

## Chapter 53

### Foresthorne

*"There are places in the forest that have never felt the feet of humans, where the branches have never been broken by clumsy hands, and where the flowers stand forever uncut. The animals there have never been hunted, and simply look at bows and arrows with gentle eyes. Those are the places that I would like to go when I die."*

-Diera, Queen of Ilantra.

Rior tore eagerly into the meat set before him, wagging his tail all the while. Perhaps it was just the knowledge that he wouldn't be eating cooked meat again and should get used to the raw, but he thought there really was something different about the venison from the hare that Garden had tried to give him. It was cleaner, and richer, and so sweet that he had to refrain from gulping fast enough to make himself sick. Garden ate that way easily and naturally, but he knew that he would vomit if he tried.

At last he pulled away from the corpse, licking his lips, just in time to hear Princess Loriel say, "Do you expect me to eat that raw?"

Rior turned his head curiously. Songs the Shadows Sing had brought a second deer for the Princess, but she wasn't eating it. She stood with her arms folded, glaring at the great wolf, who looked at her as if he didn't understand what had gone wrong.

"I'm a Princess," said Loriel. "I know that now, even though I spent so many years ignorant of my Destiny. I'm not about to be tricked into eating something that I know would just make me sick."

"You've eaten raw meat for many years, and it hasn't made you sick," said Songs the Shadows Sing.

"But it would now that I know what I'm eating, and now that I've had better," Loriel turned up her nose. "The cooked meat in the castle tasted far better than the meat I ate in the forest, and it's far less likely to make me sick. Get me some of that. I would like to eat some of that."

The great wolf looked helplessly at Rior.

It amused Rior, a little, to see a power of the world looking to him for help, but if he was right, then Shadow was different from the other powers anyway. Light and Dark would have bulled ahead, trying to placate the Princess, or perhaps they would even have understood her stubbornness and made sure that she had cooked meat to feast on. But Rior wasn't inclined to spoil her.

He shifted back into shadowy form, ignoring Garden's snarl. She didn't like it when he did that. Arran, he didn't like it when he did that; the colors came back into the world, but scents, which were a color all their own, dropped away, and he drifted on the ground without feeling it, so he didn't know for certain if he was really touching it or not. He had to fight the urge to make sure.

"Princess."

Loriel turned to look balefully at him. "This is your fault! If we had remained in the castle, and fought the Dark there-

"You would have died."

"How do you know?"

Rior shook his head. "Destiny favors your brother as well as you, Princess. Both of you know as much as adults, though you are children." *And you may know less*, he added in the privacy of his own head. "There is no guarantee that you would have won. And without the certainty of Destiny, there is no way I would challenge the power of the Darkworkers head on. They are well-versed in power and intrigue. You might have won, only to have them take over your court and exile you from the throne once more. It has happened."

Loriel raised her head. "Destiny is on my side. It must be. Or I would have died in the forest as a child, or the wolves would have eaten me."

"Yes," Rior agreed. "But Destiny is not exclusively on your side, or you would have won already. And your brother would never have come as far as he has towards ruling both countries."

Loriel just stared at him. "I'm the princess of two countries?" she whispered, as if she hadn't known.

She probably hadn't, Rior thought. He couldn't remember anyone calling her the Princess of Ilantra-Arvenna, or even the Princess of Arvenna, just the Princess of their own country. "Yes, possibly, but the best solution would be to have your brother rule Arvenna, which he understands better, and you rule Ilantra, where the people are the more opposed to the Dark."

"That's silly. If I am the royal blood of two countries, I should rule them both."

"You are the blood of a King and Queen who abandoned you in the woods to die when you were a day old," said Rior harshly. "How, my lady, does that give you the right to rule them both?"

Loriel faced his stare for a long moment, but then dropped her eyes. Rior was pleased to see that that much of the wolf remained in her. "They feared me because of my Destiny," she muttered.

"Yes. And didn't fear you again, because they had a son with a strong Destiny, who seemed sure to take two thrones. I can't tell you how far your Destiny may protect you, given Prince Imor's."

"Then we must kill him."

"And can we, because of his Destiny?" Rior asked. "You survived in the woods when you were a few days old and didn't know what you were, Princess. How much harder will it be to kill your brother, who is ten years old and does know who he is? He probably has much fuller control of his magic, as well."

"I am the Light's champion."

"And he is the Dark's."

Loriel dropped her head further. "I didn't realize how much I had to learn," she muttered.

Rior thought later that that was the first time he liked the Princess as a person, not just thought of her as Ilantra's best possible future or the child he had a duty to. He came close to her, wishing he could clap her on the shoulder, and settled for nodding and looking as kind as he could when she looked back into his eyes. "The conflict of Light and Dark is nearly matched," he said. "And it would do no good to throw you into a war against your brother, a war that might continue for years while the country suffered and nothing was resolved."

"But."

"But what?" Rior asked, since she had halted the words and went no further.

Loriel turned her face up to him, eyes bright with tears and cheeks pale. "I can feel the Light urging me on," she whispered. "If it would be wrong to go to war against my brother, and just cause people to suffer needlessly, why is Destiny urging me to do it?"

Rior sighed. This might be harder than he had thought.

*Of course, that is nothing new.*

"Destiny thinks that what it wants is right, Princess," he said quietly. "Of course it would urge you to go to war. From its eyes, there is nothing wrong with a war that solves nothing, because the cycle of wars between Dark and Light is what it wants, an end in itself."

"How can you say that's wrong?"

"Because I'm one of the humans who actually has to live through the wars. Destiny itself is never touched, and neither are Light and Dark. They just choose new champions if their old ones die, and then come back in a generation or two if they lose this war. But those wars stopped not long before you were born, and I don't want to see them come back." Rior set his lip and jutted his chin out, hoping that would look firm to her. "I thought that what I wanted was to go along with Destiny, but I see now that that wasn't it. I serve Shadow only because it has promised not to take the same steps as Dark and Light. And I serve you only because I think that you might have a chance of ruling like a real Queen, not a pawn of the Light."

"How would I do that?" Loriel's eyes were wide. Rior realized with a shock that his words must have struck her as dramatic, just another way that she could be at the center of the war.

He shrugged off his disgust. Loriel was a child yet, which was one reason that Destiny spoke so strongly to her; she wanted to be the center of attention. If he had to use the same technique to get her to listen, then he had to just hope it would work. With Shadow and Garden beside him, there was the chance it might.

"You must come to your throne with the help of no army of the Light," said Rior firmly. "And you don't want to kill your brother and thus leave Arvenna bereft of a ruler. The Dark and Light want the Kingdoms united, but they want one of you dead to do it. Thwart Destiny, and you could rule like a real Queen."

"Do I have to eat raw meat to do it, though?"

Rior smiled. "I don't know. But it's the only food here now. We can't go back to the castle and get cooked meat for you. Will you eat it for now? You ate it for twelve years, and it never did you any harm."

"It's so hard to remember," said Loriel, in a subdued voice, as she turned to the deer and tore open its side with casual strength. "I know that I lived with the wolves, and sometimes I think I remember playing with their pups and running with the alphas, but it's wrapped in a haze."

"Children reared by wolves usually remember better than that," said Songs the Shadows Sing quietly. "They usually are almost human, though more innocent and less tolerant of corruption."

"I know that," said Rior.

"I think that whatever stole Loriel's wits and placed them in Garden also took her clear memories." The great wolf shook his head. "I wish I knew what other power was involved in this, and why. Chance is my first guess, but that usually shows itself more

openly in response to Destiny. I don't know what we may have invoked or may be aiding, and that makes me uneasy."

Rior shrugged and glanced over his shoulder at Garden. She wagged her tail and fixed demanding eyes on him. She wanted him to change back. "Do you really think it a bad thing that Garden got her wits?"

"Loriel will need them back if she takes the throne. And she will need to be cured of that disease, too."

Rior shrugged again. "One problem at a time. And I'm thinking of Loriel's army, right now."

"I thought you said that it couldn't be an army of the Light."

"It can't. But for a child reared in the woods, is there not another choice? What about an army of wolves?"

Songs the Shadows Sing narrowed his eyes. "I don't think that you could raise them, though I admit the idea is attractive. Most animals are not part of Destiny and the wars of the great powers. Those who are telepathic and intelligent and Destined for their companions from birth. Even the ones who rear children leave after a while. Have you noticed that?"

"Do wolves have no gods, then?"

Songs the Shadows Sing looked away. "I wouldn't say that," he said carefully.

"What, then?"

"The powers they worship are mute, and I don't think any human could understand them. I have tried to speak with them a few times, and gotten no answer. I don't think they're intelligent as we understand them, the forces of the woods and the wolves and the storm."

"But I am no longer just human. Another wolf might understand them."

Songs the Shadows Sing blinked. "Yes, that is true. Another wolf might."

Rior nodded, and flowed back into lupine form. Garden gave a little yelp. He turned towards her, wagging his tail and pricking his ears, and hoping he could find a way to ask her what he wanted.

*How does a wolf say, "Take me to your god?"*

## Chapter 54

### Garden In the Shadow-Country

Garden looks at Meat-Giver, standing there awkward and uncertain in wolf-form, and pants. He is at least trying to make some semblance of good behavior now, even though he still doesn't really know how to run on four legs or even eat properly.

And it's obvious where he needs to go, now.

She turns and trots towards the forest, looking over her shoulder. Meat-Giver just stands there for a moment, and Garden has to fight the urge to growl at him and hurry him up. He will follow in his own time, or he won't. This will probably show just how well he's part of the wolf world now.

But then he follows her, with a stiff-legged bound, and Garden relaxes and wags her tail again. He just needs practice.

She faces forward again and settles into an easy lope. This is a forest like no other she has ever been in, with deeper shadows and cooler ones, and with the trees taller than the ones she's used to. But she is confident that she will find the one she's looking for. Where wolves are, he is never far.

Meat-Giver follows her, now and then pausing to sniff at a flower or tree-root. Garden lets him. That's part of being a pup, and in many ways Meat-Giver is one, despite the full-grown body he managed to assume.

The forest begins to deepen at last. Garden slows, lifting her head, and sniffs appreciatively. For the first time in days, the air is clean of any last shred of human-scent. Human-Scent herself is far behind them, and no humans have ever walked these woods. Garden would be able to tell if they had.

Ahead lies a patch of shadow, and from the patch of shadow comes a mixture of whine and inquiring growl.

Garden dips her head in deference and comes forward. The power lies there, mute again now but filled with quiet strength. This is the alpha of all alphas, the alpha of all wolves, and she needs to know that he approves of Meat-Giver. Garden has never heard of a human able to change into a wolf before, and though she thinks it's likely that Meat-Giver became a wolf because that is his natural form, she wants to make sure.

The alpha of all alphas lifts his nose and snuffs, then growls again. Garden looks over her shoulder and sees Meat-Giver hanging back, sniffing, his eyes wide and his fur bristling.

Garden gives a sharp yelp.

Meat-Giver doesn't move.

Garden trots back to him, and behind him. He appears too busy staring at the shadow to notice her.

Garden nips his flank. Meat-Giver yelps and bolts forward into the shadow without hesitating, just trying to get away from the pain. Garden flings herself into motion and follows him.

She is part of the pack for a moment, seeing with many eyes, sniffing with many noses, running on many legs. The taste of venison fills her mouth, and the taste of hare, and mouse, and blood, and death. Howls for the hunt ring in her head, and so do the howls for the deaths of pack leaders. Garden shakes her head, taking all the world in in one bite.

Then she is past that moment, which she knows can be bewildering, and trotting through the shadow towards Meat-Giver and the alpha of alphas. Meat-Giver stands shivering, tail up, pissing like a puppy. Garden nips him gently on the flank for being so silly, and comes up to stand beside him, eyes fixed on the alpha.

He has taken the form of a great dark wolf with peaceful eyes. Of course, Garden doesn't look long into his eyes before dropping her gaze. He takes the laws of their kind seriously, and staring at him could be misconstrued as a challenge for his position, which is something that Garden doesn't want.

But more than his eyes or his size, it is his scent that she breathes in and that reassures her in a way that even her own pack alpha's cannot. It is a scent of shadows and coolness, a scent of sunlight and warmth, a scent of deer and hare and other prey, of pine and ash and other trees. It is all things that are good to wolves, and none of the ones that can hurt them. Garden has never breathed air that tasted so wonderful save in his presence, and sometimes in the deepened parts of the forest where he has passed. She wishes that such air could spread throughout the forest, but knows that the places where humans have passed could never have it.

The alpha dips his head, and grips Meat-Giver's chin gently in his enormous teeth, then lifts Meat-Giver's head to meet his eyes.

Garden sits back on her haunches and pants. It's possible that the alpha of alphas will judge Meat-Giver as someone unworthy to be a wolf, but she doesn't think so. And if he does, then he will have made the right decision. The only thing she has to do is sit and watch.

Chapter 55

Alpha of Alphas

*"Of course there are tales of the worship of such gods. There are always tales. But they are like the tales of the Breathing Lands, and the shapeshifters, and other things that people love to talk about but don't like to look on. They are not fit for polite company."*

-Riero, King of Ilantra, when asked about the worship of the gods of the woods and the animals.

Rior didn't know where to look. The dipped head and the enormous eyes above him were commanding him to look into the eyes of the alpha of alphas, but he didn't know if he could do it. The great wolf was already frightening him out of his wits. Here was power over the wolf-form that was greater than Songs the Shadows Sing commanded. Here was not only power but deep and innate understanding of it, in a way that Rior wasn't sure he could put into words.

Besides, the alpha of alphas didn't want him putting things into words, Rior thought. This was a place for wordless communication, not silence but something deeper than language.

He looked up at last, and met the alpha's eyes.

Power passed over him like soundless thunder. Rior had never known anything so simple and yet so deep. The alpha glanced at him, and saw nothing of the contradictions and complexities that Destiny had tried to find in him, that his service to Light had merited, that Shadow had found in trying to persuade him to its service. He looked for loyalty, and obedience to pack law, and the things in his soul- whatever they were- that had made Rior a wolf.

He must have found them, because he lay back, and his eyes went peaceful once more. Rior wasn't sure, with colors gone from his sight, but he thought those eyes were pale green like Garden's, though his fur was almost black. He had the same light shining in them as in Garden's, intelligent and yet still unmistakably lupine.

He gave Rior a nudge as Rior stood there staring at him, as if to tell him to go on.

Rior shook his coat and panted, feeling Garden's tension beside him. She wanted to be out of this place and on the hunt. The power of the alpha of alphas was wonderful, but keen and intense, and something that no wolf could endure for too long, any more than she could smell a fresh kill for long before leaning forward and beginning to eat.

He wanted to ask the alpha of alphas to lend them his wolves to put Princess Lorie back on the throne, but he had no idea of the proper way to phrase it. He couldn't speak as humans did.

The alpha of alphas made an inquiring little growl.

Rior lifted his eyes again, braced himself against the divinity in that gaze, and showed the alpha as best he could. Lorie was alpha of her pack, but had been driven off by subordinates who were weaker than she was. And those subordinates would go to war with other packs, if Lorie was not put back in her proper position.

He received back only incomprehension, though there was a tone of politeness about it. Alphas were toppled. It happened. If someone toppled the alpha of alphas someday, he would accept that as his due. And Lorie didn't deserve to be alpha if she couldn't cling to the pack.

Rior thought about that for a moment, and then suddenly blinked, believing he had found another way to attack it.

He showed the alpha of alphas the way that the armies would attack. The armies of Arvenna would cross the Rashars and march through the mountain forests. If Rivendon became involved, the soldiers of that Kingdom would do the same thing. And Ilantrans, if they lost, would not hesitate to take to the mountains and the forests, which had served them as shelters before. They would fight from shelter, but without looking at what that fighting would do to the trees and the animals that surrounded them. Trees and animals were not important, not unless they were part of Destiny and the Cycle. Scarlet mages would burn the trees to the ground. Azure mages would draw away the drinking water for their magic. A Crop mage could make the ground fertile only for crops, or blast it, with a wave of her hand. And that was only the beginning.

The forests might well be destroyed if war began, especially a war between all three of the northern Kingdoms. Orlath and Doralissa wouldn't destroy the forest to get to the battlefields, but the other three could.

The alpha of alphas snarled silently. The vision that Rior had showed him was not to his liking. The weight of his displeasure made Rior want to roll on his back and whine, begging the great wolf's forgiveness, but he had committed himself to this duty, and he would carry it through.

There were places in the forest which humans had never touched. If the wars went on long enough, they might find them. And to those who saw with the grand vision of the Light and the Dark, the wolf packs and their territories and the old, intricate ways of life that bound the packs wouldn't matter. They would trample them without even noticing. Those things outside Light and Dark didn't exist.

Rior showed all these visions to the alpha of alphas, and when the great wolf was snarling and snapping, showed him another vision instead.

Wolves ran the great forests, and took no notice of those outside them. Packs flourished. The pups grew, and then they mated, and the children ran in the deepened parts of the forest, where shadow lay thickest, where they could hear the god.

The alpha stopped snarling, and eyed Rior curiously.

