

## Chapter 41

### Uncertainties of the Elves

*"Amid all the uncertainties of the world, there are some certainties, after all."*

-Dying words of Queen Joydancer of Doralissa.

"You don't have to come with me."

"Oh, it's no trouble. I think that it will be interesting. Besides, now you have heard a prophecy that seems to concern all four royals at once. That could be important to what we're trying to do."

"Which is what?"

Pannerel closed his mouth and gazed at him calmly. Kymenos gritted his teeth. Getting answers out of the elf was as frustrating as it always had been.

Pannerel had turned around the moment Kymenos had assured him that he needed nothing for his head, and was now gathering up the remains of Kymenos's breakfast with an air of high excitement about him. Every time a bird called, or the leaves rustled with the passing of the wind, he would jerk his head up, only to lower it again and sigh when he realized what it was.

"What are you waiting for?" Kymenos asked at last.

"For Annalithiel to come back," said Pannerel simply. "Then we can go through into your own world."

"We can't go now?" Kymenos was unnerved. He had thought that he might be able to get out of the elven world, if not away from the annoying elves who inhabited it. Juladi seemed strange and dangerous to him now, full of secrets that whispered inside his head and prophecies that laughed cruelly when he questioned them in an attempt to find out what they meant.

*It's good that the prophecy was so clear, really. It seems that I know exactly what I must do. But I am still uneasy.*

"No," Pannerel was saying. "We have to wait until Annalithiel gets back from scouting your world."

"But I want to go now."

Pannerel just looked calmly at him. "We have to wait."

Kymenos folded his arms and sat down on the branch. It seemed an injustice to him, that he couldn't at least go back and drop himself into a pool until he stopped smelling. And he had to find new clothes; the orange robe was tattered and ripped beyond repair. It wasn't a matter of vanity at this point, just a matter of making sure that he didn't faint from the stink.

"Ah, here she is," said Pannerel.

Kymenos looked around, but saw nothing at all. A moment later, Annalithiel stepped out of the air and nodded to them.

Kymenos scowled. *If he could sense when she was coming, why did he waste the time jerking his head at shadows and birds and wind? Probably just to show off and impress the human.*

Annalithiel said softly in Orlathian, "They found them, Pannerel."

Pannerel's face went very still, the animation that seemed always there draining out of it. "Where?"

Annalithiel glanced at Kymenos.

Kymenos rolled his eyes. "Speak in Elven if you want. I won't feel slighted. You doubtless have important secrets to tell each other."

"Yes, we do," said Annalithiel, and then turned towards Pannerel and went on speaking in Onnalathiel. Kymenos stared, then snorted. He was almost sure that they were doing that just to be elven, too.

Almost sure.

He sat down on the branch again and stared out into the green-lit spaces. Birds flitted past, hunting or bringing home food to their nests hidden somewhere under the vast leaves. Kymenos heard a twang like a harp from the tail of one flying bird, and smiled sourly. *That must be the harpbird that Pannerel was going to show me. I would rather have seen one than heard that prophecy.*

Abruptly, a flash of red feathers caught his eye. Kymenos stared. A bird was watching him from behind a leaf, tilting its long swan-like neck to get a glimpse, and though he was not quite sure, he thought it was the bird that had been beside him when he awoke the first time, speaking to some unknown master.

He stood up. The bird at once took flight, its long red tail streaming behind it, its call a thrill of warning.

"What is the matter, Kymenos?"

Kymenos glanced up at the elves, unable to believe they hadn't seen or heard the creature. Chaos knew it was distinctive. "That bird, with the long red tail," he said, pointing it out. "I think it's a spy."

Annalithiel followed his pointing finger. She shook her head. "That's just an *ilmaria*," she said. "They're everywhere in Juladi."

"But it was sitting by my head when I awoke, and reporting something to someone."

"Really?" Annalithiel reached out and put one hand on his forehead. Kymenos blinked. Her fingers were strangely warm, as if she really did have a light imprisoned under the skin. "Are you sure that it wasn't just a dream, or something that your mind made up?"

Kymenos shook his head stubbornly. "The bird was real. It flew away when I reached for it."

"The bird was real," Annalithiel agreed, "but the voice need not have been."

"Why don't you believe me?"

"Because," said Annalithiel, "we know all the powers that are moving now. We have made very sure to keep track of them, so that we might stay distant from the conflict and keep our people safe. And none of those powers would have a reason to send a spy to Juladi. We are only resting here, not keeping secrets here."

"Except for me."

Annalithiel glanced at Pannerel. "Do you think that any power would have a reason to spy on him?"

"Perhaps," said Pannerel, staring intently at Kymenos, "depending on how much he annoyed them."

"I haven't annoyed any power that I can think of," said Kymenos, "except for Destiny."

"Then it was a dream," said Annalithiel, and turned back towards Pannerel, to resume her conversation in Elven.

Kymenos ground his teeth and looked towards the flash of red that was whipping behind a leaf. A moment later, though he couldn't be sure at this distance, he thought he saw the head peek out again, the eyes aiming towards him.

*But I suppose it must be nothing,* he thought savagely, glaring back at the bird, *since the elves have said so.*

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"I don't want to rescue Alliana."

"You don't have much choice," said Annalithiel, reaching out and tapping the air. A shimmering gate of light opened. Beyond it, Kymenos could see a courtyard of the Orlathian castle, in his own world. He eyed it with longing, but didn't dash through. The elves were sending him home, but with an escort, and with instructions to do something he didn't like when he got there.

"I only don't have a choice if I obey Destiny's dictates," he said. "I think that I could walk away from the castle and Alliana, if you would help me."

"We aren't going to attract Destiny's attention right now, for helping you or anyone else," said Annalithiel, her beautiful face severe. "I thought that you would see that, Kymenos. It is risky for us to be helping at all, for us to intervene to heal your wounds or to send you back."

"Then why did you?"

Annalithiel glanced at Pannerel and said something soft in their own language. The male elf nodded back, and then walked through the gate. Kymenos stood where he was for a moment, continuing to look at Annalithiel.

"The history-tales say that the Orlathian royal family is your charge, that you swore yourself to guard them."

"Yes," she agreed, without the slightest sign of embarrassment or hesitation.

"Then why don't you go back and rescue Princess Alliana yourself? Why spend all your time standing around and telling me to do it, as if it were really my chosen task as well as my Destined one?"

"It is not for you to question the ways of the elves," said Annalithiel, face becoming more severe. It was frightening to stand there and look into her eyes, but Kymenos weighed his fear against his irritation at having to go back and help Alliana again. Irritation won.

"I think it is, when those ways don't make any sense and they seem content to ignore warnings of dangers like that *ilmaria* bird."

Annalithiel grabbed his elbow and shoved him through the portal. Kymenos tried to brace his feet so that he didn't slip, but it was useless against elven strength; in seconds, he was through, and stumbling so that he went to his knees in the courtyard. He cursed, feeling stone bite into his knees. The robe was no protection at all anymore.

"You questioned her, didn't you?" asked Pannerel, standing there with his arms folded and examining Kymenos with an expression that came the closest to prim Kymenos had seen an elven face come.

"Yes," said Kymenos. "Help me up."

Pannerel turned his back without speaking.

Kymenos ground his teeth and glanced around. No one in sight at the moment, so they probably had a little while before they had to move for cover; he doubted the elves would have opened the gate into a place where they would have to hide at once, or someone was bound to see them. He fought his way to his feet, scooping up a lump of what looked like horse dung mixed with mud.

He flung it at the back of Pannerel's head, staining his long pale hair. The elf turned at once, staring at him.

"Why did you do that?"

"It would be too risky to tell you," said Kymenos, and walked away. The courtyard, and the castle, really were remarkably quiet, moreso than they should be on such a morning. He wondered if something had come and claimed most of the people from the castle.

*It would be too much to hope that they are all dead, I suppose.*

Then he heard distant cheering, from the direction of the old collapsed Temple, and nodded. There was probably something happening over there that had distracted the attention of most of the people of the castle.

"Why did you do that?"

Kymenos glanced up, expecting to see anger or resentment on Pannerel's face. Instead, he saw only the most lively curiosity.

"Because I was annoyed at the way you were treating me," he said. It seemed childish to fling clumps of dirt and dung at the elf, suddenly, but what they were doing to him was equally childish. Kymenos clung to that as he stared stubbornly at Pannerel. "I didn't like it."

"But we really can't tell you what we're doing," said Pannerel, as if he thought that should soothe Kymenos's resentment.

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you that, either."

Kymenos pointed a finger at him. "You're being annoying, again."

Pannerel nodded slowly. "I think I see. Humans don't like it when elves don't tell them things?"

"Not most humans," said Kymenos. "Just me. You rescued me and insisted that was not intervention, but it would have been intervention to try and save Alliana's family. It doesn't make sense."

"But we couldn't intervene."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you."

Kymenos snorted. "If you don't see what annoys me so much about this, then I'm afraid I can't help you."

Pannerel abruptly seized him and flung him to the stone of the courtyard. Kymenos rolled over so that he could get back up, thinking the elf had done it to see what would happen, but Pannerel bent and hissed, "They are coming this way. I can hide in plain sight, but you cannot. Stay still."

Kymenos blinked, and stayed still. Pannerel closed his eyes. A look of intense concentration, or at least the elven equivalent of it, probably, twisted his face. A moment later, a silvery, shimmering egg appeared out of nowhere and enclosed Kymenos.

"There," said Pannerel, from beyond the opaque shell. "That will protect you from the forces of the Dark, and shatter only if it is touched by a friend. They will know someone is here, but they cannot see who is within the egg."

He vanished then, though Kymenos yelled for him to come back and explain himself. Then he shut up, realizing that the Dark was coming, if the tread of many feet was anything to go by. And while they couldn't see him, they could probably recognize his voice.

"This way."

"My lady, what is that?"

Kymenos shuddered. He didn't recognize the second voice, but he did know the first. It was Nightstone. She had probably been showing off some inventive new form of torture to her troops, he thought.

"I'm not sure," said Nightstone. "Probably another elvish trick. Send lightning at it, and see what it does."

Kymenos heard a crackle, and braced himself for shock or burning or even death. All that happened was the second voice saying "My lady, it doesn't seem to be vulnerable to fire."

"Ah, well," said Nightstone. "I'll set you to carry it, then. The elves probably meant it as a gift of some kind. They are odd like that, leaving bubbles of dreams lying around to try and convince me to leave Orlath."

Kymenos closed his eyes as several people heaved the egg into the air. It didn't shatter, as Pannerel had promised, but he could be moved. Would they simply take him back into the dungeons?

"It's heavy, my lady," said the second voice, evidently one of his bearers, grunting. "Do you really want us to bear it into your chambers? It could be dangerous."

Nightstone laughed. "I am in the mood for danger. Bring it along."

Kymenos heard only footsteps for a short time, though he could feel himself being carried down stairs and then across another wide courtyard. Then he heard hoofbeats as well as footsteps, and guessed that they were passing near the stable. A great yearning rose in him. If he was free, then he could creep into the stables and steal a horse, and possibly flee before anyone, even Destiny, noticed him.

*Of course, he thought, the stables are probably full of pegasi and not ordinary horses anyway.*

A certain set of hoofbeats abruptly sounded close. Kymenos peered at the silvery wall of the egg, but of course could see nothing. He hadn't even been able to make out the shapes of those carrying him. Perhaps one of the pegasi was coming to report to Nightstone. At least he could listen in.

Then he heard a loud neigh. The egg rippled around him, shivered, and vanished.

Kymenos fell to the ground, bruising his hands, making his knees ache, and tangling his limbs with the legs of his bearers. They stepped back out of the way, swearing, partially sent flying by the bay stallion who nudged between them. Sykeen whinnied and nuzzled Kymenos's cheek, while all the while his telepathic voice sang a torrent into Kymenos's mind.

*I was so worried. I sensed that you had vanished, and I didn't know where you had gone. I looked for you when they took me out on my exercises, but never saw you. And then I sensed you this morning, and I just had to come and look, and-* Sykeen fell silent at the look on Kymenos's face. *You aren't angry, are you?*

Kymenos was, but he thought he knew someone who was far angrier. He turned his head, slowly, and met Nightstone's eyes.

The ruler of Orlath stared at him for a long moment, then shook her head slowly. "You do turn up in the most unexpected places," she said. She glanced at the liadrai. "Take him. There was a questioning that was never finished."

Kymenos decided abruptly that, no, he was in fact the angrier one. His hands were moving before Nightstone finished her little speech, weaving Falto's Pattern. His mind went springing, more speedily than it usually did, from Azure to Dust, and as he looked up, one of Nightstone's guards collapsed, dehydrated.

Nightstone fell back at once, raising her hand and sending Scarlet at him.

Kymenos stood up and met her, coolly, with a shield of Azure. He couldn't hold her off for long, but he hoped that it would be long enough to kill her. At his side, Sykeen was neighing and kicking at the liadrai who crowded close, though that would end the moment one of them showed a sword.

*I don't have much time. I don't need much time.*

*I just want to kill her.*

## Chapter 42

### The Whispering Dungeons

*"Cells in the rock are made to hold Gust mages best of all, while cells high in the air will hold Crop mages. Surround Scarlet mages with water, Azure mages with fire, and they shall not escape."*

-Elsetta, High Priestess of Elle.

"Aren't you curious about what you're doing here?"

"No."

"Not the least little bit?"

"No."

The jailer stared at him for a moment more, then turned and walked away from the bars. Olumer smiled a little, then bowed his head and closed his eyes, preparing to sleep if he could. There wasn't much else to do.

Ever since he had awakened in this small, round stone cell, barely large enough for him to extend his arms, there hadn't been much else to do. Olumer had seen Prince Artaen a few times, the jailer every day, however many days it had been. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he saw the jailer often.

He didn't know where Cadona was. Prince Artaen had told him not to ask. Olumer thought that was sensible advice, since it was highly improbable that he would get a chance to rescue her. He bowed his head and slept, or lay awake and thought about what it meant to be back in the castle, after so many years.

He had no doubt they were in the castle, though since Artaen controlled the whole of Rivendon, they could logically have been almost anywhere. But Olumer had seen these cells before, and knew that the Prince would probably use them in just the same way as the rulers of Rivendon, all of whom he was said to revere. Olumer had been a prisoner in these cells, though not this particular one, and had seen prisoners taken in, and had seen them come back into the light again, blinking and shaken, never talking about what had happened. It was widely assumed that the darkness and silence of the Rivendonian prison drove the prisoners mad.

It was more than that, of course, but it would almost have to be. Olumer had spoken with spies in his time who were as loyal to their thrones as he was to the Rivendonian royal line,

scouts who had been instructed to kill themselves before submitting, and assassins who had killed out of sheer belief in what they were doing. They would have survived an ordinary dungeon, no matter how dark or silent it happened to be.

It was the whispering that got to most men.

Olumer could hear the spirits, whispering and whispering and whispering. They wanted to know what was happening. They wanted bodies, so they could go hunting. They offered opinions on the quality of the air and the quality of the day outside, if he would listen. It would drive someone mad if he didn't know what was going on; he would begin to think that he heard thoughts from other minds, or just that he was already a lunatic, and might as well yield to the insanity pressing him.

Olumer had silveryeyes blood, knew what the spirits were perfectly well, and was immune to such temptations. No one with silveryeyes blood was ever held here, except to make sure they couldn't escape. It surprised Olumer, a little, that Artaen was trying to use the cells on him.

On perhaps the third day he was held there- it was the third visit of Prince Artaen, at least- he found out why.

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"We are having no luck with the Princess Cadona."

Olumer opened his eyes. He supposed that he was supposed to be surprised or flustered by the Prince's visit, perhaps sit up and bang his head on the low ceiling.

Instead, he replied simply, "I'm not surprised. She has a sharp sense of her dignity and what is due her as a Princess of Rivendon."

Artaen, leaning against the bars, smiled at him. "A remarkable achievement, really, to raise her like that in the middle of the forests. She has been gone from the Court most of her life, and yet she knows just what she would deserve if she was here. Or she thinks she does, at least. I must confess, some of her demands surprise even me. Singing, floating crystals? Where did she get such ideas?" He chuckled, companionable, trying to set Olumer at his ease.

Olumer had played this game too long to be taken in. Artaen was a high Dark lieutenant, and that meant he must be good, but not good enough to win Olumer over in the opening stages. "The history-tales I told her, my lord. There are some Princesses of Rivendon, and Queens, who had such treasures. They are probably still hidden somewhere in the castle, deep in the vaults."

"You raised her on history-tales?"

Olumer bowed his head. "I did, my lord. That is part of the reason she loves her country and lineage so much."

Artaen snorted. "I don't know about her country. Her lineage, yes. She can list her ancestors all the way back to the time of the Founding."

"That is good," said Olumer quietly, while feeling a little thrill of pride. He had drilled Cadona in that constantly, but it was only recently that she had stopped confusing the reigning Princesses of five hundred years ago. That she could do it now, while under intense pressure to give in and do what the Dark wanted her to do, testified to the pride that was in her, the pride that he had managed to cultivate if not plant in her.

"It is tiresome." Artaen changed tactics, leaning forward. "Do you know what we will do to her, and to you, if we can't make her yield and cooperate with us?"

"I thought that you would kill her," said Olumer. "I have always heard that as your expressed intention."

"Yes," said Artaen, "but if there is a chance that she can be saved, I would like to take it. I am not inhuman. I am not cruel. I would save her life if I could." And the tactic had changed again, so that his voice was noble, a little puzzled, a little injured. "Surely you want your Princess to live, Olumer, so that she can take her place at the head of the Court?"

"Of course," said Olumer, "but I don't think that you would ever let her take that place. You want to rule Rivendon, and that means that she has to be dead or totally under your control, which would make the place-taking a joke."

"You should address me by title," said Artaen.

"I won't," said Olumer quietly. "You don't truly have any royal blood in you. I serve only the royal line of Rivendon, and that means that Cadona, as the only one left, is the only true Princess."

"The royal line of Rivendon has been Dark for a hundred years now."

"I know that."

"Then why serve the Light?" Artaen changed his voice back to appealing. "You could come back to the Dark and be welcome with all honor. It is quite an achievement, to have reared a Princess so far from the Court, making her aware of her heritage while making sure that we would never hear of it. There are few even in the Dark who could do it. You would be welcomed."

Olumer shook his head. "I am bound to the Rivendonian royal line, my lord, and no other force or god can command my allegiance."

"You failed to protect them twelve years ago."

"I know."

"Does that not sadden you?"

"It does."

"Then why take the chance on this?" Artaen asked, his voice back to lulling again. Olumer thought he was catching the rhythm of the man, now, the alternating tension and relief. Doubtless it was effective with some people, just not with Olumer. "Come back to the Dark with all honor."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You would kill Cadona."

"She is not ready to rule Rivendon," said Artaen, "not worthy. You think that she would ascend the throne as she is now and live out a year? The people would kill her."

"She has the blood," said Olumer, "and she is quick of mind, when she has to be. She could learn. I trust that she would learn better than you, my lord, whom I think are so old and settled in habits there is no chance."

Artaen smiled. "You would have made such a wonderful servant of the Dark," he murmured. "Skill, and wit, and cleverness. Yet the patience that keeps all those things concealed when need be is above praise."

"I was a servant of the Dark for many years, through my Queens and Kings," said Olumer. "And now I have a Princess who is of the Light, and I will follow her as long as she is alive."

"What happens if she dies?"

"I die as well."

Artaen nodded. "That would be a waste."

Olumer was quiet, watching him.

"You do know that you have played a large part in ruining her for the throne?" Artaen said, after a pause. "Even I can see that her dignity and pride would have been something different in someone else, someone not spoiled beyond redemption by the title 'Princess' and its glittering attendants."

"I know that," said Olumer. "It is a grief to me."

"You don't sound very sad."

"I know what has happened, my lord. What concerns me very much is what will happen. Will you kill Cadona?"

"Perhaps." Artaen smiled at him. "There are many forces in the world that have nothing to do with Rivendon, Olumer, and even some that might attract your attention, if you would only think to look for them."

"I will not."

Artaen shook his head, and now he seemed to have decided that he should remain pleasant. "You have lost much, Olumer, and it seems likely that you will lose more. Good luck to you."

He turned and walked away from the cell, his footsteps echoing against the stone. Olumer leaned back on the rock and closed his eyes, falling into sleep almost at once. There were dreams of the past, of course, but there always were. He would sleep, and when he woke, there would be the present to deal with.

A simple mantra, but one that had served him well, all his days in royal service and out of it.

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In fact, he woke from scattered dreams that weren't of the past at all, or at least nothing he could remember- a voice had been speaking to him from fire, which had never happened- to find Artaen waiting by the cell again, his smile soft and his face almost genial.

"Come, Olumer. Today I am taking you to see your Princess."

The jailer appeared, glaring at Olumer all the while, and unlocked the cell. Olumer stepped out and stretched.

"The cell is rather cramped, isn't it?" Artaen asked with a sympathetic smile. "There is something else that must be rather cramped, I'm afraid, and must remain so for the duration of our journey."

"What is that?" asked Olumer, glancing around the hall as he finished shaking out his arms. He could see a glittering pattern of silver inscribed in the wall at one end, and knew where they were, now. This was the eastern wing of the dungeons, where the prisoners who could hear and dismiss the voices were most often kept, as it meant that they could at least be made uncomfortable if not mad.

"Your ambitions to rescue the Princess." Artaen laughed softly as Olumer glanced at him. "Oh, of course I knew that you planned to rescue her. What else would you do, when you knew that she was a prisoner here? But I have done something that I think will hold your ambitions in reserve. A wonderful thing, the literalness of so much of the old texts."

He held up a hand. "Strike me, Olumer."

Olumer shrugged and moved his hand lightly forward as if he would hit at Artaen's elbow.

At once, a silvery glow sprang up between him and Artaen, a glow that pushed at Olumer as if forcing him backwards. The other man laughed merrily.

"Wonderful!" he repeated. "I drank a little of Cadona's blood, and now I have Rivendonian royal blood as well. Not what is meant by your oath or the books, of course, but the old enchantments are literal, without the cleverness of humans. Come with me now, Olumer. Time to see your Princess."

He turned and walked away down the hall, to the west. Olumer followed him, now and then glancing at the silver patterns on the walls. Old memories sprang to life, and he nodded. *If there is any way to free her and run, then I shall. I know where the nearest stairs are.*

"Hello, Olumer."

Olumer turned, blinking, to see Renne walking towards him. She had a bandage on her face, probably where Cadona's flames had struck, and a wrapping on her arm where the wolf had bitten her. She eyed him for a moment, then shook her head. "It's still hard to believe that the man who saved my life is in league with the Light."

Olumer turned back to follow Artaen without speaking, Renne walking along beside him. Of course, he had hurt Renne. His oath demanded it. He had long ago acknowledged the necessity of such things.

They reached a large cell soon enough, complete with a bed and a chamberpot. Olumer could feel his back almost aching as he looked at the bed. There was a twinge of envy in there, he had to admit, that the royal blood of Rivendon managed to win such luxuries.

Then he looked at Cadona, and felt any trace of envy flee far away.

She had many small cuts on her arms and legs, and looked utterly miserable. Both eyes were blackened, and she spat blood and teeth on the floor as Olumer watched.

He called at once, "Princess? Who did this to you?"

"Someone whom you weren't here to stop!" Cadona yelled back at him. "You should have been, Olumer. You really should have been."

Olumer glanced at Artaen. "This is-"

"What I do," said Artaen, "when a prisoner gets on my nerves. I can hear the whining and screaming all the way up in my rooms, Olumer. You have an hour to calm her and convince her not to whine and scream any more. Renne will stay with you. I am leaving. If I come back and she's still a bitch when an hour has passed, then I will kill her." He turned away and walked towards the distant stairs.

## Chapter 43

### Scarlet and Azure

*"Fire and water have always been enemies, and they have extended their hatred through the Cycle, through the gods, into the realm of mortals. I do not think there is any reason for this hatred, though some posit an ancient war of the elements of which Azure and Scarlet are the only survivors, and others claim that because water can quench fire, the hatred comes all from Scarlet. But I think the hatred simply is."*

-From a study by the Masters of the Star Circle.

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. *What has come over Kymenos? I did not think, when I first met him, that he was capable of anything like this fury.*

In fact, she knew that he hadn't been. He had wanted to avoid pain, and he wouldn't have defied her like this. Now he was.

*Perhaps it was a bad idea to point out that I did intend to subject him to pain and questioning again.*

A blast of Azure nearly got through her flames, and Nightstone swore and called more flames. Kymenos was not a Master of the Star Circle, and he didn't move like one. He was using Patterns, but they were almost random, his mind seemingly whipping them out as he needed them. It was annoying. And the horse was beside him, lashing out with his hooves and neighing in a way that made Nightstone's guards afraid to try and get around him.

*Enough of this.*

Nightstone whirled slightly to the side, allowing the Azure to knock her off-balance, and flung flames at the horse. The stallion screamed, tossing his mane, afire in seconds. Kymenos glared at him intensely for a moment, letting up on his attack, and the stallion suddenly flung himself to the stones and rolled over, smothering the flames.

Nightstone clucked her tongue in annoyance before she could stop herself. *I didn't need that to happen.*

But the attack had been broken, and the liadrai were pressing forward now, blades in their hands and lightning-magic glowing around their bodies, no longer taken by surprise. Kymenos couldn't recover his rhythm, and when he glanced around, Nightstone saw that he had registered that. He looked back at her, panting still, his robe barely covering his bruises, his dark eyes darkened further with hatred.

"Why?" asked Nightstone. "I am afraid that I have no choice but to make you uncomfortable now. I might have spared you before, but you have caused pain to me, and you must be caused pain." She spoke as calmly as she could, denying anger the opportunity to bite into her voice. Anger was dangerous just now. She hadn't felt this enraged in a long time, and she could become too bound up in taking revenge on Kymenos. Hatred was as dangerous as love. She had accepted that a long time ago.

Kymenos didn't even flinch, though she remembered him being so afraid of pain before. He spat, "I know what you will do. I have known ever since I knew that you had Alliana's family summoned to make them suffer."

Nightstone raised her eyebrows. "You have learned about that? You have moved remarkably quickly, then, and seen things that you should not have seen." *And when I learn who in the castle helped you, then I shall make them suffer, as well. Perhaps I shall make you scream in the sight of each other.*

"I heard of it from the- from the people who rescued me," said Kymenos. Nightstone had the feeling that he had nearly slipped up and given her some clue, but his anger hadn't lessened into caution at all. "How could you do that? Torture them, just to make sure that she confessed a secret? Have you any heart at all?"

Nightstone blinked, genuinely taken by surprise at the accusation. "I had thought that you didn't care about such things. After all, you were the one who offered me everything you knew in exchange for not being hurt."

Kymenos snarled at her. Nightstone shook her head. The man was very strange. And he had tried to kill her.

She lowered her voice and tried to infuse it with the regret that she would ordinarily feel at this point. "I have no choice, not now. Bring him," she said to the liadrai. "And bind him."

They closed in around Kymenos and bound his wrists, then manacled them further with chains when someone fetched those up from the dungeons. Kymenos just kept staring at her, never saying anything. The hatred in his eyes was its own message.

Nightstone turned away after a moment of that stare. She wasn't frightened, of course not, but it was a little unnerving.

"My office," she said to the liadrai, when they glanced at her for orders. "And set two guards on the door. Ensure that we will not be disturbed. And send someone to take care of the horse."

They bowed their heads and dragged Kymenos forward, not daring to question her when she spoke in that tone. Nightstone swept ahead, her heart pounding, her mouth dry with fury.

*I will not hurt the Dark by indulging my hatred, for once, she assured herself. This man is no one important, except insofar as he can tell me who helped him. Then I can kill him. The Dark will not care.*

But the unicorns might.

She would have to be careful. Fall too far into passion, and she would endanger the chastity her life depended on. Nightstone knew that. There were so many tales, some of them preserved and told by the Dark if not by the Light, that told what could happen. Sometimes rapes happened. Sometimes the passionate embrace of a lover.

And sometimes a woman just lost her head, whether because of love or lust or anger or something even less definable, and ruined her own chastity.

Nightstone glanced back at Kymenos, and was glad to find that her own rage had lessened, tempered by the warnings. Kymenos glared at her with as much hatred as ever, and she was not pleased about that. But she reminded herself that, after all, someone who hated the ruler of Orlath that much was possibly a threat to the Dark's continued control of the Kingdom. She could torture him or kill him, and it would only be a reasonable precaution. Only reasonable.

*Not to indulge hatred. Not that.*

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"You are familiar with legends of the more powerful Scarlet mages, I assume?"

Kymenos just glared at her, and didn't answer. Nightstone turned to the fire in her hearth and fed it with a little more wood. A servant's task, but she had dismissed all the servants, and they were alone. Nightstone might have felt more uneasy about that, but Kymenos was securely bound to a chair, and her own rage was a bright and steady flame, though it was rage on the Dark's behalf and not her own anymore. She had no fear that he would attack her or that she would give in to- other things.

"We can call salamanders," she said, turning to face him again. "And we can speak to the body, as can all the most powerful mages of each element. Crop mages control the bones, Azure mages the blood, Gust mages the breath." She smiled at him, feeling her passion drain further away with the lecturing tone she had adopted, enjoying the way he just stared at her. He was probably too uneducated to know what she was talking about, if he had left the Star Circle in exile and disgrace. "Scarlet mages-"

"The spirit."

Nightstone clucked her tongue to hide her surprise. "So you do know," she said, walking towards the chair and then around it. This time, his fingers were bound so that he couldn't use the Patterns on her. It was a precaution that she should have thought of before, but there was no use wasting blame now, with Kymenos recaptured. "Why didn't you speak up before?"

"You don't deserve anything from me," said Kymenos.

