

Destined To Be Slightly Hapless

Prologue

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"Do you hear me, Kymenos?"

Kymenos awoke with a gasp, staring blankly into the sky for a moment before turning his gaze to the south. The voice had come from that direction, he was sure.

But nothing stood there save the bulk of his horse, Sykeen, who snorted and awoke on feeling his rider's distress. *Kymenos? Are you all right?*

"Yes," said Kymenos aloud, standing and going to rub Sykeen's mane. The horse snorted once more and leaned against him, apparently taking comfort from the rubbing. Kymenos looked again to the south, without Sykeen in the way, and again could see nothing of note: only endless grass, the grass of the Corlirin Plains he had begun to traverse two days ago and would not stop traversing until he reached the city of Corlinth. Not far away, the Terrana River sang, but Kymenos was used to the sound of rivers, and wouldn't have mistaken them for a voice. Above shone only the stars, larger in the sky than the light of his fire was in the Plains themselves.

No, he knew who was speaking to him, and he had not really expected to see her standing to the south and glaring at him.

Nightstone will not give up until she has me.

Why does she hate you so much? Sykeen asked unexpectedly. Kymenos looked at him and saw that he was turning his head to the side, his eyes fixed on Kymenos. *I thought that mares welcomed stallions, and you are that.*

What? asked Kymenos, momentarily distracted.

Sykeen gave the little whinnying noise that served him for a whimper. The farmer who had once owned him had threatened to geld him, and he had never quite gotten over the threat. *You are not a gelding. Why would a mare be upset unless a gelding, who had no right, was trying for her?*

Kymenos shook his head and stroked Sykeen's mane. *You don't understand. I didn't really want to bed her. I was just saying that I did so that it would embarrass her and make her let me go.*

I don't understand.

Good.

I should understand! Sykeen's voice grew heated. *If I am to be your friend, I should understand everything about you.*

It's too complicated for a horse.

I am no ordinary horse.

Kymenos rolled his eyes. *No, you're not. You speak constantly into my mind and irritate me. Go to sleep.*

Sykeen seemed to obey, but not without a snort and a shift away from Kymenos's hand. *Perhaps I will run off into the night, and you will be left without anyone to carry you to Corlinth. How would you like that?*

You won't run, said Kymenos with confidence, as he lay down again. *You love me too much.*

If you know that, why don't you love me back? The telepathic voice was all but a wail.

It's too complicated for a horse, said Kymenos, with great satisfaction, and closed his eyes. Sykeen snorted and made a low, fussy mental whining, but Kymenos thought of great knives suitable to geld someone with, and the whining went away.

Kymenos opened his eyes a few moments later, though, and stared at the sky. Nightstone's voice hadn't touched him again, but it said something that the Lady of the Unicorns, who lately had begun to call herself the Lady of Orlath, could reach out and touch him at this distance. He had felt her last night, too, and even had a vision of her muttering and pacing a bedroom. He was willing to wager that the sun wouldn't rise again before wagering that the mutters were peaceful.

Was there a bond between them?

Kymenos closed his eyes again, willing to test this. *She may have the power to touch my mind with her hatred. We will see if I do not have the power to touch her mind with my taunting.*

He turned his thoughts to the south, half in simple hope, half in the concentration that was one of the few tricks he had learned from the Star Circle before he left them. He felt the distance of the Corlirin Plains falling away, felt the castle of Orlath rear up before him, and heard the crashing of the Lilitha Ocean that lay to the east of the castle. He passed over the gates like an owl and sought the bedroom that Nightstone had been pacing.

She was sleeping, or so he thought in this strange trance-vision, though the way she started at slight sounds showed that her sleep was likewise slight. Kymenos concentrated, trying to reach out and touch any dreams she might have.

He caught what he thought was a glimpse of one, and insinuated one of the comments he had delighted in making while still her prisoner. *Greetings, my lady. Are you going to invite me into your bed, or must I climb in and lie there naked until you notice me?*

Nightstone sat up with a shriek. She stared around the room, at least in Kymenos's vision, with narrowed eyes, then stood and went to a balcony that faced north. Her thoughts were tinged with heavy hatred, rich as sugar. *When I find you, you bastard, I will geld you.*

You could stand to touch me like that?

Ah! There was her embarrassment, stealing up her cheeks like fire. Kymenos chuckled to himself. He was quite enjoying this.

I will have the liadrai do it, if I must, she told him. *But it will be done. And then you will be in too much pain to taunt me.*

I will never be in too much pain to taunt you, Nightstone. It is such fun.

You will refer to me by title.

Only one lover of mine ever demanded that, Nightstone, and she was into such games as I think you have never heard of.

In his vision, Nightstone covered her cheeks with her hands, as if she could somehow hide the blush that imperiled her chastity. You do not know how you will pay, and pay, and pay. The Star Circle has much knowledge, but most of its Masters won't live long enough to realize the things that I have. I know such torture techniques as would make you scream in fury to learn they existed.

I know such techniques as would make you scream, too, though not in fury, I assure you.

Abruptly, the contact between them was broken. Kymenos blinked his eyes open and reached out after it, but this time he met only darkness. Nightstone must have found some way to shut him out of her mind.

He shrugged, grinning. Either way, this was fun. If he got to taunt her night after night- as he thought he would be able to, if she insisted on screaming her hatred at him- then he would take pleasure in it. And if this was the only chance he had, then he would remember that she had at least heard those words.

He lay down and slept more peacefully than he had for the last month.

I don't like it.

It's water. It's not going to rear up and bite you.

But it might rear up and sweep me away.

Kymenos rolled his eyes indulgently and patted Sykeen's neck. *I'm right on your back. I'm taking the same risk. We have to ford the Terrana here; it's the shallowest place before we get to Corlinth.*

I'm frightened.

Kymenos glanced over his shoulder. *It's not all that far from this place to the farm where I bought you. Think we can make it in a few hours?*

Sykeen snorted miserably and began to ford the River. Kymenos sat straight on his back, now and then looking around with alert eyes. The grass gleamed around him, golden and green, beginning the work of reviving after the long winter. The River shone and sang. His stomach ached with hunger.

Kymenos shrugged. He knew there was a village on the other side of the Terrana, not far away, and there had hardly been time to bring food when they fled from the castle. He would buy food there, by offering to perform some minor magic if nothing else.

Won't that tell them that you were trained by the Masters of the Star Circle?

Are you concentrating on fording the River or not?

I am- Kymenos!

The horse's mind-scream was genuinely frightened, and Kymenos could feel a stir in the River that should not have been there. It might have been only a large fish or dolphin swimming past, but he reacted as quickly as he could, opening a conduit to the Azure and then to the River.

Something resisted him, something wild and implacable. When Kymenos tried to grasp the water, it twisted out of his hands, as he had never known that element to do. Fire was difficult to control- and, for him, nearly impossible- but Azure was the tamest of all the elements, and had always lain quietly in his hands.

Not now. Now it was bucking, fighting him, and even rearing against Sykeen. The horse tried to ford amid two curling waves as high as his shoulders, and screamed in fear and despair.

Kymenos knew what was happening, then. It only puzzled him as to why the creatures had launched an attack instead of speaking to him directly. They were usually more polite to Masters of the Star Circle, even former ones, and all his contacts with them in the last few years had been amiable.

"I would speak with the water!" he shouted.

The wavers responded at once, turning into two forms made of the Azure, glowing with blue power, and riding the waves as if they were their own horses. One looked like the traditional undine, a small beautiful woman with long flowing hair like a waterfall, but the other had taken the form of an elf, regal and tall and dangerous. Only her clear body, and the way that her legs trailed off into the River instead of feet, showed what she was.

"What is this?" Kymenos asked, patting Sykeen to insure the frightened animal wouldn't bolt for shore. "The People of the Blending have never shown animosity towards me."

"We owe a great debt to the Orlathian royal line," said the elf- or, rather, Person of the Blending who had chosen the guise of an elf. The People of the Blending were the masters of shapeshifting, able to form any body they liked out of the elements. "You were a guardian of the Orlathian royal line. You failed."

Kymenos sighed in irritation. *Sometimes I think every fey race in existence owes a great debt to the Orlathian royal line.* "You don't understand," he said. "I was dragged into this unwilling, and I did not kill her. She died while I was still a prisoner."

"But you failed her," said the undine.

"Well, then so did you," snapped Kymenos. "When you did not prevent the Dark attack that conquered Orlath and killed every member of the royal line save the Princess Alliana, didn't you fail?"

The two looked at each other. Kymenos raised his eyebrows, satisfied that he had made his point, and urged Sykeen forward.

At once, a bond of water coiled about the stallion's hoof, and the undine said, "But it is your fault that there is no one of the Orlathian royal line still left. You should have protected her, and you failed her."

"What are you talking about?" asked Kymenos. "There is the Lady Nightstone. And there is the Princess Cadona of Rivendon, whose father was Prince Haniron of Orlath." He paused,

thinking. "And when the thiria came that destroyed the Princess, it mentioned something about a fourth royal. I don't know who it meant, but it did mention a fourth one."

The two People of the Blending looked at each other again. Then the undine said, "The Princess Cadona is protected for the moment."

The elf said, "But the Lady Nightstone is not."

"I think that you should go and offer to protect her," said Kymenos, in his most innocent voice. "She has people who want to kill her, you know." As *he* should know, having exploited some of the faction divisions among the Dark to his advantage.

"Thank you for telling us," said the undine.

"We will put this knowledge to use," said the elf.

And then they dived back into the River and were gone. Kymenos let out a breath and urged Sykeen towards the shore again.

The horse waited to speak until he felt solid earth beneath his hooves. Then he said, *You do realize that Nightstone will be more angry than ever with you, when she figures out what you have done.*

I know.

Then why do it?

Kymenos grinned, and spoke his response aloud; he wanted to savor the words. "Nightstone held me prisoner, tortured me, and refuses to leave my mind at night. I think sending her a few protectors is the least I can do."

It could be dangerous, pursuing this feud with one of the Dark's highest lieutenants.

Kymenos laughed aloud. "Then it is dangerous! I will be in Dalzna soon, and in a land where other Dark lieutenants rule, Nightstone's sway will be only by reputation, not by direct control."

It could still be dangerous.

"Then protect me."

I will.

Kymenos rolled his eyes, and let the horse have his little moment of absurd pride and self-congratulations. Really, where was the harm?

Chapter 1

Hunted

"Nothing so irritates me as those who cannot look beyond their own irritation."

-The Mistaken Mage.

Ternora swam in a large circle. This was different from the small circle she had been making for twenty minutes before, or the larger one she had been swimming in for an hour before that.

She was bored.

She had never thought the bottom of the sea, if she could somehow visit it and not drown, would be boring, but it was. The water gleamed all around her, clear and warm and utterly without entertainment. The fish sometimes swam past, but they had no intelligent conversation to offer. Viridian was off somewhere else in the palace, conferring with Erlande's priests over the best way to honor the Lord of Waters. Erlande himself rarely appeared, since he was a god of the ocean and had other matters to attend to- though once a day he would come by, just when the light was burning in sunset, to taunt Prince Warcourage about his state. Lately he was speculating on the trouble it would be for a dolphin to sit on the throne of Doralissa.

And Prince Warcourage himself-

Ternora gritted her teeth. Just once, she would have liked to depend on the Prince whose cause she had taken up to entertain her. She had thought he would come up with daring, though useless, plans for escape, and that she could then entertain herself by pointing out all the problems with them. Just once. Was it so much to ask, she wondered of whatever gods might be listening- besides the Lord of Waters- to depend on him for amusement just once?

Instead, he was bemoaning his fate.

Ternora, he's holding me captive here! What will I do if I can't get out into the sunlight and walk on land again?

Ternora closed her eyes and replied as cheerfully as she could. *I imagine that you'll continue doing what you have been doing. Swimming in circles and wailing to me telepathically about it all.*

Warcourage didn't respond to that, but then, he never did. He needed to know that someone was listening, apparently, but he just wanted responsive ears, not a mouth that would give him advice.

I should never have tried to appease Erlande. Then none of this would have happened.

None of this would have happened if you hadn't been rude to an elf, Ternora felt compelled to point out. It had nothing to do with Erlande. He changed me and Viridian, not you.

Warcourage swam past her, squealing his distress. At least he could still make noise. Ternora's attempts to speak underwater just produced bubbles, which seemed to amuse Erlande, so Ternora had started keeping her mouth shut when the Lord of Waters came by for his daily gloating session.

I can only imagine how the people in my poor country are suffering without me. I wonder what they're doing? Gazing into the sky and praying for their Prince to come home, not knowing why Elle doesn't answer?

Ternora shrugged. Responding to him really was useless, but it was the only chance she had of eventually irritating him enough to make him really interesting. *I think that they're more*

likely to wonder why Elle doesn't answer their prayers for just enough rain for the crops and instead sends them too much.

I have to breathe!

Warcourage hightailed it for the surface. Ternora followed him, since she hadn't been to the surface today and it was at least something different to do. She couldn't rise into the air herself, since Erlande had given her gills in place of lungs and she could now only breathe water, but at least it was something to see the frantic way Warcourage rose every time, as if the water would turn to glass and keep him from breathing.

The water became brighter and brighter as they swam up, and then Warcourage stuck his head above the surface and breathed. Ternora swam in another circle, watching the gleam of the sun from below. She was dreaming of sunlight and fresh air when she didn't dream of roasted meat and fruit. Eating fish all the time was getting to her; it didn't make her sick, but she was very sick of it.

I have to figure out some way back to land, said Warcourage, diving down next to her again. I have to figure out some way to persuade Erlande to let me go. Do you have any ideas, Ternora?

Surprised that he was asking her for ideas, Ternora gave him a wary look, but the frantic way his eyes fixed on her showed her he was serious. She shrugged. *Truly, my Prince, I don't know what to tell you. I think the Lord of Waters is enjoying having you as his prisoner far too much to let you go.*

But I must make him see that it's counterproductive, that without me the forces of Dark and Shadow will win. Don't you think he cares about that?

No, said Ternora honestly, remembering the way Erlande had laughed at the suggestion that he care about wars on land. I think he cares only about the water. Why shouldn't he? He's a water god.

But the forces of Dark and Shadow can reach into the water, Warcourage insisted. They must be able to, or there wouldn't be legends of evil creatures in the oceans. There are evil creatures here. He turned his head from side to side and gave a little flip of his tail, which Ternora had come to recognize as a sign that he was nervous or afraid. I can feel them.

Can you? asked Ternora without much interest.

Yes, I can- ah!

The telepathic words were accompanied with a squeal out loud that made Ternora turn around quickly. Warcourage dived, and the sleek shape barreling after him just barely missed her. Ternora took a deep breath, then realized how ridiculous that instinct was and just followed Warcourage and the shark- something that sleek and deadly had to be a shark- down.

She could see glimpses ahead of her for some time, but it grew harder and harder to see them as they went further down. Ternora had noticed that her eyesight was getting better beneath the surface, but it was a gradual thing, taking days for her to notice the difference. Right now, she was just at her limit of what she could see, and the lashing tail of the shark was only a few feet ahead of her.

Ternora couldn't think of what else to do- her singing magic wouldn't work beneath the water, and might not put a shark to sleep besides- so she reached out and grabbed the shark's tail.

Almost at once she pulled back, gasping. The shark's skin had shredded her own, and blood drifted from her torn palms.

The shark turned beneath her, a swift, graceful motion that reminded Ternora of a hawk wheeling across the sky, and then came back up towards her, moving so fast that Ternora didn't think she could outswim it. She did the best she could think of, and dived instead, to the side. The shark swept past her, just where she had been, and Ternora gasped as it went. She could see the teeth; she could see the teeth very well. She didn't want to fall victim to them.

She dived again, somersaulting in the water, and felt the disturbance in the water as the shark came so close that it almost clipped her head. Ternora sobbed with fear, though she couldn't hear herself make the sound. She simply wasn't experienced enough with this, while the shark was a creature of Erlande's realm. It would kill her. She knew it would.

Ternora! Dive!

Ternora didn't question the voice that boomed in her head, even though for a moment she didn't recognize it. She simply dived.

She felt heat at her back, but if it hurt her, she didn't care. It was still far less than the shark's teeth would have hurt, and even less than the tearing wounds that had made her palms bleed. She turned around again, this time almost sure of what she would see, her heart gradually quieting.

The shark floated dead in the water, thoroughly cooked. Viridian swam slowly towards her, now and then glancing at the shark distrustfully, as if he thought it might awaken in spite of succumbing to the scalding water that his steam breath manifested as here.

Ternora? Are you all right?

Ternora nodded. *But if you weren't nearby, I might have lost more than a little blood.*

We should get those bound, said Viridian, looking at her hands. Sharks aren't the only creatures the blood will draw.

I know.

Ternora turned to follow him, but had to stop when Warcourage bolted back up between them. He danced, reared on his tail, looking at the shark with an expression of satisfaction in his eyes.

Did you see that? I fought a creature of the Dark, and I lived.

Ternora stared at him, then stared at the cooked shark, then stared at Viridian. The dragon gave a shrug of his wings to tell her that he had no more idea of what Warcourage was talking about than she did.

I am of the Light! I am a warrior of the Light! I defeated the shark! It must have died of its own inherent evil while it was chasing me.

Ternora closed her eyes and let out a bubbly sigh. Then she opened them again and looked at Viridian. *Should I tell him, or do you want to?*

Let him alone, said Viridian, as they swam towards Erlande's palace once more and left Warcourage dancing in the water. I don't think that he would listen to us even if we managed to present a good case.

But he must know-

He doesn't want to know, Ternora, the dragon interrupted her wearily. Destiny and the elves taught him, and those are the only voices he listens to, I think.

I am foolish, then, said Ternora, glancing back at the Prince. I thought that things might change once he ruined his hand.

He can't see the hand in this form. It isn't there to remind him of the price of being stupid. Viridian stretched his neck. Perhaps we might call on Erlande to remind him of it, though.

Ternora smiled. She had never enjoyed the god's visits, because Warcourage was sulky and impatient for hours afterwards, but possibly she could put them to use. *I will speak with him and see what he says.*

Do so.

I hear that you had an adventure today.

Ternora turned her head. The giant water-face that was Erlande's usual way of manifesting himself drifted just a few feet away from her, wearing an amiable expression. Ternora tried not to take offense to the light, easy tone with which he spoke of her almost getting herself killed.

That's one way of putting it, yes, my lord.

And do you think that you would have escaped the shark without Viridian's help?

No, my lord.

Do you know why the shark was hunting you?

It was trying to feed on Prince Warcourage, my lord. I objected to this, of course, and grabbed its tail. Ternora held up her hands, which several mermaids had bound with seaweed. It seemed to do the trick and make the bleeding stop, though every time she looked at them, Ternora found another reminder of just how far she was from any aspect of the world she recognized. And then it turned and chased me, and Viridian came along at that moment.

Erlande drifted around her in silence for a few moments. Ternora rolled her eyes and waited. She knew that silence. The god was trying to think of something else that he could say to remind her of why she was here, and his prisoner- for helping Warcourage, descendant of his ancient enemy.

But the god said at last only, I protect the borders of my realm, for I love dolphins and do not want sharks harming them. A shark should not have been able to pass them so easily.

Ternora swallowed. *I thought you might have sent it to teach Prince Warcourage a lesson about the price of stupidity.*

No, said Erlande, and then abruptly smiled at her. *I came to do that myself. I heard Viridian's prayer, and yours as well- the first time you have ever spoken to me. I shall speak to him.*

I didn't pray-

But Erlande was as bad as the Prince about not listening to what he didn't want to listen to, and he ignored her, drifting merrily towards the place where Warcourage usually was at this hour. Ternora followed behind, thinking vicious thoughts about various gods to herself.

Warcourage was, sure enough, floating in front of the coral palace and staring up at the surface of the ocean. Ternora always thought it a silly position, since going nearer the surface would have let him do the same thing while not requiring him to swim up when he wanted to breathe, and then back down. But, of course, if he wasn't here, he wasn't as visible to the fish and mermaids and dolphins and undines who swam in and out of the palace, and whom he wanted to impress with his melancholy.

Erlande formed in front of him, making Warcourage drift back and lash his tail before he realized who it was. At once, he went back to pointed staring at the surface, attempting to ignore the god altogether.

Erlande didn't want to be ignored, Ternora saw. *You are a warrior of the Light who can't even ignore childish teasing. For shame.*

That brought Warcourage around at once, squealing. *You tease me when there is a war happening above the waters, a war that needs my help! Why do you keep me here when you know about the war?*

It's fun to watch you rage.

And Warcourage did just that for the next few minutes, while Erlande watched and Ternora followed his gaze, though her interest was waning. So far, this wasn't different from the other teasing sessions that Erlande had held, and while it was amazing that he could make Warcourage angry with the same words every time, they bored Ternora to death.

But then the god said, *If you get yourself killed, either trying to escape or because you foolishly challenge sharks, then I shall be displeased. I keep you here to gloat over, not kill.*

I won over the shark, didn't I?

Ternora saw her chance. *He didn't actually fight the shark, my lord, she said sweetly, so that is one stupidity that you cannot accuse him of. He fled before it like a frightened fish, and Viridian followed and cooked it.*

There was a silence. Ternora was almost sure Erlande had known that, but from the wide-eyed, interested expression on his face, he might not have. He glanced back and forth from the Prince to Ternora, and was silent.

Erlande said at last, *What is this? Were you trying to lure the shark into a cunning ambush, my Prince?*

Warcourage floated straighter at once, looking at the god now and not Ternora. *That is exactly it. I would have floated beneath him and bitten him to death when he rushed into my jaws.*

Ternora snorted. *And how would you have done that? You were only a few feet in front of him. Far more likely that you would have ended in his jaws, not the other way around.*

Erlande laughed. Warcourage squealed, and then turned and fled the palace through one of the windows. Erlande shook his head, still chuckling, and then turned and looked at Ternora.

I do find it disturbing that a shark could enter the boundaries of my territory when I did not call for it, he said. Do you have any idea how this might have happened?

That made Ternora blink. *Me?*

Yes.

Ternora hesitated, but she didn't feel that she owed much loyalty to Warcourage now, and it made her feel important and honored again, to be asked her opinion. *Warcourage was speaking of something evil just before the shark showed itself. Perhaps the Dark, or Shadow, is reaching into the waters.*

I would know, said Erlande at once. If any of the land powers were so foolish as to try corrupting the ocean, I would know. No, it cannot have been that the shark was an evil creature drawn to the Prince.

But was it sent? Ternora asked. *Perhaps you would not have felt it if another power had merely sent the creature against the Prince.*

True, said Erlande after a moment. That is a more subtle magic, on the order of sending undines up the Rivers. I must consider this.

The great face broke apart into water again. Ternora sighed, feeling satisfied for just a moment.

And then the boredom returned.

Wearily, she started swimming in a circle.

Chapter 2

Tremors In The Night

"Whenever I hear my lord speak of the night when he lost his arm, I feel a trembling in my own limbs, a weariness and a darkness and a buzzing in my mind, and think I can feel the echoes of that old, old treachery spiraling through me still. So it is with all true subjects when their leader feels amiss."

-Diary of an unknown soldier, found in the ruins of Orlath's castle.

Nightstone paced the balcony. It was less satisfying for pacing than her room, being so much smaller, but she wouldn't go back in her room, not just yet. She was tired enough to lie down on the bed and fall asleep, relaxing not only her body but the guards on her mind.

If she did that-

And if Kymenos reached out to her again-

Nightstone swore and increased her pacing. She didn't know what she would do if Kymenos touched her mind again before she had completely and fully rested, but it wouldn't be pleasant. And she needed to be pleasant, relaxed, charming. The Orlathian nobles had chosen a new leader to negotiate with her, someone they thought would succeed in blinding her to their plans. Nightstone didn't fear Lord Caraban, but she did need to be alert.

But that also meant she needed sleep.

Pace, curse, pace, curse. Nightstone took pleasure in marking every step with a curse, most of them words that had died long before the grandparents of the fools who surrounded her. There were advantages to age.

And very severe disadvantages.

I must hold my mind secure from his invasion. Who knows what thoughts he could pluck, what information I might unwittingly give to the forces of the Light?

But sleep seemed to be impossible, and a moment later, she was just as glad of it. She heard the flapping of wings, the scraping of hooves, and the loud and agitated neighing of a pegasus who wanted to land and could find no place to do it.

Nightstone flung herself into her room and watched as Chive came down on her balcony. She blinked. She had never seen the pegasus like this before, tossing his head so that his mane snapped like a whip. The lather on his neck gleamed in the light of the lamps below.

"Chive, what is it?" Nightstone asked, stepping as far towards him as he could, since he took up most of the balcony. Pegasi needed to be steady and calm to rise in the ranks, and Chive had been Black Rose's second-in-command for nearly half a century. Nothing would ordinarily get him this upset.

So it must not be something ordinary, then.

Nightstone laid her hand on the pegasus's neck, calming him a little, and waited for him to speak.

It took long moments. Chive breathed carefully, but that still left his breath whistling in and out of his lungs at far too fast a pace to be healthy. He shook his mane and seemed to force himself to calm down.

"Black Rose is dead," he said at last.

Nightstone sat down, hard. She stared up at Chive, hoping that any moment he would tell her this was a cunning joke, or a lie spread to present the Light with rumors. At least twice before, Black Rose had faked her own death for one or both of those reasons, but she had always let her second-in-command and the rest of her blaze know the truth.

There was no reprieve, no sign of a joke, in Chive's eyes this time, however.

"She is dead, Nightstone," he whispered- and that was something else that showed how he was grieving, since he almost never forgot Nightstone's title otherwise. "I saw her torn body. I felt her calling to me in pain, and I flew north as fast as I could, but she must have died just before I arrived. I have never seen so much blood. Something tore her apart in midair."

"Something?" Nightstone asked, narrowing her eyes. The pegasi were hunted by gryphons and dragons and other predators of the upper winds, but they were adept at recognizing their hunters.

Chive gazed directly at her, or at least as directly as a pegasus could look. "Yes," he said. "Something. I have never seen such butchery to match this. And I would swear- I would swear that nothing ate any part of her, Nightstone. The organs were there, the backbone, the skin, the blood." He kicked at the balcony rail, making it tremble. Nightstone could understand his emotions. The inspection he would have to give the remains to be sure of something like that was horrifying to contemplate. "I don't know why whatever this thing was killed her, but it wasn't for food."

Nightstone nodded. There was one more thing she had to ask, one more secret that Chive would now have to learn perforce, though Nightstone had hoped to keep it concealed from everyone but Black Rose. "And the message?"

Chive blinked his eyes. "Message?"

"Yes. She was flying to the north because I gave her an important message for the Dark, very important. Possibly this thing attacked her to stop her from delivering it. Was there no sign of the message?"

Chive shook his head.

Nightstone closed her eyes. So. Some unknown enemy, perhaps a creature of Shadow, had killed one of the ablest pegasi and taken the information that should have gone to the Dark.

Perhaps even Shadow himself now knew Nightstone's suspicions, while Dark was still ignorant of them. Shadow could be chuckling and leaning back on whatever he used for a throne, plotting to betray the Dark, confident that he would get away with it.

The more she thought about it, the angrier Nightstone grew. She gritted her teeth and stood again.

"Chive," she said, in a voice that she barely recognized as her own, "I won't send you north. I can't risk losing you. But you're blaze leader now, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Chive.

"Then send three of your blaze north," said Nightstone. "Tell them to fly low and quietly, and make their way slowly, as if the message were not of great importance. I want one to go to Rivendon, to our contacts there. Another to a peak in the Dalorth Mountains that I will imagine for her. And the third to Dalzna."

"Where in Dalzna, my lady?"

"The Lake of the Northern Winds."

Chive was silent for a long moment. "Those are all long flights," he said at last, "but the last is the longest. And what message are they to bear, my lady?"

"That Shadow has betrayed the Dark," said Nightstone. "That he is plotting to double-cross us all, if he can, and take the lands and the people away from us. He retains the Iantran Princess Mitherill, pretending that he will educate her instead of kill her. And he may be the one who was behind the attack of the thiria and Kymenos's escape," she added, liking the idea. She

didn't know if that was the truth, but it made sense that Shadow would try to do something like that.

Chive dipped his head, nostrils wide and flaring. "Yes, my lady. I know the flyers. I will send them. And you?"

Nightstone turned to face back into the castle. "I must speak with the Dark. It will tire me, and therefore I hoped I could do it by message, but message, as we have seen, is too risky."

"My lady-"

Nightstone glanced over her shoulder. "Yes?"

Chive hesitated, then went to both front knees on the balcony, dipping his head so that his mane swept down to the stone like a dragon's wings. It was a difficult gesture for a pegasus to perform, especially one as tired as Chive, and yet he held it, the bow that the pegasi granted to those few humans they thought worthy of honor. "Good luck, my lady, and may the Dark attend you," he murmured.

Nightstone blinked back tears. She did walk back and quickly stroke Chive's mane, murmuring as she did so, "Mourn Black Rose, and let the others have as much time as they need to mourn, too. The messages must get there, but their getting there is the important thing, not the speed with which they do it."

"I understand." Chive looked up at her for a moment, big dark eyes shining in between the strands of silver mane, and then turned and launched himself up and out over the balcony.

Left alone, Nightstone sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. She didn't like this, but it wouldn't become easier for putting it off.

She turned, gathered a candle from the table, and left her room. Though she had better night vision than many humans she knew, her eyes weren't completely adapted to the dark, even after so many late nights and early days.

She made her way to the dungeons quietly, seeking out a place she still remembered. It might have been easier to do this in the open air, but there were too many distractions. This place would both seal her away from those distractions and provide a way of using her element.

Nightstone tapped on the stones near the cell that had, briefly, held Kymenos, glaring at the shattered chains on the floor as she did so. She didn't want to think about him, but it was hard when she was reminded of him every time she turned around.

The door sighed and slid open with an ease that made Nightstone raise an eyebrow. *Just how powerful were the Crop mages who built this retreat?* But it would slide shut again as easily, so she stepped inside and held the candle high as it did so.

The room was as she remembered it from more than four hundred years ago, ever since the day when she had tricked a terrified priestess of Elle in revealing it to her. Here one could speak with the powers, with the Light or with the Dark- and presumably with others, though when the room was built those were the only two great powers acknowledged. The Circle of Four was inscribed in blue veins on the marble, marked with a pile of stones for Crop, a long vault leading down into the floor for Gust, and a quiet, still pool for Azure.

And a firepit for Scarlet.

Nightstone stepped towards it and then held out her hand above it, smiling a little when she felt the tingling warmth. This place was indeed well-made. A permanent conduit to the Scarlet lay open in the firepit, though it wouldn't flare without a Scarlet mage to call on the element and make it burn bright.

She closed her eyes and opened her own link to the Scarlet, one that matched the conduit open inside and behind the firepit. At once, she felt the fire increase, flowing from not only within her but also from within the conduit in front of her.

She reached out, straight through the Scarlet, feeling the flames wrap around her and welcome her as one of their children. She continued reaching, though, not letting herself be distracted by the familiar caresses of her magic, until her hand touched the ball of Darkness that lay at the center and heart of every element.

She closed her fingers around it.

The darkness of the chamber at once deepened.

Nightstone opened her eyes, and found herself nowhere. Or perhaps it was really only her mind that had gone nowhere, and left her body still standing in the dungeon with a hand stretched out towards the firepit. Nightstone didn't know. She only knew that she could feel the darkness breathing, sighing, beating like a heart with immense and nearly unimaginable life, and that a mind nearly as great and unimaginable was slowly turning towards her, wondering at her reason for disturbing its rest.

She was in the heart of the Dark.

Nightstone dropped everything she was- all the layers of deception that made her accustomed to hiding her true emotions, all the shields in place that would defeat telepathic thoughts she didn't want to entertain, all the careful ways that she kept her thoughts from wandering to lust and disturbing the chastity that kept her alive. One did not stand before the Dark shielded and wrapped in lies, of any kind. One stood as oneself, or one did not stand.

The mind of the Dark washed over her in slow, lapping waves. Nightstone sighed, at once comforted by the sensation and reminded of the power behind it. It could destroy her if she breathed wrongly.

It could destroy her at any moment, really.

The Dark found what she had wanted to tell it, and Nightstone could almost hear the indrawn breath. Then the sensation of warmth flowed over her once more, telling her that she had done well. The Dark had suspected Shadow for some time, but this was the final confirmation of his betrayal.

Then one of the thousands of entangled voices that made up that mind spoke directly to her.

Do not pursue this man, Kymenos. The Dark cannot afford your distraction.

Nightstone opened her eyes in startlement, and found herself standing once again in the chamber. Actually, she was only standing for a moment before she pitched forward and knelt on the floor, shaking.

"Nightstone?"

Nightstone lifted her head. Prince Artaen of Rivendon stood in the door, staring at her with concern in his eyes- and undoubtedly much else, but he was masking it too well to let her see.

Nightstone stood quickly. She was tired, she hurt, but none of that was an excuse for lying on the floor in front of a very dangerous rival, nor was it as important as finding out how Artaen had gotten in. "How did you know about this room?"

The Prince of Rivendon gave a graceful shrug. "I felt a large concentration of elemental magic when we- a few days ago." That was as close as he had come to directly discussing their failure to kill Kymenos, the Princess of Rivendon, or her guardian. "I thought that I might come back and find out what it was."

Nightstone sighed. She was almost sure that he was lying, but if she accused him, then she should have had proof. And she didn't know for certain, at that. Prince Artaen didn't rely on reputation in the same way that most of the Darkworkers did. While Nightstone and others kept enemies at bay with knowledge of their powers, Prince Artaen kept them at bay with vagueness. It was possible that he could sense such a concentration of elemental magic. Nightstone couldn't say that it was impossible, at least.

"I think that you need to lie down."

Nightstone bit her lip to resist making the obvious remark, and let him hold out his arm and escort her out of the room. She felt both more tired and more rattled, and told herself that it shouldn't really have mattered. She had delivered the message to the Dark, barred by no mysterious pegasus-killing enemies. She had satisfied the Dark. She should be feeling exultant.

Instead, she could only focus on that last warning.

Kymenos insulted me, and through it, he insulted the Dark. Why would the Dark warn me not to pursue him?

Then she thought about the wording of the warning once more, and realized with a shock what it meant. A flush heated her cheeks.

"Nightstone? Are you all right?"

Nightstone cast a haughty glance at Artaen. "My lord, I must accept your help since I cannot stand on my own, but you will kindly call me by title. I do you that much courtesy."

Artaen blinked, then nodded. "Very well, my lady. You were pale, and now you are flushed. Is there something that I can do for you? Are you sick?"

Nightstone shook her head. "No. A realization came to me, that is all. But I thank you for your concern."

Artaen frowned, but continued guiding her. He had come to her for his own reasons, of course, and the *most* generous of them would have been that he felt the Dark would weaken if she died. But he could hardly get past the mask of calmness without tearing his own mask, and so he didn't try.

Nightstone was glad. Her mind was busy with other distractions, and not even the meeting with Lord Caraban that was now only a few hours away. The Dark was afraid that Kymenos would distract her, keep her from focusing on things that were far more important.