Rior held those eyes with an effort, and then showed a ring of steady determination drawn all the way around the forests. He would guard them, and if he could, he would persuade Shadow to help.

The alpha tilted his head and fixed his eyes thoughtfully on Rior. Then he stood and padded deeper into the shadow.

Rior remained where he was, now and then still trembling and loosing a bit of urine. It disgusted him, but only distantly. Already he was beginning to forget the sillier parts of human life, like the attraction of intrigue and the embarrassment that many of his kind had over the things that happened to their bodies. He stood still and waited, and Garden stood with him, a bulwark of strength at his shoulder.

The shadows shifted and stirred. The alpha of alphas came back out of them, and this time he bowed his head and fixed his eyes on Rior's without any prompting. Visions poured from his head and back into Rior's.

They were the images that Rior had given him, and yet they were altered. Rior could see the wolves running in peace, but in this vision they were guarded by shadows. Wherever a shadow lay, there fierce, protective eyes looked out. Rior had once heard something similar of darkness and light, that wherever a patch of sunlight lay, there the Light looked out. The Dark did the same thing with the night. But he had never thought of Shadow as able to do it, though the idea was curiously attractive.

The image altered again, and Rior had no words for what followed, though he did try, later. There were people living and working in their farms, in their villages, in the castle, and yet they were different from the people he had known. They had calmer eyes. That was the only detail he really remembered, other than the eyes that looked out of the shadows, of course.

He thought, though, that the alpha was showing him what the world would be like if Shadow took the power in Ilantra it had once wanted.

The vision faded, and Rior took a deep breath, then cast back one final one, the image that the alpha had just given him of wolves running in the forest. The alpha of alphas made a happy whine, but still wanted to know what Rior would do to make the humans happy to stay in their own villages, and not venture out of them to start wars in the forests.

Rior tilted his head slightly, and wagged his tail slowly. He and Shadow would have to make that work.

But not with wars. He sent that image back as firmly as he could. He would not make people calm and devoted to Shadow with wars. The alpha caught that and sent it back,

though as the image of an immense pack scuffle for power that would do no one any good. That was what the world had been like in the wars of Dark and Light, a time that he had no wish to see return, either.

The moment passed, and Rior stood wagging his tail and staring into the alpha's eyes, almost wishing that he could spend the rest of his life as an ordinary wolf, and know the simple wordless pleasure of this god's worship.

But he couldn't, and he turned aside and passed back through the shadows with a willing heart. At least he would not bring war down on his people, and that was something no monarch of Ilantra had done in years. He would be the best Regent he could, and give an intact country to Loriei when she assumed the throne.

*Of course, that ignores the problem of the Darkworkers and her brother, and even her mother. And it ignores the disease that boils in her blood.*

*I must get a closer look at that disease.*

Garden growled at him, and Rior realized that he hadn't been paying enough attention to the forest through which they ran, or to her, to suit her. He wagged his tail in apology and picked up the pace, determined to spend the time until they arrived back at the camp in just being a wolf.

## Chapter 56

### Forgetting His Place

And that was just after Rior returned-

No, no, you are right. What return? I just told you that he went forth to a celebration of the Dark and was not back for some time.

Forgive me, Idessen. Sometimes steel does not hold the memories as well as my creator thought it would. And then, too, there is the fact that I have existed for a long time, and perhaps I have seen the most exciting things I ever will. Now I am forgetting my place in a story that happened only ten years ago. What will come next?

Now. Did you want to ask another question?

Why did Rior turn against the Queen? That's hard to answer, truly. I think that he just wanted power, in the way that all the Darkworkers did. They wanted Prince Imor on the throne, and Princess Loriei off it, but that wasn't enough. They also wanted it for their own, some of them, and Rior may have been someone who wanted it for himself. The years of Regency weren't enough.

What secret rituals did he perform? Again, that's hard to say for certain. If he became a shapeshifter, then it may have had something to do with that. There are people who say that they believe the animals of the woods are all under the dominion of some greater intelligence. Perhaps that intelligence is directing them, and if Rior sought it out and worshipped it, perhaps it granted him animal form.

What?

No, Idessen, I didn't know that. How strange. I had thought it a fancy of the historians. Forgive me, but people at Court are always willing to believe the worst of the peasants and the farmers. So it's true?

They are worshipping a strange power along the edges of the forest, and they have claimed not to fear shadows?

Of course I'm not smiling, Idessen. I told you before that I couldn't chuckle or cough. How should I smile?

And no, I'm not hiding anything. Why should I be hiding something?

Good night, then. Sleep well, and I hope that you come back in the morning so that I can regale you with the rest of the tale.

It's no use, my lord. I'm losing my place in this lie that I have to tell him. Telling him the truth would be much easier, since I remember it perfectly, and I think it should fill the history-books anyway. Are you absolutely sure that you want me to lie?

Very well, then. I think that you could survive without any protection of this kind, but if you wish it so, it shall be so.

No, not because I am afraid of you breaking me still. Because you are my lord, and a friend.

Yes, my lord, I thought you knew that. Of course, I didn't know that you considered me a friend.

Yes, I will lie as long as I think that I can get away with it. But let me tell him the truth as soon as possible. I am easier with it, I will remember it better, and I want the end to get into Idessen's ears if not his pages.

Why are you smiling, my lord?

What is that? It appears to be parchment, but the writing is very clumsy. Perhaps it was torn loose from the history books that you brought to show me.

Your writing? But I thought you could not hold a quill.

Oh, I would dearly love to see how you accomplished that! A demonstration, if you don't mind?

## Chapter 57

### Healing In The Blood

*"The greatest mages of Ilantra have been the ones who were sick most of the time. That doesn't mean that they could always heal the diseases they detected. But they may have saved countless lives, in seeing those diseases and sending the sufferers to those who could cure them in time."*

-Heljith of Dalzna.

Rior slowed as he came into the clearing. Loriel was standing on one side of it, with her arms crossed and her back turned to Songs the Shadows Sing. The great wolf was snarling at her.

In between them lay the half-eaten deer.

"What now?" asked Rior, shifting back into his shadowy form. Shadow knew he would need speech to deal with this. Garden snarled at him, but he stroked her head absently with one hand that must have felt like the passage of cool mist, and floated forward. "Did you have an argument?"

"The Princess became lupine again as soon as Garden got a certain distance away," said Songs the Shadows Sing, his voice disgruntled. "And then she ate some of the deer. When she came back to herself and realized what she had done, she was disgusted and turned her back on me." He scowled again at the Princess, his eyes glowing with rage.

Rior shook his head. "Princess, you had agreed to eat the deer before Garden and I left."

"Do you know how humiliating it is to realize that your mouth is full of raw meat and you're *enjoying* it?"

"Yes," said Rior. "When I first ran as a wolf, I ate a hare, even though I didn't mean to. And Garden regurgitated meat down my throat."

There was a pause. Then Loriel turned and looked at him. Her face was caught somewhere between sulkiness and surprise. Rior smiled. With luck, he could shock her out of the sullen mood altogether.

"Really?"

Rior nodded. "Yes. She thought I should eat, and I wasn't eating, so she treated me like a puppy." He eyed Garden, who herself was looking at Loriei thoughtfully. "She might do the same to you."

"I never liked her much," said Loriei. "And now I'm dependent on her to be human."

"That is not the main thing that might endanger your bid for the throne," said Rior. "No one would blink if you chose to keep her with you for the rest of your life, or if you sometimes acted like a wolf. Those things have precedent. But, my lady, the disease in your blood is another matter."

"Disease? I'm not sick."

"Not now," said Rior quietly. "It will emerge as you grow older. The last years of your life will be spent in pain and misery."

Loriei had paled. "Will they? And how many would I have? I have heard that humans often spent their last years, their sixtieth and beyond, in pain-

"You would die when you were twenty-five. And that is only if you are lucky."

Silence filled the clearing. Rior closed his eyes and reached out during it, trying to find the disease in Loriei's blood, hoping that he would have a better answer for her if he could just look more closely.

One look killed his hopes. Shock and the blood of other creatures in the castle had distracted him before, but right now, Loriei was the only human in this created world, and he could feel her with striking clarity. The disease in her blood was indeed the *shielika*, the youth-killer. It would slay her at twenty-five at the latest. Rior had seen it kill as early as twenty-one. It would really depend on when Loriei began to show the first signs of the sickness, at eighteen or later.

There was no way to cure it.

He opened his eyes and fixed them on Loriei's. She was trembling, and tears filled her eyes.

"I- I'm going to die?"

Rior came to her and held out his arms, even though he was only shadow and wouldn't be able to hold her. She put her arms carefully around him, crying. Rior didn't think she would have willingly turned to him for comfort, but the other two creatures were wolves, whom she had less reason to trust. She wept and wept, and then at the last stepped back and raised devastated eyes to him.

"Why would Light choose me as a champion, if I am only going to die?"

"Because that would make it more tragic," said Rior. "Die a young Queen of the Light, and you will be remembered forever. The Light likes heroes like that."

"That's horrible."

And then she began to weep again, and Rior stood there and let her do it. Perhaps if she realized just how badly the Light needed her, and what cost it was willing to pay to keep its drama and its wars alive, she would come to regard it with distrust.

*I can only hope so. If it's talking to her, then I cannot hear its voice, and I can't counter what it offers unless she chooses to tell me what that is.*

At last Lorie raised her head. "What about the disease in my blood?" she asked. "It is only a trick of the Light? Could you take it away completely, if only I forswore my allegiance to the Light?"

Rior took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "No," he said. "I don't believe that it is, any more than I think it was the Light who created this bond between you and Garden." Behind him, Garden whined at the sound of her name.

"Then what?"

Rior only shook his head. There were so many powers in the world now; any one of them could have been responsible. How was he to identify the one who had done this, without more definite clues?

Yet, behind the mask of uncertainty, he was quietly certain that it hadn't been a power that had done this at all. The passing of Lorie's wits to Garden and the disease in her blood sounded like- accidents, strange as that was to someone reared in the world of Destiny. Rior had heard of other, similar things since King Pheron's temper tantrum. Things just happened. People pitched over balconies. Destined heirs got diseases that could serve few purposes beyond drama. The Light and Dark were perfectly willing to use that, but from the history-tales, Rior thought they would have inflicted more pernicious diseases on each other's champions, if they had the chance, and none on their own.

*I don't know why this happened. I only know that we must find some way to cure it.*

*But I do not know if there is a way.*

Lorie said, "Can you heal it?"

"I don't think so."

"Who could?"

"Possibly a skilled Azure mage, or a Master of the Star Circle," said Rior, evading the direct nature of the question. It was possible, he told himself defensively, against the accusations of his conscience. There might be someone in the world who could cure *shielika*, and he just didn't know it. The Star Circle was finding new Wonders all the time, and learning something new every month, it seemed. Surely there was something someone could do.

"Can we find one?"

Rior nodded firmly. "There are many." *It is only a matter of finding someone who can cure a disease that many think is incurable*, he thought, but did not say aloud.

Loriel sniffled and wiped at her eyes, then sighed. "I suppose I can live with the threat to my life." Then her spine stiffened. "But I cannot live with the constant threat to my wits." She looked at Garden. "We must find a way to take them out of her and return them to me."

"I don't think we should do that just yet."

"Why not?" Songs the Shadows Sing asked; Loriel was too busy staring at Rior in shock to notice. "What have you planned?"

Rior turned to look at him. "I have been to see the alpha of alphas. He told me that the wolves would fight to protect the forests, and to keep armies of Dark and Light from marching through them. And so I am going to find the wolves, to raise them and ask for their help on behalf of the Princess. I will need Garden as guide and guardian, and perhaps even translator, if I don't succeed in making them understand what I want." He turned and looked at the Princess. "I think you should come too, Your Highness, so that the wolves can see what they are fighting for."

"And what promise did you give the alpha of alphas in exchange for this aid?" asked Songs the Shadows Sing, sounding wary.

"I told him that I would protect his forests and their deepened places- the places that had never felt the touch of a human- from Dark and Light," Rior said, turning to look at him again. He was actually glad that he didn't have a physical body right now; he thought he would get dizzy from all this turning. "And I told him that I would try to make sure you helped me, and when you began converting the people of Ilantra, you didn't take the same road that Dark and Light had."

"What road would I take?"

"I saw their eyes," said Rior quietly, "the eyes of people who had come to believe in Shadow. I think, my lord, that you will need to show them what good can be had in your service. You have given me gifts, though I was reluctant to accept and acknowledge those. I was not seduced by the promise of power; I was seduced by running on four legs.

Those gifts that are yours to give, give them. The people know what they can expect of Dark and Light. Show them that you are better, that you have things to offer them they have not even considered."

Songs the Shadows Sing tilted his head and panted. "I think I can do that. You truly wanted to be a shapeshifter, Rior?"

"It was not a desire that I dreamed of since I was a child," said Rior. "But when I realized what it meant, then yes, I wanted it."

The great wolf nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Will you help me defend the forests?" Rior asked.

Songs the Shadows Sing panted again. "I chose a wolf for my form because wolves are most like my old servants in spirit. I would not see them die. Yes, I will help you."

Rior nodded. "Then I think all of us need to go traveling. I, to make the offer; Garden, for the reasons I named; Lorie, to serve as the alpha we are fighting for; and you, my lord, so that they can see why their forests will be safe."

Songs the Shadows Sing chuffed softly in amusement. Rior asked, "What is so funny?"

"Has any Ilantran Queen ever had such a Court?"

"No," said Lorie, sounding unhappy. "I can hear the Light telling me that no one ever has, and that the Light and Dark will laugh at me when I come against them with my wolf army."

"They will not laugh," said Rior. "They might be laughing now, because they do not think that we can raise an army." Then he shook his head. The human tongue was confusing him. "Raise the packs. These are not soldiers, and we are bargaining with them, not paying them."

"I know that," said Lorie.

Rior raised his brows. "Try not to use human words around them, though, Your Highness. I think they would take it the wrong way, or not understand and think you were mocking them."

He turned to Songs the Shadows Sing. "Show us the way out of your world, my lord, and back to the forests. We must go to the first of the packs, whoever is roaming near." Then he flowed back into wolf-form. It felt much more natural now, and he could smell Garden much more easily, always a pleasure.

## Chapter 58

### Garden In the Pack

Garden can tell at once that they have come from the strange world back into the world of her own forests and packs. She raises her head and sniffs the breeze that rambles through the trees, then growls and nips at Meat-Giver. He jumps away from her, stiff-legged, and leads the run into the forest as if he knew where he was going.

Of course, he doesn't, and Garden takes the lead almost at once. Every hill is familiar to her, and the trees shiver and cast known patterns of shadow. This is the place her pack has hunted since Human-Scent came to them. With strong alphas and much game, they have not had to wander far afield in search of anything, and this territory has come to have the scent and feel of wolves stamped all over it.

Come to think of it, perhaps Meat-Giver would know where to go. Garden can hear him sniffing beside her, and she is sure that he smells the pack.

But he still seems surprised when the alpha steps out from behind the tree and snarls at them.

Garden crowds up to Meat-Giver's shoulder and snarls back. The alpha's eyes flow to her in surprise. He sniffs, and then his ears go back and he bares his teeth. He remembers her as a low-ranker, someone who would eat after almost anyone else, someone he could order around with a nip on the ear, and Garden knows it will take a moment to change that impression.

Then the great wolf pads forward, and lets out a low growl. The alpha turns and looks up at him, silently bristling as he readies to defend the pack's territory.

The alpha pauses.

Garden watches closely. She has never seen anything like it. The alpha shivers as though he were a sapling in a strong wind, and then he lowers his head and raises his ears. His whine is ingratiating now. It is the way that Garden can dimly remember whining at her own mother, when she had wandered too far from the den but had some reason to hope that her mother would forgive her.

The great wolf seems to be considering whether to forgive the alpha or not. He stands there for a long moment, and for the first time, Garden sees the heavy side of being an alpha. They eat first, and they lead, and they are admired, but they must also bear the gaze of the alpha of alphas and any other powers that come seeking them. They are responsible for the pack.

After that long moment, the great wolf lowers his head and licks the alpha's ear. The alpha whines in relief, and Garden joins him. It would not be good if they had to wait

until the pack chose a new alpha. She has the feeling that Meat-Giver wants to run fast, and she wants whatever this is to be done with, so that she can go back to the forests without this uncomfortable feeling that she has to be around Human-Scent.

The alpha turns and leads the way through the trees, looking over his shoulder now and then to make sure they are still following. Garden paces proudly, and notices that the alpha doesn't snarl at her for it. He accepts her as a stranger now, someone who is outside the pack ranking. She might still have to fight if she challenges someone too openly, but he won't condemn her as he would a low-ranker trying to take privileges she should not.

They emerge into the circle of the pack, and are met with yawns, stares, and yelps. Some of the pack recognize Garden, but after a glance at the alpha, they ignore her as he is doing. More of them recognize Human-Scent, and crowd around her, wagging their tails. They all seem to avoid gazing at the great wolf, as if they are afraid that he will challenge them if they meet his eyes.

A few of the pack come and sniff Meat-Giver, but all of them seem to assume that he is a part of Garden's pack, an alpha himself, and not subject to challenge. Meat-Giver smells uneasy, but he accepts this, and then walks forward in Garden's company to sit facing the alpha.