"Then why speak up now?"

Kymenos looked at the ropes that bound him to the chair, then back up at her. "I can't escape."

"How does that make a difference?"

Kymenos just stared at her.

Nightstone shook her head and sat on the edge of her desk. "Really, Kymenos, you could make this much easier on yourself if you would tell me the names of the ones who helped you. That would mean a comfortable bed in one of the rooms again, and food." His stomach rumbled loudly, and Nightstone smiled. She had gotten good results before when she accurately judged the way her subjects' bodies reacted. "You could avoid all this, if not for your own stubbornness."

"No, I couldn't," said Kymenos, speaking very precisely. "I attacked you, and you couldn't forget that. If I told you everything now, you would still torture me, saying I was hiding something else."

Nightstone stared at him. He stared back. He wasn't smiling, but there was mockery in his eyes, bitter and savage.

Nightstone cleared her throat and shook her head. "I am afraid that you don't understand the Dark, Kymenos," she said. "I would never do such a thing, never endanger my post for a personal passion- hatred. Never. You are wrong about that, wrong about me."

"No, I'm not," said Kymenos, and moved into Dalznan. "I grew up under the Dark, taught to love it. I know that the Dark is pragmatic and often does terrible things with a sigh of regret. There's nothing of that regret in you now. You hate me and want me to suffer. Simple enough."

Nightstone stiffened. This was ridiculous. She was immortal, more than four hundred years old- more than twelve times the age of this man, if she had judged his age correctly. She was free, and he was not. She was the lieutenant of the Dark here in Orlath, and he was only someone who had revolted against her and tried to kill her. She could kill him, and everyone would be happy. Kymenos probably had few friends in the world, even the Princess Alliana. No one would miss him.

There was no reason for her to be afraid.

"Wrong on all counts," she said lightly, forcing herself to shake back her hair and smile at him as if nothing had happened. "Of course you would think that you understood the Dark, if you are Dalznan."

"I am," said Kymenos, still speaking Dalznan like a native.

"But that does not mean that you really understand anything of the Dark," said Nightstone. "Sometimes, the Dark understands- other things. And it is protective of its children. It does not take kindly to someone trying to hurt its children."

Kymenos went back to staring.

Nightstone came and knelt beside the chair, staring into his eyes. That was the easiest way to reach out to his spirit, and through that to the memories she would set afire in his soul.

He spat in her face.

Nightstone stepped back before she could help herself, scrubbing at the saliva. It didn't hurt, of course, but it felt disgusting running down her face.

And she heard his laughter.

Nightstone finished scrubbing the last of it off, moving quite slowly and deliberately, to give him time to stop laughing. He did, but when she looked at him she saw merriment instead of fear in his eyes.

"Do you understand what I will do to you because of that?" Nightstone asked. She actually felt quite calm.

"Yes."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted to."

Nightstone sighed. Perhaps he was simply mad, and if so, it was foolish to waste time trying to speak to him. "No matter. I can do it from back here, if you are insistent on spitting saliva at me and acting like a child."

Kymenos laughed. "If I'm acting like a child, why are you so angry?"

Nightstone caught his eyes in a single intense glance, and sprang within, searching for the memory that she could most easily set afire.

She caught one, not the worst memory, but the one that was most responsive to the Scarlet, which was what she wanted. Kymenos had nearly fallen into the Neiran River, it seemed, when only a child. He had never felt anything since like the intense panic that had taken him for a moment, as he reeled on the slippery bank, caught a branch that broke off, and then slipped down towards the Neiran, swollen with snowmelt. He had known what would happen to him if he fell into it, could remember thinking about his body broken on the stones, and had called to the Crop in absolute fear, building up a small wall of earth that stopped his tumble. It was the first sign his parents had had that he was in possession of an element.

Nightstone called on the fear, the intense panic that had lasted only a few moments, and turned it into flames. Then she set the flames burning in Kymenos, burning as brightly as she wanted them to for as long as she wanted them to, and stepped back to watch. The important thing was not the memory, but the fear. Kymenos would feel the fear for much longer for a few seconds, this time.

Kymenos threw back his head and screamed. The panic was running through him now, an emotion never meant to last this long. Nightstone gloried in it, in the twisting of his features and the way that he tried to shed the ropes that bound him to the chair and run. It was revenge, of a sort, for the way that he had momentarily made her feel when he spoke of the Dark.

*But not revenge that is too harsh, she swiftly assured herself. When I make them suffer, it is not for the sake of my own revenge. It is only for the sake of the Dark, and what it would mean if a lieutenant smiled and ignored the threat to her life.*

Nightstone let the panic last for about ten minutes. Then she gestured, and the flames in his soul flickered and went out. Kymenos sprawled on the chair, panting, trembling, his body worn out by the intense emotion.

Nightstone said softly, "Is there anything that you want to tell me, before we do that again?"

Kymenos opened his eyes and looked at her. Nightstone was pleased to see that the intense hatred in them had quieted a little. There was nothing there, now, to make her fearful. Kymenos had learned.

He opened his mouth and tried to say something, but only his lips moved. Then he shook his head and tried again.

Nightstone felt a stab of disappointment. She had hoped he would hold out a little longer against confession, so that she could have more pain-

*No, Nightstone. This is better. Move him to a cell and get him out of your mind, then take the information he gives you and use it. That is the important thing.*

She listened hard, and made out Kymenos's breath whispering past his parted lips, but nothing else. She knelt beside him, reaching out and taking one bound hand. She could be kind, after. It was something she liked to do. "What is it, Kymenos?" she asked, ears tuned to the sound of his voice. "What are you trying to say? Who helped you?"

Kymenos paused, working his mouth as if to make sure that he would have breath the next time he tried to speak. Then he opened it again and spat in her face.

Nightstone didn't immediately wipe it away this time. She knelt there, eyes closed, and let it dribble down her skin.

Then she stood up and opened her eyes. "I hope that was worth the pain it will cause you, Kymenos."

She saw him laughing, without sound- perhaps he really couldn't speak- and felt a brief stab of fear again. Then she shook it away impatiently. So he hadn't broken under the first memory. Well, it was an old one, and she hadn't let the fear last for very long. He would break the next time, or the time after that, and the longer he lasted, the more pleasure-

*Recompense.*

-he would afford her.

And, really, she must have misjudged his intelligence. Only someone stupid went on reacting like this, like a trapped animal, lashing out where it would have been better to lie back and accept help.

"It will happen again, Kymenos," she said.

He laughed at her.

Nightstone shrugged, reached into his spirit, and began again, this time quite content that she wasn't doing this out of hatred. The man was clearly mad. He just needed somewhat harsher measures to make him tell the truth.

Chapter 44

The Temple of Shara

*"The goddess known as Shara is also known as the Lady of Night, and She is also Lady of all Night's Mysteries. Thus Her priestesses are sometimes even harder to understand than the priestesses of Elle."*

-Evening, priestess of Erlande.

"We need to rest."

Ternora spoke the words wearily, not expecting the undines to heed her. They had kept swimming steadily since this morning, when they had found another three elves slaughtered in their ranging down the River. They thought some enemy was near, and they didn't want him or her or them capturing the Prince. Ternora supposed that was commendable, but it was making her legs ache, and Viridian grumble and steam, and Prince Warcourage glare even more murderously at the undines than he already had been doing.

This time, the lead undine glanced over her shoulder in acknowledgment. "We have been making for a place where mortals like yourselves might find sanctuary," she said, "since you cannot find sanctuary on the River or in the open the way that we can." Her voice showed a faint, rippling emotion that might have been puzzlement or amusement. Ternora was too tired to identify it, and she didn't try very hard. As long as she could rest soon, then she would be grateful.

"Where is this place?" she asked.

"There."

Ternora lifted her eyes, and at once felt like a fool. If she had been remembering the paths around here, which was the Prince had hired her for, then she would have known the sanctuary at once. These were the stone walls of a Temple of Shara. A goddess of the Dark, to be certain, but the priestesses would welcome them in and offer them shelter, as long as none of them offered violence to anyone already in the Temple. Ternora had often wondered what they were doing here, in the middle of the jungle, but they only smiled and told her it was the goddess's business when she asked, and Ternora had fallen silent then, not wanting a goddess to have reason to be angry at her.

"Come on!" she called back to Viridian and Warcourage. "Just a few more dragon-lengths."

Viridian snarled and hissed in what Ternora thought was his own language. Warcourage lifted his head and shook back his hair, which was still wet; whenever he had said something snide this morning, the undines had ducked him into the Triaga.

"What is it?" he asked now, his first question in hours. At once, two undines surfaced near the River bank and watched him. Ternora answered as soothingly as she could, hoping that Warcourage would look at her and not them.

"A temple, my lord. There we might hope to rest from the dangers of the jungle, and to eat hot food." The jungle was never particularly cold, of course, but Ternora preferred hot meals when she could get them. It was a relic of her childhood.

"A temple to what god?"

Ternora had hoped that he wouldn't ask, but she wasn't about to lie. He would have known the truth the moment they stepped inside the temple, anyway. "Shara."

Warcourage halted at once, his legs braced and his green eyes wide and flashing with disgust. "I'm not going in there! I worship Elle."

Ternora sighed. "My lord, we are all weary, and they will not hurt you for worshipping someone else."

"You don't understand," said Warcourage flatly. "I would be contaminated if I entered the same building as a group of Shara-worshippers. Their rites are unclean in the eyes of the Lady."

"Pray to Her," snapped Ternora, losing her own temper. "Perhaps She'll tell you it's all right."

Warcourage sniffed. "That's the first sensible idea you've had all day," he said, clasping his hands and bowing his head.

Viridian crawled up beside Ternora and rumbled softly, "Are you really going to let him keep us out of there?"

"No," said Ternora. "If he doesn't want to go in, he doesn't have to. He's welcome to stay out here with the tigers." Her glance went back to the Triaga. "And the undines."

The dragon made a soft, surprisingly cat-like purring sound. Ternora was beginning to think it meant a chuckle for him.

Warcourage lifted his head and blinked. "She didn't answer," he said.

"She often doesn't," said Ternora. "Are you ready to go in?"

Warcourage just shook his head, but for some reason Ternora didn't think he was replying to her. For one thing, his eyes were still distant, as if he hadn't heard her at all. "I felt no trace of Elle's presence. I have never felt that. All my life, She has been there, with the Light and Destiny, reassuring me that I have a grand purpose to fulfill. Now, there is nothing." He frowned at his hands.

Ternora waited a moment, but he said nothing more. Then she said, "Come inside with us, then. If Elle didn't speak to you, there's no law against you doing it."

Warcourage recoiled, and finally came back to himself long enough to glare at her. "You don't understand divine law at all, Ternora, though given what you are, I find myself unsurprised. If Elle doesn't permit something, specifically, it is forbidden. I will stay out here."

Ternora shrugged at him and turned away. The undines were already swarming towards his ankles, and a moment later she heard a yelp and an indignant splash. Her bones ached at the thought of a soft bed, and she swung the finely balanced temple door open without bothering to knock.

She saw a large room with the mosaic that it always had on the far wall, the picture of a woman with a gentle face and dark hair spreading out her hands across a vast tree, and then a priestess came to meet her. The woman was smiling, clad in dark green robes that almost perfectly echoed the color of her eyes. "Ternora. I remember you. I am Alira. I don't know if you remember, since it has been long since you passed this way, but I served you the last time you were here."

Ternora smiled. "My memory is not that badly shot. I do remember you, and I assure you that I am ready to accept whatever hospitality you can offer."

"Do you have companions?"

Ternora turned. Viridian had laid his snout within the door, as if to remind those inside that he was there. Many people Ternora knew would have panicked at the sight of the green dragon, but Alira was only regarding him calmly. Of course, compared to some of the sights that Ternora had seen and heard rumored within the temple, a dragon was nothing to fuss about.

"Two," said Ternora. "But one is a worshipper of Elle and will not enter. The other is Viridian. Viridian, this is Alira."

"I know," said the dragon, steam-scented breath blowing into the room. "I heard. Do you have cattle for me?"

"What price will you pay?" Alira asked.

"This."

Viridian's snout withdrew, and his paw came in instead, as much as it could. Ternora saw that two of the claws were delicately curved, as if to hold something between them, and managed to make it out by squinting. It was a dragon scale, by the size of it from somewhere on the ridge of Viridian's back.

Alira came forth to accept the scale at once, and smile at it. In moments, she transferred the smile to the dragon. "This is perfect. We have been trying to understand the mysteries of dragons, and this will help."

"I don't think that you'll find anything out," said Viridian, his voice unexpectedly gentle. "But you're welcome."

Alira tucked the scale away in a pocket and turned to Ternora. "And you, my lady. You sang the last time you were here, I recall."

Ternora nodded. "With your permission, I would offer a song again in repayment for a dinner and a bed."

"You shall have them." Alira turned to the other priestesses who were beginning to stray forward from the back of the temple now. Most of them had ink-stains somewhere on their robes or hands. "Make sure that the Lady Ternora is housed, and get the food ready. There will be a feast tonight, in honor of our guests and the mysteries that Shara is gracious enough to allow us to begin solving, the mysteries of dragons and half-elves."

The priestesses bowed and hurried off. Alira turned to Ternora again. "Have you felt a trace of the madness yet?" she asked.

"Not yet."

Alira sighed. "A pity. We want so badly to understand this. Why do half-elves go mad? There must be a reason."

"Perhaps they start thinking they're immortal," Ternora suggested, her preferred answer. "I think that immortal and mortal blood do not mix easily."

Alira only waved a hand. "We've considered that answer, and been told it doesn't fit. Shara does not lie."

"But She doesn't tell you the answer, either?"

"What would be the fun of serving the Lady of Mysteries if She did?" Alira asked, and led Ternora towards one of the cells, while calling out for other sisters to fetch cattle for Viridian. "Now, tell me a little more about being half-elven. What is it like, exactly? We know that you see the world more intensely than we do, and that you start feeling madness towards the end of your days, but what about-"

Ternora sighed, and relaxed happily into questions that she could answer, though she might not be able to provide just the answer that the order was looking for. There was a reason that, jungle guide or not, she preferred civilized settings to the wild trails. Making a decision about what to tell someone else in response to a question was far easier than making a decision about fallen logs, shifting paths, or whether the River would explode in piranhas in the next moment.

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"Do you know anything about the dangers of the road ahead?"

It was late. Ternora knew that, and knew she was tired, but couldn't make herself go to bed, even though she had seen the one they had picked out for her and knew it was a fine one, soft for aching bones. She was content to sip wine and listen to Alira talking, and sometimes answer the other woman's questions.

Now, she had one of her own, though she expected little information. The priestesses didn't often venture out into the jungle save to forage. Their own gardens and herds provided most of what they needed, so they didn't even do that all that often. But travelers from the south might have told them something vital. Ternora's life had been saved twice by gossip she first heard here.

"Dangers of the road ahead?" Alira smiled at her. "It would depend on where you're going, which is something that I haven't let you have the breath to mention all evening." She leaned back in her chair. The silver light of the fire which the priestesses of Shara made, giving off light but not heat, flickered on her dark hair. She sipped at her own wine, and looked sublimely content, her mind flickering among the pieces of the puzzle of being half-elven that Ternora had given her.

"Something is slaughtering Faerie elves," said Ternora. "I have seen nine of them dead. I have received a vision that a silvery woman killed them, but I don't know what that means."

She was content, and lazy, and she had assumed that Alira felt the same way. She wasn't expecting the woman to sit up and abruptly, gravely, say, "Ask me any other question, and I will answer it. Not that one."

Ternora blinked, her own mood shattering. "I don't understand. What is wrong with the question?"

Alira stared at her hands for a moment. Then she looked up and said, "The situation is very delicate, Lady Ternora. You have not the least idea of how delicate."

"No, I don't, because I don't know what you're talking about." Ternora felt anger stirring. "You know whom I have in my charge." It hadn't been possible to conceal it, though Ternora wasn't worried the priestesses would report it to the Dark or try to keep Prince Warcourage here. Shara was a goddess of the Dark, but not the Dark alone, and this particular order worshipped Her mainly as the Lady of Mysteries and had other concerns in Her service.

Alira stared at her hands again. Then she said, "Sometimes, even those of us who wish to think most about mysteries are drawn into what is plainly obvious. And this is a situation so delicate that I cannot tell you anything about it, Ternora, for fear of offending the other party we are bargaining with."

"Bargaining?"

Alira smiled a little. "Perhaps that is too crude a word. Perhaps 'courting' would be better. We are courting."

"In the way that a power or god courts a mortal?"

Alira nodded. "But this is other. Please, my lady, do not ask about it. There is nothing I can tell you."

"Will this power, whatever it is, slaughter us as well?"

Alira shook her head at once. "If you were by yourself, or just with the dragon, you might be in danger. But this power would not touch the Prince. Stay with him, and you will be well."

"And the undines?"

Alira shrugged. "I have no idea at all about what would happen if this power decided the Lord Erlande was a threat. So far, that has not happened." Her eyes were pleading as she leaned forward. "This is so delicate, my lady, but it is a dance worth dancing, because of what could happen when the music finally stops." She sucked in a deep, nervous breath. "One way or the other."

Ternora put her wine down carefully and looked at Alira for a long moment. The woman stared back, and at last Ternora nodded. Alira let out a long whistling breath and drank the rest of her wine.

"I wish I could be more specific."

"I trust you," said Ternora, and made a face. "I suppose it is bad news in that I will have to make sure the undines do not kill Prince Warcourage, because now he keeps me safe as well as annoys me."

Alira laughed, and the moment passed. But Ternora did wonder about it, and even more when she went to sleep that night and saw the silvery woman again in her dreams. She had killed the elves. That was undeniable.

But she had stood there and wept when it was done. That was also undeniable.

Ternora snorted, woke then, and then slid away into dreams that made more sense.

## Chapter 45

### When the Questions Begin

*"Any belief that cannot stand the test of a child's questions is not worthy to be followed."*

-Maxim of those who serve Tersin, god of doubt.

"Elary?"

Elary had feared and expected, both, that tone in Mitherill's voice. She lifted her head from the bowed position she had kept it in since they arrived back in the bedrooms. She had been praying to Anakora, endlessly- and fruitlessly. The healer goddess had not answered her.

"Yes, Mitherill?" she asked the Princess, wincing at the sight of shattered trust in her golden eyes. She had been such an innocent, Elary thought sadly, someone who so deserved to be cherished and protected and held. But all chance of that was past now. Rior had told them what he claimed was the true history of Ilantra, and it was a history that Elary had never heard before. From the look in Mitherill's eyes, the Light had never told her this, either.

"Do you think what he said was true?"

Elary let out a shallow breath. There was still a chance, then. Mitherill might still doubt that what Rior was saying was the complete truth. Elary would do what she could to shelter and preserve the Princess's innocence. She could remember her own being snatched away, too abruptly. She would keep Mitherill a child and ignorant of some harsh things for as long as she could.

"I don't know, Princess," she said. "But it seems astonishing that a history like this could have lain hidden for so long. To say that our ancestors worshipped Shadow, that they were frozen in place and time for thirteen hundred years- all of that would surely leave some trace behind. And yet, no historian of Ilantra has ever mentioned those traces. Surely there would be some reason to think that some of them would."

"Yes!" Mitherill seized on that answer so eagerly that Elary felt herself relax. The Princess was anxious to preserve her own innocence. She would have help, no matter what Rior and Shadow tried to do. "Of course. Shadow is probably lying just so that it can justify its conquest."

Elary frowned lightly. Rior hadn't gotten around to telling them what he had called the "reason behind the conquest" today. He had started from the beginning, or what he claimed was the beginning, saying that Ilantra had been founded more than seven thousand years ago. Elary snorted lightly. Everyone knew that Doralissa was the oldest of the five southern Kingdoms, and that had been founded only twelve hundred years ago. Then he had gone on to claim that their ancestors had worshipped Shadow, and that Dark and Light had united to drive Shadow from the world about two thousand years ago. The people of Ilantra had been frozen in time, he said, until they awakened at what they thought was the beginning of their history.

All of it was ridiculous. But Elary didn't really see how these untrustworthy lies would justify Shadow's conquest.

"After all," Mitherill went on, apparently not noticing that Elary had paused, "he probably thinks that if we worshipped him once, long ago, we should worship him still." She smiled, and there was an adult, tolerant tone in her voice, as if Light were speaking to her. "Children may make mistakes, of course, and not understand the true meaning of the Light when they are young. But to say that we should pay the rest of our lives for mistakes we made as children is laughable."

Elary breathed out and looked at the Princess with admiration. Of course, the thoughts probably came from Light and Destiny rather than originating with Mitherill, but that didn't mean they were less admirable. And the two powers had chosen Mitherill as a conduit, which

was impressive. "Very good, Princess. And of course we shall tell that to anyone who might be inclined to believe Shadow's lies."

Mitherill looked at her seriously. "Do you think there will be some?"

Elary sighed. "Yes, I do. It was not a lie that most of your ancestors for the last hundred years worshipped Shadow. Some of them were even shapeshifters."

"Mistakes," said Mitherill. "That, doubtless, is why Light created me, so that I might redeem the balance."

Elary nodded, then looked up sharply as the door opened. She had expected Quenent, but instead the soldier with downcast eyes, Tern, entered and said without a shard of feeling in his voice, "My ladies, your presence is requested for another lesson."

"The Princess is tired," said Elary. "She cannot bear so many lessons so quickly. Tell Shadow that it will have to wait."

Tern just looked at her calmly. "I was told to drag her, my lady, if she resisted."

"She's not resisting," said Elary. "She's only sitting calmly there. Could you justify that with Shadow?"

Tern thought a moment. Then a ghost of a smile crossed his face, and he met her eyes directly for a moment. "Then I will become a bird and defecate in her hair."

Elary stared, not really knowing what to say. It sounded as ridiculous as the lies that Shadow had persuaded Rior to tell.

Mitherill, however, said, "My hair? That would be horrible!" She rose to her feet, trembling and looking frightened. "Come, Elary."

Elary followed her as she followed Tern, wondering why the threat had unnerved her so much. Perhaps it was part of Mitherill's plan to escape, though, and so she did not question her then.

Tern led them past the cave where the lessons had occurred that morning, and into another one about the same size. In the center stood a table, lined with chairs and plates of food. Shadow stood at the head of the table, inclining his head graciously when he saw them.

"This morning was Ilantran," he said. "This afternoon is Arvenese. The table is set up like a feast table in the Arvenese royal Court. We will see how well the Princess does with her manners, and correct her when necessary." He glanced at Tern. "Thank you, Tern, you may go."

Elary let out a sigh of relief. Of course, the manners the *ilzánai* had taught Mitherill would be at least a little different from formal Court manners in Arvenna, but it was true that Mitherill was delicate and graceful and would only nibble at her food. Elary was sure she would do well.

"Who are the other chairs for?" she asked, glancing around. There were five in all.

Shadow smiled at her. "The Kings and Queens of Arvenna often entertain- well, unusual guests. There are many fey in the Kingdom who would attack the humans without constant and delicate negotiations."

"I have heard this," said Mitherill.

"Of course you have," said Shadow, without glancing at her, his eyes still on Elary. "So I have invited myself. I am, you have to admit, unusual. And I have a few others as well." He glanced to the side.

Elary was about to ask how he could eat, when his body was only mist and shadow, but he abruptly solidified, flesh pouring into the shadow-body as though through a funnel. Elary closed her mouth. He looked human, though his eyes were golden and might have indicated fey blood. Elary would have passed him on the streets in Neveren or Colutro without a second glance.

Shadow smiled at her again, and then turned to face the guests. So did Elary, noting that Mitherill had stood by her chair and not yet sat down. That was good. She might be standing out of curiosity instead of politeness, but they also happened to be proper manners.

One of the guests was a liadra, tall and graceful, silver of skin, with long silver hair and a lightning-like aura. Elary swallowed hard. Most of these fey served the Dark, but not, she supposed, all of them. The royal family of Arvenna had had liadra blood for some time before the Dark's conquest or the more recent conquest of Shadow.

The other guest was- Elary blinked. A wolf. He stood perhaps three feet at the shoulders, and moved with a confidence that suggested he was dominant, perhaps even an alpha male. His coat was a soft gray, his eyes amber. He leaped up into one of the chairs and turned his head to look at Elary, who blinked again. There was intelligence in those eyes, bright as most human eyes she had seen.

"Please, sit down," said Shadow.

Elary did. The liadra bowed to everyone around the table and followed her example. Mitherill remained standing by her chair, and Elary glanced at her in curiosity.

"I need someone to pull out my chair," said Mitherill.

"Ah," said Shadow. "Not in Arvenna. You see, the Kings and Queens there take pride in their independence. There is a long history-tale that talks all about the Princess Carestia of Arvenna refusing to have any servants, since she thought it was akin to slavery. Pulling out your own chair and sitting down is proper manners."

"I don't want to."

Elary stood up and pulled out the chair. Mitherill sat down at once, and waited until Elary pushed the chair back in towards the table. Elary sat back down herself, and met Shadow's gaze, expecting to see frustration or contempt there.

Instead, he appeared amused. Elary glared, then reminded herself that he was a power and she couldn't guess his nature or his thoughts. He acted human enough to make her forget that, but he was still divine and immortal and everything that went with that.

Shadow sat down himself, and clapped his hands. At once, the cups beside the plates filled with wine. Elary sipped at hers. It was quite good.

"Another piece of Court practice in Arvenna," said Shadow, as he picked up the concoction that lay on the plate and bit into it. "The nobles often use magic to outdo each other and impress the King and Queen, or just to show off their skills."

Elary took up the first dish eagerly. It looked like just a lump of bread, but out of each end poked meat and cheese. There would be at least three different kinds of cheese in this, along with three different kinds of meat, all of them cooked to perfection and rolled carefully inside highly sweetened bread. Elary had tried to make it on her own, and achieved disgusting results. She had had to accept her cooking skills were limited to healers' draughts, but she enjoyed good cooking when she could get it.

She realized in a few moments that Mitherill was not eating. She glanced at her, and found the Princess staring at the bit of meat that stuck out of the end of her bread as if it were seaweed.

"What is wrong, Princess?" asked Shadow, who had chewed and swallowed every bite before he spoke. It was considered highly impolite to speak at the table in Arvenna except between dishes, or at least between bites.

"I can't eat meat," said Mitherill, looking up at him. "It would have been a little creature."

"Not little, in this case," said Shadow easily. "I assure you that this meat was taken only from mature animals."

"But they could have lived if you hadn't killed them!" said Mitherill passionately. "Doesn't that matter to you at all?"

"No," said Shadow.

Elary intervened hastily. Even the wolf was eyeing Mitherill with amusement as he took surprisingly neat bites out of his pasty, and she didn't want Mitherill punished as she had been this morning for not obeying the lesson. "It's usual to eat meat in Arvenna, Mitherill. They don't have that much fertile earth for growing crops except in the south, and the Court is often in the north."

"It doesn't mean that they should eat it," said Mitherill. "It is killing, and not in war. I will not eat it."

Shadow shrugged. "Very well, but you didn't refuse the meal in the proper way. In Arvenna, if you don't like or refuse to eat what your host is serving, you must lay the food carefully to one side and then wait for the next course, perhaps sipping your wine. I notice that you haven't done that, either."

"I don't like wine."

Shadow sighed, and it really did sound like the sigh of a teacher. Elary wondered if he had intended to teach this lesson himself, since so far he hadn't involved the wolf or the liadra. She glanced at them, and found them both eating neatly, watching the Princess.

"A Queen of Ilantra-Arvenna will have to do a great many things that she doesn't like, Mitherill. Taking wine, or at least a few sips of it, is a social custom."

"I can change such things when I ascend the throne."

"But you will have to know what you're changing, and what the ramifications will be," said Shadow. "Have you ever heard the Coralira Cycle of history-tales?"

Mitherill peered at him suspiciously. "No."

"They reflect what happened when a Queen of Arvenna tried to change the customs of her country, just because it happened that she was in a bad mood on a day when she had to perform a certain routine ceremony. The consequences were devastating, and resulted in the first of the Arvennese civil wars. The people whom you come to rule will remember the Coralira Cycle. They will be wary and on their guard the moment you try to introduce any changes. You should know the way they live. You may find much to admire in it."

"I don't," said Mitherill. "Sitting at a table with a wolf and a power who is keeping me prisoner for his own reasons? Having to eat food I don't like and drink wine I don't like? Listening to lies for history? This is only your attempt to corrupt me, and not an attempt to educate me." She held up her burned hand. "And you have already resorted to pain."

"You believe that the history was lies, then?" Shadow asked. Elary was uneasily aware that the wolf had finished his pasty and was watching them closely, his head cocked on one side. "Even though I have no reason to lie?"

"Of course," said Mitherill. "I don't trust anyone who serves Shadow. I especially don't trust you, yourself. What purpose would you have to lie about the history? To justify your conquest, of course."

"It is a sad thing to see what my kin has been reduced to."

Mitherill gave a shriek and leaned back against her chair. Elary stared. The wolf was gone. Rior sat in his place, resting his elbows carefully on the table so that they didn't drift through it and shaking his head at Mitherill.

"I share some Ilantran royal blood," he said. "No Arvennese, but I know and love some customs of the country. I am ashamed, my lady, that you don't know or care about the people you say you must rule."

Mitherill lifted her head. "I know what I am. Royal. That gives me the right to change customs if I think that I must."

"You don't know that you must," said Rior in irritation. "You are only doing this because you think that the Light has told you the complete truth. And it hasn't. You're nothing but a silly little girl who listens to voices in her head above those of mortals who have lived in the world."

Mitherill stared at Rior, her mouth hanging open but no words coming out. Elary was certain that was the first time anyone had ever called her a silly little girl.

"Ah."

