. I have never seen them. There are many places in Ilantra that I know as thoroughly as my own steel, but that isn't one of them."

"No," said Rior firmly, and turned towards the gates.

There came a sudden glow of fire, and then a harsh cry. Luden flew past him through the Gates. Rior cursed and floated after him, not even thinking about it until he was already within the Gates and their blaze of white light.

He glanced over his shoulder, and saw that the Gate had shut, as silently as it had opened in the first place.

"We're here," said Luden. "No going back. Now, pick me up and hold me over your head. I want to see where we're going."

Chapter 84

The Gifts of Shadow

I never told you how much I expected you to just throw me back through the Gates. I thought you would find some way to open them and do it. I've never seen someone who was human so irritated.

What? Oh, no, the fey aren't always calm. If you insult them long enough, then they will turn on you. And they can be very destructive when they want to be, though it was never quite enough to destroy me.

It's very peaceful here, isn't it? I can imagine all of you living in the forest in silence and comfort, worshipping Shadow, and paying no attention at all to anything that happens in Ilantra.

Why are you laughing?

I wish I could laugh. It is the gift that I most regret my creator did not give me. Of course, he gave me so many other things that I can't regret it that much. But I do wish that I could chuckle, or sneer, or chortle, or even laugh aloud-

Have I told you this already?

Then tell me why you're laughing.

Well, I didn't say that you had no contact with Ilantra at all. I just said that it was easy for me to imagine that you had no contact with them. I can also imagine furtive messengers going back and forth, and whispered words by night, and secret meetings in fields-

Would you be interested in seeing me replicate the burns that I gave Idessen and all the others who threatened to melt me?

Well, then tell me what you really do.

That seems as if it would be too simple. Of course, I know that you meant to offer them the gifts of Shadow, and that there would be some who accepted. But I didn't know that they would join so easily, without a qualm, without a thought of their old allegiance to the Light. How do you do it?

Show them shapeshifting. That sounds too simple. Is there something else that you can show them?

What are you doing?

I have never felt such magic before, my lord. I know that you are not trying to melt me, or I would strike out at once. But I have never felt such a grip on my hilt before, or a heat that was so like fire and yet not of it. And keep in mind that I only believe you are not trying to melt me since you are my friend. That is all.

Is my hilt melting?

I-

I-

What is this? This is a joke? Or you have managed to fool me with an illusion. But no illusion has fooled me since my creation. This is a very good joke, if it is a joke. Will you show me how you are doing it?

Of course I want to feel what it's like! Give me a moment. I-

I.

I never knew what it was like to have a body. Hands and eyes. The colors are all richer, deeper, even though I thought my creator gave me the best eyes of anyone I've known. And I can laugh. Listen to the sound of it! I can feel it tickling in my throat. Does it always tickle in your throat?

What is that? Is that smell? It is rich and fresh and in the air all around me! How do you go a day without fainting from the wonder of it?

And what is that? It smells better than all the rest, but I can't tell what it is. Give it to me.

I didn't mean to drop the cup. I'm not very good with hands, you know. I've never had a pair before!

Another mug. Thank you. And- that- is that taste? It is sweet and foamy and strong! What is this?

Ale.

Of course.

Yes, I see why the gifts of Shadow are enough to persuade people to your side. It is to be wondered at, that they could not please those in the castle who still name themselves your friends.

Chapter 85

The Gates of Ilantra

"The Gates were built long ago for the purposes of travel, but who built them is not known. They were built through time, but how is not known. The risk of them is great, though there may be some method of protection to insure that the one who passes through is not subject to the bending of time- but that is not known."

-From *Early Ilantran History Questioned*.

Rior moved forward, cautiously feeling the way out ahead of him with one foot. The steps sometimes came to abrupt ends, and then he would drift helplessly into the white light, still clutching Luden. He didn't like that, but there seemed to be no way to avoid it, other than by the cautious way of advancing. He couldn't see ahead into the light, no matter how much he squinted. The sword might have been able to point the way, but he kept up a running commentary on the landscape around them and how strange it all was instead.

"I never knew that they built the Gates using time. I thought it was more like opening a door into another world and hopping through, and the way was shorter just because the other world didn't have as many obstacles. But I see now that you couldn't go that fast here. It has to be Time. And I can feel Time bending around us. I wonder what will happen when we come out?"

"Shut up, Luden," said Rior, as he tried to find the place at which the step ended. He couldn't find it, got fed up, and stepped forward. The step turned out to be a landing between two staircases, and he drifted forward, sinking into the staircase before he could stop himself. Luden scraped against the steps with a horrible sound. Rior gritted his teeth, was denied the satisfaction of feeling them grit, and abruptly laid the sword down and changed into a wolf again. That was better. He picked up the sword in his teeth and began to advance.

"You shouldn't do that," said Luden helpfully.

Rior growled.

"Well, you shouldn't." Luden sounded offended. "Your other body is just shadow, and how can shadow age? But if you come out the gate as a wolf, then I think you might age."

Rior growled at him and kept trotting. He would turn back before he came through the gate again, that was all. It was as simple as that. He couldn't believe the sword hadn't thought of that.

"Do you know where the gates are? How can you change back if you tumble through them?"

Rior laid the sword down again and changed back, mainly for the satisfaction of yelling at Luden with a human tongue. "Are you going to do something useful, like point the way, or only be snide?"

"I don't know the way. I told you that. The Gates are the one part of Ilantra I don't know. I've never been in them, and that was why I wanted to come."

"Do you feel any trace of the fey's passage?"

"I don't know. What would that feel like?"

Rior shook his head in disbelief, scooped up the sword, and began to drift up the stairs again, trying to ignore the dazzle of the white light all around him. Sometimes it would press against his body like a strong wind, even though he was only shadow, and threaten to sweep him off the stairs. It was the reason Rior had wanted to travel as a wolf. Who knew how long he would drift or tumble before he found a way back to his own world, if he ever did?

But he thought he could be careful and still go on. Luden's point about coming through the Gates as a wolf and aging too much to help anyone, Garden or Lorie, was well-taken.

"Something's coming."

Rior snorted, or at least would have if he had a physical nose. He tried to put the snort in his voice instead. "You can't tell what the trace of the fey's passage feels like, but you can tell that something's coming?"

"I know this feeling."

"What is it? Something big and scary?" Rior nearly drifted off the stairs again, and had to choke back a scream of frustration. He paused and reoriented himself, then went on rising. The white light pushed against him insistently.

"I mean it. Rior!"

Rior swung as something darkened the white light to his left. A great shape reared there, reminding him of a bear he had once seen during rouge wolf hunting. It had stood up and looked at him, not threatening, not moving, just staring. Rior could feel the stare of immense eyes now, as he had then, and this time he got much more of a sense of threat from them.

"Greetings, my lord," he said, as casually as he could. "I am sorry if we are intruding on your domain, but we will be through in a moment. You could speed us through if you could tell us. Have you seen a great many fey go by, some of them flying in bird form, some walking? They would be led by a white woman who would be singing and making annoying remarks."

The dark shape loomed closer. Luden spoke, his voice quiet. "It's come for me, Rior."

"What are you talking about?"

"I see now why I never came through the Gates, why no one ever brought me through. It wouldn't have worked." Luden's voice was still very calm. "This is an enemy of my creator, and it wants me."

"How ridiculous." Rior glared at the dark shape. "What does it want you for?"

Luden sounded astonished. Perhaps he couldn't believe that Rior didn't take the threat seriously. "He wants to destroy me, of course. My creator is beyond his reach, but I am not."

Rior shook his head. "I don't have time for fey feuds. I have a human one that is claiming most of my time." He looked back at the immense shape, which still stood with its head and form lost in the white light. "If you are going to claim Luden, then you will have to fight me first."

"You can't fight," said Luden in a whisper. "You'd lose."

"Shut up."

The dark figure stood still. Rior was sure that his words hadn't given it pause; it was probably amused with him, perhaps even pleased. But he continued to glare at it. He really didn't have time for this.

At last, a voice said from the white light, scraping like metal, "You must give him to me. The feud that lies between my kin and the *obrynn* is ancient. There will never be a better time to take revenge. And in return, I shall spare your life and guide you out through the Gates without aging you."

"You show me the Gates, and don't take Luden, and I won't kill you," Rior countered.

There was a long pause. The dark thing seemed to be staring at him. Rior was still, staring at it, or as much as he could see of it. He wondered if it would think he was joking, and how he could convince it that he was telling the truth. He didn't know if he could kill it, but he would certainly attack it.

"You cannot kill me," said the thing at last.

"I don't see why not."

"I am immortal."

"So was Elle," said Rior, referring to the goddess who had once ruled the world through Light and Destiny. "And yet, it seems that She has been defeated by a mortal, and locked away so that She must contend with other powers as one of them, not as the major one. I have seen Shadow return to the world, and Chance, and other powers with no names. Do you dare take the chance that I might be an emissary of one of them, and that you might die?"

Silence. Then the dark shape said, "No mortal has ever been able to stand the terror of my full shape," and it walked out of the white light.

Rior caught one glimpse of wildly scintillating colors, and slipped into wolf form, dropping Luden as he did so. A great hand reached out for it, but he jumped so that he stood over the sword, and growled. The reaching hand, or paw, or whatever it really was, stopped.

"You are not affected," said the thing, with a note of astonishment in its voice. "How are you not affected?"

Rior couldn't answer, but he was thinking that the creature didn't look all that terrible through lupine eyes, just a large bear with many shining spikes on its hide. It looked at him with large, platter-like eyes, and he looked back at it. The thing didn't seem to know what to do with him.

At last, it stepped back and waved one large paw. "Go," it said. "Go, and take the sword with you. If you leave him here, then I will destroy him, even though you might not want me to."

Rior flashed his teeth, just to be sure that they had that right, and then picked up Luden and trotted up the staircase again. In seconds, the spiked bear was just a shadow in the mist, and then it was gone from sight altogether. Luden was silent, not even saying anything about Rior changing back or that he would age when they escaped the Gates. He appeared to be thinking.

At last he said, "Do you really think that he would have taken me?"

Rior growled distractedly. He could see a shine ahead that was probably the Gate, and he thought that Luden probably knew the answer to that question better than he did. He had known what the thing was, after all.

"I think that he would have," Luden continued. "And I think that you did a very brave thing by standing up to him and saving me. I would count you as a friend, my lord, if you would have me so."

Rior stopped and spat out the sword, which fell with a clatter on the steps. They were only a few stairs from the Gate now. He changed back into the shadowy form. "I am glad that you think so," he said. "Now tell me if the fey came this way."

"What makes you think I know?"

"Because you're a fey sword."

Luden sighed. "They did come this way. I was only teasing you. But it's true that I don't know what will happen to you when we go through the Gate."

"I don't care," said Rior, and picked up the sword in his shadowy hand. "By now, I just want out of here." He strode forward, feeling the pressure of the light ease as he ascended. Soon, he could see gleams of green and gold through the portal.

"You saved my life. Existence. Steel. Whatever."

"Glad to hear it."

Rior stepped through the portal.

Chapter 86

Garden In Battle

Running.

Garden did not think she could ever get bored of running; it is one of her favorite things to do, whether she is chasing deer or some errant puppy. She thought she could run forever and only have to stop when she got tired. But now she is getting very bored of seeing the grass spring up before them and then fall back. She thought she could hurry ahead of the pack and be with Meat-Giver again by nightfall.

No such luck. There continues to be the grass in front of her, and the pack whines if she gets too far ahead. They seem to think that she alone can guide them along the groove carved into the ground, though Garden thinks anyone with half an eye and one nose could follow it.

Then, too, there is the whining of Human-Scent. Garden is beginning to dislike her. She whines if Garden gets too far away, though she doesn't do it with soft whimpers in the back of her throat. Instead, she does it in human words, and Garden wishes that her understanding of the language had left her when Meat-Giver did.

"Why are you going so far away? Why don't you come back here and keep me company? I don't have anyone else to talk to, at least anyone else who I can be sure is going to understand me. Rior took all the fey with him. Why did he do that? Why are we going so fast? I'm going to fall off soon." Garden thinks the pace of the beast that bears Human-Scent is smooth, but of course she can't tell her this, while Human-Scent is free to complain to a pair of listening ears. "Does it really matter when we get there? Surely by the time we get there Rior and the others will have secured the castle for me, and I can ride in as Queen."

Garden doesn't understand everything of what Human-Scent says, but what she understands wears her. She will be glad to get back to the forest, not only to get away from humans, but to get away from Human-Scent.

Abruptly, something new strikes her nostrils. Garden pauses and sniffs, wondering if they are drawing near the castle at last.

But, instead, she smells many, many human scents, and growls softly. The alphas of the packs are already looking at her, wondering what the strange new thing is and what the wolf among them who understands humans is going to do about it.

Garden flattens her ears and runs ahead. She will scout for them, but she doesn't have to like being the only one who goes and scouts. She never realized that being alpha meant having everyone look at her calmly and just wait for the answer, instead of offering their help.

She creeps up the ridge before them, and then flattens herself as she sees many, many humans just beyond. They have strange large cloth things like the ones that she and Meat-Giver met just before he left, but Garden knows they are not the same group. For one thing, the dragon is nowhere in sight. For another, Living-Fire is not with them. And for still another, they smell worse.

There are many horses and dogs with them, and Garden growls softly to herself. She can remember a time when hounds picked up her scent in the forest, and she had to run before them for a long time and play every clever trick she could think of before she got away.

The hounds are already beginning to bay, and even though the humans are kicking and cursing them now, Garden doesn't think that they will ignore them for long. The pack will have to fight.

Garden is just starting to slip back to the pack when, abruptly, someone yells her name. She looks over her shoulder and sees the strange little human with the power behind him, staring up at her. He smells of fear and hatred.

Garden bares her teeth at him, and then slips down the side of the ridge and begins to run. They must move fast now. The humans will come around the ridge and attack them in a moment.

She howls as she runs, the howl of the hunt, and the massive pack responds. Garden pants as she hears the massed howl, and knows that among the cries of humans in the camp below, there are the cries of those who fear. Some of them are angry, but many of them are afraid.

She slips back into her place in the pack, and howls again. At once, wolves crowd around Human-Scent, forcing her back. Human-Scent yells and growls and whines and yelps, but Garden ignores her. This is even more important than whatever complaints Human-Scent might be making. Garden knows that it is unnatural to protect an alpha, who should go to battle with his pack, but Human-Scent is a human alpha, and she will do this the human way.

She sees the humans come over the ridge. Some of them have sharp sticks, and some of them have curved sticks to which they are fitting other sticks. Garden doesn't allow them the time to stand around and just wave their sticks without challenges. She yelps, and the first wolves hurtle forward, following Garden as she runs towards the base of the ridge.

The curved sticks the humans hold are pointed at them, but Garden doesn't fear for the moment. Surely they can do nothing from so far away-

Then the sticks make a high singing sound, and Garden abruptly recognizes them. They are sometimes used when humans hunt wolves in the forests, and they can kill from a distance. Garden sees some of the pack fall, bleeding and yelping, or already silent as death takes them. The pack howls again, this time mourning the fallen.

Garden continues to run forward, though. The humans and their curved sticks cannot kill everybody. Besides, she can smell fear among them. She doesn't think the humans expected wolves who attacked straight up the ridge at them.

Sure enough, one human tries to fit a stinging stick to his curved one, and fumbles, falling forward down the ridge instead. Garden jumps, and then her teeth snap shut on his throat. One more snap, and he is dead, and one of the wolves who fell will have meat in the dreamworld.

Garden jumps at another human, and he tries to beat her off with his sharp stick. Garden snarls and breaks it in her jaws, and then her weight forces the human down the other side of the ridge. They tumble into the midst of the other humans, he yelping and trying to fend her off, Garden growling and biting at his arms.

"Kill her!"

Garden jumps away from the human as a sharp stick stabs down where she was, and finds herself facing the strange little human with the power behind him. He still has the wounds that her teeth gave him, and he still stinks of hatred and terror. He stares at her and screams.

"Kill her!"

Garden backs up, flashing her teeth and snarling, as the humans crowd towards her. Some of them have sharp sticks, some swords, some curved sticks, but she knows that no matter what, if one of them touches her hard enough, she will die.

Then, abruptly, other wolves come hurtling among the humans, and they have something else to worry about. Garden breaks out of the ring of humans, and turns to shred the arm of a woman passing by. She cries out and falls to the ground, where Garden opens her throat.

But when she looks back at the strange little human, she sees that he is changing. Wings writhe up from his back, and his eyes are burning with a light that Garden can see, even in the day.

She throws back her head and howls for help, and suddenly feels as though some enormous bird has passed overhead. She opens her eyes to see shadows writhing and flowing throughout the camp, all of them heading for the strange little human.

She doesn't know if they will get there in time, though, and charges forward herself, straight into the middle of the black cloud the little human suddenly disappears into.

Chapter 87

Queen Aloriadell

"Never assume that you truly know any monarch of Ilantra, or any of the other Kingdoms. They do indeed have blood in them that we do not understand, and Destinies that we do not share. They look beyond us-

"Stop, stop! I can't keep a straight face anymore."

-Kymenos Starshard.

The first thing that Rior noticed was that he wasn't dead or noticeably aged, which was nice. He blinked and stretched his shadowy arms above his head, then looked around.

He was indeed no more than a few feet from the walls of the castle, and not far from him were the fey. They seemed to be arguing about something. Above all their voices soared Alami's, protesting.

"I don't see why. I know that the Princess would probably like it standing, but Rior didn't say anything about it. And neither did our Lord Shadow."

"Perhaps because they had no reason to think that you would do anything as mad as this," said Neretsa's voice dryly. "Why do you want to knock down the castle?"

"I've never seen one fall."

Rior drifted towards them as quickly as he could. "I don't want it knocked down," he said, when he got behind Alami.

She turned towards him, her face wistful. "Are you sure? It would make a most impressive crash. It might be just the thing that you need to intimidate your enemies."

Rior smiled. "Yes, but then we wouldn't have a home. Imagine what it would be like if someone came in and destroyed the deepened places. Do you think that you would like it if someone did that?"

Moments after speaking the words, he was afraid that he had treated her too much like a child; indeed, Neretsa gave him a sharp glance. But it seemed to have worked. Alami gasped, and her face went so pale that Rior could see it even through the extreme pallor of her skin. "No! Of course not. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it would be like that for you."

"It would."

"I'm sorry."

Rior shook his head. If someone had asked him a few days ago if a fey could ever be contrite, he would have said no. But it was impossible to meet Alami and the others and keep his old ideas about the fey intact. "I need to find out just where my enemies are. We met Prince Imor in the woods, and he may have flown here, or he may have flown somewhere else."