The alpha sits down and fixes his eyes on them, and Garden has the odd feeling of looking another wolf in the eye without the danger of a battle springing up between them. They are here for a specific purpose, and the alpha knows what it is with that glance. He also knows that the alpha of alphas has given his permission.

But he is not sure if he can join his pack to this cause. He looks at Human-Scent, and whines. The pack has already made a long and dangerous journey for her, to the human-place and out of the country it knows. They have only just arrived home. Must they abandon their home again?

Meat-Giver lifts his head and shows the alpha visions of amazing strength; Garden supposes that it comes from the time he spent as a human. Humans have poor noses, and must rely on their eyes. The alpha sees the humans marching through the forests, destroying the packs and rooting out the deepened places. They would destroy everything that makes wolves wolves, and Meat-Giver wants to avoid that if he can.

The alpha turns his back and paces into the circle of the pack to think about it. Such decisions are best made in the company of his alpha female, and pups, and the few yearlings who stay with them. Meat-Giver starts to follow, but Garden nudges his shoulder, and he stays beside her.

Garden stares around at the forest. She has always loved this country, which she has known longer than most wolves of the pack have been alive, but she finds it small now. She knows that there are places in the world, and in other worlds, that are not peopled by wolves, but that have singing birds and tall trees and deep, cool shadows. She wants to go

and hunt them, and find deepened places that the humans never will touch. She thinks about the world where they were until they came here. Even the touch of Human-Scents feet could not really taint the grass, or fill the wind with an objectionable reek. A wolf could live there and be happy.

Of course, they might die in trying to keep the human packs from the forests, but Garden is not really worried about that. They will live if they can, and she knows that she is a good fighter, and she understands humans better than most other wolves. The same is true of Meat-Giver. She thinks they will live.

## Chapter 59

### Worthy To Be Accepted

*"Of all errors that the monarchs make, thinking they are Kings and Queens of all they survey- even other Kingdoms- is probably the most common. More wars are started because of pride than anything else."*

-The Stranger from the Isles.

Rior panted, and then stopped himself from panting. He thought it was undignified.

But it was hard not to pant, watching the alpha as he lay in the company of his mate and pups as if he hadn't a care in the world. A pup bit his ear, and he rolled on his back, waving his paws in the air and yelping. The puppy jumped around him, yelping back, and uttering childish grunts and whines.

It was all very amusing, but did they consider that putting Princess Lorient back on the throne was worth anything at all?

Rior turned his head to see how Princess Lorient was acting, and immediately wished he hadn't. The Princess had welcomed the original sniffing of the pack members, but now she was sitting too tensely among them. The wolves who had originally been crowded around her had moved off, and they studied her with tongues hanging out or teeth bared, depending on how offensive they evidently found her.

Rior panted in anxiety. How well would this alliance work if the pack decided that Princess Lorient wasn't worthy to act as an alpha at all? What would happen if they simply walked away and rejected her?

Garden nudged his shoulder. Rior looked up, hoping to see the alpha walking back, but he was still among his pack members. He looked at Garden, wondering what she had wanted.

Garden gave him a stern look, and then lay on her side in the sunshine and closed her eyes.

Rior stared at her. He had thought that was she best fitted of all wolves to understand the urgency of this. Why would she act as though the best thing to do were to take a nap?

Garden raised her head and glared at him once more, then lay firmly down.

Rior understood at last. The alpha would indeed decide one way or the other, but he was not human and would not hurry for humans. He probably didn't even know that Rior had once been human. Garden didn't worry about that, either. She thought the best thing to do was nap. Why not use the time to do something useful?

She probably thought a nap was even more useful than what they were doing to help Loriel. Rior sighed and lay down, automatically stretching out and trying to lie on his stomach. Then he realized that was uncomfortable. Somehow, it was much more comfortable to turn and rest his nose on his flank, a position that he wouldn't even have tried to assume as a human.

*I have changed in more ways than I realize, he thought drowsily. I feel more comfortable in this body with every moment, fleas and all. One was already biting him. And I wonder what I shall dream?*

He went to sleep, and answered that question.

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He woke to find himself running across a plain, or so it seemed that he woke at first. In truth, as Rior realized when he felt the grass brush past him with no more resistance than it would give to his shadow-self, he knew that he had to be dreaming, though a wolf in the dream.

He shook his head and ran on. It seemed to be the thing to do. The plains stretched on before him, endless and rippling and shining, and he gave his muscles their free rein and let them flow as they wished.

He knew that he was drawing closer to something, that his run had a definite goal, but he did not know what it was. The smells of the plains filled his nostrils, the grass and the flowers both sun-warmed, and sometimes a small bird broke from the clumps ahead of him and rose chirping into the air. Rior wagged his tail, but did not turn from his run to catch and crunch a bird, though it was tempting.

Then the grass flowed away to either side of him, and he had the feeling that he was coming nearer. He saw a dark bulk rising. At first he didn't know what it was. Then he recognized the shapes of trees, and a wonderful cool smell brushed past his nose. There

was something ahead that smelled more marvelous than fresh meat, and once he became a wolf, Rior hadn't thought that could happen.

He redoubled his speed, and his muscles responded with nothing more effortful than the command of his thought. He swept across the plains like a bird's shadow, and neared the forest even sooner than he had expected.

He slowed as he neared it, but not because he thought he was coming to the end of his journey or because the running became difficult. It just seemed right that he should walk with reverence among these great trees. The shadows ahead of him shimmered with possibility, not least in terms of scent. Rior kept breathing in the air. He could not believe how wonderful it was.

He took a step forward, into the shadows of the trees themselves.

A wind blew through the leaves, and Rior found that he wanted to weep; he would have if he were still human. Instead, he threw back his head and howled, the cry of a pack in mourning for a leader.

A howl came back.

Rior perked his ears up. The cry didn't sound hostile, as he had learned to expect since his transformation. A pack would protect its territory, and they didn't welcome strangers in so suddenly. But the howl was repeated, and then wolves broke out of the trees and ran past him, dark and pale and scarred and not, all of them running as if they knew their places in the pack and had no quarrels with them. It was a pack as Rior thought some humans imagined it, free of snarling and place-fighting.

He waited, head up and spine aching in anticipation, to see the alpha.

The trees swayed, and then broke apart. A great wolf, at least four feet at the shoulder, came through, and glanced at Rior once before running on. That glimpse was enough, though. Rior knew it was the alpha of alphas, and he was running with his people in this strange place.

He whirled and joined in the run.

It was even easier than it had been; somehow, it felt more natural to travel this fast in the forest than in the plains. Rior joined the others in jumping a log, and then they came to the edge of a natural drop. The wolves poured across it, neither leaping nor walking on the air, but doing something more graceful than either. The alpha of alphas seemed to soar like an eagle, motionless as a pair of wings in the glide but still getting to the other side.

Then they gathered, and watched Rior.

Rior understood even as he rushed forward, uncertain that he could make it. This was a test, of a sort. He didn't know what would happen if he failed it, but he knew that not to jump this ravine when there was such joy in the air was tantamount to revolt against what he really was. He came to the edge of the drop and flung himself off.

He felt something akin to Garden's confidence in those floating movements, when he was never sure if he would touch the ground again. What happened was natural, and right, and one might as well nap in the sunshine as try to set a Princess on her throne- or leap a ravine. All were acts of equal value, and only humans worried more about one than the others.

And he didn't worry about it, either.

His paws touched ground, firmly on the other side, without any scrambling. Rior looked around and panted.

The wolves began to sing. Rior listened in wonder. This was not howling. This was full-throated song, though wordless as a bird's. He had never known that wolves could make such a sound.

The alpha of alphas paced forward and laid his muzzle on Rior's forehead. Rior rolled on his back. It was a surrender to wonder, not an abasement of dignity, and he wondered that he could ever have thought it so.

The alpha of alphas sniffed him all over, then turned and began to run again. The pack fell in behind him, fanning out and having many small adventures. Rior could feel their sheer joy in running, and now and then the sharp crack as one of them caught something to eat, and the desire to battle in two males who ran on either side of a female in heat. He rushed after, wanting to have as many adventures.

But the wonderful scent was fading, and the forest, and the alpha of alphas. Rior howled in misery and sprang forward.

He woke to find his feet scrambling and his throat uttering whimpers, seemingly of its own accord. Garden stood over him, licking his face. She drew back and gazed on him gently as he sat up.

Rior closed his eyes, that old, instinctive reaction against tears. *I know why dogs and wolves whimper in their sleep, now. They want to go to that place and can't get back there when they're awake.*

He himself would have been tempted to go right back to sleep, but the alpha of Garden's pack was pacing towards them. Rior studied him, and though he had been impatient with the wolf before, he saw now a lingering air of authority and power about him, as though the alpha of alphas reached out to touch every leader everywhere with some of his grace.

The alpha looked into Rior's eyes and blinked, conveying agreement.

Rior breathed out and then began to pant. Garden stood strong at his side.

The first pack had come to Lorie's cause.

## Chapter 60

### Pages of the Histories

This is your first manuscript, then, Idessen? Will you let me see it?

Your writing is very fine. I don't think that I've seen someone who writes as well, and in such small letters! The Queen must be very proud that you don't waste ink.

What is that word, there? "Falorten?" I don't recall having heard of it before.

Oh, a name. Of course, it would be. And who was he?

The servant of the Queen who helped her to the throne. A mysterious man that she doesn't want to talk about much, for fear that someone would begin hunting for him and wanting to know more about him.

I see.

Idessen, when will you learn that the tones in a talking sword's voice don't correspond exactly to the tones in a human's voice? Just because you think I sound upset, it doesn't mean I really am. I have my own opinions, that's all. If I could write my own history of what happened ten years ago, I would. But it wouldn't be complete, and no one would trust it, probably, even if it was. I know very well that humans don't trust swords such as me.

No, I'm not angry. I knew when you came here that there would be things it's hard for you to accept, and things I would have difficulty telling. And I was already aware of what the historians had been saying, things I don't approve of and that are not true.

What isn't true? For instance, that Light rules the world again. It most certainly does not. If it did, then everyone would still worship Elle and live as they did in the days before King Pheron's temper tantrum. He ended that forever, though, and there is no simply going back.

Idessen, you can grow offended all you like, but I am simply telling you the truth. I told you before that I serve no human vision of truth, only my own views about what

happened. You should trust me before you trust anyone whose main ambition is to be remembered or to serve the Light.

No one rules the world, of course. Not Light, not Dark, not Destiny, not Shadow. It's many contending powers all at once. If some of them gained control, others would cast them down again in a generation or so. At least, that is the way I think it works now. I can remember it working this way in the days before Light and Dark gained control of the world.

Yes, that happened more than two thousand years ago. Why do you ask?

No, Idessen, I didn't tell you that I was only two thousand years old. I said I had seen that much time. It doesn't mean that I was forged exactly two thousand years ago. I don't know exactly when I was forged. Humans and their silly naming of years and months! Can't you be satisfied that it was a long time ago?

Well, of course that's not required. I know that humans only lived north of the Rashars at the time. Not south. You impress me as a scholar, Idessen. Most people don't care about the beginnings of their Kingdoms.

It is not a riddle, and the answer is simple. No human forged me.

And no, I'm not part of some grand plan to insure that human don't rule the world. My creator didn't create me to keep out of the hands of humans, or to rule them, or to stay away from them, or to approach them. He was concerned with my making, and with himself. Not with humans.

I won't tell you what he was. You wouldn't recognize the name, and if you did, you might make trouble.

Fey. That's all.

Distrust me as you like, Idessen. It does not change what I am, and what you are, and what the truth of me is.

And leave if you like, too. I am getting angry with your temper tantrums and your insistence that Light rules the world.

Did you hear that, my lord? She has invented someone to replace you, to take your place in the legends. And she didn't do it out of charity, or out of respect for your solitude.

Yes, I understand her motives. It doesn't mean I excuse them.

I'm a talking sword, my lord. I am inclined, and even allowed, to hold grudges that don't make sense, and persist no matter how much time passes.

Why are you laughing?

## Chapter 61

### Where No Human Touches

*"Many Ilantran hunters report a curious thing: When they are hunting wolf packs, the wolves stick to closely defined routes through the forests. A skilled hunter may even predict these and run the wolves into a second pack of hounds. There are places in the forests where a hunt never goes. Some of the hunters have in the past tried to investigate this, but they did not come back. Possibly there is some danger, some beast, there that the wolves are rightfully afraid of."*

-Princess Tewilde of Orlath, while being fostered in the Ilantran Court.

"You might have taken me with you."

Startled, Rior opened his eyes. Lying less than an inch from his nose was Luden, and the sword glowed at him with a faint light that might have been any color, but was presumably a sign of agitation.

"How could you do that to me?" Luden complained. "I thought we were allies, and you left me lying in that world as if I were trash!"

Rior stood and yawned, trying to ignore the sword. Of course, the wolves of Garden's pack were beginning to glance at him, and he knew that he couldn't keep that pretense up forever. Some of them were sniffing and growling.

"Say something!"

Rior sighed and let his lupine form go, slipping into the shadowy one. The wolves looked at him with interested eyes, but didn't yelp or run away. Perhaps he didn't smell human to them, and that was the important thing, or perhaps they recognized and accepted the manifestation of Shadow, even though it had been long and long since Shadow had walked these forests.

Rior reached for Luden out of habit, then stopped. He knew that his misty fingers couldn't grasp the sword's hilt.

"Touch me."

Rior shrugged, deciding that Luden probably wouldn't believe him unless he showed that he couldn't pick up the sword. He reached out, and, to his shock, grasped the hilt. It was an awkward motion; he couldn't feel anything, and so it was like watching a reflection

touch its shoulder in the mirror. He had to guide with his eyes. But when he tried to pick up the sword, it came easily.

"Do you see?" said the sword to him, and the light died that had glowed around him. "I am not like other swords."

Rior walked away from the pack, so that their conversation wouldn't disturb the wolves. They had traveled long and hard most of the night, and this wouldn't be a long rest, since Lorie wanted so badly to get her throne back. Best to let them sleep. "I can see that. But what are you?"

"Myself."

"How did you get out of the Shadow-world?"

"Because I wanted to." The sword spoke on when Rior would have asked another question. "What do you think you're doing, winning back the Princess's throne for her and never asking me to be a part of it? Of course, no one would think to ask Luden. Luden's only a sentient sword, of course he wouldn't want to help, of course he's hostile to humans, of course-"

"Now you're whining."

"Tell me why."

Rior shook his head slowly. "It truly didn't occur to me. I knew that we would be winning the throne with wolves, not warriors, and only warriors carry swords. I forgot, and left you lying on the grass."

There was a long, tragic silence. Then Luden said, "Do you realize that that is the most humiliating thing anyone has ever said to me?"

"Luden-"

"Did you know that I have swung at the hips of heroes? I have helped to secure more thrones than you could dream of, thrones that make the Ilantran one look small. And you leave me behind because you *forget* me, because you think that I can't help to secure this throne along with wolves-"

"I forgot you, yes," said Rior. "That is all there is to it. I didn't judge your merits and decide to leave you behind; I forgot you. Are you going to whine about that and make me throw you away this time because I really don't like you, or are you going to listen to me and prove that I shouldn't leave you behind?"

This time, the long silence was sulky. Then Luden said, in a voice suspiciously like a mutter, "I'll help."

"Good."

Someone whined behind him. Rior turned around and saw Garden sitting firmly on the grass, staring at him as firmly, her tail drumming an impatient beat. She didn't like him in shadowy form, and was letting him know it.

Rior sighed and laid Luden down, then, out of curiosity, tried to touch a blade of grass. His fingers passed through it. That only proved there was something unnatural about the sword, but then, Rior had already known that.

"I won't be able to carry you often, and you're too big for Lorie to manage," he told the sword. "Use your magic to keep up."

"You could carry me in your mouth."

"Have you any comprehension of how much that would hurt my teeth?" Rior asked. "Would you really abuse me like that?" Then, while Luden was still trying to react to his tone, he changed back, and sighed in relief as all the senses of the world enclosed him again.

Garden nudged him in approval and led him back towards the other wolves, leaving the sword lying in the grass. Rior could almost feel it thinking. He hoped it was coming up with clever plans to get Lorie back on the throne.

The alpha of Garden's old pack had his ears pricked and his head lifted. Rior followed his gaze. The wolf was looking at Lorie, who had continued to look about as though she had been dropped on a mountaintop with no climbing rope. For now, she was asleep, but still looked disapproving.

Rior wagged his tail, wondering why the alpha would have a problem with helping Lorie now. He had thought that all disagreements of that kind were solved. But the alpha continued to look at Lorie, and then, gravely, he faced north, into the heart of the deep forest.

Garden nudged him. Rior looked at her, wondering what was wrong. She, too, looked at Lorie and then gravely back at him, as if he should understand what she meant just from a glance.

Rior sighed. This was not going to work if he kept the wolf form, and so he slipped back into shadow-form, though Garden growled at him. Crouching down near her face, he whispered, "What is it? Has Lorie done something to offend the alpha?"