Elary glanced at Shadow, who was smiling at Rior. "You do have a way with those kinds of words," said Shadow. "And I think that we're never going to make Mitherill learn anything as long as Elary is there to pull out her chair for her, fetch food for her, and act as her translator. I think that you should be her guardian, Rior." He glanced at the liadra. "Anorie, would you make sure that the Lady Elary has a comfortable room and adequate preparation for the journey back to her fellow healers, please?"

Chapter 46

Bravado

*"Those who are truly wise will know that a time comes when one cannot strike back, not even against the foulest deeds of the Dark. The wise will then abide the coming of the Light, and will wait until the chance comes to win their freedom."*

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

*You know that what you're doing is beyond ridiculous.*

Kymenos ground his teeth. It was the voice that often spoke to him, the quiet voice of reason. It was the voice that had warned him not to invest all his money in a voyage to the Green Isles, the voice that had told him he was hardly a hero in a history-tale the day he walked away from Serian, the voice that he had heard at other times in his life. It always told him the best course of action to take. Kymenos followed it, most of the time.

But not this time.

*You know that you cannot really hurt Nightstone, that you are only striking back at her because she is a closer target than Destiny.*

Kymenos ignored that, too. He didn't like what Destiny had tried to make him do, or the elves, or Nightstone, and he had lost his temper so fiercely that he feared he might never get it back. Nightstone was the closest one right now, so he was doing everything he could to defy her.

Which wasn't much.

*You are exhausting your strength, said the patient voice. Better to wait. Sykeen is here, and you know that he would carry you anywhere you asked. He is probably rested from the run against the pegasi. Wait, and slip out of the castle in the dead of night. Or just tell her about the elves, and then she will stop torturing you and let you go. You don't care about the elves, do you? They gave you no new information, and Pannerel, though he declared himself your companion, hasn't come back to help you.*

Kymenos leaned against the side of the chair, panting, his eyes closed and his body aching. The voice was the loudest thing in the room, other than the rush of his heart in his ears and the light crackle of the fire. He knew that Nightstone was pausing and staring into the fire, giving him a chance to recover his strength, because she did that after every two bouts of emotion now. He thought it was also to make sure that her own anger didn't carry her away. He had enraged her, but only enough to make her cause him pain and pace herself, not enough to cause her to make a mistake.

*There is no point to this, said the voice. Stop it now.*

But Kymenos was resolved to pay no attention, not this time. The only other time in his life he had lost his temper like that, he had wound up frightening away the other students among the Star Circle who had made it their duty to chase and beat him up. He had scared them so badly that none of them would even make eye contact with him after that. He wanted to do the same thing now. Nightstone wouldn't just stop hurting him; she would do whatever he said, including freeing Alliana's family.

*You can't believe this will actually work.*

Kymenos hung there, and panted. This time, Nightstone had selected a memory of a night he got drunk and wound up sharing a bed with another student he had barely known.

Drunkenness and exhilaration could be just as hard to relive as panic, he had found, especially when Nightstone intensified the feelings with her Scarlet magic.

He was going to make her pay for this. He just had to figure out how he was going to go about it.

*You can't figure out a way!* said the voice in anguish. *Just give in and let yourself tell her the name.*

Nightstone turned back towards him. After so long in the room, Kymenos was attuned to the turns of her body. He opened his eyes to find her staring at him with blue eyes that seemed extremely bright in the light of the fire.

"I don't like doing this," she said, and her voice was actually tired, as if she thought that her saying that should make him agree with her. "And we can stop the moment you tell me who helped you. That is a simple thing, Kymenos. You have paid for trying to hurt me. You have paid for being Princess Alliana's unwitting companion; I am convinced that you know nothing more about her, that you have done just as you said you did and no more. This can end. Who helped you?"

Kymenos stared into her eyes, and actually believed her. He thought her anger was gone. Perhaps she really didn't like torture, perhaps she was just tired, but he only had to speak the words, and she would stop.

And perhaps he would even have told her, but there was a knock on the door then. Nightstone strode to it at once and opened it, hissing something that sounded like, "I told you I was not to be disturbed!" Kymenos's blood pounding in his ears almost obscured her voice when she wasn't close.

"But, my lady-" He was certain of that much.

A pause, and then Nightstone said, "Oh, very well." He could hear her more clearly now, as she was moving back towards him. "I did ask for it. I suppose I should have been ready for the interruption."

Kymenos managed to focus on her, and saw that behind her was a liadra holding the green robe of a Master of the Nine Wonders. She was staring at him calmly, without curiosity; she must have brought the robe to replace the dirty and torn one he wore, and had no other business.

Kymenos blinked. *New clothes? Why would they care what I wore? If they turn to physical torture, it would be easier the more nearly naked I was.*

He turned his head to look at Nightstone, and blinked again. She had averted her face and was studying the far wall with a decided blush on her cheeks. She had worn the same expression when he first opened his eyes after her choosing his drunken memory.

Strange. She seemed disconcerted, as surely no one that old should be, by the thought of nakedness or bedding.

Strange. Perhaps just a curiosity, a quirk of personality.

*Or a weapon.*

"Dress him and get out," said Nightstone, speaking without a glance at either the liadra or Kymenos.

Kymenos flexed and stretched as the liadra unloosed him from the ropes, keeping a careful eye on Nightstone. She kept a careful eye on the wall, as if it might open into a secret passage and disgorge Lightworkers at any instant.

The liadra bowed her head so that she was staring directly into Kymenos's eyes from a few inches away, and said, "Will you be quiet and give me no trouble? I will strike with lightning if you do so, and that will mean that you die. I am not as merciful as the Lady."

"I understand."

Kymenos did indeed remain quiet as the liadra slipped the dirty robe off him and dressed him in the other one. It felt wonderful to have clean cloth against his skin again, and Kymenos was glad to see that it fitted him as well.

He stretched his arms as the liadra arranged the robe carefully around his shoulders, as though he needed to uncramp them, but his eyes were on Nightstone.

She kept her eyes resolutely on the wall, but the blush stained her cheeks even more deeply.

Kymenos smacked his lips and said to the liadra, "Does the Lady often torture using her Scarlet magic?"

The lightning-fey blinked as if astonished that Kymenos was talking to her, and then nodded. "Yes. She is one of the most powerful Scarlet mages, and only they can do such things. There is no reason not to use them."

"Ah," said Kymenos. "I see. And, no doubt, it is the power of her magic that has kept her alive this long?"

"No," said the liadra. "It was the favor of the unicorns. That is part of her legend," she added, in a slightly indignant tone, as she put Kymenos back in the chair and bound the ropes around his arms and fingers once more. "Surely you must have heard of those legends even in Dalzna?"

"Of course, of course," said Kymenos, in a soothing tone that he hoped would satisfy the liadra, while he kept his eyes on Nightstone and saw her shift slightly in agitation, as though she felt his gaze.

*She is a virgin. She must be. No unicorn I've ever heard of tolerates the company of non-virgins for long. Four hundred years of chastity, and serving the Dark.*

*Four hundred years of controlling herself, and probably fearing what will happen if she loses that control, even for a moment.*

*Oh, yes, I think I know how to fight her now.*

"Thank you, Torien, you may go."

The liadra bowed and left the room with no sign of anger at the Princess's peremptory dismissal, but then, Kymenos didn't think the fey felt many such human emotions. Nightstone

turned back towards him at once, the blush fading from her cheeks as though it had never existed.

*I think I know how to bring it back.*

"You have the choice I mentioned," said Nightstone, her eyes on his face. Kymenos noted the angle of her neck, as well as the steadiness of her gaze, and realized that she hadn't glanced down at his groin or chest once, even when he was still wearing the torn robe. It hadn't struck him before, but the lack of movement was unnatural. "You can tell me who helped you, and then the pain will end and you'll go back to one of the comfortable cells, with a meal."

Time to test just how unnatural she was about this. "And a bed?" Kymenos asked.

Nightstone's head jerked a very little, but she must have learned to think of beds as for sleeping, too; she only nodded. "Yes, that too. You must be tired, aren't you, Kymenos?" Her voice had resumed its coaxing tone. "And hungry?"

"Well, yes," said Kymenos. "And I have to piss too."

Another slight jerk. Nightstone glared suspiciously at him for a moment, then turned her back on him and stared into the fire again. "Decide," she said, trying to sound bored and failing. Kymenos wondered if it was only her awareness of his awareness that was making her self-conscious, or if the new robe fit him better than he had thought. "I will not stay here and wait for you to make up your mind."

"You've done it so far."

Nightstone glared at him. "And have won only your saliva for my pains." Her hand rose to her cheek for a moment, as though the spittle had remained. "Why did you do that?"

Kymenos grinned. "Well, I might have licked you, but I didn't think that would have the effect I wanted."

Nightstone flushed at once. "Stop that!" she shouted.

"Stop what?"

Nightstone's face darkened. "I know what you're doing," she said. "It won't work. My enemies have tried to use my chastity against me as a weapon over the years, and none of them has ever succeeded."

"Doesn't mean that you don't react," said Kymenos. "Your hair is beautiful, you know. What does it look like down?"

Nightstone growled and locked her eyes onto his, reaching out into his mind and towards his memories.

Kymenos reacted as quickly as he could. He couldn't dictate what memory she would choose, but he could try to influence the decision. He thought of all his bedding partners over the years, and arranged his memories of them disrobing in the forefront of his mind.

Nightstone cried out as if she had been burned, and approached him, hissing, "I will gag you."

Kymenos grinned at her. "I didn't know they played those games south of Amorier or north of Doralissa, but I'd be willing to try it."

Nightstone stared at him. Kymenos stared back.

"Besides," Kymenos added, "you can't gag me, or you would have before now. You need to hear me say the name."

Nightstone smiled. "Ah. So it was only one person, then? Much easier to deal with than a whole pack of traitors. Tell me who."

"For a price," said Kymenos.

Nightstone lost the smile at once. "You do not dictate the terms here, Kymenos. I have promised you sleep and food and rest from this if you tell me the names. Otherwise, I will give you nothing."

"This is a small price," Kymenos objected.

Nightstone rolled her eyes. "What is it?"

"A kiss."

Nightstone cried out as if he had physically struck her. Kymenos could see her hand twitching with the need to slap him, but she withheld it and spoke as quickly and harshly as she evidently trusted herself to.

"You will only suffer torture at other hands. If I myself cannot torture you, there are those who will."

Kymenos worked up his best pout. It had been some months since he had had occasion to use it, and he feared that he was out of practice, but consoled himself with the thought that Nightstone probably couldn't tell the difference. "But they won't be as lovely as you, will they?"

"Glow!" Nightstone yelled at the door, turning away from him.

Kymenos closed his eyes. He would see what happened when the door opened. He could hear the click of claws as the *zeyr* entered, and opened his eyes again.

"Take this prisoner from my sight," said Nightstone. "Put him in a cell, give him food and water and a chamberpot, and let him sleep. Then bring him back to me. I will do something to- that is, I will torture him then." Her face was afire as she shoved past the cat-like creature and vanished into the hall.

Kymenos let out his breath.

"What did you do to her?" Glow asked him, making Kymenos look down at him. He had his head on one side, and his eyes glowing.

"She wouldn't like me telling you, would she?" Kymenos asked.

Glow purred. "I assure you that she shall not hear of it from me."

Kymenos narrowed his eyes even as he smiled. *Divisions among the factions, then?* "I began to refer to bedding her."

Glow stood quite still for a moment, then said, "She did not say that you should not have one of the comfortable cells."

Kymenos blinked. "She didn't say I should, either."

Glow purred again. "If something is not forbidden, it is permitted." He sprang onto Kymenos's lap and began to chew through the ropes. "You do understand I will have to scream if you run."

Kymenos, who had heard a *zeyr* cry at close quarters before and was not anxious to repeat the experience, winced. "I understand."

"Good." Glow turned and gave a low version of the call at the door. Another *zeyr* appeared.

"Tell the *liadrai* to prepare one of the comfortable cells," said Glow, with a glance at Kymenos. "I think that Princess Nightstone would uniquely appreciate that."

Kymenos smiled. He had made Nightstone stop torturing him, and he was getting a comfortable cell out of it, too, indirectly.

*How is that?* he asked the little voice in his head.

For once, it had no reply.

## Chapter 47

### Distractions She Doesn't Need

*"Distractions, obstacles, and enemies rarely wait until the most convenient moment to attack—unless Destiny is arranging matters, of course."*

-The Mistaken Mage.

Nightstone pressed her hands over her face and stood still. She could control this trembling. She should have been able to control it long since. She had shaken since escaping—

*No*, she thought furiously. *I will not think that. I will not.*

-Since leaving her office. She should be able to control it. She would control it. She opened her eyes and clenched her hands on the edge of the stall before her, panting, but calmer.

*He is only a man*, she reasoned with herself, *only trying the same tricks that your enemies have tried a thousand times before. And he is stupid, to think that petty vengeance like this is worth more than what you would give him if he cooperated. Why won't he cooperate?*

"My lady?"

Nightstone glanced up in startlement. She had come to the stables thinking that all the pegasi were gone on scouting missions, but one stood in front of her. It was Chive, Black Rose's second-in-command. He was gazing at her with nostrils flaring wide, as though to sniff the scent of her fear.

Nightstone stood straighter and cleared her throat. "Yes. What is it?"

"I wondered if you were well, my lady. I know that not many things could make you tremble so, or weep so."

Nightstone's hand flew to her cheek. It was the first time she had realized that she was weeping. She hadn't wept for herself or because of something someone had done to her in a long time. Tears were for fallen comrades or times of joy, not for herself.

"Did someone hurt you?" Chive half-reared, as if to show her the sharp hooves that made pegasi so dangerous, like a nobleman showing her his sword. "Is it an attack by the Light? We will gladly kill anyone who harms you, my lady. You know that."

"I know that," said Nightstone, and managed to smile. "No, it was just an unexpected encounter with something I thought I had forgotten."

"If you are sure-"

"I am."

Chive looked at her closely, then nodded. "Then I should be going." He cantered out of the stable, his wings already raised for flight.

"What did you come back for?" Nightstone called after him.

Chive glanced at her. "Scouting mission," he said, even as he began to run. "They're not only useful on the Plains." And then he was up and away over the castle walls before she could ask him any more questions.

Nightstone clucked her tongue, falling once more into the familiar routines. There were always politics happening in the castle, of course, among the nobles who wanted to gain her favor if nowhere else. But she hadn't thought that the Darkworkers were engaged in gameplaying. The *zeyri* and the pegasi, at the very least, and who knew who else might be jockeying for position?

"There you are."

Nightstone turned in astonishment, not least because there was no one in the castle who dared to address her like that. She would have heard anyone who was approaching, too, or so she thought.

Then she saw the figure's golden-brown skin and long pale hair, and understood.

"What do you want, elf?" she hissed.

The elf halted a few feet from her and looked her over severely. Nightstone pinched her lips shut to keep from hissing out more of her dislike. This was an elf she hadn't seen before, a tall man with clear eyes that seemed designed to scoop out her soul, but she wasn't afraid of him.

The power of the Dark, if she had to call on it, could destroy him at once, even if her own flame could not.

"I know that you have captive humans," said the elf at last. "Let them go."

Nightstone blinked. None of the elves had ever come to her and made such a direct request. They had simply wandered around and made enigmatic statements, usually vanishing sideways into air when she tried to make them tell her the truth. "Why would you care about that?"

The elf put his head on one side. "I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know why," said the elf. "I only know that I thought it a good idea to ask you. I was hoping that you would know the reason I wanted them free."

Nightstone stared at him for a moment more, then shook her head. *I will never understand the fey, and the elves least of all.* "You can't command any of my attention now, elf, still less my obedience. The prisoners are prisoners for good reason, and prisoners they will stay."

"No."

"What are you going to do if you don't agree with me?" Nightstone called to the Scarlet and let flames begin flickering on her palms, despite all the straw and wood around her. It would actually relieve her temper to get involved in a fight.

The elf lifted his hand, but just then another one, an elfwoman, appeared beside him and said, "No, Pannerel."

Pannerel glanced at her, then back at Nightstone. She kept her hand up and the flame flickering. She wasn't sure what was going to happen next, but she wouldn't let the elves take her by surprise.

"Why not, Annalithiel?" asked Pannerel.

*Annalithiel.* Nightstone nodded a little to the elfwoman. "I understand now why you have persisted in staying around the castle. I salute your dedication, but you should know that it's useless. The child who is the last heir to the Orlathian throne should die soon, when the Dark gives me the command."

Annalithiel ignored her completely, speaking to Pannerel instead. "You know very well. The situation grows more delicate every day. You know that Shara made some progress, but it fled again, and more of our people died. The power has reason to hate our people, and I don't think that interfering in the affairs of one of the countries it wants to rule will endear us to it."

Nightstone had not the slightest idea what they were talking about, but she kept her hand ready. Shara was a goddess who mostly loved the children of the Dark, but She was also liable to go off and do things on Her own, and Nightstone had noticed that She hadn't been answering prayers lately. This could be some sort of divine politics, probably was, but it could still mean that the elves would strike at Nightstone, if they argued themselves into it.

"I don't like this double-talk," said Pannerel. "Why not speak of the power in open terms? It is-

"Pannerel."

Nightstone's flames flickered and went out, and she felt her bladder release at the same time. She had never heard such anger in anyone's voice as there was in Annalithiel's voice at that moment. She bowed her head, wanting to drop to the ground and curl up so the elf wouldn't notice her, but retaining just enough pride not to do so.

Pannerel spoke a moment later, and save for that short silence, there was no sign in his voice that he was intimidated. "Well, I suppose that if we must do such things, we must."

"We must."

"Orlathian is such an inconvenient language," said Pannerel, and glanced at Nightstone. "I suppose that we could not converse about this openly in Onnalathiel?"

"She might know it," said Annalithiel, with another glare at Nightstone that made her bow her head again. "And there are many who will know it if she does not. There is too much risk, Pannerel."

"I don't like sneaking around and using subterfuge."

"Neither do I. But we can't make demands now. We're so close, but we have to show this power that we'll be faithful to our agreements. And if it demands that we refrain from interfering in Orlath, then that is what we must do, for the sake of our kin as much as for what could happen in the future."

Pannerel let out a heavy sigh. "Then I will follow your lead, Annalithiel, and refrain from interfering in Orlath as much as I can. This won't help Kymenos or anyone else." He turned to Nightstone, added, "Sorry to have troubled you," and then turned and jumped into the air. Annalithiel followed him, with another glare at Nightstone that kept her pinned in place until moments after the elves had left.

Then she relaxed, and smiled, feeling her heart begin to sing again. The elves had just told her who had helped Kymenos, probably without meaning to. They had taken him away, probably to another world, and returned him for their own reasons. Nightstone still couldn't understand the silence that smacked of loyalty, when the elves refused to even help him out of his cell, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that she now knew who had helped him, and it was no one from the castle, no one whom she could have prevented. There probably weren't intrigues brewing in the minds of the Darkworkers to unseat her after all.

She decided that such good news deserved a small indulgence. She would go and speak to Kymenos, let him know that she knew and that his silence had been useless. That would upset him.

Off she went, a smile on her face, though a few steps reminded her that she needed to change her gown first.

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Two hours later, she was no longer smiling. She had scoured the whole length of the lower dungeons, and Kymenos was not there. Had the elves come back in and rescued him again?

"Hello."

Nightstone turned her head, then stopped. She was standing in front of Princess Alliana's cell, and the girl had an expression of such glee on her face that Nightstone decided to ask, even though she knew she probably wouldn't get much from the Princess but curses and insults.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked.

Alliana peered through her fingers and giggled. "The Light has told me something that makes me very happy," she said. "There is a prophecy of the four of us, the four Heirs of the Kingdom, the Heirs of the Light, coming together, and of what we shall do when we are together."

"What is this prophecy?"

Alliana giggled.

Nightstone sighed and shook her head, but didn't give up right away. Experience had showed her that Alliana really couldn't resist the opportunity to show off her own cleverness, and that meant she was prone to giving hints and clues about things that might enable Nightstone to figure out what she was talking about. "It's too bad, really. I'm sure the prophecy glorifies you."

"It does."

"And you won't tell me what it is?"

"No."

"Pity." Nightstone turned away again, wondering if Glow had taken Kymenos somewhere else. That was possible, but why not put him here? It wasn't that far from her office, and the *zeyri* usually had no trouble obeying instructions.

"But Kymenos could."

Nightstone paused, then glanced over her shoulder at Alliana. "Why would you tell me that?" she demanded. It was the most direct statement the Princess had ever made to her, at least when she was trying to be mysterious; Nightstone counted the losing of her temper during the torture as something else. "You've never told me anything like that before."

"Kymenos is a traitor," said Alliana, and for a moment her face went from gleeful to stormy. "He thinks that he can resist Destiny, and that he even has a *right* to resist Destiny. He's wrong. That didn't stop him, though. So I don't care about what happens to him anymore. Destiny promised to find me a new guardian, one who wouldn't yell at me and would let me do whatever I liked."

Nightstone nodded her thanks, and then turned and began to ascend the stairs again. She would look in the comfortable cells, and now she had a reason to torture Kymenos again, after all.

Granted that it was the word of a Princess of Orlath Nightstone thought was more than half-likely to be mad, but still, it was something.

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Sure enough, she at last found Kymenos in one of the comfortable cells, sleeping extravagantly on the bed. He had sprawled across it as if to insure that no one could lie down beside him.

Nightstone felt the blush glowing her cheeks again, and shook her head firmly. *Not this time. This time, he is the one who will be undone.* She knew the way that sudden pain could feel when waking someone else out of sleep, and she decided that she would use that. She couldn't claim his memories with his eyes closed, but she could, and did, simply set fire to one of his feet.

Kymenos came awake at once, but didn't shriek in pain the way that Nightstone had thought he would. He simply stamped down, putting the hotfoot out, and then sat up, staring towards the illusion-concealed door. Nightstone reminded himself that he couldn't see her, and that she was therefore perfectly free to blush. How would he affect her now, when he couldn't see what he was doing?

She quickly had her answer. Kymenos, continuing to stare towards the door, yawned and ran his fingers through his hair, making it look as though he had just risen from bedplay-

*Stop that!*

Nightstone shook her head at her own straying thoughts. She would have to visit the unicorns soon, and once again emerge with a clean mind and pure.

"I know that the elves helped you. And I know that you know a prophecy of some kind," she said to him. "I want to know what it is."

Kymenos blinked, for a moment complete surprise showing on his face. Then he shrugged. "I'm not inclined to tell it to you."

"You will feel the bite of my flames again."

Kymenos winked. "Did I ever tell you how much I love it when a woman says the word 'bite?'"

Nightstone growled before she could stop herself. Then she closed her eyes and said, "That is entirely inappropriate. I suggest that you stop."

"You sound like a prissy matron I once knew," said Kymenos. "In Corlinth. She wouldn't tolerate any talk of bedding at all, you see, even though she had three children. But I had a notion, and I went back that night to see if the notion was true. It was. She didn't happen to like the way her husband usually made love to her, but she did like for me to lie down and-

"Stop it this instant!" Nightstone was a little startled to hear her voice emerge so shrilly.

Kymenos laughed, deliberately, she was sure, deepening his chuckle. "So, I've learned not to trust first impressions. The women who disdain bedding the most and cling to shreds of what they call 'chastity' are the ones who are actually most desperate for a good bedding. They haven't had one, that's all. I will admit that a lot of men are impatient or just unskilled. I am not. Can you imagine me-"

Nightstone struck out blindly with flame, and heard him scream with pain. She opened her eyes to see his hair burning. Kymenos rolled in the bed, smothering the flames with a blanket, and sat up with his hair still smoking slightly. His eyes had narrowed, but his smile stayed in place.

"Such a waste of energy, these flames, my lady. We could kindle a different kind of fire in the bed, if you would only let it happen."

"I will kill you," said Nightstone.

"Yes," said Kymenos, "and what would the Dark say to that, when you haven't learned what this prophecy is?"

Nightstone closed her eyes and forced herself to calm down. The Dark wouldn't like it if prophecies about the Heirs had begun to appear, and she ignored one. It thought such things were important, even though they were obscure. There were some among the Darkworkers, including those priestesses who worshipped Shara as Lady of Mysteries, who could figure them out in time, and predict the movements of the Light. Prophecies were valuable tools against the enemy.

"I shall come back later," she said.

"Oh, my lady. I look forward to it."

Nightstone turned and marched off, her spine straight. She would go to the unicorns, now, and spend time with them until she was sure that her mind was cleansed.

And then she would write a certain letter to Prince Artaen of Rivendon.

## Chapter 48

### A Change of Guardians

*"Nothing has ever startled me as much as the revelation of my true parentage. It was then that I learned many things all at once, or perhaps realized them, but the most disconcerting thing was having to realize that some certainties had changed. Most children live and die never having cause to think that their parents, the first folk they remember, are other than what they say they are. And this- this changed something that should not have changed."*

-Musings in the private journal of the Hidden Princess of Arvenna.

Elary stared at Shadow for a long moment. She didn't dare look at Mitherill.

Then the girl wailed, and Elary could not help but look at her. Mitherill was on her feet, her mouth open in a long cry of indignation, her hands flapping as if she would shoo chickens away.

"You can't do this!" she screeched.

"Why not?" asked Shadow. "Am I not as great a divine power as Light or Destiny?"

"No!"

"Well, I am." Shadow turned regally to Rior. "Of course, you would have to accept the burden of her guardianship, Rior, and that is something that I would not lay upon you unless you are willing to accept it."

"The last one didn't work out so well," said Rior.

"That was with a different Princess, one who had other problems," said Shadow, but softened his voice, as if attempting to persuade Rior with his tone and not just his words. "This will be different, Rior. And if the burden grows too heavy for you, I give my word that I will remove it. Will you take it up? I think that you could teach her better than anyone else could."

Rior stared at the table, looking at the cloth through his own shadowy hands. Then he glanced back up and nodded.

"Good," said Shadow, beaming around at everyone with cheerful good-will. "That's settled, then."

"It is *not*!" shrieked Mitherill. "You can't do this!"

"Why not?"

"Because I say so!" Mitherill took a step back from the table, and her aura of Destiny flared around her, turning the air gold. "I say that you cannot do this, and Destiny and Light will support me."

Shadow stood as well, though Elary noticed that he was careful to keep to Arvennese manners even now; he pushed his chair back all the way from the table, instead of simply shoving it out like Mitherill had. "My lady, if you call forth the power of the Light in my sanctuary--"

Mitherill held out her hands and proceeded to do just that. The room vanished behind a sudden explosion of radiance. Elary put a hand over her eyes and leaned close to the table, so as not to lose it, but with the other hand, she groped for Mitherill. This might be their only chance to run.

She didn't find the Princess before the light suddenly dimmed. Elary slowly uncovered her eyes, and found herself facing Shadow, who had filled the room with swarming, dancing shadows. It didn't seem to matter that they didn't come from any objects at all.

Shadow said softly, "If you called forth the power of the Light, I meant to say, I would call forth my own power. I don't want to do this, Princess. I want to see you learn to be a good ruler. I have always had a special place in my heart for the Ilantran royal family, and I have been learning to love Arvenna and Doralissa, too, since my conquest. But I have no patience for those who do not understand the reality of things."

Mitherill didn't appear to be listening. She shrieked, "How did you do that? There's no way that you could have done that!"

Shadow looked at her steadily, with little of regret or apology in his gaze now. "This is nothing that I would not do otherwise, my lady. I am divine, and a power of the world on a rank with Dark and Light. Only together did they ever defeat me, and they could not lock me out of the world forever." His voice was growing in power and resonance; Elary almost expected the stone to start shaking. Rior was watching with an old sorrow in his eyes. The liadra, Anorie, just looked calm. "I have the power to change history and use humans as much as they do, but I prefer not to do that, since I think humans make the best changes on their own, and that when subtly guided. You have not thought this through, my lady, not if you plan to fight me. You should at least think about it some more."

Then his voice died, and once again he was a human man with some fey blood, whom Elary would have passed on the street without a glance. She shivered. In some ways, Shadow's ordinariness was more dangerous than the bared power of the Dark.

But then she firmed her spine, reminding herself that she was Mitherill's guardian and couldn't back down just because she was afraid of the enemy. It was well to be afraid. It was not well to let fear turn her courage into cowardice, and so she did not, instead saying, "You may contend with Mitherill, my lord, and Light and Destiny, but you must contend with me as well."

Shadow turned to face her, dipping his head slightly as if he were a duelist acknowledging a hit. "Yes, of course, my lady. I have to be careful how I fight you. But that does not mean I cannot."

"I know," said Elary. "But neither will I leave Mitherill's side."

"Yes, you will," said Shadow, and uttered a shrill cry that stopped in a moment, though he kept his lips parted as if still giving it.

Elary didn't know what that meant, and she wasn't about to find out. She grabbed Mitherill's arm and dragged her towards the entrance of the cave. She thought she could find an outer tunnel from here, and-

The crackle of leathery wings warned her. She dragged Mitherill to the ground just as the first flight of bats went overhead, apparently coming in response to Shadow's call. The bats were turning their heads from side to side, their ears moving at the same time, and Elary knew they were seeking some sign, some sound, of her and Mitherill.

Putting her mouth as close to the Princess's ear as she could, she whispered, "Can you call on the gnomes?"

"But that should wait-" said Mitherill in a normal voice, and Elary saw one of the bats swerve towards them.

"There is no more time for secrecy!" Elary yelled, rolling. Almost at once, the bats came back towards them, and then she was surrounded by a beating cacophony of leathery wings and grabbing scarlet feet. She felt the claws rip at the skin of her arms, and the blood begin to flow.

Luckily, Mitherill raised her voice just then, in a low, rumbling chant that seemed to echo through the stone. Some of the bats at once landed, though Elary wasn't sure if it was on purpose, or if they had been tugged down somehow.