"Why not just ask?"

Rior glanced at Alami. "That suggestion has merit, indeed, my lady," he said. "I will go to the gate, I suppose. Nothing they throw can hurt me, and I should be unusual enough to command attention."

"We will be with you," said Neretsa at once. "But hidden, so that they can't throw things at us, either."

Rior opened his mouth to make the point that his body was shadows and couldn't be hurt, then closed his mouth. Neretsa looked like Garden when she wanted something so badly she would just continue to oppose him. "All right. But please, let them speak just with me at first. I think they will be unnerved enough by the appearance of someone who was once human and now so obviously is not. Keeping the fey back will help the negotiations."

"As you will."

Rior bowed to her in gratitude, and then turned and drifted towards the bridge. Unsurprisingly, the gate beyond it was closed and barred, and Rior could feel the eyes of the guards beyond the walls. He didn't care that he didn't have a body; he could still feel it.

He bowed, knowing that someone would be taking note of the way that his body drifted slowly in the gesture, like mist. "I know that you can see me, and hear me," he said. "My

name is Rior, or it was until just recently. I must speak to the Queen, or Prince Imor, or whoever is here. There is important news that I have for whoever rules."

At once, the gate opened. Rior blinked. He hadn't expected that. But he stood as still as he could with the wind blowing and waited as the figure advanced across the bridge towards him. He knew it was Queen Aloriadell long before she reached him. There was simply no one else who looked like that.

She had blue eyes, with silver lightning bolts marking the center of them. Her children both had the same marking, but the Queen's veins ran so thick with *liadra* blood that her hair had also been affected, and silver streaks crossed its pale blue color. She looked delicate and hardly human as she stood before Rior, but Rior knew that was a disguise. She had ruled her own Court in Arvenna well enough, though here she had always depended on King Delian to do it for her, and surely no mother would be fragile in the defense of her children.

"I rule here," she said. "But only as Regent for my son, who shall arrive soon and take the throne."

"A ten-year-old child, ruling two countries?" Rior shook his head. "And why is that?"

The Queen's eyes fell from his. She was infinitely stronger than Rior remembered her the first time he had seen her at Court, but she still wasn't good at holding a direct stare. "You know what he is," she said, her voice calm enough. "You know that he is the avatar of the Dark."

"I know. And I do not like it."

The Queen looked up now, with a faint smile. "Of course you would not like it. You serve the Light. But matters have changed now, and Dark is coming back to rule Ilantra, as it has since we conquered in the last war. And that Destiny shall not be challenged for another generation at least."

Rior felt a bolt of sweet confidence. The Queen had not heard about Shadow, it seemed, or what had been happening lately. "My lady, I no longer serve Light. I now serve Shadow."

The Queen's eyes clouded. "I don't know what you're talking about. You serve the shadow of what?"

"Shadow. As a power."

Her lip trembled. "You have not- there is no such thing as a power of shadow. There is Dark, and there is Light."

"He has come back to the world as have many other powers, Change and Chaos and Chance and the rest." Rior bowed his head. "Destiny has ruled its last throne, my lady. It has chosen both your children, but it shall rule neither of them. I mean to make sure of that."

"Do you mean to rule yourself?"

"No. Princess Lorie shall take the throne of Ilantra, and Prince Imor the throne of Arvenna. I don't dispute that your own country might love the Dark and be better off under its rulership. But in Ilantra, many of the nobles never acceded to the rule of Dark, and you will be opposed at every turn if you put a ten-year-old on the throne, probably even by many of those who don't really care about Dark or Light. The other Kingdoms are already on the march. They will be here in two days, and they have elves and dragons with them. They will force you to surrender the throne, and perhaps they will choose a Regent and even a monarch to their own liking. This will become a bloody war, civil or not. I mean to make sure that the war doesn't happen."

Queen Aloriadell let out a long breath, and suddenly stood straighter. "I will not say that is not a noble ambition. But King Pheron had the same ambition in his time, and the war began anyway."

She stopped. Rior waited for a moment, thinking she was going to say something more, and then realized that she thought of that as an answer. He laughed aloud, and the Queen flinched.

"Your Majesty," he said, granting her the title now, when it couldn't matter, "it doesn't matter what King Pheron did. I don't care if he managed to stop the war or not. I still want to stop this one."

"You cannot. We have taken the castle, and we have only to hand it to my son when he comes."

"Why do you think so?"

"You alone, and your Shadow, cannot oppose two of the great powers and all their armies of servants."

Rior raised his voice. "Alami, Neretsa, I think that now might be a fitting time to reveal yourselves."

The Queen glanced around nervously. "Who are you talking to?"

The air shimmered to either side of him, and Alami and Neretsa appeared. Rior hoped that he managed to conceal his own start in the general misty shifting of his body. He hadn't realized they were standing so close; he had sensed nothing of them at all.

Alami smiled at the Queen, who had given a little shriek and fallen back a step. "My name is Alami, and I am a shapeshifter who long ago served Shadow. I think that I even remember some of the castle. It's beautiful, isn't it? I still do think it would make an impressive crash, but Rior won't let me knock it down."

"My name is Neretsa," said the darker woman in a cool voice. Rior glanced at her and saw that her eyes were unreadable, and fixed on the Queen. "I think that you might remember me from legends. I am one called the Lady of Swans, and they know of me even in Arvenna."

Rior glanced back at the Queen. She had been staring at Alami, but suddenly her eyes snapped to Neretsa, and she gave another shriek.

Then she turned and ran back to the gate, shrieking all the way. Rior watched as she slammed it shut, and heard her yelling instructions to the guards.

There was a silence. Rior blinked. "That didn't go well," he said.

Alami sounded sad. "Perhaps she really thought I would tumble the castle around her ears. I didn't mean it."

Neretsa sounded offended. "Just because I used to pull human souls from bodies and turn them into swans!" Rior glanced at her, and she glared back at him and added, "What? I haven't done it in a long time."

Rior sighed and eyed the castle. "We'll have to figure some other way to pull her out of there."

"Why didn't we take her captive when we had her here?" Neretsa asked.

"Because I don't want to do that. I want to end this without war or bloodshed or the taking of hostages, even without intimidation if I can. We brought the wolves partially because they can help convince the people of Ilantra that it's right that Loriel take the throne. And I want to convince the people in the castle, as well." Rior frowned again.

"Why didn't you say so?"

Rior glanced at Alami. "What did you have in mind?" he asked cautiously.

She laughed at him and spun around, the white gown she wore fanning about her like the wings of her swan form. "I can impress humans. All the fey can. We've been doing it since our creation." She came over and put a hand near where his shoulder would be, smiling at him. "Leave it to us."

Chapter 88

Watching the Sunset

Have I told you yet how rich the colors seem when looked at through human eyes?

There's no need to nod and mutter like that. They do look much better through human eyes. And there's no need to mutter about my keeping the same personality I had as a sword, either. I-

Ouch!

Was that pain? How did I feel it? And how did a bench manage to stab me? Have you also trained them to stab people you don't like? Or is this bench another transformed sentient sword?

Splinter. Is that a splinter, then? I understand now why some of my masters cursed when they ran their fingers along wooden doors and got them. I felt nothing, of course, since wood can't pierce steel.

And what was that? A sneeze? What causes a sneeze? Small things in the air. Well, can't you get rid of them?

I'm sitting here because I want to watch the sunset, of course. This looks to be the only place nearby where you can see it. All the other places are covered with trees. And most of the houses are further back in the forest, I notice. Why is yours placed so close to the edge?

Well, that's a nicely symbolic reason. Stand between the forest and the plains, and the people of Ilantra and the shadows. Very well, I'll accept it, even though I think it's a little melodramatic for you. And now to find out what all this fuss is about. I never understood why so many humans love to watch sunsets, you know. There are colors in the sky today, and there will be colors in the sky again tomorrow. They're even there twice a day, if you count the sunrise.

See? It's just shiny gold. I've seen the same thing when sunlight reflects off a puddle of water.

What do you mean, look there? Yes, it's a cloud, and it's moving towards us. But what about it? What is it going to do? If it blocks out the sunset, then there really will be nothing to see.

Wait and see?

Oh, all right.

What's it doing? How can it get tinted pink like that? I've only seen clouds that are white or gray. And why is the sky turning that odd color around it? I wasn't looking at it for just a moment, and now it's blue streaked with pink. It can't do that, can it? It's not allowed to do that.

Shush, I'm listening.

For what? For the fire, of course. One of the gods must light an immense fire in the sky every day for it to do that. Don't you hear it crackling all the way over here? You must, even if humans don't have very good hearing. Be quiet for a moment, and I'm sure I'll hear it.

What do you mean, the sky does that all by itself?

Why did I never notice this before?

No, I didn't really want to hear all about the deficiencies of talking swords. I would have asked someone else if that was what I wanted to hear. But I suppose it's true that humans might notice some things that swords don't, and that sunsets might be one of them.

And look at that! What is the name for that color?

What do you mean, you don't know? And the sunset really changes every day? And there might be a color in it every day that no one has ever seen before and no one will ever see again?

No, no, don't answer that. I'm watching.

Chapter 89

All In The Impression

"I have seen the Dark take a town with a simple dance from the filifernai. They are rather impressive, aren't they?"

-Dark's Lady Ahreven to the Light's Lady, Solis.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Rior smiled at Alami, noting the impatient tone in her voice. "You were the one who wanted to knock the castle down. I'm just making sure that you understand the point is to impress the humans, and not kill all of them."

"I understand that." Alami tossed her head impatiently. "I like impressing humans more anyway. And I want to get back into the forests and enchant them into the shadows. Let's impress the humans here so we can do that."

Rior glanced at Neretsa, who appeared entirely more sober. The dark lady inclined his head when she saw that he was watching her. "I agree with my cousin. We were not meant to be here, not forever. Let us impress the humans, and put Princess Lorie on the throne, and then we can return to the forest. I imagine that you would like to return as well, my lord?"

Rior blinked. He hadn't considered it. He had thought that he would remain in the castle with Lorie, and start to encourage the nobles in the Court to accept the worship of Shadow, as well as repairing whatever damages happened to the farmlands along the way. He hadn't thought of returning to the forests permanently, only for a few days when he had to spend some time in wolf form.

But, now, he wondered if Garden would stay with him in the castle, even though she had managed to bear it so far. Wouldn't she want to go back to the forest, and to the deepened places?

Shadow, didn't he?

"My lord?"

Rior woke himself up. It was an idea that he hadn't considered in enough detail, but no matter that; it would have to wait until he did have enough time to consider it in detail. "You can begin."

The fey women slipped into their swan forms. Rior's gaze sought the sky, and he saw several other fey hovering there. Their forms were birds he had never seen before, glowing sapphire and amethyst like a box of spilled jewels, but they had promised that they could provide a fitting introduction to the parade of the fey.

They promptly began to fly in a circle, and then to sing. Rior stared. He had never heard music like that, haunting and wild, and yet so sweet that he could hear shutters in the castle already being drawn back.

Alami and Neretsa spread their wings and flew into the sky, alighting with the other swan-fey in the Isiluin River. They began to swim, arranging themselves two by two with breathtaking speed and grace. One black swan and one white made up each pair, and they shone in the sun as they majestically advanced.

Rior picked up Luden. The sword had been making a fuss about lying unregarded on the ground, but now he was stubbornly silent.

"Can you do it?" Rior asked him.

"Do what?"

"Make a great light, and tell everyone in hearing distance that this is all for Lorie's benefit?"

"I can do it. But why should I?"

"You are my friend, I said. And I saved your life in the Gates. Do it, Luden, as a favor for a friend if nothing else."

"Oh, very well."

Rior slipped into wolf form and picked Luden up in his teeth as the sword began to shine. He trotted along behind the swans, and heard the sword's bellowing voice, seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"Hear me, the sword Luden! We have come in the name of the Princess Lorie, heir of the true royal line of Ilantra and the Light, to show you that the very animals of the wilds have accepted her into their hearts!" Luden added in a normal voice that Rior suspected only he could hear, "No matter how much some of us despise her and think that a spanking or a slap would do her good."

Rior growled.

Luden grumbled, "As you will- friend," and began to speak in a loud voice again. "Do you see the swans swimming in the River? You will, if only look out through your windows and arrow slits. White and black they are, and they shall represent those of both Dark and Light who shall join Lorie. And look upon them now, when the fates of Dark and Light are shown!"

Rior looked warily at the river. He had hoped that the fey who were black swans would pull this part off, but luckily, they hadn't protested. Of course, if the fey who were white swans tried to make a fuss about it, then Rior suspected the black swans would tell them off later.

The black swans all bent their necks at once, dipping them until their beaks floated in the water. The white swans curled their necks over the black ones in the next moment, and held them there for a moment longer. Then they pulled their heads back and trumpeted.

"Thus Dark yields to Light!" yelled Luden. "Like the black swan yielding to the white, who shall teach it; like the night yielding to the day, which brightens the world; like a cloud passing across the moon, which fades before her brilliance; thus the Dark yields to the Light. And thus the Dark of Ilantra should yield to its Light, that Light might come to the throne as it was meant to do." In a whisper to Rior, "This is stupid. Do you really think they'll fall for this?"

Rior just growled and kept walking.

"Behold!" Luden yelled again. "The very world is singing for love of the Princess Lorie. The birds are singing and dancing and diving. You have never heard this music before, but you will find mention of it in the history-tales, if you look. The birds sing so when a true Princess comes to the throne." In another whisper, "Must you do this? I am gagging on the words that you make me speak, and I do not even have a throat."

Rior continued trotting, not even bothering to growl this time. He could see that the deception was already beginning to work.

Shutters were flung back. Faces stared hungrily out the windows and arrow slits at the birds who, as Luden had proclaimed, were singing and dancing and diving in the air. Then their eyes fell on the procession of black and white swans, who just at that moment curved their necks in the pattern again. Rior blinked, then panted, nearly dropping Luden as his jaws relaxed. He wondered how they had known to do that, but he supposed that the fey had their own ways of reading human minds and knowing what they needed.

Then someone cried out rapturously, "I see them! I see the swans who have come in honor of Princess Lorie!"

Rior thought that was his cue. He dropped Luden on the ground, ignoring the sword's protest, which also boomed off the walls, and flung his head back. His howl rose into the air, clear and compelling though solitary. He howled again and again, soaring towards the song, giving it as much voice as he could.

Luden's voice called out as he sang. "Princess Lorie was reared among the wolves, and the wolves have come to honor her! A great army of wolves and other animals is escorting her across the Kingdom as we speak."

Rior stopped howling. For a moment, there was a profound silence. Then he heard the sound of snicking bolts.

Someone was unlocking the gate of the castle.

Rior panted and picked up Luden again, then made for the bridge. The sword said to him, "I am always surprised at the stupidity of humans."

Rior didn't bother to respond. They had begun their conquest of the castle, and would probably finish it without hurting anyone.

I wish that Garden was here to see this. She probably isn't doing anything half as exciting.

Chapter 90

Garden In Danger

Garden bolts into the black cloud as it forms without a second thought. She knows that someone has to stop the strange little human, and she managed to bite him once before. She thinks that she might have a chance to do so once again.

For a moment, thick and choking air seems to fill her lungs, like trying to breathe the smoke from one of the campfires that the humans light. But it passes, and then Garden is standing and facing something that is not human any more.

It has glowing eyes, and great wings, and fangs. Its face is lengthening as Garden watches; it looks as though it were flowing and changing like Meat-Giver when he first became a wolf. It falls towards all four legs and snarls at her.

Garden snarls back at it.

The thing begins to circle, like a low-ranker in the pack challenging for dominance. Garden flows along with it, snarling whenever it looks at her. And it meets her eyes more or less continuously, until she is at last growling without pausing for breath.

The thing hurtles forward, and then hits Garden. Garden clasps her jaws on its throat and begins to press down, ignoring the claws that rake along her sides. She doesn't think that she can move fast enough away from the thing to count, anyway, so she'll just hold close and bite through its throat if she can.

Soon, she is rewarded; the thing howls in pain and tries to back away from her. But Garden won't allow that. She knows that she has to hurt it, to kill it, and if she can do that with a simple bite, then she is going to do with a bite. She clamps her jaws down even further and kicks and scrabbles, trying to sink her paws into the grass and halt the sliding motion across the ground.

She manages to catch hold for a moment, and then the thing rears back and flaps its wings grimly. It is going to try and fly with her hanging from its throat.

Garden thinks that is amusing, but she doesn't dare take her jaws from its throat to pant. She clasps strongly and hangs on, and then digs her paws into the ground as hard as she can, just as the thing tries to leap.

It falls back on top of her, wings hammering, and Garden is buried between its body and the ground. She feels a close weight press on her chest, and for a long moment she has trouble breathing. She knows that she might be going to die. But she claps her teeth on and breathes tightly.

The thing lets out a shivering screech that almost makes Garden let go; the pain in her ears is intense. But she can feel blood dripping into her mouth now. It's thick and foul stuff, as thick and foul as the air she breathed when she entered the smoking cloud, but it's blood, and she will make the thing bleed until it dies.

"Let me go."

Garden stares into the bright eyes just above her and snarls again. She has the breath for that much left.

"Let me go, or I will kill Rior."

That is a stupid thing to say. Garden knows that that name means Meat-Giver, in the way that humans like to name each other things that don't make sense, and she knows that if she lets this thing go, it will probably kill Rior anyway. The best way to make sure that it doesn't is to kill it now, and then her packmate will be safe and beyond all reach of danger.

She growls and digs her paws into the ground with all the strength she can, then separates her jaws just a little and shifts to a new position. At once, new blood fills her jaws and flows down her throat. It tastes horrible, and Garden thinks it's blistering the inside of her throat. But she hangs on.

"Let me go!"

Garden hears it speak, and decides that she must not be clamping hard enough, if it can still get the breath to speak. She bites down harder. The flesh in her mouth is soft and wrinkled and hairless. At least that's good. She doesn't get the taste of foul fur along with the foul blood.

The thing wheezes and gasps above her, and Garden wags her tail as best as she can with the thing lying on top of her. That is right. Now it will die, and then it can't threaten Meat-Giver again.

The thick cloud around her grows thicker and more choking. Garden ignores it. It can do whatever it likes. It could kill her, and it probably will end up killing her. But she is going to hang on and kill this thing. Then they will both die, and she can run in the dreamworld until she sees Meat-Giver.

The thing abruptly screams, and then throws back its head, tearing Garden's hold loose. She scrambles from underneath it and bounces back at its throat. It won't get away so easily.