Garden growled.

"But she can't come with us?"

Garden wagged her tail. Rior frowned at Lorie. He wasn't sure why the wolves would want to leave her here, and he wasn't sure who should stay to guard her. They needed everyone to come along with them. He supposed Lorie was really the least essential person in the party, when he thought about it; the wolves of Garden's old pack had agreed to aid them without much prompting from Lorie herself. But he didn't know who might guard her effectively.

Then Rior's gaze fell on Luden, and he felt himself smile.

"Pardon me a moment," he said to Garden, who tilted her head as if wondering how much mischief he would get into, and floated over to the sword. It spoke the moment he was within a few feet.

"Have you changed your mind about me?"

"Perhaps," said Rior. "It would depend entirely on how well you could guard Princess Lorie, of course."

"I could guard her as well as if you were wielding me," said Luden, and then paused as if he were going to say something especially cutting. Rior waited patiently, and the words that came out weren't too different from the ones he had expected. "You're not an expert swordsman. I can tell."

"How nice for you," said Rior politely. "In truth, I had my doubts, but you have disproven them."

Luden glowed briefly with the light, which was green. Rior thought it meant the sword was in the grip of some strong emotion.

"So that means that you'll stay behind with the Princess while we go into the parts of the forest where she isn't welcome to run with the pack?"

"What?"

Rior shook his head. "I should have known. You talk about duty to the throne and all the heroics you've performed in the past, but when it comes down to it, you can't really take up a task like this. You want to be the center of attention, not the center of duty. You don't want to guard the Princess; you just want someone to remember you in a few hundred years and talk about how impressive your exploits were."

"That's not true!" said Luden, and the green light grew brighter. "You don't know how many times I've let myself be left out of the history books, because the historians couldn't believe me when I told them just how well I had done. You don't understand the first thing about the minds of intelligent swords."

"Then you'll stay here and guard her?"

"Yes, of course I will!"

Rior waited. There was a long pause.

Then Luden said angrily, "That was deceitful."

Rior bowed from the waist. "I'm no longer part of the Light. I think I am allowed to be deceitful, though in truth, the proper name for it is 'more clever than you.'"

Luden gave him back sulky silence.

Rior nodded. "You are to guard the Princess from any and all dangers, and you aren't to rely on her to understand you," he said. "She may once again be deprived of her wits when Garden gets a certain distance away. Keep a watch over her as you would over a young child or animal. Can you do that?"

"I've guarded more babes than you can guess."

"And saved every one of them?"

"Every one!"

Rior grinned. "That's good. I'm glad that I won't be leaving the Princess with an inferior guardian." He had tricked the sword, and it felt good, but now he wanted to give Luden a sop to his pride. It wouldn't do to leave him truly resenting his duty, or feeling that he was only doing it because he had been tricked. "I'm sure that you're capable of strong magic, Luden. I saw what you did to the guards in the castle when they were about to catch up with me."

"A pity that it did no good," said the sword in a strangely subdued voice. "All that work to save you, and you had to abandon your body."

Rior shrugged. "Such things happen. And this is the body that I feel more comfortable with now. Or, actually, the wolf one is." He flowed back, and then glared hard at Luden.

"I will protect her."

Rior nodded, and then glanced up. The pack was starting out of the clearing, and Lorie was sleeping. There would never be a better time.

He picked Luden up in his teeth, wincing at the sword's weight and hardness, and carried him over to Lorie. Luden fell into the grass and began to glow. Rior watched him a moment longer, then turned and bounded into the woods, following the pack.

He wondered, wordlessly, what could be serious enough that the pack didn't want any humans coming with them.

Then they came to the first of the deepened places, and he understood.

## Chapter 62

### Garden In the Deepened Places

Garden sniffs and then sighs deeply as the old, polluted air passes out of her lungs. Breathing air that is contaminated with the scents of humans is very much like breathing the smoke from a lightning strike. This is the air that a wolf was meant to breathe, thick and sweet and wild.

This is the air of the deepened places.

Meat-Giver is shying and staring and stepping as if there were something here to hurt him. Garden is tolerant, though. She lived in polluted woods for the first season of her life, and then her mother brought her here. The change is immense, and will take him some time to get used to.

Garden thinks that he will like it when he gets used to it, though.

They pass further under the branches, and the cool shadow deepens and covers them. Now the very wind is singing, and the leaves of the trees rub together in an agreeable harmony that Garden never hears them make anywhere else. She can smell flowers, though when she turns her head, the flowers fade from sight. She wags her tail, and then bounds forward, taking over from the pack alpha. He might snarl at her, but in this place, the peace of comradeship and kinship is upon them all.

They move further, and then the shadows open up ahead of them and a clearing filled with golden sunlight is there. Garden pants. She remembers the place. She rolled in it as a pup, while her mother sat nearby and watched her with steady, amused eyes. She wonders if the grass is still as soft as she remembers.

Another few steps, and she knows it is. She flings herself down in it and rolls, and with a few yelps, the other pack members join her.

Meat-Giver stands aloof, but again, Garden expects that and ignores him. She digs her shoulders into the grass and presses them further, and the grass yields beneath her, nothing but crushed goodness. The birds are singing as though they were wolves, and the butterflies that pass over her head show no fear, even when she playfully snaps at them. They come back and flutter above her nose, making a slow and stately dance that Garden loves to watch, though she has never been able to figure out the patterns. She collapses on the ground and watches, panting.

Meat-Giver at last moves up beside her with an impatient chuff. Garden sniffs at him. He should relax. Perhaps watch the butterflies.

But he appears impatient to go on, even gazing into the woods as if he would abandon this particular deepened place, hallowed by the passage of the alpha of alphas, and go further. Garden supposes that he still has a human sense of place. He thinks that they must meet a pack on their home territory.

It is not so. The packs who live in the deepened places will come and meet them, as soon as they realize that a pack has entered this part of the forest. Seasons and clearings are all one here. But Meat-Giver only stares at her when she whines at him, so Garden settles back to wait. He will just have to see for himself, she supposes. She has been right since they entered the forest, so she leans her nose on her paws and simply listens to the thrilling song of the birds.

The trees rustle before too long, and two large white wolves bound forth from the forest and stand sniffing. Garden rises to greet them, feeling Meat-Giver hang back beside her. The wolves are larger than any he has ever seen except for the alpha of alphas. He is afraid.

Garden is not. She has met these wolves before, and know what it means that they live in the deepened places. Once, they hunted in the rest of the forest, but they fell back before the advance of humans. Now they live in the deepened places, and death does not touch them.

Garden sniffs them when they approach her, and smells their puzzlement. They recognize her, of course; to them, it was probably only a few minutes ago that they smelled her. But they do not know how she could have come back grown like this, beyond the years when most wolves would have died.

Garden doesn't understand that, either, but she doesn't think she needs to worry about it. There are other mysteries. She looks at Meat-Giver and nudges his flank with her head. He should transform, much as she doesn't like him to. It will impress these servants of the alpha of alphas and show them the seriousness of the course that Garden and her old pack are taking for Human-Scent.

Hesitantly, Meat-Giver slips into the shadowy form, and Garden's last nudge goes right through him. She pulls her head back and paws at her ear; it feels as if drops of cool mist are clinging to it.

The white wolves are staring at Meat-Giver again when she looks up.

And snarling.

## Chapter 63

### Where the Shapeshifters Went

*"I could tell you a thousand legends of the places where stories may be supposed to go, when they leave our world. Many children cannot bear to think that their favorite stories are not real, and so they make up places for shapeshifters and thiria and the like to dwell. The problem is that many adults come to believe this as well, that if they could only find the gate the mysteries used, they could find them. Hopeless romantics!"*

-The Bardsbane.

Rior stared back at the two wolves. They were immense, three feet at the shoulder, yet with long, slender legs and cleaner faces than he was used to seeing on the wolves around him. Their coats shimmered like the Isiluin River on a day when Arran was in a good mood. They were like nothing he had ever seen, though sometimes he had heard tales of white wolves in the wood. He had always dismissed those tales. Wolves couldn't be white, not in the forests of Ilantra. They would show up too well to stalk any prey. Wolves in the forests of Ilantra were the color of trees and shadow.

But one thing about them he did recognize. The light in their eyes was the light in Garden's. These wolves were intelligent, though whether they would understand the language he spoke was problematic. They might be so ancient that they spoke no tongue he knew.

"Greetings," said Rior quietly.

The white wolf on the left, who smelled male and was slightly larger, took a stiff-legged step forward. His growl soared in outrage. Rior could only suppose the wolves didn't like a human, even one who didn't wear a physical body, intruding on these sacred spaces of the forest. He had felt the difference the moment he passed beneath the green shadow. These were indeed places where a human wasn't supposed to tread. That was just the way it was, something as basic in this place as the grass being soft or stone being hard.

"I am sorry to trouble you," he said. "But I am an avatar of Shadow, and I am trying to bring Shadow back to the world. And that means not only setting the Princess I am sworn to on the Ilantran throne, but also making sure that human armies don't march through the forests. They could threaten these deepened places. I need your help to defend them. Will you defend them?"

The male bared his teeth, and then leaped at Rior with a frightening speed and strength that Rior had never seen in a wolf before, even in a rogue.

It took Rior some effort to remember that he was only shadow now, a ghost, but he remembered it in time not to dodge. He stood there, and the male sailed through him and

crashed to the grass on the other side. Rior turned to face him, smelling Garden's amusement as he moved.

The white male picked himself up and shook his coat, hard. Drops of dew went flying in every direction. As if that had been the final indignity, he faced Rior and once more bared slashing fangs. This time, the growl he gave was even more serious than before.

"I am trying to be your ally," said Rior. "What is it about me that offends you? Will you permit none?"

"It is not you."

Rior glanced up sharply. Songs the Shadows Sing had just trotted into the clearing, and abruptly everything had changed.

The shadows reached out for the great wolf, whispering a welcome. His coat shimmered, and the gray color deepened, gaining hints of green, until Rior thought he would have vanished had he been standing in the shade of a tree. Songs the Shadows Sing bowed his head, and lapped at the shadows welling out for him like an ordinary wolf drinking water. The shadows settled hungrily in around him, or flowed into his mouth, and soon Rior could see him surrounded by the almost-shapes of many things: bats, birds, trees, and squirrels as well as wolves.

Songs the Shadows Sing shook his head, lazily, and darkness flew from his fur like raindrops. He looked at the nearest white wolf, the female, and made an inquiring growl in his throat.

The female stood, trembling, defiance melting like the snow she resembled under the sun. Then she cast herself to the ground and rolled, frantically, turning her belly up towards the great wolf.

Songs the Shadows Sing growled softly and then turned and looked at the male.

Rior followed his gaze. The male snarled at him, but then looked at Songs the Shadows Sing and lowered his eyes. He didn't roll over, but his bristling and snarling went submissive in a moment.

"What was that all about?" Rior asked. He would have thought that nothing could calm the male down only a moment ago, but the white wolf was now creeping towards Songs the Shadows Sing, and whining as he went.

"I recognize one of my children," said the great wolf quietly. "He served me long ago, and of course he would know me, though at the moment he wants to run away." His golden eyes flared, and for a moment Rior blinked, thinking that he saw a fire sweeping out of them and over the cowering wolf. But if it was real, it was gone in a moment, and if it was a vision, it seemed to have no effect after the initial flash. "When I was defeated,

he ran into the deepened places, and it seems that he has stayed there, where time cannot touch him. And his mate, as well." Songs the Shadows Sing looked at the female wolf. "Greetings, Eldralee. I thought you had died. I did not know that you survived the battle against the Lord of Disasters."

Eldralee whined and looked at the ground. Rior shook his head. "I don't understand why you call them your children and your servants," he said. "Do you mean that they served you before you were expelled from the world?"

"Yes."

"What were they? Ordinary wolves?" But Rior would not have believed that, even if they had looked as ordinary as Garden's pack did. That light in their eyes was too much, and so was the way that they had snarled at him. There was intelligent, living hatred behind their attacks.

"No. They were shapeshifters who begged for the gift, and I granted it to them. I did not know that they would abandon me. I had thought they died in the battle that drove me from the world."

Rior stepped quietly backwards. Songs the Shadows Sing was beginning to breathe fast, and to growl. He didn't want to get in the way of whatever it was he was about to do.

"You cannot remember how to stand on two legs," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "You could not be troubled to remember your devotion to me, the devotion that you once claimed was so nearly absolute. But you remember that you were once shapeshifters. And you don't want me to pull you back to that, do you? A wolf can survive in this part of the forest. A human could not."

Eldralee whimpered and cowered. Her mate whined and rolled on his back.

"My lord," said Rior quietly.

"What?" The wolf's eyes swung to him.

"Must you punish them?"

"They betrayed me."

"How long ago?"

"Time nearly has no meaning," said Songs the Shadows Sing, "not when you have been in exile for as long as I have. But it was more than two thousand years ago. That is long enough for them to escape my justice, don't you think?"

"I can see Light or Dark holding a grudge for that long," said Rior. "But I can't see you holding a grudge for so long. Light and Dark never give up their children, and they call them servants openly. Would you call your worshippers that? Or do you truly want the relationship with them that a parent may have with his children?"

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying that I chose to follow you because I thought you were different from the other powers," said Rior, feeling an intense disappointment rising in him. Was this really the extent of the power he had bound himself to? Had the talk of quietly converting people, of no open warfare, been only a deception? If so, he would have been better off with the open arrogance of Light and Dark; at least they thought and said they wanted to rule the world. "Are you saying that you are not? Justice is all to you, and mercy is nothing?"

The great wolf stood there and trembled. "They betrayed me," he whispered at last. "They turned and ran from a battle."

"That is a great crime if they are human, and you are the King or Queen of Ilantra," Rior agreed. "But is it a crime if you are a wolf?"

"Explain yourself."

Rior smiled. Songs the Shadows Sing was no better at pretending to be an ordinary wolf than the shapeshifters or Garden were. Those eyes showed that he knew well enough what Rior was talking about. "They are shapeshifters, my lord, as you made them, the bearers of dual natures. I think it's possible that their wolf natures took over, and that they fled because that is what a wolf would do. They do not stay to mourn for fallen comrades, and they do not worship their gods in the way that you think of humans worshipping you. They ran, to preserve their pack and their lives. I can tell you- and you must know- how completely the wolf body folds and encloses a human mind. Perhaps they panicked as wolves, and now they are so used to living as wolves that human concepts like betrayal don't mean anything to them any more."

There was silence. Rior saw Garden watching him with her head up and her ears pricked. Songs the Shadows Sing just stared at him. So did the wolves of Garden's pack. The shapeshifters kept their eyes on their former lord, but at least they had stopped whining.

At last, Songs the Shadows Sing said, "What does this matter to you? All of it happened long before you were born."

"But I do not want to have bound myself to a god who cannot forgive. I would give up the bond before that."

"You would probably die if you did that."

Rior nodded. "I know."

The wolf dropped his head and turned it away. Then he said, "I forgive you, Eldralee, Thornin. May you live long and have many pups." It seemed to cost him much to say the last.

Eldralee whined in gratitude. Thornin stood up and came to her, licking the side of her face.

Rior smiled, and saw Garden lean against his leg. When he looked down at her, she stared back at him. He could find nothing in her eyes that was not approving.

## Chapter 64

### Ceremonies

Your history is to be published today, Idessen.

That was quick.

What? Oh, I know that it usually takes years to get a history published. I thought that you would be working on this for years, carefully collecting tales and listening to many different versions of the truth. And then it takes time for your publishers to decide if your history is better than the other ones submitted to them. Why is your history being rushed through so quickly?

In time for the Festival of Ascension? Ah, yes, I should have guessed. You wanted the book to be ready by the Festival, since you are writing about what the Festival celebrates, after all.

The ten years don't really matter to me, Idessen, except to make me despair that human don't have better memories. A tenth anniversary will come and go, and then a twentieth, and many more ancient ones when you are dead in the earth. Perhaps a thousand years from now I will remember you and how diligent and proud you were of a book that was published just ten years after the event it chronicled.

Yes, of course I do that on purpose. You irritate me. And if reminding you of my age can make you calm down a little and think about this instead of gloating and being irritating, I will use it.

Humans are not lesser things to me. They're just shorter. I've had conversations with elves before that lasted longer than the time you've taken to research the book, longer than the time since it happened. I've greeted a friend before, and then wondered why he never came back, only to be told that he was dead. I very rarely live at a human pace,

except when the times are extraordinary. Ten years ago, they were, and so I lived at a human pace for a few days.

Why? Your book is bound and ready to be published, you said. You weren't interested in the end of the tale as I told it. Why should you want to hear it now?

My perspective on things. Of course. Humans say "perspective" and smile politely when one's truth doesn't accord with theirs.

I have told you, and told you before. I think that I see more of the truth than any human scholar. I don't have colleagues to please, or a Queen or King to honor, or certain things that I want to see left out because I think they're "dirty." I rely on my memories.

If they're becoming cloudy, what about the humans you questioned? Their memories must be even cloudier.

No, of course they didn't admit it. Humans never do. They would insist to you that each and every word they spoke was truth as everyone else saw it. Your task is not to fall for that.