She found out as small, strong arms grabbed her attackers and threw them off, and then a wrinkled face peered at her.

"Leave her, she's a friend," said Mitherill, pacing forward with her golden aura of Crop magic glowing all around her. She smiled at Elary with calm, exultant eyes, and reached out to pull her guardian to her feet on her own. "That was a good thought, Elary." She glanced at the crumpled bats lying in the corridor. "And at least some of Shadow's creatures will never fly again."

Elary opened her mouth, then closed it. It disturbed her that Mitherill seemed more exultant over the death of Shadow's creatures than their escape, but she would deal with it later. "Come," she said instead, and began to run. Mitherill followed right behind her, the gnomes leaping in and out of the stone on either side of them, treating the solid rock like water.

Elary closed her eyes as they ran, once she was sure there were no pits or loose stones right in front of her, and concentrated as hard as she could. She had thought she felt a faint breath of fresh air from the south, with senses long honed to the feeling of bad air or the sounds of patients breathing, and she swerved towards it. Mitherill followed, laughing slightly now, and she heard the stone parting with a sound like wet flesh as the gnomes came after.

Then she felt a whole blast of wind on her face, and opened her eyes.

She stood at the end of a tunnel that led into the open air, but beyond, there was only cliff and a long, sheer drop. Elary supposed that Shadow's servants hardly needed steps or handholds of any kind, when they could fly themselves.

She turned to look at Mitherill. "What now?"

Mitherill seized her hand, staring intently into her eyes. "Elary, there is something very difficult that I must ask of you."

"What?" asked Elary, shaken. Mitherill seemed to have changed in the last few moments, as if she had taken off a mask, or as if something else was speaking through her. The look she was giving Elary now was very serious.

"I can escape, but I know that you cannot. I can sink into the stone and swim with the gnomes, but you cannot do that- unless you have earth magic yourself."

Elary shook her head, mouth dry.

"Then I must go alone. Can you stay here, and look for me, and meet me again when you get away?"

"I can," said Elary. "Shall I go to the mountain with three heads when I can?"

Mitherill smiled. "You should. But it will take some time before I can join you. I have other things I must do first."

"Are you all right, Princess?"

Mitherill tossed her long hair back, so that the white streak in it gleamed in the light of the gray day beyond the cave entrance. "Yes, I think so. I am growing into my power, that is all. I think that my Destiny is beginning to be fulfilled. The prophecy I sang to you is stirring."

Elary opened her mouth to say something, and then Shadow was upon them.

The shades came from everywhere- cracks in the rocks formed by the gnomes, their own shadows, the ceiling and the mountainside below the cave entrance. Elary would have thought them easy to evade, since they were made of mist alone, with no substance, but she found quickly that that was not so easily done. One of them grabbed her and held her still, while the others went after Mitherill, sliding past the glows of the gnomes that she called but gripping them firmly enough.

Other shadows made it to Mitherill and bound her in one place, despite her shrill screams.

Elary struggled wildly. If she could only break free and go to Mitherill, then she would. In the last moments, she had seen something in the Princess that was not childish at all, not the side that had made half her traitor mind believe Shadow's scheme of education a good one. She

wanted to be free and serve that woman, the woman who might really become the Queen that Iantra-Arvenna needed.

There was a flicker of silver in front of her, and the liadra, Anorie, appeared. She grasped Elary's shoulder and said to the shadow, "You may let her go." The shadow at once loosened its hold and flowed away into a crack in the rocks.

Elary lunged, or tried to. Anorie held her still easily, and in fact leaned forward so that she could peer into her face. Meanwhile, Mitherill's screams grew more distant as the shadows dragged her away into the caves.

"You have to let me go!" Elary screamed into the liadra's voice. "She is the one I want to serve, just as you want to serve your Lord Shadow."

Anorie smiled, which was an expression that Elary had rarely seen on a liadra's face. "I don't think that you really understand how the liadrai serve Shadow," she said, and then gave a high, piping call that ended after a moment.

Wings flapped, and then one of the bats came skidding down the corridor and landed on the very edge of the cave entrance. Anorie pulled a leather harness from the floor behind her and wrapped it around the bat, then bound the struggling, screaming Elary into position on the bat's back. Elary knew that the liadra was binding other things on the bat around her, and saying something about money and food, but she didn't care. She wanted to go back to Mitherill, damn it!

"Bear her back to the village where your brother took her from," said Anorie to the bat at last.

The bat pushed itself forward, and a moment later, the cold wash of air was around Elary again, though nowhere near as cold as it had been when she rode the first bat into the blizzard. And, bound to the bat, even strapped in so that her head hung over the side, she was a great deal more secure than she had been the first time. The bat's wings snapped out at a lower altitude, and it started soaring soon enough, so that the journey might even have been pleasant.

But Elary could not stop thinking about Mitherill, and how the Princess was stuck in the caverns still, and how Elary had failed her.

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Elary never knew how long it was before she suddenly felt walls around her again, and then the bat landed. Lifting her head dazedly, she saw a familiar divan. The bat had indeed brought her back to Lorianna's house.

The beast shrugged its wings in a certain way, and Elary tumbled off its back, leather harness and all. In fact, she thought numbly, the bat had probably just shrugged the harness off. It was the kind of thing that interested her now, after however long of flying with her head hanging towards the ground.

She dimly heard wings flap, heard running footsteps, heard a voice that sounded like Lorianna's shout, "It's Elary!" But she was closing her eyes and sliding towards oblivion, and didn't pay attention.

Then someone else shook her shoulder, and she opened her eyes and stared into Palant's face.

"Where's Mitherill?" he shouted.

"Gone," said Elary, and this time really did slide away, so that she wouldn't hear his anguished wails.

## Chapter 49

### Joy of the Winds

*"There is no joy like the Gust mage's when the wind changes. I feel a stirring in my blood, a sense of promise and hope, when the wind begins to blow from the sea. And then the wind blows over the Plains, and I scent the past and the mysteries of the grasses, and my heart is still within me."*

-Words of Queen Silla of Orlath, at her coronation.

"Ternora."

Ternora opened her eyes. Someone was shaking her, she knew that, but for a long moment she couldn't tell who it was. Then she saw Alira's face, and noted that the woman was smiling.

"What is it?"

Alira shook her head. "He said that he wanted to tell you himself. Come." She turned her back and walked towards the door from the room. Ternora took a moment to smooth out her wrinkled tunic and trousers, and then followed.

No one else was in the main room of the Temple, save for a few priestesses kneeling before the mosaic of Shara and chanting something softly. Ternora had seen them at the ritual before, but never asked about it. On a whim, she did so now. "What are they praying for?"

Alira glanced back at her with a smile. It was a delight of the scholar-priestesses to answer questions, Ternora had found, and they despaired when they could not, just as Alira had despaired last night. "They are hoping that the Goddess will grant them answers to the questions they are researching, and if She cannot, then that She will scatter light into other minds, so that they may have a sudden inspiration."

Ternora nodded. *I do not know why Warcourage refused to enter last night, she thought. Surely Shara and Her priestesses are harmless.*

They stepped out of the room and into the light of early morning then, and Ternora looked at once for Warcourage. To her confusion, he was still asleep by the River, the undines keeping watch over him.

She looked around, then, and understood whom Alira had meant by "he." Viridian stood in front of her, his neck arched in the graceful curve that she had learned meant a good mood, his eyes blazing at her.

"What is it?" she asked him.

The dragon didn't answer with words. Instead, he simply unfolded his wings. Ternora gasped to see them healed, glinting green fans of leather, turning the sunlight to emerald as it fell through them.

"Your wings are healed," she whispered. It was stating the obvious, but she didn't know that she could find any other words.

"Yes." Viridian turned his head to glance complacently over his shoulder at his wings. "At last."

Ternora hesitated. She had often hoped that some chance like this might come along, but when it had, she had never dared ask. She would ask now, she decided in a spirit of recklessness. Viridian knew her well enough that he would probably only refuse, not spit steam. "Would you take me into the air?"

Viridian swung his head back. "You do not think that I would want to share the joy of the winds with you?"

"Well, I-"

"Of course I do." Viridian laid one wing on the ground. "Come."

Ternora climbed the wing hesitantly, since she had no idea how strong the leather was and thought her boots might rip it again. They did not, however, and in some little time, she was seated on Viridian's back, in the hollow of his spine where his shoulders ended. She shivered and looked around for a handhold. There didn't seem to be any, since only smooth scales stretched in every direction she could see.

"How do I hang on?" she asked.

"Ah. A moment."

Viridian twisted his neck, making Ternora gasp and fling herself flat on his back, and snapped a liana off a tree with a quick bite. Then he turned, holding it out to her. "Will this do?"

"Yes." Ternora bound the liana around her waist, then wrapped the vine around his neck; Viridian had chosen one long enough for that. The dragon bore this with patience. Then he glanced back at her and made a small fluttering motion with his wings.

"Ready?"

Ternora nodded, then grabbed the liana as the dragon sprang forward. He did not run, since there wasn't enough room. Instead, he simply brought his wings down, pushing off from the ground at the same time. The trees swayed dizzily past them. For a moment, Ternora feared that he couldn't get enough momentum going, and that they would only crash into one tree or another.

Instead, Viridian shot upward, making the liana creak. Ternora thought she heard it snapping and grabbed frantically for his scales, only to find that the vine had held firm. She gave a little laugh and settled back, then looked down as Viridian settled into lazy, vulture-like circles.

Her stomach gave a lurch. She had never had a problem with heights, but this- this was something different. She had known that dragons were the fastest creatures on the wing, but she had never fully realized what it meant. They were already so far above the ground that several dragons could have flown comfortably between it and them, and she couldn't make out individual people on the ground below.

"Are you all right?" Viridian asked.

"I- yes." Ternora steadied herself with her hands on the scales, which offered no purchase but weren't bad to lean her weight on. "I will be well. I want you to go higher and fly faster."

"Do you?"

"Yes." Ternora blinked a little, startled at how fast her mood had changed from frightened to exhilarated, but then shrugged. Since she was in the air on a dragon's back, and this was probably never going to happen again, she might as well enjoy it. "I do want you to."

"Very well."

It occurred to Ternora that the dragon would never have just cheerfully obeyed her, given his pride, if he wasn't secretly longing for this as well.

And that was the last coherent thought she had for some time, as Viridian rose higher and higher, his body just slightly canted. It wasn't enough to make Ternora slide off, or even really test the strength of the liana vine, but it was enough to make Ternora have the sensation of what it would be like, did either of those things happen. She clung to the dragon and laughed giddily, in between fighting the impulses to be sick.

Viridian reached a certain height- Shara alone probably knew what it was- and then settled into a circle. "Look, Ternora!" he said, his voice a rumble like a distant earthquake under her. "You can see the ocean from here."

Ternora turned her head, and blinked. "See" was not really the right word. She could be dazzled, blinded, by the sun flashing off its surface, but she couldn't see anything of the waves or the individual islands.

*The islands. I wonder.*

"Could you fly Warcourage and me to the Shining Isles, then?" she asked. "I know that dragons use magic to fly, but would it last to carry us there?"

Viridian was silent for a long moment, though the beating of his wings and the roaring of the wind that swept past them kept Ternora from missing his voice all that much. She tried to look at the ocean again, and again got only an eyeful of sundazzle.

"I think that I could," said Viridian. "As long as Warcourage's Destiny was not baffled by flying above the ground, of course. I would hate to get to the Shining Isles and then find out that we had come all that way for nothing. If he could not find the Pool of Siliyonete except by walking, then I would prefer to walk."

"We could ask him."

"That is true." Another silence, at least of Viridian's voice, and then he snapped out his wings and shook them, once. "Yes, I think we could do that," he said. "I want to fly again. I am a creature of both air and land, and I have had only one of my elements for too long."

"I thought your element was Steam," said Ternora, startled. "And that you worshipped Erlande."

"Dragons are- it is hard to explain," said Viridian, sounding the most human she'd ever heard him sound. Usually he was more enigmatic than an elf, since Ternora, having grown up around them, had some idea what they were talking about. Viridian seemed to take everything for granted, but just at the moment, his words came slowly, as if he were searching for an explanation for once.

"We are hung between all the elements at once. We are born able to gain strength from one element, that is true, but that does not mean that we are bound as closely to it as humans are. For example, I have heard that Scarlet and Azure mages will war, not because they have done anything to each other, but because their elements are opposites."

"That is true," said Ternora, thinking of all the history-tales where Scarlet mages burned the Azure, or the Azure drowned the Scarlet.

"But we have a choice," said Viridian quietly. "I know it seems strange, but it is true. They call us thieves, but stealing makes us free. We can choose which elements we love, which we ignore, and which we hate, if there are any. I am free to breathe Steam, to fly the Gust, to walk the Crop, and to worship the Azure. I don't think I could do all of those if I was human."

"No."

"Glad I am to have been born dragon, then." Viridian's voice changed, becoming brisk once more. "Not that it's something new for me to give thanks for that. And we have wandered far from the beginning. We must ask the Prince if his Destiny would still be able to guide us from the air."

"We must," Ternora agreed, and felt him begin to slant down again. She looked around as they went, taking in everything she could during her remaining brief time in the sky.

*For once, I wish I had been born with elemental magic. It would be something to fling my mind into the sky and soar the air.*

Abruptly, Viridian pulled up, jolting Ternora and her vine again, and stared at a certain place in the air. "It appears that we shall not have to go seeking the Prince," the dragon said. "It appears that he has found us."

Ternora followed his gaze, wanting to ask what he meant, and then realized that a faint outline of the Prince was forming there, out of the Gust. Warcourage shook his head at them both. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting ready to land, my Prince," said Viridian.

"Hurry up."

Warcourage faded from sight. Viridian gave a long snort that let out steam, but said nothing as he dived further. Ternora agreed. There was really nothing to say, not when Warcourage took on that tone.

They landed next to the River, and the undines at once swarmed Viridian, begging him to tell them what it was like in the "water that didn't fall to the ground." Ternora cut the vine with the knife she used to skin animals, and then slithered down the dragon's side. Almost absently, Viridian extended his left wing for her like a ramp, and Ternora took it to the ground.

Warcourage was on her at once.

"I heard you speaking of the Pool of Siliyonete, and whether we could fly there," he said. "We cannot."

Ternora blinked. "And why not?"

"Because I must go to the sea and make my homage to Erlande," said Warcourage. "And you told me that we were going to Kesista, where we could hire a ship to take us to the Shining Isles."

"You had objections to that plan, as I recall."

"I withdraw them," said Warcourage, his face glowing with a peculiar fervor. "We must hurry, Ternora. How many days are we from the Delta where the Triaga joins the other rivers?"

Ternora considered. Now that she knew they were at the temple, she could calculate the distance, without being bewildered by the path along the River, which she had never taken before this. "About three days," she said.

"And do you think that we can speak to Erlande from the Delta waters?"

"I don't know," said Ternora in irritation. "Ask the undines or Viridian. They would know."

"I'm asking you."

"I have no idea, my Prince."

Warcourage stared at her for long moments. Then he said, "If we can only speak with Erlande from the sea, then we must move faster. We *must*. There really isn't a choice."

Ternora shook her head. "I don't understand why you think the urgency of the situation has changed, my Prince. So far as I know, Shadow is no more likely to come after us today than tomorrow."

"Destiny has granted me visions," Warcourage whispered. "And I have flown on the winds, sending my mind over the Kingdoms."

Ternora reached out and gripped his ruined hand before she could help herself, flinching a little but not withdrawing when she felt the stumps of his fingers. "My Prince, that could be dangerous. I have heard that not even many adult Gust mages can manage it."

"Destiny will guard me," said Warcourage, smiling at her, "though I thank you for being concerned about me. It speaks well of your loyalty to the true Doralissan royal line. But I have seen- many things, some of which I cannot share, but some of which I can. The other royal Heirs, the ones who will rule Ilantra-Arvenna, Rivendon, and Orlath, are in danger. The Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna is held in captivity by the foul Shadow, parted from her true guardian. The Princess of Rivendon is in captivity in the Dark's dungeons, told lies that she believes. We must move as fast as possible, to make sure that I do not join them in captivity. If only one of us is still free to fulfill the designs of Destiny, then our quest becomes more important than ever."

"What about the Princess of Orlath?" Ternora asked.

For the first time, Warcourage frowned, and the glorious certainty of his face dimmed. "I don't know," he admitted. "I think that, because the Dark ruler of Orlath is also of Orlathain royal

blood, she is confusing the visions that Destiny grants me. I can see that the Princess of Orlath is in danger, but the nature of the danger varies each time I look. Sometimes, she is in captivity. Other times, she is in danger of death. And at still others, it seems that she is threatened by her guardian, but that cannot be so. It would mean that Destiny had chosen her guardian wrongly, which does not happen."

"Does not the confusion of your vision suggest that Destiny can make mistakes?" Ternora asked.

Warcourage nodded reluctantly. Then he stiffened abruptly, and looked up at Ternora with green eyes that flared with the eerie light she had first seen in the elven clearing.

"Destiny wishes you to know something," Warcourage whispered. "It has grown impatient of the lesser powers who wish to claim a place in the world. This is the last war."

Ternora frowned. "My Prince, I don't know what this means."

"This is the last war," Warcourage repeated, his face flushed and shining. "The war for all or nothing. Destiny will win, because it is putting forth all its strength. It is true that it has been challenged, and sometimes, small twists of the other powers, like Shadow, can rupture its plans. But those ruptures are always small. And what can a small thing do, truly, to halt the march of Destiny?"

Ternora thought of the long history-tale she knew which had involved the Queen Felaranamoria of Doralissa. The chain of coincidences that unseated her from the throne could be traced back to a pebble beneath the wheel of a cart.

But she didn't mention that. Warcourage looked so happy.

"Can Viridian at least fly us to the delta?" she asked.

Warcourage dipped his head. "Of course. I should welcome the chance to ride in my native element, in fact." He turned to speak with the dragon and the undines.

Someone cleared her throat next to Ternora. She turned in startlement, and saw Alira standing there, regarding her thoughtfully.

"There once was a Queen named Felaranamoria," she said.

"I know," said Ternora.

Alira ducked her head. "The study of such small things is a special province of Shara," she said softly. "I wish that She could tell us what will come of these 'small ruptures,' but She must do other things."

"Like the negotiation?"

Alira nodded. "Like that."

"Good luck with that."

"Thank you." The priestess's eyes went to Warcourage, and she shook her head. "I would wish you good luck as well, did I think it likely to make a difference."

## Chapter 50

### Healing Cadona

*"The best medicines in the world can do nothing for someone who does not want to be healed."*

-Maxim of the worshippers of Anakora.

Olumer leaned his head on the bars. At least half of their time had gone, and he had not managed to convince Cadona to stop complaining. She said that it was her right, when she bothered to listen to him at all. She said she was the Princess of Rivendon, and would rule the country whether Artaen opposed her or not. She said that she had no desire to listen to Olumer, and was tired, and wanted to sleep.

Olumer had no more ideas.

Then he did have one, and considered it for a long moment. He was reluctant to ask for help from someone of the Dark, but his service was to the Rivendonian royal line, and not to Dark or Light, as he had told Artaen. Cadona could scold him for it later. Right now, his task was keeping her alive.

He turned to Renne. The healer was looking at Cadona with a mildly bored expression, but she turned to look at Olumer when he cleared his throat.

"My lady," said Olumer quietly. "Will you help me, please?"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Renne.

"It is simple," said Olumer. "Convince Cadona to not whine."

"I heard that," said Cadona. "I am beginning to think that Destiny made a mistake in choosing you for my guardian, Olumer. You don't consider as important any of the things that you should consider important. You don't take into account the pain I have suffered. I wake up with nightmares of the filifernai eating my family every night. Did you never think of that?"

Olumer didn't look at Cadona, though it was hard. He had spent twelve years trying to comfort her at night, in the hopes that something- warmer blankets, or a hug, or happy stories- would end the nightmares. Nothing worked. Cadona didn't care about that, though, and right now, neither could he. He was watching Renne instead, whose face was working as if he had just asked her to eat vomit.

"You want me to what?" she asked.

"You heard me."

Renne shook her head. "You can't expect me to do this, Olumer," she said. "You truly cannot."

"Why not?"

"I am of the Dark. She is of the Light."

"You suspected that on the journey, and yet it didn't make a difference in your resolve to heal her." Olumer didn't turn his head away or flinch, hard and contemptuous though Renne's stare had become. "Please, Renne. There is no one else I can turn to. No one. She will die without this."

"I know," said Renne, "and I rejoice. The Rivendonian royal line has been increasingly erratic and mistaken in the last few decades. I shall be glad to see our fair country ruled by someone who actually cares about it, and not about politics."

"You think that Artaen does?"

"Prince Artaen," Renne corrected at once. "And yes, I think he does, but I was not talking about him."

Olumer controlled his impulse to scream at her. His training as a spy had taught him that sometimes the most promising information could come from the most unlikely beginning. He would remember that. "Who were you thinking of? Someone who is better-qualified to rule?"

"Oh, I think so," said Renne, smiling slightly. "Someone who knows Rivendon rather well, and has long experience in loving the countryside and the people. Someone who knows that the royal line cannot be permitted to return, and knows its excesses and mistakes, so that she will not commit them again. Someone who, in other words, will make a far better Queen than Cadona ever will." She jerked her head at the Princess, who immediately began to scream again.

Olumer spoke quickly, trusting the guess his mind had made. "You're talking about yourself, aren't you?"

Renne laughed. "Of course not."

But Olumer had been watching closely, and had seen the flinch at the corners of her eyes. He leaned as close as he felt comfortable doing, making himself smile in a very relaxed manner, though he was very far from relaxed right now. "I know that you were thinking of yourself, my lady. And that Prince Artaen has not thought of you as his successor, or you would not have hesitated to confirm my guess."

Renne shook back her pale hair, eyes steady now. She was prepared for the fight, but she had not expected an opponent like him- or so Olumer hoped. "You dream, Olumer. Why would I speak of something of such importance? It would be like revealing my heritage in a land where everyone hated *ilzánai*. It is beyond foolish. I trust that you do not think me beyond foolish?"

"Not that," said Olumer. "Just as human as anyone else, though you have half-fey blood. I act human myself much of the time, though I am half-silvereyes. It is all right to make such boasts around those who know of them. You simply wanted to brag about something you had forgotten I should not hear."

Renne watched him, her body slightly braced, her head bowed. Olumer knew what was coming- he had been around many other half-*ilzánai*, as well as those who were full-blooded- and sprang aside as her unwounded arm shot out abruptly, her hand seeking to touch him.

Olumer leaned against the bars, just out of reach, and smiled at her. "Really, my dear, think about what would have happened if you had touched me and managed to kill me with some

rare disease. Prince Artaen would have come down and asked for an explanation, and I doubt that you would have been clever enough to provide one. Isn't it better to leave me alive?"

"What do you want?" asked Renne.

"Save Cadona."

"I don't know how."

But again had come the flinch around her eyes. Olumer shook his head. "I don't believe that for one second, and I know that you don't, either. I have seen even half-*ilzánai* accomplish miracles before. You can lay the grieving heart to rest, soothe the harshest pains, make someone over into something she never was before. I hold faith in your power to change Cadona's heart."

"You have more faith than I do," said Renne, but leaned towards him again. Olumer watched her hands, but she didn't try to reach out and touch him, this time. Olumer suspected she knew that he spoke the truth about providing an explanation to Artaen. Darkworkers tended to be practical. "I heal her, and you will not tell anyone of my ambitions?"

"No."

Renne nodded. "Well enough." Then she turned back to Cadona, and raised her head as if she were facing another charge. "Princess of Rivendon," she said. "Cadona. Look at me."

Cadona did so, though she appeared sulky. "Why should I look at you?" she asked. Her voice was almost a whisper, though not because she had decided to be quiet; she had simply grown hoarse from screaming. "You don't have the right to command me."

"I do," said Renne.

Cadona sprang to her feet and ran towards the bars, so angry that she was whisper-yelling incoherently. Renne at once reached through the bars and gripped her arm.

Olumer tensed, then made himself relax. Half-*ilzánai* healed through the laying-on of hands, as well as killed that way. He would just have to remember that Renne had good reason not to betray him, and trust that she would keep her word. He had been around enough Darkworkers to be a good judge of them. He thought he could trust Renne.

She gripped Cadona's arm hard, and peered into her silver eyes. Cadona looked back, panting. Olumer thought, sadly, of how much she looked like her ancestress, Queen Idona. *Now there was a Queen of Rivendon.*

"I don't know what you're doing," said Cadona, "but you should let me go at once. You're a subject of Rivendon, and I am the rightful Queen. When I take the throne, then I could have you-"

Suddenly, she gasped and sagged, and then stared blankly into the air. Olumer found himself following her gaze, but saw only blank stone. She was obviously under some kind of trance that Renne had compelled her to. The healer was indeed speaking in low, intense tones when Olumer next looked at her.

"Know this. You have no right to carry on as you have, crying and screaming, when there are other tragedies that merit the time and attention of a Rivendonian Queen besides your own imprisonment. There are children dying under the dominion of the Dark. There are people who

are gazing in silence at emblems of the royal family and dreaming of the day that you come back to lead them. There are those who do not have enough to eat, and who feast mostly on the fragile hope that a Princess will someday reappear. If you carry on like this, you will get yourself killed, and that will be bound to disappoint them. How dare you disappoint them? You have to live. You have to make sure that everyone has their Destined Princess."

She let Cadona's arm go. Olumer found himself watching the Princess skeptically. *Perhaps it was the only approach that Renne could think of, but that doesn't mean that it was the right one. Won't it drive Cadona's conviction of her own worth even deeper into her mind?*

Then he saw Cadona's eyes, and thought he understood. They were fired with new determination, and she looked at Renne as if the woman were ignorant of all the secrets of the universe.

"You are only of the Dark," said Cadona, "and so you cannot understand how my people need me. They are feasting on the hope of my returning to them. They are gazing at things that remind them of the royal family of Rivendon and weeping. They are planning revolts in secret all over the Kingdom, though they are revolts that shall falter without me to lead them. You can try all the tricks that you like on me, but they shall never succeed."

Renne closed her eyes. Then she said in measured tones, "You are right, Princess. They shall never succeed."

"Of course, they won't," said Cadona. "I must bear up and be strong for my people, and I have a responsibility not to get myself killed." She sat in the middle of the cell and folded her arms.

Olumer glanced at Renne and opened his mouth, but the healer shook her head, leaning close to him. Her breath brushed his ear as she whispered, "It's best if we don't talk about it in front of her. The more she hears of something that's not of the way she now sees the world, the more likely the barriers are to break. Come with me, and make sure that they do not."

Olumer lowered his head, and paced away from the cell. Cadona was now gazing into the air with iron fortitude.

When they were around the bend of the tunnel, Renne turned to him with a small grimace. "I hope that you never ask anything like that of me again. Her mind was foul with arrogance."

"What did you do?" Olumer asked. "Surely arrogance is not really a disease of the mind that can be healed, is it?"

"No," said Renne, and for a moment a smile curved her lips. "Otherwise I would have healed myself of it long since, and that means that I would never have blurted out my desire to rule Rivendon." Then the smile faded. "In effect, I gave her a disease. It is one that I have sometimes seen in the minds of those who have spent too much time with dragons, and felt myself on one occasion. I have noticed that I was very susceptible to believing whatever anyone told me, as long as it ran in accordance with the general desires of my mind. I thought that red dragons were the most beautiful of all dragons, for example, and prone to allying themselves with the Dark. When a dragon told me that a beautiful red dragon was ready to ally with the Dark, and was waiting in a cave a hundred miles away from the Rashars, I believed him, and went. I did not awaken until I was actually at the cave. My disease-giving would not have worked if I told Cadona to stop being a bitch, because she does not believe she is a bitch. But it worked when I told her that her people are all waiting for her to come back, something she sincerely believes, and just exaggerated it."

"Do you think that her people are waiting for her to come back?"

Renne again smiled faintly. "Olumer, tell me. Have you been out of those woods since you rescued her?"

"Not far."

Renne nodded. "Then you don't know the temper of the Rivendonian people. They know about the politics of the royal family, and how many of them were arrogant or almost mad. They don't really care. They care about being left alone to farm, or hunt, or raise sheep, or whatever it is that they do. They see themselves as Rivendonian, not the subjects of a Rivendonian King or Queen."

"It was different in the time of Queen Idona," Olumer murmured.

Renne looked at him closely. "I had not realized that you were that old."

Olumer smiled as enigmatically as he could. *Now I have been stupid and nearly blurted out my secret.* "Fey blood does strange things to our appearance."

Renne nodded, even smiling again. "I have had many humans think me only thirty years old, not a hundred and thirty."

Olumer would have replied, but they heard Prince Artaen's boots on the stairs then, and hastened back to the cell. The Prince came down the stairs, halted in front of Cadona's cell, and looked at the silent Princess with no evident surprise.

"Wonderful," he said, turning away. "She will not die."

But he caught Olumer's eye as he turned, and he was smiling. Olumer ground his teeth. Did the Prince know? Had he even perhaps left Renne with Olumer just to see if Olumer would ask her for help?

*The waters of politics are never clear, and I don't like drinking of them. But needs must when the royal line of Rivendon is in danger.*

## Chapter 51

### Other Paths

*"There are many, particularly since the return of the other powers to the world, who argue that Destiny is not absolute, that there are things outside its purview, and above all that there are other paths someone can take. These paths do not include Destiny, do not touch on it, and are for the free of heart alone."*

-Line from a heretical text mostly burned by the priestesses of Elle.

"Who are you?"

Kymenos blinked and turned his head. He had been expecting guards or Nightstone to intrude into his cell, if anyone did at all. Instead, he saw a child standing there, staring at him.