They think that I will fall in love or lust with him, she thought. They do not realize that my hatred is the strongest emotion I feel for him.

With that in mind, Nightstone felt free to disregard the Dark's warning. She had lived for four hundred years relying on the chastity that made the unicorns value and protect her. She had been tempted numerous times to give up that chastity and yield to her inherent curiosity about what bedplay was like, but she had never done so yet. She would not do so now.

I have only to convince the Dark of that. Immortal and powerful it might be, but it does not know everything about the human heart. It cannot. I know better, in this one case, than it does.

Chapter 3

In the Land of the Silver Leaves

"There are places I have not seen,

There are so many places I have not been."

-Fragment of a bard's song purporting to describe the wandering of elves from world to world.

It took Olumer several hours to find Alliana, or she who had once been Princess Alliana, and when he did she was crying.

That was not unusual, he had noted. The defiant little girl who had screamed at Princess Nightstone in the dungeons was all but gone. Instead, she spent most of her time huddling away from the elves, flinching when they reached for her, and in general acting as if she had been frightened for life.

Perhaps it was the land they were in, as strange as it was beautiful. Everywhere stood trees, their silver leaves glinting when the wind stirred them, when the sun hit them, when the moon gleamed high in the air- if just about anything happened. There was no end to the trees, apparently, and nothing but the trees. The elves who tended the Princesses provided beds and silver platters and food from nowhere, and took them back into nowhere.

Alliana huddled in the shade of one of the largest trees, near the place where the portal had first opened from their world, crying. It was the sound of the soft sobs that drew Olumer to her hiding place at last, and made him wonder if there was anything that could be done for her. She was sobbing flat out, in the way he had already come to expect would last for several hours, her arms clasped around her knees as she rocked back and forth.

Olumer sat down next to her, but didn't try to take her in his arms. That resulted in her panicking and trying to bite or claw him. Olumer wondered what had happened to make her react that way, but he didn't ask. He didn't know what the Dark had done to her, nor if she wished to speak about it.

"Princess," he said at last, when the sobbing seemed to be calming down a little. Around him, the wind stirred, and the leaves stirred in the same way, sending off silver flashes of light that hurt his eyes.

She glanced up at him, fiercely swiping the tears from her eyes. "Don't call me that! I was never the Princess."

She's as strong-willed as one, though, Olumer thought. Or perhaps just as used to getting her own way. "I will not call you that if that is your wish," he said soothingly. "But then what is your name?"

"I don't know," Alliana whispered, staring at her hands.

Olumer waited patiently.

Alliana continued, in a voice that was the ghost of the one that had cried out defiance. "I was Lyli for twelve years. I remember that. And at the same time, it seems like a dream. The remembrance of Destiny, and of being told that I was called Alliana, and before that I was called Tima, is stronger."

"Would you prefer Tima?" asked Olumer, though he winced as he said it. "Bratty child," it meant in Dalznan, and there were stronger connotations that he didn't like to consider. If names were supposed to foretell a person's fate, as his mother had sometimes believed, then this girl had an ill-omened name.

The girl gave him an unhappy smile. "But I can't do that, either. Can I? Even that was a name of the Princess."

"Do you remember being happy under one name?"

The girl hesitated for a long time. Then she said, "I want Lyli back, I think. I was happy then, and my parents were kind to me." Her eyes gleamed with tears again. "My true parents," she whispered. "My parents, who are still in that castle, and still prisoners of Nightstone."

She began to cry once more. This time, when Olumer pulled her into his arms and rocked her, she didn't struggle or try to bite him. She just leaned on his chest and cried herself to sleep.

Long after she had fallen asleep like that, Olumer, staring at the leaves as he stroked her hair, wondered if something like this would happen to the Princess he was oath-sworn to guard. He shuddered.

I will not let it. If I can give my life for the Rivendonian royal family's, surely I can give my life to keep something like this from happening to Cadona.

Olumer had to admit that a similar loss of strength and heart on Cadona's part seemed unlikely. When he walked out of the trees with Lyli in his arms, Cadona was waiting for him, eyes brilliant and angry.

"Where were you?" she challenged. "I wanted to practice my swordplay."

Olumer stifled a sigh. The elves seemed content to provide the two little Princesses with whatever they asked for, and Cadona had asked for a sword, thinking it was a weapon a Queen should know. Olumer had never taught her the sword, since it would not have fit with the protective shield of hunter's daughter he had tried to draw about her, but that mattered very little to Cadona of late.

"I was comforting Lyli," he said, lowering the little girl to the ground. She stirred and reached out for him, but he gently stepped away, and a moment later Lyli curled in on herself and slept.

Cadona snorted. "I thought her name was Alliana."

Olumer sighed again, this time audibly. He had tried to explain what had really happened down in the dungeons of Orlath's castle to Cadona, but because he didn't know what power had blinded Destiny to the true nature of the girl it was protecting, it was difficult. "I told you, Cadona. Some power tricked Destiny into thinking that the Princess of Orlath wasn't really the Princess of Orlath. It guarded her peasant sister, Lyli, instead, and let her go. It was the Princess of Orlath that the thiria killed in the dungeon." *And it may yet kill you, my dear one, if it survived.*

"But why not call her Alliana?"

"She said she didn't want that name."

Cadona tossed her hair, which glittered like the leaves. "Why would anyone not want the name of a Princess?"

Olumer gave up on trying to make her understand, and picked up the second sword she had laid out for him instead. "Ready?"

Cadona fell into a guard position at once, her eyes shining.

It was not that she was terrible with the sword, Olumer thought, as he began testing her out with simple practice strikes and parries. Cadona was good at most things, absorbing the knowledge effortlessly; it was part of what made her Destined to rule Rivendon. But no amount of magic could help her make up for the lateness of her start, or ease the ache in her muscles when they had practiced for more than a few minutes at a time.

Or ease her anger when she started to tire, for that matter.

"What is *wrong* with this sword?" Cadona screamed in a few minutes, throwing it down. "The elves have filled the hilt with lead."

"No," Olumer tried to explain. "A sword's a heavy weapon, and the balance isn't like a knife. You have to move it in different ways. And you're still tired from our last session. That's all."

Cadona stared at him, then shook her head. "I better not be tired when I come back to practice again," she said.

"But, my Princess, you could be."

"Find some way to prevent it!" she screamed, and turned her back.

Olumer scowled. *Powers of the North only know how intolerable she would be if the elves weren't so good at providing us with what she asked for.*

Then he blinked. That thought was unusual for him, at least in the last ten years; it had taken him two to get used to caring for the crying child he had rescued from the ruins of the Rivendonian palace. He was patient with Cadona's meanness and shortness of temper, understanding what it sprang from. She wanted to reclaim her throne, but couldn't as long as

the Dark ruled in Rivendon and the moment when Destiny wanted her to move had not yet come.

Then it had come, and Cadona was declared mad, then captured by the Dark, then nearly sacrificed before the thiria had unexpectedly come hunting and caused- something, an explosion of some kind- which had freed them.

Olumer shook his head and bent to pick up Cadona's sword. He shouldn't think treasonous thoughts, which was what such thoughts about the Princess of Rivendon by one life-sworn to guard her essentially amounted to. She couldn't help being what she was. He was the one who had made her that way, really, spoiling her with stories about her place and the magnificence that would attend her when she became Queen of Rivendon. It was his fault.

No, it's not.

Olumer sighed. Sometimes he just needed reminding, that was all. If he thought of the look in Prince Artaen of Rivendon's eyes, then he would have all the reminding he needed. Cadona had powerful enemies, and he didn't have the time to mutter against her or blame himself. He had to watch out for her.

"And for the other child."

Olumer turned sharply, then forced himself to relax. Even after what he thought was a few days here- the turn of day and night was sharp and abrupt in this world- he hadn't gotten used to the way that elves would appear out of nowhere, read his thoughts, and then vanish again.

"I am not the guardian of the Princess of Orlath," he said to the elf who leaned against the tree not far from him. Pannerel, his name was. Olumer hadn't had much chance to get used to him, since he was around less than the elfwoman, Annalithiel. "I will try to protect her, but I cannot promise to lay down my life for her. Cadona's demands must come first."

"And such demands they are," said Pannerel. "Why do you put up with them?"

Olumer blinked, unnerved. Such a question from a human would be laden with scorn, he knew; there were plenty in his own world who had found Cadona a trial. But Pannerel just sounded curious.

"I am her guardian," he said.

"Does that include spoiling her?"

Olumer sighed. "No, there I failed."

Pannerel put his head on one side and regarded him. The elven gaze hurt the skin of Olumer's face, but he bore it patiently. Those who were only half-fey often felt this way around the fullblooded fey. At least it wasn't the kind of pain he would have suffered if he were full human and trying to look an elf in the eye.

Pannerel murmured something in a language that sounded like flowing water, or the wind brushing through pines. Olumer wanted to close his eyes and listen to it, but it was over too quickly, and then Pannerel was gazing at him as if he expected a response.

"I'm sorry," said Olumer. "I speak Dalznan, and Rivendonian, and Orlathian, and a few of the other human languages of my world. But I don't think that was a human language, was it?"

"No." Pannerel stared harder at him. "It was the tongue of the silvereyes. I would think that you would know it."

"No," said Olumer. "My father left before my birth, and if my mother, who was purebred human, knew that tongue, she never taught it to me."

Pannerel stared.

Olumer stared back, uneasy.

Pannerel shook his head. "You should know this language," he proclaimed. "I think I will teach it to you."

"Would it take time away from teaching Cadona swordplay?"

"Oh, of course."

"Then I cannot learn it."

"Really?" Pannerel subjected him to that hard stare again. "I would think that spending time away from her would be an attraction."

Olumer felt for a hideous moment as if he were falling, but he recovered his balance with a jerk. "You do not understand me, my lord," he said. "I am oath-sworn to her. To death and beyond."

Pannerel's face became lively. "*Oath-sworn*, ah! You should have said."

"I thought you knew."

"I didn't. You should have said."

"But I thought you knew."

"You should have said."

Olumer shook his head. He knew he wasn't going to win an argument with an elf, and was a little ashamed of himself for trying. Most of the time, he didn't even understand what the elves were arguing about. "Excuse me, my lord, but I should find Cadona and see how she is."

"Screaming, no doubt."

Olumer winced. "This is my fault, too, but she is my lady."

"That part's not your fault," said Pannerel. "She's simply a bitch."

And while Olumer stared at him with an open mouth, the elf turned and wandered away into the forest as if nothing noteworthy had occurred.

"*Olumer!*"

Olumer shook his head and hurried after Cadona. Elves were strange creatures, and they couldn't understand the nuances of human or even half-fey relationships. He just had to keep telling himself that.

The part of him that was tempted to laugh aloud when Pannerel spoke that word, he chained firmly in the dungeons of his own mind.

Chapter 4

Day and Night

"Miracles of the Dark are not often given that name. Many times we hear of 'miracles of Light,' but 'gifts of Shadow' and 'curses of the Dark.' It is strange to give so many names to what is, essentially, the same thing."

-Welleran of the Bards, writing in *In the Name of the Most High Gods*.

"Where are they?"

"They'll be here, Elary. Just be patient."

Elary sighed and blew on her hands. It was early spring in Arvenna, but given the cold in the Dalorth Mountains, she never would have known it if she hadn't lived in the country for a while. The wind still blew keen and cutting, sometimes with ice in its teeth, as if they would have a snowstorm. The last one of the season had passed, but even the intimation was enough to frighten Elary, who had flown through that storm on the back of a bat and had no desire to do the same thing again.

Wanting to ask another question, but obedient to the certainty of the boy beside her, she tilted back her head and watched. The sun was just rising, shedding pale light that carried no warmth on the slopes above Lorianna's village. She could wait a little longer.

Wait.

Elary blinked. From the south there had been something, hadn't there? A flash, a ripple of movement? As she stared, it repeated itself, and then again, and then broke apart into the familiar sight of a flock of gryphons in war formation, soaring across the sky and towards the village with all speed.

Palant began to cheer. Elary blew on her hands again and watched, not entirely certain that the gryphons would be allies. It was true they couldn't go rogue, but she was very interested in how they had heard of Princess Mitherill's plight, and if they would actually help rescue her from Shadow.

The lead gryphon landed first, of course, turning his head from side to side to scout for danger. Apparently satisfied with seeing none, he uttered a screeching cry as loud as a roar and then moved out of the way of the others, his head bowed slightly so that he could look Elary and Palant in the eye.

Elary shivered. The leader was a black gryphon, and though the color of their feathers meant little, since all gryphons served the Light, he looked as deadly sleek and dangerous as a

creature of Shadow or Dark. His eagle's talons were big enough to pick up boulders, and his curved beak, made for wickedly tearing flesh apart, was only a foot or two from her face.

"My lady," said the gryphon, in a voice that broke and rumbled unexpectedly, sometimes a growl, sometimes simply deep. "My name is Avestar, and I have come in answer to the call of Destiny, to help rescue the Princess Mitherill."

"Truly?" Elary asked.

The gryphon blinked and lashed his lion's tail once or twice. "Truly."

Elary nodded. "And how did you know?"

"Ah." Avestar's tail stopped lashing. "I should have known. You have the instinctive rage and protective urge of a guardian. Destiny told us, and so we are here. But you will come along with us, ride with us when we attack Shadow's sanctuary, and see that we do your Princess no harm."

Elary nodded. "I will do that," she said, struggling to make her voice as confident as the gryphon's. *It's probably the damn beak so close to my face that won't let me say it confidently. That's all.* "But I do want to know if you brought enough gryphons to handle all the bats that are flying." She looked over Avestar's shoulder and noted with some dismay that the flock of gryphons numbered only ten. "After all, they are large, and there are very many of them," she went on, returning her gaze to Avestar's.

"What kind of bats?" the black gryphon asked, his head tilted to the side like a curious bird's.

Elary swallowed the temptation to ask why Destiny hadn't told him this part and described the great snow-bats that Shadow had used to kidnap Mitherill and return Elary. Avestar was right. She was only suspicious because she wanted to make sure that nothing happened to Mitherill. And of course nothing would. The gryphons would rescue her, and they would continue their quest for the Diamond of Ezudlos. Elary was sure of it.

When she finished, Avestar said, "Yes, this will require some planning, but I have no doubt that we can kill all of the bats at any time we wish."

"When will you be ready to attack the sanctuary?" asked Elary.

Avestar lifted his head, almost as if he were sniffing the air, though Elary wondered if he could smell anything with that beak in the way. "When the moon sets," said Avestar. "We should be able to reach the sanctuary by sunrise if we start flying then."

"You know where it is?" Elary's heart leaped in hope. She had managed to remember much she thought forgotten, and help create a reasonable approximation of a map, but that would still have meant long and weary searches, at least as long as they were trying to rescue Mitherill on foot.

"I could lead you there this moment," said Avestar. "The call of Destiny is so strong and so clear when it requests aid for its chosen. But we must, of course, plot this out, or the attack will be useless. I will send a few of my gryphons to scout the caves."

"Be careful," Elary warned him. "The bats can fly during the day, and there may be other shapeshifted servants of Shadow about."

Avestar bobbed his head and then gave a low growl, looking over his shoulder. Elary couldn't see how he indicated them, but two white gryphons leaped into the air at once and began to fly north. Elary sighed as she watched them go, and imagined holding Mitherill in her arms again before this same time tomorrow.

"For the time being," said Avestar, "we will hunt and hide ourselves. I suspect the people in the village should not see us."

"No," said Palant, speaking for the first time since the gryphons' arrival. "There may be servants of Shadow among them."

Avestar bowed his head gravely. "Thank you for that warning, young lord." He and the rest of his flock took to the air again, spreading out slightly as they wheeled in circles like huge hawks. With the blessing of Light, Elary thought, those who saw them from a distance would think they were only hawks, or eagles.

She turned back to find Palant staring at her, and blinked. He didn't look like the patient boy who had bade her wait for the gryphons, and scolded her when she became impatient. He looked frightened.

"What is it, Palant?"

Palant ducked his head slightly. "They look- they look so much bigger than I thought they would look," he murmured.

Elary smiled. "You've never met a gryphon face to face before?"

"No."

"They can be overwhelming," Elary agreed as they started back towards the village. If they were away too long, Lorianna or Hanever would ask questions, and while neither of them were probably servants of Shadow, it would be best not to take chances. "Not as overwhelming as dragons, of course."

"You met a dragon?" asked Palant, sounding awed. "When?"

Elary was more than happy to tell him the tale, if only because it would keep her own mind busy and stop it playing with thoughts of disaster. The gryphons would succeed. She and Palant would succeed. She knew it. Destiny wouldn't allow them to fail.

But Destiny had allowed Mitherill to be captured in the first place. There was that worrying little detail.

"Elary."

Elary opened her eyes, and then pressed back against the divan with a gasp. The face above her appeared to be an owl's, but she knew it couldn't be; owls didn't speak human languages.

Then the face vanished, and a woman she recognized far too well stood before her, flexing her wings in agitation. "Why were you not on this divan last night?" hissed Silar. "I came to find you and introduce you to the Serpents, but you were closeted with that boy who stinks of true love and Hanever's mother. The Serpents agreed to meet you tonight, but they are close to

being discovered and want to break camp. We'll have to move fast, and you'll have to come up with some convincing reason that you didn't want to meet them before."

Elary let out a shaking breath. She had almost forgotten. Silar was a friend of the little boy, Hanever, who had taught him some magic and claimed to be part of a group called the Serpents who could rescue Mitherill. But they were too dangerous for Elary's taste- they almost approved of the way that Shadow was educating Mitherill, and they had an ill-omened name- and she had been comforted when the gryphons appeared instead as a way to rescue Mitherill.

Still, the gryphons were here now, and coming to take them in for the attack on the sanctuary in a few hours, when the moon set. Even if Elary had wanted to go with Silar, she had the perfect excuse not to do so now.

And no excuse for not facing her down.

Elary drew the blankets around her shoulders and said, "I appreciate it that you think so highly of the Princess, but neither she nor I need the Serpents' help now. Gryphons are here, and they will carry us into Shadow's sanctuary, into battle, and out again. They are of the Light, and will not suffer the taint of the Dark that your group carries with it. I thank you for your time in trying to offer up a solution, but it wouldn't have worked. Good day to you." She lay down again on the divan and turned her back.

Silar was silent. Elary strained her ears for some sign that she had left, but couldn't hear the thump of feet. Of course, Silar could have masked the sounds with an illusion, being a powerful Illusion mage, but-

Elary gasped as a hand clutched her robe and dragged her from the couch, nearly tearing the fabric. Silar hissed in her ear, "I have told the Serpents they should be waiting for someone who could tell us about the new Queen of Arvenna. They've risked themselves to not break camp when they should have; we'd intended to move on tonight. You are going to come with me, and explain to them your reasoning about the gryphons. Pray to whatever goddess you worship that it's enough for them."

"You can't-"

Silar grabbed her up efficiently, with strength in her arms that Elary hadn't known she had. Then she turned towards the open door, wings already beating.

Elary closed her eyes and spoke a swift prayer to Anakora, confident the healer goddess would stop her from being carried away.

Nothing happened, though.

For a moment, Elary panicked, and tried to get out of Silar's arms. Silar was already running, though, and in seconds was soaring. Elary squeaked and closed her eyes, trying not to look at the ground below or feel the sharp, clear cold that was already eating into her bones.

She remembered the gryphons, though, and spoke as calmly as she could. "There are gryphons flying the higher winds. You won't get far before they spot you and tear you apart."

"And you with me?" Silar's voice shone with amusement, as hard and silvery as the cold. "No. I don't think so. I have you as a hostage if I need one. They probably haven't even thought to ask you about the setup of the sanctuary and will need to wait until we return, the fools."

"Avestar sent scouts," Elary snapped, opening her eyes to glare up at Silar. The woman looked almost human now, but whether that was her real face or not Elary couldn't say. "They'll know where the sanctuary lies, its layout, everything about it. You can kidnap me, but the rescue of Mitherill will still go on."

"I don't think so," said Silar pleasantly.

"Why not?"

Silar laughed. "They'll have to find out what happened to you first, won't they? And that will delay them. They probably want to arrive at the sanctuary at sunrise, symbol-loving Lightworkers that they are, and if they have to search for you, then they can't possibly do that."

Elary shut her teeth for a moment. Then she said, "What good will it do for me to meet the Serpents when I've already decided that I won't accept your help?"

Silar gave her a tolerant glance. "I already told you. You should apologize to us for the inconvenience and danger you put us through. And we are going to have a say in the next monarchy of Iantra-Arvenna. It really doesn't matter if you want us to have that say or not."

Silar swerved abruptly, and Elary braced herself for the jolt and looked down. For a long moment, she could hardly make out anything; the moon was indeed far in the west, and its faint light barely illuminated the ground. But she caught a glimpse of a shallow valley with a river coursing through it, and then Silar thumped out her wings to their fullest extent and began to descend.

Elary squinted. Yes, there were human shapes moving beside the water, or at least two-legged shapes. She supposed they might be fey like Silar, whatever kindred Silar belonged to; she had refused to name it.

"Will you hurt me?" asked Elary.

"Only if you refuse to apologize."

"I don't have that much pride."

"Then you are a pleasant change from all the Lightworkers I've encountered," said Silar, and landed, running hard. A moment later she dumped Elary on the ground and stepped back.

Elary swiftly scrambled up and arranged her robe around her again. *Pride is one thing, dignity another.*

The Serpents stared at her for long moments. Elary stared back. They had a small, nearly smokeless fire burning, and by its light she could see that they all looked to be human or half-liadra, the latter marked by the silver or golden lightning bolts that shone in their dark eyes. The voices that murmured in the background all seemed to be speaking Arvennese. If it weren't for their name and the dangerous, intent look about them, Elary might have taken them for refugees.

Of course, refugees usually didn't have all the weapons they clutched, either.

"You are Elary?" asked a tall man with the silver lightning bolts in his eyes. Elary nodded hesitantly, and he smiled, to her amazement, and put his hand out. "Naldeon. I'm one of the leaders of the Serpents."

"Or so he likes to think," muttered Silar.

Naldeon laughed at her. "And perhaps it is vanity, at that," he agreed, turning back to look at Elary. "But a little vanity can be a good thing, my lady. As long as one does not take it too far, and start thinking that she can resist a whole encampment full of Serpents."

That he said it so gently made it all the more frightening. Elary lifted her chin and strove to reply with dignity but in a way that wouldn't anger them. "I have heard much ill-omen attached to the name of serpent, and I think it's not vanity but sense to walk carefully around poisonous snakes."

Naldeon laughed again. "Yes, poisonous snakes is what we are," he agreed, sprawling beside the fire. "Join me?"

Elary stared at him, then at Silar.

"He really is one of the leaders of the Serpents," said Silar, amusement in her voice. "Sit down and eat with him."

Elary sat and accepted a hot mug that Naldeon seemed to snag from one of the others without even looking at him. The mug warmed her fingers at once, and she drank the liquid inside greedily. It was like tea, but had a faint, buttery aftertaste. She grimaced and wiped at her lips.

"Now," said Naldeon, "you'll tell us how you think we can train the Princess Mitherill to be a good Queen of Arvenna. You have an hour."

Elary blinked. "You only expect to keep me that long?"

"No," said Naldeon calmly. "I expect to have that long before you start choking to death from the poison in the drink. The antidote awaits, of course, but only if you satisfy us." He smiled. "Start talking."

Chapter 5

Corlinth

"Corlinth is a strange city. Not the center of government for the Kingdom of Orlath- the castle takes care of that- nor yet a center for the rebellious people on either side of the border- that is Ozue's role- it still maintains a strong reputation of welcoming either Arvennese or Orlathian. And much trading is done there, and much exchange of knowledge. The wisdom of its library is vast, and the collected opinions of its scholars are sought even by the Star Circle.

"What makes it strange, perhaps, is that Corlinth should be a hotbed of political intrigue, and so rarely is. Ever since their city was destroyed and rebuilt in the last war of Dark and Light, the people have eschewed politics, perhaps, and been better off that way."

-From "A Description of Corlinth," by the Wandering Mage of Shadow.

It's big.

Kymenos thought of making a tartly obvious remark, but there was a kind of truth in Sykeen's words that kept him only thinking about it. Corlinth was big, its walls high and gleaming. Built to withstand dragons, it had failed, but its people had only built it up again. The shadows fell long and sharp from its walls as he rode the bay stallion up the path from the River.

How many people live here? Sykeen was asking, just like someone newly come from the Plains villages, arching his neck as if that would let him glimpse the tops of the walls.

Thousands, said Kymenos. *I don't know the exact number.*

How wonderful! And how many horses?

Kymenos laughed aloud this time. *I have no idea.*

Did you never think to count?

Kymenos narrowed his eyes. The image of a skinning knife didn't take long to form in his head now, since he had practiced it so hard. Sykeen gave his whimpering whinny and then said, *Sorry.*

Kymenos nodded, then reined Sykeen up hard as two guards abruptly rose out of the grass on either side of the trail. Cursing himself for not seeing them before, he nodded courteously, but felt all the muscles in his body tense. This was new. Corlinth's guards usually stayed on the gates or on the walls.

"State your name," said one of the guards, a woman with short brown hair and somewhat Dalznan features, leveling a spear at his breast.

"Kymenos of Ilion," said Kymenos, naming the street in Corlinth where his house stood. "I have been researching some of the seeds that I hope to breed into my plants, and am just now returning. Stand aside, if you would."

"I know him, Asienda," said the woman on the other side, whose most startling feature was a pair of blue eyes that looked too big for her face. She bowed to Kymenos, while he bowed back and tried to remember if he had met her. "I went to him for a bout of fever once, and he managed to heal me back as right as rainbows. He is who he says he is."

Kymenos recognized her now. "My lady Weretta," he said. "So the fever left you when you ate my plants?"

Weretta nodded to him. "Just as you said it would, healer," she said, giving Kymenos a title he supposed he had some claim to, although he rarely demanded it. "I know that you mean no harm to Corlinth, but do step carefully. There are some who think that everyone with an accent means harm these days."

"Why?" asked Kymenos. "What's going on?"

"Rumors of another war between Dark and Light," said Weretta grimly. Her companion snorted and turned to look down the path, eyes bored. "The Lady Nightstone has encouraged extra security measures to be taken around Corlinth, and the ones we have in place tightened."

Kymenos nodded as calmly as he could. She couldn't have sent his name ahead, obviously, or the guards would have stopped him here. "I see. Well, I should be going to my house now; I've been in Ozue for some time, and hunting plants for some time before that."

"Of course, healer," said Weretta, stepping aside and waving him up the path to Corlinth's gates. "Shara ride with you."

Kymenos dipped his head to accept the blessing, though he highly doubted if Shara would bless him at all, did she know what he was up to. The Lady of Mysteries had returned to Orlath in force in the past twelve years, and some of her devotees sought to convert everyone who didn't worship her- with the blessing of their goddess, apparently. Kymenos had had to do a delicate dance at times to avoid showing off that he was researching a different power entirely.

Is it good that they know who you are and where you live? Sykeen asked as he made his way through the gate.

Kymenos tilted back his head, enjoying the shade of the cool stone for a moment. Even in early spring, the sun could be mercilessly hot on the Plains themselves. *One knew me anyway. And I could hardly enter without giving a name and business of some kind, which would have looked the more suspicious when they found out who I really was.*

I still think-

But then they emerged from the gate and Sykeen saw Corlinth. He halted for a moment, staring. Kymenos, glad there were no horses or carts immediately behind them, patted his neck and let him gaze his fill.

High walls, nearly as high as the ones that surrounded the city, rose in every direction, turning the streets into narrow valleys of sunlight. They gleamed a color that had earned the city the name of Corlinth the Golden in many a melodramatic song or poem. Shops stood at street level, of course, backing up to the walls- and narrowing the streets still further- but also hung from the walls on cleverly constructed ledges, with ladders leading up to them. Sometimes stairways twisted up the walls themselves, leading from shop to home and finally to the very top, which was often as broad as the street. And everywhere was a mass of people, hurrying.

Why did they build the city like this? Sykeen asked at last.

To slow intruders down, said Kymenos, gently squeezing with his knees and nudging the horse forward again. *The Arvennese used to invade all the time. But unless you know the streets or have flying mounts, you're going to become horrendously lost and confused.*

It seems as though fire or water would sweep through here very fast, though.

Yes, said Kymenos simply. *That is the price they pay. But there have been no attacks by dragons in more than a hundred years, which is a good reason to live like this- at least to them.*

Sykeen lowered his head as if to inspect the stones beneath his hooves. Kymenos let him do that only until the first cart nearly ran them down, at which point he turned Sykeen close towards the wall.

Sykeen's tail flicked as he felt the stone rub against his flank, but he said only, *How far until we reach your house?*

Not far.

It wasn't, not at all. Kymenos rounded a corner and came onto Ilion Street, a quiet place (or as quiet as it could be this close to the gate) composed mostly of homes rather than shops, a

rarity for Corlinth. His house sat not far ahead, and he nudged Sykeen into a trot to reach it. It was at ground level. Kymenos was Dalznan enough not to want to perch on the walls like a bird.

And now he wouldn't have to worry about that, ever again.

Kymenos smiled slightly. *This was home, but never really home at the same time. I will be glad to see the walls of Corlinth fading behind me and the slopes of the Rashars rising ahead.*

As he came to the door, it opened, and a delicate-looking woman, though her spine was as firm as steel with haughtiness, leaned out.

"We only allow three visitors a day when the lord-

Her face lit up almost at once, though. "Oh, Lord Kymenos, it's you!" She crossed the remaining stones between them at a swift pace and flung herself at Kymenos. Kymenos leaned down from the saddle and hugged her, almost lifting her off her feet. Sykeen was calm enough to stand steady while he did that and not dance to the side, which Kymenos had to admit would be embarrassing for both of them.

"Dalinda," said Kymenos, when he was able to let her go. "How are things here?"

"A flood of patients," said Dalinda with some satisfaction. "I gave the ones you showed me how to treat buds and petals and sent them away again." She shook her head in mock sorrow. "You wouldn't believe how many of them asked for seeds, and how many tried to steal them."

Kymenos laughed. "I would believe it. I still get a few requests each month." He slid down from Sykeen's back. "There's something you should know, Dalinda."

The prim woman whom he had hired as housekeeper for her efficiency quieted at once and gazed at him.

"The house is yours," said Kymenos. "My exile has ended, and I will be returning to Dalzna."

Dalinda smiled quietly, and reached out to clasp his hand. "My lord," she said, with a little bow. "You found a way to free yourself from your unwanted task, then?" Dalinda probably knew more about Kymenos's burden than anyone else, though even with her he hadn't shared the exact nature of it. She thought he would have to become guardian to some worthless relative's child, not the Princess of Orlath.

"Yes, I did," said Kymenos. "And I see no need to linger. I have missed my home."

"Is this the best time of year to be traveling?" asked Dalinda.

Kymenos smiled. "I remember the weather in Arvenna and my home very well, Dalinda. I'll keep to the lower passes of the Rashars until I'm sure that the last snowstorm of the season is past. And then I'll be on my way."

"Will you settle in Serian?"

Kymenos shrugged. "Perhaps. In a way, it would be pleasant to do that, to taunt the Star Circle. But I might go further north. I've always wanted to see the Lake of the Northern Winds."

"Wait until summer, please, my lord," said Dalinda. Then she sighed. "I shall miss you."

Kymenos clasped her hand again. "And I you," he said sincerely. "The more because you do not burst out in unseemly displays of emotion."

"I, my lord?" Dalinda frowned at him. "I would die sooner than do that. Life changes." She turned and walked into the house. "Come, my lord," she said. "There is a package for you that arrived yesterday, and a few of the plants have sprouted seedlings I'm sure you'll want to examine."

Kymenos glanced at Sykeen. *You'll be all right?*

I would hardly let someone steal me, would I?

Kymenos accepted that as an answer, and followed Dalinda inside.

His home hit him with all the more impact for having been away two months. The entrance hall was long and narrow, lined with chairs for the patients and tubs where the mature plants could soak in the sunlight coming through the windows. Kymenos was rich enough to afford glass, and liked to use it, so carefully placed mirrors also reflected light onto the tubs. The whole room sparkled on a morning like this, and Kymenos was filled with the temptation to linger, rather than going back to the darker rooms inside the wall where he would need to use Light magic.

"This is the package, Lord Kymenos."

Kymenos turned. Dalinda was hastening towards him with a long, narrow object wrapped in what looked like spidersilk. Kymenos took and unwrapped it, feeling his curiosity grow. There was no note included with the package, as there usually would be with a gift from a grateful patient. There was only the silk itself, and the thing left when it fell away.

In his hands lay a long, shining, narrow sword, not a rapier but still marvelously light of balance. The hilt was bone, or so Kymenos assumed from the smoothness, though he had never seen bone polished to that color of rich amber before. There were letters inlaid on the blade, raised and swirling shapes of gold that a Master of the Star Circle would probably know. Kymenos had left before he had begun his study of ancient alphabets, and did not recognize them, but thought them lovely.

"Was there any note that you removed?" he asked, lifting his gaze to Dalinda's face.

The housekeeper shook her head firmly. "No, my lord. I discovered it lying on the doorstep two days ago. I assumed you would know whom it had come from," she added, her voice taking on a tinge of curiosity. "You don't?"

Kymenos shook his head and slowly swung the sword back and forth. He wasn't a fighter himself, but the balance really was marvelous, and the steel itself beautiful, a dark gray like a dapple horse's coat. "Perhaps it's from a patient who just expects me to remember him," he said, peering at the letters on the blade once more.

"It is not. It is from me."

Kymenos nearly dropped the sword. The loud, sharp feminine voice had come from behind him.

But when he turned, there was no one there.

"My name is Norianna."

With a sick feeling brewing in his belly, Kymenos looked down at the sword. This time, there was no doubting that it had spoken.

"I understand that the Princess of Orlath will not come seeking me," said the sword. "Destiny has been marred and tangled. But some things do not change, and one of them is that I was meant to come here. So. Here I am. I suggest you pack quickly. We have a long way to travel on our Quest."

Chapter 6

Early Morning Screams

"I am sure there are children, somewhere, who do not laugh and squeal and cry and scream, who are as polite as adults and as reasonable. Do let me know if you find them."

-Unnamed Master of the Star Circle, assigned to teach new students.

"Olumer!"

That cry brought him to his feet and started him running at once. After years of living with Cadona, he could tell the difference between one of her ill-tempered screams and the kind of scream she gave when she decided her life was in danger. She had cried that way when cornered by a wolf, and again when she thought the Dark was hunting her.

Olumer slipped around a tree trunk, and found Cadona sitting next to another, staring down at something on the ground. She reached down, dipped her fingers in it, and held it up for him to see, crying all the while.

Olumer stared. There was blood shining on her fingers, fresh blood.

"What happened?" he asked, hurrying forward and embracing her tightly. Cadona clung to him, which wasn't something that happened much any more, and renewed her sobs. Olumer listened carefully, managing to pick out the words despite the broken sounds of her fear.