But the great wolf, the wolf made of shadows, is behind the animal that was the strange human now, and he is growling. Garden is glad to think of it as she latches onto the

thing's throat once more. He can help. She just hopes that he's sensible enough about battling as a wolf not to try and take the same target that she has.

He seems to be. He circles off to the side, snapping, and when the thing turns to face him, dragging Garden with it, he springs at its wings. Snap, crunch, crackle, and they are so much useless bone and leather.

The thing howls, rather like a wolf, and strikes out at the great one with one claw. He dodges, and then growls.

Garden decides that this has gone on quite long enough. She brings her jaws together with all their strength, the way that she would when trying to crush a particularly stubborn bone.

It works. The bone would crack under that kind of pressure, and the pressure that she brings to bear on the thing's throat is obviously doing the same thing. Grind, grind, grind, and the leathery flesh rips apart at last. Blood flows over Garden's face, for a moment blinding her. She lets her hold go hastily, and paws at her eyes. The blood burns and itches.

When she can see again, she sees the thing lying on the ground, blood still coursing heavy and dark from its throat. She pants and then glances at the shadow-wolf, who is gazing at her with respect in his eyes, one alpha to another.

He bows his head, and then the dark cloud that surrounds them dissipates and Garden can see again.

They are still among the humans who followed the strange human, and the wolves are still battling. Garden stands to resume the fight, willing to join in, though her face and throat feel as if they're on fire.

The great wolf moves towards her and nuzzles her, and Garden feels cool mist ease the burning on her face. "Rest easy," he says, and then he turns and howls.

The sound calms the quarrels of the humans with the wolves at once. They turn and stare, and the great wolf stands before them, staring them all in the eye and looking very stern. Many of them let their gazes fall; Garden does not think they can stand the directness of his eyes.

"Hear me," says Shadow. "Your leader is dead, Prince Imor of Arvenna." He steps away and lets them see the tattered thing lying on the ground. Many cries rise, and some of the humans are howling, though Garden doesn't think their mourning for their fallen leader is as fair as that which she has heard in the pack, many a time.

"That means that you have two choices," Shadow goes on. "You may remain here, and try to go back to Arvenna when the chance comes. Or you can follow the Princess Lorie,

who shares the same blood as your Prince, though not the same devotion to the Dark." He turns his head.

Garden looks up. The beast is coming towards the camp, lightly dancing. Garden has never understood why the beasts with the single horns on their heads don't seem to walk so much as dance. But if they want to dance, then she supposes they can.

On his back sits Human-Scent, and her head is up. She is no longer whining or whimpering. She looks like an alpha. Garden is willing to admit that, though she doesn't think she will ever like her.

She smiles at the humans, and Garden sees some of them begin to kneel. She thinks that many will choose to follow Human-Scent, but some of them might not. She doesn't really care.

She looks ahead over the grass instead, and tries not to let anyone else hear the bubbling whine rise in her throat. How much further to the castle, and to seeing Meat-Giver again?

Chapter 91

Dealing With Queens

"Some of the royals require you to swear mighty oaths before they will accept you into their service. Others require surrender of weapons. And there are many who require some sort of ceremony. All of them want to know, at bottom, if you want their thrones, and if you are going to kill them."

-Anegel of Arvenna.

Rior trotted into the castle, and looked around. For a moment, he could see nothing out of place. The courtyard looked almost exactly as he had left it, though without the bodies of Dorwen and the guards that Luden had killed lying around.

Then he saw that the walls were covered with carvings of allegiance to the Dark and Arvenna: lightning bolts, dragons, the two eyes that were Shara's symbol. Rior panted. *I suppose that Loriel will want those covered over or chipped out when she comes into possession of the castle.*

"Why have you come like this?"

Rior looked up quickly. It was Queen Aloriadell again, but this time, he thought that she was much nearer to breaking. Her lips trembled, and there were tears in her eyes as she hastened towards him.

"Must you?" she whispered. "Must you do something like this? The Dark has ruled Ilantra for eighteen years."

Rior dropped Luden and turned back into his shadowy form again, ignoring her little gasp. "It has not truly ruled, my lady," he said quietly. "It has kept control among those who would serve it, and made no new converts. Those who turned to the Dark were not loyal to it, but loyal to the royal family or to the idea of gain. This I would say, from what I have seen among the nobles of the castle and also among those who claimed to serve the Dark of their own free will."

"But it is Dark's Destiny."

Rior sighed. "Destiny was truly broken in the last war, my lady, whatever it might have told you."

"I have a son coming who will claim the castle--"

And then abruptly Queen Aloriadell broke off and screamed.

Rior lifted his head alertly. He thought he could feel it, too, the sudden shifting of powers, and a swift blast of exultation that traveled through the mist that comprised his body. He blinked. Was that Shadow's way of celebrating, whatever had happened? And something surely must have happened, or he would not have felt that shifting, and the Queen of Arvenna would not have screamed.

He looked back in time to see the Queen standing again, her head bowed.

"My son is dead," she whispered. "Prince Imor is gone."

Rior definitely felt it this time, a sweet shiver that traveled through him, though whether it was his or Shadow's, he still wasn't sure.

And then the Queen looked up at him, and Rior fell back a pace at the rage in her eyes. Even if she couldn't physically harm him, he didn't want to be that close to her. She looked angrier than he had never seen anyone look.

"They will pay," said the Queen. "The one who harmed him, and the ones who couldn't guard him, and the ones who wouldn't agree to let him sit on the throne." She took a step forward, and the air around her shimmered and began to crackle. Rior thought she was summoning the lightning magic in truth that her son had only been able to summon as an illusion. She was three-quarters *liadra*, after all. "And since you are nearest, you will pay first."

Rior took a deep breath, and said, "Luden, don't."

"How did you know what I was going to do?"

"I did. Be still."

Rior stood still, or at least drifted in the same place, until the Queen halted a pace from him and lifted her hand. Her smile was strange. Rior didn't think she was crazy, but the grief and the lust for vengeance had driven her into a kind of temporary madness. She kept smiling at him as if he were her dearest friend, and she was whispering as if sharing an intimate secret with him.

"You cannot stop me. You know that. I will blast you, wherever you are. The magic of my kind crosses the boundaries of Light and Dark and Shadow. We are older than him. I can blast you."

"I know," said Rior quietly, and thought that his tone was the first thing that made the Queen pause, the smile suddenly gone, and something like sanity flickering in her eyes. "But, Your Majesty, I would ask you not to use your magic against me."

"And why not? You were one of the ones who helped to kill my son; you spoke against me, and you would have turned the throne over to my daughter. I know that. So why do you ask me not to harm you?"

"Because I would ask what you have to gain," said Rior softly. "Your son is dead, and no force on earth can bring back what has-"

Aloriadell interrupted him with a low moan. The wind in the courtyard moaned as if in answer, and Rior felt the mist of his body shift as it began to rise. He kept his voice low and his eyes fixed on the Queen's, though, thankful that he couldn't sweat or flush or do anything else that would indicate fear without a physical human body anymore.

"You don't have anything to gain," he said. "I think that if you harm me, and I have no doubt that you can, then Luden will harm you."

"Yes," said Luden. "I might as well harm her now and get it over with." He began to glow.

"Luden, enough."

For some reason that Rior never understood, those two words made the sword's light fade as though suddenly extinguished. Rior took a deep breath and looked back into Aloriadell's eyes. She was less than three paces from him now, and the air around her shone as if he were looking at a lightning bolt.

"You must continue to rule Arvenna," said Rior. "I do not think that Loriel should have charge of two thrones."

"There is no other heir," said Aloriadell, her voice flat and cracked. "I only ever bore two children. And I know that my King was faithful to me. He would not have sired a bastard."

"Then perhaps Loriei must someday rule Arvenna, but not yet," said Rior. "You should be Regent, my lady. You are an experienced Queen. You can rule, and no one would question your right or your commands."

"You say these Lightworkers would."

"No more than they questioned the Dark in the past, I think," said Rior. "And I know that they would like the promise of Loriei on the throne in the future, even if they had to wait until she aged a little, more than the promise of Prince Imor on the throne for the foreseeable future. I think that we could manage this, my lady, with the Princess as your heir and you as the Regent."

"I loved my son. I never knew my daughter."

"I wish I could tell you that she was a lovely girl," said Rior. "I cannot. She was raised with the wolves, and there is still much that she doesn't understand about humans. But I can tell you that she's young enough and strong enough and stubborn enough to become something different. You won't find it easy to train her to be a Queen, but I think you can do it."

"And what else is there about her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you want her on the throne at all? If you agree that she isn't a lovely girl, then why have her on the throne?"

Rior found the answer there as if he had always known it. "There is no other heir, my lady. You admitted it yourself. Loriei will have to be the Princess, and eventually the Queen, of two Kingdoms. I wish that the death of Prince Imor had not happened, but it has, and there is no other heir."

"And why are you doing this?"

"To prevent a civil war. And to prevent the other Kingdoms from intervening, as they will unless we can show them a throne and an heir and Regent who will remain stable into the future. Ilantra's future should belong to the monarchs of Ilantra, and to her people. Not to the Queen of Doralissa, or the King of Orlath. They are wise rulers, but they cannot understand the history and heritage of our Kingdoms."

Aloriadell closed her eyes. "And is there anything about Loriei that would not make her a good Queen?"

"The stubbornness, and the conviction of her rights. That is why we need you, my lady. If she takes the throne the way she is now, then she will become only a spoiled princess. She is too convinced that she is the center of the universe." Rior took a deep breath. "And her disease."

"What?"

"She has the *shielika*, Your Majesty, the youth-killer. She may see thirteen more years of life. I think it likely that she will see less."

There was a long silence. Then Aloriadell opened her eyes and stared at him. "And what do you think we can do about that?"

"Nothing for the moment. I cannot cure it myself. We shall have to try and find a mage who can cure it. But, practically, I think that Princess Lorie must marry young, and bear at least one child, so that the line can continue after she dies. She will not like that, either, and I am not one who can tell her to do it, since I never married in life. It will have to be you who does it. And then, if she does die young, we will need you as Regent for the new heir as well."

Aloriadell shook her head, her face clouded with confusion. "Why are you doing this? Why put the Dark in charge of a Lightworker child?"

"Because you are the only one we have, the best choice we have. Because you are needed. Because I dare to hope that you care more about the future of both your Kingdoms than about serving a cause."

Aloriadell closed her eyes and bowed her head. Rior watched as she struggled for a long moment, and wondered what she would say when she had finished. At his feet, Luden was silent. The fey were no doubt peering in through the gate, but even they were silent, and Rior was grateful.

Aloriadell looked up at last. "My King is dead," she said, "and my son is gone. I have not mourned at all. I have only swept here to take up the throne and hold it as Regent until my son arrived. And now you tell me that the Regency will be much longer, and you think I should take it."

"Yes."

Aloriadell shook her head. "I do not think it will work, but if my people will have me as Regent, then I am willing to accept."

Rior bowed his head and closed his eyes. His voice was light and shaking as he said, "Then, Your Majesty, you shall have my support, and I think I can promise the support of Shadow, as well."

"I shall accept it."

Rior let out a slow breath, and then turned towards the castle. Now he had to deal with both the Darkworker and Lightworker nobles who would think that one or other of their sides should triumph permanently.

Compared to dealing with Queen Aloriadell, though, he felt as if it would be infinitely easy.

"Rior."

Rior looked back in surprise, then blinked and picked up Luden. "I suppose you could be useful," he said, carrying the sword into the castle.

"Useful, he says."

Rior grinned, and tried to ignore the temptation to dance and sing and laugh. There were assuredly struggles ahead. But he had gotten into the castle and gotten the Queen to agree to stand as Loriel's Regent, and he hadn't had to kill anyone yet. Surely that was something to be proud of.

Chapter 92

Life In the Forest

And you weave these shelters out of the branches themselves? How curious. I would not have thought so. I thought that you constructed them more simply and crudely. They look simple and crude.

It isn't a slight on your skill. I think that anything made of branches looks crude, unless it was built by an elf. Only they have the true skill with living wood that lets them make beautiful objects from it.

I've known plenty of elves.

I have too!

Of course I can sketch you what one of their shelters looks like. I can show you tomorrow, and then we can start weaving shelters that will keep your people dryer than these crude things. I-

You can't weave branches.

I can, now that I have hands and a solid body, but you can't.

You tricked me into helping you.

How did you do that?

That's not an answer. Smirking at me and telling me that you've learned how to handle me is not an answer. I'll sketch the house for you, but don't expect me to like it. I might not even talk to you.

What was that?

That- scent. It smells stranger than anything I've smelled so far. And what is that walking into camp?

That is not Alami. I know what she looks like. I saw her, remember? And that is not her.

Is this yet another of those things that look different through human eyes than a sword's eyes? Perhaps. And yet, I thought I knew the fey. None of them were so great as my creator, and they did not try to charm me or impress me as they would humans. Yet here she is, looking very different.

Of course not, my lady. I was only saying that I had never known the differences between a fey seen through a sword's eyes and a fey seen through a human's eyes would be so very great. I don't think that I could resist your charms, if I were an ordinary human man lost and wandering in the shadows. But might I inquire if anyone has?

No? Then you have taught them to see magic and beauty and wonder again, my lady, and you are to be commended. I would have said that someone must have escaped. But it seems as if the common people of Ilantra knew more about what they wanted than their rulers give them credit for.

Only an overflowing of bitterness, my lord. I promise that I will be quiet about it if you wish.

What, my lady? You wish to speak with me?

Don't laugh at me, my lord! I know nothing about what it really means to be with a fey as a human, or even what Alami might say or do. I have only watched from a distance before this, and not been so caught up in the moment.

Oh, very well.

My lady, you are- charming. I don't know what to say other than that, but I have heard that that is a good thing to say to a woman. May I inquire where you are leading me? I don't recall seeing this part of the forest before, and human eyes are not good at finding their way in the dark.

I have never seen a pool like that, no. What is it made of? Surely not just water, not when it shines like that, and not when it has managed to snare the attention of someone fey.

Is it truly a way to see the past, then? I have heard of such things, but never seen them.

Would you show me the last battle between Dark and Shadow, all those years ago? I never saw it clearly. I was taken away to Doralissa soon afterwards. And it seems that not all of my memories have come with me out of the sword form.

Of course I will be still, if that is what you need for the pool to work.

Chapter 93

Dealing With Therion

"The most doomed, and those who knows themselves to be the most doomed, may be the ones who laugh the hardest."

-Glangon, Traitor Prince of Rivendon.

"It is done, Therion."

She laughed at him through the closed door. Rior sighed. He had had a long day, and he wanted to turn back into a wolf and sleep. He wasn't entirely sure how long it had been since he last slept, but he knew that when he became lupine again, the exhaustion would fell him. He was feeling premonitions of it in shadowy form that made him quake.

"It is not," said his cousin through the door. "So long as there is Dark in the world, the conquest and rule of the Kingdoms will never be done. And so long as there is Light in the world, then I will fight against it."

"Dark shall still rule for a little while," said Rior. "Queen Aloriadell will have to be Regent until Lorie reaches at least sixteen, by the laws of both Kingdoms. And then, if Lorie bears a child and then must die because of the sickness in her blood, the child may turn to the Dark. I don't know, and I will make no attempt to guide Lorie or her child towards the Light. I want only to make sure that there is no civil war. Prince Imor would have caused one."

"You can tell me all the reasonable things that you tell yourself," said Therion. "Or the things that sound reasonable. I remember how much you hated the Dark, Rior. You only want to lure me out, and then put the last loyal Darkworker in the castle to death. I don't intend to fall for it."

"Therion-"

"Don't talk to me! You would only want to convince me to surrender. And I won't let you convince me to surrender."

"There are no other Darkworkers in the castle who share your opinions, Therion. They have agreed that it makes more sense to let Queen Aloriadell take the Regency and hope for the best in the future. But then, they are truly loyal to the Dark, unlike yourself."

"What?" Therion sounded as if she was bleating in outrage; she stopped only to sneeze.

"They are loyal to the Dark and they know that, to the Dark, it makes little sense to risk everything now, when you might have much in the future," said Rior. "The Dark is immortal, and it can choose another avatar and let that avatar grow up. Perhaps it will present itself to Loriel's children and have a stronger champion than it could have in a ten-year-old child. But you have joined the Dark because you thought it was the winning side, and therefore you can't think of it otherwise."

"That is a lie."

"Then come out and face justice. The Queen has requested that you should."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Try to trust you," said Rior. "You will be watched, and the moment you do something suspicious, then I will know. But until then, you shall be free, though watched. And if you show yourself a true Darkworker, or if you yield to the Light, then I think that Queen Aloriadell will take you gladly into her service."

"I don't want to be tortured."

Rior blinked and looked at the door. *How thick is it?* "I said nothing about torture."

"You didn't have to. I know that you will torture me, for the crime of being on the wrong side."

Rior hissed. "You mistake my power in this. I am going to make sure that Princess Loriel gets here and on the throne, and then I will have other concerns to occupy me. I think that you should come out and deal with the Queen, who has requested your presence, and not me."

Slowly, the bolt slid back, and the door opened. Therion's face peered at him around the edge. "You must hate me," she said.

"Why?" Rior asked.

"Because I hate you."

Rior snorted. "Thank the powers of Shadow that I don't think of you the same way." He gestured towards the throne room. "Now, go to the Great Hall. The Queen is awaiting you."

"The Regent."

"Whatever you wish to call her."

Therion passed him, glaring at him all the way. Rior wondered why. He had not opposed her as fiercely as many of the Lightworkers had done. Why did she seem to think of what he had done as unforgivable?

"She doesn't like you," said Luden, in a murmur that Therion didn't seem to hear.

"I know that."

"But she will try to destroy you."

"Why?"

"Probably because she thinks that she would have won if not for you. So. Watch your back."

"I think I have more important things to worry about. And it's out of my hands. If the Queen and Princess trust her, then her crimes can be forgiven."

Luden made a sneering sound, and then fell silent. Rior shook his head as Therion opened the door ahead of him. *The sword would probably have me live alone in the forest, suspicious of everyone.*

Come to think of it, Garden would probably have me do the same thing.

Chapter 94

Garden In Valleys

Garden lifts her head and pants at the shadow-wolf. She is ready, and if he will just give the command to move forward, then she knows that the others who are currently crowding behind will be ready to follow her.

The shadow-wolf pants back at her, and then throws his head back and howls. The response comes from every side, and then he begins to trot forward, glancing over his shoulder at Garden.