It looked much like Alliana, but he knew it couldn't be right away; Alliana would never have spoken to him in such a gentle, surprised tone. Besides, there was a sweetness in her voice that wasn't in Alliana's. Kymenos knew that she had to be the sister, Lyli.

"How did you get in here?" he asked, sitting up.

"I don't know," said Lyli, glancing at the stone as though it might tell her the answer. "I was wishing to be somewhere- anywhere- else. And then suddenly the stone melted in front of me, and let me through."

Kymenos blinked, then said, "Come here a moment."

Lyli shook her head. "You still haven't told me who you are."

Kymenos grinned in sour amusement. *The child's in the middle of enemies, and she wants to know who I am?* "My name is Kymenos. I'm the one who came and fetched your sister Tima-

"Don't say that," said Lyli sharply. "She's not my sister. She didn't even cry when Father was tortured."

"She didn't?" Kymenos asked, his voice gentler.

"No," Lyli bowed her head, and for a moment, the lamp that some kind guard had left him sparkled on her brown curls, and on the calm Destiny that outlined her. She would have a grand path to follow, Kymenos knew, though not as grand as the one that Alliana would have. "I don't know what's wrong with her. She knew us and loved us all her life, and yet she's turned to Destiny as if it were her family." She looked up at Kymenos abruptly. "Did you do that to her?"

"Do what?"

"Did you make her into that?"

Kymenos shook his head. "Hardly. I did what I could to spare her and myself from this fate, in fact." Bitterness choked his throat as he remembered the years of study, the prayers he'd spoken to Chaos, the way that he tried to resist the force that dragged him back to Alliana. "Nothing worked. If it could have, then I would have walked away from this and just left Alliana in the embrace of your family forever. But Destiny insisted on this."

"You would have left her there?"

Kymenos nodded, wondering at the flash of outrage in Lyli's eyes now. *Wasn't she just saying that she doesn't think Alliana should have left?*

"But what about Orlath?" Lyli asked, sweeping a hand around the cell, her voice growing in strength and resonance. "What about the people who love Light and want a Queen of the royal line on the throne again?"

"Nightstone is of the royal line," Kymenos felt compelled to point out.

"But she is of the Dark!"

Kymenos snorted. "Just so. Being royal doesn't make you good, and having a King or Queen on the throne is no reason to think that you won't come to grief." He leaned forward, intent on

Lyli, who just stared at him with her mouth open. This was a debate that he had never bothered having with Alliana, since it would simply have led to more blustering on her part, but he felt compelled to have it with this child, who seemed more sensible and less spoiled. "We had a royal family in Dalzna, once. They protected us, and guarded us, and tamed Death itself, it was said. But they also worshipped Light, and went mad with it. The last Queen of Dalzna imprisoned and tortured many whom she felt were plotting against her, or anyone who dared to worship a power other than Light or question her decrees. At last, the Dark came and conquered us, and gave us our freedom. They killed the last of the royal line, and gave us a group of people who might always rule wisely, but at least aren't claiming that they are the chosen of Light and Destiny and we must obey them."

He finished, panting. Lyli just stood there and looked up at him with wide, troubled eyes.

"But Light and Destiny are always right," she said at last. "They are immortal powers. How can they be wrong?"

"Because they want to oppose the Dark, and Shadow, and Chance, and they alone know what else," said Kymenos, rubbing his eyes. He still felt tired, but at least the aches in his muscles from the last pummeling Destiny had given him had begun to fade somewhat. "They can't be right about everything if they have a stake in some things. It's going to blind them to other paths."

"That's humans. Not divine powers."

Kymenos snorted. "The Dark and Shadow are divine too, and yet I don't see people making similar claims for them. Obviously you can be divine and still be wrong. What do you think of that, my lady?"

Lyli laughed a little, though her voice was still strained. "I'm just a peasant girl. You don't need to give me a title." Then her tone grew more serious, almost pensive. "I don't know. I never thought of it that way."

"I know," said Kymenos. "There are many things that people are taught all their lives and never question." He sighed again and lay back on the bed. "I think that you should go back to your bed, little one. Nightstone would surely be upset if she found you in here."

"I'm not afraid of her."

Kymenos shook his head slowly. "I was right, my lady, and you have both Crop and Azure magic." The golden edge of her Destiny was not just Destiny after all, but Crop magic that she had never yet found out about. "You can open the walls and go back to your cell. But you can't fight Nightstone yet, and you especially can't escape."

"Could you?"

Kymenos shook his head. "Not yet. I'm winning my battle, I think, but I haven't managed to convince Nightstone to do anything terribly stupid yet, only unnerve her."

"But-"

"Yes?"

Lyli was struggling with something. Kymenos, who had no idea what it was, watched in silence. At last, the girl raised her chin and said, "Do you think that sometimes people are brought together for purposes that they could not have foreseen?"

"Of course I believe that. With Destiny controlling my life, what else could I believe?"

Lyli shook her head earnestly. "I didn't mean that. Or, at least, not only that. I was thinking of something else."

"What?"

Again came the pause, the struggle. Kymenos was content to lie where he was and watch her try to think of some way to express what she was thinking. It was, at least, evidence of an intelligence that Alliana had never demonstrated. Perhaps some children were not slaves of Destiny and Light and their own lack of wits, after all. It was good to be reminded that some things were not as he had always thought they were.

Lyli said at last, carefully, "I mean that sometimes, a meeting can spawn so much more. What would have happened if Nightstone had not met with the Dark all those years ago? She would have been of the Light, and lived and died like a normal Princess, and we wouldn't be under her rule now. And what would have happened if I hadn't come through the wall and found you? I might never have found out that I had Crop magic, and that would mean that I would live and die without it."

"No," said Kymenos. "You would only live until it reared its head, and then it would have killed you. I've seen any number of children who wouldn't come to the Star Circle for training die that way. They're the only ones who can teach you to control multiple elements."

Lyli blinked, but then appeared to come back to her original point. "You can't think that the path would only end that way, Kymenos," she said. "Don't you think there are other ways things could have happened?"

"Not with Destiny ruling." Kymenos arched his brows at her. "And that's an odd way for a child born to the Light and Destiny to talk."

Lyli leaned against the wall and put a fist beneath her chin. Kymenos thought it was to make herself look older and wiser. He refrained from laughing with difficulty. "My mother always said that even Destiny needed help. Sometimes we mortals need to shove the gods along in directions that we dare not go on our own, and that they would not think of on their own."

"That rather contradicts the idea that Destiny and Light know everything because they're immortal, doesn't it?" asked Kymenos.

Lyli gave him another startled glance, then snorted. "You don't like people trying to help you, do you?"

Kymenos shook his head. "I just don't like people ignoring reality for the sake of their own private visions. It is what Alliana does. It is what more than one monarch of Orlath has done, if even one of the history-tales is true. And I think that you are ignoring it, too."

"Why?"

"Because you are a child," said Kymenos tolerantly. "And you think that things will fall out as you wish them, with justice and beauty for all in the world. That's not the way it works, but because you are a child, you are allowed to think so."

"I saw my father tortured!" said Lyli, clenching her fists. For a moment, blue and golden light glowed about her, but it died away again. Her parents would not have been able to afford

even training from a priestess of Elle, Kymenos thought, and her magic was still very far from being under her control. "Don't try to tell me that I only see the world as a place of justice."

"But you probably think that you're going to get vengeance on Nightstone, don't you?" Kymenos asked.

Lyli blinked at him. "Well- yes."

Kymenos nodded. "I can tell you, my lady-" He paused. *Why is it so hard to call her anything else? I suppose that Destiny has been busy, confounding my tongue as well as my mind.* "I can tell you that that isn't always the way it falls out. Perhaps it would suit Destiny better to have you dying in some grand battle against Nightstone, or falling so that you might set an example to inspire Alliana. You have no guarantee that Nightstone will ever suffer for what she did to your father."

"You speak as if you don't care." Shining tears filled Lyli's big brown eyes, and her lip trembled.

"I speak the truth, alone," said Kymenos. "I do care, and sometimes I think that someone will succeed in taking vengeance on Nightstone. They almost surely will, if Destiny deems it so and no one succeeds in opposing Destiny." *Chaos did not*, he thought, and for a moment tasted bitterness. He put that aside as best as he could and went on, "I don't think that you really understand how Destiny works. It may allow horrible things to happen for the sake of building up something else that it thinks is glorious. Perhaps it will want justice fulfilled, and perhaps it will simply want you to be glorious and tragic and die."

"But-"

"Yes?"

"My mother always said that Destiny wanted order in the world," said Lyli, looking bewildered again. "And so did the priestess of Elle who came and taught us history. Why would it want this sort of chaos?"

"Destiny wants drama," said Kymenos. "It chooses between the things it thinks would be the most dramatic."

"But that is terrible."

"Costly to the people involved, at least. Yes, my lady."

Lyli bowed her head. "Why do people want Destiny back then, if they think it's so horrible?"

"They haven't been victims themselves." Kymenos pulled up one sleeve of his robe, so that Lyli could see the fading bruises on his arm. Lyli only glanced away, blushing, for a moment, until she realized that he was not undressing; then she leaned forward and looked intently. "This comes from Destiny striking me when it thought that I had refused to obey it."

"Destiny wouldn't do that."

"It did," said Kymenos simply, and pulled the sleeve back down.

Lyli stared at him again. Then she said, "Did it ever burn you, the way that Nightstone did to my father?"

Kymenos shook his head. "I don't know if it could, without calling on a Scarlet mage. Punching me or slapping me is the way it works."

"Then what happened to you wasn't as bad as what happened to my father," said Lyli, sounding as if she were trying to convince herself.

Kymenos's eyes narrowed. Yes, he could understand that she was still a child, and if she believed what he was telling her, it would turn most of the things she had loved and known upside down, but that didn't mean that he enjoyed acting as a scapegoat. "I've suffered twelve years, my lady, and lost a good portion of my life to Destiny's wanting me to be a guardian for Alliana."

"But you would have a part in the history-tales!" said Lyli, her eyes growing wide again. "Why would you not want that?"

"I have," said Kymenos coolly, "other treasures that I am far more concerned with. Did you think I didn't have them?"

"I never thought- I didn't-"

Kymenos sneered. "I would have lived out my life, if I could, selling healing plants and bedding where desire led me." A tide of color rose in Lyli's cheeks, and she looked away, but Kymenos wasn't done. "I would not have spent twelve years studying some way to escape Destiny, and then have the way I found fail. I wouldn't have played guardian to a stupid, spoiled little Princess who whines and giggles until I want to kill her, nor wasted my time hearing prophecies and asking elves questions they won't answer and talking Nightstone out of torturing me. No, I would not have chosen this life, and to say that I should have because Destiny wanted me to is mad."

Lyli turned away from him without saying a word, laid a hand on the wall, and melted into the stone. Kymenos stared after her, shoulders heaving. He might have felt bad, since she was only a child, but he refused to feel bad.

*I'm suffering this because of the sister she loves and the Destiny she worships. I'm not inclined to share her opinion of them.*

"There is good news, Kymenos."

Kymenos turned with a snarl on Nightstone, who had stepped out from behind the illusion-hidden door and into the room for once. She only looked back at him, smug and calm, and smiled when she saw that his face was flushed. "Is something wrong? Were you engaging in a shouting match with the voices in your head?"

*She doesn't know Lyli was here, then.* Kymenos would keep that much hidden. He couldn't be the cause of the girl's torture, though he saw nothing wrong with educating her. "Is the good news that you have finally decided to let your hair down, my lady? I would like to feel it slide over my body, trail down my chest, go-"

"Stop!"

Kymenos ducked his head, his anger fading, his good will restoring itself. "What was the good news, my lady?"

Nightstone managed to calm herself and smile, though the flush remained in her cheeks to match his own. "I cannot torture you, but that does not mean that the Dark will not learn the

prophecy. I have sent for the Prince Artaen of Rivendon, and he shall come to us. He shall make sure that you do not hold anything back, and then we will kill the Princess of Rivendon and Alliana in the same moment. Is that not good news?"

## Chapter 52

### Healing Hands

*"Who will touch a heart of stone?"*

*Who will hold a child alone?*

*Who will make what once was new?*

*Who will heal the healer?"*

-Peasant song of Arvenna.

"Elary?"

"Go away."

"Elary, we must talk. We have to make plans to rescue the Princess, and you're the only one who might be able to guide us to the mountain where Shadow has her captive. Please, speak to us, and tell us how to get there."

Elary rolled on her back and looked up at Lorianna. The woman's face was sincerely concerned, but she was Lorianna. She wasn't someone who had ridden the bat to the cave, and seen how Shadow treated Mitherill. She wasn't the one who had failed. Elary didn't think she could speak to anyone except Mitherill about this, and Palant. Palant was mostly silent, though, staring at her with burning eyes and not saying anything at all. He was furiously trying to come up with plans to rescue Mitherill, but so far they had come to nothing. As long as the rescuers lacked wings, there was no way they could get into Shadow's stronghold. Subterfuge was one choice, but Palant didn't want to use that; he wanted to charge forward and use force.

"Elary." Lorianna sat down beside her, stroking her hair. "Please. You have to tell us. We can't do anything until you tell us. Where is Shadow keeping the Princess, and what will happen when he finds out that he can't change her mind about the Light?" Elary had managed to choke out that Shadow wanted to keep and corrupt Mitherill. "Please, think of her, if not yourself."

Elary closed her eyes and swallowed. "All right," she said. "I'll try. But I'll tell it to you."

"Not Palant?"

"He keeps accusing me." Elary shut her eyes tighter, so that the tears that wanted to leak out could not. "And while Anakora knows I deserve the accusations, I don't want to hear them from anyone but myself right now."

"I understand. Let me get paper, since I'll probably need to draw a map."

Elary heard Lorianna stand and withdraw. She cried quietly, but just for a moment; she had wept often enough in the last few days, and none of it would help Mitherill.

"Elary?"

Elary turned her head in shock. It wasn't Lorianna who stood in the doorway, but Hanever, her son. He came cautiously forward and knelt down beside her, clutching her hand. Elary continued to stare at him in confusion. He had avoided her ever since she got back three days ago, and she had thought his grief over Mitherill was simply too intense to let him approach.

But now he was staring at her, his eyes gleaming with both hope and something else that Elary was too tired to decipher.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I think Palant is going to try and betray the Princess," said Hanever. His words started out calmly, but once they began to tumble free, it was as if he had lost command of his tongue and it was racing away with him. "He said that he wanted to save her, but he would have tried harder and made better plans. He's just drawing maps and muttering about charges, and charges can't free her, and I don't know what to do because I want to help Mitherill, but-"

"Hush." With some effort, Elary reached out and caressed Hanever's brow in the way that she was used to doing, when her patients needed a simple calming touch. The boy fell silent at once, staring obediently up at her. "Just because he wants to free the Princess using direct action doesn't make him evil, Hanever. It just means that he's of the Light. Most Lightworkers think subterfuge is evil."

"I don't think anything is evil that gets Mitherill back again," said Hanever stubbornly. "Do you?"

"Not really," Elary had to agree.

"Then, if he's not a traitor, we have to convince him that that's best." Hanever bowed his head. "I know that he's her Destined prince, but it's strange to see him so obsessed with freeing her in his own way and not the way that would work best."

Elary smiled painfully. "Well, guile or force, nothing will work unless we somehow have wings."

"What about allies who can fly?"

Elary nodded. "They would of course be useful, but I don't think that we could trust any flyers except the gryphons, and I think that most of them live in Doralissa now. Certainly I've never heard of any in the Dalorth Mountains."

Hanever licked his lips, glanced hastily over his shoulder at the door, and then said to Elary, "I know someone who could fly, who could maybe even get us into the stronghold."

Elary blinked. "Who?"

"Hanever, are you troubling the Lady Elary?" Lorianna asked, as she stepped back into the room.

Hanever at once retreated, his head bowed and his eyes on the floor. "No, Mother," he said. "But she's troubled, and I'm troubled, and I thought that we could heal each other."

Lorianna's voice softened. "That's a nice thought, sweetling, but you've been healed of the roughlung, and one healing is all anyone should ask for. I think that you should leave the Lady Elary alone to get some rest."

"But you have paper, Mother. Are you going to let her rest?"

Lorianna started, then glared at her son. "This is not a game for children, Hanever, but a-

"Game for adults?"

"Leave us, Hanever."

The boy bowed and walked away, but now and then looked over his shoulder, as if he thought that his mother might relent and allow him back. Lorianna retained the steady glare until he was gone, then looked at Elary and shook her head. "If you are ever a mother, dear, never be too indulgent with your children. They begin to think of it as a right instead of a privilege."

Elary smiled slightly. "I will remember that. I think, though, that I am most likely to go down in history as Mitherill's mother." She winced, remembering again how she had failed the Princess. "Or something like that."

"We will get her back," said Lorianna firmly, "and this is the first step." She poised her quill over the paper. "Tell me as much of the stronghold as you can remember."

"It isn't much," Elary warned her. "I was flying into a blizzard the first time, and head-down on the way coming back."

"Anything you can remember might help," said Lorianna. "Any little glimpses of mountain. Did you go north?"

Elary shut her eyes tight, trying to remember. The blurred memories of the night-ride were still there; oddly, blurred as it was, it was locked into her mind as one of the most terrifying events in her life. She would remember it for years to come, though not very well. "North, yes, I think so," she said, opening her eyes and fastening them to Lorianna's. "And certainly further into the mountains, towards the higher ones and not south towards the foothills."

Lorianna nodded encouragingly and began to scribble on the paper. "And did you see anything at all when you got your glimpse from the ending tunnel? Did you see any lakes, strangely-shaped mountains, hills, riven trees, anything that would help in identifying the mountain again?"

Elary again tried to remember as hard as she could, and a flash of light she hadn't even noticed she was noticing returned to her. "I think- I think, yes, there was a lake," she said, opening her eyes and staring at Lorianna. "And it couldn't have been far away. The sun was catching on it, as dull a day as that was."

Lorianna beamed, and her quill almost flew over the paper. Elary breathed a little more easily. Perhaps they would really rescue Mitherill after all, hard as that was to believe when she thought about it seriously.

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"Elary. Wake up."

Elary started and turned her head. For the first time in nights, she had slept deeply and peacefully, without dreams of snow or bats or Mitherill's screams, and now she was to be snatched away from that?

But she relented when she saw Hanever crouched above her, face twisted with equal parts fear and exhilaration. He was taking a great risk to come to her like this, and she knew it. She looked towards the doorway, but saw no sign of Lorianna. The woman was probably sleeping the rest of the righteous; she had given a copy of the crude map they made to Palant, and he was working it into his plans. That Elary didn't think they would work was one thing; Lorianna had faith in Palant, though, and Destiny.

It shamed Elary, to think she had lost that simple faith.

"Elary," said Hanever insistently, drawing her gaze back to him. "My friend is here. She said she would be willing to speak to you. But you have to be careful. Do you understand that?"

"Your friend?"

"The one who can fly," said Hanever. "She doesn't really trust anyone except me, and she's never said why she trusted me. I don't want to give her a reason to fly away and never come back. Say you'll be careful?"

Wondering who this could possibly be, Elary nodded. Hanever stood at once and went to the door, opening it.

"Silar!" he called.

A shadow filled the doorway, and Hanever stepped back. Elary stared at the figure who moved inward. She was familiar with many different kinds of fey- after all, she was half-*ilzán* herself- but she had never seen anything like the woman who stood gazing at her now.

She was tall, thin, pale, with a head like a snowy owl's. It took Elary a moment to realize that that face was a mask, and that the face beneath was probably close to human, given the body. She had long, glinting silver hair that looked more like braided strands of metal than hair, and enormous frost-blue wings hung from her back, drooping slightly. She shifted at Elary's gaze, as if she could feel and didn't like the weight of the healer's eyes.

Hanever reached out and gripped Silar's hand, drawing her further into the room. The woman kicked the door shut behind her. Her body was undeniably human, since she was naked, but absolutely slender and muscled, without a trace of fat. Elary might have felt a twinge of envy had she cared about such things.

"You don't feel the cold?" she asked.

Silar answered her in a high, piercing voice, thin as the wail of the wind. "That is not it. I am an Illusion mage, and I am simply adopting this disguise to make sure that no one recognizes me."

"I have never heard of a fey who was an Illusion mage," said Elary. "I suppose that you are disguising your voice and your features as well?"

Silar nodded.

"But not your wings?"

The woman replied with a smile in her voice, though given the admission of her magic Elary wondered how far she could trust that. "I would not have survived if I were. I often have to fly back and forth from my people to Hanever. The wings are real enough."

"Half-fey don't have elemental magic, though," said Elary.

The woman made no reply.

"Who are you, really?"

"The name Silar will do," said the woman. "Hanever hasn't told me why he called me here tonight, with a feather on the wind. I suppose it has little to do with the magic I have taught him?"

"Little enough," said Elary. She hesitated, then shrugged and decided to tell the woman. Secrecy would truly serve Shadow's cause better than theirs. "Shadow has the Princess of Iantra-Arvenna caged in secret, and is trying to corrupt her, under the guise of educating her. He keeps her in a cave high in the mountains, from which white bats fly. We need someone who can fly to help us. Will you?"

Silar drew in a deep breath. "There is a True Heir of Iantra-Arvenna," she said, the breath hissing out of her. "I had wondered. I must confess that. I had wondered."

"Almost all of us did," said Elary, forcing a smile. "But there is one. Her name is the Princess Mitherill, and she was reared by the *ilzánai* in secret. Shadow has her now. Will you help us?"

"Who are you to her?"

"I am Elary. I was a healer, but am Destined to be her guardian." Elary felt tears fill her eyes again, but kept them from falling. *I owe Mitherill that much strength, at the least, since in so much else I have failed her.* "Shadow told me I was unworthy to be so, caught her as we tried to escape, and sent me back again."

"That is strange," said Silar. "Why would he only send you back, instead of trying to kill you?"

"I don't know."

There was a long silence. Elary looked at Hanever, to see if he would show her what Silar was thinking, but he was gazing at the woman in adoration and absolute trust, and showed no sign of noticing Elary's glance.

Finally Silar said, "I have long wondered when my Destiny would come hunting for me. I thought I was meant to tread one path, and then my life changed when my wings grew. Then I thought I was meant to fight for a cause, but the cause has flagged and become unworthy of the name. And now this comes along. It may be that this was what I was truly meant to fight for."

She looked at Elary. "You have trusted me with much. I think it is time to trust you with something." And her form shimmered, Illusion fading.

Elary blinked. The woman was still tall, but clothed this time in warm furs that made her look stockier than she was. The wings reached from her feet to the ground, over incredibly muscled shoulders. When she spoke, her voice was no longer high and thin, but sweeping and musical.

"Silar is still the name I would use."

She removed her mask, and Elary trembled. The voice should have told her at once, but it was the face that did, the face of the woman she had seen in her dream, who had become Queen of Ilantra-Arvenna in Mitherill's place.

Silar blinked at her uncertainly. "What?" she asked.

## Chapter 53

### Nerve Racking

*"There is still an old story in Orlath that speaks of a man who defied the King, saying that he would only consent to torture if the King could find some way to rack his nerves. The King tried and tried, but could come up with no solution that did not involve killing the man, and in the end let him walk free. The man, it is said, wisely took to his heels and made it into Dalzna before he stopped running."*

-From *The Subtle and the Serious: A Guide to Fooling Those Born to Destiny*, banned in most Kingdoms as heretical.

Nightstone crumpled the message in her fist and looked at Chive. "You are certain that this was his only response?"

The pegasus bowed his neck. "My lady."

Nightstone closed her eyes. Inviting Prince Artaen had been one thing; the Regent of Rivendon had agreed easily and cheerfully, since he did have his Princess in custody and always liked an opportunity to practice his torture skills. Nightstone had sent an invitation to Shadow in northern Arvenna, certain that he would want to bring the Princess Mitherill south and kill her at the same time. He had spoken often enough of his annoyance at the royal Heirs that some of his people still dreamed of supporting.

However, he had sent her a short, polite message telling her that, no, he had plans to stay where he was and educate the Princess in the ways of the world instead, and he hoped they would have a good time.

Nightstone opened her eyes and looked at the message for a long moment. She couldn't prove anything by it. After all, Shadow could have just meant what he said. He was known to be human-hearted, and he didn't like killing his enemies in a way that was quite ridiculous for such a great power. But Nightstone felt a trickle of suspicion flowing through her: the conviction, growing into a certainty, that something more was happening with this. She meant to bring her suspicions to the Dark.

She looked at Chive, and then dismissed the thought of asking him to fly again. He was so tired that lather gleamed on his neck like a second skin. "Send Black Rose to me," she said instead.

"With respect, my lady, she is out flying."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. "Is she? But I had thought that I ordered no scouting missions." That didn't cover the whole truth, of course. She had said nothing of a scouting

mission at all, and if Black Rose had taken her blaze into the Plains, then she was acting without orders.

"I don't think that she's scouting, my lady," said Chive, lifting his head and meeting her eyes as squarely as a pegasus could. "I think that she just went to fly and think for a while. There is much on her mind."

"Is there?"

"Yes."

Nightstone met his eyes, and saw nothing there that was not sincere. Of course, pegasi were the masters of seeming sincere, as long as they themselves were doing nothing wrong. Let the blaze leader or someone else in charge be planning something, and the subordinates would go along with it, quiet and placid as sheep.

"Is there anything that you want to tell me, Chive?" she asked quietly.

Sometimes, of course, one could make the subordinates wish they were in the position of the blaze leader.

Chive's nostrils flared as if he were scenting lions. In a way, he was. He had a chance to betray his blaze leader and gain greater status for it, but he couldn't know if Nightstone would be able to protect him from Black Rose.

Nightstone waited in silence. She had lived four hundred years because of the unicorns, but she had survived for hundred years among the Dark because of her wits. She was good at judging when someone was actually ready to betray a confidence, and when it would take a little longer.

Then Chive lowered his head and gave his mane a determined little shake. "No, my lady, nothing."

Nightstone nodded. "Then go back to the stables, Chive, and make sure that Black Rose comes to me on her return."

Chive bobbed his head at her and leaped off the balcony. Nightstone watched for a moment, to make sure that he wouldn't simply crash and break his bones on the flags of the courtyard, then turned to go back into her room, staring at the crumpled message in her hand all the while.

*I cannot prove Shadow is plotting something. But I can warn the Dark, and make sure that the spies we have on Shadow miss nothing.*

She made for her writing desk, and then paused. Soft sounds were coming from the other side of the room, the place where Nightstone had at last moved the mementos of the royal family.

Nightstone crept towards the sound, hoping to surprise whoever it was this time as more than just a fleeting shadow in the night.

She did. There was a woman there, a tall woman shaking with her sadness. Her hair was extraordinarily pale, only about as golden as candlelight. She stood with her back to Nightstone, and she was clad in the kind of rough dark gown that a servant might wear. Her sobbing seemed sincere enough, though Nightstone of course had no way to tell if it was or not.

"Who are you?"

The woman spun to face her, and Nightstone blinked. She had a strange face, with pointed ears and a few slight elven angles to her cheekbones, but the angles seemed softened and pulled back, almost melted. Her eyes were large and blue, and shining with despair.

Yet she was not entirely unfamiliar, and in a few moments, Nightstone remembered where she had seen such a face. This woman was half-elven, and from her hair she was half Faerie elf, though that didn't explain why she was looking through the mementos of the royal family and sobbing.

Nightstone sprang forward just as she realized the woman was getting ready to run, but she wasn't quick enough. The woman began to sing, and Nightstone found her steps faltering, her eyes fluttering shut. The woman ran past her in a flurry of gown, out and down the stairs.

Nightstone managed to rouse herself enough to follow, though. If the woman was only half-elven, then she couldn't be worldwalking the way that purebred elves could. She had to have some other method of vanishing, and Nightstone was determined to learn what it was, so that it couldn't be a threat to her.

The woman's footsteps sounded just ahead of her own, quick and light. Nightstone leaped over several stairs, and in that way managed to see the edge of the half-elf's dress just nipping into an opening in the stone. Nightstone hurled herself headlong at the door.

It closed before she got there, and then sealed itself somehow. Nightstone ran her hands over the stone, looking for some sort of catch or crack, and found nothing. She stood back with a profound curse.

"Looking for something?"

Nightstone whirled around. Glow stood behind her, his head up and his eyes shining with enjoyment.

"Don't you dare to laugh at me," she said, narrowing her eyes when the zeyr opened his mouth again. "Don't you dare to make it seem as though I am doing something ridiculous by chasing this woman."

Glow dipped his head. "Then I won't," he said. "My lady, I came to tell you that the Prince Artaen spoke into my mind. He said that he would open the portal from his castle into yours in a few hours."

Nightstone nodded. "Then we must get ready." She turned towards Alliana's cell. "I'll need the zeyri to stand guard. Destiny will probably try to rescue its precious Princess from her fate, and I don't want anything to interfere with this."

She paused when she realized that Glow hadn't responded in any way, either to acknowledge or challenge the order, and glanced over her shoulder. The zeyr was staring at the ceiling, every piece of his fur standing on end. Nightstone followed his gaze, expecting to see one of the spiders, sometimes as big as cats, that would scuttle about the castle and weave webs to catch the zeyri in.

There was nothing there, though, only blank stone. Nightstone looked inquiringly at Glow.

"Can you feel it?" whispered the zeyr.

"Obviously not, or I wouldn't be looking at you with a question in my eyes," said Nightstone. "Will you come with me, or are you going to stand here and stare into the air all night?"

"You don't feel it," said Glow, and his voice was full of fear. "You don't feel what's going to happen."

"What's going to happen, then?" Nightstone asked.

Glow shuddered, and his fur lay back down. Then the knowing look faded from his eyes. "I don't know," he said unhappily. "Something will happen when you try to kill the Princesses, but I don't know what it is."