"I- don't know. I woke up, and I was bleeding, but I can't find the wound! The Dark did something to me so I wouldn't wake up in time. What is it? Where's the wound? I can't *find* it!" And she began to cry once more.

Olumer made soothing circles on her back with his hands, as bewildered as she was. Why would the Dark do something like this? They had other ways to kill Cadona, more violent ways that he was sure they would have taken.

And then something occurred to him, and he sighed.

"There was no pain at all, Cadona?" he asked.

"No," she said. "There was a little, in my belly. But I checked all over, and I couldn't find the signs of a gut wound."

Olumer sighed again, and rubbed her back. "I don't think it's a wound, Cadona," he said. "I think that you're bleeding with the Goddess."

A long silence. Then Cadona stepped back and stared up at him. "This is the blood that you told me about? The blood that's going to come once a month for years and years and years?"

Olumer nodded.

Cadona shook her head. "No. No. I refuse to accept it."

"Why?" Olumer asked quietly. At least she was shifting from panic to anger, and as hard as she could be to deal with in either mood, he preferred the anger. It was more familiar, and he had a better idea of how to protect her or face down her rage than he did of how to console her without spoiling her further.

"It means that I can bear children," said Cadona with some heat. "And I don't want children. I want my throne back. What if someone bedded me just to insure that I would have a child of the Rivendonian royal line?"

Olumer decided that now was not a good time to mention the duties of royals who did have to bed to continue the line. Goddess knew that Cadona's ancestor, Queen Idona, hadn't wanted to bed much of anyone either, but she had in the end. Cadona just needed some time to get used to the idea. "You'll have the power to make sure that doesn't happen," he said, and shifted tack. "You need something to catch the blood with, new clothes, warm water, something to chew on until the pain in your belly fades-"

"How do you know so much about all this?" Cadona asked, squinting at him. "Silvereyes don't bleed too, do they?"

Olumer smiled a little. "No, to the best of my knowledge." He kept his voice calm and rational. It was amazing that Cadona's anger had faded away without a fight. Perhaps she was too busy thinking about the subject to keep screaming. "I'm sure the elves will have something. Come on."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I have tended Princesses, and Queens, through their bleeding with the Goddess before," said Olumer patiently, taking her arm and steering her towards the clearing where the elves usually left food and clothes. "Most of them had more warning than you did, but it was still frightening for them, and I learned what was best to soothe the pain and dull the- dull the discomfort of the bleeding." He had almost said "dull the fear," but Cadona would certainly have objected if he had called her afraid, no matter what her panic a short time before.

"How old are you, Olumer?"

Olumer shrugged. "It really depends on how you count it, Princess. In human years, perhaps thirty. But I hibernate at times, and so I've been asleep more often than awake."

Cadona tossed her head. "I know that. But sometimes you speak of the oldest things as if they were yesterday, and I always come to wonder how you know so much."

Olumer blinked. "Memories are very clear for even a half-silvereyes," he said at last. In truth, the state of his memory wasn't something he liked to dwell on. There were fragmentary places, especially in the months right before or after a hibernation, where he had the feeling

he had done things he wasn't especially proud of. "But here we are, and I see that Annalithiel is ready for us."

Annalithiel nodded briskly to them both, and held out her hand to Cadona. "I, too, have tended Princesses and Queens through their bleeding with the goddess, as you call it," she said. "Come with me."

Cadona took her hand willingly enough, and Olumer watched them depart into the forest. He hoped that Cadona would trust the elf enough to really let her help, and that he wouldn't have to run and rescue Annalithiel from the screams in a few moments.

"What's wrong with Cadona?"

Olumer turned. Alliana- Lyli- stood behind him, rubbing sleep from her eyes with slow motions.

"Nothing's wrong, my dear," said Olumer soothingly. "She began her bleeding with the goddess, that's all, and it caught her unawares. She thought she had a gut wound from the Dark at first."

"What's the bleeding with the goddess?"

Olumer blinked. "You're twelve-"

"Yes," said Lyli sadly.

"-and your parents told you nothing about it at all?"

Lyli's eyes filled with tears. "I haven't seen my parents for days now. How could they tell me about it?"

Olumer raised his eyebrows. "I meant that they should have told you about it before now. The bleeding with the goddess means that a woman sheds blood from between her legs for a few days each month. The first sign of the blood is the first sign that she can bear children. Of course, many women don't get married then; they wait until a few years have passed and they've chosen the man they want to marry. But that's the first sign."

He stared. Lyli appeared to have come down with a sudden fever. Her cheeks had flushed, and she was sweating. She whirled away from his gaze as if it physically hurt her, and concentrated on the ground.

"Lyli? What is it?"

"I- you speak so casually of a woman bleeding from- between her legs," said Lyli, and the hot flush roved even further in her cheeks. "My mother told me that polite people didn't talk about it at all."

"Bleeding?"

"The between the legs part," said Lyli in a strangled whisper, and now Olumer understood her emotion, though not the reasons for it. "It's not a polite thing to talk about. When a man and woman are married and have children, then we talk about it, but not before."

Olumer stared at her back, having no idea of what to say. "You grew up on a farm, didn't you?" he said.

Lyli glanced back at him over her shoulder, appearing to judge it a safe question. "Yes."

"And you never saw an animal give birth?"

Again, the hot flush consumed her cheeks. "Giving birth is one thing," she said faintly. "But undressing- anything between the legs- bedding-" She could apparently barely speak the last word. Then she turned away, whispered, "Pardon me, my lord," and rushed off.

Olumer stared after her. He had never seen anyone react that way in Rivendon. Perhaps it was an Orlathian reaction.

"Orlathian peasant morals. There was a great deal of damning of them in Kymenos's mind, too, when we were healing him. I do believe that most of them never tell their children anything about bedding at all."

Olumer turned, saw Pannerel behind him, and shrugged. "Well, at least I did raise Cadona more sensibly. I trust that Annalithiel will take good care of her?"

"Of course. She is used to Orlathian princesses, who are a good deal more delicate." Pannerel touched a tree. "Come here. It is time for your first lesson in the silvereys language."

Olumer rolled his eyes. "If you wish to teach me, then I will be happy to listen, but I must go the moment Cadona calls for me."

"This won't take long."

Olumer shrugged and walked over to join the elf, who appeared to be touching a particular knot on the tree. Wondering if some magic would occur, he looked at it, but the elf's long, slender hand was completely covering it, whatever it was.

"The word for tree," said Pannerel, watching him, "is *saf*."

Olumer let out a grunt as the word blew through his ears like a cold wind and hit him in the belly like a punch. He had never heard it before, unless it was as part of the sentence that Pannerel had murmured the other day, but this reaction was immediate. He lowered his head and trembled, wondering what the hell was going on.

"Yes, I thought so," said Pannerel. "Something we might say in this world, though of course not in many others, is *safi illa*, the trees are silver."

Olumer stared at his hands. Frost rimed the fingers, as if he were a leaf poised to fall from its tree and die. He stared at Pannerel, whose eyes had gone very quiet.

"I did not know the depth to which they had bound you away from your own people," said Pannerel. "You don't remember any of this language at all, and yet it calls to you, trying to bring you back to what you were."

Olumer felt a moment of intense excitement. The frost riming his fingers was very strange, of course, but there was something rising in his mind in response to Pannerel's words that was not strange, something homely and even desired, something-

Something that snapped when Cadona's voice called out his name. Olumer shook his head and took a step backward, feeling as if he had escaped tumbling into an abyss, though he didn't know why.

"Thank you for the language lesson," he said. "It was interesting. But I don't think that I will require any more."

Pannerel raised his eyebrows. "Truly?" It occurred to Olumer, a little too late, that the elf's eyes were without a hint of the passionate playfulness he had always displayed before. "*Safi illa, mefin ta panerth.*"

Olumer shuddered again.

"*Olumer,*" Cadona demanded, in tones that were just on the edge of rage.

Olumer shook his head at Pannerel. "You want to give me a gift," he said. "I can see that. But you should know how dangerous such gifts are. This might threaten my oath-sworn vow to the Rivendonian royal family. I am sorry, but I cannot accept it, and I will not let you teach me any more."

Pannerel said nothing, just stepped out of the way. Olumer rushed towards the sound of Cadona's voice, still shuddering all over.

Why would the elves attempt to break me of my oath to the royal line of Rivendon? It has nothing to do with them, either to help or to hinder. Perhaps Cadona could threaten them, though.

That led to new thoughts, thoughts that largely had to be put out of his mind when he found out that Cadona objected to letting Annalithiel throw her blood-soaked clothes away because "the Dark might use them." Diplomacy that required soft words on one hand and understanding an elf's sense of humor on the other was more than enough to keep him from thinking of why in the world the elves would want to hurt Cadona after rescuing her.

"Olumer?"

It was the first time he had ever done so, but Olumer turned away from Cadona's voice and plunged deeper into the forest. He had come perilously close to shouting at her the last time they spoke, as if it were somehow her fault that she were angry, and he didn't want to actually express his own anger.

"Olumer!"

That call was in Lyli's voice. Olumer closed his eyes and walked faster. The two girls had started an argument about who would be the better ruler of Orlath- Lyli, since everyone thought she was, or Cadona, since she carried the blood of the Orlathian royal family. Both of them had begun to scream and shout halfway through, and the shouts were still pounding in his ears.

He forced his way past a particularly stubborn curtain of leaves, and halted in a clearing that spread out around him like a sudden silence.

Olumer was sure he had never seen this clearing before, though it wasn't far from the place where the elves left their supplies each day. It had a strange shape, almost perfectly six-

sided, though a few of the sides were longer than others. The trees shone as all the trees in the forest did, their silver leaves reflecting back the light of the moon that had begun to abruptly shine not long ago. There was a pool in the center, of water that looked unruffled despite the breeze that touched Olumer's hair.

Olumer hesitated for a long moment. This felt like a sacred place, and that probably meant he should leave. He had no idea about the kinds of gods the elves worshipped, but they weren't likely to be more forgiving than their worshippers.

The pool held his gaze, though. Olumer could see something moving in it, after all, though nothing that disturbed the surface of the pool itself. It was as if fish made of light danced there, passing through the water without harming it.

"Olumer?"

He could hear them even here. Olumer hunched his shoulders and took a few more steps towards the pool, hoping he would have time to see what it was before Cadona or Lyli broke in and disturbed him.

The pool remained still as he came up to it, but the darting things were not fish. They were visions.

Olumer stared. He saw a vision of the castle in Orlath pass like a flickering dream, to be joined a moment later by a forest that looked much like the one in which he stood, and which vanished as quickly. And then a vision lingered on the water, and grew until it consumed the surface.

Olumer found himself looking into the woods of northern Rivendon, in the middle of a snowstorm. Sheer winds bearing ice in their teeth howled past the trees, which bent and swayed under the winds but continued to stand upright. The dark green of pines and spruces showed between the white here and there, as the snow dropped off some of the trees almost as fast as it piled on. Olumer could hear the howling of the wind, feel the cold-

"Olumer!"

And then the vision was gone. Olumer shook his head and stepped back. Was that supposed to be a warning vision of some kind? He hadn't had time to see anything useful, if so. A snowstorm in the middle of a Rivendonian forest could mean almost anything, could be important in itself or useless.

"There you are."

Cadona pushed firmly through the leaves as she spoke, and reached out to grasp his hand. "I need your help to persuade Lyli that I would be the better Queen of Rivendon. It's what you trained me for, after all-" She paused as she noticed his face. "Are you all right, Olumer? You look as though you saw the ending of the world."

"Do I?" asked Olumer, and forced a smile to his lips. Truly, he was having absurd reactions today. The silvereyes language made him feel happy for no good reason, and now he felt homesick for the forests of Rivendon. "I shouldn't. Let's go and speak to Lyli, and see what she says."

Content, Cadona trotted out of the clearing on his arm, chattering the while. Olumer glanced back once or twice at the pool, and noticed that once more sparkles of light appeared to be darting through it.

Was it meant to show the future? Or to show something else?

Olumer shrugged. He was unlikely ever to find out.

Chapter 7

III-Advised Rebellions

"There are some rebellions that succeed. And then there are the ones that fail. I find the latter more interesting, in truth. Some of the incredibly stupid ideas that the organizers of the rebellions came up with could serve as history lessons in how not to organize a revolt."

-Yillos Goldfleet.

"My lady, I would like to introduce Aurora. She is my new second-in-command."

Nightstone nodded to the pegasus with golden eyes- where she had gotten her name, most likely- and the mare nodded back. Her eyes were distant, and she had a habit of looking up at the sky even when she spoke, as if every moment spent on the ground and away from the air were a punishment. Nightstone didn't know her well, which made her unhappy, but she had no doubt that Aurora was a fast flyer and a good leader. Chive wouldn't have chosen someone who wasn't.

Chive himself looked much recovered this morning, rearing and stamping proudly whenever Nightstone looked at him. He had done his mourning for Black Rose, and then tucked it away. Nightstone often wished humans could mourn as practically as pegasi did, realizing that the person was gone and never coming back.

"There is another task that I would charge you with, Chive, when you have selected your three flyers to go to the north and sent them off," said Nightstone, keeping one eye on Aurora all the while. The mare showed no surprise, just continued to watch a cloud. Good. Chive trusted her, then, and had already told her about the mission. "Make sure that you fly the blaze once around the castle, so that the guards on the doors can see you. Show them off."

Chive gave a low whinny and tapped his hoof on the balcony. "It will be my pleasure, my lady."

Nightstone nodded, satisfied. That should show anyone thinking of rebelling- Glow, perhaps- that just because Black Rose was gone didn't mean that the pegasi, or Nightstone's support among the pegasi, had weakened.

She never got the chance to find out if it would have convinced them, though, because the cries from below exploded just as she turned away from the balcony.

"Nightstone!"

Nightstone knew that voice. It was Glow's, and the zeyr told her in a moment why he wasn't using the title.

"We have decided that you must fall from your high position, Nightstone!"

Nightstone glanced over the railing. The courtyard below her was filled with milling *zeyri*, all of them spitting and arching their backs like true cats. Glow stood in the forefront, looking up at her. Nightstone couldn't see the expression in his eyes from this distance, but given his voice and the way his fur stood on end, she didn't need to.

"Will you defend yourself, or will you yield to those who are better-suited to command Orlath than you are?"

Nightstone swore quietly. Such rebellions were a regular feature of Dark life whenever someone felt he had the strength of will to become a lieutenant, and she knew the Dark wouldn't help her now. Only her magic and the support she might still have among the Darkworkers would.

She turned to Chive and Aurora. "What side are you on?"

Chive knelt to her at once, considerably more gracefully than he had when performing that motion yesterday. "Yours, my lady."

Nightstone nodded. "Then fly at once to the small garden on the western side of the castle. The one planted with night-blooming flowers. You know it?"

Chive rose back to all fours, gazing at her in surprise. "My lady, I know it. But would you not prefer that we fight the *zeyri*?"

"This is the most effective way of doing so," said Nightstone. "Fly at once, and bring me what you will find there."

"My lady, I will do it."

Nightstone peered at Aurora in suspicion. The golden-eyed pegasus appeared to have awakened from a trance, and was looking calmly at Nightstone, while her wings beat with eagerness to rise into the sky. Perhaps she was only looking forward to flying, Nightstone thought.

"Then do so," said Nightstone. "Chive, to the stables. The *zeyri* may already be attacking your blaze."

"They will wish they had not," said Chive grimly, and then sprang off the balcony and flew in the direction of the stables.

"Nightstone!" cried Glow, his voice rising dangerously close to the debilitating shriek of the *zeyri*. "Answer! You have only a few minutes left in which to answer, before I will consider that you are fighting me."

Nightstone glanced at Aurora. "Why aren't you flying?"

"You haven't told me where you want me to meet you, my lady," said the mare, her gaze once again distant.

"Go the garden and bring what you find there back here."

Aurora rose and flew off without another word. Nightstone stared after her, swallowing a gasp. She had never seen any pegasus fly that way, so graceful or swift, skilled or controlled.

"Nightstone!"

Nightstone rolled her eyes, walked to the balcony rail, and leaned over. "What do you want, Glow?" she asked, making her voice as bored and regal as possible.

"You know very well!" The *zeyr's* tail was lashing back and forth. "You have failed the Dark, failed Orlath, and will doom us all for the sake of pursuing a man who should be allowed to escape instead. Dozens of our people died from the creature that he called down. You should have done something about that, and you did nothing. Even the Prince Artaen was the one who drove the creature away, and not yourself."

Nightstone narrowed her eyes. "So you are committing this crime in the name of the Prince Artaen of Rivendon?" she asked.

"No! When you are removed, then I will rule as the Dark's lieutenant in Orlath."

Nightstone sighed in relief. She wasn't sure she could have faced Artaen's magic; she still felt weak and sick from her contact with the Dark a few nights before. If this was a rebellion of *zeyri* alone, then what Aurora was fetching back from the western garden would swiftly end it, one way or another. "Have you spoken to the Dark about this?" she asked. "Has it chosen you?"

"It has chosen me to see that you are nothing more than a coward, someone who hides behind her power!" Glow answered, his tail once again lashing. "You cannot face a real challenge, and the moment one comes along, you whimper and hide behind your more powerful friends."

Nightstone felt her face become a smooth mask. No, Prince Artaen probably had nothing to do with this; he was most likely watching from a window and sipping wine as he chuckled. But having him here had not been good for her reputation. She had originally called him in to destroy the Princesses of Rivendon and Orlath, but when they couldn't manage that, then she should have required that he go back to Rivendon immediately.

"You have made your point, Glow," she said, and then caught a glimpse of a dark shape out of the corner of her eye. It was Aurora, flying back with all speed. "But there is one thing that you have not considered- or perhaps I should say four things."

"What are they?"

Aurora landed on the balcony beside her, so carefully pinpointing the landing that Nightstone didn't even have to move aside. Nightstone smiled her thanks at the pegasus and took the basket that she had fetched from her mouth, holding it up so that Glow could see the contents. "Your mate and kittens, perhaps?"

There was a long silence.

Nightstone calmly reached into the basket and gathered up the first *zeyr* kitten, a squirming bundle hardly large enough to fit her palm. The mother, Teshia, Glow's mate, hissed and tried to bite her, but she was as helpless as an ordinary cat for a month after the birth, not able to make the screeching cry that was the *zeyr's* true weapon. The kittens themselves were too young. Nightstone held the kitten out over the balcony railing, ignoring the way Teshia curled around the other two kittens and hissed threats at her under her breath. She was far too focused on the way that Glow was watching her hold the basket.

"You have a choice, Glow," said Nightstone. "You can withdraw with your people back into the stables, and there await my judgment. Or you can stand here and watch me drop your mate and kittens."

Glow said, "Or I could scream."

"Oh, of course," said Nightstone. "But then I would faint, and I might easily drop your kitten. Accidentally, you understand."

There was a tense silence again. The *zeyri* in the courtyard looked at Glow, their stances changing from excited and tense to uncertain. Nightstone noticed it, her eyes darting from *zeyr* to *zeyr*. This was Glow's plan, then. The others had followed him because they thought he could win, but if Nightstone forced him to back down, they would as well.

Nightstone turned her head and locked her eyes on Glow's face.

The *zeyr* was trembling, his puffed fur making him look at least twice as big as normal, his head twitching from side to side.

"Your call, Glow," said Nightstone quietly.

The silence continued. Nightstone studied the *zeyri* curiously, but none of them seemed inclined to move, or even to tell Glow to forget about his family and continue to lead the rebellion. It was strange. Hadn't they planned their rebellion more carefully than this?

Perhaps not, Nightstone thought. Perhaps they really had just expected her to give in the moment they threatened her. If they thought of her as weak, that wasn't unreasonable.

At last, Glow bowed his head, and retreated into the stables. The other *zeyri* followed him, though a few turned their heads and snarled at Nightstone before they left. Nightstone lowered the kitten back into the basket and glanced at Teshia, taking notice of her threats for the first time.

"-touch my kittens again, I will scream at you until you are dead!"

"I have no doubt you will," said Nightstone. "But your family won't be threatened if you only tell your mate that I won't accept another rebellion."

Teshia snarled at her. Nightstone smiled, admiring the courage in her eyes. She would have gone ahead and dared Nightstone to drop her family- or perhaps done the intelligent thing and made sure they were safe before daring to rebel.

Nightstone made note of the dangers of such intelligence as well, of course. Perhaps the next time it truly would be Teshia leading the rebellion.

Nightstone climbed off Aurora's back and nodded a brisk thanks. The pegasus had flown her to meet with the Orlathian nobles and then the filifernai, taking delight in the flying no matter how short a time it lasted. And now Nightstone was here at the stables, having made the *zeyri* wait and tremble a while. She had known just what she was doing, balanced the time until she thought they would snap, and now she strode in. At once, their heads turned towards her.

Nightstone eyed them. They eyed her. At least there were no more snarls or screams of defiance among them. They had thought she was weak, and they had been shown how wrong they were.

"I don't want to punish you," said Nightstone to all of them. "I know that you followed a misguided leader, and he had, for whatever reason, the idea that I would simply yield power. You would never have done this without more reassurance. The Dark preserve you. Go back to your guard posts."

The *zeyri* watched her for a moment more, then trotted out of the stables, moving past her. Every single one of them dipped their heads as they passed, and Nightstone nodded calmly and regally back.

Then she turned to Glow.

His silvery claws sank into the floor as he stared up at her. Nightstone wondered, somewhere behind the growing anger, if he had thought that he would be able to hold her gaze at the moment. He couldn't. His eyes flinched, his whole being flinched, and he dropped his head to look at the floor of the stables again.

"And you," said Nightstone softly. "What am I going to do with you?"

It wasn't really a question. Glow knew it, and he gave the only possible answer. "What you do with leaders of failed rebellions. Execute them."

"And if I don't feel like doing that?"

Glow's head snapped up so fast that his ears swayed. He stared at her.

"I don't particularly feel like depriving myself of a guard commander, Teshia of a mate, or your kittens of a father," Nightstone went on, unable to keep from wrinkling her nose at the mention of children. Glow knew that of old in her, though, and she was sure he would understand. "On the other hand, I don't want others to get the unfounded impression that I'm weak because I let you live. A balance between justice and mercy is necessary. Come here."

Glow trotted up to her willingly. He didn't know what she was going to do, Nightstone knew, but anything was better than death.

Or so he would think.

Nightstone held out her hand. Glow laid his chin on her fingers. "My lady, thank you. Thank-"

Nightstone called a precise burst of Scarlet, and burned out his vocal chords. Glow gave one hollow sound that faded almost at once and then passed out from the pain.

"I think that is a good balance," said Nightstone, and pulled her hand away from the fainted *zeyr*.

She strode out of the stables again, stretching. Nothing like thwarting a rebellion to relax her.

And if my spies are right, Kymenos is in Corlinth. I shall have him back soon enough, and dead. Then I shall be even more relaxed.

Chapter 8

Serpents and Mouse

"I have heard the tale of the snake entrancing the mouse. I have also heard a version of the tale where the mouse managed to enthrall the snake, and then ran away while he was still recovering. I do not, however, believe the second story is told very often, either around the campfire or beyond it."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

Elary stared at Naldeon. He stared back. After a moment, he said, "That was nearly a minute you wasted, I think."

Elary licked her lips, and found the hated buttery taste waiting once more. She shook her head. "I can't tell you that Mitherill will be the Queen you want. You want entirely different things from what she does."

"Even that is new information to us," said Naldeon, his voice so soft that Elary almost thought he was trying to make it lulling. It wouldn't work, if he was. Her heart was crashing so hard against her ribs that it hurt. "What does she want?"

"The countries of Ilantra and Arvenna free from the taint of Shadow, and united under her," said Elary.

"Hmmm," said Naldeon. "But what of those who worship Shadow, the shapeshifters and the fey? Would she cast them out of her Kingdoms if she came to the throne?"

Elary sprang to her feet, shaking. "I was right," she said. "You are allies of Shadow. You worship him!"

"Only some of us," said Naldeon in irritation. "Please, do sit down. We're all more concerned about the future of the Kingdoms here than who worships who."

"But the Light-

"Will have the chance to come into the Kingdoms, if all goes as we plan. We don't want to cast any worshippers of any power or god who might help to make things better out. *Sit down.*"

Elary blinked. It was strange, but when Naldeon spoke the last words, her concern abruptly vanished. She did sit down, quickly and quietly, her eyes on the Serpent leader. He appeared to have withdrawn back into the shadows of the fire, so that they flickered and leaped around him like living things, but she could still see his face, those compelling eyes.

"Tell us what could change Mitherill," whispered Naldeon. "Tell us what could make her a Princess we would love and serve."

From somewhere off to the left, Silar's voice said, loud and blaring compared to Naldeon's, "Is this wise, my lord? When she wakes up and finds out that she was enchanted by your magic-

"Hush."

Elary felt the command fall deep into her mind, like a stone tossed into a still pool. The ripples were still spreading out when Naldeon asked her the question again, and this time she was compelled to speak.

"Mitherill is really a child, still, and not someone preparing to become an adult," Elary heard herself murmur. "She loves childish things, and she needs everything just so or she will cry. She loves to be comforted and told she's right. She hates to be told she's wrong. She has no idea of the Court manners in Arvenna, and perhaps none in Ilantra, either, unless the *ilzánai* who raised her taught her of such things. I don't know what will happen when you meet her. She will probably think that you are evil, or at least Destiny will tell her so."

"Destiny?" asked Naldeon. "Is that the force that guides and guards her?"

"Yes. She worships Light, but Destiny is the one that grants her power. It was starting to flood her with strength the night Shadow sent me back. I think she would have managed to escape from Shadow if only it wasn't in his sanctuary that the transformation began to happen."

Naldeon's voice was silent for a long moment. Elary swayed slowly back and forth, not sure why, only sure that it was the right thing to do.

"And you think that we should love a spoiled Princess who could not even set up a Court in Arvenna without help?" said the voice. "How?"

"She has a loving heart," said Elary. "She knows that her suffering is nothing next to the suffering of the people of her Kingdoms, and she grieves for them. She will be a gentle, compassionate Queen."

"Or a weak one," said Silar's blaring voice.

"Quiet, Silar," said Naldeon in what was almost a snap, and Elary felt glad. She didn't think the woman should be saying such things about the Princess, but she couldn't stop them right now. "Elary, tell us this. How would the Princess feel if we tried to teach her about truly loving Arvenna?"

"She probably wouldn't take it very well," said Elary. "Shadow tried to teach her manners, but he was teaching with pain, and he could never stop reminding her of how ignorant she was. If you're going to teach her, do it gently and slowly, with plenty of reminders that she's doing better."

Naldeon turned away from her and said something to someone else, one of the figures back in the shadows. Since it wasn't addressed to her, Elary didn't know what it was, and frankly wasn't sure she cared. She stared dreamily into the fire, only looking up again when she felt Naldeon's eyes on her.

"And do you think that she would be truly susceptible to such teaching?" Naldeon asked. "Or would she push it away as she seems to have pushed almost everything else away?"

Elary blinked. "I don't know," she said. "I know that I tried to teach her, and it didn't really work."

"What do you mean?"

"She wanted certain foods that we didn't have, and cried when I said that we couldn't get them. I can remember having a dream where I was disgusted by her behavior, and she wouldn't listen to me when I told her to stop acting like a brat." Elary paused for a moment,

wondering if there was something else about that dream she should say- something about Silar?- but decided that she didn't have to since it had nothing to do with Mitherill. "She cries and cries and cries, until she wore on my nerves but I couldn't say anything."

Naldeon made a slight sound that might have been a laugh. "And Destiny chose you for her guardian?"

"Yes, it did. Mitherill and an *ilzán* came straight to me, and told me I'd been selected for that honor."

"Some honor," said Naldeon.

"What, my lord?" Elary leaned forward, concerned that she might have missed something, since that last had been in a mutter.

Naldeon shook his head. "Nothing. Tell me, Elary, what made you decide to take up the task?"

"Well, she's the true Royal Heir of Iantra-Arvenna. And one of my apprentices fell in love with her; I think he's going to be her Prince. And then Shadow sent the Lady of the Swans to hunt her. So we ran."

Naldeon made another slight noise that might have been a laugh, a groan, or something else. Elary frowned. "I'm sorry, my lord, but when you grunt like that, I don't know what you're saying."

"Never mind," said Naldeon. "It almost seems as though Destiny and Shadow between them drove you into this, that it wasn't your choice."

"Well, I had chances to turn back. But I didn't."

"I wonder," Naldeon murmured, and then turned and called someone's name. Elary went back to staring into the fire.

A moment later, she found her face taken in a pair of gentle hands, hands that turned her head back and forth. Since they didn't seem intent on hurting her, Elary submitted, staring into a pair of lightning-marked eyes with drowsy curiosity. These lightning bolts were golden, she noted, and the eyes surrounding them were large and dark.

"Yes, my lord," said the woman in surprise. "You are right. I've only seen one other case where Destiny had clouded someone's mind this completely, and then it was trying to bind an elf. She must be the kind of guardian who would never have willingly taken up the task. The bonds run deep and strong." She reached out and made a light plucking motion at the side of Elary's face. Elary winced. It felt as though the woman had pulled something in her that vibrated like a harpstring. "But that leaves the question of why Destiny chose her, of course."

"Doesn't it," said Naldeon dryly. "Can you snap the bonds, my lady? And if you can, how long will it take?"

"The weakest of them I can break," said the woman. "She's been away from the Princess for a few days, which is all to the good. The others are as deep as taproots, and I'll need some more time."

"Well. Touch her mind and fetch out memories of the sanctuary, then. We can't risk having her go near the Princess if Destiny would just enchant her again."

"Very well, my lord."

The woman's face vanished, and Elary found herself walking down the tunnels of Shadow's hideaway again, looking into the rooms, noting the small cracks in the walls, seeing the room where she and Mitherill had slept as clearly as if she were there. She saw the Princess asleep on her bed, the marks of tears on her face. Compassion overcame her, and she reached out-

Then the Princess vanished, and Elary was once again staring into a pair of lightning-marked dark eyes. The woman whistled softly, and said, "Destiny's hold is indeed strong. Even remembering the Princess made her try to rush forward, and Destiny reached out to grasp her."

"Can she ever be healed?"

"Yes, my lord. Though it will take separation from the Princess, and time." There was a long silence. "And I think it might even take the Crown."

Naldeon's breath hissed out. "Truly?"

"Truly."

Silence again, or almost-silence. Elary thought they were speaking of something, but since it wasn't Naldeon doing the talking, she didn't have to pay attention. She went on looking into the fire. The fire was fascinating.

At last, Naldeon said in a commanding voice, "Elary."

Elary's attention snapped back at once. Naldeon was saying something! And not just anything, but her name! She leaned closer. "Yes, my lord?"

"You will go with Melior here." Naldeon touched the arm of the woman with the golden lightning bolts in her eyes, who bowed. "She will take you to a place known as the Crown. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No."

Naldeon nodded his head as if that were only expected. "You will accompany her there without a fight. You may feel uncomfortable at times, and at other times you will hear the voice of Destiny speaking to you, asking what you are doing. But you will never give in to it. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Naldeon," said Silar, her voice sounding softer this time. "Is it wise to put her so far under the trance? It will be harder for her to awake."

"It will snap when Melior clears the first binding of Destiny," said Naldeon in what seemed to be a dry tone. "I simply want to make sure that Elary can't kill Melior when she finds out that we're going to separate her from her beloved Princess."

"My lord, may I have permission to go with them?"

"I thought you wanted to rescue the Princess."

"I found Elary intensely ignorant," said Silar. "And now I realize it was almost certainly the effects of Destiny. I would like to have the chance to travel with her and heal her, as an apology."

"You have the strangest ideas of apology, Silar."

"I know."

Naldeon sighed. "Very well. Go with them, then. But remember that Destiny could use her as a conduit to reach out and-"

The night abruptly filled with screeching. Elary jerked her head back, some of the fog fleeing from her mind. Large shapes were falling on the camp, and it didn't take her long to recognize them as gryphons.

Gryphons diving on the camp. They must have come to rescue me.

And then most of the fog fled, and Elary jerked herself up with a gasp. She had to run. Now. The gryphons would almost certainly kill the Serpents, and in their battle-rage they might kill her by mistake. Besides, it was possible that they thought she had joined the Serpents, and she didn't think that she could explain it to them in the midst of their battle-rage.

Avestar dived at her. Elary twisted aside, and his talons slammed into the earth. He turned his head, snarling and screeching at once, and then checked himself when he saw who she was.

"Elary-"

Elary was already moving towards his wings, while Avestar twisted his head from side to side, occasionally roaring instructions. When she was safely up, the black gryphon looked back at her and said, "Who would you think is the most dangerous here?"

"Naldeon," said Elary, her heart still hurting with the memory. "He entranced me, and I don't even know how he did it. And Silar, the winged one who brought me here."

"The one my scouts tracked," said Avestar with fierce satisfaction. "My people are spread all about the camp. Silar will never escape, even if she takes to the air. And I don't think that this Naldeon-"

If he finished the sentence, Elary never knew it. A pair of arms snatched her abruptly from Avestar's back, and she found herself rising into the air, staring at Silar's face.

"What are you doing?" Elary screeched, sounding like a gryphon herself, and began to twist in an effort to escape the woman's hold. Silar tightened her arms and spun to the side, just avoiding a flailing pair of gryphon claws.

"Shut up, *meros*," said Silar in tones of deep disgust. "I'm taking you to the Crown, since it's obvious that you would never go yourself." She turned her head as another gryphon swept dangerously near, and cried, "Unless you draw back and stop attacking me, I will drop her."

Elary knew that for a lie, but she didn't dare struggle further; Silar might drop her without meaning to. She kept an eye on the gryphons, hoping they would see that Silar had to be stopped no matter what. Who knew what they would do to her at this Crown, whatever it was? They might diminish her loyalty to Mitherill, and Elary would rather die than lose that.

But the gryphons pulled up, hovering. Their screams echoed in the air, but they didn't try to come closer. Elary cursed. Silar chuckled. "Lightworkers are compassionate and brave and heroic, of course," she said, as she began to beat her wings so hard they shot almost straight up into the air, "but so predictable."

"Silar, where are we going?"

Elary turned around with a cry, almost making Silar drop her again. Silar gave an annoyed cluck of her tongue and readjusted her grip.

Melior hovered beside them, or at least her face did. The rest of her body trailed off into lightning bolts that zipped around, came back and reformed her body, and zipped around again as Elary watched them. She had never known a half-liadra who could travel this way, but then, she had never known one who could entrance her the way that Naldeon had done, either. She swallowed, desperately afraid. *Who are these people? And how can I stop what they plan to do to Mitherill?*

"The Crown," said Silar. "I'll have to rest in a few miles. My wings weren't made to carry this much weight. But I do want to try and free this woman from her Destiny-bonds, and I know that you want the same thing."

"Of course," said Melior, sounding insulted. "Otherwise, I would still be with Naldeon."