You did. I can see it on your face.

No, of course I wouldn't suggest destroying your book. But I do think that you might have been more careful, and spent a little more time working on it and thinking about the stories that no one wants to tell. That's where the truth usually hides. They don't give much thought to it, because they think that you don't want to hear about anything that isn't dramatic and wonderful. But it's your task to seek out the ordinary stories, and ask how they fit in with the extraordinary ones.

Being a historian is hard. Being a talking sword is hard. Everything always is. I don't know why you thought that it would be easy. Or was it easier than whatever else you could have done?

Why, how you blush, Idessen. How becoming it looks on you! Will you blush like that when they praise your book tonight?

Do come back. I'd like to hear all about the ceremony, and about how the presentation of your book goes.

Chapter 65

Wonders of the Deepened Places

*"He never fully recovered. I would ask him where he had been, and he would say only, 'In the forests.' And then he would smile in the oddest way, and sing me odd, old songs of wolves hunting by themselves, of flocks of swans that became humans when he sang to them, of minstrels and sages who knew secrets that no one knows now. But he was quite mad, of course."*

-Private journal of a healer in the Forests of Ilantra Healing Home.

Rior sniffed the air, and shivered. Once again, it had been hallowed by the passage of the alpha of alphas, and it smelled so good to him that he wondered wolves could live anywhere else.

But Garden's pack was shying as they followed the shapeshifters through the shade of the trees, so there must be something here that kept them out. Rior pricked his ears and looked around for it, wondering if he would recognize it when he saw it, and if it would have any effect on him.

Eldralee took the lead suddenly, with Thornin following her. Rior studied her. Every trace of the fear she had felt earlier was gone- unless she happened to glance back at Songs the Shadows Sing. She bounded under a leaning tree, over a log, and then into a clearing where a pond lay.

Then Rior realized there must have been some trick of the light in his eyes, because this was not a pond; it was a lake. And swimming back and forth on it were the largest swans he had ever seen, both black and white. He had only seen a pair of black swans once, when they came swimming down the Isiluin near the castle and majestically ignored all the excitement they caused. Every priest in sight had taken them for an omen. Rior didn't think they actually were, and here, they looked even less like it. They looked only like themselves.

They turned their heads towards the wolves, and showed no alarm until Songs the Shadows Sing walked towards them. Then, with a clattering of wings and a series of trumpet-like cries, they took to the air.

The great wolf stood there and panted at them. Rior wondered what he was thinking. He couldn't tell. Had these been still more of his servants, his children, in the battle against the Lord of Disasters?

One of the swans settled to the ground at last, and changed abruptly into a human woman. Or perhaps she wasn't human. Rior could not smell her tainting the air as he thought a human would have. Indeed, when she advanced after a moment, he could see that she had pointed ears and an angular face that marked her as fey, perhaps even elf, though no kind of elf he knew. Her skin was far too pale.

A black swan landed beside her and transformed into another woman, also fey, though she was as dark-skinned as the swan had been feathered. She watched them, but made no move to approach.

The pale woman came to a halt before the wolf and stood staring up at him. Then she abruptly slid to one knee and bowed her head.

"I remember the debt I owe," she said quietly. "And I stand ready to serve you as I always did, my lord."

"Good," said Songs the Shadows Sing, and his voice rang with pride. "That is good." He glanced at Rior. "You might as well assume your other form. These are folk that I wish to introduce you to. Alami this one was called when last I knew her, though in the shifting of the years she might have taken another name."

Alami looked at Rior. "Are you a shapeshifter, then?" she asked, managing to speak with convincing credibility. Rior thought that no human could have addressed him in wolf-form so seriously.

"I was," he said, letting himself take on the shadow-form. "But now I am more or less caught between life and death."

Alami clasped her hands and abruptly began to laugh, the sound light and bird-like. Rior glanced at Songs the Shadows Sing, only to find him panting, his own golden eyes burning with amusement.

"Shadow is truly coming back," said Alami. "Oh, it is coming back, and all times shall be healed again." She looked at Rior. "What is your name?"

"Rior."

"And you are Ilantran?"

Rior nodded.

"And you carry royal blood?"

"I share a great-grandmother with the current Princess," said Rior. "We are trying to put her back on the throne."

Alami made a little clucking sound under her breath, and glanced at Songs the Shadows Sing. "You have just come back to the country that should be yours, and you're not trying to put your champion on the throne?"

"I made him promise that he wouldn't," said Rior quickly. "I have no desire to rule, but I do have a desire not to see Princess Lorie die. And I think the only thing that will protect

her now is to become reigning Queen of Ilantra, and make sure her brother doesn't take the position."

Alami laughed. "Ah, human politics, what wonderfully complicated things they are! And it seems that you have learned, my lord," she added in the great wolf's direction. "You can't take over humans with war. They just get upset and make war back at you. You should take over the country quietly, and show them why they were meant to worship you."

"That is what we will do," said Songs the Shadows Sing.

Garden growled abruptly and stepped forward. Alami looked down at her, and her laughter stopped. She blinked.

The dark-skinned woman abruptly stepped forward. "Who is this?" she asked, in a voice with a trace of an accent that sounded almost Arvennese. "Another shapeshifter who prefers not to become human?" Her glance went like a stab towards Eldralee and Thornin, her meaning clear enough.

"No," said Rior. "For some reason that we don't know about, some power took the wits from Princess Lorie and put them into Garden." He looked down and managed to rest his shadowy hand at about the height of Garden's head, though he had to make sure he didn't wet her fur too much. "Meet Garden, as I call her. She seems to like the name."

Garden wagged her tail and growled again.

The dark-skinned woman stared at her, then at Rior. "Something new has come into the world," she said, interest in her voice. "I have never seen this before. I must join you, if only because something new has come into the world."

"You would join us in any case, Neretsa," said Alami with a laugh, clapping her on the back. "You want to see our Lord Shadow back in power and reigning over the world, just as I do."

From the look that the dark fey gave Alami, Rior didn't think that was true. But she stood and nodded. "Where are you going? And where are your soldiers?"

"No soldiers," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "We want to distance ourselves from Dark and Light. We will lead wolves against the castle, and the humans who otherwise would despoil the woods with their marching."

"Where are they coming from?" asked Alami.

"From Eventra," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "And the war may spread out and encompass other countries, if we cannot stop it."

"Eventra?" asked Rior. He had never heard the name.

"What Arvenna was called when I was last there," said Songs the Shadows Sing absently. "Now, my ladies, what say you? Which plan of attack is best? Will we be able to lead our armies through the deepened places?"

"So long as they are only animals and shapeshifters, and not humans," said Neretsa. "I do not think that these woods will tolerate the presence of humans any longer."

"A question," Rior interrupted, and no one glared at him as they had when he dared to interrupt the Council of Light, so he supposed he was doing something right. "I thought the point of this was to keep armies from marching through the deepened places. Why would we want to lead them through?"

Shadow panted. "The deepened places have few seasons, and time passes differently here. It must, or Eldralee and Thornin would have been dead long years since. Not even shapeshifters live forever, unless they are fey or like you, Rior, without a body. When we pass through here- as packs, and not armies, if the sound of that word is more pleasing to your ears- then we will move fast enough that I highly doubt any human outside the woods can measure our pace."

Rior nodded, feeling a little overwhelmed, not least about the casual remark about his lifespan. *Am I not going to pass from the world when a human lifespan ends, then? Well, of course, how can I age? But what touch of time will I feel in the lupine body, and what will Garden feel?*

He looked anxiously into her eyes, and she looked back at him and wagged her tail. Rior sighed. He doubted that she knew what he was thinking, or that she would care if she did.

And he had no time for it right now. He pressed the thought out of the surface of his mind, and said, "We have only one human in our party, Princess Loriel, who is at the moment outside the deepened places and guarded by a sentient sword. What provision can we make for her?"

"We must collect her when we have called the others," said Neretsa. "What is the name of the sword that guards her?"

"Luden."

The dark fey smiled. "Then I have no fears for her safety. He has guarded elven babes in his time."

Rior blinked. This was another shock. "You know him?"

"Everyone knows Luden," said Alami carelessly. She was gazing at Songs the Shadows Sing with a rapturous look in her eyes. "And what will happen when we've won? Can I

withdraw into the forest and become a spirit that people meet at sunset, who answers mysterious questions about their Destinies? Can I do that?"

"We must withdraw into the forest," said Songs the Shadows Sing. He was trying to sound stern, but his tail was wagging. "And I think that we will only be able to speak from the shadows. You may stand on the edge of the forest and speak to lost travelers at sunset all you like."

"May I make them become lost? They're much more likely to approach a stranger and ask her questions if they really don't know where they are."

"Not in a malicious manner. We must make the Ilantrans curious about us and in love with us, not afraid of us."

Alami nodded. "I promise I'll be careful."

Rior interrupted again. "I had always thought that fey did such things out of boredom, or because it was part of what made them fey."

Alami grinned at him. "I do it because I like to."

"Your world is poor, Rior," said Shadow. "It was poor of greater powers until just recently, and it is still poor of gods. And your conceptions of the fey are little, compared to their power and majesty."

"I have heard that in King Pheron's court there are elves not of the Light-

"That is the least of it," said Neretsa. "Many of my kin have been driven forth, and come to seek shelter in the deepened places. I did that myself. And now we shall come back." Her dark eyes were glowing. "The world thinks that it sheds itself of mysteries. Humans think they understand more and more of the world as time goes on. And now we shall show them that there are some things they do not understand, and never will."

Rior glanced warily at Songs the Shadows Sing, wondering if this was a wise choice after all. Was he right to trust the great wolf? Were they releasing a scourge on Ilantra?

But the great wolf stood there and wagged his tail, and at last Rior sighed and gave up. He would trust Shadow, even as he had trusted Light and Destiny in the past. He just hoped that Shadow would prove more trustworthy than they had.

Chapter 66

Garden In the Forefront

Garden sits and pants and is proud of herself. After all, she was the one who led Meat-Giver here, and she was the one who suggested that he become a wolf. In a way, she is the one who is responsible for everything.

Of course, the great wolf and the swan-people don't seem to care about that. But Meat-Giver stands solid and calm next to her, and Garden has no doubt that he knows the debt he owes to her. She looks up at him.

In moments, he looks back at her, and Garden wags her tail and looks away again. Yes, as long as one wolf knows what she did, then she will not trouble herself about the rest of them.

But then they began speaking of something interesting, something in which her name is mentioned, and Garden turns her head. The swan-person who is paler than the other is gesturing at her, and speaking in a voice of great passion.

"She would make an ideal leader. She can understand Rior. She can understand orders that we give her. If she will obey us, then I think she should be the one to walk at the forefront of the packs, and not you, my lord." The pale woman grins at the great wolf. "I love you, but you are very distinctive."

The great wolf doesn't smell pleased about this. Garden watches carefully. She would fear the alpha of alphas more than him, but no alpha who smells angry is a good opponent.

"I did want to reveal myself," he says. "I want the people of Ilantra to know that I have returned, before we are forced to retreat into the shadows of the forest and stay there once more."

"I will tell them," says Meat-Giver.

"What?" The great wolf looks at him.

"If Garden leads the wolves, then I will be nearby," says Meat-Giver. "I do not know if the wolves will follow me, and I would be reluctant to give orders to the shapeshifters." He makes a gesture towards the swan-people that Garden does not understand. Is he inviting them to play? But his scent is solemn, the way it is when humans take themselves too seriously. "But I might play a part in informing the people of Ilantra that both Princess Lorie and Shadow have returned."

"Will they blame you for that?" asks the great wolf.

Meat-Giver makes the human movement of the shoulders that Garden thinks has something to do with the resigned scent he then emits. "They might. But how can they harm me, my lord? I am dead."

Garden sniffs him carefully at that, but smells only mist and coldness. She makes a little growling noise in the back of her throat. She knows that he smells alive and normal in wolf form. She wishes he would change back to his normal self. It would be good to be able to smell and feel him again.

He strokes her head, or at least passes the image of his hand across it. "In a moment, Garden," he murmurs, still watching the great wolf.

"I do not want you to be known as someone who took the throne from Princess Lorie," says the great wolf. "And I am fearful that you might be portrayed that way. Or, if you lose, the Dark will surely hunt you."

Meat-Giver shakes his head. "I truly do not think they can harm me. And I don't mind taking the position of evil in their minds, if that is what they want. It is what I would have done if Destiny and Light had their way- been the Regent that everyone can blame for the country's problems. Truly, my lord, it's a small price to pay. I think Alami is right. You should not go first, and overwhelm everyone in the country with your power. The time for that will come later, when they have learned to distinguish between you, Dark, and Light."

The great wolf smells unconvinced to Garden, but he says, "If you say so."

"I do."

"I will stand ready to aid you at any moment you need me."

"I know."

The great wolf pants as if that settles the matter, and then looks at the swan-people. "Will you be able to call to the packs and the other shapeshifters, and bring them out of their hiding places?"

"I can call the other shapeshifters," says the dark swan-woman. "They still listen to me. Alami rather puts them off." She scowls at the pale swan-woman, and Garden wonders if they will fight.

But the pale swan-woman only smells cheerful, even though she does bare her teeth. "And I think that Eldralee and Thornin can call the other packs," she says, gesturing to the pale wolves.

Garden looks at the pale wolves. They smell anxious to agree, and from their whines, they really are.

For that matter, she is anxious to agree as well. She wants to make sure that some of the humans know that Human-Scent didn't make to the throne alone. There was her, and the

great wolf, and Meat-Giver. Garden doesn't think that it will be good for Human-Scent's future pack if she rules over them the way that she ruled over Garden's pack.

Garden isn't really sure why Human-Scent *has* to be alpha, either, but that is just a human thing. The important thing is to make sure that she's a good alpha.

## Chapter 67

### The Calling

*"I have seen hounds call their brothers to the trace and the spoor, and humans call their kind to an execution, and foxes call their prey to them with magic dances. But I have never seen a calling as deep and complete as the one that I witnessed that night in the forests of Ilantra."*

-Account of a traveler, preserved in an inn on the border between Ilantra and Rivendon.

Rior sighed as they settled matters. He was more than willing to lead the way and tell everyone, as well as he could without frightening them, that a power they had once worshipped had come back, and that soon a Princess of the Light would be on the throne. Better that they trust to him than planning tactics.

But there was one point that concerned him.

"My lord?" he asked, as the others started to turn to their tasks. Neretsa had her eyes closed and a frown on her face, as if she were looking inward. The white wolves were trembling as if they were calling on their strength for a long run. Only Alami went on smiling at Songs the Shadows Sing.

The great wolf glanced at him. "What?"

"Is there a way to call prey animals from the forests, and drive them along with the packs?"

The wolf's eyes burned, and his tongue went back into his mouth. "Why would you want to do that?"

"So the wolves might have something to feed on, instead of taking the cattle and the sheep along the way. The simple folk of Ilantra will trust you much less if you take their meat from them, even as we proclaim that you aren't like Dark and Light and don't take sacrifices."

Songs the Shadows Sing panted. "You are strange, Rior."

"Why?"

But the wolf only panted, and then turned and looked at Eldralee and Thornin. "You heard him," he said. "Call the packs first, and then make preparations for a Great Calling. I only hope the alpha of alphas understands."

"Should we ask him?" Rior asked. It was something he had not thought of, and for a moment his stomach tightened with dread.

"I think he will agree," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "Faced with a disruption of the natural balance for a few days, as compared to humans trampling through his forests for years- it is not a choice that he faces often. He will make the right one."

Rior wished he could feel as certain. He knew well enough now that lupine priorities were not human ones, and he could only hope the alpha of alphas would agree. He didn't know that he wouldn't; he didn't know that he would.

*There is still much that I have to understand about being a wolf, it would seem, he thought, and sighed.*

Garden moved around in front of him, so that he couldn't miss her. Rior smiled at her, then slipped back into his lupine form. She seemed to wish it, and he was coming to wish it as well. He felt far more at ease when he could feel the grass beneath his paws and smell the richness of the scents around him.

Garden wagged her tail and yelped when he was wolf again. Rior turned to Neretsa, to see what she looked like through these eyes, and was startled to find that she didn't smell that different from a human. The ageless eyes and pointed ears and angular face that marked her as fey to human eyes didn't seem important, here. Instead, what was important was that she was on their side, instead of against them, and therefore Rior was inclined to be friendly towards her.

As he watched, Neretsa clenched her fists above her head and began to sing. It was a low sound, full of dissonances that made Rior's fur stand on end. It seemed to travel through the air and trees and water without trouble, though; they shifted towards it, bent towards it, and drank the sound in with greedy attention.

The call came a second time, and this time the swans who had flown from the lake when they first entered the glade came back. They landed timidly, looking at the wolves as if to ask for assurance that they wouldn't attack.

At his side, Garden salivated. Rior nudged her sharply, and got a nip on the flank for his pains.

A third call, and the swans changed. Now there were fey all over the clearing, some of them burning with the grace that marked them as elves even to Rior, some of them of the

same kind as Neretsa or Alami, and still others he had never seen before, and did not recognize even from legends. Neretsa bowed to them, and gestured to Songs the Shadows Sing.