Nightstone nodded briskly, keeping away her own sense of the uncanny. "That is what I was trying to tell you. I want the *zeyri* to stand guard around the dungeons. And tell the *liadrai* and the *filifernai* to assume attack positions as well. Do you understand?"

"Why can't you tell them?"

Nightstone smiled in spite of her efforts to make her face severe. "I have some news to deliver."

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"It will be tonight."

Nightstone had intended the words to startle Kymenos out of a sound sleep, and at first, they seemed to have done so. Kymenos sat up quickly and opened his eyes. Nightstone smiled at him, and elaborated. "Prince Artaen of Rivendon is coming to torture you, and he is bringing the Princess of Rivendon with him, so that we may kill both of them at the same time. Is that not pleasant news?"

"Oh, of a surety," said Kymenos, without a trace of fear in his voice. "If the Princess of Rivendon is anything like Alliana, then I think eliminating both of them at once is an excellent idea."

"You will be tortured," said Nightstone.

"Will I?"

Nightstone frowned, wondering what had happened. Kymenos was smiling in a secretive way, even in a relaxed fashion, as if he had heard good news. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "You must know what this means. And I thought you didn't like being tortured."

Kymenos shook his head. "I don't. But I've learned never to think that something will happen until it does. Comes from guarding a Princess and having things happen that I could never have imagined."

"Tell me what you suspect," said Nightstone, calling fire to her palm. "I will burn you, at least, and you cannot stop me from doing that."

Kymenos laughed at her. "And what about my making you blush by telling you that you look fair? Is that really something that you want to risk?"

Nightstone did flush, and then damned herself for it. Her skin had always refused to help her when she was embarrassed, instead showing off the flush. "Prince Artaen will make you scream and tell all you know."

"He may not have the chance," said Kymenos, and grinned at her. "Are you sure, my lady, that all your people are loyal?"

Fear touched Nightstone for a moment. She tried to reason herself out of it. *There's no way that he could have influenced anyone. He's locked in a cell, and he can't get out of it to walk the halls like an elf. Everyone knows he is my prisoner. There's no way that they would have listened to him.*

And then she remembered Glow, and Black Rose, and the way that she had found Kymenos in a comfortable cell instead of a lower one. Perhaps it had been a mistake, but Glow wouldn't usually have erred on the side of comfort if he had a choice. He could have taken Kymenos there on purpose, perhaps.

Perhaps.

*Or this could be a ploy that he's trying, hoping to hit flesh by casting an arrow into the air.*

Nightstone smoothed her face, and bowed her head. "I cannot always trust everyone around me, of course," she murmured. "But that is part of the price for being in the Dark. I think there is another question you should ask yourself instead."

"What is that?" Kymenos asked.

"If you can afford the consequences of trying to play this game," said Nightstone, calling flame again. "Perhaps you could endure the torture that was done to you by holding on to your anger and teasing me. But what about what is done to others?" She turned and called one of the liadrai in the corridor behind her.

"What are you doing?"

Nightstone ignored Kymenos's question, and spoke quietly to the liadra in her own tongue, so that Kymenos probably wouldn't understand. "Fetch the little girl, Lyli, from the cell."

The liadra bowed and went to get her. Nightstone turned to Kymenos, and found him on his feet, glaring at her with hatred. Regular meals and sleep, and time to recover from the beating he had taken, seemed to have restored him to much more strength and boldness, though not, perhaps, more sense.

"You will see," said Nightstone, and then stepped back as the liadra led Lyli forward. The cells where Kymenos and the little girl had stayed weren't far apart at all. Lyli looked at Nightstone with big eyes, then turned her head to face Kymenos, and blinked, as if she hadn't been expecting to see him.

"I will torture her until you tell me what you mean by not being able to trust my own people, and tell me about the prophecy," said Nightstone calmly, enjoying the agony on Kymenos's face. *Yes, I should have done this long ago.* "I don't think that she means anything to you, of course, but I will be inflicting pain on someone else, and you will be the cause. I don't think that you will really enjoy that, either."

"Don't do this," said Kymenos, his teeth gritted and his eyes steady.

"I will," said Nightstone, and then reached down and touched the burn that she had inflicted on Lyli's cheek once before. It glowed and sprang back to life, and Lyli crumpled, screaming under the pain of it. Nightstone kept her hand where it was, following the little girl to the floor.

"No!"

Nightstone looked up at Kymenos's shout, and then cried out as Light filled her vision. The liadra beside her made a similar confused sound, and Nightstone could hear her falling back. Nightstone held her place, determined to prevent Kymenos from escaping.

She didn't feel him brush past her. However, she did feel someone tug on Lyli, and she was too late to grasp hold of the girl. By the time the Light cleared, Lyli lay on the bed, staring around with big eyes, and Kymenos stood in front of her, his hands glowing with blue light.

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. *I was wrong to let him rest.* Kymenos didn't look very clean, but he did look rested, and strong, and ready to fight Nightstone if she tried to get past him to Lyli.

Nightstone made the best of a bad situation. Since she was the one who had begun this phase of the game, and since the liadra was right next to her, she didn't have much choice. She bowed her head, smiling slightly. "Well, Kymenos. You have made your choice. I know now that you are of the Light."

"I am not," said Kymenos. "I only interfered because I wanted to prevent Lyli from getting hurt." The liadra made a motion as if she would step inside the cell, and Kymenos's attention snapped to her. The lightning-fey blinked and went still, glancing at Nightstone.

Nightstone bowed her head. "As you will, of course, Kymenos." *Speak as slowly as you can. It's one way to keep him from noticing that your voice is shaking, that you really are that unnerved.* "But you should know that Prince Artaen's punishment, when it falls on you, will be harsher than it would be otherwise. You have done things that the Dark does not like prisoners to do."

"Let him do what he wills."

Nightstone peered in bewilderment at him. *I don't understand him at all. What is Lyli to him, that he should interfere?* But she nodded and said, "I shall inform the Prince, when he arrives, that he has your permission."

She shut and locked the door, then walked away from the cell, with the liadra trailing behind her. After a moment, the fey asked, "My lady, what is to be done with them?"

"When Artaen arrives, I'm sure that he will want to torture the girl as well," said Nightstone, without glancing over her shoulder. "It is one of his tricks. And then Kymenos can watch as we kill her, and the Princess of Rivendon, and the Princess Alliana, who was supposedly Kymenos's charge. Such things will break the Light's dominion over Orlath at last."

She came to believe the words as she spoke them. She knew that she was right, and that Artaen would break Kymenos's spirit.

*If it can be done.*

Nightstone pushed that thought out of her head, along with the small regret that Kymenos had to be broken. She had no time for such things.

## Chapter 54

### Mourn's Allegiance

*"Some things, like the true allegiances of the greatest figures of the history-tales, must always remain shrouded in shadow. Who can know whether a hero of Orlath really does kill a Dark's Lord or Lady because that is what he wants to do, or because he wants the honor and glory of it?"*

-Scrap of parchment found in the Temple of Elle when it was torn down.

*At least she is quieter than she was.*

Olumer started and glanced over. Mourn was trotting into the courtyard where Cadona took her morning exercises, his head held high and his horn gleaming as if someone had polished it. For that matter, Olumer noticed, his hooves were flashing and glinting in much the same way.

Cadona finished another turn around the courtyard, and saw Mourn as she pivoted back to face Olumer. At once, her smile grew across her face, grave and adult, the new one she had been practicing. She did not hurry forward as she would have once, Olumer was sure, but walked forward with the same sedate grace and bowed to the black unicorn. "I give you good welcome, Mourn."

Mourn dipped his head, horn almost grazing Cadona's forehead. *My lady is gracious. I thank you for the welcome.*

Cadona nodded, gazing at him. "I am glad that you followed me here. When I am free of this confinement, then I will reward those who have been faithful to me." She gave Olumer another of those ambiguous glances she had been giving him since he persuaded Renne to calm her down. Olumer wasn't at all sure what she wanted from him, but wasn't inclined to worry about it. She was still his Princess, and he still served the Rivendonian royal line. "I hope that the Dark has not been treating you poorly."

*Oh, no. Prince Artaen believes that I am on his side, and I am not inclined to tell him otherwise.*

Cadona smiled more widely. "That is good." Her hand rose, and she scratched at the base of his horn. Mourn snorted and rolled his head so that more of it came under her scratching hand. Cadona withdrew it in a moment, however, and turned back to exercising in the courtyard. The unicorn watched her go, while Olumer stood to the side and wondered if they were speaking privately, the Princess and the unicorn.

If they were, the conversation had ended by the time Mourn said to him, *I suppose you wonder what I am doing here.*

*Not truly,* Olumer answered silently. *I assume that you were accompanying Cadona to keep an eye on her, just as Renne was.*

No.

Olumer gave him a curious glance before he could stop himself, but Mourn ignored him. The unicorn was watching Cadona walk in circles with an indulgent expression, as if she were a foal finding her legs. When some minutes had passed in silence, Olumer ventured, *What were you doing with us, then? I think that you must be of the Dark, since you didn't fight to free Cadona when Artaen took her through the portal.*

*You can believe what you like, think what you like.* Mourn looked at him then, but only to flick his tail, as if to say that Olumer's speculations were not worth his time and attention. *That does not change the reality.*

*And what is the reality?*

Mourn flicked his tail, and said nothing.

"Princess. There you are."

Olumer turned his head quickly. Artaen had come out of the same door that Cadona and Olumer used to enter the courtyard, and was strolling towards them as if he had all the time in the world, which was the way he usually walked. Since he controlled Rivendon so thoroughly, Olumer thought, it might even have been true. "I have some interesting news for you," the Prince went on. "I suppose that you might not care for it, but on the other hand, as it concerns you, you should."

Cadona just bowed her head and said nothing. Olumer didn't know what to make of that. He supposed that she could be acceding to the Prince's will, but given how much she hated the Dark, he didn't think that was the case.

He glanced at Artaen, and found him smiling, as if he had expected this reaction. Mourn just waited, looking into the air and flicking his tail as if he were thinking about running on hills far away.

"You see," said Artaen, "I think that Destiny has had quite enough of its own way, interfering in the futures of Kingdoms and royals and throwing even those it claims to love about like grain in a sack. I think that we should do something to fight back against this kind of abuse, if we can, and thus, we are going to do it. We will kill you and the Princess Alliana of Orlath in a few hours."

Cadona looked up at him. Olumer remembered that moment, later, when it seemed that the Prince of Rivendon, and the true Princess, were the only two people in the world.

There they stood, silver eyes locked on green, and the world and time wheeled around them. Olumer looked from face to face, uncertain how Cadona would react, but willing to help her if she ran for it.

She did not. Instead, she called Scarlet, and flames burst through the courtyard, reaching for Artaen.

He made a little gesture, and the flames fell back as though they had met a barrier of Azure. The Prince never stopped looking amused. "Do you know the reason I told you this, Cadona? You can do absolutely nothing about it, that's why."

Cadona screamed and struck out with flames again, all the calm that she had gathered about her gone in an instant. Olumer ran forward, the magic stirring inside him. The spirits swarmed him. He had been here almost five days now, and they were impatient for him to give them bodies.

*Do not attack.*

Olumer didn't even look at Mourn. The unicorn had his own reasons for forbidding the fight, of course; he worked for the Dark. Of course he would not want someone who served the same power hurt. But he couldn't get in between Olumer and Artaen in time.

Olumer called, and imagined cockroaches as the spirits poured past him and into the bodies. In seconds, they were cockroaches, not the small ones that roamed the palace of Rivendon but the giant ones that Olumer had once seen when on a scouting trip to the south for the Rivendonian throne. They hissed and began to crawl towards Artaen, each of them as big as the palm of Olumer's hand. Altogether, they were probably as big as a dragon.

Mourn galloped forward and began stepped on the cockroaches. The spirits flowed out and then into new bodies again. As long as Olumer's magic was extended, then they could not be killed.

"That is enough."

Olumer found himself on his knees, his magic back inside him, the cockroaches gone, his head ringing as though someone had struck him with a hammer. He tried to remember what had happened, and couldn't. He looked up, to see that Artaen stood over him, face dark with something more than anger. The cloud that boiled around his head, like heavy smoke, told Olumer what must be happening, but still he had trouble believing it, until Artaen spoke again in a voice of pure command.

"Rise to your feet."

Olumer stood at once, without conscious volition. He believed it, then. Artaen was host to the Dark, which had lent its presence where it felt it was most needed. The Prince of Rivendon glared at him out of those divinely shining eyes for long moments, then turned and looked at Cadona.

"And you."

Cadona gave a little jerk, then said, "You can't command me." She remained on the stone of the courtyard, and Olumer smiled in pride. Even though she wasn't Light's avatar, she still had a strong enough Destiny to resist the careless orders of the Dark.

"Stand."

Cadona jerked to her feet that time, and then glared. But Prince Artaen was ignoring her, instead turning back to Olumer.

"We will be going to Orlath by portal, and if you are wise, then you will resist the temptation to interfere at all. Do you understand?"

Olumer paused a moment, to be sure that the Dark really would let him answer back, and then said, "I don't care if you do threaten me. To die in the service of the Rivendonian royal line is something that I always knew could happen, and if I must die to protect her, I will."

The Prince of Rivendon laughed. "You have no idea of what will happen, Olumer, no idea at all," he said. "There are rumors of a prophecy regarding the four royal Heirs, and yet Light is making no move to stop us from gathering them. How can the prophecy function when one of the Heirs is dead?"

Olumer shook his head. "I don't know, but that's not my concern. Cadona is. Try to kill her, and I'll try to kill you."

Artaen shook his head in turn. "I'll just take you along through the portal. And perhaps, once Cadona is dead, then you can see that there are others in the world who would welcome your skills."

"I would not serve you."

Artaen smiled. The Dark was entirely gone from his eyes now, and it was the cool, collected Prince of Rivendon who studied them. "I don't think you grasp everything about the death of the Princesses, Olumer. When they die, and if they are the last of their royal lines, then the wards and spells bound to them snap as well."

"I don't know what you mean."

Artaen laughed. "You will." He turned around, then stopped when he noted Mourn. "You will follow us through the portal as well, I suppose?" he asked. "You will watch the end of the Princess Destiny told you to serve?"

Mourn looked at all of them, his head up, his eyes bright, his horn gleaming. A wind blew through the courtyard, and picked up his mane, making it flap. Olumer stared into his eyes and felt abruptly as though he stood on the edge of tumbling into an abyss, though he didn't know why. The Dark had not been more threatening than what lay in Mourn's eyes, even though it didn't have a name.

The black unicorn inclined his head to the Prince of Rivendon. *My lord, I have not come to serve Destiny, or to see justice done, or to see the Princess safe. I am here to observe.*

"Observe?" said Artaen, in such a puzzled tone that Olumer knew he had no more idea about what was happening than Olumer did. That just increased his fear, of course. Olumer shivered and rubbed his arms, or at least the gooseflesh that was springing up on them.

Yes, said the unicorn, as blandly as though he was speaking of the color of the sky. *I came to make certain observations, to scout, if you will, and see if the ground was hospitable for the planting of certain kinds of seeds. It was. And now I have done my work, and the seeds have been planted, and I can go back to my lord and report that he need not worry.*

Artaen reacted quickly. Olumer had to give him that. He snapped his hands up and flung a burst of Azure at the unicorn.

Mourn fogged and blurred, as though the outlines of his body had suddenly given way to the same kind of heavy smoke that was a sign of the Dark's presence. Olumer blinked desperately, seeing only a smudge of dark ink for the longest of moments. Then wings unfolded, and a sleek black bird soared into the sky, hanging there to laugh at all of them.

Olumer stared. He had heard tales of these birds, with their crests and slender necks and sharp beaks, as though a peacock had lost its tail and grown sturdy wings. It circled there for a moment, head down, and Olumer had the strange sensation that its eyes rested particularly on him.

Then it turned and sped towards the north.

"Shadow."

Olumer turned to Artaen. He had made the word a curse, and his hands were clenched into fists as he watched the bird vanish.

"Shadow controls shapeshifters," said Artaen. "And there have been suspicions for some time that he was not telling the truth about his involvement with the Doralissan royal Heir. He has betrayed us all, and taunted us. But he shall not have time to gloat over his victory."

He whistled, and soldiers poured into the courtyard. Among them were Scarlet mages who controlled Cadona's flames and bound her in shackles, ignoring her screaming. Artaen raised his voice above all the sounds. "Do not wait! We will go through the portal now, and kill the Princess before Shadow can come back."

Olumer, dragged along almost unregarded, stared into the sky and thought about legends, and double-crosses, and verifiable facts.

Such as that the shapeshifters Shadow controlled only had one animal form.

## Chapter 55

### The Delta

*"Have you seen the waters of the Doral Delta sparkling in the sun, glowing the golden color for which it was named? You have not? Then you cannot say that you are a true Doralissan. Being raised in this county, even born here, is one thing, but you cannot call yourself a Doralissan in soul until you have seen the sunrise from the waters of the Doral."*

-Rumossori Farfoot, the Traveler of Doralissa.

"Ternora."

"What?" Ternora stirred a little, and nearly slid off the dragon's back. That brought her awake at once, of course, and clutching the scales. She didn't want the long fall that she could almost feel hungrily waiting to swallow her to happen.

"There is the Doral."

Ternora narrowed her eyes, then fell back in surprise as the sun flashed golden just ahead. "So it is the way that I always imagined it," she said softly.

"How did you imagine it?"

"Golden."

That was the only word that Ternora could manage, but, in truth, she thought it was the only one she needed. She had never imagined anything like the sight that spread before them now, the triangle of water where the three mighty rivers of Culatharion met, and turned lazy, spreading out around numerous small islands of dirt and marsh-grass. She could hear the calling of waterbirds, and then a flock of them rose and wheeled in front of Viridian before settling with a heavy splash again. Ternora's heart ached to see them. She had heard tales of them all her childhood.

"You've never seen the Doral before?" Viridian asked, his voice a warm rumble between her legs.

"No," said Ternora softly. "Or, at least, I only saw the outer edge of it. I never saw the sunrise in it."

Now she was seeing it. The water gleamed like hammered gold, set with small flecks of jade, as Viridian flew above it. Ternora caught a glimpse of their green reflection, but it seemed as though they could do nothing to mar or touch the water for long; in a few moments, it was back to itself, surging dreamily and reflecting only the sky.

*The way it was meant to be*, Ternora thought, as Viridian began to circle, dropping nearer to the Delta. She knew that the Kings and Queens of Doralissa would come here to make treaties with the elves, and sometimes even to discuss and debate with their people, but it seemed wrong for humans and elves to intrude here. The delta belonged to the birds.

"And Lord Erlande."

Ternora started. "I'm sorry," she said to Viridian, who had his head turned back on his neck to watch her, obviously trusting to his wings to guide them. Ternora didn't put that much trust in his wings, but she wasn't about to say so, not while she rode his back hundreds of feet in the air. "I didn't realize that I was speaking aloud."

"You weren't," said Viridian. "I've seen that expression on humans' faces before."

"I'm a half-elf."

"They taste the same," Viridian said, as he always did, and then turned forward again. Ternora thought he was going to scout out a landing place at first, but then she realized, from the stirring behind her, that Warcourage was awake. She glanced back to see the boy blinking and looking around.

He smiled at once, and turned to look back at her. "We are both true Doralissans now, you and I," he said. "We have seen the Doral Delta at sunrise."

Ternora nodded, and hoped she was keeping off her face the fact that she would have preferred to share the experience with someone else. "We'll be landing soon, my Prince," she said. "Do you want anything for your ritual? That is, will you need special instruments, implements of any kind?"

"No," said Warcourage softly. "I know that the repentance that I carry in my heart is enough."

Ternora said nothing, but thought that that repentance hadn't been enough to keep the undines from tossing the Prince around the River like a toy.

Viridian slanted lower and lower, and Ternora leaned over his neck, looking for signs of an island where they could land. It seemed that Viridian was looking for the same thing, and they both saw it at the same time: a large patch of grass, at least large enough for the dragon and the two he carried to stretch their legs.

Viridian roared, and Ternora pointed. The dragon circled one last time, drawing back and far from the island, then slanted down, landing more neatly than Ternora would have expected on the grass. His wings did make the vegetation waver and stir, but they didn't tear it to shreds entirely. He laid his wings down and to the sides so that Ternora and Warcourage could climb off, and then turned his head back and forth, observing everything. His rumble was content.

Warcourage knelt at once near the edge of the water, his eyes closed and his concentration seemingly absolute. Then he looked up at Ternora, and said, "There is something that I need after all, and that you could procure for me."

"What is that?" Ternora asked.

"Silence."

Ternora swallowed an annoyed sigh. "What does my Prince mean?"

"I mean that I must have silence to speak to Erlande," said Warcourage, "and you and Viridian can keep still, no matter how ridiculous you may think this is. I have heard you speak of such things, but now is not the time for them. Keep still and let me speak to Erlande."

Ternora bowed, because she didn't trust herself to answer. Warcourage smiled and nodded at her. "Good, you're already beginning to learn the proper way to do this," he said, and turned back to the water.

Ternora clenched her fingers. Viridian rolled his eyes at her, and then laid his neck down so that his chin rested in the water. He closed his eyes, and Ternora supposed that he was probably communing with his god as well.

Which left her nothing to do.

Ternora sat down, not quite daring to make noise, and linked her arms around her knees. She stared out over the water, at first looking for some sign of the undines who had promised to follow them, and then just enjoying the view. Now that the birds had seen the dragon settle, some of them were swimming back, bobbing their necks nervously and never coming closer than a hundred feet or so to the island. Ternora saw geese, a stalking heron, some swans, and more ducks than she could count. All of them seemed prone to take to the air at the slightest instance, and those with pale feathers flashed the sunlight back as if they were polished glass.

A song pierced the silence, then, and Ternora turned her head to see a small blackbird clinging to the reeds and singing cheekily. Beside her, Warcourage opened his eyes and glared at the bird.

"Will you silence that, Ternora?"

Ternora stepped cautiously into the water, and found it shallow. Apparently, the island extended underwater for some distance. She splashed towards the blackbird, while around her the ducks took flight again, with an awful clamor and clatter of wings. She heard Warcourage yell in frustration, and grinned. She had only agreed to wade out towards the blackbird because she had known that would happen. The Prince couldn't get complete silence in the Delta, and was stupid to try.

She halted in front of the blackbird, almost the only creature in the marsh who hadn't fled. It cocked its head at her and sang another impudent note.

"I'm sorry," she said, and reached out to remove it from the reed. She had at least to seem as if she were trying to obey the Prince's orders, no matter how stupid she thought them.

The blackbird fluttered past her fingers and made its way over the marsh, singing all the while. Ternora watched it go, then splashed back to the island, shrugging when she saw Warcourage glaring at her.

"Your pardon, my Prince, but there's really no way to walk quietly in water," she said, sitting down on the island again and untying her boots. They needed water poured out of them.

Warcourage just shook his head and closed his eyes.

A moment later, a flock of ducks descended with another clatter of wings. Warcourage sprang to his feet. "Elle damn it!" he cried.

Ternora giggled in spite of herself. Viridian just opened one eye, then closed it and went back to communing with the Lord of Waters again.

Warcourage whirled on her. "It's all very well for you to laugh," he said. "But if I can't speak with Erlande, then we can't take passage across the sea for Kesista, and we can't find the Pool of Siliyonete, and that means that I will never be King, and you will never have your reward."

Ternora shook her head. "I said all along that we should have flown, my Prince. Viridian could fly us, now. You are the one who would not permit us to fly."

"I have to make peace with Erlande."

"But if you fail in doing so, then we could fly, and there would be no reason to keep up the attempts to please Erlande," said Ternora. "You'll excuse me for hoping that you do fail."

Warcourage closed his eyes and flung himself back into the communion as if he had nothing else to do in the world. Ternora shook her head and glanced at Viridian, who had opened his eyes.

"Did you speak with Erlande?" she asked.

"Yes." Viridian gazed into the distance for a moment, as though he were looking across the expanse of the Doral. "This really is the best place to do it in, where the running waters of the land meet and then run into the sea." He shook his head abruptly and glanced at Ternora, seeming to awaken from a dream. "It is amazing, Ternora, what it does to one when one has a god. One learns to slow down, and see things from another perspective."

"Really," said Ternora, as noncommittally as she could. She had worshipped many gods in her time, whichever seemed most likely to get her out of trouble, and she couldn't really see another need for them.

"Yes." Viridian glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "But I don't really think that you would see the need."

"Thank you. I suppose."

Viridian chuckled.

"Will you be quiet?" Warcourage wailed, sounding as though he were on the brink of slapping them.

Ternora bit her lip and looked at the dragon. Viridian inclined his head to show that, yes, he could be quiet, and then laid his head on the grass and closed his eyes. Ternora supposed that she should do the same thing, since sleep was the best way to insure that she wasn't making noise.

But she wanted to remain awake and see if Warcourage did manage to contact Erlande, and so she went on watching until Warcourage told her that the staring was making him nervous, and would she turn her head away, or lie down and close her eyes?

Ternora sighed and turned her head in the other direction, then blinked. There were several figures walking along the bank of the Delta. They were tall and slender and had long pale hair, but that could have left several candidates. It was by the way they moved, as if grace were just a natural part of them, that told Ternora they must be elves, and Faerie elves at that.

She stood, trying to get a better look at them, wondering why they would want to come here. Of course, she had never really understood them, and she had heard that Faerie elves would travel a long distance merely to see some sight that had become commonplace to mortals. Perhaps they had come to see the sunrise in the waters of the Doral.

Ternora squinted as she saw one of the women turn her head. Was she looking at them now? The elves were several hundred feet distant, which made it hard to tell, but Ternora almost thought that, yes, the woman was looking towards them, and even mentioning to her companions that someone was there. The Faerie elves all turned their heads, and then stopped walking at the same time, so that a solid line of elves was standing and looking towards their island.

Ternora swallowed and looked at Warcourage. "My Prince?" she asked. "I think that someone is here to prevent you from speaking with Erlande."

Warcourage turned his head, narrowing his eyes when he saw the elves, and didn't even scold her for interrupting him. "That was well-thought, Ternora," he said, coming to his feet and raising one hand. Ternora felt a gust of wind travel past one cheek, growing in strength as she listened. "I don't know why Faerie elves would have an interest in what I'm doing, unless it really is to stop me."

One of the elves waded into the water then, and came towards them. Ternora stood still, fighting the impulse to run. Faerie elves were no different from Light elves, she told herself, at least not more likely to kill. And they could hope that the Faerie elves would only look at them, in that way they had of looking at mortals and mortal things as if they were wonders, and then turn and walk away. The woman who was walking towards them didn't have a hostile expression on her face.

She halted a few feet out from the island and gazed at them. Then she said, "Do you know who has been killing our people?"

Ternora blinked. "You don't?" she asked, and then wondered if the question had been offensive. The elfwoman had sent her a sharp glare.

But she only shook her pale hair in the next moment, and said, "There are several candidates. And I think that we would like to narrow them down as much as possible. If you know anything, we ask that you tell us."

"I had a vision of what killed several elves," said Ternora. "A silvery light that shut off the exits to the other worlds, and resisted the power to dream like fire, and then formed into the image of a silvery woman, weeping."

The elfwoman leaned forward at once. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

The elfwoman nodded once or twice, as though absorbed in the small amount of information Ternora had given her. Then she said, "You shall not go unblessed for this," and raised her hand as if she would touch Ternora's brow.

"Don't touch my servant!"

Ternora turned to stare at Warcourage. He had his ruined hand in the air sill, and by the way that his golden curls whipped around him, he was calling on the Gust with all his might.

"She has never done you ill," said Warcourage. "She might even have helped you. Why would you want to hurt her?"

"I am not hurting her," said the elfwoman, sounding amused. "I am blessing her. That is a powerful and protective gesture."

"Only blessings that come from the Light are worth anything," said Warcourage. "And you are not of the Light."

All the elves were looking at Warcourage now, and Ternora could feel her skin crawling. She didn't think it was a good idea to have Faerie elves so intensely interested in what one did or said. "Warcourage," she whispered. "Let it go, please. I believe that she only wanted to bless me."

The elves smiled at her, but the Prince of Doralissa shook his head and said, "I can't take the chance," and called on the Gust. It traveled past Ternora like a solid wall of wind, apparently trying to knock the Faerie elves back into the water.

The Faerie elves who remained on the shore began to sing at once, and their voices made Ternora lower her head, soul writhing. It was beautiful, so beautiful that it pierced her and made her feel as if she were unworthy to walk on two legs, or at least share the blood that bound her to these elves, however distantly Light elves and Faerie elves were bound to each other now.

She heard a gasp from behind her, and then turned.

Prince Warcourage was gone. Lying on the ground where he had been, with the silvery sheen of elf magic just fading from around him, was a dolphin. He gave a few flops, and then fell into the water.

Ternora turned back, just in time to feel the Faerie elfwoman's blessing on her head. Then the whole lot of them turned and went back towards the north.

"Why did you do that?" Ternora called after them.

The elfwoman turned her head. "He might have hurt us, with the backing of Destiny behind him," she said. "But now he cannot."

Then the elves were gone, and Ternora and Viridian were left alone with a dolphin swimming in circles and blowing water into the air.

Of course, that was the moment that Erlande chose to respond.

## Chapter 56

### Silar's Plan

*"There are mysteries in the world that I shall never understand, in spite of a long life devoted to the pursuit and care of mysteries. I suppose that, because I shall never see another sunrise, I shall never understand the Riddle of the Jacinth, or the Song of the Emerald Serpent.*

*"It is hard, sometimes."*

-Harpseeker the Bard.

"You are certain that Princess Mitherill could not escape on her own?"