Garden begins to move, and hears the mingled pack begin to move behind them. There are not just wolves in that pack now, but also humans, and the beast that bears Human-Scent on its back, and many of the horses that the humans brought along. Of course, they lash out with their hooves at any wolf who comes near them, and other wolves are grinning at them and drooling, but no one has attacked a horse yet, and Garden thinks that she and the shadow-wolf can keep them under control.

This country is gentler than the country they have crossed so far, rolling and rippling up and down with more grace. Garden can often see over a ridge, so small are they, even when she is right next to it. And at the bottom of each tiny valley runs a stream, it seems, and the wolves can satisfy their thirst there.

Garden trots out of such a valley, and comes upon the first human farm. She sniffs the scent of smoke coming from the house, and then sniffs the scent of cattle longingly. She would eat their meat, if she could. They taste richer than even deer, and they are not nearly so much effort to catch.

Next to her, the shadow-wolf suddenly shimmers and then fades. Garden glances at him, and is surprised to find that in his place is a human, though he looks as gray as Meat-Giver does. His eyes are burning, though, and he looks down at Garden and winks, reassuring her.

Then he strides forward as the great pack passes. Garden turns her head to watch him, even though she keeps strictly to the groove the sword carved in the ground. The pack has a distressing tendency to follow her if she goes off it, and she wants to make sure they keep a steady pace.

The shadow-man knocks at the farm's door. It opens, slowly, and Garden sees a sword in the hand of the man behind it. But the shadow-man smiles and says something, and the door swings open.

Garden shakes her head and keeps walking. She supposes that the shadow-man is doing the kind of thing that he and Meat-Giver talked about, and which she still isn't sure she understands. They are going to make the humans who live on the farms part of their packs, though she isn't sure how, or why anyone would want the humans who live on the farms. They are cowardly, and they don't seem to have any alpha. They attack all at once or not at all.

She swings past a pen where the cattle are, and drools. The cattle low and eye her suspiciously. Garden shakes her head and keeps going. She can't attack them, though she really wishes she could.

The pack writhes behind her, and then one of the alphas streaks away and towards the cattle pen. Garden raises her voice in a howl and lunges after him, wondering if she can really catch him before he kills one of the cows.

Then the shadows in front of him writhe, and the shadow-wolf is standing there, looking stern. The alpha whines, and lowers his head, and turns to start running towards the pack once again.

Garden howls smugly, and then keeps running. Ahead, the groove goes straight over a hill, and she can smell many humans beyond that. She hopes that the pack will keep straight and stern.

They mount the ridge, and see a small town lying beneath them. The wolves growl and whine. The humans who are coming out of the town to stare are doing some growling and whining of their own.

Garden puts up her head. She feels that she understands humans better than any wolf in the whole pack, and she will make them behave. They will not bite a human, or they will feel her teeth.

They come down the ridge and through the valley where the town lies. Human eyes stare from every side. Even Garden feels her skin crawl and her fur bristle under their gazes, but she just keeps trotting. That is what every wolf should do, and what most of them are doing.

But then a human with a sharp stick bars her way. "We are going to kill you all!" he cries.

Garden growls.

The man frowns at her, as if he hadn't expected that, and then turns and motions to the humans who are standing around the houses. They come forward, slowly, bearing sharp sticks and curved ones. Garden sets her paws and gets ready to fight, if that is what she has to do.

"What is this?"

Garden turns her head with a resigned little yelp. The only way that things could get worse is if Human-Scent joins them, and it appears that she's set on doing just that. She's reading the single-horned beast forward, her face stern. She looks as if she will growl any moment, but Garden doesn't have much hope of that. She thinks it's far more likely that she'll start whining and yammering again, and think that the humans should listen to her.

But the humans stare at her, and then one of them says, "My lady, who are you?"

"I am Princess Lorie," says Human-Scent, her head high as if she were really the alpha of them all, "and I am the true heir to the thrones of Ilantra and Arvenna."

"What is your allegiance?" someone shouts. Garden pants in confusion. What does that mean?

"To Light."

There comes a glad shout, and then the first man who tried to bar Garden's way comes forward and kneels. His eyes shine as he looks up at Human-Scent, and Garden can't understand why. Human-Scent is just a small human, and a strange one. Why does everyone think she'll make such a good alpha?

"Your Highness," the man says, "I served in the last wars of Dark and Light. I am proud to serve you."

Human-Scent inclines her head. "Then you shall. What is your name?"

"Everon."

Garden shakes her head. The man doesn't smell like a random sound. He smells eager. Fever-Scent, she will call him.

"Then, Everon, I appoint you Captain of my Royal Guard." Human-Scent looks up and smiles at everyone in sight. "Will you not come forward and greet your Princess, your next ruler?"

A few of the humans come forward slowly, as if they can't really understand why they're doing this. Garden feels a sense of kinship to them. She doesn't know why they're doing this, either.

But they kneel to Human-Scent, and she accepts their "homage" with a nod and a few words. It's only that that she gives them, not even the kind of welcome that an alpha would give someone who was new to the pack, but all of them look at Human-Scent with shining eyes and crowd around the beast with the single horn. Their hands reach out and touch Human-Scent, and she bears it. Garden nods. This is more like it; packmates should touch each other.

"You don't understand, do you?"

Garden glances up. In front of her is the shadow-wolf, and he is looking at her with knowing bright eyes. Garden shakes her head.

The shadow-wolf chuckles. "It is a human thing."

Garden relaxes. If it's something ridiculous that humans do, then of course she can't be expected to understand it. She is a wolf, after all, and she intends to remain that until the day she dies, no matter how much of the human language she might be able to understand.

And she will make sure that Meat-Giver comes with her back to the forests and learns to be a proper wolf, too. She is tired of all this human talk and human matters. They will reach the castle and turn around, she hopes.

She hopes.

Chapter 95

The Requirements of Politics

"Have I told you that alliances rarely hold firm in the face of political necessity?"

-Princess Nightstone.

"Your Majesty, Lady Therion."

Rior didn't see who announced that- some version of the royal herald, no doubt. He leaned against the door, or at least drifted next to it, and watched as Therion advanced up the hall and towards the throne.

On the throne sat Queen Aloriadell. She was very pale, but she looked stronger than she had even out in the courtyard. Rior had long thought the trappings of royalty, the crowns and thrones and the gowns, were not just trappings to her, but something real and needed. And now he saw it. Just put a crown on her head and seat her on a throne, and she became a Queen, not the trembling and fragile woman he had confronted out in the courtyard.

Therion sank to her knees before the Queen, and bowed her head. Rior was a little surprised at her complacency, but thought she was intelligent for doing this. She must have decided that Dark wasn't going to win after all, and it was useless pretending that it was.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Therion?" the Queen asked, not granting the kneeling woman a title. Rior could feel the stir and murmur in the room, the way that the nobles were guessing what that meant and calculating the way they would treat Therion accordingly. He felt a wave of disgust, and choked it back. He had been spoiled by his time among the wolves. No, they didn't have politics, but they didn't have comfortable beds and cooked food, either. The ways of wolves and humans were different, and he couldn't expect the nobles to echo the ways of the packs just because he liked them better.

"I have to say that I was serving the Dark," said Therion, lifting her head. "And your son, Prince Imor."

"He is dead."

Therion made a little gasping sound. Rior blinked. He had told her that. He wondered if she hadn't believed him.

Probably, since she was so difficult about everything else I said.

"The Prince is dead," said the Queen, "and the Princess lives. Will you agree to serve her?"

"She serves the Light."

"She does."

"And what about you, Your Majesty?" Therion's voice was shaking, as though she couldn't believe her own daring, but it was steadier as she went on. "Have you deserted the Dark just because your son died, or do you serve it still, in spite of being a Regent for the Light?"

There was another gasp and shiver through the nobles. They were watching, Rior knew, and he prayed to Shadow that Queen Aloriadell would make her stand in such a way that she would impress them. If she backed down now, then Therion would win their confrontation, and probably win a great many nobles to her side.

"I say that I serve the Dark," said the Queen. "And that is all that you should ask of a Queen."

Another shiver, but this time it was approving, and it died down almost as soon as it had arisen. Rior let out his breath. He was glad that that was past, and that the Queen had faced down the first challenge without losing anyone, at least if he was any judge of murmurs and shifting political currents.

"Very well, Your Majesty." Therion dropped her head towards the carpet again. "But what will you tell the Darkworkers in the castle? The People of the Snake, and the filifernai, and the others who love the Dark? They tried to keep the Princess from coming back. They won't be pleased to be told they have to put her on the throne, or that the thrones of Ilantra and Arvenna are turning back to the Light."

"I will tell them myself," said Queen Aloriadell. "Dark cannot always win-"

"That is an unusual stance for someone who is of the Dark to take."

There was a long, chill silence. Rior smiled at the look on the Queen's face. This, she was good at. She didn't have to say anything that might reveal her voice was breaking; she only had to look at the person who was speaking, someone always less striking and impressive than she was, and wait for her to realize that she had made a mistake.

Therion abruptly dropped her head further. "Forgive me, Your Majesty," she said. "I forgot the title. It was an honest mistake."

"I forgive you, Therion," said the Queen, and let everyone hear that she had left off the title, not forgotten it. "The other Kingdoms are waiting on our borders to interfere. Doralissa and Orlath are already inside them, and will strike from the north if we don't do things to show that we are a stable Kingdom again. They have a dragon with them, a dragon who could burn the castle to its foundations if we refuse, or if we go on fighting among ourselves."

Therion muttered something then. Rior couldn't be sure what it was, but it sounded like, "Damn King Pheron."

"And Rivendon may intervene soon," Queen Aloriadell continued. "I am surprised they have not already done so."

"I can answer that, Your Majesty." Rior bowed and floated forward when they started and turned their heads towards him. He didn't mean to interrupt Queen Aloriadell, but he didn't want to leave them dreaming of help from Rivendon, either. "Shadow said that he would go north and speak to the Queen of Rivendon. I can only imagine that he managed to persuade her, or the Rivendonian soldiers would have been over the Rashars by now, and we would have heard some rumor of them."

"Who is Shadow?" someone asked from the general direction of the left. "Some powerful avatar?"

Rior shook his head. "The power of Shadow, equal in strength to Dark and Light." He heard the murmuring begin again, but he didn't think that he needed to argue against that. He gestured to his body. "He was the one who made me into this, so that I could survive death."

"You are close to him?" the Queen asked.

Rior bowed, making the outlines of his body shift again. He heard the murmuring increase in strength, and knew that they were trying to imagine some other explanation for his state than the one he had given them, and failing. "I am his servant, and his avatar. He promised that he would help to set Princess Lorie back on the throne. In return, I will go and serve him when this is done."

"Surely there is a price to pay for this aid," said Therion. Glancing at her, Rior saw that her eyes were glittering, sharp as icicles in their malice. "Surely he will want something from us."

"Something from me, not you," Rior corrected her. "He wants me to come and serve him when this is done, as I have said, and I have promised that I shall do so. And he wants converts, the people of Ilantra to worship him as they once did."

"Of course he does," said Therion.

Rior laughed. He heard the murmuring once again begin, but it was difficult for him to take that seriously. Therion was trying a tactic that she might have thought would work, but she really should have thought it through more carefully. "My lady, the Dark and the Light want converts as well. The difference is that Shadow will not take them by force, or conquer the Kingdom and then insist that everyone who is in them should worship him. He will offer them gifts, and try to show them that there are advantages to worshipping him."

"Gifts? Such as what?"

"Shapeshifting." Rior flowed into his wolf form, and then changed back while they were still gaping, ignoring Luden's muttering as he dropped the sword to the floor in the shift. "If you want to be a certain animal, then he can show you how to become that animal. He reshapes the body, and makes it flow like shadow. And all shadows are his eyes, so that he can see the plots of Dark and Light and those who might try to lock him away from the world again."

"Rior."

Rior glanced up at the Queen. She had narrowed her eyes at him, and was shaking her head. Rior supposed that he had passed her tolerance level, though he wasn't sure why.

"Kindly do not preach of your god here," she said. "We have important business to discuss."

Rior bowed and drifted backward. It was no loss to him, if some of the nobles didn't respect him. He wouldn't be dealing with the ones who couldn't get over that and come to see Shadow as their best choice.

But deep inside him, a spark of resentment burned for a moment. If Shadow hadn't helped her, then the Queen would probably be confronted with a self-righteous Princess claiming that she was of the Light and had the obligation to kill everyone of the Dark, even her mother. He quieted the resentment as best he could, and watched the Queen and Therion again.

Queen Aloriadell said, "Tell me why I should spare your life, Therion. Can you serve in a Court that mingles Dark and Light? Can you agree that the Princess is of the Light, while agreeing that perhaps her children might not be?"

"I suppose I must," said Therion. "And there is at least one thing I can do, Your Majesty, that no one else can."

"What is that?"

"Serve as ambassador to the Darkworkers, Your Majesty. They do not know you as well as they know me, since you were in Arvenna most of the time. They did not even know Prince Imor very well, and accepted him as their future ruler only because he was the Dark's avatar. I think it would help if I was your emissary to them, and convinced them to accept the new state of affairs."

The Queen looked at her thoughtfully. "There is some merit in what you say, Therion."

"Your Majesty," said Rior.

The Queen glared at him. "Yes, Rior?"

"There were many in the Court who thought that Therion was of the Light, and others who knew she was of the Dark," said Rior. "She is used to treachery and to presenting a convincing face-about, when really she maintains her allegiance to her own goals. Please be very careful before you use her in a mingled Court. She might undermine you even as she pretended to be working for you."

The Queen frowned. "Rior, I am no stranger to treachery myself. I think that I shall know it when I see it. And while your concern is commendable, I think that you would distrust everyone but yourself and me. I can understand why, but I don't think that you really understand the intricacies of running a Court. I must have someone upon whom I can depend. And I think that Lady Therion is well-suited to be emissary to the Darkworkers."

"There is only one thing that I would ask in return, Your Majesty," said Therion, her voice as slimy as earth after a rainstorm. "I do not know if I can work with Rior. He hates me, violently. He will always speak against me. I might ask that you exile him from the Court. Not for good and all, of course, but simply until he learns to put his hatred under control. And this talk of Shadow- well, you heard how he is. He will preach and try to convert others to the worship of his god, when really what we need are people who understand the balance between Dark and Light and how to maintain it. We don't need those who would disturb it with the mentions of new gods."

Rior stared. The Queen was looking at him thoughtfully. "If Rior really does want to preach and doesn't want to keep his hatred under control, then I could see the merit of that," she said.

Therion turned and smirked at him.

"What did I tell you?" asked Luden quietly.

Chapter 96

Visions In A Pool

What is that, my lady? I can make out nothing in the blankness. I see something that looks like a cloud, but-

Ah. A unicorn. And going to its knees as the wolves pounce on it and tear it to shreds. I have never seen wolves do such a thing. Why are there unicorns running in the Dark's ranks?

And what is that? An elf? But-

It was not just a battle of Dark against Shadow, was it? It was Dark and Light against Shadow. They wanted to lock it out of the world so that they could have their own private wars. I am astonished, if only because I never thought I would see Dark and Light working together like that.

And there goes a black unicorn, and then a pegasus. The wolves seem to be winning, though, and the shapeshifters. May I ask what turned the tide?

That man. He looks familiar. I know that I have seen him before. Let him only look towards us, and I will know who he is.

Of course. The Lord of Disasters. I told Idessen he was well-named. Everything that he touched turned to disaster, and he did not know how to rule. Rather like the present monarch of Ilantra, when you think of it.

What is he doing?

He chose Dark and Light, and not Shadow? How could he cast Shadow out? It is a power of the world, and not amenable to vanishing on the choice of one human, I would have thought.

Oh. He was Shadow's avatar. And here he is, declaring that he would rather serve Dark and Light. I imagine that Shadow was rather unhappy with him. What could have Dark and Light offered him to be worth that displeasure?

Destiny. I should have known. The idea that the world would be secure and orderly from now on, and that it wouldn't change. The idea that the future is so secure that one can predict it. The old trap that has caught so many. I could almost feel sorry for him, if he was not such a disastrous decision-maker.

And there he speaks his rejection, and there Shadow flies from the world. Could they not see how the world grew dimmer in its passage, how many wonders perished when they sent it forth?

Of course, you are right. They would not care about that. And they would turn on the Lord of Disasters when they had finished with him. He had served Shadow once, and they didn't want to leave him alive in case he chose to go back to its service. And then-

What is that?

Some force did indeed stop time in Ilantra! I always knew that. But what force was it? Shadow couldn't have done it with its last fading power, could it? But Dark and Light wouldn't have any reason to stop time, either.

Many strange things lie in the past, and not even a sentient sword or a fey know all the answers.

I never said that you did not know the answers, my lady! Only that the fey in general didn't.

Yes, I did mean it that way.

Thank you for not destroying me, my Lady Alami.

Chapter 97

Unexpected Reverses

"I have seen battles tuned in the past by something as small as a word, a glance, an order that was given by the right person at the right time, a laugh or even a small piece of magic tossed off casually."

-Arion, Priest of Chance.

Rior gathered his breath as the Queen gazed at him. "Your Majesty, there is something I would say," he said.

"Speak, if you can do it without preaching." Her eyes were wary as she looked at him, and Rior wished he knew what he had done to make them that way. He had spoken a word out of turn, but Therion had done the same thing, and the Queen didn't seem hesitant about accepting the woman back into her service. Could it be that the worship of Shadow was somehow different than insulting the Queen?

"Your Majesty, I don't want to preach. I would do nothing to try and force anyone to convert to Shadow."

Aloriadell studied him, not looking convinced. "But you would speak about Shadow, and show gifts like shapeshifting to those who asked for them?" she asked.

"Yes. I would."

Aloriadell shook her head. "The Kingdom is in a delicate balance, my lord. You were the one who reminded me of that. Dark and Light could lunge at each other again if one perceived that the other was winning the battle. And Shadow could muddy the waters further."

"Shadow would have nothing to do with Dark or Light winning the battle," said Rior, a little surprised that she thought of it that way. "It would not have anything to do with Dark or Light. I would only speak to those people who sought me out. If they did begin to serve Shadow, it would be their own choice. I would not force it on them by conquest. Shadow might have taken that route, but I talked him out of it."

"What?" And in Aloriadell's eyes, there was fear.

Rior shook his head. "Your Majesty, I don't understand why you're looking at me that way. I promise you, I have done nothing wrong. I have tried to keep Dark and Light and Shadow from destroying the Kingdom, as they apparently did when their wars were still proceeding. And I think I have succeeded, with help. This would be no different, just a continuation of the same process."

"But Shadow would complicate things intolerably," said the Queen. "I am not sure that we can allow it to have a place here."