Another gryphon flew past, gleaming pale in the darkness, and Silar clucked her tongue again. "Could you do something about these gryphons, Melior?"

"It would be my pleasure," said the half-liadra, and turned towards the gryphon.

"No!" cried Elary.

It was too late. One of Melior's lightning bolts hit the white gryphon, and its wings spasmed out. Then it dropped to the ground. Elary craned her neck as Silar flew on and saw it lying far too still in the darkness. Distance and height obscured the gleam of pale feathers in a moment, but could not obscure her sorrow.

"You are heartless," said Elary to Melior's face when it formed again. "They were only trying to rescue me."

"And drag you back to your slavery under Destiny and Mitherill," said Melior, who had the audacity to look pleased with herself. "No, I won't let that happen."

"Why?"

Melior gave her an odd look. "Because Naldeon told me to take you to the Crown."

"And do you do everything he says?"

"Unless I have a good reason to do otherwise, yes."

"That doesn't sound as though you have much independence or happiness of your own," said Elary. "Why not do what your own heart dictates, instead of following the whim of another?"

Silar laughed. "Arguing with her is useless, Melior. Try it again when she's healed."

Elary went on trying to persuade them as they flew, and they went on laughing at her and not listening. At last she slumped in Silar's grip, tears streaming down her face, and looked back towards the camp.

I'm sorry, Mitherill. I'm sorry, Avestar. I'm sorry, Palant. I've failed you, all of you.

When she felt the choking sensation in her throat, she thought it was tears at first, but when she gasped and grabbed her throat, Melior said, "Ezetek! Knew I forgot something. Hold her still so I can give her the antidote, Silar."

Elary didn't feel like remaining awake after that, and fell asleep to nurse her grief.

Chapter 9

The Great Escape

"There are daring escapes, masterpieces of wonder and excitement that are the center of history-tales and beloved by the listeners of the bards-

"And then there are escapades like this."

-Klessa of the Nine Wonders, writing in her journal of a child who tried to escape the Star Circle by challenging all the Masters to duels.

Ternora? I have an idea, Ternora. I need you to wake up, and come with me, and don't tell Erlande.

Ternora opened her eyes. She had fallen asleep in the same sudden way she had been using since they came to Erlande's kingdom, with the darkness falling on her as she drifted in the water. It was an odd thing, not at all the way she was used to sleeping, and it unnerved and upset her.

Not nearly as much as the sight of Warcourage gamboling about with his eyes gleaming, but still, it upset her.

I wouldn't tell Erlande, Ternora said, rolling over on her back. Even that didn't offer her the comfort of pressing against anything solid. The mermaids had offered her a bed-like piece of coral, but Ternora had simply drifted away from it every time she relaxed and had at last given up on trying to use it. *I just don't care about what you're doing, and I don't want you to bother me right now.*

I've thought of a way to escape.

Really? How fascinating. I'm sure that you'll tell me all about it in the morning, and I'll listen the more willingly for a little sleep. Ternora closed her eyes again.

Warcourage nudged her sharply with his nose. *The morning might be too late, Ternora. We have to move towards the boundaries of Erlande's kingdom now.*

Ternora reluctantly opened her eyes again. *And I suppose you have a way of dealing with the border guards?*

We will make them help us.

Ternora blinked once or twice. Then she said, *Why would they? All of them are loyal to Erlande, and all of them know what we look like. They would never mistake you for just another dolphin, not with me swimming beside you.*

Not like that. We won't use disguises, and we won't use subterfuge. Such things are tools of the Dark. Warcourage was dancing back and forth, the subtle gleam of moonlight playing through the surface reflected from his body. *Don't you see? We will go to the border guards and tell them the truth about my exile from the throne and the need to regain it. Light and Destiny will convince them to become my partisans, and then they will not only let us escape Erlande's kingdom, but swim beside us and insure that we come to no grief in the ocean.*

Ternora stared at him. *And you really think that will work?*

Do you have a better idea?

Of course not, or we would be gone from here. Ternora could feel a small smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. She had some idea of what would happen when Warcourage spoke to the border guards, but she could be wrong, and in any case it would be fun to watch. *Very well. Let me alert Viridian-*

No.

What?

I don't think that we should involve him. His loyalty to Erlande compromises his loyalty to the Doralissan throne.

Ternora hid her disbelief that dragons should have loyalty to the Doralissan throne behind a cough of bubbles. *Then you just want to leave him here?*

He hasn't seemed unhappy.

Ternora had to admit that was true. Viridian didn't spend much time with them anymore, instead debating with the priests of Erlande or swimming around the coral castle as if he wanted to see every one of the endless rooms. Perhaps he wouldn't mind being left beneath the ocean, after all. He showed no sign of wanting to look on the sun or the stars again.

Very well, Ternora repeated. *Then we might as well start swimming. Which direction are we going?*

East.

Away from land?

We can't walk on land right now. Light has told me there is something in the eastern ocean that can change me back and grant you the lungs and legs that you need.

Ternora nodded patiently, and kept a smile on her face. Inwardly, she hoped the situation would fall out as she had foreseen, and that they wouldn't manage to escape.

Perhaps it's best that we're not bringing Viridian along, she thought. *He would almost certainly tell Warcourage this plan is doomed from the start.*

Halt, in the name of Erlande!

Ternora blinked. Perhaps it was her still-limited eyesight underwater, but the guards had appeared from nowhere, she thought. Then she realized they had come from beneath her, and sighed out a mournful string of bubbles. It was still hard to remember that guards, attackers, or fish could come from below as often as from the sides or above.

Warcourage drifted upright, his body curved in the dancer's position that seemed to have been his favorite since he was changed into a dolphin. *I am the Prince Warcourage of Doralissa, turned into a dolphin by elven magic. I demand that you allow us to pass.*

Ternora winced, wondering if the guards- mermaids holding long knives fashioned from bone-would spear Warcourage before her little entertainment even began. At least Warcourage could have "requested" passage instead of "demanding" it.

The nearest mermaid looked nearly as perplexed as Ternora. She drifted closer, her large green eyes fixed on Warcourage and her tail lashing to reflect her own agitation. *You would demand passage from us?*

There is a reason.

The mermaid set herself, body bowed so that she would be harder to knock through the water, tail curved slightly under her to propel her at once in any direction. Ternora had seen the mermaids training- she had watched them when she grew so bored she thought she would die of it- and recognized their fighting stance. They weren't using dulled knives now, though, and this mermaid looked far angrier than any Ternora had seen in the training sessions. *Unless Erlande Himself has given you permission to pass us, then there is no reason good enough.*

Look upon me. Warcourage began to glow with Light, as though a second sunrise were taking place underwater. *See what I am.*

The mermaids gazed at him, some of them shielding their eyes with delicate hands. Ternora fought the urge to shield her own eyes, and held out her hands towards the radiance instead. This was the brightest light she had seen in some time, and she was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

The Light dimmed at last, and Warcourage said, *Do you see?*

The green-eyed mermaid made a flipping gesture with both hand and knife that Ternora had seen them use to dismiss something as unimportant. *You can glow. You can doubtless alter the intensity of it. I don't understand what that is supposed to tell us, or how it should convince us to let you pass.*

Warcourage let out a squeal. *I am a servant of Light itself! Stand back or you will be cursed to the Dark when you die.*

Ternora grinned and drifted back in the water, again wishing that she had something solid to lean on. Here came the entertainment she had been anticipating since the first mermaid appeared.

The green-eyed one shook her head. *We serve no power but our Lord, and He told us that you were to stay inside the boundaries. Go back. We need not hurt you.* She turned her head so

that her eyes brushed over Ternora, as if she thought that threat might make Warcourage back off. *Either of you.*

Warcourage squealed and charged.

Ternora let her mouth fall open. She hadn't anticipated that. She wondered if the mermaid would turn aside and let him go, or actually gut Warcourage with the knife.

The guard did neither. Instead, she simply moved in a somersault, far faster than Ternora could have turned, and gave Warcourage a drubbing in the flank with her tail. The Prince squealed and tried to turn back, only to get another hearty smack of her fins in his face. That one sent him end over end, in a few somersaults of his own that made Ternora begin to laugh helplessly.

The mermaid glanced at her. *You expected this to happen?*

Ternora wished that she could still cry tears, but she settled for grinning so hard her face hurt. *Something like it. He told me that he could actually convince you to stand aside by invoking the Light. A pity it didn't work out.*

The mermaid stared at her through narrowed eyes. Then, *A pity*, she said coolly, and turned back to Warcourage, who was once again circling in as though he could defeat her. She sighed. *Does he ever learn?* she asked Ternora.

No.

The mermaid let Warcourage storm past her and then punched him in the side, so heavily that he staggered away from her. *I thought not.*

Warcourage was still squealing as though ready for battle, but the way his tail drooped told Ternora he was almost done for. She drifted up beside him and wrapped him in what she thought was a good parody of a comforting hug. *Should we go back to the palace now, and wait for Erlande to arrive?* she suggested.

No. Warcourage turned his head and glared at her. *I have to make her pay for what she did to the Light's chosen.*

I think that she would only do it again if you approached her, said Ternora mildly, hoping to Shara that the laughter stayed out of her mental voice. *Come back to the palace, my Prince. Perhaps you can complain to Erlande when you see him again.*

I will do that. Warcourage glared at the mermaid once more, then turned and swam back to the palace, trailing injured dignity that polluted the water as thickly as blood would have.

Ternora started to follow him, but the mermaid said, *The next time you're bored, arrange something else to amuse yourself.*

Ternora glanced back at her. *I probably won't. This is the most fun I've had since I got here. Would you deprive me of it?*

My name is Ebbtide, said the mermaid. *Come to the inner courtyard when the sun begins shining, and I will show you something that might take your mind off the boredom.*

Ternora eyed Ebbtide curiously, but the woman just glared back at her, so Ternora shrugged and began to swim. Perhaps it would be interesting, but she didn't think that, whatever it was, it could compare to watching Warcourage be smacked in the face by a mermaid's tail. She was still grinning about that when she returned to her room in the palace and drifted off to sleep again.

She found out what it was the next day, when she swam into the inner courtyard and found Ebbtide waiting for her, alone. The mermaid looked calmer now, but still had a grim expression on her face. She carried two knives, one in each hand, and had her green-golden hair bound out of the way with a bone coronet. She held out one of the knives towards Ternora. *I am going to toss this toward you. Catch it.*

But it will go slowly.

I know. This is the first lesson.

Lesson? Ternora asked, but she had tossed the knife, and Ternora found herself swimming forward to meet it. It took her some time to get up behind the knife and catch it, and it sank almost to the floor of the courtyard before she could. She floated up again, clutching the knife and glaring at Ebbtide. *Was there some point to that?*

You do not swim well because you don't remember what's beneath you, and you know almost nothing about the water, said Ebbtide, ignoring her tone. *I wanted to see if those were the reasons, and they are. We can begin your training now.*

Training?

You're bored. I have no one to teach right now, since Erlande is keeping the boundaries closed and there are no young mermaids coming in for training. I might as well teach you. It will entertain you and keep you from causing more trouble by encouraging your Prince. Is that a fair trade?

Will Erlande like this?

He has said nothing against it. Ebbtide lifted her knife. *This is the way that you hold it. This is the first cut that you would make, if you wanted to gut an enemy barreling towards you. The knife cut the water with excruciating speed. You try it.*

Ternora tried.

No, no, no! Brace your feet as you would a tail. Put the power of your arm behind it. I will make you fight like a mermaid if I can't make you swim like one. Like this, again.

Why are you doing this?

Because you will cause me less trouble like this than you will accompanying your Prince to the borders, said Ebbtide. *Again, now.*

The Ways of Talking Swords

"The talking swords were forged by the fey, it is said, but few seem to know what kind of fey forged them. And they have powerful magic, it is said, but few seem to know what kind of magic it is. Only one thing is certain: The talking swords have been in the world for so long, and have had so many stories told about them, that it is no longer possible to separate the truth from the lies."

-Tyver, writing in the year before the fall of Ganolth.

"If you had told me this in the first place, a great deal of trouble might have been saved," said Kymenos. He pulled a clean tunic over his head and stuffed another into a traveling bag.

"I didn't know that you were obeying the call of Destiny," said Norianna coolly from the bedside table where he'd placed her. "You seemed intent on not obeying it, in fact. I think that you would have left me behind and walked out the door if you had the strength."

"I'm not going to Dalzna because it's my Destiny," said Kymenos. "I'm going there because it's my home."

"And your Destiny is to go there."

Kymenos narrowed his eyes. "I think that you would get on well with my horse, Sykeen. He also prefers to believe that I am not truly the way I am, as if there are excuses for it that I can't see."

"You are going to fulfill your Destiny," said Norianna calmly. "It really doesn't matter if you think that's the reason you're going or not- though most humans I have ridden with have been happy to be part of the history-tales. You're going north, and along the way, your Destiny will happen."

"How can it, with Alliana dead?"

The sword began to hum a smug little tune to herself. Kymenos turned away with another curse and tied the bag shut.

He wasn't taking much. Clothes, money, and enough seedlings to start a new healing practice at home were the bulk of it. He was carrying a few tokens from admirers and grateful patients- not always the same thing- but the majority of those were silver or gems that could be worn in secrecy and comfort. He would use them as money if need be.

"You're going to be traveling through the Rashars and the Dalorth Mountains," said Norianna, sounding bored. "And you're not going to take warm clothes? I suppose that you intend to call on the Scarlet. Masters of the Star Circle intend to do that, I've noticed, draining themselves to use magic when they don't need to. It proves a point, though what the point is, I don't know."

"I can't call on the Scarlet," said Kymenos absently, studying the bag and wondering if he could fit just a few more of the keepsakes he had been considering in. "I'm making a purchase on the way out of town that will take care of that."

There was a long pause. Then Norianna surrendered to her curiosity- Kymenos could almost hear her damning herself for doing so- and asked, "What is it?" She had seemed very interested in discussions about magic in the last three days, at least after Kymenos stopped trying to toss her into the street or drop her from the top of the walls.

"Perhaps not so much making a purchase as calling in a debt," said Kymenos. Memories flickered and burned for a moment, and he smiled. Yes, the twelve years of his life spent struggling fiercely against Destiny had filled him with a passionate hatred for that power, but that didn't mean that the years had been all research and darkness and nothing else. "I did something for a woman once, and she said that she would pay the debt whenever I called it in."

"You're buying a slave?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"Oh, let's wait," said Kymenos, tying the bag at his waist and scooping up the sword. He had never regularly worn a blade, and he was still uncomfortable with a sheath banging against his legs, so he would simply tie her to Sykeen's saddle. "I want it to be a surprise."

Light flickered in the gold lettering on Norianna's blade, a sure sign that she was irritated.

Laughing, Kymenos stepped out into the sunlit hall, and was surprised when Dalinda grasped him around the waist, hugging tightly.

"You'll send a message to me, my lord, when you're safely settled in Dalzna?" she asked.

"Yes, Dalinda." Kymenos stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. As much as he had ever had friends in Corlinth, she had been his friend. "Look for a message in the early summer, perhaps, or later. It takes time to cross the length of Arvenna, as I know."

"We will have to go faster than that."

Kymenos just rolled his eyes, while Dalinda scowled at the sword. "You can't go faster than that across Arvenna," she said. "Riding, it still takes months. Do you know how mountainous that country is?"

"We must make it by early summer." There was a tension in Norianna's voice that Kymenos would have asked about, only he knew the talking sword wouldn't explain. She had woken him up in the night muttering about the same mysterious need for speed. He wasn't inclined to ask her to explain and gratify her with the attention anymore.

"We should," said Kymenos. "Serian isn't that far on the other side of the Dalorth Mountains. As long as we don't have any trouble with Arvennese loyalists or the Crownkillers, we should get over the mountains all right."

"We are not going to Serian."

"Oh?" Kymenos asked politely, while mentally deciding that the sword's definition of "we" could be redrawn if necessary. "Where are we going?"

"The Lake of the Northern Winds."

Kymenos blinked. The lake was a beautiful place, but that was about it, and the sights that made it beautiful weren't visible except at certain times of the year. He had wanted to visit the lake mainly to say that he had been there. He suspected that Norianna's reason would be different, unless she wanted to have something to brag about to southern talking swords.

"Why are we going there?" he asked, but he didn't really expect an answer, and so Norianna's vague dark muttering didn't disturb him. He slung the sword back into his arms and nodded at Dalinda. "Take care, my lady. A message by early summer at the latest. I promise."

Dalinda nodded and smiled at him, tears bright in her eyes. "Take care, my lord."

Kymenos bowed to her, then stepped out the door of his house for the last time. He had expected some sadness, but instead freedom seemed to leap from the walls and clench gleeful claws on his shoulder. He took a deep breath and walked briskly to Sykeen, who accepted the last bag without comment but Norianna with a snort.

Must she come?

"I am on a Quest," said the sword, who could apparently hear Sykeen's telepathy perfectly well. "I need not ask the permission of a lowly four-legged beast whose brain happens to be able to reach outside his own head." She paused, as if considering what she had just said, and then added, "A short distance."

Sykeen danced sideways, snorting, and then turned his head to appeal with large eyes to Kymenos. *The way she talks to me! Do you hear how she talks to me?*

"I hear it," said Kymenos, swinging himself into the saddle and settling carefully between the bags. All it would take now was shifting a little to the side, and one of the many bags would fall off Sykeen's saddle. "But since she talks to me the same way, you'll excuse me if I can't spare much sympathy."

Do you hear the way he talks to me? Sykeen appealed to Norianna.

"When you've lived a thousand years and seen the plans you made crumble to the ground because of others' foolishness, then you can talk to me about suffering," said Norianna.

Can you call what you do living? I would call it existing, you thing of steel and dragonbone.

Kymenos rolled his eyes and let them complain at each other, though he did take something Sykeen had said into account: Norianna's hilt, which had puzzled him each time he ran a hand over it, was made of dragonbone. That was a sign of the oldest talking swords, the ones made by some unimaginable race of the fey. It was no wonder that Norianna was more troublesome and fiercer than other swords he'd heard of. She was probably three thousand years old at the very least.

Not that that will stop me from taking her to the Lake of the Northern Winds and throwing her in, if that's what she really wants.

Whistling, Kymenos rode down the street towards the house that waited at the end, to call in his debt.

He hadn't seen Cheyena in a few months, but even that was enough to work some changes. He had thought it would be. Kymenos smiled as she stepped back before him, eyes filled with an uneasy blend of welcome and fear. She was always glad to see him, always concerned that he had come to take back the gift he had given her, and always happier when he shut the door behind him.

This time, they would both be shutting the door behind them. Kymenos glanced around her house and barely kept from snorting to himself. For her, it would be no loss. Cheyena had the skills to earn money for herself, but had a persistent fear that someone would break into her home and steal any delicacies she bought. The walls and the tables were bare of all but a few silver ornaments that she was unable to resist, and which bore the glittering red lines of Scarlet wards.

Kymenos finally looked at Cheyena, and found her standing with her head bowed and eyes on the floor, hands twisting in front of her. The rust-red hair that hid her face was already darkening with her sweat.

"You've come to call in the debt," she said softly.

"Yes."

Cheyena took a deep breath and tilted her head back. "Well, take my magic from me, then, if you want."

Kymenos closed his eyes. *Yes, I know what is best for me and do it, but I do not like to see the marks of pain.*

"My lady," he said quietly, "I did not come to take your magic from you. I came to ask for your help." He opened his eyes to find that her golden ones were staring at him in disbelief. "For my own reasons, I am leaving Corlinth and journeying home to Dalzna. I do not have any ability with Scarlet magic myself, though, and no skill in locating enough trees to chop down for a hearty store of firewood; it was summer when I last made the pass. I would ask you to come with me, use your fire to warm the nights and to cook the food, and to protect me if the snow becomes killingly cold."

Cheyena blinked for a long moment. Then she said, "And what about when we reach Serian?"

"I do not know if the journey will end in Serian," said Kymenos, thinking about the Lake of the Northern Winds. He might go there, after all, if only to spite Norianna. "But it should not last much past that. Either we will halt in Serian, or we will go slightly further north and then come back to Serian. After that, you are free to stay there, return to Corlinth, or go anywhere else. I will have need of your help no longer."

Cheyena was trembling now, a small flicker of flame growing on her palm as she fought to control her hope and joy. "And the debt?"

"Will be canceled."

Cheyena bowed her head. "I am a little curious why you're not waiting until summer, my lord," she dared to say.

Kymenos raised his brows. "Are you? Truly?"

Cheyena shivered, and said nothing.

Kymenos was satisfied. He knew, from the "conversation" he and Nightstone had had last night, that she had sent his name and description to the guards of Corlinth, but hadn't told them what he was wanted for. She hadn't counted on, probably because she hadn't known about, the renown he had here. The guards would hesitate, suspicious and wary. A Master of the Star Circle was in the city, and Nightstone was far away. She ruled Orlath, but Corlinth perched almost on the Arvennese border, and the guards had to do a delicate dance with

Shadow as well as with Dark. They would delay as long as they reasonably could, and by the time Nightstone made up some excuse that satisfied them, he would be gone.

In fact, as long as no guards had tracked him from his house to Cheyena's, he had won. And given the way Nightstone had abruptly begun to scream about People of the Blending last night before darkening her mind, he thought he'd won that round of the battle with her, too.

He looked back at Cheyena. It was important not to let victories matter too much, though, and she was a living example of why. She had come to him with a fever that was destroying her Scarlet magic, and Kymenos had warned her that the healing brew would either kill her or save her life and magic. He could have given her a less risky mixture that would save her life without question, but not her gift.

She had still been willing to try the brew that could kill her.

And ever since then, she had thought that he could take away the Scarlet magic he had "granted" her again with an easy flick of his wrist. Kymenos encouraged it. It was a useful illusion.

"How long will it take you to pack?" he asked.

Cheyena smiled at him again, now that she was convinced he would no longer destroy her in the next moment. "Not long, my lord. Some clothes and my treasures I wish to gather up, of course."

"Of course."

Cheyena turned and vanished into the back of the house. Kymenos looked around the bare room, waiting as patiently as he could.

"Kymenos."

Kymenos whirled around, his eyes narrowed. He was quite, quite sure that he had left Norianna tied to the saddle, bound firmly with ropes so that no one would have the clever idea of ripping her free. And the door was closed, too.

"How did you-"

"It does not matter," said Norianna impatiently.

"It matters more than one of your cryptic pronouncements."

"This is hardly cryptic," said Norianna. "I take it you have an enemy who is high in the Dark?"

"I do," said Kymenos. "Nightstone, the Lady of Orlath. But though she's alerted the guards, I'm sure they'll hesitate for a little while."

"Not the guards," said Norianna. "Listen."

Kymenos listened, and tensed when he heard a long, wailing cry. His vision blurred, and he would have staggered, but Norianna floated up under his hand and kept him as steady as a chair back would have.

"You recognize it, then," she said.

"I heard it often enough in the Dalorth Mountains," said Kymenos, shuddering all over. "But what makes you think they're after me?"

"I can feel their minds," said Norianna. "They are pointed towards a common goal, and that goal is you."

"How many in the pack?"

"Four."

Kymenos blinked, some of his fear- which had partially been inspired by the cry- melting away. "Why didn't you say so?"

"What?"

"Four ghioutlin are not a problem," he said. "I can call enough Light to kill that many."

"I think we should run."

"You want a dramatic escape with the pack nipping and yapping at our heels, don't you?" asked Kymenos.

Norianna didn't answer.

"You're not going to get it." Kymenos opened the door and stepped towards Sykeen, quickly opening a specific bag. *Where- ah! There!* He scooped the mirror into his free hand and laid the sword on Sykeen's back. "I don't want ghioutlin running the streets of Corlinth. I'll face them here."

"Kymenos-"

"Be quiet."

Kymenos turned towards the edge of the street just as that cry rang out again. His vision filled with mist, but he shook his head, and it passed. The ghioutlin were bold to be running in daylight. Doubtless they thought they could take him.

No, they can't. And a battle like this will be ever so much more satisfying than running in fear when there's nothing to run in fear of.

Chapter 11

Azure and Gust

"There is a kinship between Azure and Gust, the two most free of the elements. The Crop stays still save in the most savage moments; the Scarlet cannot burn by itself, but must be set free by a mage or by a lightning strike. But the wind and the sea are forever moving, and do not stop moving for a human's command."

-Treatise by the Lord of the Star Circle in the time of Klessa of the Nine Wonders.

Why are you laughing? You should know that the guards of Corlinth will be searching for you the moment they receive my message.

You have no idea about the political realities in Corlinth outside of your own narrow interests.

Nightstone's rage burned her, made her pace back and forth while she flung the words through the strange night-link to Kymenos's mind. At least when he was talking about other things and she was this angry, there was less chance that he would say something taunting that would embarrass her. *Can you even comprehend how long I have been alive? Can you even comprehend all that I know?*

Can you even comprehend how good it would feel for me to lie down with you in a bed and-

Nightstone nearly darkened her mind, closing off the night-link. It was under her control, she reassured herself. She was the one who reached out for Kymenos's mind, the one who whispered all the measures she had taken to rid herself of him. He was the one who should worry, the one who could never predict when the sky would crack open and her words would flood his brain.

But she couldn't control what he said, and that lashed her.

She waited until the taunt had passed, and then began again to tell him about some of the measures she had taken, while keeping some of them back. No need to tell him about the ghioutlin pack that even now was speeding down from the mountains, and that would take him into their own world and torture him until he was compliant. *I don't think that you understand-*

At that moment, she felt a stinging sensation course through her. In the same moment, a step sounded behind her, and she bared her teeth in acknowledgment.

The People of the Blending are here, she thought before she cut off the night-link, and knew from the laughter that touched her mind that Kymenos must have felt the thought, though why he found it amusing she had no idea. Perhaps he simply liked the idea of her not being able to cope with something, or perhaps he had never met the People of the Blending and didn't know what they were. Nightstone had met them before, and didn't want to meet them again.

She turned to face the filiferna behind her, nodding a little. The faceted eyes stared at her, and then the filiferna moved, putting its back to her while it watched the door. The chain in its hand twitched slightly, and the silver hair that looked like twisted wire rose and moved in an unseen wind. None of those things were as unnerving as the faceted eyes, though, and Nightstone allowed herself to relax a little. It was at least possible that the People of the Blending who had passed her wards would hesitate at the sight of a filiferna, the darkest of the fey and the only ones Nightstone had ever known who could destroy one of the elemental creatures.

An elf walked in through the door.

Nightstone blinked. Had the old wards she had habitually set since her one encounter with the People of the Blending stung her wrongly after all? This was a Faerie elf, silent and arrogant, not-

Then it dissolved into water, and, laughing, an undine rose and danced from a fountain that seemed to spring from the middle of the floor. In reality, Nightstone knew, the "fountain"

would be curving back in on itself, using up the same water again and again, but it was a clever illusion.

She forced herself to stay calm as she met the undine's eyes. "What do you want from me?"

"Acknowledgment," said the undine.

That made Nightstone blink. "I don't know what you want acknowledgment of," she said slowly. "Have we somehow intruded on your territory?" That was possible, since the People of the Blending would arbitrarily declare a bit of unlikely ground theirs and then defend it fiercely until they grew bored.

"You are a descendant of the Orlathian royal line," said the undine.

Nightstone bent her head a little. "Correct, or I would not be ruling in this castle. I don't have the pretensions of some of the Dark's lieutenants," she added, thinking of Artaen, who called himself by the title Prince of Rivendon even though Princess Cadona was the last living descendant of that line.

"One of your ancestors did us a great service," said the undine. "We have always considered ourselves in his debt. We are therefore here to protect you. The Princess Alliana is dead, of course, and there's nothing we can do about that. But you are still alive, and you carry the blood of Queen Aneron, just as he did."

Nightstone blinked. "I must have been born before he did you this great service, though." Certainly her brother and father had never acknowledged the People of the Blending as allies, and her uncle had gotten himself killed before she was born.

"Yes. That does not make you share any less of his blood."

Nightstone let out her breath. "Then why come to me now? Why not come to me before?" A thought occurred to her, and she spoke it aloud, since letting the People of the Blending find out about it later if they didn't know would be suicidal. "You are aware that I planned to kill Princess Alliana."

"I know," said the undine. "But you didn't actually kill her, and that makes it far different than if you had spilled shared blood."

Nightstone shook her head. "I don't understand this at all. Where were you before, when I needed protection?"

"Busy."

Nightstone studied the undine's narrowed eyes and the vigorous way the water was splashing on the floor, and decided she didn't need to pursue that right now, untrue as it probably was. The People of the Blending were fey, and that meant neither their bodies nor their minds nor their memories worked like a normal human's, even someone who had been alive four hundred years. "Well, you're here now. By what name am I to call you? And are you alone?"

The undine smiled abruptly. "I'm not alone. You can call me Blackbird."

"Why Blackbird?"

"I like blackbirds."

Nightstone shrugged. "And your companion?"

"Here."

Nightstone turned swiftly. This one formed as a sylph, a small woman with wings and a more delicate beauty than an undine's, appearing out of thin air slowly. She studied Nightstone for a long moment, then looked at Blackbird. "Are you sure about this, sister?"

"I am."

The sylph landed on Nightstone's shoulder, feeling like a delicate breeze and an itch at the same time. "Then I will serve you as well. My name is Anna."

Nightstone nodded. "And will you do anything that I ask of you?"

"Within reason."

Nightstone smiled, feeling the power surge within her. The People of the Blending were powerful allies, and she had tried to approach them that way more than once. Far more difficult, of course, was getting them to agree to anything once they'd been approached. "Then get rid of Prince Artaen of Rivendon for me."

"Is he actually royal?" asked Blackbird in interest.

"No," said Anna, her eyes narrowed, one hand shading her eyes as if she were looking into a great distance. "The last one who could claim that title is far from here, in the care of the-" Abruptly, part of her face melted back into air. She shook her head and regathered herself, looking ruefully at Nightstone. "I'm sorry. I know that she's somewhere far from here, but I can't tell who the ones protecting her are. They don't want me looking."

"It's all right," said Nightstone calmly, while her heart sang. The power at her disposal! Getting rid of Kymenos would be a pleasure. Getting rid of Artaen was a sound political move, an ambitious but wise decision. The Dark would forgive her for killing one of its most powerful lieutenants if she could bring the power of the People of the Blending along with her. "You can look later. For now, find Prince Artaen and bring him to me."

Anna blurred into flight, vanishing when she was halfway across the room. Nightstone turned forward, to Blackbird, and blinked when she saw the filiferna in the way. She had almost forgotten it was there. "You may go," she said sharply.

The dark fey turned and looked at her. Nightstone shivered, as she always did. Those eyes were filled with a faceted, turning triangle of colors, and there was nothing human in them at all. The filifernai's bodies were smooth and sexless, their hair moved by itself, they could die and come to life again in their dances, but those eyes were the most frightening part of them.

She licked her lips, and reminded herself that she was a lieutenant of the Dark the filifernai had always served faithfully, and more powerful than a single dark fey could ever dream of becoming. "Go," she repeated.

The filiferna turned and glided out of the room, the chain still swinging in its hand. Nightstone was just as glad that she had had no reason to command the dark fey to attack.

She turned to Blackbird. "Will you really do anything that I want to protect me against my enemies?" she asked curiously.

"As we said," said Blackbird. "Within reason, and within our power. We cannot attack elves."

Well, there goes the dream of making them stop wandering in and out of the castle. "But you can attack Masters of the Star Circle?"

"Oh, yes." Blackbird made a flipping little gesture with her hand that caused some of the water to splatter on the carpet. Nightstone might have cared about that an hour ago; now, she was far too eager about other things to care. "They annoy me, truly, playing with the elements as if they were the *Masters* they proclaim themselves, as if the elemental magic could not consume them any time the Cycle should care to do so."

"Could you torture one for me?"

"Who would you like tortured?"

"His name is Kymenos," said Nightstone, feeling herself grow more and more eager. The ghioutin would beak Kymenos, she was sure of it, but just the thought of what the People of the Blending could do was wonderful. "He has annoyed me and defied me times without end."

"Truly?" Blackbird blinked at her. "I would never have guessed. I thought that he was your ally."

"Why?" Nightstone asked, trying frantically to keep her fear from showing on her face. How could Kymenos know these particular People of the Blending?

"We met him in the middle of the Terrana River," said Blackbird, the sharp, clear features growing more and more puzzled as she watched Nightstone. "He suggested that you were without elemental protection now, and as one of the last descendants of the Orlathian royal line, we should help protect you. I thought he was your ally, since why else would he tell us about you?"

Nightstone shook. Why, indeed? She would have discounted most of the ideas now racing through her head, unless she was dealing with another Dark lieutenant, but Kymenos, though not immortal- and thank the Dark for its blessings- was more than clever enough to play some deep game. He had sent her the People of the Blending, or at least these two. Why else in the world would he have done it but to forward some plan of his own? She would be a fool to simply yield and pick up the bait without checking to see that no snare lay behind it.

"My lady."

Nightstone turned, expecting to see Anna dragging Artaen. Instead, the sylph alone was hovering in the center of the room, looking troubled.

"Your pardon, my lady, but I could not retrieve Artaen. He opened a portal just as he saw me, and I could not follow him through."

"Can't you track him through the elements?" Nightstone asked in hope. Surely that was possible. Most of those who could open portals used elemental magic to do so.

Anna gave her the answer she had been fearing, the answer she had already suspected since the sylph wasn't gone. "He did not travel by the elements, Lady. He was in a room deep beneath the castle, with the Cycle of Four inscribed on the floor. He sprang into the pool, crying out the name of the Dark, and though I knew it was a portal, the power of the Dark was what opened it, not the power of the Azure. I could not follow him through," she repeated, and then sighed.

Nightstone clenched her fists. She knew what was happening. The Dark would not interfere in the squabble between lieutenants unless it was called- and then the interference would be light, mild. If she had managed to take Artaen before he went through the portal, then the Dark would have applauded her cleverness and allowed her to do what she liked with the Prince of Rivendon. But Artaen had been clever and wary enough to spring through the water first, and so the Dark had accepted that he had won this round and carried him.

She might have some time before he arrived in Rivendon, though- and surely, going after Artaen could have no part in Kymenos's plans and should not spring whatever trap he had woven these People of the Blending into.

She had just opened her mouth when she screamed and went to her knees. Artaen's voice thundered in her head, hungry, snarling. Nightstone had never known anyone who could speak from a distance the way he did, and never known anyone who could throw a telepathic bolt with such power.

We should have been allies, Artaen raged at her. Instead, you tried to take me down, and you are still pursuing a man who could have nothing, now, to do with our plans. You are playing games, Nightstone, laying your own personal grudges ahead of t Dark's goals. I can play that game as well, my lady, and the Dark has given me its permission. I will send Rivendonian forces against Orlath. From this moment on, consider us at war.

The link snapped. Nightstone sat up cautiously, clutching her temples. They felt as if she had a separate heart beating in her head, one whose every beat was pain.

"Why did you smack your head into the floor?" Blackbird asked. "That wasn't very intelligent, was it?"