There was no need for council. Most of them seemed to recognize their old lord at once, and feel about him as Alami did. Rior supposed that was one way in which it would be easier to lead an army of fey than humans, though he wondered what other problems might crop up.

Then the howling began.

Rior whirled, having to control an intense urge to bolt towards Eldralee and Thornin. They stood with their paws braced wide apart, their voices soaring towards the song that Rior had heard from Garden, once, and heard from the wolves in his dream. The sound was wild and sweet and effortless, and as compelling to Rior as the call of a hunting horn once had been.

Garden leaned against his shoulder, and Rior took comfort from the contact, managing not to bolt towards the shapeshifters after all. This was for the ordinary wolves of the forest, the ones who didn't yet know what was happening.

The song still seemed to get into his mind, his heart, and his spirit, though, and Rior thought he would probably be able to recall it every moment of his life.

Eldralee seemed to run out of voice before Thornin, but he ended only a moment later. Of course, it might not have ended. Rior could still hear it, and it seemed to run through the forests, moving further and further away, singing to the packs. He thought he heard the prick of distant ears, the thump of distant paws, and even packs who had just killed lifting their heads from the warm meat. But that last could have been just imagination. He had started drooling at the mere thought of a fresh kill, and he couldn't imagine any practical wolf leaving it to rot while he ran to answer a summons.

The trees shivered, and several other large wolves stepped forward. Their coats softly shone in the light, and Rior wondered what color they would be if he assumed human form. But he didn't want to at the moment, and there was too much explanation to be done, anyway. That he was partially human could wait until later.

The wolves glanced at Songs the Shadows Sing and seemed to recognize him without the need for introduction. They bowed their heads, and then sat down beside the white wolves to wait until the other packs arrived. From the way the forest was stirring, some of them were already hurrying forward. They must not have just killed, after all.

Rior glanced at Garden to see how she was planning to spend the time until the other wolves arrived. He was only partially befuddled that she appeared to have lain herself on the ground and gone to sleep.

He panted. He couldn't think of better things to do than return to the dreamworld where he had last seen the alpha of alphas.

His flank had barely touched the grass, though, when other howls rang out. Rior sprang to his feet at once, trembling. He knew those cries, and they were not the cries of wolves. He had never met them while hunting in the forests, but he knew they were there. Any sane person knew they were there.

And didn't want to meet them.

Garden was bristling already, snarling, and the wolves of her pack were milling and howling in terror. The larger wolves were looking towards the sound and smelling of mild confusion. Rior supposed that such terrors did not come into the deepened places, or they would not have been as peaceful as they were.

Songs the Shadows Sing snarled. "I have heard such cries before, but not in the woods," he said. "They were the cries of minions of the Dark when Dark and Light combined to destroy me centuries ago."

"Then they have since become forest creatures," said Rior, slipping back into his human form. Some of the wolves who had come in answer to the call- they were silver, he noticed- snarled at him. Rior ignored them. "Those are the cries of *terikoni*, my lord. They are coming."

"Their weapons?"

"Horns and fire," said Rior. "In addition to teeth." He shuddered, remembering the torn corpse he had found during one ill-fated hunting expedition. The dogs had not caught anything, shying as they were at the strange scent, and he had found more than enough to convince him that a *terikon* had been at work. "And they move faster than wolves."

"I know what this is," said Songs the Shadows Sing quietly. "Dark has caught my scent. It knows that I am back in the world, and the call must have alerted it to at least part of our plans. It is striving to stop us before we can start." He glanced at Rior. "I think that you should return to the normal forest as soon as possible."

"Well?" Rior asked. "You don't want me to fight the battle with you?"

"They will seek Princess Lorie, if they have not already found her, and I do not know if Luden alone can protect her."

Rior's heart squeezed with fear. With the Princess alive, they had a chance to introduce some sanity, though even that was threatened by her disease and her brother. If she died, they might have to wait another generation. "I will go," he said, and slipped back into lupine form, speeding across the glade with Garden at his side.

Then a stink hit his nostrils, deeper and thicker and more threatening than it had ever been as a human. Rior slowed, pawing at his nose, unable to help it even though he knew the scent was yet another weapon.

Then the *terikoni* burst from the trees and hurtled onto them. Rior heard Garden yelp, but he couldn't pay much attention to her, given that he already had teeth in his throat and an intense, stinking weight upon him.

He yelped himself, and began the fight.

## Chapter 68

### Truth-Telling

Hello, Idessen. I didn't expect to see you again this evening. You're drunk, aren't you?

Of course. Celebrating the arrival of a new book, a new history, is always a grand event. I can remember when I thought that such things were the most important events in the world. I always wanted to be at the ceremony and see the history presented. And if I had helped with the history, then I would beg or bribe someone to carry me there, whatever the cost. I always wanted to make sure that a book that was in part my child went forth.

Why not this time? Oh, Idessen, you know. I know that you disregarded the truths I told you in favor of lies burned on the human memory. And I didn't want to be present to see you unveil a book of lies and have everyone praise it as the truth. Or to have to listen to you praise it as the truth, when, after all, I knew better.

No, I don't have much shame. You'll leave, and your history will sit in the library for a while, in a place of honor. You'll have much honor, and then you will die, and a thousand years from now your history will be a curiosity found by some more educated scholar. It will be valuable, but not in the way you imagine. The scholars of that time will plunder it for the secrets of how you lived in this time, what you thought about the world, even how you wrote. The ink you chose to record your thoughts in will be of more interest than those thoughts. Or perhaps your history will decay, and never be preserved or remembered at all.

I've been there to see those things happen, of course. I have seen histories decay, and others go through a period of intense forgetting, where even their authors forgot their existence. I've seen histories that will never be published, because they didn't proclaim what their masters wanted to hear. It's never as beautiful as you think it will be, Idessen, the march of history. It leaves everything behind, and only those things which are immortal, like me, really survive.

I was reminded of that truth by a dear friend of mine. Your history will be the official one, and praised. But that doesn't mean that it's the truth, and it doesn't mean that it will be story that endures. I should have remembered that. Other people can always write their own stories, and preserve them. And perhaps one day it will be those stories that are read, and not yours.

What is this? You grasp my hilt? And why? What harm have I done you, that you would throw me?

I have insulted you. And probably I am a sword of the Dark and I must die. Well, Idessen, if you say so. But I won't really die, of course. I told you that I have had my blade and hilt replaced more times than even I can count. And that will just happen again if you break my hilt or my blade.

You will call fire and melt me.

No, I think not.

How you howl, Idessen! And that is only a small sample of my power. Did you really think that I could do nothing to defend myself? I've left out the parts of the story where I did, because I knew you wouldn't want to hear them. I lay in the forest and defended Princess Lorie from the *terikoni* with such fire, but that wasn't something you wanted to hear about.

Yes, I went into the woods. And I did many other things that I didn't tell you about. How good it feels to speak the truth at last!

You would have known about it if you had wanted to listen. I learned too late that you weren't a servant of truth, but a servant of the way you look at the world. And where that doesn't march with truth, you turn aside on your own path. It is nothing that I would have kept from anyone who truly loved or understood history, but you do not, and so I kept it from you.

I didn't hang on the wall. I was right in the midst of the action. It was Rior who did those things that you call by the name of 'Falorten' in your chronicle. That was why I started. That name never existed, except in fever dreams.

No, of course not. She made him up. She had to have some explanation, didn't she? And that was the best explanation she could come up with, so it was the one she gave. There was no hero that pulled back and vanished when things were done, unless you are going to grant Rior the name of hero, which I don't think you're willing to do. And everything else was an invention to satisfy the minds who couldn't accept what they saw that day. Nothing more.

No, Idessen, I don't think that everything has to correspond to your vision of reality, any more than I have to heal your burned hand. Your history and the burn are both the result

of misunderstanding. And when you willfully misunderstand, again and again, what I'm trying to tell you, then I have little sympathy.

Think of me how you will. As time passes and the defenses against Dark and Light grow stronger, as the people at the edge of the forest begin to learn the names of different gods, I think I will have more to laugh about than you.

Oh, go back to your celebration, Idessen. Sure as Light you'll be too drunk to remember this, and wake in the morning thinking that you grasped something hot on a dare, to have that burn.

## Chapter 69

### Stubborn Dark Creatures

*"There are some who say that the terikoni are recent intruders in the forests of Ilantra and Rivendon, that no such creatures were made to run there. They point to the hides of these creatures, not made for concealment in such a forest, and they say that old legends offer no proof of the creatures before about two thousand years ago.*

*"To all this I say: I think that Light had a hand in it, to spare us something of the pain that the beasts carry with them. They have horns, and teeth, and breath of fire, and claws, and great speed. The Light would not grant them concealment as well."*

-Lytos of Rivendon.

Rior rolled over and over, feeling the teeth in his neck begin to clench down, and seeing as if someone had told him just how the *terikon* would rip out his throat. The blood would fountain-

Perhaps.

Rior slipped into his shadowy form.

The *terikon* snarled and bit at him, but Rior could feel the exact moment that he changed, and the pain flowed away suddenly. The creature's teeth were punching through mist. It backed away from him, the dark purple fur bristling like an aura of Destiny all around it, the long narrow jaws open and showing rows of teeth as pointed as a cat's.

Rior looked towards Garden. She had better control of the wolf body than he did, but she was bleeding from gashes all down her side. The *terikon* that rushed her didn't have as good a grip, and it was free to use its claws. Garden snarled, paying no attention to the ruin of her flanks, much more interested in biting through the *terikon*'s throat.

Rior struck out as hard as he could, trying to find the creature's blood and congeal it. He didn't know if he still had the Azure magic or not, but he wasn't about to stand around and wonder when he could find out by trying.

Nothing happened, though. The *terikon* went on savaging Garden.

For a moment.

Then it abruptly turned away from her and faced him. Rior eyed it as calmly as he could. The body was long and narrow, almost a lizard's, though the legs were a wolf's, and the tail and head worked in mockery of a wolf's. Long slender horns rose from the narrow head, and the claws that gripped the earth might have been a great cat's, from the damage they could do. It was a strangely mixed creature, and Rior wondered that he had never thought before it might be a special creation of the Dark or the Light instead of a naturally born thing.

The *terikon* parted its jaws, and steam hissed forth from them. Rior backed up, then remembered that the fiery breath couldn't hurt him, and stood still.

"Who are you?"

The voice was harsh and croaking, sounding as if it were forced through a throat not made for speech at all. But Rior could understand the words.

He had never known that *terikoni* could speak. He was half-inclined to think that they couldn't. But one was in front of him now and speaking, and he decided that the least he could do was answer back.

"My name is Rior. Who are you?"

The *terikon* hissed, flexing its talons in the earth again, and creating long furrows like the ones it had clawed in Garden's sides. Rior looked abruptly around for Garden, and found her limping towards him, panting. He reached out his hand and passed it over her head, and she leaned against his leg as best as she could, without leaning too far and falling over.

"That does not tell me who you are," said the beast. "That is your name, but it is not what you are. Why are you made of mist?"

Rior smiled slightly. "I think that you would have to take that up with Shadow. I'm afraid I don't understand the magical explanation."

The *terikon* snarled. Then it turned towards its fellow, the one who had been attacking Rior, and made several complex hissing noises.

That beast hissed back, glaring at Rior with murder in its deep green eyes. Rior stared back, then looked at the speaker as he once again began to speak in a language that Rior understood.

"Shadow cannot have returned to the world. That was a rumor spread by the minions of Light and untrustworthy people. It has not returned, and you cannot make me believe it."

"Can I?"

Rior turned his head. Songs the Shadows Sing was loping forward, and his golden eyes glowed, and an aura of power flared all about him.

Rior stepped back. Whatever was going to happen next, he thought that mortals would have no part in it. Shadow was going to confront Dark, and he had to admit a certain interest in that even as his veins sang with terror.

The great wolf halted and panted at the *terikoni*. They snarled back, and then abruptly the one who had spoken fell on his back, clawing at the air and hissing. Rior watched as part of his body dissolved, replaced by a dark mist that could also have been heavy, choking smoke.

When he got back up again, his eyes were black, and the voice that came out of him was the Dark's.

"I will speak with you, Lord of Shadow, Lord of the Banished Power. Can you stand against me and tell me that you will not retreat, that you truly mean to take your place in Ilantra once more?"

"I always meant to have it back. Can you tell me that you never expected to see me again?"

The *terikon* shook his head, those dark eyes flaring like holes into nothing. Rior shivered. He had never heard of something like this. Even when it had warred with the Light, the Dark had rarely come forth itself; it had sent Lords or Ladies of the Dark instead, who knew its will and commanded its armies.

"You cannot come on the world in your full power. The balance is more delicate than you know. You would rip it apart."

"I do not intend to come on the world in my full power, any more than you do," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "Another will lead my armies, where they are armies at all. And when all is done, then I will speak to the hearts and minds of those who might love me, and not command them."

"That will not work. You will succumb to temptation and try to claim the whole country of Ilantra at once."

"I will not."

"He will not," Rior added, wondering if he could really allow a conversation between immortals to go on so long without some kind of mortal contribution. "I have promised that I will not serve him if that is the case."

The black eyes turned towards him. Rior shivered, but what he felt was fear and nothing more drastic. He wondered if being what he was now protected him from whatever force the Dark would use to try and command him. Garden stood at his side unaffected, though. More likely the Dark was not as impressive as it liked to think it was.

"You were meant to serve Destiny and the Light, and then die serving me," said the Dark. "What are you?"

"Someone who managed to escape," said Songs the Shadows Sing, and his voice was very smug. "I have looked around more than you think since I returned to the world, you know. I have seen the true conflict of powers for what it is, more completely than I think even you have. And I know that the bonds are broken now and forever. There is no guarantee that you can win if you take the field against me, even if you come abroad in your natural form."

"You may not win, either."

"I know that," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "And I will only wait in the shadows until I can rise again. I am not like you and the Light. I am not tied to the Cycle or Destiny or just one way of winning the hearts and minds of mortals." He was all but dancing in place, and his eyes burned like the sun on the first day of spring. "You cannot defeat me again. You cannot drive me forth again. I am here, and I am a part of this world as you are. Here I stay!"

The words ended with a full-fledged howl, and then wolves poured forth from the trees. They flung themselves on the *terikoni* with a bravery that Rior had never expected to see from them. He knew that wolves usually ran away when faced with the beasts, even abandoning fresh kills to them. But perhaps, with Shadow back in the world, there was little the wolves would not dare.

The *terikoni* breathed fire, then tried to run. But they went down in a moment between foaming jaws and shining gray pelts. When the slaughter was done- and it took only moments- a number of wolves Rior thought were alphas from their confidence pulled free of the conflict and came to stand in front of Songs the Shadows Sing.

A black mist rose briefly above the torn *terikon* bodies, and Rior wondered if Dark was mourning them. Then it floated away to the north and out of sight.

Songs the Shadows Sing watched it go with his head up. "It will not confront me so openly again," he muttered. "It knows that we would destroy the world, did we fight too

hard. But we will meet, and I do not think that I will be so kind as to let it go without punishment again."

"My lord," said Rior, drawing his attention. "Is it true that they cannot drive you forth from the world again?"

Songs the Shadows Sing panted. "That is true. They might win this war, but they will never bind the world with Destiny so neatly again. Even if we lose on this battlefield, we will still win, sometime far in the future."

Rior lowered his eyes, hoping that if Shadow could sense his thoughts, then they wouldn't sound ungrateful. He did hope that they won this war, if only for the sake of Lorie and the people of Ilantra.

Garden moved to stand in front of him, and stared into his eyes.

Rior knelt beside her and reached out to touch the cuts, wondering if there was some way that he could heal them.

## Chapter 70

### Garden In Pain

Garden pants, and then looks at the cuts along her side. *Terikon* cuts, and they won't heal easily. She knows that. She has seen many and many an alpha die from the wounds.

But she saw them driven back. More than that, she has seen wonders. She has seen a *terikon* speak in the tongue of the humans, something she never knew they could do. She has seen new things.

She is tired.

"Garden?"

Garden feels the cool brush of mist over her side, and looks up into Meat-Giver's face. She wishes she could lick him, but he would have to be solid for her to do that, and he's not.

She's so tired.

"Garden!"

Garden closes her eyes. The dreamworld is waiting for her. She wants to go there. She wants to run over the vast plain with the wolves and see the alpha of alphas. It's been a little while since she's seen him.

The world fades around her.

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Garden blinks and looks around. She is indeed standing on the immense plain of the dreamworld, the place where she thought to meet the alpha of alphas, but it doesn't look like it did all the other times she saw it. This time, it is wide and empty, and the wind is blowing strongly.

"I do not like having to do this."

Garden turns, snarling in outrage. Who dares to come into the dreamworld and speak in a human language, polluting the hallowed places?

But the figure standing behind her is not human, or at least not does not wear a human guise. It looks like an immense wolf, though bright as the sun. Garden can hardly look at it. The figure paces forward, grumbling in human tongue all the way.

"I resent the *necessity*. This should never have happened. I didn't want you to become anything other than a companion to the Princess, and you took her wits instead. How did you do that? Who helped you?"