"The Court intrigues of Ilantra have always been complicated," said Rior, only then realizing that she might not know that. She had spent most of her time in Arvenna, after all. *But surely her husband told her something about his Court life, and surely she saw something of it while she was here?* "And Shadow does have a place, Your Majesty. Now that it is back in the world, nothing can detach it again. It might add a new player to the games, but it won't make them much more complicated, and it won't take its pieces and go home."

"We cannot allow it to have a place here," Aloriadell repeated.

Rior stared from face to face. The nobles stared back at him with silent but unremitting hostility. Here and there, he saw a gaze slip to the floor, and he saw someone else twitch and turn away as if he suddenly found it hard to meet Rior's eyes, but no one spoke up, and no one said anything about allowing or wanting Shadow to stay.

Rior said at last, "Your Majesty, your daughter has relied on Shadow to get her this far. If Shadow did abandon her, then she might never take her throne in such peace as she would otherwise."

"Are you threatening the Princess Loriel?" The Queen sat up very fast.

"I think he is, Your Majesty," said Therion.

"I am not," said Rior coldly, disgusted with the lot of them, though he remained bewildered. *How did things change, and so fast?* "I have been a better friend to her than you have been, Therion, with all your intrigues. She will come back, and rule. I am only saying that she might do it more comfortably with Shadow at her side."

"And if her Court has no place for it?" Aloriadell asked, watching him.

"Then it will go back to the forest, to the wolves that it loves, and begin to seek out servants among the people who might appreciate it," said Rior. "He told me that he loved the country of Ilantra, that he had missed it, and that he came seeking someone here to be his champion first, because he was once our special protector. But I am sure that he will not scorn others in other Kingdoms who might decide to worship him."

"That is, he will remain a threat," said Therion.

"Not so," said Rior. "Why should he, unless you threaten him?"

"Anything is a threat to the delicate balance of Dark and Light, and the dance that we need to dance to keep the other Kingdoms from attacking us," said Queen Aloriadell.

Rior stared into her eyes, and then shook his head. "You don't really believe that," he said.

They all gaped at him.

"You don't," said Rior, too angry to care about what would probably happen when he finished this little speech. "You just can't bear to think that there is a third power in the world, one as strong as the others, one you'll have to learn about and negotiate with. You just want everything to go away." He laughed. "How like pups hiding their headings in their mother's fur!"

"That is enough," said Therion, her eyes shining. She stood. "Your Majesty, I would ask your permission to kill him."

The Queen huddled on her throne, staring at Rior. Quickly, fearfully, she nodded.

Therion stepped forward, holding out her hands.

"I have had enough of this," said Luden suddenly. "Ignorant, spiteful humans, who want a simple world. I have a simple world for you. Fire is always simple." He began to glow.

Rior could feel the other nobles readying their magic. He shuddered at the thought of the whirlwind that might come through in a moment.

"We can kill him," said Therion. "I know your weaknesses, Luden, and how to keep you from using that magic. We can stand against you, for you are two and we are many."

"They're not just two. Where did you get that idea?"

Wings beat, and Alami set down on one side of Rior, Neretsa on the other, transforming as they went. Gasps and screams arose. Neretsa stared around, and then smiled and reached out a hand.

One of the noblewomen in the corner collapsed. Rior saw mist swirl up from her body and move around in a spiral before it assumed the form of a swan. The swan grew solid, beat its wings, and looked very surprised before flying to Neretsa's side.

Alami looked around with a cheerful expression. "Who do you want to die first, Rior?" she asked.

Chapter 98

Garden In Uncertainty

Garden stands on the ridge and stares down at the human camp below. Their fires are glittering and shining on the ground like fallen fireflies. She can see many of them. She thinks that she should be able to count them, but that is something that escapes her so far.

"Are you well?"

Garden turns her head. She does not recall inviting the shadow-wolf along, but there he is, sitting on the ridge beside her. She can only see his glowing eyes and the general outline of his body. He seems to blend into the falling dusk as if he were literally part of it, which of course is true.

Garden pants, and meets his eyes, then turns her head to the south, towards the castle that is their goal. The groove still stretches ahead, pointing the most direct route, and she has to fight the longing to take it herself. She has come to accept that she will not see the forest again unless she first takes the groove to the castle and then takes it back, but surely if she ran ahead, then it would be accomplished more quickly?

"You will see Rior again," the shadow-wolf says confidently. "Surely you will."

Garden sits down, then lies down with a huffing sigh. She might as well sleep while she can, and run in the dreamworld. She ran in the waking world all day, and her legs ache.

But the shadow-wolf has other ideas.

"Wake," he says, nudging her, and not at all minding the flash of her teeth. "We must see something. There is one particular thing that is puzzling me, worrying me, but I cannot

make a decision about it on my own, since I might be guessing wrongly. I wish Rior were here. He was born human, and he understands the human heart better than I."

Garden snarls at him. If this is a human matter, then why wake her? She is a wolf, and does not understand such things.

"But you lived in the same pack with her for twelve years," says the shadow-wolf. "Come with me."

It concerns Human-Scent, then. Garden is not really surprised. She has noticed that the humans have been drawing off from the wolves since they passed through that first village, and she knows that the humans were giving the wolves suspicious looks. Human-Scent keeps speaking to Fever-Scent in a low voice, so low that Garden can't understand the words, and she is always looking at the wolves when she does so. When she isn't looking at them, she's speaking with someone else and looking at the shadow-wolf. Garden does not like it.

She slips down the ridge and through the resting pack. The alphas sniff her and yelp quietly, some of them ready to go on. They have not all rested during the night and sped during the day, though the packs that were behind only caught them up a few hours ago. Garden sniffs back and growls, and they settle back. They can smell the lingering scent of the alpha of alphas on her, and so long as she retains that, and probably after, they will be inclined to listen to her.

Garden slips around the fires and towards the great tent that holds Human-Scent. The beast that bears her is nowhere in sight; Garden thinks it is grazing. The glowing eyes flash beside her, and she realizes that the shadow-wolf is right beside her, closer than she would like. She snarls at him.

"My apologies," he says, smelling amused about something, and then closes his eyes so that they don't flash quite so much. Garden supposes that she will have to be content with that.

She halts near the fire, and sees Human-Scent staring into the darkness for a moment, as if she had heard something. Then she turns back around and begins to pace, her voice rising and falling softly. Garden looks around, but doesn't see any other human nearby. Unless Human-Scent knows that Garden and the shadow-wolf are there, she is talking to herself. Garden pants, not really seeing the point.

"I can't do that. I can't possibly do that. They have all come so far to help me, and tried so hard. How could I turn my back on them and tell them that I don't need them anymore?"

"Not having a choice? Of course. I know that I was born to serve the Light. But that doesn't mean that I need to betray everyone who has helped me, does it?"

"So it wouldn't really be a betrayal. All right. If they don't serve the Light, then they can't be betrayed. Do we call someone who converts from the Dark to the Light a traitor? No; she has only seen what needs to be done and done it. How can someone who was born to the Light and has known the right thing from the day she was born do any less?"

"I suppose I must. I don't like it, not after everything they have done to help me, but given that they aren't human and aren't of the Light, I don't think it's such a great betrayal. And my people are uneasy with them. And, ultimately, I must rule over people, and not wild beasts from the forests."

Garden growls, unable to help herself. Is Human-Scent talking about leaving the wolves? But how can she? She needs them to become alpha of whatever human pack she is about to become alpha of.

Human-Scent turns at the growl, her eyes darting around the darkness. Of course, being weak human eyes, they don't see far, and certainly can't see Garden. "Who's there?" she asks, and reaches towards the fire, probably to throw an ember or a burning branch at whoever is there. Garden has seen humans do things in the past like that, when someone comes too close to their fires.

"Princess, you cannot do this."

Garden glances at the shadow-wolf in astonishment as he steps into the light. Of course, he's made of shadow, like Meat-Giver when he looks human, and Garden doesn't really think he can be hurt by embers or burning branches. Thinking he will protect her, too, she trots forward beside him, and then sits down and flashes her teeth at Human-Scent. She might as well show her what she thinks of her.

"What are you doing here?" Human-Scent demands. "I thought that you had left again."

"And, therefore, you spoke with Light and plotted to betray us?" The shadow-wolf pants, but there is something just behind it that makes Garden think it might be a growl, too. "I don't think that that's very nice, Princess, when we have done so much for you. Why should you do this?"

"Light is speaking to me," says Human-Scent in a low voice, "and reminding me that I have a responsibility to my people."

Garden glances in confusion at the fire that Human-Scent stands next to her. The light of the fire talked to her? She didn't know that fires could talk. Of course, perhaps Human-Scent has the thirst-sickness. Garden looks back at Human-Scent, studying her mouth for traces of foam.

"Are not the wolves and the fey and those who worship Shadow your people, too?"

Human-Scent sighs, and her face looks like that of a much older human. Garden thinks that is wrong, but she doesn't really know why. "Light has told me the truth, Lord of Shadow. The people of Ilantra want Light back, as it ruled over them for hundreds of years. They want the Kingdom the same way it was. And the Dark has not been good or kind to them. They are unwilling to trust a land with three masters, or even two. Light should reign again."

"But not all your people want it so."

"How can you say that?"

"The wolves and the fey and the shapeshifters do not want it so," says the shadow-wolf. "And I have spoken to a few people in your army who do not want it so, who say that they worship Dark even though they want you on the throne. They just don't want a war. There are others whose hearts could turn to me. I can feel them, even if I don't know just who they are yet."

"They will be sent forth from my army, then."

"Have you forgotten the other Kingdoms, Princess?" The shadow-wolf is growling now, but Garden doesn't think that Human-Scent can hear the growl, which is down beneath the human words. Otherwise, she wouldn't stare at the shadow-wolf like that and wait for him to finish. "They are ready and waiting to strike. If you show them that you won't compromise, that you will only allow Light in your Kingdom, then they will strike."

"I don't care. The Light will help me fight them."

The shadow-wolf leans forward and peers deeply into her eyes for a moment. Then he turns to Garden. "Come," he says in the human language. "We will leave the Princess to think about what she wants."

"It's not about what I want," Human-Scent says as they leave. "It's about what I have to do. Garden! You must understand. You have to find dens in the spring, and food when you're hungry. This is just like that."

Garden glances over her shoulder. She thinks about that. Is it true that Human-Scent is like a wolf in some ways?

"No," says the shadow-wolf beside her. "Loriel is planning to betray the packs. She won't stay loyal to them. She isn't a packmate, but a human."

Garden growls, and turns her back.

When they are beyond the fire, the shadow-wolf speaks to her, his voice grave, still with a growl beneath the human words. "This is something I did not foresee. I suppose that Loriel wouldn't have dared to do this, but she has humans around her now and doesn't

think she needs the wolves. This you must do, Garden. Race ahead to Rior. It is vital that you go, and that the packs follow you. I will warn Rior of what has happened, since he must know. But you yourself- run."

Garden stares at him, wondering why he insists on that. The shadow-wolf meets and holds her eyes, but with no sign of a threat in his stare. "With you gone, her intelligence will once again turn into that of an ordinary wolf. We need that to happen, and slow her army down. It's the only way that we might make sure a war doesn't explode."

Garden isn't quite sure why that will work, but she has come to accept that the packs' ways are simpler than human ways. And the shadow-wolf seems to be giving her permission to do what she wanted to do, and go to Meat-Giver.

"Go to Rior," the shadow-wolf repeats, and then his body breaks apart and flows away into the dusk.

Garden does not hesitate any longer, but howls and begins to run along the groove. The ringing cry rouses the packs, and she hears them following along behind her. The startled howls of the humans in Human-Scent's pack rise and then die away as Garden passes further into the darkness.

She feels the exhaustion ease away from her as she drops into the wolf-trot that devours the miles. She will reach Meat-Giver and give him the warning in time, and stand by his side if Human-Scent tries to kill him. And then they will kill Human-Scent and go back to the forest. Garden can see it now.

Chapter 99

Peace or Cinders

"The powers of the world have ever been uneasy with each other, and will attack each other on the slightest whim."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

Rior.

Rior blinked and shook his head. Just what he needed now, on the edge of exhaustion and vast trouble, to start hearing voices.

"I am here."

The whole Court shrieked and started backward as the shadows in the middle of the room suddenly pooled together and formed Songs the Shadows Sing. He glanced around; Rior

thought he was noting the lack of wolves. Then his body wavered, and he turned into a shadowy human form that looked much like the one that Rior currently wore. But Rior didn't think that anyone could ever mistake the two of them for two of the same kind. For one thing, a writhing, seething divine aura of power gathered around Shadow. Rior let out his breath at that. Surely they would have to see that Shadow was a power of the world now, with his strength gathered around him like this?

"I am here," said Shadow, "and I see that Dark is no more reasonable than Light is." He glanced at Rior. "I suspect they were about to destroy you?"

Rior licked his lips. Something made him reluctant to speak the words, but he spoke them anyway. "Yes. I was talking about you, and they thought I was preaching of you and would sway the hearts of nobles of the Court against their wills. They said that there was no place for Shadow in the intrigues of the Court, which already have Dark and Light and more factions than they can handle, and they would have killed me and hoped that you would go away."

There was silence. Rior waited, tense, horribly afraid that Shadow would lash out and kill or shift everyone in the Court.

Instead, a strange sound succeeded the silence. Rior saw the shadows swaying back and forth like snakes to a charmer's music, and thought for a moment they were attacking. He moved forward, intending to shield the humans of the Court somehow. They were stupid, but that didn't mean that they all deserved death, or that- and this more potently- the country could get along without all of them.

But then he realized the truth, and halted and stared at Shadow's back in perplexity.

The shadowy man was laughing.

It was rich and loud, but it wasn't sound so much as ripples, as if the world itself were laughing. Rior looked around at the swaying shadows, and, concentrating, could feel the ripple in his own misty body. He found himself smiling back. *So this is what it feels like when a power of the world laughs. I do not think that I have ever heard Dark or Light laughing.*

Shadow shook his head, and at last calmed. "Ah, I should have known!" he cried, and then glanced back at Rior. "We have done what we could, and still it will never be enough. They demand that we leave altogether, that we take the good we could do and the evil we could do both with us. Or perhaps they think that we can do no good." He looked back at the silent, staring human Court. "Is that it? Do you think that we can do no good?"

Queen Aloriadell rose to her feet. Rior remembered that later. Terrified and fragile as she had been, still she was the first one to come forward and try to answer their obviously divine visitor. "That is not true. It is possible that you could do much good. But I don't

think that we can bear the strain right now, waiting to see what you will do and what you won't do."

Shadow laughed again, and then turned to Rior, Alami, and Neretsa as if the rest of them had ceased to exist. "My lord, my ladies, we have done what we could here, and our work in the Court is almost done save for a few last things. I think that we shall leave and go back to the forests." He winked as he said the last, so Rior was not sure how seriously he meant it. "And-" Abruptly he paused, and looked at the swan that sat beside Neretsa. "Where did that come from?"

Rior glanced at Neretsa, expecting her to respond with haughtiness, and was astonished to see her frowning and pouting like a child. "From that woman," said Neretsa, pointing at the body of the woman she had killed.

"Neretsa."

"She makes such a perfect swan!" Neretsa reached out a hand, and the swan pushed its beak into her palm. "See?"

"Put her back."

"My lord!" whined Neretsa.

"Now."

The fey sighed in a very put-upon way and waved her hand. The swan suddenly flew into the air, with a surprised trumpet that suggested the working of her wings hadn't been her idea, and then dissolved into a mist. The mist flowed back into the body of the noblewoman, who sat up and screamed.

Shadow glared at Neretsa for a moment longer, as if to make sure that she had learned her lesson, and then looked at Rior again. "Loriel has betrayed the wolves," he said quietly. "She will leave them and try to advance with a human army."

Rior felt his heart begin to beat very fast. "Where did she get the army?"

"From the villages that we passed through, and from some of the Arvenese army who decided to join her after the death of Prince Imor." Shadow shook his head. "We cannot stay here and wait for her. We have other things to do. One of them is confronting the emissary of Doralissa who will be arriving at any moment and explaining to her that things will be fine."

"They told me-"

"It was that expedition that would stay in place," said Shadow. "They sent another one, to which your words, technically, do not apply."

Rior frowned. He had never understood the complexities of politics as played in Doralissa. "And then what shall we do?"

"Explain, and then withdraw and wait just outside the walls." Shadow smiled at Rior, and Rior had the distinct impression that he was the only one who could hear those last words, despite the straining ears of all the other nobles. "There is still one last good deed I am ready to do."

Rior nodded uncertainly, and then turned as the door of the throne room abruptly popped open. A woman with golden skin and bright, focused eyes stepped through it, surrounded by obviously fey guards, though Rior didn't recognize their kind. The woman halted and smiled at those in the throne room, and Rior realized abruptly that she was a full-blooded elf. For some reason, he had thought her only half-elven, but those eyes swept across the room with a force that made him jettison that idea.

"My name is Emrissa," said the elf. "I had heard that there was trouble here, and I came to explain just how unhappy Queen Joydancer will be if there is."

"There is no trouble that the nobles of Ilantra cannot handle on their own," said Therion. Her head was high and her back straight; Rior thought he could even see her eyes flashing. "We will handle it, and put the Princess Loriei on the throne. Then you can leave."

Emrissa laughed, a laugh that seemed to reach into Rior's heart and awaken joy. The sound of elven merriment always did that. "But the Princess is committed to the Light, we have heard. We don't want a Light-Destined on the throne. It would destroy all the careful work that we have tried to achieve."

"That doesn't matter," said Therion. "Doralissa and Orlath have no say in the affairs of the Kingdom of Ilantra, and should have no say."

"But now they do." Emrissa turned towards Shadow, and then paused abruptly. Rior could see her eyes grow brighter, probably with the same curiosity that had inspired Reweren. "Who are you?"

"My name is Shadow, my lady, and I am a power of the world who has just returned to it." Shadow bowed from the waist. "May I say that I am glad to see a *selde* here?"

"You may. Of course you may." Emrissa was smiling. "And you will make things more interesting. Of course, the Queen Joydancer will not like it that you are here. She has worked to keep the compromises intact, and they will be threatened with you in place."

"I do not intend to stay here," said Shadow. "I will only make sure that the Princess Loriei is crowned and that the Kingdoms do not have a war, and then I will depart and go back to the forests."

Emrissa stared at him. After several moments, she spoke. "That is a human thing to do, my lord, a sensible thing. Why in the name of the beast that holds the worlds would a power of the world do something so human and sensible?"

"Rior convinced me."