Chapter 12

Training the Fey

"I have only watched an elf fight with a sword once. I have no wish to see it again."

-Attributed to Prince Leroth of Orlath.

"To the side, down, around- *good*, Cadona!"

"Really?"

Olumer smiled, feeling better than he had since they had come to this strange forest-world. Cadona was beaming at him, and for once the smile had nothing of the arrogant touch that it did when she talked about rising with Destiny and taking her Kingdom back from the people who had despoiled it. She was only taking pride in a skill well done.

"Yes, it is," he said. "Down, to the side- *around*-"

His sword pivoted, and slammed to a stop against hers. If he had pressed a little more, his strength would have forced it past, but only yesterday Cadona had been unable to block at all. She was learning to compensate for his speed, and the strength could come later.

Cadona drew back and looked at him with speculation in her silver eyes. Then she threw herself forward again, pressing him hard with the lighter sword the elves had found for her and which she liked much better.

Olumer fell back, putting what he thought was a reasonable distance between them. He wasn't really letting Cadona win, but if she didn't, then that might destroy the pleasant mood between them, and he didn't want it to shatter. Lyli was off somewhere, crying, but for once Cadona was only concentrating on the swords.

"You're holding back, aren't you?" asked Cadona, with a hint of anger in her voice.

"Of course-"

"Don't hold back!" she shouted, and threw herself at him again, striking so quickly that Olumer found it hard to keep up.

For a moment.

Then he accepted what she said and unleashed the strength that was waiting within him, and her sword slammed hard against his, hard enough shock both him and her. Olumer sprang forward and found Cadona almost dancing in place, waiting for him, her eyes shining with glee.

"I *knew* that you would make a good sparring partner!" she shouted, and came at him again with the moves he had taught her.

She was fast even if she wasn't strong, and she was considerably younger than he was. But at the same time, Olumer felt as if he were inside her muscles and knew where the sword would go. She had to swing it in an arc that would land there, and all he had to do was block it.

He twisted to the side and did so.

Cadona blinked, circled, and came in again. Olumer spun in a complete circle, and blocked her sword when it was only an inch into the move she had planned to use.

Cadona lowered her sword and studied him. Olumer at once mimicked her, panting a little. The air shone with a peculiar intensity, as if light had touched every strand of the Gust. Olumer shivered and felt a pleasant ache, both from his own muscles and from Cadona's, which he could feel as she shifted back and forth on the wet grass.

"Olumer," said Cadona at last, "how did you do that?"

Olumer shook his head and attempted to reply. It took him some time, since the air seemed to have gotten into his throat and filled it with sweet jelly. "I am older and more experienced at fighting with the sword, Cadona. It's not impossible that I would manage to defeat you."

A moment later, he winced, and some of his usual caution returned. He shouldn't have phrased it like that. He and Cadona had been training, not fighting. He hadn't defeated her, not really. He should have phrased it more diplomatically. Any moment now she would become enraged and scream-

But when he dared to meet her eyes, she was still staring at him, shaking her head a little. "You stopped me before I knew what move I was going to use," she said. "And you did it without watching my eyes or my face, which is the way that you've taught me to pick up on clues."

Olumer shrugged. The shivering came not from the intensity now, but the sweat trickling down his back as it cooled. "Just experience."

"You also told me you've only spent about thirty human years awake."

"Maybe a little more."

Cadona raised her eyebrows. Olumer thought she was about to say something else, but just then Pannerel stepped through the trees and she retreated, her brows contracting and her mouth pursing.

"Olumer," said Pannerel, smiling at him. "I wanted to talk to you. It's time for your language lesson."

Olumer looked at Cadona, hoping she would rescue him, but she had heard the words "language lesson" and wasn't meeting his eyes. A moment later, she scooped her sword into her arms and headed into the forest, not turning back when Olumer called her name.

"I should go after her," said Olumer, edging around Pannerel. "She doesn't like elves much, and we were having a very interesting-"

"Stay here."

Olumer tensed. Again, Pannerel's eyes had altered, the playfulness bleeding out of them. "I would rather not," Olumer said as quietly as he could, though his heart had kicked from the hard rhythm of sparring into the volatile rhythm of panic. "I haven't seen Lyli for some hours, and since it's my responsibility to take care of her, then I think I should. And of course Cadona needs me all the time."

"You can spare as much time as this will take."

Olumer didn't understand himself. The panic was growing, but rising right behind it was irritation. Where was the patience he used to deal with Cadona? After spending so many years with her, he should have been able to submit, nod and smile, and do whatever the elf asked of him. "My lord, my charge is the Princess of Rivendon."

"Yes, I know that," said Pannerel. He glanced at Olumer's sword. "You're teaching her weapons."

"It would have looked strange for her to know the sword when she was just a hunter's daughter. But now she's the Princess to the world as well as to herself and me, and she needs the training."

Pannerel nodded and made a smooth, sweeping motion. When he was done, there was a sword in his hand, a blade so light and fragile that Olumer would have thought it would snap on the first pass. It glittered sharp and golden as an edge of light, though. Olumer didn't think it would shatter. He fell back a step, the irritation vanishing. Perhaps it would have been best to just listen to whatever it was Pannerel wanted after all.

"It would please me," said Pannerel, watching Olumer, "if you would play at swords with me."

"Why?" Olumer asked. Once again his emotions had shifted, and the irritation was back. He knew a moment of pure irritation with himself in the middle of it all. *Gods, what is this?* "My lord, you are an elf, and faster and stronger than any human-"

"You aren't human."

Given the savagery with which Pannerel made that particular declaration, Olumer wasn't going to contest him. "Half-human," he said. "You are stronger than any half-human, my lord, and more graceful. We know you would win. You don't strike me as the type who likes to show off his skill. Why are you doing this?"

"Will you duel with me or not?"

Olumer shook his head. "There would be no point. The language lessons have a purpose behind them, even if it's one I don't agree with, but this would only take time away from Cadona and Lyli to no purpose. You haven't struck me as unreasonable, my lord. Let me go."

Pannerel paced forward, that beautiful blade waving like the tail of a cat or a snake. Olumer tensed again and laid a hand on the hilt of his own sword.

"You fight well," said Pannerel. "You move well, for a half-human." A smile was back on his face, but it was still too intense and tight. Olumer thought the elves found most other people fascinating but incomprehensible. Now, Pannerel was looking as if he understood Olumer very well. "I think it will turn out differently from what you believe."

Olumer would have protested, but he was afraid that much more of that would make Pannerel strike to kill. And he couldn't do that. He couldn't leave Cadona and Lyli here, with no notion of when the elves might try to take them back to their own world, or even an idea of what would happen to them.

He set himself and met the first strike blade to blade. All his suspicions were confirmed at once. Pannerel was stronger, faster, more graceful, and none of those qualities were limited by the body he wore. He could flow out of it and then back in. He could change shape if he wished. Olumer had always known that about elves. Most of them wore the elven shape because they liked it and because it was the body that other races had become accustomed to seeing them in.

He fell back before Pannerel, trying to take care that his sword wasn't cut by the blade of Light. The elves would replace it, he was fairly sure, but they might be irritated enough with him after this- for whatever reason- not to.

"Olumer," said Pannerel.

Gods, he sounds as though he were walking through a forest. "What?" Olumer panted back, dodging the Light blade's strike and then coming back in. Hard, now, hard and vicious to the midriff.

Pannerel blocked it, of course, and danced aside to stare at Olumer. His eyes shone nearly as much as the blade, and they cut into Olumer, which didn't easily happen to a half-fey. He had seen humans with small spots of blood on their cheeks from meeting an elf's eyes, but only rarely had they had the same effect on him. "You're not fighting, not really fighting. You need to do what you were doing with Cadona."

"I'm *not* holding back!" Olumer cried, ducking another sweep of the blade that would have scalped him. He could feel the wind in his hair, and he wasn't sure if Pannerel was trying to kill him or not. That scared him. He pressed his back against a tree and held his sword as firmly as he could. "I was holding back with her, but I'm not with you, and it doesn't make any difference!"

"Look through the air."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look through it."

Olumer fixed his eyes on the air, shivering, aware that Pannerel could spring out of the easy stance he stood in now and forward at any moment.

The air shone like dew, like diamonds. He had noticed that since they came to this world. It had fresher air than their own world, as if not far away was a strong source of the Gust. He would have enjoyed looking at it under ordinary circumstances, but for some minutes now, he had seen only the way it tended to sharpen and gleam around the blade of Light.

As he watched, the shine he had seen to it earlier returned, as well as that peculiar intensity that had gripped him. Olumer licked his lips and shifted closer. If he could just reach out and touch-

"Now."

Pannerel laughed and sprang forward in the same instant. Olumer twisted to meet him. His own blade caught the sword, and flung it back.

Olumer stared, trembling like a just-birthered wolf pup. That had been close, so close that he could almost feel the blood the blade would have started flowing, but he had done it.

"Do you see?" asked Pannerel quietly, as he lowered his hand and his sword faded into light again. "You have not tried hard enough, Olumer. Or you have felt what you could have done, and retreated from it like a bashful lover. There is more. You will never know how much more unless you make the decision to reach for it."

"Why did I never know about this before?" Olumer asked.

"You are bound," said Pannerel quietly. "Bound by the oath that you swore to the Rivendonian royal family, and which was almost certainly designed to stop something like this from happening."

Olumer shook his head. "I remember taking that oath. It was of my own free choice. I didn't say anything about binding my strength. I have always been half-silvereyes, and that means less strength than a fullblood. There's no reason why I should be acquiring new abilities now."

Pannerel just bowed to him, and faded into air.

Olumer stood there blowing air past his lips and scowling. The one time he would have welcomed conversation with the elf, and Pannerel had had to vanish on him. At least Cadona wasn't screaming for him this time.

"Olumer!"

No, but Lyli is.

With a sigh, he went to tend to his duties.

"You will have to make a decision soon."

Olumer started and looked up. Annalithiel was sitting across the fire from him, gazing at him as if she found him actually interesting. When she turned her head and stared into the flames, Olumer forced himself to wait, not sure what she wanted. It was almost the first time since they had come to this world that she had spoken to him. Her efforts were fixed on the Princesses.

"About going back to my own world?" he asked.

Annalithiel darted a glance at him. "No. We would send you back regardless. You couldn't stay here in this world with no one to protect, clothe, or feed you. But you must decide what Quest you will pursue."

"Why, Cadona's."

"You will not take Lyli with you, then?"

"Lyli doesn't have a Quest," said Olumer, wondering if this was another thing about humans elves didn't understand. They didn't have auras of Destiny themselves, so perhaps they were unfamiliar with how it worked. "She is only the foster sister of the Princess of Orlath, and not her sister. Her sister died in chains." He winced. He still didn't like to remember how terrified he had been when the thiria came into the dungeon. If the strange explosion hadn't freed them all, he might have hung there while it devoured Cadona. "Only Cadona does. We'll go back to our world, fulfill the Quest, and put her on the throne as Queen of Rivendon."

"And what is her Quest?"

"The answer lies in the western part of Rivendon."

"And you don't know where?"

Olumer shook his head. "I heard her recite her own prophecy just once. I would assume that she knows far more about it than she's willing to tell me, and that is information that should remain private. If her enemies catch me, they can't torture it out of me."

"Will Lyli consent to go with you?"

"Where else would she go?" Olumer asked, honestly bewildered. In the days- or however long it really had been in their world- since their escape from Nightstone and Artaen, Lyli had come to depend on him almost as much as Cadona did. She wanted him to hold her while she wept rather than provide her with someone to scream at, but it was almost the same.

"To free her parents from Nightstone's dungeons."

Olumer winced. He had almost completely forgotten about the peasant family, probably because he had never seen any of them except for the supposed Lyli. "That cannot be done," he said. "Unless you go with her and help her do it, of course."

Annalithiel shook her head. "My guardianship, if I were to think of it that way, lies with Cadona more than Lyli, since the blood of my friend runs in her."

"Your friend?"

"One of the Kings of Orlath." Annalithiel watched him for a moment. "That is what I was thinking of asking you- if you would permit me to go to Rivendon with Cadona, while you took Lyli back to the dungeons and helped her free her parents."

"No!" Olumer was hardly aware that he had sprung to his feet until he realized that he was staring down at Annalithiel, but he held firm.

The elf studied him. After a moment, her eyes filled with curiosity. "I *think* I understand," she said, "but could you explain further?"

"Gladly," said Olumer, taking his seat again. Anger warmed his blood, and that was an asset when dealing with elves. Really, any emotion beyond fear was. "I swore an oath to her. She is my Princess, and my Queen. I will not leave her. I will never leave the last Heir of the Rivendonian line until the breath leaves my body."

Annalithiel sighed. "I was afraid of that," she said.

"I still don't understand why you can't tear into the dungeons and rescue them, guardianship or not," Olumer argued.

"The balance is very delicate right now," said Annalithiel. "A few of the great powers and gods are playing politics, and they can turn and lash out and destroy elves." Her eyes went cold. "One of them is slaughtering our people. When we figure out who it is, then we will move to stop it."

"So you have other concerns?"

Annalithiel nodded.

Olumer relaxed. Bleak as that was, it at least let him understand some things that he hadn't about the way the elves behaved. They took care of him and Cadona and Lyli, but that was only a secondary concern. Of course they would be more worried about the slaughter of their people.

"I am more worried about Cadona and Lyli," he said. "Place us in the Western Crescent of Rivendon, and Destiny will guide us."

For the first time, Annalithiel smiled. "I would depend on someone else, if you can," she said, climbing to her feet. "Destiny is a notoriously blindfolded guide."

Chapter 13

Light From the East

"Beware the dawn."

-Password among Darkworkers.

Are you all right?

Ternora shut her eyes and said nothing for a long moment. She didn't know what she could say. Her muscles had never ached so much. Swimming back to her room in Erlande's palace had almost made her start drifting. Ebbtide had taught her so many knife moves that shouted warnings crowded her head, and she couldn't find the peace to rest. She hung there and hurt.

I'm all right, she said at last. *And I did ask for this, when I told Warcourage it will be all right to go to the border guards.*

What!

Ternora winced and opened her eyes. She had forgotten that Viridian hadn't known about that little plan. *Warcourage was sure that he could persuade the mermaids to let him escape. So I accompanied him. And, sure enough, he began glowing with Light and I thought he might actually do it. But they beat him back instead, and then Ebbtide started teaching me the knife the mermaids use so that I would stay out of trouble.*

There was a long silence. Then Viridian said, *I see. And did it occur to any of you that you could just ask Erlande if you wanted to leave?*

He would have said no.

Yes, but you could have asked him.

Warcourage didn't want to wait. Ternora rolled over and looked at the dragon, who was sticking his head in through the window of her room, curiously. *Would you want to leave? I know that you're having interesting debates here. And you haven't said anything about the Pool of Siliyonete in a long time.*

Viridian let out a hot sigh. He couldn't breathe steam underwater, but his breath wasn't all scalding water; sometimes it could feel just pleasantly warm. Ternora floated in the current and studied the dragon while she waited for a reply.

I am having a pleasant time here, said Viridian at last, *and I would regret leaving. But it is true that my lord will never tell me where the Pool of Siliyonete is, since He thinks it's a legend. And I must find the Pool. If you and Warcourage find a way to leave, then I will accompany you. I just hope that I don't have to incur the wrath of my god to depart.*

What do you want with the Pool?

Some secrets must remain mine.

Ternora just barely kept herself from thinking at him what she thought of that. She was going with Warcourage for perfectly acceptable mercenary reasons. Viridian had some secret that he wouldn't reveal. She was getting tired of it.

I wonder how much longer the Prince will be willing to accept you as a companion, when you say tiresome things like that?

You could always ask him.

He's sulking again.

Viridian made some small talk after that, but seemed uncomfortable, and swam away from her as soon as he could, leaving Ternora to drift in the water, and hurt, and think.

Even if Ebbitide teaches me to fight as well as she does, there's no way that I could fight my way past her and all the mermaids, and no way to guard ourselves in the open ocean. I wouldn't know how to hunt a fish who fled me.

What are we going to do?

Just the thought of all the jewels going unused on land- and, of course, the poor, poor Doralissan people who were waiting for their Prince- made her sick.

"Ternora?"

Ternora opened her eyes in startlement. Was she in an air bubble? It was the only explanation for why she was hearing a voice that spoke aloud, and not telepathy.

Slowly, she stood up, realizing that, indeed, she was in an air bubble, and she could breathe. The gills were gone. She looked at her hands and saw only her hands, with none of the webbing that Erlande had put between her fingers when he changed her.

She burst into tears, quite startlinging herself.

"Ternora," said the voice softly. "I have done this for you, so that you might enjoy the peace of the dream in comfort. But we don't have much time. And the more you weep, the less time we have."

Sniffing, Ternora looked up, and stared. She had expected a goddess or an elf, perhaps, but the woman who sat before her on a raised white throne was neither. Her skin was as pale as the stone surrounding her, which would have made it difficult to see her if not for the sharp dark eyes, and the wings that extended from her back and slowly moved up and down.

"Who are you?" Ternora asked.

"I am called many things," said the woman softly. "None of them are names you would recognize. You can call me Savior, though. I intend to be the Savior of both you and the young Prince of Doralissa."

"Why?"

Savior hesitated. Then she said, "I have seen many, many things in my lifetime. I have seen devastating wars. I have seen prophecies fulfilled. I have seen Princes and Princesses ascend and become Kings and Queens."

"I've seen those things, too," said Ternora, grinding her teeth. For some reason, she found this woman intensely annoying. "But I don't have the power to change myself back into my half-elven form, or to change Warcourage back into a human from his dolphin form."

The sharp eyes flickered once, and then a look that was more human overcame the pale face for a moment. "Half-elven? You're a half-elf." Savior studied Ternora's pointed ears as if she had never noticed them.

Ternora dipped her head. "Yes, I am. And Prince Warcourage's guardian. You must understand, Savior, having someone appear from nowhere and declare that she's here to save us... it's a little strange."

"I know," said Savior, and sat upright. Abruptly she seemed to grow, so that magnificence shone through her. Ternora shivered, catching a glimpse of her true power. Images of birds brushed past her, a great many birds flying south, their voices lifted in triumphant calls. "And I really do intend to save both of you. My motives are right. I am sure of that."

"You want to see Prince Warcourage on the Doralissan throne?"

Savior nodded fervently. "I have little stake in Doralissa, but Prince Warcourage must come to the throne so that other things bound to the prophecy about him and the other three royals can happen."

"What prophecy about him and the other three royals?"

"You haven't heard of it?"

"No."

Savior nodded, and then tilted her head back and began to sing in Doralissan. Ternora shivered as the words poured past, dancing and shining.

"She who sings sees now a great vision;

The cry of ravens she hears, who deride

The attempt to reclaim those who have died.

The great ones of Light come to a decision,

And influence the birth of four Heirs of Light

Who shall make the world forever bright,

And turn the Kingdoms into a deep paradise,

Though only with blood and fire's sacrifice.

But they must be the true and four royal Heirs,

Or else this paradise shall never come to pass.

This prophecy is as fragile as glass."

Before the advent of the black stone's cares."

Ternora shivered again. She couldn't hope to translate everything in there, but certainly some things were true. There had been four Heirs of Light; that was the whole reason that Dark and Shadow had attacked the royal families in the first place. And the "black stone" sounded like Princess Nightstone of Orlath. She wondered what would happen if the prophecy didn't come true, and decided that she didn't want to know.

"You see," said Savior, who was watching her when Ternora glanced up, "that far more is at stake than you realized."

"Yes," said Ternora. "I thought that I could just leave Doralissa if something went wrong with Prince Warcourage's attempt to reclaim the throne, but I can't. Nowhere will be safe, will it?"

Savior stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. "No. Nowhere will. You have to make your decision now. Will you trust me to rescue Prince Warcourage and you, and follow the signal when it comes?"

"What is the signal?"

"A shaft of dawnlight from the east," said Savior. "The Prince has sensed something in the eastern ocean, he said. Do you remember that?" When Ternora nodded, she went on. "That was me. He received at least one of my messages. But I can't keep sending them. Erlande is getting suspicious. I must strike, once and hard, with all my remaining strength, and open a path for the two of you through his border guards. If you want me to do this, and you trust me enough to swim through it when I tell you, be at the eastern border at dawn." She paused, as if communing with herself, and then said, "There isn't much time left, if you're going to start swimming. Will you be willing to trust me?"

Ternora felt the dream dissolving, and fought to cling to it just a moment longer. The image sharpened again. She was elven enough for that. "What do we have to do when we see the light?"

"Swim towards it, and then up it, as fast as you can." Savior's voice was fading. "I will form a tunnel through Erlande's power, one he cannot touch. But-"

"We must be ready."

"Yes."

The dream faded then, and Ternora opened her eyes. For a long moment, she thought that hope hurt as much as the aches in her muscles.

Then she began swimming to get Warcourage, and found out she was wrong. The aches in her muscles hurt far more.

You're sure?

I am.

Surprisingly enough, that seemed to be sufficient. Perhaps Warcourage was reassured by his own sensing of something helpful in the eastern ocean, perhaps it was for some other reason, but Ternora knew that he believed her, and so they were waiting now at the eastern border, waiting for the sun to lift above the waters and for something else to happen.

The border guards were swimming all around them, but since Ternora and Warcourage weren't actually trying to get across the border, they had given them both amused glances and left them alone. Ternora used that to reassure herself. All wasn't lost if this didn't work. They could return to the palace, and Erlande would never know that they had tried to escape.

She thought.

Where's Viridian?

Ternora winced at the question. *I didn't tell him about this*, she said. *There wasn't time, and I don't know if we can trust him*. She knew she didn't, after his desire to keep what he wanted with the Pool of Siliyonete a secret. Besides, he was far too complacent about Erlande, sure the god would let them go. Ternora didn't think so.

I am here.

Startled, Ternora turned her head. The green dragon hung not far from her, the beginnings of the sunrise reflected in his scales. There was an accusing look in his eyes. Ternora turned her head away.

What are you doing here?

Ternora turned her head back, and saw Ebbtide swimming up behind Viridian, her green eyes growing more disturbed.

Ternora would have tried to think up some convincing lie, but Warcourage yelled *There it is!* and she swung back to see the path glowing through the water, a shaft of sunlight stabbing down almost vertically, waiting for them.

Viridian roared and surged towards it, snapping out one paw that caught Warcourage, and another that caught Ternora. For a moment, seeing that the mermaids made no move to catch the dragon, Ternora tasted bitter betrayal. Viridian must have thrown in his lot with Erlande.

Then she realized that that was what the mermaids thought, as Viridian arched forward and up into the light.

Ternora had never felt anything like what happened next. Someone grabbed and violently yanked on every part of her body, trying to pull her in every direction at once. She heard roaring, as of water rearing up to crush her, and singing voices, like the triumphant bird calls she had heard around Savior. And then the roaring and the singing crashed together into air, and Ternora gasped and then began to cough. She was once again standing in front of a white throne, though this time with water dripping from her clothes.

But she could breathe air again. And she had her fingers unwebbed.

She turned to see Viridian shaking water from his wings and dumping Warcourage on the floor. He was human again, and looked up with a smile as Savior appeared on the throne.

"You are my rescuer," he said. "My protector. Thank you."

Ternora glanced at Viridian. The dragon smiled, showing his teeth, and spoke in a rumble that neither Warcourage nor Savior seemed to hear.

"He is only a means to the Pool of Siliyonete. No more."

Ternora nodded, and reminded herself of the jewels going to waste, then turned around with a smile when Savior asked, "Was that impressive magic?"

"It was, my lady," said Ternora, dumping awe into her voice until Savior preened. Ternora smiled as she watched the woman. Goddess or fey or whatever she was, she would be easy to handle.

Just like Warcourage.

Ternora knelt in front of the Doralissan Prince. "My lord, I have been inspired by your courage. From now on, I swear loyalty to the throne, and to the Light, and may the Dark take me if I stray."

Not a word of it was true, but Warcourage reached out and brushed her face with his half-eaten hand to signify that he believed it.

Ternora smiled again as she rose to her feet. *So easy. And since I don't trust either of them and they both trust me, I'll have the advantage when Savior finally reveals what in the Light she really wants. No one does something like this just for the sake of loyalty to a country, or for a prophecy. No one would be that stupid.*

Chapter 14

The Crown

"Have you ever been in the Arvennese mountains? No? Then you wouldn't understand."

-The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

"Wake up, Elary."

Elary stirred, then came suddenly awake. The cold wind wasn't blowing on her, for the first time in the gods knew how long. She looked around, stretched and blinked, and slowly climbed down from Silar's arms when she realized the woman was standing still in order to let her do just that.

Elary looked around hopefully. She had lived in Arvenna for a year, and had crossed these mountains before. There was a small chance that they would stand in a place she recognized, and that she could therefore find a way back to Mitherill.

But the mountains around her were wild and rugged, and higher than she had ever climbed on her passage through them. The air itself was thin and keen as the wind had been, as Elary began to recognize after a few moments of breathing it. Everywhere around them, snow shimmered in the light of the moon and stars, cloaking any familiar features that Elary might have spotted. And she could almost taste the magic that rose from the stone, wild and vicious. There were reasons that few people dwelt in the Dalorth Mountains, and not all of them had to do with the cold.

Elary decided to try reason. "You have no right to hold me here, wherever we are. I demand that you let me go."

Silar gave her a single, swift glance, then turned and talked with a figure forming out of lighting. Melior, Elary knew, even before those bolt-marked eyes turned her way, and the woman inclined her head in a short greeting.

"We're not completely to the Crown yet," said Melior, "but we'll be there before long, and there your mind can be freed."

"I am not a slave."

"Yes, you are," said Melior, her voice sweet with sadness. "Destiny has enslaved you so completely that you don't realize it, but you *are* a slave." She turned her head to the east, or what Elary thought was the east; the mountains and snow and shining, faint light were beginning to dizzy her. "We should make it to the Crown before dawn if we can, Silar."

Silar nodded. "I know. I just need to rest my wings." She sat down, spreading her wings wide and slowly moving them up and down.

"How will that rest them?" asked Elary.

Silar looked at her, then turned her head away, not deigning to reply. Melior did. "Such a motion is slow and relaxing, and quite different from the constant flapping that she would need to do otherwise."

"Oh," said Elary, and turned away to study the Mountains again, because she couldn't think of any better reply than that. Her gaze kept moving to the north. At first, she thought it was because that was the direction she would have to take to get back to Mitherill, but after a time she became uneasily convinced that it was something else. Besides, Silar had been flying east.

"What's up there?" she asked Melior, jabbing a hand at the large peak that drew her gaze again and again.

"The Crown."

Elary tensed. That was the place where they would "heal" her of her obligation to Mitherill, "free her from slavery." And she was not going to let it happen. She had let too much time pass between leaving the camp and coming here anyway, but she had been in shock. Now she wasn't, and she must try to resist.

Naldeon had given her some sort of order about fighting Melior, Elary remembered. But he had said nothing about Silar. The way she had struggled against the woman when they were flying proved that.

Elary came up beside Silar. The woman looked up at her in silence, still moving her wings gently up and down.

Elary punched her in the face.

Silar twisted to the side as the punch came in, and it only grazed her. In seconds, she had reached up and grasped Elary's arm, squeezing so hard that Elary thought she could feel the bones turning to pulp. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to concentrate through the pain. As long as Silar was holding her this tightly, then she would attempt to use the magic that she should have used in the first place, the devastating disease-magic of the *ilzánai*.

She called on the first sickness that she was familiar with, the sneezerot that occupied the victim with the endless mucous draining out of the nose. It wasn't fatal, but slamming into someone as quickly as a half-*ilzán* could send it, it would certainly have the advantage of surprise.

It ran down her arm and hit Silar. The woman let her go, blinking and sniffing and touching her nose as if she thought it would explode. And then it almost *did* explode, as Silar let out a sneeze that tore through the night like thunder.

Elary backed away, panting. Melior turned her head to look at her, and the half-liadra's eyes were glowing, now, the black shining around the golden lightning bolts.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Melior quietly.

Elary just shook her head and backed away further. "Are you really going to hurt me? It's not worth it, is it? All I want to do is get back to my Princess. You don't need to interfere. You probably need to get back to your leader anyway. Aren't you worried about the gryphons killing him?"

A strange smile touched Melior's mouth, and faded. "You don't understand the way the Serpents work," she said, gliding forward until she could reach out and touch Elary. "I have no fears for their safety."

"I will jump," said Elary.

"You will? But then how will you get back to your Princess?" Melior seemed no more than slightly curious, studying her with eyes that gleamed.

"I would prefer to be dead than to have you take my loyalty away."

Melior shook her head and clucked her tongue. "And I thought you were clever, too. My dear, this loyalty that you so value is nothing more than the snares of Destiny, spun about your mind so that you won't see Mitherill for what she truly is and leave her to fend for herself."

"She's a child," said Elary tightly, backing away another step. There was a drop behind her, but she didn't think that Melior would force her to go over it. She didn't think so. "No child deserves to be left alone and helpless."

"And no woman deserves slavery to her." The half-liadra's feet left the ground, transforming into lightning. "My lord ordered us to take you to the Crown, and so we shall."

"Why?" asked Elary harshly. "What benefit do you hope to reap from breaking me of my loyalty against my will?"

"You misunderstand Naldeon," said Melior, and drifted still closer. "We do what we do because you deserve better than slavery to Mitherill. We do it because, after all, you know her best, and we need you to look at her through clear eyes and see if she truly can become the Queen of Ilantra-Arvenna. You can't see her clearly now, and we don't know her well enough."

"Why do you distrust the choice of Destiny? Do you really think it would choose someone unsuited to the throne?"

"Of course," said Melior. "It has done so in the past, so that it could have the drama of bringing in yet another Heir, or a civil war. Destiny loves drama, Elary. I don't care for it that much."

"You name yourself a Serpent."

Melior grinned. "That much drama is permissible. What Destiny wants- people dying or dead, Kingdoms shattered, people ruling who should not be ruling- is not." She moved another step closer.

Elary spread her arms. She was filled with insane confidence that Destiny would catch her. Perhaps it was the sensation of strong magic, whispering around her and thrumming in her veins. Perhaps it was just confidence in the way that Destiny needed her. "I'll jump."

Melior only shook her head and stepped forward again, arms out as if she were going to catch Elary and restrain her.

Elary flung her head back and jumped.

In seconds, she felt arms grab her, and then felt the warm explosion of a sneeze in her hair.

"If you're going to afflict me with sneezerot," said Silar's voice, "at least you'll get to share in the blessings."

Elary opened her eyes sharply, and found herself hanging in Silar's arms above the long fall she would otherwise have taken. The sensation of magic drifted heavy and sweet in the air around her, and she could almost hear Destiny calling her to make the jump. It would catch her, and bear her on the winds to Mitherill, where she would arrive just in time to rescue the Princess from her own death.

"Destiny doesn't want to let you go, does it?" Silar asked quietly as Elary struggled in her arms. "I should have guessed. It chose you for the guardianship for a reason. If someone manages to interfere, then all its carefully laid plans will be destroyed."

"Let- me- go," Elary growled, twisting in the woman's grasp.

"No," said Silar, and then her fist struck Elary on the head.

Elary tried to cling to consciousness, arms flailing while the world wheeled around her. Then Silar hit her again, this time with considerably more force, and the world turned into a dusky gray veil.

From somewhere beyond it, Elary heard Melior's voice. "Did you have to hit her so hard? Now she may not be awake when we reach the Crown."

"That doesn't matter," said Silar coolly. "You know that the Crown can reach through and speak to her mind for something like this. Unconsciousness should be no trouble when it's required to snap the bonds of Destiny."

"No, I suppose not," Melior murmured, and then Elary had the sensation of being borne rapidly along once more. Silar sneezed in her hair several more times, and that disgusted her more than the thought of being made to submit did, but she couldn't gather the strength to move away.

"Here we are."

Elary shivered. The cold wind was blowing again, and it hit her so much like a slap in the face that she opened her eyes at last. They hung above a mountain peak that Elary assumed was the Crown, at least from the reverent expressions on Melior's and Silar's faces when they gazed down at it.

"Ready?" Melior asked, and Silar said something that, even as close to Elary's ear as her mouth was, was inaudible.

They dived.

Elary could feel the magic getting stronger as they approached. It could have been her imagination, just perhaps, but she didn't think so. The magic shone and glittered visibly in the

air now, like the tricks of a Light mage. Elary swallowed and wondered if she would feel her loyalty to Mitherill disappear, or if it would be a subtle thing. Probably subtle. Destiny's enemies wouldn't want to show their hands too early, just as in case Destiny managed to stop them.

Silar pulled up abruptly, and Elary found herself hovering, along with the winged woman, in the midst of an immense circle of rock. The stones that formed the circle were irregular in both shape and size, some of them almost statues, some of them incised with patterns, some of them simple standing stones. Elary stared at the nearest, and thought she saw a face melt out of the rock and frown at her.

She screamed.

"What is it?" asked Melior, coming to her side at once.

"Don't worry about her," said Silar. "Some new trick to get out of our care, I'm sure." She fluttered the rest of the distance to the ground, and set Elary in the middle of the rough circle. "There. Now all you need to do is remain still, and the magic of the Crown can work on you." She flew up and out of the circle, joining Melior in hovering a short distance away.

Elary didn't remain still, of course, but at once tried to move away. *If the magic needs stillness, that is the one thing I will not give it.*

Piercing silver light flickered to life at once, speeding from the stones and concentrating on her. Elary flinched as one beam struck her eyes, blinding her for a moment, and then another hit her shoulder, leaving a stinging, numbing cold behind. She stumbled to a stop and bowed her head.

The silver light continued to grow in intensity, and now Elary thought she could hear a voice singing. The sound shifted and moved, however, flickering from side to side like candlelight whenever Elary thought she had pinpointed the direction. Beautiful and savage and strange, it frightened her as much as the silver beams.

Abruptly, every muscle in Elary's body tightened.

Something was coming.

She could feel the approaching footsteps as if they walked over her bones. Something was coming. Something immensely powerful and unhurried. It would crack her open and devour her as if she were nothing special or important. And it wouldn't do it out of malice, or even hunger, but only because it was coming, and she was in the way.

Elary screamed again, but the sound didn't strike her ears. Only that singing did, now altering, now shifting from side to side, now coming back again. And the strangest visions were rising in front of her, obscuring the vision of the standing stones as she looked around but then vanishing like ghosts. Elary thought she could see flickering flames, and forges, and swords.

"You're sure?" Melior asked.

"I'm sure," Silar said, from somewhere beyond the visions and the singing.

Elary wanted to scream at them to rescue her. Even just a touch of a hand would be more human contact than she had had so far. But she knelt, shivering, deprived of strength in her arms and legs by the cold. The visions of the fires could only flicker, not provide warmth.

The singing and the footsteps continued approaching, surrounding her until Elary thought she would die of the sounds.

Then they stopped.

Hoping that they had gone away, Elary looked up, and realized that yet another vision stood over him. She could see through the figure, but it didn't stop her from being caught by the sight of it, or those extraordinary eyes.