"I fear that she could not," Elary admitted, sitting back from the woman. She still found Silar strange, though now Silar had assumed the complete guise of a human woman, even hiding her wings with Illusion. She sat on the divan next to Elary, and spoke of what they were going to do to rescue the Princess, and still made Elary tremble as though she were stung.

"Of course, I may be wrong," Elary added. "She has a strong Destiny, and Light is there to help her. But Shadow's power is absolute in his own stronghold, and without help from us, I fear that Mitherill will never be able to get outside it and use her strength against him."

"Fair enough." Silar leaned back against the divan, closing her eyes as she apparently fell into deep thought. Elary admired her pretense; the way that she shifted to accommodate the presence of her invisible wings was barely noticeable. "The best we can do, then, is rescue the Princess and bear her to the place where her Quest Object is hidden. The Diamond of Ezudlos, you say?"

Elary nodded.

"Silar is so clever," said Hanever, sitting on the ground at her feet and gazing up at the fey with a smile that made Elary uneasy. Silar's presence seemed to make him happy, and he said that she had been visiting him for a long time, teaching him to control his Lightning magic. Why Silar had wanted to do that instead of going to Lorianna openly and asking permission to teach her son, Elary didn't know, but it was enough to make her nervous. "She'll come up with a plan that will get the Princess out of the caves, I know it."

"I think I have one," Silar murmured.

"What is it?" Elary asked, anxious for any scrap of hope. She had been in despair for so long, and it was still painful to think they might have a chance. But better to think this way, she thought, than just lie on the divan and wander around the thought, poking it without ever really getting anything done.

"A question, first," said Silar. "You said that the Princess was raised in Ilantra, among the *ilzánai*."

Elary nodded. "It is the reason that Shadow never found her. She was kept secret, and reared in silence, so that no one would see her until it was time for her to emerge and begin fulfilling her Destiny."

Silar nodded. "But that means that she has never come to Arvenna before, doesn't it? It means that she has no real idea of what this country and its people are like, even though she

will someday rule them. And you told me that she couldn't speak Arvennese, or even Ilantran."

Elary tensed a little. "I can see how that would matter, to someone who is Arvennese," she said, as carefully as she could. "But Mitherill will learn. I am certain of it."

"You said that she did not have a great will for Shadow's lessons."

Elary sat up and glared. "Would you? Shadow uses pain to teach, and punishes Mitherill for infractions that she has no idea she's committing. Would you listen to such a teacher?"

"No," said Silar. "But this much, I will insist upon. If we rescue the Princess, then I would like to introduce her to- friends of mine, who know the Mountains and Arvenna and its people as well as anyone alive. Instead of simply reclaiming the Diamond and then reclaiming her throne, I think that the Princess should learn from them to love Arvenna and her subjects."

"She does love them. She is willing to suffer for them."

"She loves the idea of them," said Silar patiently. "And she can't even speak our tongue. Besides, the old laws say that she cannot assume the throne until she is sixteen in either country. She needs to have a Regent to guard her, and guide her through her first days on the throne."

"I suppose that you are thinking of yourself for that position?" asked Elary, wondering if this was how the ambition to take Mitherill's place would begin in Silar, with the dream of a Regency.

Silar blinked and stared at her. "If no one better is available," she said at last. "But since you are the Princess's Destined guardian, from what I understand, I think that you would be available."

"I plan to be," said Elary, sitting up again to put a little more distance between herself and Silar. "But that doesn't mean that I will require her to serve under a Regent. She should be able to take the throne at once herself. She is the last living member of the Arvennese royal line, or the Ilantran one-" Then she paused. "I bet that is his plan," she said softly, feeling thoughts surge together in her head.

"What is?" asked Silar.

Elary ignored her, just staring off into the distance. Rior, the shadowy figure who had served at Shadow's strange Court, had had Ilantran royal features, and said something about seeing his kin "reduced" to the thing that Mitherill now was. He could serve as a Regent, if Shadow was inclined to make him so. A Regent had to be of the royal blood of a Kingdom, but there was nothing in the laws about him having to be a servant of Light, or even alive.

"What is it?" Silar repeated.

Elary turned to face her. "Shadow has someone who could serve as Regent," she said quietly. "A man, Rior, who is made of shadow now, but was once made of flesh, and still carries the mark of the Ilantran royals on his face. That must be his plan, and the reason he was so eager to get rid of me and set Rior up as Mitherill's teacher. He can emerge from hiding in a few years, or whenever he thinks that the people would accept Mitherill on the throne with her Regent behind her. The Princess would have four years until she could take the throne, under those laws. And by the end of those four laws, Shadow would probably have hopelessly corrupted her."

"It could work," said Silar, though she was frowning. "But I am surprised that he didn't seek to take Mitherill before now."

"I think that Destiny protected her until she started moving to reclaim her throne," said Elary softly. "Then it could do nothing to keep her hidden; indeed, it would be counterproductive to do so. Her people have to hear of her and know that a Princess is alive. But that makes her vulnerable to her enemies, too, of course."

"There are some people, the Arvennese, who do not know this Princess, and would be glad to do so," said Silar.

"Yes, you said that," said Elary in irritation. "But the Princess can't help where she was reared, and she can't help it if the *ilzánai* saw fit to teach her only one tongue. I don't understand why you keep returning to it."

Silar smiled a little. "There are people who might help if they knew that, yes, the Princess Mitherill would receive tutoring in Arvennese, and the laws and customs of Arvenna. They would help a Queen of their country. But she really must be a Queen of our country, and not just the country of her own imagination. Would you agree with that?"

"Who are these people?" Elary demanded.

Silar opened her mouth to answer, but Hanever sat up then and clapped his hands. "Silar, are you going to take me to meet the Serpents?"

Silar smiled at the little boy and touched his hair. "Yes, Hanever, if Elary wants to meet them and wants their help in rescuing the Princess, then I will take you to meet the Serpents." She kept her eye on Elary the whole time, as if wondering how the healer would react to this.

It didn't take Elary long. She spluttered for a moment, and then said, "Who are the Serpents? And what have you been telling Hanever about them?" She could feel her ire rising. Silar was a long way from the compassionate, serene woman Elary had seen in her dream about to take the Ilantran-Arvennese throne. She was someone who would lie to a child, and, apparently, belong to or at least know a group of people named after one of the most ill-omened animals. "Don't you think that you should have named your people something else?"

Silar shook her head. "No one else agrees with us, and so we have to slip into and out of the villages again, so that we might maintain our freedom. The name Serpent fits us."

"What are you?"

"We want to have the country ruled by a monarch who loves it," said Silar quietly. "Not for us the wild way of living in Dalzna, where they killed off their royals long ago, but not for us the ways of Queen Tiriena, either, who lived in Ilantra all her life and only made two visits to Arvenna. We are determined to have a King or Queen who will really care for Arvenna, and not just for Ilantra."

"Mitherill is the only choice."

"Then we will teach her to love Arvenna," said Silar calmly. "But we will make sure that a King or Queen who loves Arvenna takes the Arvennese throne. Only that, and no other."

*Like you?* Elary had to bite her tongue instead of asking the question, though. Silar just looked at her oddly when she said things like that, and Elary had discerned from that that she harbored no ambitions for the throne of Ilantra-Arvenna herself.

Not yet, at least.

"I will come back tonight," said Silar, standing and dropping the Illusion so that Elary could see her wings again. "I know that you'll need time to think about this, and realize just what a task it will be, to not only rescue your Princess but teach her to love the people and customs of Arvenna. And tonight, we'll go to meet the Serpents, if you're still agreeable to the plan."

"I think I will be."

Silar inclined her head. Hanever walked beside her to the door, and she touched his face with gentle hands, murmuring what sounded like a blessing, before she opened the door and flew away into the cold, clear dawn. Hanever shut the door and then ran to the window to watch her go.

Watching him, Elary wanted to ask if he was sure that he trusted Silar, but again she had to refrain, knowing that he would just eagerly bob his head. He was a child, and he didn't have the ability to judge that someone who was wiser in the politics of Dark and Light would.

"Elary!"

Elary jerked her head up. Palant had just run into the room, and he was beaming at something in his hand.

"A message," he said, holding it up. "It's from a gryphon, Elary, look! They say that they've heard of the plight of the Princess of Iantra-Arvenna, and they're going to help us. They'll fly us to the cave to rescue her, and make sure that she is safe until then, with scouts. Look, look, read, read!" He flung himself onto the couch beside her, and held out the letter.

Elary read in bewildered silence. The handwriting was shaky, in a way she knew was consistent with a gryphon gripping a quill in a beak or talon; she had seen that kind of thing before. But the message itself was the wondrous thing, promising just what Palant had said.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Palant asked, when Elary had finished reading the letter and sat staring into space. "And we know that gryphons are beloved of the Light, and never go rogue. We can make sure that we have allies who are serving the same cause we are. They say that they are flying, and will be here by the day after tomorrow," he added, even though Elary had just read that.

"I know," said Elary. "But I wonder how they heard of Mitherill's plight, and how they knew how to send a letter to you."

Palant smiled. "Come, Elary, think!" he said. "Destiny must have told them. There's no other way, really, and no reason that Destiny shouldn't tell them. After all, they're on the same side, and Destiny would seek some way to rescue Mitherill that doesn't involve compromises with Shadow or any other force." He leaned back on the divan, gazing at Elary, and his eyes seemed to pierce through to her meeting with Silar and the secret of the Serpents.

Elary closed her eyes. She couldn't really accept Palant's explanation, if only because this was so convenient.

But the Serpents sounded no better than the servants of Dark or even Shadow, and Elary could see the determination in Silar's eyes as she spoke of having a Queen who loved Arvenna.

Elary thought that determination could too easily turn evil. What if Mitherill wasn't to the Serpents' taste? Perhaps they would kill her, insuring that no one they hated could take the throne. They probably wouldn't care that they were killing the last descendant of the Ilantran-Arvennese royal line.

Elary opened her eyes, and nodded. "Very well, Palant, we'll wait for the gryphons."

And thus was their course set, both then and for what happened after.

## Chapter 57

### Lord of the Waters

*"Have you ever heard a god speak? No? Then I wish that we could trade memories, and you could deal with that terrible thing while I ran in silence and in gratitude with a normal memory lodged in my head."*

-The Godspeaker of Gazania.

Ternora watched as the water mounded up into a great head, a head with dark eyes that opened and pinned her at once. She felt her bladder releasing, but she couldn't move. She could hardly even feel fear. She could only stare into those dark eyes a few feet away from her, and wonder.

"Your name is Ternora," said Erlande. "I know it. You have voyaged on My waters often enough, and done no harm there. But you were escorting the Prince of Doralissa south, or so the undines would have it."

"Yes, my lord," said Ternora, when she realized that he actually expected her to respond. "I was escorting him."

"And now?"

Ternora could only indicate the dolphin, who raised his head from the water and cried in that moment, as if to demand that someone change him back.

Erlande's head slowly turned. In truth, Ternora thought he knew what was waiting for him when he looked down, but he seemed to take all the time in the world, as if to delay his reaction. Ternora wondered what his reaction would be, on learning that the Prince of Doralissa was now a creature who was more at home in his waters than on the beloved land of Doralissa.

The reaction, apparently, was to laugh.

Ternora shuddered, and trembled, and fought to keep from pressing her hands over her ears, as Erlande roared with laughter. It was the sound of waves crashing on the shore, and gulls crying, and even dolphins singing their high, eerie songs. It went on and on, and then abruptly stopped.

"And you, Viridian?" said Erlande then, his voice softer and tempered with something that might or might not have been affection. "What purpose do you have for coming south to My waters, where you have not been in years beyond number?"

Ternora looked up to see the dragon bow his head, and was momentarily relieved to see that he was as disconcerted as they were. Perhaps it wasn't easier for him, just because Erlande was his god. "My lord," said Viridian, "I came south searching for the Pool of Siliyonete."

"The Pool does not exist."

Viridian shrugged his wings. "Destiny apparently told the Prince of Doralissa that it was in the Shining Isles, my lord. They were going to voyage there and look for it. I thought I would come along, since I have never stopped searching for the Pool, and this is the best chance I have heard of in a long time to find it."

"Why did the boy think that I would let him voyage on My waters and live?"

"He planned to perform some appeasement," said Ternora, feeling that she should defend Warcourage, who could hardly defend himself at the moment. "My lord. He said that he had a way to make you forgive the crime that Queen Rizzeros committed against you long ago."

The great face acquired an introspective look. It was strange how the water could take on different forms, Ternora thought; it was beyond even the skill of any Azure mage she had known to shape water that way, and so she had not known it was possible. "That is hardly something I would have answered to," said Erlande. "Her crime is not a crime in the way that most crimes are understood, and there is no chance that I will forgive. But he has been paid for it, I think, transformed into a creature of the waters, under My protection." The amusement was back in his voice again.

"My lord," said Ternora, and then hesitated. But Erlande wasn't her god, and she didn't think that she would suffer that much if he grew angry with her, not in the way that Viridian might suffer. "Could you transform the Prince back to his normal self? This is elven magic, and we are not sure how to undo it."

"Oh, no." Erlande smiled at her. "I think it is quite an appropriate punishment. He must learn to cooperate with the Azure he has always hated."

"But- my lord-" Ternora took a deep breath and reordered her voice as best she could, so that she didn't come off as a crying child. "We are on a quest from Destiny itself, and we must find the Pool of Siliyonete. A few days ago, the Prince had a vision, proclaiming that we must communicate with you in three days, or all would be lost. I don't think that Destiny would have lied about that. The other royal Heirs of the Kingdoms are in terrible danger-"

Her voice faltered, as she realized the look on Erlande's face was not anger, but simple uninterest. In the silence that followed, the Lord of Waters shook his head, his voice gentle but cool.

"You do not understand, my Lady Ternora. I care nothing for the affairs of the land, the wars of Light and Dark and the fussing of Destiny. I only care for the water, and those who worship me." He looked down at Warcourage, who had again surfaced to breathe. "And those who have offended me."

"But could not Destiny involve you in the pattern of its weaving?" Ternora asked. "My lord, terrible things have happened to even gods in the past who tried to delay royal Heirs on their Destined Quests."

Erlande laughed softly. "I don't think that I need worry. After all, as I said, I am not a power of land. And Destiny does not touch the folk of the Green Isles, who are My only human children from birth. I think that I shall follow the plan that I meant to follow, if the Prince came to me and was proud."

"What is that?" asked Ternora warily.

Erlande lifted a hand instead of answering, and Ternora felt a tremor in the water that surrounded them. She looked around in alarm, and saw the waterbirds rising into the air, flapping and squawking, as the Delta seemed to rise up all around them.

It looked like a vast wave flowing in from the sea, Ternora realized, one that was curving past all the islands and birds and grass, rising until it was a smooth wall of blue-green towering into the morning sky. Then Erlande gestured, and it swooped down and around them.

Ternora turned to run far too late. She felt her feet swept from under her, and then she choked as the water invaded her lungs. She tumbled over and over, pummeled by the foam, trying to escape the wave and unable to, fighting to keep what air she had left in her all the while.

Then the air rushed out, and with it, Ternora thought, she would have to give up life. She closed her eyes, wondering which god would claim her soul, and what they would do with it.

Then it came to her that she was apparently breathing as easily as she had ever done. She opened her eyes in suspicion, and realized that she was still beneath the surface of the vast wave. But Erlande had done something to her, it seemed-

In a moment, she realized what it was. A small fluttering at the side of her neck distracted her, and she lifted a hand to find one of a pair of gills there. There was another fluttering on the other side, and her feet and hands kicked through the water with more ease than she had expected. Ternora lowered her right hand into her line of vision, and found that it was webbed, the fingers stretched apart by the webbing but still recognizable as fingers.

She turned, and found Viridian swimming beside her, looking almost unchanged. His wings looked like paddles, though, and he must have gills of some kind, though Ternora couldn't see them in his scales. He turned his head to her and nodded.

Ternora tried to ask him what was going on, but found that only bubbles emerged from her mouth, popping as they went to the surface.

*We must speak by telepathy,* said Viridian in her mind. *It is the way that those who are not as dolphins, to call over vast distances, speak.*

*What is happening to us?* Ternora demanded.

*I don't know,* Viridian admitted. *I have never heard of Erlande doing something like this outside of the old legends, when sometimes He would take a beloved servant to His breast in this way. I suppose that we must seek Him and ask.*

*I am here.*

Ternora turned her head forward in alarm. The water-face they had seen before was there in front of them, smiling at them both. Erlande didn't seem angry, but rather amused as he had been.

*My lord, why?* Ternora demanded.

Erlande chuckled, something that was visible more as a ripple in the water all around them than as sound. *I had determined that I would punish the Prince of Doralissa and those who escorted him, but the manner of the punishment was something that I had not decided. The transformation of the Prince into a water creature gave Me this idea. You will live out your days in My Kingdom, while I attempt to make the Prince see the error of his ways, and learn why Destiny has set this thought about the reality of the Pool of Siliyonete in his mind.*

*My lord-* said Ternora.

Yes?

Ternora could only shake her head. *Could you let us go, at least? We have done nothing to harm you. Viridian worships you.*

*And yet he took up with a Prince of Doralissa,* said Erlande, with a frown at the dragon. *And you escorted him, my lady. No, I think not. You shall not remain here forever, but long enough to feel the weight of My displeasure, and learn that it is better not to help an enemy of the Lord of Waters.*

Ternora swallowed, since she could think of nothing else to say, and went on swimming in Erlande's wake. The swimming seemed easier as time passed, and at last she realized that her clothes were gone.

She was tempted to blush, but she made herself think of who might be watching- starfish? Turtles?- and kept swimming.

After what seemed far too short a time for them to have escaped the Doral, they emerged into the open sea. Ternora could see the dark mass of the shore glide past on one side, and a sudden urge overcame her to look upon her homeland again. She rose towards the surface, her head breaching it.

She had just looked in the direction of the shore when she began to feel as if she were choking. She quickly ducked beneath the surface of the water again, and was relieved to find that her gills were working again. The choking sensation swiftly vanished.

*You see that we have little choice about accompanying Him,* said Viridian, who swam next to her. *He has determined that we will suffer for helping the Prince of Doralissa, and that includes no escape. You cannot breathe air, and that means that you cannot swim to the land and escape that way.*

*I couldn't escape in any case,* said Ternora sourly, as she turned back to the open sea. *Unless there is some water that I could drink or bathe in that was not controlled by Erlande.*

Viridian said nothing, which Ternora thought did justice to her observation. She went on swimming, and at last saw something gleam ahead of her, in the filtered sunlight that came through the surface. She dived, thinking it was a creature that would hurt her, and then floated in place, staring.

It was a palace, made of white stone and coral, perfectly shaped, as though someone had built it to a certain design- or as though Erlande had commanded the water that shaped it, which Ternora thought actually made a good deal more sense.

*Come.*

Ternora started as Erlande swooped past her and into the palace, through a door that Ternora had thought was a window. She looked at Viridian, but the dragon only moved his wings in what Ternora thought was a shrug. She turned and followed the god into the palace.

The water filled the palace, of course, and it itself was filled with darting schools of fish in colors that Ternora had never seen before- red and yellow, green and blue, silver and black. They moved aside as Ternora and Viridian entered, but darted back again when they had passed, only to move yet again as the dolphin that had become Prince Warcourage hurtled past.

Ahead of them hung a white throne, and Erlande created another water-body for himself to sit on this. He nodded at all of them, and then a small pocket of air formed above his head. Warcourage darted to it at once and breathed, then dived back down to confront Erlande.

*What have you done to us?* he demanded. *Let us go.*

*I'm afraid that you don't understand,* said Erlande. *I have no motivation to let you go. Those who go seeking for the Pool of Siliyonete usually vanish, and I have no desire to lose one of the few dragons who worships me.* He looked with a smile at Viridian, then added, *Or one of my ancient enemies.*

Warcourage made a sweeping motion with his tail that Ternora thought was indicative of his frustration. *I would have made restitution and appeasement to you, whatever you desired. I don't know why you didn't listen to me. My ancestress's crime is a burden that hangs on my heart, one that I wanted removed.*

*Truly.* Erlande leaned back on his throne. *And would you have restored to me the dolphins that she killed?*

There was a long pause, and then Warcourage said hesitantly, *I know nothing about dolphins.*

Erlande nodded his head, his eyes glittering like the coral. *I thought that you might not. There was a kind of dolphin, long ago, that I was fond of. They swam around the Green Isles, where Rizzeros came from, and they delighted Me with their singing. They were white, and blue. They were the dolphins who came from the souls of sailors, Those of My children who sought union with me, or who died in the waters, came back as dolphins.*

Ternora stared .She had never heard of such a thing, and, by the agitated lashing of his tail, neither had Warcourage. He seemed more angry about it than she was, though. *My lord, all souls are taken up by one of the gods when they die. They are taken up by a Dark god, or accepted and welcomed to Elle's Light. They are not sent back as dolphins into the ocean.*

*That was what Rizzeros believed,* said Erlande coldly. *And she could not bear to see the poor souls suffer eternal separation from Elle, or so she said. So she killed them all, My beloved children.*

Warcourage's tail lashed again. *My lord, she was right. You must realize that Elle cannot take charge of the souls that should come to the Light, not if someone is interfering and making them into other shapes. But the souls will suffer eternally until someone comes along who can free them, because they were meant to rise and seek Elle's Light.*

*Does that mean that you no longer wish to make restitution for the crime that your ancestress committed?*

*That is not a crime. That is only fulfilling the deepest desires of Elle and the Light.* Warcourage lifted his head. *I am proud to be descended from such a woman.*

*Then you shall stay here,* said Erlande, with a satisfaction in his voice that made Ternora think he was mostly happy about the way things had turned out. *Perhaps, if you please me enough, I shall change your colors, and then you can become the first of My new children.*

Warcourage began to rage, but Ternora was not listening. She was thinking back to the day Amirien had led her into the elven clearing, and she had first seen Warcourage standing there, surrounded by adoring elves.

She was wishing with all her heart that she had refused the offer to guide him, even the offer of a Court position.

*It seems the only position I am ever likely to have after this is attendant to a dolphin.*

## Chapter 58

### Conspiracies Everywhere She Looks

*"Sometimes the superstitious will not speak their fears aloud, out of the belief that this calls their fears to them. It does not seem to matter, truly. I think that your enemies will always find out your deepest fears, and use them against you."*

-Advice of Adovra of the Fourteen Wonders.

"You wanted to see me?"

Nightstone glanced up from the message she had been writing. She had almost finished it, she thought, but there were a few tricks of wording that she wanted to get just right before it went north to the Dark.

The sight of Black Rose on the balcony changed her mind. She rose at once and walked briskly over to the pegasus, rolling up the message as she went.

"Yes," she said crisply. She had planned to confront the pegasus about her treachery, but this was a much simpler and more indirect way of getting rid of her for a little while. "I have encountered enough evidence that Shadow will betray us. I am sending a message to Dark, urging it to end the alliance with Shadow. Of course, if this message falls into the wrong hands, there is the chance that Shadow might learn of it, and that will mean all loss of surprise."

As she spoke, Black Rose's eyes had been growing wider and wider. Now, she scraped a hoof on the balcony. "It sounds as though you need someone trustworthy to carry the message," she said.

Nightstone bowed her head as if in grave acknowledgment, though really it was to hide a smile. She had taken a gamble, and it had worked. Black Rose was intrigued by the thought of delivering such an important message, one that would get her notice in the eyes of the Dark, intrigued enough to set aside her plans, whatever they might be, of leading a rebellion against Nightstone.

"I am glad that you think so highly of the message," said Nightstone, "and of our safety. I was considering asking Chive-"

"My lady!"

"What?" Nightstone asked. "Can Chive not be trusted?" She let a hunted note slip into her voice, and glanced over her shoulder.

Black Rose tossed her mane and snorted. "My lady, Chive is- is trustworthy, yes, but he does not fly as fast as certain other pegasi in your service, or he would have been a blaze leader."

"He flies faster than many," Nightstone countered, letting her gaze drift back to the pegasus. "Unless- Black Rose, are you thinking of delivering the message yourself?"

"If my lady would be so gracious as to entrust the message to me, then I would be most glad to take it."

Nightstone smiled a little. "Then I will be glad to entrust the message to you," she said, and bound the scroll around her neck. "You have heard the latest reports of danger in the air?"

Black Rose, who was dancing from hoof to hoof with her eyes on Nightstone, nodded. "Yes, I have. There was a flock of gryphons seen heading north, riding the higher winds. I know, my lady. Please. May I go and deliver the message?"

"Of course you may."

Black Rose spread her wings and flung herself from the balcony at once, circling into the air. Nightstone watched her until as she was as high as the clouds, then higher, and then out of sight.

Nightstone sighed and went back to her writing table. *One problem solved. If the Dark is pleased enough with her, it might even keep her at its side, and that means that she'll have the promotion she wanted, without it coming at my expense. And now, what to do about Glow and my mysterious disappearing half-elf?*

As if he had been called by the thought of his name, Glow trotted into the room just then. Nightstone opened her mouth to ask him what he was doing here, then shut it and frowned at him. Something was undeniably wrong. Every piece of his fur stood on end, and he was shaking as though he had seen one of the ghioutlin, the great black hounds of the Dark.

"Glow, what is it?" she demanded, rising and coming around the table.

"Something is hunting the Plains," Glow said, in a whisper. "Something to the north. It is coming."

Nightstone went at once to her balcony and looked to the north, in the direction that Black Rose had vanished. She wondered suddenly if she should have sent Black Rose flying after all.

"What kind of danger is it?" she asked, turning back to Glow.

The zeyr only shook his head, and then lowered it, shivering.

Nightstone sighed in exasperation. "Your people are on guard around the castle, as you said they would be?" she asked.

Glow bobbed his head, still without looking up.

"Then I won't worry about it," said Nightstone in determination, and brushed past the *zeyr*. She could hear his claws as he skittered after her, following nearly as closely as a cat would. She raised her eyebrows. The *zeyri* usually liked to avoid any behavior that might make them look "tame."

She came onto the cell level and walked at once to Kymenos's cell. She opened the door, destroying the Illusion spell deliberately by stepping inside, and then stopped, a little befuddled.

Kymenos was sleeping on the floor, now and then letting out a deep, huffing breath. But Lyli was on the bed with her eyes open, facing the door, and her face was twisted as though she were fighting to keep back the tears.

"Lyli," said Nightstone softly. "What has happened?" She took a step towards the bed, wondering if one of her guards had come and threatened the girl. It didn't sound like something a *liadra* would do, but then, on the other hand, if the *liadrai* had joined the brewing rebellion against her rule, they might do something like this for their own, fey reasons.

"I'm in danger," said Lyli. "I know it."

"How?" Nightstone asked, as gently as she could. It seemed incredible that the girl could have heard anything about their plans to kill her other than from Nightstone's mouth, and she hadn't seemed inclined to tremble and weep then. But now, she was looking as though someone had not only threatened to kill her, but showed her the rack they would use to do it.

Lyli sat up, huddled in on herself until she looked like a child of eight or nine instead of twelve, and her teeth were chattering. "I don't know," she whispered. "But I can feel the Dark coming."

Nightstone sighed, her interest fading. The Dark's Lord or Lady was probably moving, and of course Lyli would interpret that as a threat. But it wasn't something that should concern the Princess of Orlath. "Then we shall just have to make sure that you don't feel the Dark coming for long," she said.

Lyli looked up in hope. "You have some way of stopping it?"

"Yes," said Nightstone firmly. It hurt, a little, to see the shining trust in the girl's eyes, but, after all, she had seen Nightstone torture her father and had to know they were going to kill her. The burn on her cheek, if nothing else, should have told her what Nightstone was capable of. Nightstone had little sympathy for people who were too stupid to realize, after so many hints, what was going to happen to them.

Then a hand grabbed her ankle, spilling her to the floor before she could even gasp.

Nightstone knew who it must be, of course, and was trying to will herself not to blush even as she rolled to face Kymenos, just call on fire. But he had called on Azure, his fingers moving in a delicate, precise pattern, and the Scarlet fell back from the blue outline around his body, snarling.

Nightstone hesitated, wondering what Kymenos would do next, and then found out as he rolled on top of her.

The breath went out of Nightstone, and not because of Kymenos's weight; after so long a period of short rations, he had few globs of fat still clinging to him. Instead, it was the feeling of being trapped between him and the floor, and knowing what such a thing might mean, and what it might lead to.

She looked up into Kymenos's face, which was very close to hers, and very intent. She had the chance to look into his eyes, to consider how dark they were, not black but seeming so from the darkness of the brown, and to admit that, yes, he was handsome, and the tales of bedding he had taunted her with were most likely true.

Kymenos blinked at her, and some of the anger drained out of his eyes, but what replaced it was no less intense. Then he lowered his head and kissed her.

It lasted only a moment before Nightstone pulled back and began to thrash her way free, reminding herself as she went that he was only using every advantage he could play, that she was here to torture him, that in a short while he would be suffering from Prince Artaen's skill. But that moment was enough to stir the curiosity that never lived far from the surface while she was around a man, and also enough to cause her a strange stab of regret.

Nightstone spun to face Kymenos, who lay on the floor and stared up at her. When he was sure that she was staring back, he licked his lips and then lifted his hands, running them through his hair.

Nightstone flushed and turned away, saying in as savage a tone as she could muster, "The Prince of Rivendon will be here soon. You'll want to-"

"My lady!"

Nightstone turned in alarm to the door. A *zeyr* stood there, not Glow, and for a moment she thought he brought word of an attack on the castle. But before she could order him back to battle position, he bowed and said, "My lady, the Prince of Rivendon is already here. He has opened a portal into the dungeon, and says that you must come at once, that it is urgent."

"Where in the dungeons?" asked Nightstone, gathering her skirts around her.

"Near the Princess Alliana's cell," said the *zeyr*.