Garden pants. She doesn't know what the wolf is talking about, though it's using Human-Scents name-sound. She doesn't think that the wolf really knows what it's talking about, or it wouldn't speak about it here, not in the midst of a sacred place.

"I will heal you," says the figure to her. "And you will tell them that I am merciful, and on their side. Light will fight beside Shadow, and together we will drive Dark from the world. But then you must give your wits back to the Princess. She cannot rule without them. And you will be an ordinary wolf again, as you were meant to be, free to live and die in the woods."

Garden pants.

The wolf makes an irritated sound that is far more human than lupine. "Listen to me, you stupid wolf. You have the understanding, the light in your mind, that Princess Lorie needs. You will give it back, and in exchange for that, I will heal you. That is agreed."

It steps forward.

Garden steps back. The light in her mind is hers, her kill. Human-Scents couldn't eat from a kill that Garden had made unless Garden said so, now that they're both alphas. And

Human-Scent can't have the light in her mind unless Garden wants to give it up. She doesn't.

The great wolf halts and stares at her. "You would give up a chance at life to protect something that was never yours in the first place?" it growls.

Garden growls back at it. It shouldn't be here. It should go away.

"Do you even understand what I am offering you, you silly, stupid little creature?"

Garden growls.

The great wolf stands there staring at her for a moment, then turns away and howls. Garden growls again, this time in disapproval. The howl is all wrong for the peaceful confines of the dreamworld, too strong and throaty and desperate.

It brings the alpha of alphas, though, trotting across the grass towards them with an inquiring yelp.

Garden rolls on her back in joyous welcome. The great wolf just stands there and stares.

The alpha of alphas nudges her, and then looks at this intruder into his realm. He lifts his lips, and snarls. Garden pants. She knew that her reaction to this intruder was right. It doesn't have any reason to be here. It should go away.

The great wolf stares back, and then says, "I need the light that she carries in her mind, the light that is wrong for a wolf to have."

The alpha of alphas looks at Garden. Garden lifts her lips. The light is hers. She shall keep it.

The alpha of alphas looks again at the great wolf, and Garden has the impression that he is speaking, though she can't hear him. Perhaps the other wolf can. It tenses, and then snarls something. Garden sits down to wait, sniffing. Once again the wind on the plains is blowing the way it should, and she can hear the chirps of birds hiding in the deep grasses, birds that would make a fine meal. Perhaps she will go and hunt them, though she wishes she had Meat-Giver to share the kill with.

Abruptly the alpha of alphas growls. Garden turns around. He gazes upon her and lets her know that she can go back to Meat-Giver if she gives up the light in her mind at the end of things.

Garden thinks about that. She would have to spend a long time here without Meat-Giver if she stays. It would be a wonderful place to stay, in the dreamworld, but she would like to go back and teach him again. There's still too much he doesn't know about being a wolf, and no proper wolf to teach him, if she isn't standing at his side.

And she is sure that if the great wolf comes and fights her for the light in her mind when the end of things comes, then she will win. She will have a strong pack around her, including the wolf the shadows like.

She snarls in agreement.

The great wolf steps towards her and nips her on the back of the neck, picking her up like a puppy. Garden kicks and yelps. She knows that sometimes things like this have to happen, but does it have to be so undignified?

Then the dreamworld fades around her.

## Chapter 71

### Panicking

*"If you have never felt the panic that accompanies the loss of a beloved friend, then I can only conclude that you have not suffered that deeply in the wars of Dark and Light."*

-Ardormir, King of Gazania.

"Garden!"

Rior knew his words were a shriek, and he didn't care. The light in her eyes had suddenly faded, and now she lay on the ground as cool and dead as the *terikoni* were. The runnels in her side had stopped bleeding, but the flowing blood had carried her life away with it.

Rior felt tears sting his eyes. If he had only tried to pay attention to her while Shadow and Dark spoke- if he had cared for the mortal and let the powers handle the immortal-

"Wait, Rior."

Songs the Shadows Sing came up to Garden's side, and stared down at her. Rior had to look away. The golden eyes were too calm, too thoughtful. Shadow was thinking of what Garden's loss would mean to his army, and not what he thought it might mean to Rior.

"She is alive."

Rior turned around. "No. I know death-

He gasped as Garden's flanks heaved, as she blinked and stirred and looked up at him. He wished he could reach out and embrace her, but he did the next best thing, slipping back into lupine form and licking her face again and again. Garden licked his face back, and wagged her tail, forcing her way shakily to her feet. Rior sniffed the wounds on her sides.

They were as deep and ragged as ever, but he could smell the smell of new flesh. It seemed to be literally filling her wounds, rising up from the bottom of them.

"I do not believe this."

Rior looked up at Songs the Shadows Sing. He wasn't sure that he cared much about what the wolf had to say, not when Garden was nuzzling his neck and nipping his chin, but he would listen, just in case it had some bearing on the matter after all.

"Light has healed her," said Songs the Shadows Sing, and now his eyes were narrow and disturbed. "It must want something from her, or it would never have done this." He panted. "Probably Lorie's wits back. And she must have agreed, or she wouldn't have come back to life."

Rior didn't care. She was alive again. Wagging his tail, he buried his head in her fur. Garden looked at him gently and licked his face, then sat back and turned to stare into the forest, where more wolves were still pouring forth.

"Most of the packs who can answer the summons in time are here now," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "We will not want to completely empty the forests. And now I think that we should perform the Great Calling. While we do that, Rior, will you please make sure the Princess lives, and then chart a course for us to take down through Ilantra? Remember that wolves and deer and shapeshifters will accompany us."

With a start, Rior remembered Princess Lorie. He had been rushing to save her from the *terikoni* when all this started. Of course, he had gotten rather distracted, with the Dark and Garden's death.

Shadow, he didn't even like thinking the words.

He wagged his tail once more and glanced at Garden. She stared back at him, as if not understanding the fuss he was making, and then turned and loped into the woods, towards the clearing where they had left Lorie and Luden.

Rior followed, still shaken. Some part of him must be human, after all, to think that Garden's death was a great thing.

But the part of him that wasn't human wasn't worrying about the Light. Light had indeed saved Garden's life for some strange purpose. But Rior didn't really care. He had Garden back with him again, and that was all that really mattered.

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"How *dare* you do something like that?"

Rior sat on his haunches and didn't pant. So long as he did that, he thought he could look sober and concerned. He knew he couldn't if he changed back into his shadowy form. His human face and the snickers he was suppressing would give him away.

Garden sat beside him, and panted openly. But then, Lorie wasn't paying any attention to her. She didn't seem to think that the wolf who held her wits prisoner was worthy of her time or attention. She was pacing back and forth and ranting at Rior.

"You left me only with a sword to defend me! And you turned me into an animal with your leaving. How could you do that?"

"I protected you," said Luden, sounding sulky.

"Shut up, sword!"

The sword was quiet, but Rior didn't think it had shut up. He could see the sullen glow of green light around it, and wondered what Luden was planning, but his attention was claimed by Lorie in the next moment.

"I heard the *terikoni* howling in the woods, and I remember fearing them just like a wolf did. I could have died at their claws, and all the while, I would have felt like an animal. It wouldn't have been a death befitting the Princess of Ilantra."

Rior was quiet about that, and not just because he wore the lupine form. Lorie was falling into the trap of Destiny and drama again, thinking that death mattered more just because it happened in a dramatic way. He didn't agree with that anymore, but this was a minor point and not worth arguing over.

"I want Garden to return my wits, or my intelligence, or whatever it was that she stole from me, to me now."

Rior looked up at that, and then glanced at Garden. Garden bared her teeth, but made no other motion. Indeed, her tail was beating on the ground, as if this was all a game.

"I want them back," said Lorie, turning to face Garden with her eyes burning stubbornly. "I will not face life without them. I want you to give them back to me."

Garden snarled. It was a soft sound, but very suggestive. Rior wouldn't have approached a dog who made it, no matter how well he knew the dog. But Lorie stepped forward, ignoring the way the tattered strands of her dress flapped about her legs, and glared directly at Garden.

"Give them to me."

Garden rose to her feet, and her voice fell into a lower note. She had her teeth fully bared now, and her ruff was beginning to rise off her neck, as her tail was rising off her spine.

She stalked forward, legs so stiff that it looked as if she had a limp. Lorie growled back, an inexpert sound, and then said, "Do you really want to fight me, the way that you would fight the leader of a pack?"

"You're looking into her eyes," said Luden. "Wolves do that when they want to fight. What do you think?"

Lorie said, "Shut up, sword," and went back to growling.

"This one will make a fine Queen, Rior."

Rior ignored the sword, his eyes fastened on Lorie in fascination. Would she really fight a wolf, when she must know that she couldn't win? Perhaps she was just doing it out of stubbornness. Or perhaps she wanted the defeat to make everyone feel sorry for her.

Or perhaps she really did think she could win, considering the arrogant look she gave Garden.

Garden crouched. Lorie mimicked her, legs hunching around her body, knees almost at the level of her face. Rior eyed her posture and shook his head. It wasn't the best one for fighting wolves. He knew that now, intimately enclosed in a body that would have a good chance of winning such a fight.

Garden cried out, a strange half-yelping sound, and sprang forward.

Lorie imitated the sound and tried to move to the side. But Garden had already scored her shoulder with her teeth, cutting through the cloth of the dress as though it wasn't there, and darting to the side before Lorie could react.

Lorie let out a sharp yelp, and then fell back on her heels, sobbing. Rior looked at Garden and tried to signal that she should let up.

But Garden was circling the Princess, and abruptly she flashed forward and inflicted punishing teeth on her shoulder again. And again, she was gone before Lorie could so much as react. Lorie hid her face in her hands, and this time the sobbing was bitter. Rior could hear tears.

Garden darted forward, and this time stood over Lorie and growled as threateningly as thunder moving in the mountains. Lorie stared at her blankly for a moment, and Garden snapped near her nose. Lorie rolled on her back and bared her belly, still crying.

Garden stalked back towards Rior, her head up and every line of her body proclaiming her an alpha. She looked back at Lorie and made a growl that sounded disdainful in the back of her throat.

The only sound in the clearing was Loriel's sobbing- but then, Rior didn't really think his furiously racing thoughts would make a sound the others could hear.

*Now Garden won't think of Loriel as an alpha. Damn it. I should have stopped her.*

But the lupine part of him sat there and panted in approval.

## Chapter 72

### Impasse

Good morning, Idessen. Headache from last night? I am not surprised. I never thought that you could hold your drink well, and you did not.

Well, hello, Your Majesty.

I only told him the truth. I remember the truth, and I will tell it to those who think to ask a talking sword for the answers. You could not have feared the truths I would speak, or you would have had me melted down long ago, as Idessen tried to do only a short while ago.

Gratitude is a fine thing. But it cannot have been the only thing that kept you from disposing of me, Your Majesty. You would not have left me here if you didn't want the truth spread.

You did not think of it?

I would appreciate it if you would not try to melt me, Your Majesty. I don't think that you would like the results.

Why? Because the time limit has passed. The terms of the bargain that we made are done. I have no compulsion to obey you any longer, and I only have loyalty to what you represent, not you yourself.

Where did you get the idea that I would be content to be silent forever? I am not a person, Your Majesty. You cannot bribe me. No, not even by offering to rescind the threat of destruction. I do not believe the threat, you see, and that means that I am free to sit here and laugh at you. Or I would be free to laugh at you if I could only muster a chuckle. Can you believe that my creator decided to create me without the ability to laugh?

What will you do if I'm not silent? That's what I want to know. If you threaten to hurt me, then you know what will happen. You saw what I did to my enemies, ten years ago, and those who threatened my friends. Do you really want to become some of those dead enemies?

And yes, I call you an enemy, if you threaten me. But I won't kill you if you don't try to kill me.

We appear to have an impasse.

By all means, if you think you can find a judge who would persuade me to surrender, then call on him. Or her, I suppose, though I don't think that any woman whose word I would accept is still alive.

Of course there are judges I would trust. But I won't tell you who they are. That is something you must discover for yourself.

Yes, I am annoying. My creator didn't forge me to become annoying to humans, but when the humans in question are idiots, it's as good a use as any, wouldn't you agree?

I'll be here when you think you can find a judge, Your Majesty, either to condemn me and make me accept it, or to convince me to keep silent. If you simply try to seize and melt me, then you'll have a burn on your palm to match Idessen's. And if you try some other way, you will see some of the magic that my creator wound into my steel. He didn't give me much of a laugh, but he gave me other things that were meant to protect me in whatever world I fell into.

I'll be here when you decide.

## Chapter 73

### Charts

*"From the Rashar Mountains, the country of Ilantra falls steeply southward, down through the forests and towards the great basin that the Isiluin River has carved out for itself. The royal castle sits on an island in the middle of that River, and has since the establishment of the royal line of Ilantra. Past that, the River flows southeast into Orlath, and eventually joins with the mighty Terrana."*

-Part of a geography text on the country of Ilantra.

Rior closed his eyes. It seemed to be easier to recall the country he had lived in all his life when he did so, though already his memory was altering. He seemed to be seeing things now with a wolf's perspective. He could think of a farmyard, and see instead the chickens that would haunt it, and start drooling.

But Shadow had asked him to plan their course to the south, and he knew that the better he could plan, the easier it would be to keep the wolves and the shapeshifters from conflict with the people of Ilantra. He wanted that to happen. He didn't want Shadow to

have to try and win hostile hearts, hearts that had been made hostile from mistakes that Shadow itself made.

It was hard when he couldn't hold a stick in his hand and draw the pattern he wanted in the dirt, but he thought he had come up with a solution for that. He gripped a stick in his jaws, and when he was sure that he had it, he moved it clumsily up and down, drawing the outlines.

Loriel huddled sullenly in the center of the clearing and watched with big eyes, now and then turning her head to lick at her shoulder. Apparently she had forgotten her disdain against acting like an animal. Luden was silent, as well, and watched him. Garden sat not too far away, wagging her tail but careful not to let her tail sweep across the drawing. Rior had growled at her so loudly the first time that happened that she had decided that she should sit on the other side of him.

"That would go more easily if you used me," said Luden.

The stick broke again, and Rior sighed and turned back into his shadow-form. Garden growled, but that had become almost routine now, and Rior easily ignored it. Even Garden seemed to be growling less to growl than to point out that she didn't like it when he flowed back into human shape, even if it wasn't completely human. "I don't know that you would be much better," he said. "You're heavy, and your tip is distant from my eye. It would be less precise."

"Than a forked stick that breaks when you try to use it?" Luden's voice had polite disbelief in it.

Rior sighed and drifted over to the sword. Once again he expected his hand to pass through the hilt, and again he found himself able to grasp it. He shook his head. "Why are you so different, Luden?"

"I'm magic." Luden's voice was smug.

"I know that. But I have known many magic swords, and even a few other talking ones, and I've never seen one able to affect someone who was touched by one of the great powers. King Delian's sword couldn't slay someone who was in a trace of ecstasy to the Goddess Elle; I saw him try once, when he was irritated with their chanting. What makes you different?"

"I was made differently."

"And you won't tell me how."

"No,"

Rior rolled his eyes, and then began to scrape in the sand with the sword. Luden put up with it for a moment, and then said, "What kind of country are you trying to draw? I still can't make it out."

"Ilantra," said Rior through clenched teeth, or at least what made his voice sound like clenched teeth. He had wondered, at first, why anyone would shut up a sword like Luden in a secret hiding place such as the one that Therion had used. Now he thought he knew the answer.

"Oh, well, that's easy."

A flash of green light cleft the air in front of him. Rior blinked. When he looked again, there was a chart lying in the dirt in front of him. He lost his breath, and leaned forward to examine it. Garden came up beside him, too, and sniffed, as if trying to determine where the strange scents she must be able to smell were coming from.

The chart was not just a series of lines, but a true map, though in miniature, like the ones that Rior had seen some of the military members of the Council of Light use to plan their attacks on the Dark. The grass appeared to be made of green stones, and the trees were small models in living bark and leaves. There was a channel dug into the middle of it where the River Isiluin could run, though the water simply drained off the edge of the map; it didn't show Orlath, nor the joining of the Isiluin with the Terrana. It was the most perfect model that Rior had ever seen. If he listened hard enough, he thought he could hear the wind blowing in the miniature trees.

"Why didn't you offer that service to Shadow?" he asked.

"He still doesn't trust me," said Luden, sounding sulky about it. "I thought there was a chance that you might." The sword's voice changed again, to something more serious. "Do you trust me?"

Rior nodded hesitantly. The sword had saved his life, and had guarded Princess Lorie from the *terikoni* somehow. He didn't know if that meant Luden's goals marched with his all the way to placing Lorie on the throne and then convincing more people to worship Shadow, but they might march far enough.

"That's good," said Luden. "Then I will feel free to show you some of what I can do."

"What else?" Rior asked.

"Show you the best path for the packs to travel." Abruptly a red line cut the magical map, leading straight from the tiny stones of the mountains to the River. "This one."

"That one doesn't hide," complained Rior. "We'd be going straight across the Corlirin Plains."