The figure had the beautiful, angular features of most of the fey Elary knew, but it was taller, and had long silver hair that moved and stirred in a wind of its own. The eyes were the dominant features of the face, if they could be called eyes. They looked more like windows into pure fire. Elary thought of suns burning at the end of darkened tunnels, and shivered.

The figure put out a hand towards her. Elary knew she shouldn't be afraid. The figure was only a ghost, or a vision, and it wouldn't be able to touch her. But the fear was there anyway, accented by the strangeness of the magic in this place, which was unlike any she had ever felt.

Elary pushed herself backward over the stone, using her elbows, since her legs seemed to have gone completely numb. The figure's arm just got longer, and longer, and then those fingers brushed her mind.

Elary had expected to scream. She had expected there to be pain.

Instead, her head burst with clarity, and the suddenness of it rocked her.

Elary dropped to the ground, wondering why fire seemed to lick around her limbs, sculpting them, shaping them, when she could look over her shoulder and see that no such thing was happening. The sensation remained, though, as warmth replaced the cold, and even her muscles and bones sagged like glass heated in flames. The hands of the figure, whatever it was, carefully reshaped her, and Elary found herself standing again, one hand on her head.

The reshaping of her mind was even more extraordinary.

The darkness was gone, completely gone. Everywhere was light, and it was merciless. Elary gazed on things she had forgotten, memories she had put out of her head to forget the grief of them, and private treasures she had hoped no one would know anything about. Whatever remade her was seeing this, and Elary bowed her head and shook in a fit of shame.

But she could see, too, the cords that Destiny had woven to bind her, and she could see the fire melting them, burning into them until they vanished like mist. Elary took a deep breath-

And her self came back.

Elary shuddered. *What in the name of the Light have I been doing in the past few days? I can see those things, I know I did them, and yet-*

Then the clarity faded, and so did the warm sensation on her muscles. Whatever had happened, it was done. The thing was putting Elary carefully back into her body, pouring her into the bones and skin meant to hold her. Elary knew when she opened her eyes that it would be gone.

It was, but there was still light. It took Elary some time to realize that the sun was rising.

She shook her head, expecting it to hurt. Nothing happened. She touched her temple. *Why did Destiny bind me like that? What did it hope to accomplish?*

"Elary?"

Elary glanced up. Silar was standing just outside the circle of stones, body braced as if she would take off in a minute.

"You can't stop me," said Elary at once. "I'm going straight back to Mitherill."

Silar stared at her in horror, and though Elary had intended to continue the game a little more, that expression broke her. She started to laugh.

Silar scowled, but Melior darted down into the middle of the circle, hardly taking the time to reform her body before she grabbed Elary in a firm hug.

"You are a healer, just like me, and I know that you are healed," she said into Elary's hair. "Welcome back. And now you can come with us and forget about Mitherill. Our lord will handle the task of rescuing her."

"I can't do that," said Elary, when Melior had let her go enough that she could speak. "Mitherill had a reason for binding me, and so did Destiny. I still don't know what it was. I would like to know, and try to resculpt Mitherill into someone who can plausibly rule Ilantra-Arvenna. Anakora knows, she's the only choice we have."

"You shouldn't go near her again," said Melior, her silver-tinged face dark with concern. "Destiny could weave the bonds to catch you again."

"That's a chance I will have to take," said Elary. "And I don't think that they'll find it so easy to catch me next time." If the anger beginning to burn in her was any indication, she would fight them with everything she possessed.

And Shadow is right, after all. Mitherill needs an education. I just trust myself to do it more than Shadow.

"There's one thing that we should do before we take you hunting for Mitherill," said Silar.

"Yes?"

Silar held up hands dripping with mucous. "Have you take the sneezerot away from me. *Please.*"

Chapter 15

Kymenos In Battle

"I don't think it's fair to judge the fighting skills of Dalznans by the cowardice of a few. They're some of the bravest people for shooting each other in the back I've ever seen."

-Glangon, Traitor Prince of Rivendon.

Kymenos, those cries frighten me.

Kymenos snorted lightly. He wasn't surprised that the cries of the ghioutlin frightened Sykeen. He would have been frightened himself, had he not been so sure that he could take the dogs. And standing and listening to them cry and cry again, while the pack drew steadily nearer, was not reassuring.

We should run.

Kymenos shook his head absently. "They would only come after us," he said, "and as you can judge from the cries that so frighten you, they are faster."

"I can help you," said Norianna abruptly. "But I am reluctant to use all my magic."

Kymenos started. He had almost forgotten that he was still holding the sword, which wasn't wise since he would need both his hands and wasn't planning to use her as a weapon. He laid the sword on Sykeen's saddle. "You won't need to use your magic at all, my lady. I will do what is necessary." He stepped behind Sykeen and braced himself for the first appearance of the ghioutlin.

The first one rounded the corner a moment later, baying that terrible cry that could pull the listener into another world, where the ghioutlin would then have the satisfaction of torturing him. Kymenos ignored the faintness in his legs and the mist that clouded his vision, and raised the mirror that he had taken from Sykeen's pack. At that same moment, he opened a conduit to Light. It had always been the one of the elements he handled best, not least because he had never respected the fancy training of the Star Circle. There were far simpler ways to harness the elements.

Like mirrors.

The beam of Light he called bounced off the mirror, and turned radiant as it flew towards the great black dog. A moment later, the fur began to smoke where it struck. The dog gave an immense howl that made Kymenos fall to his knees, but it also began to rip and tear apart.

"How did you know that would happen?" asked Norianna. "I haven't seen anyone use that technique in battle for a thousand years."

"I discovered it by accident defending my plants," said Kymenos, turning towards the second and third members of the pack. These ghioutlin came around the corner more cautiously, but still came, their mouths parted in hungry snarls. "Light becomes more savage when it's multiplied, akin to Scarlet."

"That's not precisely what happens-"

Kymenos ignored the sword's attempt to explain magical theory, and aimed the mirror again. The ghioutlin moved as if they would jump aside, but Light was the swiftest of the elements, and not *that* easy to escape. The beam caught one, and it fell to the ground, shredding apart. The third dog smoked, but still continued its charge, and Kymenos knew it would reach him in a moment.

He called on Azure, and moved his fingers in Zalido's Pattern, the one that stepped from Azure to Light. A small flutter of rain fell just as the next beam bounced off the mirror. Mingling together, they created Reflection, the Fourteenth Wonder, and turned the Light as savage as a second mirror. The street filled with a storm of Light. No ghioutlin would have survived it, and this one was no exception.

Kymenos lowered the mirror, and slowly climbed to his feet. The air still glittered, fiercely brilliant, but the ghioutlin were gone.

"Kymenos!"

Kymenos turned, and found the last member of the pack springing at him, jaws open and getting ready to unleash that terrible howl. He fell beneath it, and grabbed the sides of its neck to keep it from reaching his throat. He knew the consequences of sustaining a bite from those teeth. Distantly, he heard the mirror shattering on the stone, but he had other things to worry about right now.

The bay came.

Kymenos shivered, the battle-fury in him turning to fear-sickness. When he glanced around, he saw only mist. It parted to reveal dark walls, hung with a variety of glittering torture instruments.

The dog pulled back from him, panting, pleased, and from the mist came the growls of other ghioutlin. Kymenos drew himself up, still shivering, his head still bowed in fear.

Then he struck as hard as he could, Falto's Pattern weaving itself in his mind and springing off his fingers. The dog that had brought him here fell, the skin molding itself to bones, all the Azure in its body turned to Dust. The growls of the others swelled, but none of them came forward out of the mist.

Kymenos stood, and glared around. He wasn't sure how to get back to his world from here, but that was a minor problem. Far more important was sating his rage.

He had just started to step into the mist where those cowardly ghioutlin were hiding when he heard a snap and flutter like a great bird's beak closing, and turned to find Norianna hanging in the air beside him. He shook his head. "Someday you must tell me how you get through doors and worlds."

"A good thing that I do, or you would have been here with no way to get back," said the sword in her cool voice. "Take my hilt, and I'll move you back into your world. And then I think you should talk with this woman you intend on bringing with us. She's hiding in a corner of her house wetting herself. Not the most valiant companion, nor the most useful on the road."

"I'm taking her because-"

The growls sounded again. Norianna gave a little vibration that Kymenos supposed might be a reasonable variation on shaking her head. "No time for you to tell me here. Grab my hilt, and we'll go back.'

Kymenos shrugged, gave one last glare into the mist, and took her hilt. The mist rushed back at once, and he bit his tongue to keep from asking Norianna how that was an improvement. She was probably doing something, though what it was he couldn't be entirely sure.

The fog swirled around them for a short time, then cleared. Kymenos found himself standing on the road outside his house again, the air still glittering with Light. He couldn't have been gone very long- if he was gone at all. Kymenos was never sure if the ghioutlin could pull someone into another world or only create convincing illusions.

He let go of Norianna's hilt. The sword floated towards him, then past him, and settled onto Sykeen's saddle. "I think you should find the woman," she added. "She still hasn't come out."

Kymenos turned to look at Cheyena's house. It was indeed quiet. He frowned. He didn't like having to herd her along or frighten her, but if that was the only way to get her to come with them, then he would.

He opened the door and stepped inside. Cheyena had obviously finished at least part of her packing, since the silver ornaments had been swept off their tables. And, when he listened, Kymenos could hear a faint whimpering coming from the back of the house.

He tracked it to her bedroom, where he found a bag half-full of clothes and other necessities, and Cheyena crouched on the floor next to it. Kymenos pulled her to her feet and glared into her eyes.

"Listen to me, Cheyena," he whispered. "This last journey will pay for it all, will call in the debt, but you must be beside me every step of the way, and true to your promise to use your Scarlet magic to warm and protect. If you faint from the danger, if you collapse whimpering when your magic could have saved my life, I swear that I shall curse you, and the Scarlet shall leave you before I die."

The weight in his arms suddenly seemed heavier. Kymenos glared, but it wasn't effective; Cheyena had fainted from fright. He shook and slapped her until she was conscious again, and staring into his eyes with terror-glazed ones.

"I will take your ornaments, too," he said. "And then all your nightmares shall come true at once."

Cheyena pulled away from him, her eyes horrified. "I won't collapse," she said. "I'll protect you. I promise." She stuffed the rest of the blankets into her bag, slung it over her shoulder, and slunk past him towards the door. Kymenos followed just behind, scowling whenever she looked over her shoulder.

Cheyena halted outside the door and looked around rather helplessly. "I don't know what to ride."

"We'll buy you a horse on the way out of the city," said Kymenos, keeping his temper firmly in check.

"You have enough money for that?"

Kymenos bobbed his head in a short nod. He wasn't happy about the expense, but he figured it was a fair trade for having someone riding with him who could call fire to cook food and keep him warm.

Always provided she doesn't faint or try to hide when the danger comes upon us.

He swung back into Sykeen's saddle, then winced and hopped off again. Norianna had still been lying there, and had scraped his leg. He tied the sword to the horse's side, ignoring her snickers, and remounted.

"You're coming?" he asked Cheyena, who was clutching her bag and staring down her street at the glittering Light.

She turned and followed him down Ilion, across Perla, and through several other streets until they reached a stable that Kymenos knew well and wished he had used before he left Corlinth, instead of buying Sykeen from the farmer. She stood nearby, eyes darting, while Kymenos bargained with the stablemaster and managed to wear him down from a price that was

ridiculous into one that was just extravagant for a placid but surefooted gray pony. She climbed into the pony's saddle when Kymenos snapped at her, but then kept her eyes down as they rode out of Corlinth's gate and towards the mountains.

Kymenos ignored her after a little while. He had more important things to watch, like the gate guards. As he had half-suspected, they looked at him and then away again, their eyes carefully narrowed to pretend they hadn't seen anything. Political realities in the city were what they were, and Nightstone hadn't punished Corlinth for any crime in the years since she ruled.

It occurred to Kymenos that that might change now, but given the failure of the ghioutlin pack and the People of the Blending's arrival, he thought it more likely that she had other things to worry about.

His heart began to beat harder as they swung away from Corlinth and towards the main road into the Rashars. It would divide soon, one branch heading for the high passes and the meadows where sheep were grazed, the other through the lowlands and north towards Arvenna. Kymenos licked his lips and thought fervently of the country beyond. They had the whole of Arvenna to cross, and then the dangerous Dalorth Mountains, but beyond that-

Home.

"I do hope that you're remembering we have the Lake of the Northern Winds to get to," said Norianna.

Kymenos smiled down at her. "Oh, I'm remembering that," he said, while he entertained visions of dumping her in the lake for someone else more unfortunate to find. "I remember it very well."

Chapter 16

Return to Rivendon

"Never was I a seeker of quests, and I refuse to be one now."

-King Kyern of Orlath.

"But you must come with me to rescue my parents!" Lyli's upturned eyes were huge and glinting with tears.

Olumer sighed and knelt beside her, wishing there was something else he could say. "My dear," he said at last, "I do not think that we can rescue your parents. The elves might. Have you asked them?"

"They said they can't. I don't understand why!" Lyli's voice rose into an accusing wail.

Olumer sighed again. "I don't understand, either." He hesitated. "Would Destiny help you? Has it spoken to you since the night we came here?"

"No."

Olumer nodded gloomily. He had expected that, really. "Then come with us, Lyli, and join us in the Quest for the Rivendonian throne. Once Cadona has it back, then she can muster the power to help your parents. And Nightstone might even let them go, now that she has no more use for them."

Lyli turned her back.

Olumer shook his head. He wished there was something he could do for her, he truly wished it, but his charge and his burden lay with Cadona. And that was a burden that he could not be free of, well-meaning elves and strange fragmented memories notwithstanding. He had sworn the oath of his own free will. He had to keep it.

"Are you ready, Olumer?"

Olumer looked carefully at Cadona before he answered. She *shone* in the forest; there was no other word for it. Being in this place seemed to have eased the constant anger that always smoldered behind her eyes, and she smiled and laughed more often and more sincerely now. She smiled at him with the eyes that proclaimed fey heritage a few generations back, and still more the heritage of the royal family of Rivendon, and any regrets that Olumer might have felt left his head.

He stood, holding out his hand to her. "I am ready if my lady wishes it."

"I do."

"Then let us go."

They walked into the forest. After a few minutes, Olumer heard Lyli's steps, slow and aggrieved, from behind them.

"I have done what I could," Pannerel murmured in Olumer's ear as they stood waiting for the elves knew what in a clearing. "I hope it's enough."

"Your trying to teach me the language of the silvereeyes, you mean?" Olumer turned around with a smile. They were going to back to Rivendon, to pursue the Quest, and in some short time Cadona might actually be sitting on the throne. He could not resent the elf. "I am grateful for the effort, but I do not need it, truly. I was sometimes curious about my father, but he was never part of my life, and my mother raised me to love and care for the land and the humans who lived on it. I have followed that love all my life."

Pannerel gazed at him with narrowed eyes, then shook his head. "I think that you could stand to learn more of the silvereeyes tongue yet," he said, "but that wasn't what I meant. I have taken some of the joy that always flows here and insured that Cadona received it."

"What?" Olumer stared at Cadona, who was joking and laughing, trying unsuccessfully to jolly Lyli out of her pensive, lip-chewing silence.

"I have tried to make her laughter flow more easily and her temper tantrums stop," said Pannerel, sounding perplexed. "Did I not explain it clearly enough? I know that mortals sometimes have trouble understanding what the elves have done, but this is simple. It should not-"

"You changed her," said Olumer, lowering his voice so that Cadona wouldn't hear the fear and anger that filled it.

"I poured joy into her," Pannerel said, his face puzzled. "Was that wrong? I only know that she seemed happier after I did it, and her screams no longer filled the air as if she were a flock of peahens. I have only done what I thought was right."

"She has to have her free temper and spirit to rule in Rivendon," said Olumer, restraining his urge to shout with an effort. *Gods, do the elves ever manage to help anyone at all, or only inflict a different kind of damage?* "Her people would never accept someone with elven magic running inside her on the throne."

Pannerel cocked his head. "And you think they would have accepted her the way she was?"

Olumer nodded firmly, watching Cadona now. He had no more time to spend on the elf. What exactly had Pannerel done to her, and how was he going to undo it?

"I don't understand," said Pannerel. "They would prefer a bitch ruling them to someone calm and composed?"

Olumer felt his face pale, and heard a roaring like the ocean in his ears. The oath surged around him like a snake. He made his voice as calm as he could, and the turning of his head to look at the elf as slow as he could. "Do not speak such things of my Princess again, or I will have to attack you, and hurt you. I don't want to do that. It would cause me pain, and it would probably deprive Cadona of her protector. But I will do it. Do not speak that word again."

Pannerel stood gazing into his face for a long moment. Olumer stared back, not sure what he expected. Laughter, maybe, or that uncomprehending fascination that most elves seemed to feel for mortals.

But Pannerel bowed instead, a neat, flowing motion that made tears rise to Olumer's eyes even in the midst of his anger. He stood back up, his eyes alert and solemn, but not laughing and not angry. "I understand," he said. "I understand all of it. Go in peace. The joy I poured into Cadona shall fade as she passes through your world. It might never have stayed outside the Wood, in any case."

Olumer felt the oath that bound him subside back into sleep, and bowed in his turn. "Thank you," he said. "I understand that you were only trying to help, but it wouldn't have worked."

Pannerel smiled a little. "No, I can see that it wouldn't have." He hesitated, and Olumer blinked. Even this hesitation had a different flavor than most of the emotions he had seen the elves show, as though Pannerel were not trying to explain something but to understand something for himself. "You knew the Queen Idona, the first Dark Queen of Rivendon?"

Olumer nodded. "Given the hibernation of my kind, I only knew her briefly before I went back to sleep, but I knew her."

"I did as well," said Pannerel, "though I only watched her from a distance in the last war of Dark and Light. I liked her." He hesitated again, as if he were about to say something more, then reached out with one hand and clasped Olumer's wrist in an unmistakably human gesture. "May the Light, or the Dark, or whatever force you worship, go with you."

"And you," said Olumer. Tears were tightening his throat for no good reason. Moments ago he had been ready to kill the elf. And now he was crying for him. This made no sense. Olumer

decided that he would be glad when he left this world and returned to Rivendon, among the humans who were more his own kind than the fey, even if he only shared half their blood.

"Farewell," said Pannerel, and then turned and walked into the woods. Olumer watched him go.

"Olumer?"

He turned. Cadona was standing in front of a gleaming silver door, through which Annalithiel was beckoning them, and watching him in puzzlement. There was a snappish tone in her voice when she said, "We have to go through. This much power might draw Prince Artaen's attention."

Olumer walked forward and through the door, glad that Lyli was following him, glad that they were leaving the wood, glad most of all that Cadona was again beginning to sound like her true self.

"What direction do we go from here?"

Cadona looked up at him from the other side of the fire. "Do you really think that I know?" she asked.

"Well, Destiny-" Olumer began.

"Oh, I know. I was only joking."

Olumer frowned and tried to remember the last time he had heard Cadona joke, other than using sarcasm at someone else's expense. Perhaps more of Pannerel's influence lingered than he had thought. But she did have a sneer in her voice as she turned and pointed to the west from their sheltered little hollow, so he could hold out some hope that she was recovering.

"West," Cadona said softly. "West until we almost reach the sea. Then I will find what I seek."

Olumer nodded. "And is there a specific point at which we need to come to the sea? Would the main roads be closer, or should we track through the wild country?"

"That is your decision to make," said Cadona, and rose to her feet with the flames glinting in her silver hair. "I am only the one who must come to the sea, and see there what waits for me. You are the one who must guide me through the country, the natural dangers of the Western Crescent and whatever else lies in the way." She turned and walked into the darkness.

Olumer stared after her, and then became aware of a small sound beside him. He wasn't sure what it was, so he turned around.

Lyli sat there, quickly covering her mouth with a hand when she saw he was looking, and gazing guiltily at him.

"What is it, little one?" Olumer asked, making his voice as gentle as possible.

"I- I wasn't like that, was I?" Lyli asked.

"Like what?"

"She's so *pompous*," said Lyli, and rolled her eyes back into her head. "I must come to the sea. Woe! Woe! I can tell you where I have to go, but not how to get there. Woe!"

Olumer blinked. He hadn't considered Cadona's pronouncement in quite that light. "Well, she *is* the Princess of Rivendon," he said. "That is no small burden to bear. And she has the right to a little drama and even hysteria, if it makes things for easier for her to bear the burden."

"Some people don't think so," muttered Lyli. "When I was Alliana, I thought I was carrying a burden, too. I thought that I had to restore Orlath and sit on the throne, or everything would go wrong."

"It is a time of prophecy," said Olumer. "It's possible that everything *could* go wrong, if it doesn't go just right."

"That doesn't make sense," said Lyli. "If things can be changed so drastically by just one alteration to Destiny's plan, then why are we still here and still on the Quest for Cadona's throne? After all, the real Princess of Orlath is dead. Doesn't that end everything already?"

Olumer blinked. He hadn't thought about that. But after a moment, he shook his head. "No, I don't think so. It will change things for Orlath, of course, and perhaps the Dark will rule that country forever. But it doesn't change things for Rivendon. Cadona is still alive, and still hearing the whispers of Destiny."

"They're very-" Lyli's face flared for a moment, and then she cleared her throat and tossed a stick lying at her feet into the fire. "They're very seductive, you know," she said, managing to choke out the words despite the blush on her cheeks. "The whispers of Destiny."

"In what way?" Olumer asked, studying her with narrowed eyes. It seemed strange that he would have to consider a twelve-year-old girl a possible threat to Cadona's Quest, but perhaps she could be.

"I heard them," said Lyli. "When I was- when I thought I was Alliana. They tell me that everything will be all right as long as I follow the rules, and they tell me that everyone will love me, and guard me, and accept me as the Queen when I come to the throne." She hesitated. "I still hear them in my dreams, sometimes, but they're faint. Destiny seems to realize that it can't reach me anymore."

Olumer stared at the girl. She couldn't hold his eyes, and looked back at the fire, poking it with another stick before she fed it that one, too.

Olumer closed his eyes. He had always known that Destiny was whispering to Cadona. It was one of the reasons he trusted her to know what was best. It was silly to be worried about it now.

Besides, Destiny might have spoken so strongly to Lyli only because she really wasn't the Princess, and it had had to use more force on her to get her to follow the paths it wanted. Perhaps it wouldn't need to use such force on Cadona, because she was undoubtedly blood of Rivendon's blood and capable of winning and holding the throne, as a Destined Princess should. He knew she was blood of Queen Idona, who had sworn him to his oath, or he would never have felt his blood sing as it did when he picked her up from the ruins. She was born to Destiny, and it wouldn't use her wrongly.

So why do I sound so much as if I were trying to convince myself?

He opened his eyes and shivered, and found himself looking into a pair of red-tinted eyes on the other side of the campfire.

Olumer sprang to his feet with a shout, going at once for a brand. Wolves and other creatures of the wild had such eyes, and they would attack him for the fey blood he carried.

But the creature didn't move when he thrust the brand towards it, only yawned and rolled over on its back. Olumer stared at the sleek, white coat dotted with dark rosettes, and blinked.

"Silverheart!"

Olumer jerked his head up as Cadona came flying back into the camp, her eyes afire with wonder, her hands reached out and clasping the snow leopard's throat. The great cat didn't seem at all startled by the hug, but licked her face with a rough tongue and rubbed its head against her neck. Cadona looked up at Olumer, smiling, one hand buried in the leopard's fur, the other stroking the head that rubbed against her.

"This is Silverheart," she said. "I felt him, so I came back. He's going to be my companion."

Olumer, remembering where he had heard those words before, asked the first question that came to mind. "Like Mourn?"

The life drained out of Cadona's eyes at once, and she stood tall and proud before him, trembling. Silverheart came to his feet and got in between Cadona and Olumer without fuss, simply with swiftness and strength, his eyes fixed as intently on Olumer's face as though he were going to attack.

"No," said Cadona at last, her voice precise and controlled. "Not like Mourn. Not in the *least* like Mourn." She took a deep breath and regained control of herself, though the smile was more fragile this time, and the hand with which she stroked Silverheart's fur shook a little. "Mourn was an aberration, Olumer, someone sent to gain my trust and then betray me. Silverheart is my true companion."

Olumer looked into the snow leopard's golden eyes. Silverheart gazed back and lashed his tail a little, then turned, putting those large fangs far too close to Cadona's face. Olumer winced, but said nothing.

He was thinking, though.

How could Mourn have fooled Destiny? Obviously he did, or it would never have permitted him to travel with you. And if that could happen once, might it not happen a second time?

He watched Silverheart for a moment, wondering if the leopard would turn his head and wink at him, ready to lunge if it did. But Silverheart was entirely occupied with licking his companion's face, and didn't seem inclined to turn around and snarl at anyone.

"Why don't I have an animal?" Lyli abruptly wailed.

Olumer turned to comfort her, still keeping an eye on Silverheart. Cadona had lain down now, with her silver hair in a position that would have been too near the flames for anyone except a Scarlet mage, and was telling the leopard something in a low voice. Silverheart coiled around her- he was big enough to surround Cadona almost completely- and was trailing his claws through Cadona's hair.

One sign of a wink, one sign of a grand pronouncement, Olumer thought grimly, and I will kill him. I don't care how deeply Cadona's attached to him. I would rather have her alive to be angry at me than dead.

The cat looked up as if he had heard Olumer's thoughts, and yawned at him, tongue sticking out from between those great fangs. He didn't speak, though, and Olumer was glad.

Especially when Cadona looked at him a few moments later and said, "Stop glaring at Silverheart, Olumer. It makes him feel unwelcome."

Lyli wailed.

Olumer bowed his head and went back to comforting her, while a slight smile tugged at his lips. At least now he knew the elven magic was wearing off, and the real Cadona was coming back to him.

Chapter 17

Preparing For War

"Few things give me as much delight as preparing for war. After all, when will we have such a chance to shed blood and tears again?"

-Attributed to the Ivyflower, Lady of the Dark.

"I will need your full trust and cooperation for this, Glow. I trust you understand what that means."

The voiceless *zeyr* bowed his head. He could at least indicate his understanding by gestures, then. Good. Nightstone had been wondering if he would refuse to do so. That he had not was a good sign.

"I will deal with the Orlathian nobles and the Dark, if it should call to us," Nightstone went on, rising to her feet and pacing around her office. She found it difficult to sit still when she was thinking, even in a room as comfortable as this one, which had been designed for it. "I will require your people to guard the castle, and the pegasi for scouts." She had already sent out a scouting mission, of course, under Chive; several pegasi were planted in various positions along the way and would give note the moment Rivendon's forces started moving over the mountains, if that happened. But she wouldn't tell Glow everything, just in case. "I will deal with the dark fey, as well. But I will require full and absolute obedience."

Glow bowed his head again. Watching that little show of submission, Nightstone almost believed it. Of course, without his voice to help command and awe the others, Glow had little power left now. Nightstone fully expected to meet the new *zeyr* leader in a few days.

Nightstone almost wondered if Glow would come to her for help. That would be amusing, though it would have been more amusing before she had a war on two fronts to fight.

And the knowledge of her own failures to deal with, of course.

"That is all, Glow. You may leave."

When the *zeyr* had departed, the click of his silver claws on the floor the only sound he made, Nightstone sat down in the chair again and linked her arms together behind her head. Blackbird and Anna were elsewhere, spying for her on the Prince of Rivendon, and asking the air and the waters for news. The *pegasi*, whom she trusted most of all, were in flight; the messengers for the north had departed yesterday. Her meeting with Lord Caraban wasn't for an hour.

She could face the knowledge that she had failed, now.

The pack of *ghioutlin* had been destroyed, utterly and completely. It was not a small loss.

And Nightstone knew it would bring glances in her direction, not only from the Dark itself but from the other lieutenants of the Dark. They would begin to wonder if, perhaps, Nightstone's ambition had outstripped her means. They would murmur of what she did, what she wanted, if perhaps the Lady of the Unicorns had let her hatred get in the way. And they would be right, Nightstone acknowledged, to wonder.

Even she didn't know why this pursuit of *Kymenos* mattered so much to her.

She shook her head and rose to her feet, resolutely dismissing the impatient, impudent thoughts. An hour would be enough time. She would spend that hour with the unicorns and emerge again reminded of all she had to lose if she kept up this obsession with *Kymenos*.

She opened the door of her office, and found herself face to face with Lord Caraban.

He bowed to her. If he was startled, he kept it hidden, behind the smooth, cool mask he always wore. Nightstone ground her teeth and smiled back as best she could. Of course the bastard wasn't startled. He must have planned to meet her at the door, an hour before his time.

"My lord," said Nightstone. "Is there a reason that you came to trouble me before I agreed to see you?" She cursed silently a moment later. The word "trouble" was too much, too harsh. From it, Caraban would know that something was wrong, and that she hadn't really wanted to see him.

Which was true, of course, but it was always best to leave an enemy like Caraban guessing if she could.

Caraban bowed again. "Alas, my lady, duty calls," he said. "There is a new concern that I would like to speak to you about."

Of course there is, Nightstone thought. *There is always a new concern. Sometimes I wonder if they are trying to wear me down by filling my head with nagging concerns, and not leaving me time to deal with anything else.*

"Then come in," she said, since she couldn't say much else, and moved backward. The Dark had a policy of interfering as little as it could in the nations it conquered, preferring to establish lieutenants, to change whatever in the country was explicitly against the Dark, and leave the rest alone. Nightstone favored that idea most of the time, but, faced with a noble like Lord Caraban, she wished that the whim-inspired executions of legend were still common.

The bastard was always watching, she thought as she watched him pace across the office and take the chair in front of the desk, while she sat behind it. His eyes were narrowed, watching for an advantage, staring, staring, staring. If he had managed to put a hint of lust into his gaze, then he could swiftly have made her as uneasy as *Kymenos*.

"We want to know why you are doing this, my lady."

Nightstone called her scattered thoughts in as tightly as she once would have called a pegasus blaze, and inclined her head. "Why I am doing what, my lord? I am sorry to inconvenience you with war preparations, but it is the only way I am sure we will be able to defeat the Prince of Rivendon. I know that some of the nobles have been discomfited, and for that I am deeply sorry."

"Not that." Caraban leaned forward, hands reaching out to grasp the edge of the desk. "We want to know why you are pursuing this man, Kymenos, who was a prisoner in your dungeons and yet managed to escape. We want to know what really happened the night that you went to destroy the Princesses. We want to know what tore the hole in the lower level. We want answers, my lady, not about anything as simple as a war but about the mysteries that you cloak yourself with."

Nightstone's eyes narrowed, and her heart beat very fast, but altogether she thought she was less unprepared than Caraban had expected her to be. "All of those things are easily explained, my lord."

"Really?" The noble sat back, toying with the glass bird that hung around his neck. It was only an affectation, Nightstone thought, but it seemed a strange one. "Then explain them."

Nightstone took a breath. She wouldn't tell him about the true Princess of Orlath dying, which might be enough to raise the nobles in revolt, but she would tell him about the thiria and Kymenos and the others. What was the harm?

And then there came an inspiration, straight from the Dark, or Shara, or perhaps from Nimmeriel, the wild goddess who controlled the craft of poetry. Nightstone sat up, and sat very still.

"My lady?" Caraban's eyes had not missed the movement, as Nightstone had known they would not. He leaned forward again. "What is it?"

Nightstone leaned close to meet him, trembling now. *Guide my hand, Dark. Guide my hand, Shara. Guide my hand, Nimmeriel.* If the deception worked, then she wouldn't need to worry about the nobles for some time.

And if the truth shone out from behind the deception, as it should to those who followed the Dark, then she wouldn't have to worry about revolts among her own people, either.

"There is something I must tell you, Lord Caraban," she said. "And it must not pass your lips unless you are completely sure that you are alone with someone else of the Light, and that no one can hear you."

"I understand," he said, eyes gleaming.

Of course he did. He sniffs for intrigue, and he can be caught by its scent. "I am doing this because I must shield my true allegiance," said Nightstone. "I went along with Artaen because I planned to rescue the Princesses at the proper moment and ally myself with them to put them back on their rightful thrones. But Artaen found out my plan, and summoned a beast that tore the wall open. If I had not managed to kill it, then I would have been dead."

"And the Prince of Rivendon?" Caraban's eyes were very bright.

"He wasn't sure, at first," said Nightstone. "After all, I have served the Dark for four hundred years. How could I betray it for the Light?"

"Why did you?" asked Caraban.

Nightstone held his eyes. "Because the Light is true, and pure, and good," she said, mimicking the words the priestesses of Elle had spoken to her in their torture chambers so long ago. "And because I know now that the Dark is only a twisted mockery of a great power, and to get anything done in this world I must follow the Light."

Caraban reached out and clasped her hand, his own closing convulsively. "You have done a great thing, my lady," he whispered, with tears pouring from his eyes. "A very great thing."

Nightstone nodded. "So the Prince remained for a short time, until he was confronted with evidence he could not deny of my true allegiance. Then he fled to his Kingdom and began to plan a war between us. Even the Dark is fooled, thinking that this is only a contest between two lieutenants, and not the battle between evil and good that it truly is."

Caraban drank it all like the finest wine. "And the Princess Alliana escaped?" he asked. "We had that much of a victory?"

Nightstone nodded, making sure to keep her face solemn. She was on the brink of howling with laughter. That night had been a partial victory, indeed, but for reasons the exact opposite of the ones she was reciting to Caraban. "Yes. She and the Princess Cadona found help somewhere, and fled. I don't know where, but I know they are safe. And when they emerge from hiding, then I will give up the throne to Alliana."

Caraban bowed his head. "You are noble beyond words, my lady," he said, his voice taut with emotion. "But will not the Dark take your life from you when it finds out what you are doing?"

Nightstone shook her head, waiting until he looked up again to speak. She wanted to see the expression on his face. "No. My life comes from unicorns, and their good will, and not the Dark. So long as I remain chaste, then I will not be in danger of losing my life. And the Dark may find out what it likes and try to kill me, but I am sure the Light will protect me."

"And Kymenos?"

One more lie. "He is the most dangerous part in all of this. I did not know that he was Dark, at the time, and a traitor. I spoke to him as Alliana's guardian, and revealed my true nature, thinking that together we could come up with a plan to free the Princess. But he is of the Dark, and naturally he came up with every excuse he could think of to delay her release. He even tried to rape me, and thus take my chastity. And then he escaped himself. Now he is running cross-country, and likely planning to go to Dalzna, while spreading rumors about my loyalties, and even about the Princess Alliana, all the way. You know that her foster sister died in the dungeons?"

Caraban nodded. "A sad loss for her parents."

Nightstone nodded back. "Yes. But he is telling anyone who will listen that the Princess died there, and destroying hope that she will come back and reclaim her throne. He is a double danger."

Caraban lifted her hand, bringing it to his lips. "Ah, my lady," he said softly as he let her hand go. "Had you been able to tell me this long since, many things might have been avoided. But now I understand, and I can promise you the allegiance of all the Orlathian nobles."