Nightstone nodded, and rushed towards the steps, calling for a *liadra* to close the cell as she did so. She wasn't fast enough to escape the call that Kymenos gave after her, though, loud to make sure she heard it, but calm and strong.

"Leaving so soon, my love? Should I be jealous?"

Nightstone lowered her head and hoped that her cheeks were not burning. Then she stopped, remembering how stupid it would be to enter the presence of the Prince of Rivendon looking flustered.

She paused and ran her hands through her own hair, straightening it under the coronet. Then she smoothed down the skirts and began to walk down the stairs a step at a time, her head high and her face the picture of graciousness.

She would not come rushed to their meeting, and give the Prince of Rivendon cause to think ill of her.

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As she found when she reached Princess Alliana's cell, she need not have bothered with the straightening and smoothing. The Prince was flustered enough for both of them, pacing back and forth, occasionally muttering in his native tongue or shouting something at the Princess in the cell. Alliana just watched and giggled, already surrounded by a protective golden aura of Destiny.

When he saw her, Artaen came forward and gripped her arm tightly. "Shadow has betrayed us!" he hissed.

"Yes," said Nightstone, moving her arm a little so that his hold wasn't so tight. "I know."

She had the pleasure, then, of seeing him blink at her. "What?"

"It was obvious," said Nightstone. "Was it not? Shadow has received my invitation to come south, and bring Princess Mitherill with him. He refused it. He also claims to have no idea where the Prince of Doralissa is, and I rather think that a lie. Yes, he has betrayed us, and I have sent a message to the Dark telling it of the betrayal."

Artaen swallowed once, then nodded. "Yes, of course. That is good."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. "My lord, are you all right?" she asked in a concerned voice, while secretly she exulted. It was rare that Artaen wouldn't think of a move like that himself, rare that she could be sure she was one step ahead of him in the game. But this time, she was sure she was.

Artaen gave her a strained smile, and then turned to the guards who stood behind him, Rivendonian all. "Bring them forward!"

Nightstone raised her brows. The struggling, spitting Princess of Rivendon, with her silver eyes and silver hair, she had rather expected; that coloring, and the temper, were traits of her line. But stranger was the man who paced also in chains, looking Rivendonian but bearing the silver eyes and the slight brown sheen to his black skin that marked him as of silvereyes blood.

"Who is this?" she asked, catching Artaen's gaze.

Artaen grimaced. "Olumer," he said. "Princess Cadona's guardian. I thought we could kill him at the same time we kill the Princess of Orlath and her guardian."

Nightstone felt a stab of disappointment. "My lord? I thought you were going to work on Kymenos, first-"

"No time," said Artaen crisply. "Bring them down, him and anyone else you want to kill now. We need someone who was close to the Princess for the ritual I plan to perform, since the ritual will break the protections of Destiny."

Nightstone bowed. "I will bring her foster sister, then." She turned for the stairs, all the while telling herself that her disappointment was unworthy. After all, Kymenos would be dead, and that was the important thing.

*I do wish it wasn't necessary to kill him, I suppose. But only because I want him to suffer.*

## Chapter 59

### The Ritual of Cortalis

*"The Dark rituals are more frightening for me to witness than the rituals of Light- but only because I was a prisoner of the Dark for so long. Looked upon in the light of day, and out of chains, I suppose they might be as intriguing and interesting as the Darkworkers claim they are."*

-Termore Grassburner.

Olumer winced only a little as they snapped the chains shut around his wrists, mainly because they had pinched his skin. He was much more involved in watching Cadona than lamenting his own fate, and trying to think of the best way to rescue her.

They had bound the Princess of Rivendon to the bars of the cell across from him. She was in a fine temper, tossing her head back and forth, the silver hair flying. Olumer hoped that she would continue to resist, and baffle her handlers. That would mean they paid less attention to him.

Olumer couldn't quite keep his eyes from going to Prince Artaen, though, who had lost his expression of anger and now seemed cool and collected, and he had to admit his heart fell a little when he considered the man's face. They probably weren't going to get out of here, and his oath to protect the Rivendonian royal line would fail after all.

But he had long ago known that he would give up his life to protect Cadona, and so he told himself not to despair, setting his feet and preparing for a struggle, instead. The first chance he had to break free, to do something that would insure Cadona was not endangered, to even give her a few moments more of life in which Destiny might come to rescue her-

He would take it.

"Why do you need Lyli? Let her go, at the least!"

Olumer turned his head, and saw liadrai, who shone like the sun on snow, pacing down the stairs. With them they dragged a young girl, almost the twin of the Princess in the cell next to him, who stared about her with wide, frightened eyes and made no move to struggle or run. Behind her came a man who needed three liadrai to hold him, a Dalznan by his voice, swearing and tossing his dark brown hair like a horse's mane. He did something that caused a thin blue flash of light and one of the liadrai to cry out in pain, but the others only tightened their grip and dragged him forward.

"You can't kill Kymenos and expect that to pierce the protections that Destiny has about me," said the Princess of Orlath then, her voice eerily calm. Olumer turned his head to regard her and saw her on her feet, her hands gripping the bars of the cell. "I don't like him anymore. He failed in his duty. He was never meant to be my true guardian."

"Tell that to Destiny," said the man, Kymenos, and then winced as the Lady Nightstone walked behind him and slapped his head.

"We are not killing him because he is your guardian, Princess," said the Lady of Orlath. Olumer thought her cold, but given the anger in her eyes when she looked at Kymenos, it was obvious that she could experience some emotion. "We are killing him because I want him dead. For the ritual, we have your sister, Lyli." She nodded to the other little girl.

The little girl in question screamed, and called a short blast of water. But all it did was hit one of her guards in the chest, and they finished affixing her to the bars of a cell without trouble, and apparently without qualms.

Nightstone turned to face Artaen. She stood between the bars where they had hooked Kymenos and an empty cell, with the cell holding Alliana and the bars where Lyli was chained in front of her. Artaen stood between Olumer and Cadona, and he stared at the chained prisoners for a moment, then nodded his satisfaction.

"Everything is as it should be," he said, raising his hands. "Though you realize that since we have no one to counterbalance Kymenos, you will need to concentrate especially hard on your hatred for him."

"That," said Nightstone, with a sharp glance at the man, "shall be no problem."

"What's the matter, Nightstone?" Kymenos asked, shaking back his hair. "Don't you love me anymore?"

Olumer blinked. *The man must be mad. I suppose that I cannot count on him for an ally.* He turned back to Cadona, trying to catch her eye and calm her. She was still tossing her head and screaming, though, and didn't appear to notice him at all.

"I never loved you!" Nightstone hissed.

"Your kiss in the cell above says otherwise." Kymenos sounded smug.

Olumer shook his head. *Mad, beyond a doubt. There is no one else who would try that sort of thing with the Lady of Orlath.* "Cadona," he whispered, and this time she ceased her screaming fit and looked at him.

Olumer made quick gestures, trying to indicate that she should tug her chains free if she got the chance and run as if all the wolves of the north were after her. Cadona just stared at him, though, and after a moment, Prince Artaen turned and noticed Olumer's gestures.

"It is poetic that you want your ward to escape, Olumer," he said. "You won't, when you realize what her line has done to you."

Olumer met the man's eyes steadily. *Perhaps a declaration of defiance wouldn't be such a bad thing, after all. It might give Cadona heart, and it would show her that I don't intend to give up.* "They have done nothing but given me a reason to live, and committed my heart to a greater service than it might otherwise have chosen. I think they have done more than enough to guarantee my loyalty."

Prince Artaen just smiled at him, and then gestured to some of the Rivendonians who had dragged them through the portal. Two of them paced forward, carrying a small table of white stone. They set it on the floor in front of Nightstone, who smiled.

"The Ritual of Cortalis, then?" she asked, lifting her eyes to Artaen's.

"Yes. I trust that you have no objections?"

"None," said Nightstone, whose eyes were indeed glowing as if the sight of the table had stoked a fire behind them. She reached out and put her hands on the table, closing her eyes and beginning to chant. The chant promptly frustrated Olumer; he could almost pick out words from the strange sounds, but they eluded him when he concentrated too hard.

"When is this going to be over?" Kymenos asked. "I'm hungry."

Nightstone's chanting snapped like a brittle branch, and she glared over her shoulder at the man, her face colder than ever. "You are not to speak during the Ritual of Cortalis," she said.

"This is the ritual that you're going to use to kill me, isn't it?" asked Kymenos.

"You know that."

"Then I should think I have every stake in interrupting it," said Kymenos, and immediately began to sing a very off-key and bawdy song. Olumer laughed in spite of himself, but quickly shut his mouth when the Prince of Rivendon turned and glared at him.

"You will keep quiet," he warned, "or I will hurt your ward before I kill you, and I don't think you want that."

Olumer was sure that he didn't want that. Cadona had to be strong and in good shape to run, if she got the chance. He wondered that Kymenos didn't want the same chance for his ward.

Then he remembered what the Princess of Orlath had said about her guardian, and decided that Kymenos most probably didn't care.

"You shut up," said Nightstone to Kymenos.

"I love to watch the shape of your lips when you say such things," Kymenos said, breaking off his song.

"I will gag you," said Nightstone.

"I told you, I've never played those games, but I am willing to try," said Kymenos.

Nightstone, flushing like a wildfire, turned to Artaen. "My lord, your permission to delay the ritual for a moment, so that I might make this man regret what he has said."

"My permission," said Artaen, whose eyes shone with the same curiosity that Olumer himself was feeling. Who would say such things to the Lady of the Unicorns? And how could she allow herself to become so affected by them?

Nightstone spoke to one of the liadrai, who nodded and tore a strip from her tunic, working it into a passable gag in moments. Nightstone took it and stepped towards Kymenos with a triumphant smile on her face.

Kymenos just hung in his chains, watching her come with narrowed eyes, and Olumer wondered if he had seen the better part of sense.

Then, as Nightstone halted in front of him and leaned over to put the gag in his mouth, Kymenos swung back on his chains and kicked out. He caught Nightstone in the stomach, and she went staggering backward, banging her head into the bars of the cell opposite Kymenos. In seconds, she stood upright again, though now her lip bled and there was a swelling bruise on the side of her face.

There was a little silence.

Olumer stared from Kymenos to Nightstone and back, and began to hope. *Perhaps this man is not mad, only anxious to live, and if he would help us, we might yet escape.*

The Prince of Rivendon said then, "Come, my lady. You are the ruler of Orlath, and have lived four hundred years. Will you let someone who is only mortal knock you into bars, and then not stand up and do something about it?"

Nightstone turned to face the Prince, and Olumer shuddered in spite of himself at the look in her blue eyes. She was no one to toy with, even for someone like Artaen. He was somewhat surprised the two rulers of the Dark weren't fighting themselves right now, given how much they appeared to hate each other.

But Nightstone only inclined her head, as if to prove that she had heard and acknowledged Artaen's words, and then turned back to Kymenos. "You shall pay for what you did to me," she said, raising a hand.

"You're going to kill me anyway," said Kymenos. "You already told me that. Why should I care?"

He cried out, then, and from the intent stare that Nightstone was giving into his eyes, Olumer suspected he knew the cause. Some Scarlet mages could grasp a victim's memories and set them alight, making the victim relive the most intense pain or pleasure over again. From the way that Kymenos twisted, Nightstone was making him relive some fearful memory.

Nightstone turned to Artaen, and said, "I have locked him in a place where the most intense of nightmares will keep him silent, afraid to draw the attention of the creatures that stalk his mind. Might we proceed with the Ritual of Cortalis?"

"Of course," said the Prince of Rivendon, eyes slightly narrowed. Olumer suspected that he had been forced to reevaluate Nightstone, and didn't like what he was seeing. But he remained still until Nightstone clutched the sides of the stone table and once again began the chant that lingered on the edges of Olumer's consciousness, familiar and not-familiar at once.

Olumer kept watching such things, storing them in his mind, because he believed that they might still get a chance to escape. And any amount of watching politics among the Darkworkers was worth that.

"Now."

Olumer turned his attention fully back to the Prince of Rivendon. Artaen was smiling, his hands clenched in front of him but slowly pulling apart as Olumer watched, weaving a pattern that wasn't unlike the patterns that the Masters of the Star Circle wove. Olumer could see shimmering lines of magic playing between Artaen's palms, growing brighter and brighter the further he moved his hands apart. They were weaving the pattern of a fishing net, or so Olumer thought; he hadn't seen such nets in a long time, ever since he had ventured into the south and seen the fishermen flinging their nets into the Corvorn Lake, singing as they did so.

"Now," said Artaen, "I am going to weave this net from Cadona to you, and if you keep still and do not speak, then I will make sure that your death is the first one. And your Princess shall die a swift death. I swear this by anything that you want me to swear by. What witness will you ask for the oath?"

"The royal line of Rivendon."

Artaen chuckled. "As you will. I swear by the royal line of Rivendon that you will die first, and that Cadona's death will be swift." He flung the net over Olumer's head and shoulders, and then turned, drawing the net towards Cadona. At once, the golden aura of Destiny sprang up around her, protecting her.

Olumer let his breath out in relief, but Artaen only shook his head. "Yes, Destiny protects its chosen," he murmured, as if someone had asked him a question, hooking the net around the outlines of the aura. "But the death of someone close to the chosen, if done in the right way, can break that protection. And such a death will come about when we kill your protector in the Ritual of Cortalis."

Cadona stared at Artaen with cool disdain. "You don't know anything. There is no one in the world who is close to me, because there is no one in the world who shares the burden of Rivendon's suffering. Your plan is clever, but it will go for naught."

Olumer sighed, hoping that she was right, and that the disdain she showed for him so often was real. And that she would have the chance to get out of the dungeons and run far, far away, of course.

Artaen just chuckled at her. "I have learned to see the depths of the human heart, my dear," he said, finishing the weaving and hooking of his net and stepping back. "And I know that hatred is just the closest cousin of love, and that you need not love the one who dies in order for his death to affect you."

He turned back to Olumer, adding as he did so, "Your charge hates you. How does that make you feel?"

"She cares more about Rivendon than she does about me," said Olumer. "That is only the way I raised her. No one matters against the suffering of our country, save Cadona herself, the one who can end it."

Artaen smiled. "Then you are the one responsible for making her the way she is. I was going to kill you painfully, but I see no need. Surely knowing that you failed to raise a competent Princess is painful enough." He reached out and adjusted the net a little, then began to chant in the same language that Nightstone was using. Olumer stared at him through the net, debating a strike.

But there was nothing he could do that would free Cadona with just one blow. At least, if he stood quietly, there was a chance that she would survive his death because they were not close enough.

If he called on silvereyes magic, either of the Darkworkers would know at once, given the intense magic here. And he was sure that-

Olumer blinked, losing the thread of his thought. He was sure- he was sure that-

Why couldn't he think?

He heard, then, the screams of the *zeyri*, the cries they used to ward off danger as well as to warn of it, and he wondered why they were crying. Surely, an enemy wouldn't choose now to attack the castle?

But those screams gave way to wails of fear, and then Olumer heard a sound as of many feet fleeing.

Nightstone interrupted her chanting to ask in annoyance, "What are those fools doing?"

But Olumer, lifting his head towards the strange sounds, knew the reason. He remembered that feeling of cold threat, of not being able to think- and he heard a moment later, as if in confirmation, the sound of many opening and closing pairs of wings.

The thiria was here.

## Chapter 60

### Fragile As Glass

*"It is easier to break a prophecy than you may think. Just because it says that it will occur does not mean it will. It is largely a product of Destiny's certainty, and the certainty of those who believe in Destiny, that the claims are believed. But Destiny is not always right, as I have cause to know."*

-Queen Annilda of Orlath.

Kymenos writhed. Yes, it had been horrible that he hadn't been able to save Fellos's life, but did Nightstone have to choose this memory for him to relive? The shame was so intense that-

And then he became aware that the spell that held him in the memory had snapped, and he was able to look around with clear eyes, and breathe, and think.

Artaen and Nightstone, he saw, had both turned to look at the far end of the dungeons, as if something was about to come through there. They both had their hands raised, their faces closed and threatening. Kymenos would have thought twice about challenging them.

Apparently, whatever was coming through the dungeon's far wall didn't think twice, or even at all. The wall trembled, cracked, and crazed, and then collapsed inward.

Kymenos gasped at the sight of the head that swung through the gap. It was like a dragon's, he thought, but different, and the fear it exhaled made him want to return to the shame and fear of being punished by the Star Circle. At least that, even relived and intensified, hadn't made him feel that he was about to lose his mind.

He heard the ringing of chains down the corridor, and could guess that the other man, the one who was Princess Cadona's guardian, was trying desperately to get free. Kymenos couldn't try. He could do nothing but stare at the creature, and wonder what it was, and pray desperately that it wasn't here for him.

*Do not worry. It is not.*

Kymenos started at the voice. It was one he hadn't heard in a long time, neither Light nor Destiny nor Dark, but Chaos. He would have said something back, but his lips felt numb, frozen by the terror that the beast carried with it.

It moved further into the dungeons, making Nightstone and Artaen fall back before it, and Kymenos caught a glimpse of the many wings and the faces that were embedded in its hide. He lost his breath then. He knew what this was, for the libraries of the Star Circle and the

other cities still carried old tales of such creatures. A thiria. It had to be. And it was here for the last descendants of Queen Aneron, the woman who had slaughtered its kin.

Kymenos dared to hope, for a moment, that he might be free. Surely, if the thiria killed Alliana, then Destiny would have no more use for him.

But his hope faded when he glanced at Alliana. She was surrounded by a glowing golden aura of Destiny, and it only flared more strongly as the creature wormed its way into the hole it had created. Kymenos knew well enough how it would defend Alliana. He didn't think that even a thiria could break through the protections that Destiny had laid.

The thiria inched closer and closer. Artaen abruptly took a step forward, crying out, and cast a blast of Azure in the thing's face.

It faded a foot away from the thing's face. And Kymenos remembered the tales that said the thiria drank and ate the memories, the emotions, the magic, of its victims.

Nightstone fell back behind Prince Artaen. She, too, might know what the thiria was and why it was here, Kymenos realized. And she was of Orlathian royal blood, and wouldn't want to be devoured.

The thiria continued to swallow the magical attacks that Prince Artaen launched at it, and at last it forced him to retreat, like Nightstone. It paused then, swinging its head back and forth, barely a few inches from Kymenos, and looking nearly as amused as something like it could look.

*I suppose that you thought you could escape me?*

All of them could apparently hear the telepathic voice, judging from the grimaces that the others made. It made Kymenos wince, and think of a thousand buzzing insects trying to fly in through his ears.

*I have come for the dose of blood that will settle the debt, the thiria continued, moving forward with a shuffling sound. And then I shall go away. If you are wise, you will surrender the four members of the Orlathian royal line in this castle to me.*

*Four?* Kymenos wondered, momentarily distracted. There was Nightstone, and Alliana, and perhaps Princess Cadona; he vaguely remembered that her father had been a Prince of Orlath. But who was the fourth?

There came laughter.

Kymenos managed to look up. Princess Alliana stood pressed against the bars of her cell, shaking so hard with laughter that it seemed as though she would be sick. She clutched the bars to keep upright, and shook her head at the thiria.

"Do you really think that you could touch me, or the Princess Cadona?" she asked the beast. "Destiny protects us." She held out one arm, around which the golden aura flared. "You could not get through the protections that it maintains around us."

The thiria swung its head in her direction, and for a long moment, Kymenos hoped that it would eat her first. But then it turned away, and he cursed in frustration.

The long neck inched slowly forward, and then the head turned around and came to a stop. It was hovering before Lyli.

*This shall be my first victim,* said the thiria with satisfaction, and then Kymenos heard Lyli scream. He saw her back arch as she was bent back in her chains, apparently by the force of the thiria's feeding magic.

Kymenos blinked and shook his head. *It must have decided to feed on other victims first.*

And again he heard the voice of Chaos in his head. *No. It is feeding on the Princess of Orlath.*

Kymenos frowned. *How is that possible? You did not-*

*I did tell you,* said Chaos's voice, cool and distant, *that I keep my promises.*

Kymenos stared, from Lyli to Alliana, who was blinking at the thiria as if wondering why it didn't attack her. And then he heard an abrupt, anguished cry, and watched the golden light rise from Alliana's body and fly towards Lyli, as if propelled by the hands of Destiny.

*You understand now,* said Chaos, as easily as if they were discussing something other than death. *I blinded Destiny. It was Lyli, the true Lyli, whom you took from the farm, and whom Destiny has been protecting all along. But the thiria knows the true royal blood of Aneron. I only had to keep Destiny fooled long enough that it wouldn't think to protect both girls.*

Kymenos could form no response, only stare as the golden aura of Destiny arrived and encircled Lyli's- Alliana's- body, and that too late. The Princess of Orlath gave a shudder, and then fell dead.

For a long moment, there was silence. The thiria gave a slow, contented rumble, the wings opening and closing above the screaming faces embedded in its sides. Given what had just happened, though, Kymenos no longer felt much terror even of those faces. He, like everyone else, was staring at the Destiny that hovered in a useless golden cloud over Lyli- or Alliana, as he supposed that he would have to become used to thinking of her from now on.

Then there came a great cry, arising from a distance and sweeping past all of them, mournful as the song of a wolf. Kymenos knew that he was hearing Destiny mourn, and if it had been for the ending of a life and not the ending of its plans, he might even have been able to feel sorry for the power.

He was thinking of something else just now, though. He was thinking of the prophecy that he had heard in Juladi, the prophecy of four royals, and how all of them were apparently needed to bring light and peace to the Kingdoms.

He was thinking of certain training he had received in the Star Circle, about what might happen when a prophecy that was supposed to be true was broken.

He ducked his head just as the first blast, traveling from the direction of Alliana's body, broke past him. The broken prophecy was as sharp as the glass that it had resembled in the song of the strange figurine, and Kymenos knew that it could scar him if he got caught in its path.

It might have a use, though, and he was hoping-

Yes! The pressure around his wrists eased suddenly, and then he dropped to the ground. Kymenos rubbed his hands and smiled smugly at the broken manacles, shattered by the flying prophecy.

Then he turned to look at the others.

The thiria was reaching further down the tunnel towards Nightstone, and Cadona behind her. Cadona's guardian, Kymenos saw, was free as well, and desperately trying to get past the thiria to the Princess of Rivendon.

Kymenos was feeling generous. He called on the Azure and drenched the manacles that bound the Princess of Rivendon to the wall. In seconds, they rusted, and the Princess jerked again, breaking them suddenly. She blinked, but was wise enough to duck past the thiria and for the hole it had smashed.

Kymenos didn't intend to stay around and see how Nightstone and Artaen handled the thiria. He was already wheeling for the hole himself, and thinking of the freedom of the Plains, running with the wind in his hair, running far away from Destiny and all the mad people who thought it mattered.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos glanced at Alliana, the false Princess, in her cell. The aura of Destiny was gone altogether now, and she was reaching out a hand to him, her eyes so big that he almost expected to see them fall out of her head.

"Please," she whispered. "Please help me."

Kymenos shook her head. "The thiria has no interest in those who are not of Orlathian royal blood," he said, savoring the words as he spoke them. "You'll be safe enough, unless, of course, the thiria drives you mad." He might have been in danger of that himself, but the thiria's snapping at Nightstone and Artaen, and his own exaltation, were keeping him safe.

"Kymenos! Please don't go!"

"Take her."

Kymenos glanced up in startlement. Cadona and her guardian were beside him, and the man was gazing at Kymenos as though he could see to the depths of Kymenos's soul, and they were slimy.

"No," said Kymenos flatly. "I never chose the duty, and because of her I've been dragged into prison, tortured, beaten up, and listened to never-ending complaints about her being the Princess of Orlath."

"She's a child."

"She's a brat," said Kymenos, "and I would tear her limb from limb myself, but it's too much trouble." He walked towards the hole, dodging smoothly around the thiria's tail, and emerged into the open air.

For a long moment, he wondered if the Darkworkers would try to stop him, but he quickly saw that wouldn't be the case. Most of the guards were gone, probably from fear of the thiria, and others were lying dead in the courtyard, bleeding from the explosion of the prophecy. Kymenos looked around, saw the stables not far away, and whistled shrilly.

There came a whinny, and the sound of tearing wood. Sykeen galloped out of the stable and towards him, neighing joyously and sniffing Kymenos all over. Kymenos endured it for a moment, then swung onto the horse's back.

*Which direction?* the stallion asked, dancing beneath him.

*North, said Kymenos firmly. We'll stop in Corlinth, and then we are going home.*

*Not Ozue?*

*No. Dalzna.*

Sykeen snorted happily as he began to pick his way over the broken stone and dead Darkworkers for the gate. *That's good. I've never seen Dalzna.*

*You'll love it.* Kymenos glanced over his shoulder, and shook his head when he saw three figures emerge into the light: a man, and two children. The man was mad to take care of two brats like that. But it was his choice.

*Are you waiting for friends of yours?*

Kymenos laughed when he realized the nature of Sykeen's thoughts. *No! Run fast, and hard, and as long as you can.*

*I will do that.*

They were in sight of the gates now, and on level ground. Sykeen broke into a gallop. Kymenos laughed again, and felt the wind blow through his hair, just as he had always imagined.

They charged through the gate, and past two Darkworkers there who appeared to have died of terror, and then swung again so that they were racing northeast. They would have to change direction soon, or else ford the Terrana River, but Kymenos didn't care.

He was free. Free.

*And if Destiny or Nightstone comes hunting me again, then they will have to contend with me armed and ready to fight for my freedom.*

He whooped aloud, and Sykeen neighed in answer. Before night had fallen, they were miles from the castle, and Sykeen insisted on running for a long distance under the half-moon and the stars.

Epilogue

Shattered Scenes

Olumer watched in disgust as Kymenos rode away on a bay horse that he appeared to have stolen somewhere. *I was wrong about what kind of a man he was. A brave one would have stayed to help me with Cadona and-*

*I do not know what to call her.*

Olumer started to turn and ask the crying, sobbing girl her name, but apparently she was still shocked from the way the thiria's tail had slammed into her cell, crushing the bars and freeing

her, and couldn't answer him. Cadona tugged on his hand and whined about leaving, and he had that to deal with, too.

He wasn't sure what they were going to do, but a shimmer of light appeared in front of him then, and Olumer laid aside the future plans for later. He would deal with the immediate threat.

The one who stepped through was no enemy, though, or at least Olumer hoped so; he would hate to have an elf for an enemy. The elf was a tall woman with long pale hair, who bowed to all of them and then met Olumer's eyes.

"I am Annalithiel," she said. "And I suspect that you need assistance."

"Yes," Olumer admitted.

"Come with me, then."

She stepped through the light. Olumer looked uncertainly at his wards, but Alliana was crying and couldn't say anything. Cadona met his eyes with shining certainty.

"Elves are of the Light," she said, and hopped through.

Olumer shrugged and followed, pulling Alliana with him.

He certainly didn't expect to find what he did on the other side.

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"I did not know that you knew that sort of magic, my lord."

"I surprised myself," said Artaen shortly, rubbing at the cuts on his arms. It had taken a large amount of his own blood to defeat the thiria. "And if I had not happened to read about a ritual long ago to kill a thiria, thought to be a relic of a time when they actually still existed, I would not have been able to defeat it."

Nightstone nodded, and sipped at her wine, hoping that her hand had finally stopped its shaking. She thought so, but she couldn't know it without looking down, and doing that would reveal the weakness she was most afraid of at the moment to Artaen.

"My lady."

Nightstone glanced down. Glow stood there, his head lowered. He knew that he had failed her by fleeing in terror when the thiria appeared, but he was contrite about it, and so Nightstone was inclined to forgive him. "Yes?"

"The search you commanded has ended. There is no sign of the Princess of Rivendon or her guardian anywhere in the grounds."

"And the Princess of Orlath?" That was a decision that Nightstone and Artaen had already agreed upon. No one who had not been in the dungeon knew that the true Princess of Orlath was dead. All of them would see only the foster sister hanging in her chains, and that was the way it would remain.

"Gone as well, my lady."

"And Kymenos?"

"Fled, as is his horse from the stables."

Nightstone drew in a sharp breath. "Thank you, Glow. You may rest now."

The zeyr ducked his head to her, and trotted away. Nightstone stood and made her way to the balcony, looking to the north. She was sure that Kymenos had gone in that direction, though it was an irrational conviction.

"We must find him," she said.

"Kymenos?"

Nightstone started, and turned to face Prince Artaen. "Yes," she said. "He knows the truth about the Princess. He might spread it."

Artaen studied her for a moment. "That is not the only reason."

"No." Nightstone turned to face the north. "There is a score to be settled between us." She touched her split lip.

She hoped that Kymenos could hear her, wherever he was, feel the silent shout of hatred that she hurled across the distance between them.

*Do you hear me, Kymenos? All is not over between us. It shall not be over until you are broken on the rack and your soul destroyed.*

She could do the former herself, she knew, but not the last.

But she knew those who could.

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Far to the south, a group of Faerie elves walked along the bank of a river, sometimes stopping to talk softly in their own language. At their center was a tall elfwoman who had transformed the Prince of Doralissa into a dolphin, and was sometimes seen to smile softly since then.

Then a silvery light sprang among them. They tried to worldwalk, and found the ways blocked. They tried to dream like fire, and the light resisted. Then it came among them and killed them all, tearing the bodies apart, since it was the only way to kill elves.

Then the light formed into a woman, and she knelt among the broken elves, wailing and weeping as if she had been driven to the deaths by a force that was not of her own making.

Eyes watched from the hills above the River, eyes that had seen the elves transform the Prince into a dolphin, eyes that had seen the elves trying to escape and seen the results, eyes that had seen the slaughter.

Eyes that recognized the killer.

The watcher smiled, and turned away, and went about her own business, which as it happened lay far in the north of Dalzna that night.