Rior flinched as Emrissa turned her eyes on him. He didn't think he would ever grow used to the pressure of elven gazes. But he tried to stand as straight as he could, or float as straight as he could, and meet her gaze.

"Most remarkable," said Emrissa, as if that was all that she needed to say. "Rior, I think that King Pheron would like to meet you, and Queen Joydancer. They appreciate those who have some experience in taming the great powers and calming the Kingdoms who fight like kittens."

Rior bowed. "If they wish to meet me, I would be honored to meet them. But I do serve Shadow."

"Yet it's going back to the forests."

"Because I told him that I wouldn't follow him if he didn't act differently from Dark and Light."

Emrissa abruptly threw back her head and laughed aloud again. This time, Rior saw several of the nobles smile and even dance in place, and a few took a step forward, reaching out for Emrissa. The coppery-skinned fey guards around her glared, and one of them sent a bolt of lightning at the people who were reaching. They hopped back and stared in fear.

Emrissa was grinning. "There are many strange and wonderful things here," she said, "and Shadow is not the least wonderful of them." She looked at Queen Aloriadell. "I think that we shall stay until the crowning of the Princess, just to make sure that neither Dark nor Light have any ideas."

The Queen shook her head. "I have listened to King Pheron and Queen Joydancer for too many years. I will not let them take the Kingdom that should belong to my daughter from her. She will rule as her own Queen."

"Well, no," said Emrissa. "It will never get that far. She would be dead before she got that far. She will be Queen peacefully, with an open ear to the advice of other Kingdoms, or she will be a smoking cinder."

The Queen stared at the elf as if she didn't know what to say, her mouth opening and closing. Rior bit his lip and stared into the air, at the ceiling, anywhere but at the throne and the woman who sat there. He was afraid that he would start laughing, and the Queen

had already lost enough face before her subjects. To be an effective Regent, she would have to maintain *some* dignity.

"Do Doralissa and Orlath take delight in throwing their power into the air and letting it land wherever it will?" asked Queen Aloriadell at last.

Emrissa studied her thoughtfully. "No pleasure, no delight," she answered. "But they do take delight in the orderly procession of the Kingdoms, and the peace that has become so precious to all of us since the last war. That means that Dark and Light must be bridled and brought into place when they threaten to tip over the world, and anyone who follows them so fanatically that she would upset the Kingdoms must also be bridled."

Queen Aloriadell rose to her feet and turned to face her people. "I say that we shall not suffer this!" she cried. "I say that the matters of the Ilantran Court are the matters of Ilantra, and that no other Kingdom should have a say in what we do with our own Court!"

A roar from the throats of the nobles answered her. Rior sighed. *It seems that I was mistaken about how many people are willing to think of Aloriadell as a powerful Regent.*

The Queen turned towards Emrissa, her head up and held high. "You might destroy me," she said, "and you might destroy the Princess. But you can never kill everyone in whose veins the royal blood of Ilantra runs, and we will scatter into the countryside and fight back if we must. You shall never truly rule this country."

Emrissa glanced at Rior. "Did I say anything about ruling Ilantra?"

Rior shook his head.

"I thought not." Emrissa turned back to the Queen. "We will threaten you and your daughter only if you make trouble for the other Kingdoms, since such trouble does become our business."

"We can plan wars without it concerning you," said Aloriadell, her head held high. Once again, her nobles echoed her with a cheer. Rior saw that Therion's eyes were especially bright.

"War would be stopped long before it got that far," said Emrissa. "I told you. Peace or smoking cinders. Nothing less."

"You are threatening us."

"Yes. Do you know why?"

"Because we dare to turn back to the old ways!" Aloriadell's eyes were blazing. "Because we dare to be human, and Ilantran, and not elven or of the southern Kingdoms!"

Emrissa sighed. "I did try to warn you," she said, and then began to raise a hand. The fey guards around her smiled, as if they knew what would happen next and were looking forward to it.

"My lady."

Emrissa glanced at Rior. "Yes? What?"

"Please do not destroy them. It is true that that would make you enemies, and not only among the people of Ilantra."

"Better that they die than that they start a war," said Emrissa without any emotion in her voice that Rior could recognize. "And if that starts a war in itself, then we will deal with it, come what may. At least we shall protect our own people from a strike from the north."

"There is another way."

"What is that?"

"Do you know of a cure for the *shielika*?"

Emrissa shook her head. "There is none. The youth-killer does what it wants. Sometimes I think it is planted in the blood of those who would cause great harm by the hands of the gods." She looked at the Queen. "Does she have it? But she cannot, not unless she has somehow managed to live to a greater age than any other *shielika* victim I ever heard of."

"Not her," said Rior. "Her daughter, Princess Loriel, the only remaining Heir in the direct royal line."

Emrissa stared at him. "And what are you suggesting, then?"

"That you leave Princess Loriel to assume the throne, ideas of war and all." Rior bowed from the waist. "She may want to conquer the southern Kingdoms, or bring back Light, or do something else equally ferocious, but I do not think that she will be able to. The disease in her blood will demand her time and attention. At the most, she will see twenty-five years. I think that she will have to bear a child before then, or many children, and make sure they live. Only then can she die knowing that someone of her blood is on the throne."

Emrissa tilted her head. "That might still mean civil war in Ilantra, either during her lifetime or after she dies."

"I will be able to cage that," said Shadow, with a bow, "if you will trust me."

Emrissa smiled. "Then it becomes entirely an Ilantran affair, as you said it was, Your Majesty." She bowed to the Queen, nodded to Rior and Shadow, and walked out of the Great Hall.

Rior looked around at the other nobles. None of them looked noticeably happy with him.

Not that he cared. He was certain that he was going back to the forests with Shadow, now, and he was rather tired of preventing wars.

Chapter 100

Going Back

My lord, you would not believe what I have learned! Did you know that the war of Shadow against Dark was a war of Shadow against Dark and Light? And they tempted and tricked the Lord of Disasters-

Where are you getting ready to go? Do you really mean that you will go back to the castle? But why? What purpose could you have behind that?

Really! Well, sometimes I suppose it does pay to have a priestess of Elle in your camp. She has foreseen this?

And what will you do when you get there? It's not as if the nobles of the castle will just give him up to you, you know. He is the most precious possession of the royal line of Ilantra now, and being guarded like it.

Set up a Regency? Of course, the old trick. But who will be Regent? You don't think that anyone will accept you?

I didn't know that.

How quickly does the *shielika* kill, when once it begins its march? I thought I heard you say that Lorie could linger years in pain and torment once. Won't you need to wait a few years?

Striking early is always good. If we had struck early when Cortalis fell, we might have saved the city.

And who will go this time? I don't imagine that you'll dare to pull all the old tricks again. It was only ten years ago, and humans forget many things, but I doubt they would forget what fooled them last time.

Ah. Hello, my lord. I had not met you before. You are overwhelming in person. Worthy to be called alpha of alphas.

And how do you know that Dark and Light will agree to this? I can't imagine that Light will, when it has had everything its own way for a while. And will the southern Kingdoms help you at all? Queen Joydancer and King Pheron are growing older, and seem to look outside their own Kingdoms less and less.

I-

I am speechless. That is clever beyond words.

Yes, is truly is. May I go with you, just to make sure that it doesn't go wrong?

Chapter 101

Outside the Walls

"Have you ever been on the brink of victory and then dashed back? I didn't think so. You could not speak of it so calmly if that were so."

-Teresta Darkstone, Dark's Lady, to her captors.

Rior shook his head. It felt strange to walk forth from the castle, knowing they had spent so much effort to reach it, and now they would have to go back to the forests.

"Is that not what we planned?" asked Shadow, who still walked beside him in human form.

Rior started. "I did not know that you could read my thoughts, my lord."

"I can, when we are both in this form." Shadow glanced at him. "Of course, if you would prefer that I do not do it, then I won't do it."

Rior sighed. "Give me warning next time. And you are right, my lord. We did plan to go back to the forests. I don't think that I could bear to part from Garden, and I know that she didn't want to stay here. I suppose that I am thinking in terms of the other things we came to accomplish. We didn't set Princess Loriel on the throne unchallenged, and we didn't get you a place in the Court. Now nobles who might turn to you are-

"Going to come to me in any case."

Rior blinked. "Do you think so, my lord?"

"Oh, yes." Shadow smiled. "You spoke of shapeshifting, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I could feel it in the hearts of those who will turn to me as we left the room. They were thinking of becoming animals, of melting into shadows and shedding their shapes. There are some whose hearts and minds are tuned to Shadow in the ways that yours are, simply naturally fitted for me, and there are others who love the things I am lord of. If they want to become shapeshifters, they will come to me, and I will teach them gift."

"Even though they are seeking you out for love of what you can give, and not for yourself?"

Shadow laughed. "Of course. I am not that selective. Once they have seen what I can do for them, then they are more likely to love me in any case. Do not the devotees of Light love the certainty that they think Light provides for them? Or adherents of the Dark think of themselves as living in the real world, practical and certain? There are many things that both offer. The difference is that they rarely have any servants at all who love them for themselves. I intend to allow some people to discover that they can love me."

"Why do you think they will?" Rior asked, as he stepped off the bridge that lay across the water and turned to the left. Shadow just floated straight across the River. Rior shivered. He could do that, he supposed, but he was still unsure of the limits of his misty body and didn't think he wanted to test some of them just yet.

"Because I am human, like you. I am the human power that Emriisa called me." Shadow was smiling as if satisfied about something. "And I think that it's easier for humans to love me than some distant and immortal thing."

"You're immortal."

"But mortal in heart."

Rior pondered that as they walked along the wall of the castle towards the place where the rest of the fey had waited. "And how many people do you think will come to you?" he asked at last.

"Only a trickle at first. But it is enough. I know that I have all the time in the world to wait." Shadow glanced at him. "As would you, I think."

"I'm mortal."

"Are you?"

Rior shook his head. "I would really rather not think about it right now, my lord." The thought that he might live more than another threescore years was shocking; he would need time to absorb it.

But not right now.

Shadow looked harder at him, seemed about to say something, and then shrugged instead. They moved among the fey, who shapeshifted back and spoke to Shadow in a chattering mix of tongues. Rior stepped away from among them, still clutching Luden, who spoke so suddenly that he almost dropped the sword.

"What will you do about intrigues in the Court when you are no longer there to watch them?"

Rior shook his head. "I think that we will just have to trust Queen Aloriadell. That is the reason we are setting up the Regency. Lorie can't be a good Queen, yet, but none of us could rule either. We shall have to trust to chance, and be ready to move if something goes wrong."

"Or you could have eyes in the Court."

"I don't think that we could pay anyone to spy for us right now. And the people who decide to come to Shadow will probably do just that, and leave the castle."

"I meant me."

Rior blinked at the sword. "You are offering to stay here and spy for us?"

"As much as I could. After all, I am dependent on others to move me around-"

"No, you're not."

Luden serenely ignored him. "But I think that the nobles of Ilantra would be glad to have a sentient sword, an undoubted treasure of the line, back among them. I could watch, and at times you could come to the Court. No one would notice you if you came like this, a flitting shadow that can hide among other shadows. Did you notice that when you pass through a shadow, part of you vanishes?"

"I honestly hadn't noticed."

"Well, it does. If you came to visit me and sometimes spy on the castle, then I don't think they would see you."

"Don't you want to go to the forest, Luden?"

"I think that someone needs to keep an eye on Lorie. And I don't know what I would do in a forest. No battles to be fought, I suppose, and no need for the wisdom that I have concerning the Courts and the intrigues of the world. I might insist on going with you if I thought that you were living primarily among humans, but I don't think that wolves and fey will hurt you."

Rior smiled at the sword.

"What are you smiling about?"

"You truly consider me as a friend, don't you?"

"I'm offering my services, Rior. Are you going to listen to me, or not?"

"Of course. I will accept your offer, and gladly. But I think that we should wait to separate until the wolves get here, or even Lorie. There seems to be something that Shadow thinks we still need to do." Rior glanced over his shoulder at Shadow, who was talking in a language so fast that it sounded like buzzing to Rior. "At least, I can't imagine any other reason for waiting here."

"Fair enough."

Rior started to agree, but wings suddenly sounded above his head, and Neretsa landed beside him, changing from a black swan to a woman as she fell. Rior studied her warily. He had half-thought that she would still be sulky with Shadow for punishing her, and who knew what damage a sulky fey could cause? He had had a taste of the damage that a cheerful fey might cause if only asked, given Alami's request to knock down the castle.

Instead, Neretsa was smiling.

"It will be just as it was," she said dreamily. "But better, because humans and wolves will join us for the first time in a long time."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean our dwelling in the forest, of course," said Neretsa, peering at his eyes as if she thought Rior had gone blind. "We shall have to make a place for the humans to live together, and anyone who wants to come and learn the arts of Shadow. It should be at the edge of the forest, where we can retreat if needed but still be close to the common people of the Kingdom and the lost travelers Alami is so fond of. And we shall need wolves to come and live with us, and other animals. And there are still many shapeshifters in the deepened places whom you haven't met, and who don't know their lord has returned. They will have to be persuaded to come back."

"You are interested in creating this place?" Rior asked.

"Of course. Why not?"

"I thought that you were only interested in- well, turning human souls into swans."

Neretsa sniffed. "That was a diversion, something that I turned to when Shadow was banished and there was no one interesting enough to listen to anymore. Before that, I will have you know, I was a teacher of the arts of Shadow, and considered one of the very best. You don't have any idea of what ancient Ilantra was like, Rior, all the arts we had and all the buildings we built and all the peoples we had living with us."

"No, I don't," said Rior, fascinated. "Tell me."

Neretsa began to talk. Listening to the way she went on, Rior had no doubt that he could pass the time enjoyably until the wolves arrived.

Chapter 102

Garden In Impatience

Garden growls as the groove crests yet another ridge and then runs down the other side. Surely they should be near the castle by now? Her pack didn't take this long when they took Human-Scent to the castle.

Of course, the pack kept to the wild areas and ran by day and night, as if the call that they could hear was compelling them. Garden supposes that is the difference.

She reaches the bottom of the little valley, and then pauses to sniff. A sudden, powerful scent has filled the air as the wind shifts, and if it's something dangerous, then she wants to know. Certainly the air is now filled with the stink of humans.

Then she recognizes the other, powerful scent. It is the river that ran by the castle, and the scent of water is thick and heavy in the air. She hears the pack behind her howl for gladness; Garden barely allowed them time to pause and drink at the little streams.

Garden howls and springs forward, expecting it when the ground drops off in yet another ridge and there is the castle before them, sitting on its island in the middle of the River. Wagging her tail furiously, she springs down the slope, outracing the pack. The groove marks the track she takes, straight and true.

It swerves before it gets to the castle, though. Garden follows it faithfully through the grass, and isn't surprised when it leads her into a camp and towards a place where the shadow-wolf stands yelping at birds.

Next to him is Meat-Giver, the shadowy, misty scent that he sheds nearly as distinctive to her now as his lupine one, though she finds it harder to smell him with the River this close.

Garden howls.

Meat-Giver has been listening to a dark woman talk to him, but he turns at the howl, and he smiles he sees her. He shifts into wolf form, and howls back. The sound and the scent fill Garden with a strong sense of home. It is good to be near a packmate again. The only thing better will be going back to the forests.

But, since she has her pack here with her, Garden guesses that she can bear a small delay.

She collides with Meat-Giver and rolls him over and over. He yelps at her, but Garden doesn't care. This is the way that she always greeted her parents when they were still alive, and this is the way that she intends to greet him. They have been apart for a longer time than Garden was ever apart from her parents or pack, anyway.

She nips his ear, and then sits up and crowds in close beside him, sniffing at his tail and letting hers swat him across the face. Meat-Giver growls, but it's a mock-growl, and he pins her face to the ground with a paw for a moment so that he can thoroughly lick behind her ears. Garden growls and wriggles, then looks up as she senses someone pass near them.

The shadow-wolf is looking at them, and his eyes are gentle, his tail wagging. Garden pants at him. The shadow-wolf pants back. He turns around and keeps on yelping to the birds a moment later, but Garden feels welcome.

She flops down beside Meat-Giver, who is now lying on his back with his paws in the air and wriggling his shoulders in the grass. Garden does the same thing to scratch an itch on her back and then lets her tail bang across his face again. Meat-Giver howls and stands up, chasing her in a circle. Garden howls back and keeps just ahead of him, swerving towards the River.

Meat-Giver follows with a slight hesitation, a glance over his shoulder towards the camp. Garden growls. Sometimes he seems to think the shadow-wolf is part of their pack, though Garden is quite definite that he is not. After a moment, though, he follows her, and all is well again.

Garden leads him along the River, pausing to drink herself and howl a greeting to the packs who are already there. Some wagging tails, some sniffs, and then they leave her alone. Garden pants. Only a short time ago, they would have seen that she was a low-ranker from her scars and the way she carries herself, and there would have been a few snarls and bites to go along with the acknowledgment.

Meat-Giver runs up behind her, clumsy as a puppy, and knocks her into the River. Garden yelps and scrambles back to the bank before she can go far; in truth, the water is very shallow near the bank, so that she almost pushed her nose into the mud while getting a drink.

She changes her mind about his clumsiness when she sees him panting at her and wagging his tail so hard that his whole body shakes. She thinks that was deliberate, and that that was his idea of play.

She drops to the ground and starts stalking him. Meat-Giver bows to her, then bolts in mock fright.

They chase each other along the River for a few moments; then Meat-Giver swerves towards the hills again. Garden glances over her shoulder, and sees that humans are standing on the bridge, staring at them. She thinks this a wise decision, and withdraws with him back towards the shadow-wolf's camp.

She doesn't stop chasing him, of course.

Past the water-course, up the hill, and then back towards the camp, Meat-Giver runs with a speed that surprises her. She thought he was still getting used to his new body, but he seems determined to prove her wrong. He darts straight through the center of the camp, and Garden goes after him, ignoring the flutterings of the birds around her. They might be good, but she thinks they would probably change into something else after she bit into them, which is not her idea of a good meal.

Meat-Giver dodges over another hill and down into a small hollow. Garden follows him, leaping and howling when something in the grass rises up to sting her. It feels like a bee.

Meat-Giver spins around and yelps smugly, then yelps much louder himself. Garden glances around, and realizes that the grass is heavy with flowers, and from them the bees are rising up.

Both of them turn and run away with one accord. The bees buzz after them, trying for their eyes and noses, but running wolves can move faster than they can, and Garden and Meat-Giver are soon safely away- though not without a few more stings under the tail.