"You are sure of this?" Nightstone asked, clasping her hands and managing to bring a few tears from her eyes.

Caraban nodded. "We will fight for you in this war against the Prince of Rivendon, and we will find Kymenos and stop his lying tongue. I have- contacts in Arvenna, discreet ones. They ship me wine, but they keep their eyes open on my behalf, too. They will find this liar and traitor, and if all is well they will capture him and send him here."

"You trust them?"

Caraban smiled oddly. "Yes, I do. For many reasons. Not the least of them is a common interest in royalty. They will bring the Princess of Arvenna back to her throne if they can, and so they will help me do this. Every time we take a step closer to the return of the Princess Alliana, we take a step closer to Orlathian armies helping Arvenna."

"I see," said Nightstone. And it was indeed clever, though not half so clever as she was.

Caraban left, with many more protestations of loyalty and help. Nightstone sat down in her chair and closed her eyes, reaching out at once to Shara.

This time, although She had not done so for some days, the goddess answered. Nightstone felt the soft pulse of approval travel through her.

"You will tell the Dark, my lady?" she asked aloud.

Another soft pulse.

Nightstone opened her eyes, sighed again, and strode towards the door. Once more she felt confident that she could handle any challenge that arose. Was she not clever beyond words? And were not other people hunting for Kymenos now? She need not pursue him herself.

Which didn't mean she would call back the latest message she'd sent. If Caraban's Arvennese loyalists took care of Kymenos, all well and good. But he was in the Rashars, and it would be a shame to waste her ally who lived in that territory.

Chapter 18

The Savior's Country

"Never trust any drink that a fey gives you, nor any food that a goddess gives you. When you deal with those more than human, one cannot be too careful."

-The Mistaken Mage.

"You have been standing here a long time, wet and shivering," said Savior abruptly, when Ternora had begun to think that the exchange of pleasantries between the woman and Warcourage would go on forever. "It was remiss of me to keep you so. Come with me, and you shall see the hospitality that I offer to strangers when I am not too enthralled with them to forget simple human comforts." She smiled and stood, gliding down the throne's steps and towards a door on the far side of the hall. Her wings never stopped moving, nor did her serene expression alter.

Ternora looked at Viridian. The dragon gazed back at her with slightly parted jaws, his eyes narrowed.

Ternora didn't need to hear the dragon speak. She knew that he felt what she did.

There was no way under Light that she would trust this woman.

Warcourage, of course, seemed inclined to. He was telling the woman all about their Quest, and what he planned to do to gain the throne of Doralissa back. Savior nodded to him, listening with an attention that made Ternora's hair stand up on the back of her neck. No normal, sane person would willingly listen to a minute of Warcourage's babbling, just as no normal, sane person would really believe that Ternora's hastily-sworn oath meant anything. So, if Savior wasn't someone traitorous helping them for her own purposes, then she was mad.

Not a comforting thought.

"We keep our own counsel," said Viridian as he crawled after Warcourage and Savior. "We tell her nothing that is vital to our Quest unless she directly asks, and then we delay her for as long we can."

Ternora was about to agree, when she heard the Prince say something about the Pool of Siliyonete. She winced. "I think part of our cover's gone."

Viridian hissed and scraped one claw on the stone. "There are times I wish I had never joined him."

Ternora nodded fervently.

"But if I want to find the Pool, I am more likely to find it following a Prince of Doralissa than wandering alone through the jungle," said Viridian, as if repeating a mantra that he used to keep himself sane, and slithered through the wide door as Savior swung it open with a delicate touch.

Ternora eyed his tail in curiosity. *What is it, my friend, that tempts you so much you will go with him? Surely not wealth; I have never met a dragon who cared for that. And yet, what else is there worth this kind of journey?*

She shook the words from her head, since she wasn't likely to get an answer, and they were coming up to Savior now, who smiled at her with an ageless face and sharp, knowing eyes.

"The Prince is a wonderful child," said Savior.

A madwoman, perhaps, but a dangerous one. "A wonderful child, indeed," Ternora said. "And he will make a wonderful ruler for Doralissa when he's grown."

Savior inclined her head, as if to say she could do nothing but agree with a statement so wise, and then gestured Ternora through the door. Ternora gritted her teeth and walked through, not sure what she expected to find on the other side of it, but certain it would be less impressive than it ought to be.

A moment later, though, she blinked. She had expected some kind of house. She had not expected a glittering plain of short silver grass, so sharp that Ternora would have feared to touch it had she not already stepped on it, and a view of mountains extending into the sky.

The mountains were purple with distance, but so clear was the air that Ternora could make out glittering details of snow.

"Welcome to my world."

Ternora glanced at Savior, and had to shield her eyes. The woman shone now with dazzling light, like the full moon grown more radiant, and her voice rang and drifted like the sound of a harp.

"This is the place that I have made for myself, and tend with all the care and magic in me. You are the first visitors I have permitted to see it."

"Savior," said Warcourage, and his voice was so tender that Ternora instantly went still. *Would he give the court position to her if she asked? Does he find her that wonderful?* "I love it. I've never seen any place so beautiful. This isn't in our world, is it?"

"No," said Savior softly, her voice more mild, as if Warcourage's praise had calmed whatever power burned in her. "I made it myself, with my own magic and my own time. There is no other place like it in all the worlds."

"You made it?" Ternora asked. "Are you a goddess, then?"

Savior glanced at her, lips twitching slightly with amusement, and Ternora bristled. She didn't like the feeling that she had just been thought of as a mildly amusing entertainment, to be played with when Savior felt like it and put away on a shelf if Savior didn't feel like it. "No," said Savior. "Or perhaps I am, but not what you would call a goddess. I am not Shara, nor yet Elle. I find them tedious, and their concerns tire me. I would love mortals and protect them, not fall into some sort of wrangling over divine precedence."

Ternora expected Warcourage to defend Elle from that accusation, but he was too busy looking around to note it had been made. Or perhaps, she thought, he didn't mind if it was Savior saying such things.

Warcourage abruptly looked up and said, "There's something wrong."

"What is it?" asked Savior, her voice unruffled. Ternora wondered if she was the only one who saw the woman's fingers curl in on each other like a crushed spider. She was getting ready to release some harsh magic, Ternora thought, or she had lost all skill at reading people.

"I can feel elves," said Warcourage. "Faerie elves, the kind that transformed me into a dolphin. I don't want them here."

Savior laughed indulgently. Her hand uncurled, and there was nothing in it. Ternora eyed the woman and wondered what kind of magic she would have called forth if there had been need. "Of course there are some here, my Prince. They worldwalk, and while I have created this place, I could not create another universe to hold it. They come here sometimes, but they never stay for very long. I think that my presence frightens them," she added.

Ternora snorted before she could stop herself. Faerie elves, frightened of a woman like this one? Unlikely.

Savior gave Ternora a quick glance, then laid a hand on Warcourage's shoulder. "Come with me," she said. "We have the future of Doralissa to discuss."

Warcourage glanced over his shoulder at Ternora. "She should come with us," he said. "She's going to be my adviser, at least when I set up a Court."

Ternora dipped her head. He had remembered, and he had remembered on his own, without prompting. There was hope yet. "He is right," she said, when she felt Savior's eyes resting on her. "I should be part of any plan you make to take back the throne, and privy to the ones I don't actually act in."

Savior looked at Ternora long enough to make her uncomfortable, but she didn't show it. She kept her chin up and glared at the woman until Savior turned away with a barely audible curse.

"And you?" she asked Viridian.

"I care little for who's ruling Doralissa," said Viridian, with a yawn. "I came to find the Pool of Siliyonete, and no more."

Savior's eyes widened, and she shook her head. "Then I am sorry for you, my friend. You would have had the chance to work for something greater than yourself, but I fear that is not to be."

Viridian shrugged his wings. "If the Prince leads me to the Pool, then I'll be willing enough to protect him from his enemies or whatever else a humble dragon can do." Ternora imagined that Savior would probably miss the mockery in his voice, but she herself didn't.

"There may be much you can do," said Savior. "And I don't think that we should leave any of you behind, or out of the plans. Come with me."

Ternora snorted when she saw that Prince Warcourage looked less than happy with that statement. *Did he want a chance to say things to her that he thought were important? And then she stilled. Did he want to say something to her that he didn't want me to hear, for some reason?*

After that, she was glad enough to quicken her steps and follow Viridian to the secret meeting place, which turned out to be a hollow in the silver grass that Ternora supposed wasn't visible from the air. Savior sat down and trained serious eyes on Warcourage, who sat up as if seeing a distant beacon in her gaze.

"You are in grave danger, my Prince," Savior began. "Shadow's hunt for you has intensified. And the Dark's lieutenants have begun to suspect that you may not be in Shadow's control, after all, so they are sending out their own hunters. Light is nowhere to be found, and Elle has not responded to any prayers in a long while."

Warcourage nodded at that, touching his heart as if in mourning for his goddess. Ternora remembered that he had tried to speak to Elle about the propriety of his entering the Temple of Shara, and received no answer.

"There is only one thing we can do," said Savior, "only one ally we can count on. And that is Destiny."

Warcourage sat up, his face shining. "I knew it," he said. "I always knew it, I think. Destiny has to reclaim the world, doesn't it?"

Savior nodded soberly. "This is the last and greatest chance, and Destiny has put forth all its power, even convinced some of its allies who had ignored it for a long time to help. The four

True Heirs will take their thrones, and rule for the rest of their lives, and their descendants after them." She paused, her face shining with muted radiance. "Perhaps, if we eliminate Dark and Shadow in this struggle, then Light will come forth and make the world as a heaven forever."

Warcourage gasped with the wonder of that, while Ternora and Viridian exchanged a look that Ternora, at least, didn't need anyone to translate for her. Savior was a madwoman, most definitely.

"But we must help Destiny," Savior went on. "Its plans are so far-reaching and elaborately constructed that something small failing in them could destroy the whole. And we don't want that to happen."

"No, we don't," said Warcourage.

Ternora glanced at him with dislike. *How in the name of the Light did I put up with him for so long? Of course, jewels do make a good lure.*

"So," said Savior, "I brought you here to see this, and spot weak places in the plans for Doralissa, and tell me what you think."

As she turned, she gestured, and the air shimmered and then drew back like a curtain. Ternora stared. She didn't know what the thing this motion revealed was, but it certainly was beautiful.

It was a golden spiral of light, the beads that formed it split here and there by darkness. Thin, almost translucent lines bound the nearest beads to each other and sometimes shot out across space to bind even the branches farthest apart. It looked like something a spider might have spun if spiders knew anything about art. Even Ternora found herself drawing nearer, hungering for something in it that she couldn't name.

"These are the plans of Destiny," said Savior, her voice soft and reverent. "These are the plans that depend so much on the fragile unity of Light and Elle, Destiny and the Cycle, and can be torn apart if those bonds are not respected." She paused. "With Elle and Light seemingly gone into hiding, I fear the web is in very great danger."

Warcourage shook his head, and spoke in a muffled voice. Glancing at him, Ternora saw he had tears pouring down his face. "Why would anyone want to destroy this?"

"Because there is evil in the wisest of us, I fear," said Savior sadly. "There are a few even of my own kind who say that Destiny should fade from the world. But they never liked it at all, so it's not surprising they should call for that."

"What is your kind?" Ternora asked.

Savior ignored her effortlessly. "And the Cycle, too," she said, tapping one of the four great branches of the spiral. Now that she'd had more time to concentrate, Ternora could see that there were four main parts of the design, one of them almost encrusted with beads, the others having less to hang on them. The one Savior tapped rang and shimmered, bound to the others, but with both less beads on itself and less threads connecting it to the beads of the others. "Destiny managed to convince the Cycle to allow the births of four True Heirs with extremely powerful magic, and to make each one of them part of the true Circle of Four. Thus you have Gust magic, my Prince, and the Princess of Rivendon has Scarlet magic, and the others have Crop and Azure. But Destiny could not convince the Cycle to stop allowing elemental magic to its enemies. So there are still those who can oppose us, and will. The

Masters of the Star Circle are among them, and there is one in particular who is a great enemy."

"Who?" Warcourage breathed.

Savior tapped the most thickly encrusted branch. It rang softly, stopped in its vibrating almost at once by the amount of bonds it had. But between two of those threads, a wavering picture formed into reality, and Ternora found herself looking at a man riding a horse through some high mountains. A woman rode another horse beside him, head bowed, and on his saddle hung a sword that blazed with Light. Ternora winced and turned her eyes away from the picture.

"This man," said Savior, and her voice was thick with disgust. "He was once a Master of the Star Circle, but was cast out for violating their laws in ways even they could not tolerate. Destiny chose him as the Beloved Traitor, the one who would resist at first and then recognize the goodness of the Princess he was sworn to serve and come back around. But instead, he simply became the Traitor, ripping apart the bonds that Destiny needs to maintain the pattern without foresight or thought. He is evil, and beyond evil. He will spread the word as he travels north that Princess Alliana of Orlath is dead."

"Why?" rasped Warcourage.

Ternora shifted impatiently. Why did this matter so much? *If Alliana was like Warcourage, I would imagine that her people would rejoice to have her dead.*

"Because he wants to destroy hope," said Savior softly, and stroked the web again. The image faded. "These are the kinds of enemies that you will have to face, my Prince. And my heart forebodes that if you find the Pool and take up your burden, in the end you will face this evil man himself, whose name is Kymenos." She touched one of the threads that had surrounded the picture of the two riders. "This thread," she added, tracing it along to a large golden bead in the center of the encrusted branch, "is him, and this bead is you."

Warcourage nodded his head. "I am ready for such a fight," he said, with his eyes burning.

Savior studied him for a moment, then smiled. "Not quite yet," she murmured. "There are things you must learn first. But in that, the Pool of Siliyonete shall be your guide. There is a reason that you are going to seek it." She turned and looked at Ternora. "And if your friends are true, then you should have no trouble in defeating him."

Ternora tried to look alert and true.

Warcourage didn't even glance at her or Viridian before saying, "They will stay loyal. Tell me which parts of the design are Doralissa's."

Savior nodded, and began to instruct him. Ternora sat still and forced herself to smile, while a slow and burning rage rose in her.

Who was here first? Who followed Warcourage down the Triaga and listened to his whining for days on end and spent more days in a boring undersea palace for his sake? If you think you can simply take that Court position away so easily, my lady, you should think again.

Shadow's Sanctuary

"I have noticed that often, the sanctuaries and private fortresses of the great powers are not very well-defended. I suppose that they want and welcome intruders, so that they might wage and win the great battles beloved of the history-tales."

-The Wandering Theologian.

"And that's the cave?"

"Yes." Elary shuddered slightly. Now that she was close to it, there was no denying the recognition. A cave high in the mountainside leered back at her like a mouth, and not far from it lay a small lake that flashed when Silar shifted position. She and the winged woman were crouched on a ledge on the next mountain, close enough to see but not be seen, with any luck.

Silar opened her mouth to say something else, and then stopped. Elary followed her gaze and saw a white bat emerging from the cave. It lay on the ledge for a moment, testing its wings, then swooped into the wind. Elary caught a glimpse of scarlet feet folded against its breast, as if any more confirmation were needed, and nodded grimly. That was indeed one of the bats that had brought her here.

"I have heard of these creatures," said Silar, sounding composed and thoughtful. "In legends of the higher peaks, mostly. I never thought I would have to deal with one. But I remember the legendary remedies."

"What are they?" asked Elary.

"Salt," said Silar. "And sometimes music. I have a little salt with me, probably not enough to distract the bats. How are you with singing?"

"I can sing a little."

"I can sing much better."

Elary turned her head to watch Melior form out of lightning beside them. She had been a little surprised when the half-liadra chose to remain with them instead of going to find out what had happened to the Serpents and Lord Naldeon, but Melior had explained that the Serpents had formed in order to get a tolerable monarch on the throne of Arvenna. Thus, rescuing Mitherill was more important even than finding out what had happened to her fellows. Having two Serpents here was enough.

"That's settled, then," said Silar. "Elary, will Mitherill come to you when she hears your voice?"

"She should," said Elary. "She was the one who sought me out as her chosen guardian, not the other way around."

Silar nodded as if that made more sense than Elary thought it did, and then stiffened. "Here comes another of them," she said. "Big enough to give me a challenge. Let's hope I don't have to face it in the air."

Elary stared at the bat sliding forward from the cave. She was certain she had never seen it before, though she was also certain she had seen the webbed cave where all the bats lived. This one was giant, so large that its wings scraped at the sides of the cavern entrance, and

gray. It lay still, fanning its wings, for longer than the other had done, and then jumped into the air and flew out of sight with devastating skill and speed.

"That was Shadow itself." Elary didn't realize she'd spoken the words until the others turned and looked at her.

"You're sure?" Silar demanded.

Elary nodded, still shaken by the immense size of the bat. "I'm sure. I saw no gray ones, but I did see Shadow and his closest servants take on several forms. That was him. It had to be."

Silar tensed, wings fluttering.

"Silar," said Melior, her voice wary, "we should wait. I don't think that we can trust a great power to leave his fortress undefended."

"Undefended?" Silar murmured. "Of course not. Defended by servants strong enough to give us a fight? Yes." She glanced at Elary. "But strong enough to hold against three people who want nothing more than to see a rightful Queen on the throne of Ilantra-Arvenna? I don't think so."

Elary nodded back, though she remembered Rior, Shadow's lieutenant who had received the injunction to take care of Mitherill, and wondered.

"We will never have a better chance," said Silar, her voice sharp with conviction. "Let's go." She grabbed Elary under the arms and flew towards the cave entrance. Melior turned into lightning and followed close behind.

Elary began praying to Anakora, the healer goddess, as they drew closer and closer. She couldn't feel the Lady's response as of yet, but she had grown used to that and didn't panic about it. They still flew closer, and still no bat emerged from the cave and lunged at them.

Then their good luck ended. Another white bat came forth, and turned its ears to point directly at them.

"Melior!" snapped Silar, never plunging in her headlong flight.

The half-liadra began to sing. Strange sounds, high and shrill and not what Elary would think of as music, but they seemed to work. The bat's wings drooped, and its head bobbed on the thick neck.

"I have it," said Melior in between clenched teeth. The bat started to lift its head again as the music ceased, but Melior hastily sang again, and the head once more went back to drooping.

"Good," Silar breathed, and then landed precisely on the ledge beside the creature. Elary shuddered at the memory of flying on a bat like this into a snowstorm, and then sternly reminded herself that wouldn't happen this time. She had strong allies. They were going to rescue Mitherill from any corruption that might occur, either here in the lair of Shadow or once they were away. She could bear the memories that swept over her with overwhelming force.

"Come on," said Silar, tugging lightly on her arm. Elary started. From the woman's impatient voice, she had been calling and tugging for some time. She turned and walked with Silar into the cave complex.

It seemed to be deserted, though now and then Elary heard sounds she would have sworn were the murmur of voices. She hunched her shoulders against the impulse to hurry, to run, and continued calmly walking, until she came to a room she recognized. Here Shadow had had them all try to eat a Court Arvennese meal before Mitherill came into her power and they tried to escape. That escape had ended with a bat bringing Elary back to Lorianna's village and Shadow keeping Mitherill.

Elary bared her teeth. *Not this time. This time, we will rescue our Princess.*

"Silar."

Elary turned in startlement. Melior must have done something to the bat to keep it asleep, because she was beside them again, fully formed out of the lightning. Her eyes darted to various corners of the room, and she looked frightened, even slightly sick.

"What is it?" Silar asked. Elary could hear her barely taming the impatient snap in her tone.

"There is something here," said Melior. "I have no doubt it was Shadow that flew off, but there is something else powerful here."

Silar took a deep breath and shrugged her wings. "We will just have to keep moving," she said. "But it might be that I can use my magic to give us a slight edge." She closed her eyes, and a moment later a sword formed out of Illusion was in her hand. Elary studied it, then nodded approvingly. The blade had the same mysterious lettering and dragonbone hilt that the most powerful talking swords had. And Silar could probably even get it to talk with her auditory illusions.

"Let's go," said Silar again, and they continued pressing forward. Elary turned her head from side to side, noting the small tunnels in the stone and ready for something to fly out of them at any moment. Shadow had so many shapeshifting servants that she was ready for anything, even an insect, to be a threat.

But they reached the corridor leading to the bedrooms that Elary remembered so well without incident. She went forward to the stone door and swung it slowly open. Beyond were the other two doors, one leading to the bedroom Shadow had given her, and which she had never used, since Mitherill couldn't sleep without someone caring and protective close by. The other led to Mitherill's bedroom.

"That's it."

Elary glanced over her shoulder. Melior was shivering, her head bowed, her words coming in between chatters of her teeth that sounded as if she were dealing with extreme cold. "There," she said, her hand shaking as she pointed to Mitherill's door. "The powerful thing is in there with her."

"Probably trying to make her rule Iantra-Arvenna the way that Shadow wants her to," said Silar, and raised the Illusion blade. Her wings propelled her forward, and in moments she stood before the door, lifting her hand to knock. Elary, hurrying to stand beside her, had to admire her courage, if not her subtlety.

The door opened before Silar's knock could land, though, and she almost hit the face of the person who opened it. At once she fell back a step, the sword raised and glowing. The man who stood there just eyed it patiently, and then looked over Silar's shoulder and at Elary. He didn't look afraid, damn him.

"I knew that you might come back," said Rior, Shadow's lieutenant, who had been given charge of Mitherill's education. "And I was prepared for the moment when you did."

"Elary?" Mitherill cried.

Elary hadn't heard that voice in days, but it didn't seem to matter. The moment it spoke, she felt a passionate response in her soul. Destiny wouldn't bind her with the same cords, not again, but this child was the one remaining descendant of the blended Ilantran-Arvennese royal lines. She would be the Queen, for good or ill. And Elary was determined to see it for good.

"Hello, Mitherill, dear one," she said. "I couldn't bring Lorianna or Palant or Hanever with me, but they are all anxiously waiting for you."

"I knew it!" came Mitherill's exultant voice.

"That is the child's voice?" Silar asked in a low tone.

Elary nodded; she was too full of emotion at the moment to speak.

Silar turned to Rior, holding her blade high. "You know what this is?" she asked.

There was a faint smile in Rior's voice; it was harder to tell if there was one on his face, since he was made of mist and shadow. "Oh, yes. A talking sword. They always have dragonbone hilts."

Silar nodded. "And powerful magic. You should step aside before I strike you down. Loyalty is to be commended, even loyalty to the wrong side, but you will die if you don't move. From what I know of Shadow, he would prefer you alive to keeping the Princess in captivity."

"That's not real," said another voice than either Rior's or Mitherill's from behind the door.

Elary narrowed her eyes, even as her heart began to pound faster. *Of course. There must be someone else in there. Rior's made of shadow; he might pass through the door, but he couldn't open it.*

A man stepped into view from behind Rior. Elary would have expected Tern, an unexpectedly gentle guard, if she expected anyone male at all, but this was a different man, one she hadn't seen before, with the dark skin of a Rivendonian and direct brown eyes. His hair was dark as well, and lay close to his head in springy curls. He glanced at Rior. "That sword is only illusion."

"I thought it might be," said Rior, still calmly. "As always, Luden, your insight is invaluable."

"Would you have thought it real without me?"

"Perhaps," said Rior. "But most talking swords I know would speak their minds at once, so perhaps not."

Luden sniffed and looked back at them. Elary frowned. Could this man be the servant of great power Mitherill had sensed? She knew she had heard the name Luden before; she simply couldn't remember where.

"You cannot take the Princess," he said. "She has the worst case of tragedy I've ever seen. She needs healing."

"You would only corrupt her," said Silar. "We want a Queen who will rule Arvenna with care for the Arvennese first."

"Then you don't want her," said Luden.

Mitherill gave an anguished cry. Elary knew it was probably only for the insult that Luden had just spoken, but she didn't care. Rage boiled up in her, and she threw herself straight at the door.

It gave, probably because no one but Rior was standing behind it. Elary stumbled into the room, and straight for Mitherill. The Princess ran to her, clinging and beginning to cry like a lost little girl.

Elary turned, smoothing her hand down the white streak in Mitherill's dark hair. It felt cooler than the rest, as it always did. "I know that Destiny tried to enslave me," she said to Rior, "but that doesn't change the principle. Alone of us in this room, Mitherill is royal. Alone of us here, she has the right to rule. And we are going to make sure she become a good Queen. If you are at all sympathetic to the happiness of the Ilantran and the Arvennese people, stand aside."

"I am sympathetic to their happiness," said Rior. "But I am also sympathetic to their not wanting a Queen of the Light. Many of them worship Shadow or Dark. Shadow can get along with Dark. Light cannot get along with either one of them."

"She's the only descendant of the royal line left," said Elary.

"Not true, in the first place," said Rior, whose eyes were beginning to glow a peculiar golden color. "And not relevant, in the second. I have seen my country suffer under a bad ruler, and I have vowed that day will not come again. It will not. I will destroy her and all your hopes first."

"You can't-"

Rior interrupted her, his eyes still glowing, shadows playing all about his body. Elary now had a good idea of who the powerful servant Melior had sensed was.

"Oh, yes, I can," he said. "I can stop you without even trying. I swear by Shadow that I will see Mitherill dead before I see her rule in the name of the Light."

He gestured sharply, and Mitherill gave a jagged scream. Elary pushed the Princess behind her and jumped at Rior.

Silar was right behind her.

And Rior spread his arms and took them into the fury of a maelstrom of shadows.

Chapter 20

Indulgences

"Won't you grant me just one of my indulgences? The Light knows I get very few of them."

-The Dark's Lord, Ernone, on the night that he escaped from prison.

"My lord?"

Kymenos shook his head and surfaced out of the pleasant dream in which he was riding, on a horse that couldn't talk and with no other company, through the mountains of his home.

"What is it, Cheyena?"

"I think there's someone following us."

Kymenos resisted the urge to turn around in the saddle, and instead assumed an expression of concern. "You're sure?" he asked, lowering his voice and leaning in, so that Cheyena had to do the same thing. She was only too happy to do it, though, given how wide her eyes were.

"Yes," she said. "I thought at first that it was another rider, but now I know it's a man on foot. And that frightens me. How could any man on foot keep up with a pair of horses?" She shivered.

Kymenos resisted another urge, this time to snort out loud; Sykeen and Cheyena's little pony, whom she had named Estia, were going at a walk and had been going at a walk all day. "I think you're right," he said. "I'll drop back and look at it."

Cheyena shivered again. "But I thought you wanted me along to protect you, if something happened," she said, seemingly trying to muster the courage to go back and look for herself.

"Only from cold and other enemies that the Scarlet will work well against," said Kymenos. "As for the others, I'll take care of them myself."

Her relief showed on her face, though Kymenos could tell she was fighting not to let it show. He snorted and turned Sykeen, dropping back towards the figure he could now see walking slowly, openly, towards them. If he had not been looking forward all morning, then he would have seen it himself.

"Greetings," he said to the man.

The man nodded back. "You know whose country this is?" he asked, gesturing to the peaks all around them. Kymenos and Cheyena were keeping to the lower trail, not the high passes, but even that had begun to rise out of its descent into a small valley, and would soon ride among the highest Rashars.

Kymenos nodded. "I am ready to pay the tribute."

"And do you know what it is?"

Kymenos shook his head. There were so many changing and shifting alliances of dragons in these parts of the Mountains that he could never guess what one might control the particular territory that he was in.

"In this case, she wants three silver coins."

Kymenos blinked. "So small?"

"So small," the man confirmed. "She has a use for the tribute, but it is not what you think. Three silver coins will do."

Kymenos, who had come prepared to hand over a great deal more, hummed as he dug the coins out of his purse. The Queen of Dragons must be in a good mood, and he smiled at the man as he dumped the coins into his palm. "Bless her, in the name of whatever gods she worships."

"Dragons worship no gods," came the predictable response. "Dragons are free. But I will tell her that you mean her good, and she will bless you for it." The man bowed and turned away into the mountains again. There would be a pony hidden somewhere, Kymenos knew, or even a dragon, to bear the tribute-collector swiftly to the Queen. Probably a pony, though. Three silver coins were not that urgent.

He rode back to Cheyena, who watched him come with an expression of deep dread. Kymenos wondered what she had thought would happen, and wished he could think up a story that would accord with what she had seen and still frighten the fury out of her.

"What did he want?" Cheyena asked, predictably, the moment Sykeen came level with Estia.

Kymenos glanced around and lowered his voice. He had one idea that might work, though it was so obviously joking that Cheyena would see through it before long. "You have heard of Death coming to claim his due?"

"Some old legends," said Cheyena. "That he rides behind a rider until he matches his speed, and the rider looks over to see his own face grinning back at him. Or that he walks behind the one who is to die in the form of a man-" She stopped, and her face went pale. "Kymenos. Is it true?"

Kymenos bowed his head, and put as much sorrow as he could muster in his voice. It wasn't much, in the midst of laughter, but she might forgive that, thinking it was shock. "I am afraid so. Death was walking behind me, and he has come to claim me. I gave him three silver coins, the old bribe, and he agreed to spare me until moonrise. But after that, I am dead."

"Oh, Kymenos!"

Kymenos grunted as Cheyena abruptly jumped off Estia into his arms. He still sat Sykeen's back, and for a moment he was afraid that she would overbalance the horse, but Sykeen shifted and took the weight, making an amused comment in Kymenos's mind at the same time.

You might have died then, after all, had I not been here to catch you.

That really deserved a reply, but Kymenos was caught up in the feeling of Cheyena's arms around his neck and her sobs, and he couldn't make the answer that Sykeen so richly needed.

"I- I knew that you would never really take my magic away!" she wailed. "But I feared you. I still fear you. I owe you so much. My magic is so much a part of my life, and it would have destroyed me to lose it. You told me there was a chance I could, you were honest with me, and then you brewed me the potion and gave it to me anyway! Most healers would have given me the other one, because sparing my life would be more important to them. But you knew that my magic was my life, and I would not want to live if it was lost. You brewed it, and you gave it to me, and I lived, and for that I owe you more than I can ever say. And I fear you. I didn't want to be so indebted. And now- oh, Kymenos!"

The wail in her voice was real, Kymenos realized. She was nearly broken-hearted that this had happened.

The joke soured.

But he couldn't just confess his wrongdoing, either, without getting more punishment from her, so he settled on a compromise.

"Lady," he said with difficulty, prying her arms from his neck and ignoring the harsh reminder of his body that it had been a long time since he felt anything so pleasant, "there is a *chance* that I could be wrong."

"A chance?" Cheyena studied him with wild, hopeful eyes.

Kymenos nodded, trying to ignore how much she looked like Lyli in that moment. "Just a chance. Death told me that he would take tribute from me, first the three silver coins and then my life. But when I did not fuss and whine, just handed over the coins, he seemed surprised. He said that courage was rare, and that perhaps he would spare my life. I don't think there's much of a chance, but there might be one."

"I will cling to it," said Cheyena. "I cannot bear to think of you dying, Kymenos, you who saved my life."

Abruptly she seemed to realize how she was clinging to him, and climbed down off Sykeen, her face red. She remounted Estia with her back to him, and Kymenos let her have the time she needed to settle herself. Then she turned to face him.

"Do you wish to make camp and await moonrise?" she asked.

Kymenos recoiled inwardly at the thought of losing a whole day, but knew he had to phrase his refusal in just the right way. A man who was going to die at moonrise wouldn't care much about how far he traveled before he perished, after all. "No, my lady. If I must die, then I would die with my face to the Mountains, and riding north to my home. When darkness comes, we will camp, because I want you to have a comfortable resting place if I- well. But let us get out of this valley first."

Cheyena watched him with burning, shining eyes. "You truly have the courage that Death praised in you," she said. "And you must love your home very much."

"Very much," said Kymenos, with no need to feign the emotion in his voice this time, as he thought of the walls of Serian and the fresh glitter of the Dalorth Mountains. The Rashars soothed him a little, but they were only an echo of the great music, played out of tune. He would find what he truly sought in Dalzna.

Cheyena inclined her head to him, as if in respect of that love in his voice, and took the lead, sure-footed Estia skipping from stone to stone. Kymenos shook his head and at last found his mental voice to make a reply to Sykeen.

If you had not been there to catch me, I would have fallen to the ground with her on top of me. I think I might have enjoyed that.

Sykeen had nothing to say in reply.

Kymenos stepped back into camp with the armful of wood- they had been lucky enough to find a camp near a copse- and became aware that Cheyena was trembling as she sat with her eyes fixed on the sky. He turned and saw the moon's thin crescent nudging above the horizon.

"I don't think that we have much more time," said Cheyena, shivering as if she were the one who would suffer the approaching death.

"Not much more," Kymenos agreed, laying down his armful of wood.

Cheyena turned to him, and there was a light in her eyes that Kymenos didn't recognize and didn't try to recognize. "You would face death that was coming this lightly, this easily?" she asked.

Kymenos shrugged. "Perhaps I have more faith in Death's love of my courage than you do."

Cheyena dipped her head, as if what he said was true and not just something he had made up on the spur of the moment, and then they turned and watched the moon rise together.

It crested the horizon, and Kymenos let out his breath, then shook his head. He had actually allowed Cheyena's silliness to influence him, and he had begun to believe that he would die then.

Cheyena turned to him and said, "That must have been some courage."

Kymenos shrugged. "I did what I thought was needful," he said. And that was true, though not in the way she imagined it.

Cheyena went on staring at him as if she hadn't heard what he said. Then she said, "And you still swear that when the journey is done, then you will consider the debt over as well? You won't try to call me back or play some trick on me to insure that I remain at your summons?"

Kymenos snorted. "No. I don't cherish your company that much, Cheyena."

She inclined her head, smiling about something. Kymenos wondered if she had figured out his trick, but she only said, "I don't wish you to," and then glared at him as if thinking that he would become offended.

"Good," said Kymenos, and then lay down and pulled his blankets over him. He had more than a little sleep to catch up on. The days since he had acquired Norianna hadn't been restful ones, nor had the evenings that Nightstone had intruded into his mind and made demands of him.

But she didn't seem inclined to do that tonight, and soon enough Kymenos passed into the kind of deep slumber that he favored.

A slumber that shattered when he heard the crashing roar rise from the east. He stood at once, trembling a little, because he had heard the sound before and knew what it meant, and he had to control the urge to flee. Somewhere nearby, a dragon was angry. It was better for anyone who couldn't match a dragon in battle- and almost no other creature could- to turn and run far, far away. Kymenos was eyeing the vale they had chosen and thinking about how it was too exposed when Cheyena said behind him, "I can feel a great source of Scarlet drawing nearer. What is it?"

Kymenos answered her without turning, his eyes still on the eastern sky. She had confirmed what he had feared. "This is one of the rare chances that I will have to protect you. Hide yourself. A red dragon is angry and coming this way."

"But I should stand beside you-

"You can control the burning of the fires, possibly, if it lets them go," said Kymenos. "But you can't hurt it with its own weapon. Hide, my lady, and take the horses with you."

I won't leave you! Kymenos would have known who that was even without the snorting and stamping and neighing fuss that Sykeen put up; no one else would sound that intensely melodramatic.