Garden flops in the grass and growls at Meat-Giver. She would never have run headlong into a patch where bees were harvesting like that. Is he stupid?

Meat-Giver whines and tilts his head to one side as if in apology, but his eyes are direct and his tail wagging. He's not sorry.

Garden pounces up, ready to chase him again, but abruptly finds that she can't move. She growls, wondering if this is some trick of the shadow-wolf. He smells like one who would play tricks like this.

Instead, she sees before her the shining figure of light that she saw once before in the dreamworld. She snarls at it, but it snarls back and says in the human language, "This has gone on long enough. I spared your life once, and it was only on the condition that you give back what was stolen when the time came. I think that the time has come. The Princess is less than three miles away."

Abruptly, the world dims around Garden, and she feels the words vanishing, sliding away like wind or sand.

Chapter 103

Justice and Mercy

"The Light and the Dark both know justice, and they apply it to whom they will. Ultimately, no one can escape judgment, though of course the judgment of Elle and the Light supersedes the judgment of the Dark. But someone may be judged in life for a crime against the Dark, and punished. They know justice, none better, because they stand outside mortal concerns and see the truths we are too often blind to."

-From a training book for young acolytes of Elle.

Rior blinked. He wasn't sure what was happening. A wolf was standing in front of him, but flaring so dazzlingly bright he couldn't look at it, and then speaking strange words about a bargain and taking back what was stolen. "The Princess is less than three miles away" was important, of course, but why had it come here? What did it want with them?

Then he saw Garden's eyes go dull, that intelligence that burned in them shining once and vanishing. Her head drooped, and she cowered away from both Rior and the bright figure, whining.

Rior knew what was happening then. The Light had come, and taken Lorie's stolen wits back, to give them to the Princess so that she wouldn't need Garden around anymore.

Rage filled him, and he leaped, snarling, at the brilliant figure. Of course, a wave of strength bowled him back, and he rolled howling on the grass.

"This is nothing more than a restoration of the natural order, Rior," said the Light in a terribly kind voice. "Wolves were not meant to be born with human intelligence. They were meant to live and die as wolves, unless marked out by Destiny- and that is a different thing altogether. I have taken back Lorie's wits and restored them to the Princess, and restored natural justice and Destiny and balance."

"Is that what you have done?"

The Light turned its head, snarling. Songs the Shadows Sing was pacing down the hill; Rior smelled him coming. But he had gone to Garden and wasn't looking up, instead staring into her eyes and trying to find anything that would suggest Light had lied. Surely there was something in there left of the wolf he knew, something of not just instinct and whatever personality a dog might have, but also of someone as individual as any human.

Nothing. Garden bowed her head before his direct gaze and whined. Rior threw back his head and howled, wishing that he could weep in this form. He thought about taking human form, but then decided staying as he was was better. He wanted to be a wolf, and comfort Garden. She was certainly pressing close to him as if seeking reassurance, though Rior didn't think she knew what had happened.

"This is not justice," said Songs the Shadows Sing, halting a short distance away. "Garden did not steal Loriel's wits, Light. You know that as well as I do. Whatever took them from the Princess was something Garden had no control over."

"That does not change the fact that it was a wrong thing to do," Light insisted. "Whatever power did this interfered with nature, just as it did in giving Loriel the *shielika*. There has to be a reason behind it, some subtle plot, and as soon as I figure out what it is, then I will punish the offender."

"What if there wasn't? What if it just happened?"

"How ridiculous you are! You should know that everything has a reason, that nothing just happens. I will have to look long and hard to find the name of the power that did this; it cannot be a simple answer, or I would have found it already. But I don't think that I need stay here and explain the whole of my search and my reasoning to you. You are one who would have left the wits with this wolf, if you could. I am leaving you now. Justice is served." The brilliant wolf began to glow as if it were going to explode. Garden whined and cuddled closer to Rior. Rior licked her nose.

"No. I think you should stay. I want you to see this."

The Light dimmed a little. "See what?"

Songs the Shadows Sing stalked forward, and halted in front of them. Rior looked up at him, not sure what to say. He meant to change back to human and be articulate, but he stayed wolf, and a whine leaked from his throat. Come to think of it, he was not sure that he could be more articulate.

"It is justice," said Songs the Shadows Sing quietly. "That intelligence was stolen. It did belong to Loriel."

Rior bowed his head, turning his face to the fur of Garden's neck.

"But," said Songs the Shadows Sing, and the tone of his voice, like a swelling trumpet, made Rior look up at him. "If the hand of Light is the hand of justice, then let the hand of Shadow be the hand of mercy."

He took a step forward and breathed softly on Garden. Rior blinked. He could see the cloud of breath, as though the air had suddenly gone cold. It was a strange color, flickering back and forth between gray and black and white, as if it were mist lit by changing lights. Then it vanished, flooding into Garden's miserably staring eyes.

Garden blinked, then bowed her head and pawed at her ears. She looked back up again, then flung herself on the grass and vigorously scratched her back. Rior watched her, vaguely aware that he was panting as if he had run miles.

Garden scrambled back up and growled at him. The light in her eyes was there as if it had never vanished, burning strong and steady. Rior crowded forward, shoving his head against her flank, and hearing her puzzled growl.

"What have you done?" Rior heard Light ask. Not that he paid much attention, when he had fur to sniff.

"Given her a part of myself," said Songs the Shadows Sing calmly.

"That upsets the balance."

"I gave it. It was not stolen. There is no balance to upset."

"Why did you do that? She is only a wolf, and not one of your servants. She does not even really know you as divine." Light's voice was painfully bewildered.

"I fear that you will never understand if you must ask that question," said Songs the Shadows Sing, his voice deep with sadness. "Go now, if you will. What I wanted you to see is done."

The Light uttered a long, low sound that Rior thought sounded more like a hiss than a wolf's growl. Of course, it may have been changing form inside the brilliance that shielded it. Rior still couldn't see it before it gave one final flare and vanished.

Songs the Shadows Sing came over and licked his face gently. "I trust that that was more to your liking," he said.

Garden growled as if in question.

Rior panted, then decided that this was one time that he needed the human words and slipped into shadowy form. Garden growled. He ignored her. "Thank you, my lord. I do not know if words can do what you did justice-

"No need," said Songs the Shadows Sing, glancing away as if he were embarrassed. "This is not a day for the doing of justice, but the doing of mercy."

"You didn't have to give up part of your divine essence to Garden."

Songs the Shadows Sing gave a sharp barking laugh, and then panted. "No, I didn't. What makes you think I did?"

"I don't. But I have never-" Rior paused, wondering if he had the words, and decided to forge ahead anyway. If he had the wrong words, then he would go back and find new ones once he had spoken the first. "I have never known a power or a god who would do something like that. The Light says that if someone fails or loses something, it is because of Destiny, or because he tried to turn aside from the path of his Destiny and was dragged back again. I have never heard of Light giving something like that to a servant."

"I would prefer that you think of yourself as a champion, or a child, or a student, than a servant."

"That is something they would never say, either."

Songs the Shadows Sing gave his tail one flop, and then said, "Would you explain to Garden? She looks rather confused." While Rior was still blinking, he turned and trotted up the hill again.

Rior smiled. Perhaps the mortal things that he was doing were just as new to Shadow as they were to Rior. He might need some time to get used to them, if that was the case.

Rior thought he could allow him that time.

He knelt down beside Garden and stroked her face with one misty hand. Almost he imagined he could feel fur beneath it, though he thought that was more a consequence of memory as a wolf than actually touching it. Garden sneezed as water dripped down her fur, and then looked up at him.

"You lost the light in your mind," said Rior softly. "It belonged to Lorie, and Light came and took it back again."

Garden snarled at him. Rior had become used to reading her eyes as well as her sounds and the flash of her teeth, though, and thought this was more the result of confusion than anything else.

"Light is like the alpha of alphas for many humans," he said. "And Lorie is a part of his pack. He wanted the light because he thought it belonged to her alone, and that you had unfairly stolen it from her."

Garden stared at him. Rior sighed. He knew that the concepts weren't making much sense. In a wolf pack, if another wolf took a kill from the one who had made it, it was because of pack rank or because the first one wasn't strong enough to hold it. Theft wasn't possible, because the complicated rules that it needed weren't possible.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Just know that it took the light in your mind, and then Shadow gave it back again."

Garden lowered her head and sniffed deeply at the grass where Songs the Shadows Sing had stood, as though to make sure that she would recognize his scent when they met again. Then she looked at Rior and growled irritably.

"Don't you want to hear more about this?" Rior asked, surprised and amused at once. "I didn't think that you would forget it so easily."

Garden growled.

Rior sighed and shed his human shape, becoming solid and lupine again. Garden nipped him on the shoulder at once, then turned and ran off across the grass again. It wasn't fast enough that he couldn't catch her, of course.

Rior panted. He doubted that what had happened really mattered to her. She remained ignorant of Light and the politics of the divine powers, but that ignorance also made her innocent. In some ways, Rior wished that he himself could have it.

He ran after her, and they sported and hunted a hare that started up before them and killed it and ate it and drank from the River and then sprawled on the grass in the sun and went to sleep.

Life was good, very good. And Rior was even ready when Princess Loriel arrived.

Not that that went the way he thought it should, of course.

Chapter 104

Forth From The Forests

I remember this track. This was almost the same one that we took to the castle last time. Are you really just going to walk along it in full sight of everyone? Everyone will know about us at once.

Oh, very well. I don't believe you, but I will wait and see.

Greetings, my Lady Alami. I wanted to thank you for the wondrous visions that you showed me in the pool. I have a fondness for Ilantran history.

Yes, it is true that I was created by an *obrynn*.

I do not know where he is, no. He created me, and stayed with me for a time that humans would probably name in years. And then he laid me down and left one day. I assume that he had matters of his own to attend to. He was always doing things that I didn't understand when we were together.

Why would you like to meet him, my lady? Even the lesser fey avoided him.

So you could talk to him. I understand that impulse. I sometimes wanted to ask him why he made me the way he did, with the ability to talk but not laugh, and now I would have more questions. I can see the world in such brilliancy through human eyes. Why didn't he give me this?

Perhaps he wouldn't have wanted such distractions if I had any particular purpose to accomplish. But I don't think that he created me for anything. He just laid me down and wandered away, and since then I have helped win Kingdoms and also hung on walls for years. I have served Light, and not served anyone in particular. And now I suppose that I serve Shadow.

I don't know what I will do now. Stay with my lord and his people, I suppose. What else would I do?

Ah, here is a village. Surely the people here will strike at us? I thought the faith of the Light was still strong among them.

No, they are smiling and strewing gifts in our path. Some of them are afraid of the alpha of alphas, but that is to be expected. Tell me, my Lady Alami, do you know why they welcome us so fervently?

All of them?

Does the Queen know that Shadow has taken her Kingdom from under her?

Can I be the one to tell her?

Chapter 105

The Second Arrival of Princess Lorie

"Many monarchs do nothing but what they wish to. Of course, many people would do the same, if they only could. But monarchs need not tame their desires to reality, as those other people do.

"For this reason, there is no one so suited to become a tyrant as a Queen or King bred and born."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

"Her Highness!"

Rior heard the shout, and it woke him up suddenly. He stood and shook his coat. He nudged Garden, who opened her eyes and glared at him sleepily, then suddenly sniffed the air. In seconds, she was up and moving towards the crest of the hill with him beside her.

Songs the Shadows Sing padded towards them, his mouth open as he panted and his eyes glowing. "Rior," he said.

Rior looked up at him, not sure why Shadow would speak to him in such a manner. There was something in his eyes, in his voice, that suggested that he knew something that Rior didn't.

"Let things fall out as they will," said Songs the Shadows Sing quietly. "I know that you could interfere, and change them. Do not. This is the best way for all things to work out."

Rior whined.

"I know," said the great wolf, and then sat on his haunches and watched as the black unicorn came over the hill, carrying Lorie on its back. "I wish that we could have what we worked so hard for, too. But it can wait. Remember that we will have time to solve these problems."

Rior whined again, not understanding at all, but Garden leaned her head against his shoulder as if she did, and Rior was content to feel her breath and listen to the cheers of the humans who were coming down the hill behind Lorie.

The wolves who lay near the River raised their heads and howled as the humans approached. The humans in the castle must hear nothing threatening in that, though, because they were already pouring across the bridge and towards the Princess. At the head of the line that was coming to welcome her walked Queen Aloriadell, her head up. Rior thought she would probably make this a ceremonious occasion. Of course, she hadn't seen her daughter in twelve years, so it was hard to see how it could be casual and comfortable.

"Go closer," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "We need to hear this."

Rior wagged his tail and trotted down the slope, Garden beside him. The great wolf broke into shadows and ran beside him. Rior thought he probably would have drawn too much attention if he had gone in his other form, and wagged his tail again to approve the change. A mock growl sounded in his ear, and Shadow's voice said haughtily, "I have no need for your approval."

Rior panted.

Then they were close to the Princess, and Rior could hear the words that Queen Aloriadell spoke as she bowed.

"Your Highness, Princess Lorie, True Heir to the thrones of Ilantra and Arvenna," said the Queen. "I have long wished for a meeting with you."

"You are my mother?"

The Queen nodded, and Rior thought the nod was not perfectly easy. Even the ceremonious Queen of Arvenna was having a little difficulty with this, as she might be expected to. "Yes. We cast you into the woods because we knew that we would have a child who was powerfully Light-Destined, and one who was Dark-Destined. We thought it better that our Dark-Destined child should take the throne."

"But now your Dark-Destined child is dead."

Rior growled. A true Queen would have shown more compassion. Lorie just made the statement with a smirk in the back of her voice.

Queen Aloriadell flinched, but nodded. "Yes. We have agreed that you should take the thrones, in order to prevent civil war among the nobles over which of them is the True Heir."

"Yes." Lorie tossed her head, and somehow her hair floated behind her, though Rior thought that it should have clung matted close to her head. "And you will let me take the throne at once?"

"Well, no," said Aloriadell. "In both Kingdoms, the laws require you to be at least sixteen when you begin to rule. You have only four years to go, but much to learn in that time. I will rule as Regent for you until you are sixteen, and teach you what I know."

Lorie went quite still. Rior could almost smell her confusion, and then her rising rage.

He growled, wondering if this was the point at which the things would start to go wrong that Songs the Shadows Sing had warned him of.

"I will not accept that," said Lorie.

The nobles standing behind the Queen began their murmuring and stirring. The Queen herself stood with head up and ignored them. When their voices had died back again, she said, "Why is that, my daughter?"

"Do not call me that," said Loriei. "I was never your daughter. You cast me into the woods, hoping that I would die. Instead, the wolves found me and raised me. I am more their daughter than yours!"

She glanced over her shoulder at the packs on the riverbank. Most of them were searching for fleas, though, and none of them looked ready to stand up and run forward to support Loriei's claim.

There was an embarrassed silence. Then Loriei turned back to face her mother. "The Dark has ruled in the Kingdoms long enough. I cast you from the throne and the Regency, Mother. I shall begin to rule soon, depending on the advice that I receive from the true masters of Ilantra, the people of the villages."

Rior closed his eyes. So this was what Songs the Shadows Sing had meant. He failed to see how it could be good or needed in any way, though.

"Very well," said the Queen, and her voice was fragile, as though holding back tears. Rior opened his eyes to see what would happen next. "Then I will return to Arvenna, and take another husband. Ilantra is yours." She bowed and started to turn away.

"Arvenna is mine as well."

The Queen turned back, and the air around her began to glow. Rior was glad to see that she was showing some spirit, even though he suspected it was useless. "You have never been to Arvenna! You know nothing of her Court, her customs, her people. You do not know what it means to control the lightning magic that lies in your blood. You could not rule there."

"I will learn." Rior couldn't see Loriei's face, but had the disturbing feeling that she was smiling. "I can learn anything, Mother, and in time my people will accept and come to love me. That is what you do not understand. They were lovers of the Light, these common people, long before they were ruled by the Dark. The Light shall come back, and rule them."

Queen Aloriadell shook her head. "You cannot do this. You are only twelve years old."

"And the Chosen and Destined of Light." Loriei's voice sounded loud and vain, and her aura of Destiny flared around her as if she would use it alone to triumph over her mother. "You don't understand, Aloriadell. I am perfectly capable of ruling as I am now, because I cannot take a wrong action with Light whispering in my ear. But you are no longer capable of such a thing. You forsook the path of Light, if you ever walked it, for the path of Darkness long ago. I suggest that you leave. Or I would suggest it, if I thought that I

could depend upon you to go far away and make no trouble ever again. But I can't. So, I will have to kill you."

"Or try."

Rior looked around. He didn't think it was Queen Aloriadell who had spoken those words; already, the glow was dying out of the air around her, and he knew that she was losing her nerve in the face of her daughter's unshakable confidence. The voice seemed to come from the ground, instead, or the sky.

Or the shadows.

Rior found himself gazing at the shadows that reached towards Queen Aloriadell. One of them wrapped around her waist, and she made a little gasping sound, as if she had plunged into cold water.

Loriel shouted and threw flame forward.

It only singed those nobles who didn't hop out of the way fast enough, and set fire to some posts of the bridge. Aloriadell was gone as if she had melted into the shadows. And then the shadows fled away, and there was nothing left. Loriel leaped off the unicorn's back and stood staring into the River, as if she thought that her mother had dived into the water. But nothing peered back.

Rior felt an impulse then, so strong that he had almost taken a step forward before he fought it. He wanted to trot up behind Loriel and push her into the River. She was a Scarlet mage; she would be all but helpless in the water. And she might drown quickly, and save them all a lot of trouble.

"Don't, Rior."

Rior turned at the whisper from next to him. A pair of eyes had formed in the shadows on the ground and was staring at him.

"Pull back," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "Now is not our time, and I don't think it will come while Loriel is Queen. But you know that things change with the years, and it is possible that Loriel's children will be better than she is, and able to take the throne with less fuss and fanfare."

"Rior!"

That was not Shadow's voice, and Rior turned his head. Loriel was standing in the middle of the bridge, and beckoning to him.

Rior glanced at Garden, who growled, and then towards the shadows. But the glowing eyes had vanished, and he had no idea what Shadow would have told him to do. He didn't know what LorieL was going to ask of him, which made it much harder.

He trotted forward, feeling Garden shift beside him and then follow him. Together, they crossed the bank and stepped onto the bridge, halting in front of the Princess.

She looked down at them. Rior gazed back at her and felt a stab of sadness. Dark had changed Prince Imor into something grotesque and strange, giving him wings and claws and horrible ideas. But just because Light hadn't changed the Princess outwardly, Rior didn't think that it had wreaked less damage on her.