"Yes, you will, Sykeen," said Kymenos. "You will leave because you have no choice, and because I command it. What else do you need?"

I won't leave you!

"Nor will I," said Norianna coolly. "You must go to the Lake of the Northern Winds. Destiny would have you there, and that means that I would have you there. You must go."

"I will go," said Kymenos, "if I don't get killed fighting this dragon. But I might, and there's no sense in the rest of you dying with me."

"Are you expecting to die?" asked Norianna.

Kymenos glared at the sword. "No, but I might, and it's foolish not to make any provisions for the rest of you, just because I'm so certain that I can survive. I'm not very good with Scarlet, so I'll fight it with Azure. That's all."

"I will stay with you."

Kymenos considered that. Of them all, the talking sword was the only one who might be able to face the red dragon, and who had the kind of magic that might protect her from his fire. "Very well. Then stay with me. Cheyena, take the horses and get them out of sight."

Sykeen danced away from Cheyena's hand, tossing his head as if he would fling the mane off. *You can't order this, Kymenos. I swear that I will just break free and race back to you.*

"It's an order that you stay with Cheyena, Sykeen, wherever she puts you," said Kymenos. "Do you understand?"

Kymenos-

"Do you understand?"

The horse dropped his head and let Cheyena grip his reins and take him away. She at least went, Kymenos was glad to see, with many backward glances but no protests, and Estia trotted willingly with her. Perhaps the females were more sensible than the males, of whatever kind they were.

Kymenos dismissed the thought when the red dragon wheeled across the moon, though. There was no point in running from a dragon that could simply set up a line of flame to take them. He had to face it, perhaps talk it out of the attack, fight it if he must.

He lifted Norianna and asked, "Can you tell if the dragon is male or female?"

"Does it matter?"

"It may. This is the mating season, and while the males are touchy, the females are deadly. She may be protecting eggs that she thinks we've come too near. I'll have to attack first and figure out what she wants later, if she's that enraged."

There was a long pause. Then Norianna said, "Female. And there is a power about her that I have felt before. This is the Dragon Queen, Kymenos."

Kymenos nodded shortly. He had expected as much. The silver coins would have been enough to allow a dragon to find him, given that dragons saw by the aura of Destiny and those coins had been with him a long while. And she wasn't altering her pace or her line, as he could see when she wheeled above him, though ordinarily the running horses might have tempted a dragon. She headed straight for him.

Kymenos wondered if there was a chance he might still negotiate, and then lost the thought as the dragon's jaws parted and a long line of fire tore the night apart. He flung Norianna up in front of him and called on the Azure. The fire sheared off around him, but caught on the trees and began to burn.

Well, I thought that I would have to fight.

With that thought burning in his head, he gave himself over to the battle, as the dragon rose above and then dived straight down at him, claws reaching.

Chapter 21

The Silver Stair

"When the Dark searches for you, then you should hide if you can. The Dark has many tracking beasts, and it will win in a chase over open ground."

-Advice of Yillos Goldfleet to his students.

"We can't move yet, Cadona."

"We should be able to."

Olumer ground his teeth and said nothing, since he thought it was the most prudent move at the moment. Sharing the same cave was getting on everyone's nerves, though it was most evidently getting on Cadona's. She had complained and cried and whined and wailed ever since they awoke that morning and found out that they couldn't move west after all. The country to the west was alive with drakes and ghioutlin, and there was a stillness in the animals around the cave that told Olumer that something worse was moving there, too. They would have to stay where they were and hope for the best.

"They have to give up sooner or later."

Olumer turned his head to smile at Lyli, who had lain in the back of the cave and muttered such hopeful thoughts to herself for some time now. At least she was managing to keep her spirits up. And it meant one less little girl he had to console and whisper comforting words to.

"They do," he said. "After all, they can't know that Cadona is here, though they might guess."

"They could know."

Olumer looked at Cadona. "How could they?"

Cadona scowled and folded her arms. Silverheart, who was curled in behind her and was a large part of what was making the cave so crowded, flipped his tail and gave a querulous growl that echoed his mistress's mood. "Prince Artaen is not a true Prince of Rivendon, but he is Rivendonian, and he would have heard rumors of a great treasure in the west. All of us have heard of them."

"But in the legends, the treasure is always discovered and carried away from the west," Olumer responded. He knew the stories she was talking about. He had heard many of them while he served in the Court and while he was raising her as his daughter, the kind of time when he would tell her such tales. "The Western Crescent is full of treasure, but it's the south and the north and the east that receive the benefits."

Cadona snorted. "But if he can prevent us from getting to the treasure, then it doesn't really matter where we carry it, does it?"

Olumer had to concede that she had a point. The drakes had them pinned, not because they couldn't hope to slip between them but because the drakes could run fast enough to catch them once they caught the little group's scent. And the ghioutlin could use their terrible cries to weaken their prey from a far distance.

And the something worse that was out there, and slowly, Olumer was convinced, drifting closer, could track and hurt them in other ways.

"I want to send Silverheart out to scout," said Cadona, for the fifth time. "They wouldn't take him for anything other than another snow leopard."

"The Dark is clever, Cadona," said Olumer quietly. "They might not take him for anything but an animal at first, but they would track him, and he would have to come back here to tell us anything useful."

Cadona sighed, and sank her hands in Silverheart's fur. The leopard laid his head on her shoulder and snarled at Olumer.

"Then what do you suggest that we do?" Cadona snapped at Olumer.

Olumer drew in his breath and let it out, to make sure that he wasn't about to say anything unfortunate. "I think that we should wait as long as we can, and try to kill whoever finds us first, before they can send a warning. That should open up a gap in their lines, and we can try to exploit it."

"Wait!" said Cadona. "Could you call forth the little animals of your magic, Olumer, and send them out? They wouldn't think to track flies or rats back to a cave, would they?"

Olumer shook his head. "The uses of my animals are limited, my Princess. They must taste blood, or they will simply go wild or fade away. And they will all have silver eyes. That would

be enough to tell even the dullest brain in the Dark that something was wrong, that these creatures were the product of silvereyes magic."

Cadona lapsed back into gloomy silence again.

Olumer shook his head helplessly. He would have given much to ease her gloom, but he wasn't sure what he could do.

"Olumer?"

Olumer looked back at Lyli, who was gazing at him shyly and chewing her lip, as if certain he would refuse her request, whatever it was. Olumer tried to relax and look as non-threatening as he could. "What is it, Lyli?"

"Could you tell me one of the stories?" she asked. "The ones about finding treasure in the Western Crescent, I mean?"

Olumer nodded. "Of course." He sneaked a look at Cadona from the corner of his eye. She had been looking at him, but she turned away again as soon as he glanced towards her, clearing her throat ostentatiously. Silverheart put his head on top of her hair and growled at him, and so Olumer didn't try to make light of it as he ordinarily would have. He turned back to Lyli instead and said, "Is there anything in particular that you would like to hear?"

"A story of escape," said Lyli.

Olumer smiled in sympathy. "Very well. I will tell you the Tale of Queen Haedra."

"The last Light Queen of Rivendon?" asked Cadona, turning her head, though Olumer only saw the movement in his side-vision.

"No, my lady. This is the older tale, the one of the Queen also named Haedra who found the Silver Stair."

"Oh," said Cadona, without interest, and then turned back and stared out the cave mouth again. Silverheart lay flicking his tail, though, and Olumer was almost certain that he was listening.

He told the story, softly, to listening girl and leopard, and let Cadona listen or not as she would to his softly falling words.

"Queen Haedra was young when she took the throne, indeed so young that many of her people thought she could not rule. And it is true that for the first three years of her reign, she did not rule well. She was always wandering away, running in the woods or hunting with no one to tend her. And though she was proud of these small escapes from her guardians, she did not come back refreshed and ready to begin the business of the Kingdom anew, as her guardians hoped would happen when they let her go. Instead, she came back full of stories and laughter and no inclination to sit on the throne and pass judgment for her people. So, in time, her guardians set such a watch on her that she couldn't escape to the woods at all.

"In sorrow and anger, Queen Haedra prayed to Elle for a treasure that would help her escape. And that night, she saw a vision of the Silver Stair, a rope ladder that led to an invisible sanctuary. She could go to the Western Crescent and find it, and then she would have a place to vanish to whenever her guardians wanted to find her."

Lyli was listening, absorbing it all, her eyes big. Olumer was tempted to ask if the history-tales she had heard in Orlath were so different, but refrained. He didn't want to interrupt the flow of the story. It was entertaining Lyli, and it had at least stopped the flow of Cadona's complaints, even if she found it boring.

"Queen Haedra used all her cunning to slip away from her guardians one last time, and went to the Western Crescent. Here, she found the Silver Stair, just as her vision had promised. She cradled it against her, and just then she heard the cry of the ghioutlin, the terrible hounds of the Dark. She had found her treasure, but the next war between Dark and Light had begun as she did so, and that meant that she had only a short time to escape.

"She unrolled the Silver Stair, and found out that it was indeed a ladder, a shining rope ladder, that rose into the air and led Elle knew where. She began to climb it, and she would have vanished into the sanctuary, but-

Cadona cried out. Olumer started, the sound snapping the story-trance that held him, and turned to see her standing, her hand on the light sword that the elves had let her take with her from the silver wood. She stared out of the cave for a long moment, then turned her eyes to him. Olumer blinked. She had begun to glow, the aura of Destiny that always flared around her turning golden and sparkling.

"This is it," said Cadona. "This is the beginning of my Destiny, the fulfillment of my prophecy. Elle surrounds me in this moment, and the Light has come. Oh, Lady!" Her voice soared, and there was as much true joy in it as there had been when they were fighting with swords in the elven world.

Olumer might have doubted her, but for that glowing Destiny, and for the fact that Silverheart had stood up, as well, some of the light spreading out from Cadona's body and encompassing him without pause. He threw back his head and roared, and Olumer thrilled to the glorious sound, even though he knew that it would bring the hunters of the Dark in from miles around.

"I know that my first battle comes," said Cadona, and took the sword from its sheath.

"Your first battle?" asked Olumer. Something was nagging at him, something that wanted him to pay attention, but he couldn't be bothered about it right now. Cadona was more important, and he wanted to find out just what her words about a battle meant, if it would be easily won or not, and whether Cadona would be facing it with him or with both him and Lyli.

Cadona glanced at him. "Yes. They are coming."

Olumer turned to look out of the cave mouth, expecting to see the drakes or the ghioutlin cresting the hill.

Instead, he felt the stillness that had been nagging at his awareness suddenly burst on him like a rainshower. No birds made any sound near the cave at all. He could feel the chill in the air as if it had teeth and had decided to feast on him. He could sense the impending wrongness that made nature coil and tense. He could hear the spirits all around him suddenly screaming and flowing towards him, wanting bodies so that they could kill. Silvereyes were the enemies of many creatures in the woods, but they were all the enemies of what walked towards them together. Silvereyes were natural.

These things were not.

Olumer watched and waited, bristling with loathing. It was already too late to run. He felt Lyli grab his hand, heard her frightened question, but couldn't pay attention to her. He couldn't take his gaze at all from the ridge above which their heads would rise.

And then they came.

They strode as they always did, and all their muscles were in free play to watch, since they wore no clothing. Their bodies were dark blue, and sexless. No breasts, no genitals, not even any hair other than the twisted silver wire that clung to their heads and moved in an intangible wind. Their eyes were faceted jewels, and they clutched chains in their hands that swung back and forth to inaudible music. They halted a few hundred feet away and stood regarding those in the cave with no expression at all.

Filifernai, the dark fey, the most powerful of all the fey except the elves. Olumer knew it would be an unequal contest, but he couldn't turn away from this. Silvereyes hated the filifernai, and they would hurt Cadona if he faltered.

Besides, he had a personal score to settle with them. It had been filifernai who entered the palace of Rivendon twelve years ago, and danced among the stones, and ripped out the throats of Cadona's parents, and feasted on their bodies. It might even have been these same filifernai who had done it, and almost as soon as he had the thought, Olumer was sure it was. The Dark would look upon that as a fine piece of irony.

There were two filifernai here now. It would not have mattered if there had been a hundred. Olumer would have fought them, and he would have died. What mattered was that they were here. And they had their chains.

As he had his magic. Since there was no reason not to do it now, he called on his magic, and formed the bodies for the spirits who flowed into him. These bodies were cougars, black, with silver eyes. The spirits came joyously. They hated the filifernai and would spend their borrowed lives in attacking them without complaint.

"My battle!" Cadona cried, and then sprang forward, swinging her sword, as Silverheart followed her with a roar.

Olumer sent his cougars forward to save her.

And then he saw it didn't matter.

The filifernai had begun to dance.

Chapter 22

Webs of Destiny

"I do not think that one in a million mortals will be granted the chance to look Destiny in the face. If they are granted it, they must take it, for though it blind and dazzle their eyes, they will never again see anything so beautiful."

-Reweren of Faerie.

"Was there something you wanted?"

Ternora had been expecting to see Savior show up since she arrived in the vale, so the woman did not startle her. And she kept her voice low and calm so as not to startle Savior, instead gesturing at the design of bead-encrusted branches and threads before her. "Can you show me which thread I am on the design?"

Savior's footsteps fell softly on the short grass as she approached. Ternora listened, and heard the grass crackle like autumn leaves. So that was not entirely her own, then. Wondrous as this world was, it seemed made of borrowed visions to Ternora; there was nothing that was not like something in her own world.

"Surely you should be able to guess," said Savior. "I showed you the bead that represents the Prince."

Ternora nodded. The large golden bead still gleamed, as though Savior's touching it had lent it a kind of light. She would have liked to reach out and brush it with her fingers, but Savior had become violent when Warcourage tried to touch it earlier. Ternora did not like to think of what punishment she, the guardian whom Savior would think should be more faithful than she was, would receive.

"You are a thread bound to that bead."

Ternora looked back at all the threads that touched the bead, and shook her head. "But some of those are friends, and some are enemies, as you showed us earlier. Which is which?"

"Ah." Savior reached out and stroked one of the threads that ran to another branch. Ternora felt a brief quiver, as though a wind had touched the back of her neck. "You are this one." Savior gave Ternora a sidelong glance. "You are a strong and sturdy thread, but sometimes you tremble as if you will break."

Ternora shrugged. "I'm half-elven, not fey or god or whatever you are."

Savior gave her a faint smile. "I do wish that you would stop trying to guess my kindred," she said. "It is most annoying."

"But I've never seen anything like you before, and I have lived three hundred years," said Ternora. "Of course I am going to guess."

Savior blinked, and for just a moment the mask of ageless wisdom in her eyes slipped, making her look very young indeed. "You have lived three hundred years?"

"Yes," said Ternora, wondering what that had to do with anything.

Savior shook her head, and settled back into the wisdom. "I would have expected someone who lived that long to be more patient, more wise about the ways of the world, more willing to accept what answers come to her--"

"That's elves, not half-elves." Ternora gave her a sharp smile. "I live a long time, but my heart is human. I am going to ask you questions, particularly about why you wanted to rescue Prince Warcourage. Do you have plans that include sitting on the throne of Doralissa?"

Savior smiled as if she'd said something amusing. "Hardly."

"And you wouldn't menace anyone who did?"

Savior sniffed. "You should know the answer to that. I could have left Prince Warcourage in Erlande's realm, which is a more effective prison than this world is."

"So you're not a goddess, then."

Savior stiffened, and for the first time since Ternora had met her in the flesh, her wings stopped moving. "My lady," she said at last, "you are treading on ground so dangerous that I don't think you can rationalize it."

"I am treading on my true ground at last," said Ternora. "I should have asked this before. What are your intentions towards Warcourage? Do you really want to help him win back the throne, or do you want something else?"

Savior shook her head. Her skin was perhaps paler than normal, but then, given how pale she usually was, Ternora really couldn't tell. "I am here to help him regain his throne. There is no more than that."

"But why?"

Savior abruptly drew herself up. "How can you ask such things? You are his guardian. You should understand the pull of Destiny, the clarity of prophecies, the wonder and the yearning for such things. I am not mortal, but how could I resist a call like that?"

"I wouldn't know," said Ternora. "I never felt any such trace of a call." *Once, perhaps, when his fingers were bitten off, but no other time.* "I am helping him because I will become his adviser."

"All this," said Savior, in a voice that she seemed fighting to keep back from a shout, "for a Court position?"

Ternora nodded.

Savior looked as if she would choke, or spit, or be sick. In a controlled fashion, she said, "You should never have become his guardian. You are not worthy to touch the hem of his robe."

Ternora looked around. There was no one else in sight. Viridian had gone flying into the clouds of Savior's world, to see if they were really different from the clouds he knew, and Warcourage had gone with him. Ternora thought the Prince enjoyed flying on the dragon's back, though he didn't want to admit it. She leaned in towards Savior. "You can drop the pretense," she said. "He's not around to hear you."

"What?" Savior stared at her.

"He's not around to hear you," said Ternora. "I'm almost sure of it, and I think you probably have magic that warns you when he approaches."

"I know where the Prince of Doralissa is," said Savior. "But I don't know what you're talking about."

"All those pretty words about serving him because of prophecies and calls of Destiny and what not," said Ternora. "I know those are just pretenses, I know it as well as you do, and I'm telling you that you don't need to maintain the pretense. You can give it up and tell me what you want. If we don't have the same goals, then we shouldn't stand in each other's way, and then I can stop worrying about you and you can stop worrying about me."

Savior backed away from her, shaking her head. "You are evil," she whispered. "You are evil incarnate." She looked back at the design of Destiny. "How could you have gotten into the plans? Why would Destiny bind a thread so diseased into the pattern? Of course there is the Beloved Traitor, but you were meant to be faithful from the beginning. What went wrong?"

"You mean to say that you believe your own words?" Ternora sighed. *It seems that Viridian is the only intelligent person I have to speak with, here.* "I didn't know that. How can you believe them?"

Savior stared at her with tears running down her cheeks. "How can you not?"

"Because that's not the way the world is," said Ternora. "I know. I've seen enough monarchs to know the petty tricks they play so they can convince their people auras of glory surround them. I know that only madwomen actually believe in all the history-tales and all the pretty things Destiny says and does. I thought you might be a madwoman. I hoped not."

"I am not mad," said Savior. "I see the prophecy that binds the four royals together. I sang that prophecy to you. Do you really believe that the four Heirs could come to their thrones and have the prophecy fail? It promises paradise if they succeed. Would you disbelieve in that?"

"Yes," said Ternora. "Of course I would. Why not? Destiny wants to destroy the Dark and Shadow and rule the world on its own, and it is Destiny that makes the prophecies. It might declare that there's a paradise, but we could never see if it was telling the truth until it happened."

Savior shook her head. "I pity you," she said. "To see the world in such a way is beyond me."

"You're right about that."

Savior's eyes narrowed, and now some hint of a flush touched her pale cheeks. "I am trying to help you. Will you reject my help?"

"That's up to Warcourage to decide," said Ternora. "But I can tell you that I pity you back, you madwoman."

Savior shook her head, nostrils pinched and mouth pursed as if she thought that she would say something unfortunate if she tried to speak again. "It seems that you are not the kind of guardian that I thought you were after all, but only a woman who looks at jewels and sees them as the greatest wealth in the world, only a woman who is hoping for a Court position, only someone who would help others for the sake of the benefit that she can bring to herself."

"And why not?" asked Ternora. "Most of the world is like that, and it seems to work. Aren't you helping Warcourage because it will benefit you, or your friends, or your kind, or whoever you're really working with?"

Savior trembled for a moment, then shut her eyes as if she thought that closing out the sight of Ternora's face would be helpful. "I do not have to tell you why I am helping Warcourage," she said. "I mean to help him, and not hinder him, and that is the only thing you need to know."

"No, it's not," said Ternora. "If I were the guardian that you named me, content to go along because of the pretty music, then I would have every right to ask the same questions. I would be protecting Warcourage in that case. In this case, I am protecting my own interests. Either way, I have a right to know this. You sound like a madwoman, but the look in your eyes

proclaims you otherwise. What do you really want from this? Putting Warcourage on the throne will help your designs, but what are they?"

"I do not have to answer you."

"I would prefer it if you did."

Savior stepped away from her, shaking her head. "Destiny has told me that I don't have to answer to you."

"Well, that answers one question." Ternora looked back at the glittering web. "I should have guessed, since you're the only one I've ever met who would have something like this in her possession. You're a servant of Destiny. And do you mean to enslave me, for not being what you want me to be?"

"Ternora."

That voice turned her around. Warcourage stood at the lip of the dell, staring at her in severe disapproval.

"No need," said Savior softly, but Ternora could hear the triumph in her voice.

Ternora cast her a baleful glance, then turned to meet Warcourage coming down the slope. "My Prince," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"I heard all of it, Ternora."

Ternora found the beat of her heart slowing at the look in his eyes. Something was very wrong, though she wasn't sure what it was. "My Prince?"

"I know the real reasons that you are serving me." Warcourage stood firm, but his lip trembled a little. "And I must say that I don't find them very inspiring."

Ternora stared at him. "My lord, you knew the reasons all along. That was how you had me go along in the first place, by telling me about the wealth and prestige I would win as a servant in your Court."

"But you swore an oath to the Light."

"I meant to keep it," said Ternora. "I am loyal to you. No one else has promised to pay me so well."

Warcourage made a sobbing noise. Ternora eyed him in wonder. He was obviously still upset about something, but she didn't know what it was.

The Prince of Doralissa looked at her with tears streaming down his face. "I thought that you were different, thought you might actually come to care for the Light and Destiny outside of what I had promised you," he said. "I promised you what I did because I thought there was a chance that I could change you. You would become someone different along the journey, changing into someone who was a more proper guardian for the Prince of Doralissa."

Ternora found her voice at that. "You know what I am, and you still dare to despise me?"

"I thought you would change."

Ternora shook her head. She was the one who had a fire in her heart now, and the words that she wouldn't have dared to speak only a little while ago rose fiercely to her lips. "You have no right to complain, my Prince. You hired someone who would guide you through the jungle and then become an adviser in your Court. I did the first. I was willing to do the second. I would even have spent my own money to take you oversea to the Shining Isles. You have no right to complain about the service I rendered you."

"I have a right to complain about the motives."

"No," said Ternora, feeling the anger grow, "*you don't.*"

Warcourage shook his head. "That is the end, Ternora. I don't think that you have a right to any more of my time and attention." He turned to Savior. "My lady, I would be honored indeed if you would take the oath that Ternora took. I know that you would mean it. And then you would become the adviser that I need."

Savior inclined her head. Her face was glowing like the full moon, Ternora saw when she looked at her, the way it had when they first came to this country. "I was waiting for you to ask, my Prince," she whispered. "In truth, I saw the treachery in this woman's heart when you came to me, but I did not know how to prove it. I thought it would be more effective to let her announce it herself."

"And you did right." Warcourage stared at Ternora, and while she couldn't read every emotion in his eyes, she could read the loathing and the horror. "Take this thing from my sight, my adviser, and cast her back into Doralissa. It doesn't really matter where you put her."

"Indeed, my Prince," said Savior. "Should I drop her in the middle of the ocean?"

"No," said Warcourage, though Ternora thought for a moment that he had considered it. "There is still a chance that she might change her mind, by thinking about this. I will give her the time to learn to think like that, to see the truth in the Light. Put her on land."

"Yes, my Prince," said Savior, and there was something broken in her voice.

Ternora shook her head.

Warcourage had started to turn away, but he turned back to her at the gesture, frowning. "Is something wrong, Ternora?"

"Yes," said Ternora, in a voice that she herself hadn't recognized, "I fear that something is."

"What?"

"What you have done to me," said Ternora. "Did you really think that I would let you get away with that?"

Warcourage sighed. "Ternora, it isn't a matter of getting away or not getting away. I have done what I have done, and rightfully, for I am the Prince of Doralissa. I am sorry for what you have suffered, but there is a chance that the suffering might redeem you."

Ternora could feel herself stiffen in every muscle of her body. Too much. This was too much. She would not bear this. She did not intend to bear it.

"This is the last that you will say to me?" she asked, still in that voice that she didn't recognize as hers.

"It is," said Warcourage, frowning at her now as if she were some kind of strange beast.

"I intend to take vengeance," said Ternora.

"Of course you do," said Savior in an indulgent voice. "They always do, the scions of the Dark. Let us take you home, my dear, and make you powerless to effect vengeance of any kind. It seems that that is the only thing that might teach you humility." She lifted her glowing hand.

"What would it take to teach the scions of the Light humility?" Ternora snapped. "The end of the world?"

"How dare you?" Savior asked.

"And that's very familiar, too," Ternora added, and then took a step backward and struck out blindly, taking vengeance the only way she could think of at the moment. Her hand sheared through two of the strands of the web before stopping against another, firmer strand, and before Savior shrieked and darted forward to pull her away from the web.

"How dare you?" she cried.

"I dare," said Ternora. "And that's really all that you need to know." She smiled at Warcourage, who didn't seem to have any words left. "Well, Savior? Aren't you going to drop me in the ocean?"

"No," said Warcourage, "land."

"Of course," said Ternora. "Because you might still me suffer. And that's what makes your own suffering worthwhile, isn't it?"

Warcourage gestured abruptly. Ternora saw a wave of Light and wind rushing towards her, and braced herself to accept it.

Had she been part of either element, then she thought it might have destroyed her. But she was not sworn to the Light, and it was rare beyond rare for anyone who was half-fey to have elemental magic. The blast swept cleanly through her, meeting no resistance, and then lodged against something in what felt like her back. Ternora found herself flying backwards down a long tunnel, at the end of which were Savior's and Warcourage's shocked and diminishing faces.

Ternora closed her eyes. There was a long moment of flying, and then ground jolted into place under her knees. She opened her eyes slowly and looked around.

She recognized this place. She was once again in the jungles of Doralissa, outside the Temple of Shara where she and Viridian had briefly gone in to rest, and Warcourage had found out Elle wouldn't answer him.

She climbed to her feet and brushed the clinging mud and dirt from herself. For a moment, she was tempted to go back into the jungles and never have anything to do with Destiny or Light ever again.

The temptation was fleeting, though. Ternora smiled. Perhaps it was the madness that had come upon her, and if so, she had to welcome it. But she didn't think that was so. Warcourage had simply enraged her.

He would find out what it was like to have Ternora for an enemy.

She went to the front door of the Temple and stepped inside. At once a priestess kneeling before the mosaic of Shara cradling the world rose to her feet. "Can I help you, my lady?"

"Fetch Alira, please," said Ternora. "There is something I wish to do."

Chapter 23

The Dance of Cleverness

"There are sometimes people in the world who are convinced they are very clever. They are almost always the least clever ones in existence."

-Attributed to Queen Deleros of Doralissa.

They cheered to see her.

Nightstone paused at that. Many and many a time had she entered the Council room in Orlath for the meeting with the nobles that occurred with every new moon, and they had never cheered her before.

Her eyes went to Lord Caraban, who would have managed to look innocent if he hadn't been grinning.

He told them.

And she had told her own people, so that they knew that any words she might speak in pursuit of her pretense were not meant as words of revolt against the Dark, but simply as part of that pretense.

Nightstone inclined her head to receive the generous outpouring, and then sat down in her usual seat at the head of the table. The nobles took their seats, all of them grinning like children.

Studying them all, Nightstone felt a burst of fierce regret. They looked much like the nobles that had attended her brother and her father when she was much younger. She had found it impossible to deal with those men and women, but Nightstone didn't think it was because they were more formidable than the ones around her now. If anything, they had been less formidable; they didn't understand as much as these nobles did about the direct experience of Dark rule. But Nightstone hadn't had the knowledge then that she possessed now.

Sometimes she wished she were a Master of Time, or could employ someone who was, so that she could go back a few centuries and confound the Orlathian Lords and Ladies. But the Masters of the Star Circle had a tiresome rule about not opening portals for things like that, so she would probably have to abide with her memories, and her satisfaction that her brother and father would have committed suicide before letting her do what she now did.

"My lords, my ladies," she said, "I assume that most of you now know there will be war with Rivendon."

Many nods, and even smiles. Only a few had the sense to grimace. But then, most of these people had never been outside Orlath in their lives. Most of them didn't understand the distances to Rivendon, or how they wouldn't take all that much time to cover, especially if Artaen managed to win the assistance of the dragons.

"It will be a dangerous war," said Nightstone, and let her voice fall a little. "Not only do we have the Prince of Rivendon to face in the battlefield- and he is no small foe- we have the Dark."

"It is true," someone breathed, a noblewoman with long silvery hair whom Nightstone didn't know well. "Oh, my lady, you are part of the Light!"

Nightstone inclined her head to the woman. "Yes, I am, my Lady-?"

"Akellia," she said, and blushed now, as if she weren't used to attention fixed on her.

Nightstone nodded, and then glanced at the others. "My conversion to the Light happened because of the Light's purity and goodness, as I am sure the Lord Caraban has already told you," she said. "But I do hope that I am not disappointed by the Light's fighting prowess."

There came promises that she would not be, and then Lady Akellia blushed and raised her hand.

"Yes?" Nightstone asked, surprised that the woman was being so forceful. Usually, she stayed in the background unless some matter that directly concerned the handful of small villages she ruled was up for discussion.

"My lady, I- I hesitate to say this, but I think there is someone else who could help us, now that you have become part of the Light."

"Who?" Nightstone asked, wondering if she was going to suggest Shadow.

"May I speak with you about it later? It will take me that long to talk to her, and convince her that you are to be trusted."

Nightstone nodded, amused. "Of course. You may come to me tonight, if that would be agreeable."

"It would be."

Nightstone nodded and turned back to the matter at hand. "Then I will need to know this: How many of you can raise armies?"

Hands rose, almost all the nobles. Nightstone winced, remembering something else, and asked, "And how large will those armies be?"

The murmurs that came back to her confirmed her suspicions. The Orlathian throne hadn't wanted armies so large that they could threaten the crown. Nightstone could see the sense in that, but most of the nobles could provide only a few hundred or thousand armed men and women, which might not be enough.

Nightstone mused for a moment, then smiled. Whatever had granted her the inspiration to pretend that she was part of the Light, whether it be Shara or Nimmeriel or Dark, had just provided another natural outgrowth of it. "My lords, my ladies," she said, "you know that I am close to the pegasi."

There were murmurs of assent.

"And you know that the pegasi can fly fast and high, and rarely are seen if someone is not looking for them."

Another murmur of assent. Nightstone could see some curious expressions, as they wondered where she was going with this.

"I am saddened to say that the pegasi have reported Darkworker activity in many of the villages," said Nightstone, turning her voice as sorrowful as she could make it. "Most of the people worshipping Shara, and so on."

Gasps and murmurs of dismay.

"If we need more soldiers," said Nightstone, "then we must round up those villagers who have turned from the path of righteousness, and send them forth into the path of the Dark. They have the chance to regain their righteousness there. We must do this, not because I truly want to, but because we must have soldiers."

She saw some frowns, and realized at once what she had done wrong. Nightstone smiled a little, even as she bowed her head to hide it. *I am new to this kind of dance, but I can do it well once I set my mind to it.*

"And, of course, they are doomed without our intervention."

That made the frowning and the muttering stop. Of course the villagers were doomed without some kind of intervention, Nightstone could hear them reasoning. They would die in the Dark, their souls consumed by its unclean fire, unless their lords and ladies managed to step in in time. Of course it would make sense to put them in the front lines of the war against the Dark, where they would not have only a chance to purify their souls, but could also use their lives to spare those who truly should be spared, those whose souls belonged to the Light.

"We must do something," Nightstone continued. "And if you would come to me, one by one and privately, for a list of the villages where such Dark activity has begun, then we can begin this great task."

After that, there was truly little to discuss. The nobles accepted all she said, and filed out of the room with Nightstone giving them her blessing. They had minor matters, of course, tales of scuffles and earth still too hard to plant crops, but those were little murmurs before the outcry of war.

The Lady Akellia stopped in front of her, chewing her lip nervously. Nightstone eyed her kindly. "Is something wrong, my lady?"

"You will be in your room tonight?" she asked anxiously.

"Of course."

"Good. She will be wary of a trap, and I am not sure I could convince her to meet anywhere else."

Nightstone's eyebrows went up before she could stop herself. *What kind of Lightworker would be prone to think that a Darkworker's room is less a trap than any other meeting place? A stupid one, perhaps, but then most of them are.* "I will be in my room tonight," she said again, just to reassure Akellia.

"Good."

Akellia departed then, and Nightstone would have done the same thing herself, had she not seen Glow waiting in the council doorway. She sighed. "Yes, Glow?"

He inclined his head and began trotting down the hallway. Nightstone scowled at his tail. Since he couldn't speak any longer, he took revenge and made her follow him as if he were the lord and she the lackey.

But, Nightstone reminded herself as she walked along, if I didn't want something like this to happen, I shouldn't have burned out his vocal chords.

Glow led her to an inner courtyard, and the moment she caught a glimpse of sleek scales, Nightstone knew what news had come. She thanked Glow and dismissed him, though the zeyr would have lingered if he could. Nightstone didn't want him to linger. Her pursuit of Kymenos was a private matter between herself and him, and it would remain so.

She hurried out to the gray dragon, and asked as soon as she neared him, "Has my friend Redglory succeeded?"

The gray dragon eyed her with resentment, but there was nothing that he could do. Redglory would never have won the Queenship without Nightstone's help, and she considered that that gave her a right to address the dragon by name and not title.

A moment later, though, the gray revealed that he had a better reason for resentment than usual.

"Queen Redglory is dead."

Nightstone could feel herself pale. She put out a hand to one of the walls so that she wouldn't have to rely on the dragon for support. How in the name of the Dark had Kymenos defeated a Queen of dragons?

Well, I didn't think that he could defeat a pack of ghioutlin, either, she reminded herself.

She looked up at the gray. "And you think that this was my fault?"

The gray bared his fangs. "You sent her at a dangerous enemy. Had you not done that, then she would not have died."

Nightstone opened her mouth to argue about that, and then found she had other things to think about. There was a roaring off to the east that she did not understand, and did not like. She turned her head a little, wondering if another revolt had started, or if the nobles had simply begun to cheer again.

"I see that one of my kind has already decided to come and make our displeasure known to you," said the gray dragon maliciously.

Nightstone tilted her head back. A blue dragon rode high in the air, coming down as she watched to hover over the castle and gesture with a talon. Some device of Artaen's, of course. It had to be. Nightstone hadn't known that he was allied with dragons, but if she could cultivate allies among the dragons, then surely he could. But what was it doing?

A moment later, she knew. She had finally lowered the wards that prevented elemental magic of any kind being used too near the castle unless it belonged to a Lightworker, since too many people coming and going every day had either elemental magic or allegiance to the Dark, and often both. The wards' twanging had gotten on her nerves. Besides, there were no earth faults or great storms or volcanoes near the castle most of the time, those elemental sources that the dragons used to gain strength.

She had forgotten about the Lilitha Ocean.

The Azure dragon circled, once, and slammed his tail down hard.

And the sea came rising up the cliffs at the castle.