"You told me that I have a disease in my blood," LorieL went on. "You said that you would have to find someone to heal me of it. Well, change back to your human form now and tell me of a healer."

Rior felt a blast of vindictive satisfaction enter him, and he didn't hesitate to shift back to human form, despite Garden's trying to bite him. Shadow didn't say anything, so Rior supposed it was all right to speak these words.

He bowed from the waist, as he drifted there, and said, "My Princess, there is no cure."

"What?" LorieL flapped a hand in irritation. "Of course there is. Just tell me where to start looking."

"No," said Rior. "There is not. An elf came to Court, representing the Queen of Doralissa, and I asked her about the *shielika*. She told me there was no cure." He nodded to the nobles who now stood on the other side of the bridge. "These people were there with me, and heard her. You have perhaps ten years, perhaps thirteen, and then you will die."

LorieL faced the nobles. "Is that true?" she asked.

One of the lords came forward and bowed. "My Princess, we heard her say it," he said. "But that does not mean it is true. There may be a cure that she didn't know about. Light would not have given you a disease that had no cure."

"Yes, of course." Princess LorieL's face cleared, and she glanced back at Rior. "Why did you try to make me worry?"

"My lady, an elf who is immortal and knows far more about the world than any of us doesn't know a cure," said Rior. He considered those words the only ones that he needed to say.

LorieL waved a hand. "That doesn't matter. I will find a cure. And then I will turn my attention to the other Kingdoms. I'm sure that they want their Light restored, as well."

"I would not do that," said Rior quietly, thinking of the Doralissan armies, the Orlathian dragon, the Rivendonian army that Shadow had apparently turned back only by hard negotiating.

"You would not do that," said Lorie, "because you serve Shadow, and you forsook the Light completely when you became the strange thing that you now are." There was a look of disgust on her face as she stared at him. "And this has gone on quite long enough. Guards, kill him."

Rior stood there and let the water and the fire and the wind strike through him. Garden growled and retreated to the other side of the bridge, but the mages could attack Rior all they liked; nothing affected the soft and shadowy stuff of which his body was made.

Lorie waved a hand to make them cease at last, and said, "At least, Rior, you will never be welcome in the castle again."

"Is it too much to hope that I might be?"

Rior turned his head. Luden lay on the grass behind him. He knew that he hadn't brought the sword there, but there was no time to wonder about it, as the sword launched into a long speech that was rapturous in praise of Lorie's beauty and wisdom. Rior smiled a little. Knowing that the sword was to be their spy, he felt better.

Lorie at last went forward, walking through Rior to show that she wasn't afraid, and picked Luden up. Then she turned around and walked back through him. Rior shivered. It was an odd feeling, like a tickle that started around his heart and then radiated outwards.

Lorie turned to face the packs and Rior again. "I have what I have come for. And I would thank you for your help, but I know now that you meant to set up a Regency and establish Shadow as a power in the Court, and I cannot really thank you for that." Her eyes flared suddenly and viciously. "Go!"

Rior turned and drifted away from the castle without bowing again. No, that had not gone exactly as he imagined.

But, when he glanced down at Garden beside him, he had cause to wonder if he would have wanted to stay in the castle anyway.

Garden growled. Rior laughed and changed back to wolf form.

Garden promptly bit him.

Garden Going Home

Garden ignores Meat-Giver's little yelp-and-dance routine. He thinks that he has a right to object? She's the one who ran miles either way, and came to a human-place where she spent more time than she ever meant to, and had her mouth burned by strange meat. She thinks that she is the one who has a right to object.

"Come."

Garden looks up and sees the shadow-wolf forming ahead. She has almost gotten used to his odd appearances and disappearances, though she still doesn't like them. She growls at him, and he looks back at her and pants. Then he turns and raises his voice in a howl.

The packs stand as if someone had stung them, and howl back. Still howling, the shadow-wolf runs up the ridge that Garden descended, and the packs begin to follow him. Garden does so, but turns and glares at Meat-Giver when she realizes that he is still looking wistfully back at the human-place.

That is done. He is done with them.

She trots back and nips him hard on the shoulder once more, this time hard enough to make blood flow from under his fur. Meat-Giver turns back around, and snarls at her. Garden snarls back and runs away, and is not surprised when he begins to chase her.

A few of the humans have curved sticks, and they shoot straight sticks at the packs. But, when she glances back, Garden sees the straight sticks melting into shadows in mid-air, and hears a high and excited voice ask in the human language, "Rior, can I knock the castle down *now*?"

After that, the packs are allowed to leave in peace, and even the birds that begin to fly above them are not hurt.

Garden tries not to wag her tail too hard. She'll give away Meat-Giver's position if she does, and she wants to make sure that he has a chance at this, his first real kill.

Then he springs forward, and his teeth crunch down. Garden can hear the strangled squeak, and then Meat-Giver stands up, wagging his tail, mouse held in his teeth.

Garden trots up to him, growling in approval, and tries to take the mouse from him. One privilege of the alpha that is very nice is having others hunt for you. And she thinks that she should have the mouse.

Meat-Giver objects, and in the scuffling, much of the mouse is torn loose and lost down his throat. Garden finishes the tussle with a nip on his nose, and sets him to stalking another mouse that she noticed in the grass. Meat-Giver stands there with a puzzled air instead of beginning the stalk, though, and Garden finally has to go and see what the matter is, since it's obvious that Meat-Giver has no concentration.

She sees the shadows in the middle of the meadow dancing together, and thinks the shadow-wolf is probably coming back. She growled and turns back to the mouse-hunting. Surely Meat-Giver can watch the shadow-wolf form later.

Then she hears a voice ask in the human tongue, "What happened?"

Garden turns back quickly. Standing there is the woman that she saw on the wooden thing across the water, in front of Human-Scent. She is blinking her strange eyes and staring at her hands as if she didn't know quite what to make of them.

"Queen Aloriadell."

Garden turns with a snarl of rage. If Meat-Giver doesn't stop turning back into a human, then she is afraid that he might lose the ability to become a wolf. That would be stupid of him.

But Meat-Giver is bowing, and he gives her the stern look that says this is important. Garden sits down, miffed. Mouse-hunting is important, too, and she still has a lot to teach him about being a wolf. Will he ever learn that human affairs are not more important? They are just stupid things.

"You were in Shadow," says Meat-Giver. "And I think that he plans to take you back to the forest with us."

:"What? Why?"

Meat-Giver's voice rings with sadness as he says, "My lady, you are bereft of your thrones. Your daughter has claimed both of them, and will kill you if she finds you. I think that you should stay with us, at least if you want to maintain a semblance of a true life."

"But what am I without a throne?" asks the human woman, looking at the ground as if she stood before an alpha. "And my people will suffer without a ruler. I could go home and try to rule-"

"Loriel would only kill you," says Meat-Giver. "And a waste that would be."

Garden yawns. So the woman doesn't want to live without her seat? That is strange. But while Garden is willing to concede that not all humans are stupid, she thinks that most of them are, so this is not a surprise.

"What do I have to live for?" the woman whispered.

"The next Regency."

"What are you talking about?"

Garden also wonders what he is talking about, but she doesn't care, unlike this woman. She flings herself into the grass and rubs her shoulders in it, to remind Meat-Giver that she's there. Meat-Giver ignores her. Garden glares at him and promises herself a bite later.

"Loriel will have to have a child," says Meat-Giver. "Even as she looks for a cure for the disease, her people will insist on an Heir, and so she will bear one. And when she is beginning to die and the child is born, then you can go back and become Regent. You couldn't teach Loriel better, but you will be able to teach the child better."

The woman stares at him. Garden wonders why. Meat-Giver isn't all that remarkable, once you get used to him being made of both fur and shadow.

"That is cold," she says at last.

Meat-Giver shrugs. "That is what must be. I can't think of any other way. I certainly can't think of a way to rescue Loriel from the Light. Can you?"

The woman shakes her head. Then she says, "But what will I do in the meantime?"

"There are many arts of Shadow that you can learn," says Meat-Giver, with a smile. "And of course, Dark and Shadow need to learn to understand each other, and since you serve the Dark, you can-"

Garden doesn't hear any more, since she has decided that Meat-Giver is not coming back for right now and gone to sleep.

"It seems so different."

Garden glances back at Meat-Giver in impatience. They are in sight of the forest, and he has decided to stop and change into a human, and make as little sense as a puppy trying out its first howls.

"I wonder what it will be like to live in the forest?"

Garden growls.

"And if I will feel more human or lupine-"

Garden howls.

Meat-Giver looks down at her in surprise. "What is it?"

Garden glares at him. One does not stand around howling and mumbling and mock-howling about home. One goes in.

Abruptly, Meat-Giver starts to laugh. He changes back into a wolf, but he is still panting.

Garden reminds herself that he has much to learn about being a proper wolf, and begins to run forward. Meat-Giver follows. In seconds, they are over the grass and under the shade of the trees; in minutes, they are in the forest and running beside a small stream. Garden can hear the other packs moving, going back to their own territories. She keeps running. She knows that many wolves live around here, and she wants a place where she and Meat-Giver can share territory comfortably. Perhaps in the deepened places.

Slowly, the noise of the other packs fades to little more than a single howl. Garden and Meat-Giver run on, through the trees, beside the stream, and into shadows. Garden feels herself relaxing, growing happier, the tension easing away.

She is in the forest, and in her pack.

Chapter 107

The Death of Princess Lorie

762 IR

"Sometimes it is good to know what will happen."

-Priestess of Elle, defending the art of prophecy.

"We can enter without trouble," said Rior, as he gazed up at the walls of the castle he had not seen for ten years. It didn't look very different, though he supposed the tempers of the people who were in the castle had altered a great deal. They would have spun intrigues, seen them collapse, come to worship the Light, betrayed it as they sought for an advantage, and above all sought some cure for their young Queen. There was none to be had, though, and this night everyone in the castle was praying for the Goddess to give Her Majesty some healing. "Starless, are you ready?"

The black wolf at his side nodded. The light in his eyes was the same light that glowed in Garden's, and after all, it should be, since he was her son. Rior ruffled his fur with one misty hand, and the black wolf sneezed and trotted forward, halting just beneath the window that Luden had told them was the Queen's.

Luden.

Rior glanced over his shoulder, and saw the transformed sword standing and talking to Alami, as he had all through their march. He managed to look like a sword even though he was human now, with a sharp, spare face and brown eyes as severe as his dragonbone hilt. But Rior didn't mind that. It was too late in his existence to expect Luden to change, and there wouldn't have been much point in expecting it.

Then Starless howled.

The sound pulled Rior's head around, even after ten years of living among wolves and hearing them sing many similar songs. He and Garden had gone when the alpha of her old pack died, and then again when the next one died, to join in the singing. Time slid past, and it touched neither of them, but it did take other wolves- some of them in the hunt, some of cold in the winter, some of bitter old age.

Rior had asked Songs the Shadows Sing once why neither of them aged, and the great wolf had simply looked at him. Rior supposed that was all the answer he was going to get.

Rior heard shutters bang as humans flung their windows open to the noise of the howling, and remembered how he would have felt if he had awakened from a sound sleep to hear that beneath the walls. Once or twice, he had heard similar sounds, usually from some Dark creature, and fear had crept through his heart.

Now, he knew Shadow and Dark both extremely well, and he had little fear left of anything alive.

He could hear humans exclaiming, but he drifted forward, ignoring them. He crossed the River easily- now, he knew it wouldn't sweep apart the boundaries of his misty body; nothing could do that unless he willed it- and up the wall, moving through the shadows there until he arrived in the Queen's room.

Loriel lay panting on the bed. Even with the ten years that had passed, Rior knew her. Those lightning-marked eyes were impossible to hide. But otherwise, she looked far different. Taller, of course, and adult. But the *shielika* had been at work on her, and once it began its run, it moved devastatingly swift, faster than wolves running cross-country. Her face was covered with wrinkles, her hands with liver spots, her hair turning white and brittle. Even as Rior watched, a large clump of it fell from her head and drifted to the floor, where it broke apart into dust.

"You- you've come back to claim the throne."

Rior looked up. "Is that old misconception still lingering?" he asked. "No, we've come to set up a Regency."

"With yourself as Regent, of course."

"No." Rior turned, and gestured. Wings passed across the sky, and two great swans bore Queen Aloriadell to the window. She had to duck slightly to pass through the window, but not much; with the advent of age, she had begun to shrink a little. But she still looked far stronger and healthier than her daughter. She stood and gazed down at Lorie, and said nothing.

"No," said Lorie. "You can't- that is, you cannot-"

"Yes, we can," said Rior quietly. "Ilantra and Arvenna shall be ruled by the true blood of both Kingdoms. That has not changed. But it shall not be ruled again by a child-monarch, who has depleted her people in the desperate search for a cure and her war on the Dark. It shall be ruled by a Regent for nine years, and then your son will come of age and can take the throne."

"My son is dead."

Rior shook his head. "So you wanted us to think. But the shadows have kept watch, and defeated every noble who tried to kill him."

Lorie gasped, then coughed weakly, the sound rattling in her chest. She tried to sit up, but fell back; her brittle bones could no longer support her weight. "You would corrupt my son, turn him to Shadow-"

"He was born that way," said Queen Aloriadell then, her voice without any tremor. Rior looked at her in admiration. She was much stronger than she had been when she fled the castle with them. Of course, she had had years to prepare for this moment, and see her daughter ignore Arvenna and despoil Ilantra. "With his heart and mind turned to Shadow. He shall grow up encouraged to become that way, if that is what he wants." She slid a sidelong glance at Rior. "Rior sometimes brought me with him, and Shadow helped me watch over my grandson. I know that he dreams of leopards. I think that we shall have a shapeshifter on our hands when he grows up."

"No!" shrieked Lorie. "It isn't fair! I fought so long- so hard- the Light-"

"It is over," said Rior, and he leaned close and listened to the rattle of breath in her lungs. Yes, she was dying. He had spent years listening to victims of the *shielika*, to learn if it was possible to find a cure after all, and he knew what the final throes sounded like. Lorie was on the verge.

"I curse you," Lorie whispered, even as her eyes closed. "Light shall find the way back to the throne someday."

"Perhaps," said Rior, stepping away. "I would be surprised if a monarch of your line didn't turn to the Light. But never in the same way again, Princess. Your time is over."

"I am the Queen."

"Of what, Your Majesty?"

The breath rushed out of Lorie's lungs, and she was gone.

Rior bowed, feeling sadness rush up inside him in answer to that last breath. It was a life wasted. It was ten years wasted, the ten years they had been forced to wait while memories among the nobles of what had happened grew dim and Lorie invented her own history. He glanced at the Queen.

"I think that Prince Halieth would be happy to see you, Your Majesty. The playmate he looked for in the shadows is the best one to comfort him right now."

Aloriadell nodded, and walked out of the room, accompanied by shadows, towards another room that she knew well.

Rior looked back at the corpse and shook his head. "All that you could have been, gone," he told her softly. "And you destroyed so much. We avoided war, though. There was that much."

"Rior?"

Rior turned his head in surprise. Luden was clinging precariously to the wall outside the window. Rior floated forward and reached out cautiously. Just as he could grasp Luden's hilt in sword form, he could do the same thing to his arm in human form, and he pulled him over the ledge.

"What are you doing here?" Rior asked.

"I came to tell-" Luden looked back at the form on the bed. "Oh, damn. Is she gone?"

"Yes."

"Damn," said Luden again.

Rior laughed. "What would you have told her?"

"That Shadow had taken her Kingdom from under her."

Rior studied the aged face one last time. "I think she knew. Could you draw the blanket over her, please?"

Luden did as he asked, and then they went to attend the declaration of the Regency and one confused, sleepy seven-year-old as the True Heir of Ilantra-Arvenna.

It wasn't all that it could have been, Rior thought, as he watched the nobles, who knew power when they saw it, submitting willingly to Queen Aloriadell. But it certainly could have been much worse.

And the forests are waiting for me.

Epilogue

Wolves In The Castle

772 IR

Ah, yes. Just adjust me a little so that my hilt catches the slanting sunset, will you?

That has been such a long and intriguing tale. I am glad that I was finally able to tell it properly, and you to hear it properly, Idessen. Purged of unworthy ambitions, I think that you will make a good historian.

What? Of course I can still become human. And I do, regularly. But now and then I want to spend time as a sword, too, just so that I don't forget. I think it's the reason my Lord Rior regularly changes back and forth from human to wolf, and King Halieth from human to leopard. We must not forget. The true gift of shapeshifting is to walk two worlds at once, knowing both and belonging in both, not to forget one or the other, or shed a body that you don't want.

Of course Shadow would teach you shapeshifting if you have a mind to learn it, Idessen. What do you want to be?

Well, that is a noble ambition.

I can't laugh in this form, remember? I have heard many people who came to us to learn say that they want to be ravenous predators. Or they want to be birds, not out of love for the bird-form, but to fly. But your wanting to be a butterfly is not laughable. It is only noble.

Ah, yes, there they go again, chasing each other through the garden. I like the castle a lot better now than I did during the reign of Queen Lorie. The loudest sound that you could hear then was the nobles plotting. But now it is busy, always with the sound of feet and the yelps of wolves. Don't you like it better, Idessen?

If you want to know the answer to that question, you must ask Rior himself. I don't think that he cares much about Court intrigues any more. He doesn't even come to Court unless the Queen or King ask for him, have you noticed? He spends far more time in the forests with his mate and his children and grandchildren. They have become quite a pack.

Granted, they ask for him a great deal.

The only way you can learn about Shadow is embracing it, Idessen. Go and stand in one-say one in the garden below. Feel it sinking into your body, and feeling you with coolness, and then speak to it.

Any words you like.

Then you just see what happens.

If you still want to worship the Light, then of course you don't have to do it. Light has never come to peace with Shadow. But Dark is quite content with affairs as they are. You could worship Dark, if you wanted.

Don't glare at me like that, Idessen. It was a joke.

And here is the alpha of alphas come visiting again! I thought there was a reason all the wolves fell silent at once. Go forth and greet him, if you want. I have greeted him once before, and we know what we would say to each other.

Farewell, Idessen. I will be available tomorrow if you want to talk to me.

Come out, my lady. I know you are there.

The giggling. It always gives you away.

A moment-

There. I always feel better when I'm human around you. And you look as though you have thought of a grand joke. What is it?

No, my lady Alami, I don't think that we should knock down the castle. Rior said he wouldn't like it.

Of course, that's a good point. Rior doesn't live here anymore, and he might not mind if it was knocked down if you got everyone out first. But I would still ask King Halieth.

Of course, my lady. He went this way, I think.