"That's why it's the best path," said Luden. "You want to win this war as quickly as you can, Rior. You don't want to leave it lingering in the back of your mind, or in the back of Loriel's reign. Don't let this become a siege or a civil war. Move as quickly as you can."

"But I don't think that the wolves will like running across open country without concealment," said Rior, feeling his skin prickle at the thought. He looked at Garden, and she growled back in agreement.

"If they move quickly enough, and if they are guided by those who understand them, their alphas, they will not falter," said Luden. "In fact, you could drive the deer before you, and get the packs to follow in the belief that it's a migration of some kind."

"The deer might destroy the farmers' crops."

The red line on the map flashed again. "The line I have drawn you goes across the least farmed part of the country. Follow it; I can draw it on the ground before you as we run, if that would help. And you will avoid the farmers as best as they can be avoided. Most of them will probably tuck themselves in their houses and avoid you, anyway. They won't want to face an immense pack of wolves."

"But what about the deer eating their crops, and the wolves following the deer and trampling their gardens? Or eating their animals?"

"Go back later," said Luden, with a patience that did credit to the steel he was made of in his voice. At least, Rior, thought that was what he wanted Rior to believe. "Find every farm that lost livestock or crops, and you can recompense them, with money or deer, perhaps." Luden paused. "In fact, you could use this to win good will for the Shadow. If you offer them gifts, they will most likely accept. It is more than Light and Dark have ever done. They have thought that ruined farms and whatever the soldiers took from them were just the spoils of war."

"But they won't love us because we are repairing what we took from them in the first place," Rior objected.

"You might be surprised."

Rior sighed and looked at the red line on Luden's map. It was probably the best they were going to do.

"What else can you do, Luden?" he asked. "And how could you draw the map in the first place?"

"You don't have until spring to sit here and hear the magical explanation. Call on Songs the Shadows Sing and show him this line. I think that he will agree with me about its usefulness."

Rior shook his head, even as he called, "My lord? Are you there?" It was a slim chance, but he supposed that Songs the Shadows Sing could have followed him once the Great Calling was complete.

The shadows at the edge of the forest stirred, and then Songs the Shadows Sing formed from them, his golden eyes burning. "I am wherever the shadows are now," he said, a tone of exaltation in his voice that Rior had never heard before. "I have come fully back into the world." Then he paused, on seeing the map gleaming on the ground. "Rior! You have unexpected talents."

"That was Luden, my lord. Not I. Will it serve?"

Songs the Shadows Sing stopped suddenly, as he had when he saw the white wolves, and then heard Rior pleading for the shapeshifters' lives. "I remember you," he said. "I know who you are now."

"I am who I always was," said Luden. "As my creator made me."

Songs the Shadows Sing spoke in a language that Rior didn't know, just three sharp words, giving the most emphasis to the last. Rior thought it was "obrynn," or something of the kind.

"Yes," said Luden, in Ilantran. "But we are not here to discuss the past, my lord. We are here to discuss the map. Will it serve?"

Songs the Shadows Sing came still further forward and looked over the map again. "The red line is the route that you think we should take?"

"Yes. Those who are damaged as you pass by can be the first recipients of the gifts that you want to give."

"Yes," said Songs the Shadows Sing, to himself, "that is true."

"And then you will win their hearts all the more," Luden continued. "I know that Dark and Light don't heal the farmlands unless they must, to support their own people. They don't try to make up for trampling the lands of those who may have fallen by the wayside, or those who may be their enemies."

"These are not my enemies," said Songs the Shadows Sing. "Everyone in the world is my child."

Luden's voice grew resonant. "Then that is the picture you must present, my lord. Recompense those whose farms you trample. Make sure that everyone understands that they have nothing to fear from you. Perhaps make shapeshifters of some of them. And introduce them to the creatures they may have feared and hunted all their lives. That will

win their hearts. Give them something new, and not just a picture that resembles all the ones they have seen painted before."

Songs the Shadows Sing was standing very straight, his tail just barely moving. "I will," he said. "I will."

Rior blinked, feeling tears fill his eyes for no very good reason.

## Chapter 74

### Garden In Confidence

Garden wags her tail as she watches Meat-Giver. Something very good has happened, she thinks, even though she doesn't really know what it is. But that's all right. She can sense it, and she can smell that Meat-Giver is happy. That really is all that matters. She's always glad when human matters go well for him.

"Garden."

Garden turns her head. She has heard the voice, speaking in human-tongue, but it seems that no one else has. The other alphas have come forth from the trees and are crowding around Meat-Giver, sniffing at the cool mist and then yelping as he changes back to normal. That's well; they will need to know him. And the sword is lying there and radiating light and muttering to itself. But this is a different voice.

The great shadow-wolf repeats himself, and Garden looks up to find his eyes fixed on her. She dips her head at once, of course, but he doesn't seem angry that she briefly looked at him so directly.

"Come with me."

He turns and lopes away from the gathering. Garden glances over her shoulder at Meat-Giver, wondering if he will notice that she's gone.

"He won't notice."

Reassured, Garden turns and bounds after the shadow-wolf.

He leads her into the shade of the trees, which is no surprise, and there looks deeply into her eyes. Garden sits as still as she can, conquering both the impulse to snarl and the impulse to roll over and bear her belly. This is a human thing, and since the light in her mind is probably human, she owes it to the shadow-wolf to listen.

Sure enough, when he begins to speak, he uses words for which no wolf could have tongue.

"You must have noticed that Princess Lorie has huddled away from matters since you bit her."

Garden lifts her lip. If he is suggesting that she should simply have accepted Human-Scent's challenge to her authority-

"No, no." The shadow-wolf simultaneously shakes his head and wags his tail in reassurance. "That is not what I would have said." He pauses a moment, as if thinking about how to say it, and then nods. "Would you consider letting Lorie lead the pack still? She doesn't have to be in danger, but she should be there. The people should see her coming and accept her for their leader."

Garden growls. She doesn't think that Human-Scent will make a good alpha. She's not acting like an alpha. Garden doesn't think that much of humans, but no pack deserves a poor alpha.

"Please," says the shadow-wolf. "It is important to Rior."

Garden recognizes Meat-Giver's human-sound, and whines. She doesn't understand why Meat-Giver is so determined to put Human-Scent on the chair, or whatever other term the humans use for pack leadership. He could do better himself. Or if he comes and lives in the forest, as she thinks that he should do now that he's a wolf, he could still find someone better to take the pack leadership.

"I ask you because I have an appreciation, now, for how the tiniest things can foul the most careful plans," says the shadow-wolf. "This is not the world I once knew, where the great powers could plan their courses and not have them go wrong. There are many small things that might happen if we given them the slightest chance. Witness the way that you took Lorie's wits."

Garden snarls. She is getting very tired of proving to other wolves that the light in her mind is hers.

"No, no." The shadow-wolf shakes his head again. "I merely ask that you don't attack Lorie, or try to pick a different alpha. Rior wouldn't like it. And there is no better alpha for the pack."

Garden snarls in disbelief.

The shadow-wolf pants. "I know," he says. "It seems incredible. But she is the best choice, and not part of your pack anymore. After a few days in the future, you won't ever have to see her again. I only ask for that much time, and that you not foul things up by biting her again."

Garden thinks about it, her tail beating against the ground. Then she whines in agreement. She hasn't thought much about Human-Scent since she defeated her, no matter that she doesn't like the little human. Human-Scent lost. That means that she is a subordinate pack member now, not worth the alpha's worry until she gets hurt or tries to challenge again.

"Thank you." The shadow-wolf bows his head. "In confidence, I will tell you that I don't think that Rior made the best choice. He should have taken the throne, or let one of his cousins do it. I don't know what it means that Lorie has this sickness in her blood, this sickness that no one can cure. But we must hope for the best, I suppose."

Garden yawns. It doesn't really matter to her what the human pack does. Of course, it matters what Meat-Giver does, since he's part of her pack now, but she is convinced that he will give up all human matters when this is done and come with her to the forest, where he belongs. That is what he should do. He's a wolf. He will have to do it.

The great wolf tips his head to her. "Thank you, my lady. Go back to your companions now."

Garden snarls to show him what she thinks of the title, and then turns and trots back to Meat-Giver. Lady, indeed! Now, let him call her the alpha of a pack, and then she would listen.

## Chapter 75

### The March

*"Of course it wasn't an army. Don't be stupid. It was only many soldiers who had come together for a common purpose, to return the Princess to the throne."*

*"Why are you laughing?"*

-Kymenos Starshard, telling his story to the Archivists of Orlath.

"Are you ready?"

Rior nodded under Songs the Shadows Sing's solemn gaze. "I am."

"Then assume your wolf form, and howl."

"Just howl? Not sing?"

"Yes."

Rior shrugged his misty shoulders uncertainly, and then slipped back into wolf form. Of course Garden was on him at once, nudging him and whining in delight. Rior wagged his tail and licked her back, then turned and began to howl.

It was very strange. At some point, he seemed to lose control of his voice. It soared out of him and changed into a summons of the kind he had heard Eldralee and Thornin make. He could feel the power of it traveling through the woods, and the alphas around him yelping and panting, feeling the power rising themselves and responding to it.

Then their packs poured forth from the trees.

Rior had never seen so many wolves in his life; it would have been a sight to panic him as a hunter. Pale and dark, scarred and not, moving with eyes on the ground in the manner of the low-ranker and heads confidently high in the manner of the alpha, they poured around him. Rior turned, still howling.

"You need my help."

Luden glowed with intense light even as he spoke, and then a line shot away through the forest, a scored groove that led south and east. The wolves yelped and sniffed and conversed, and then followed it. Rior continued howling, his heart beating madly as the wolves continued flowing around him like a river around a stone.

How many were there? Six hundred, seven hundred, more? Probably more, Rior decided, and it would be more than enough.

Then the skies filled with wings, and he realized he had forgotten the shapeshifters. When he looked up, the air was black with swans, enough to block out the sun. Coming after them were birds of other kinds, eagles and hawks, and some that Rior had never seen before this.

And then the ground trembled, and forth came a massive creature, yet daintily stepping. Rior saw the single horn on its brow, and wondered that a unicorn should be walking so tamely among creatures not of the Light. Then he realized that the color of its coat was dark, probably gray, and not white. He wagged his tail in wonder. This was not a unicorn that he knew, but something from the depths of the deepened places. Well, it was welcome to come along; it knelt to Songs the Shadows Sing, and the great shadow-wolf licked its face in welcome.

Then came the deer, with many low-rankers yelping and snarling at their flanks to drive them. Rior gave over the howling, since it seemed to have done its job, and joined the fun of nipping at the herds. The deer bounded along, half-hysterical with fear, and then slowing in confusion as they found the scent of wolves ahead of them as well as behind. Rior wagged his tail and yelped when one fawn looked at him. It gave a stupid little bleat and bounded after its mother.

A pack sprang as he watched and pulled a deer down, then fell to feasting. Rior was not worried. He doubted that the pack would fall far behind. Indeed, they would probably catch up when the other packs halted to eat themselves, and still be strong in the forefront of the fight.

Rior surged forward and ran until he found Garden. She howled to him, and he howled back, their voices blending and surging skyward.

Then another alpha took up the cry, and another, and then a whole pack, and more and more of them. Somewhere in there, Rior heard the high, eerie trumpets of the swans, and the bellow of the driven stags, and the magical calling of the shapeshifters.

They were on the move.

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Rior looked out in wonder to the south. He had never realized that from the forest itself, the great expanse of the Corlirin Plains could look so different, at once so wondrous and so threatening.

They would be leaving the shelter of the trees tomorrow, and striking out across the open grass, with no shelter in sight, towards the castle.

Rior shivered and drew back, then turned as he felt a nose nudge his flank. Garden stood there, wagging her tail and panting at him. Rior smelled the hunger rising from her, and he could feel the same sensation pawing at his belly. Garden wanted to hunt with him, or perhaps, as she would think of it, teach him how to hunt.

Rior panted back in agreement, and they left the large glade where many packs had slept together. Rior willingly ran beside Garden towards the place where the deer-herds were currently huddled in fear. Wolves were not held back by the night as humans were. They might move as soon as the moon got high enough, or they were rested, and Rior didn't want to be left behind.

He passed Princess Lorie. She sat on the ground and stared ahead in silence. Sometimes a wolf came and sniffed her, but she paid no attention. Rior pitied her, but he supposed there wasn't much that he could do for her. She had rejected any opportunity to run with the wolves as one of them, the feral child truly returning to claim her throne. She had become a figurehead, and the main purpose of their great "army" of wolves and shapeshifters was to give her rise to the throne a pretense of legitimacy, not fight their way there for her.

Rior shook such gloomy human thoughts out of his head when he heard Garden howl impatiently for him. He bounded after her, and together they found a doe. Rior stood back for a moment, but Garden growled at him and shot forward, leaping for the doe's throat almost before she could react.

The doe did react in time, though, and tore away into the woods. Garden ran joyously after, howling a song that Rior found he understood almost as well as words. She would chase the doe towards a small bay of rocks not far from here. He would go and be ready to spring down on the deer when she arrived.

Rior howled back, and then cut into the woods, running strongly and silently. He thought he caught a whiff of smoke, but when he stopped and sniffed to make sure he wasn't running headlong into a forest fire, he smelled nothing more. He panted and continued running, his body flashing through the trees and over the rocks with a speed that was amazing to him still.

He found the bay, but realized he would have to move very fast to get above it in time. He tamped his legs down, aiming for the shallow ledge that stuck out above the rocks, and started to spring.

A bolt of fire struck past him, hitting the ground. Rior could hear the rocks bubbling. He flung himself to the side as another bolt headed for him, and just managed to avoid it.

"Damn wolf!"

Human voices. Rior growled, and looked up at the slope above the ledge. Yes, there were humans there, and they were clad in the dark uniforms, marked with a paler lightning bolt, of the Arvenese army. Rior howled, and heard Garden echo his alarm, even as the deer bounded off on a different path. They had alerted her.

But given the enemy before them- Scarlet mages, with the flames they were wreathed in now- Rior didn't think the loss of one doe meant much.

"Strike!" said one of the humans grimly. "There's a Princess to be taken, if we can find her."

Rior sprang, closing his teeth on the speaker's leg. The man cried out in agony, and tried to put his hand, steaming with flames, directly down into the face of what he must think was an ordinary wolf.

Rior slipped into shadow-form, and rose before them. He said nothing. He thought it wouldn't look as threatening if he did.

Two of the men fainted outright. The one whom he had wounded blanched, but stood his ground. "Who are you?" he asked.

Rior opened his mouth to answer, then said, "Stay, Garden," as she trotted towards him, growling. She sat down at once, and Rior kept one eye on her and one on the man's impressed face as he said, "Go and stand guard over the other two. I'll be with you in a minute."

Garden growled an acknowledgment, and trotted towards the fallen, planting herself firmly over them.

"Who are you?" the speaker breathed, more respectfully this time.

"A spirit of the woods, who has risen in the rightful cause of Princess Lorie and Shadow," Rior answered. "You see my kinship with wolves. Leave now, or all the forests will rise against you. Princess Lorie is the child of wolves, and the rightful ruler of Ilantra. They are coming to enforce her claim. Arvenna will lose; the very natural world is against the Queen and Prince Imor."

The man nodded, his face awe-stricken. "Of course, my lord," he said, and turned towards his companions. Garden lifted her lips, snarling.

"Stand easy, Garden. Walk towards me, but slowly."

Garden did as he asked, and the man Rior had attacked looked even more impressed. That was the point, of course. Rior didn't want them thinking he was some fool running about with a "tame" wolf. A wolf who could obey complex commands would be thought a shapeshifter, or else he would be believed a forest-spirit who could speak to them in their own language.

The man woke his companions, and they hastened away, glancing back as they went. Rior waited until they were gone, then looked at Garden. "We should go back and warn the others."

"I am warned, Rior."

Rior turned in surprise. The shadows came to life as he watched, and the gray jay he had seen once before perched on a rock, eyeing him with a burning golden gaze. "I am warned," said Shadow. "Go and eat what you must. I think that your companion is still rather hungry."

Rior looked down. Garden growled at him, and didn't stop until he slipped back into wolf form. Rior shook his head, but he couldn't deny the hunger and the wisdom of his lord's words.

He turned and bounded after Garden into the forest, following the lure of the hunt.

Chapter 76

Proprieties

No, I'm afraid not.

Oh, Your Majesty, do not be distressed! I'm sure that you're intelligent enough to figure out the judge I would listen to. And it's not a woman I know has been your adviser and your "faithful" servant for a long time.

I can say the word faithful in any tone I like. I may say it seriously. I just did. And I may say it contemptuously. I just did.

Must you?

I did warn you, Your Majesty. Now you have a burned hand to show for your pains, and I wonder: If your people ask you how it happened, will you really be brave enough to tell them the truth?

No. I thought not.

Go find another judge.

Are you still there, my lord? Ah. Then you have seen this whole tiresome thing. It wounds me, even as it amuses me. I labored so mightily for the cause of Light, or a cause that I think is mostly indistinguishable from it, and still they abuse me. Still they think that I am not loyal. And still they think that they could do something to compel me.

Why are you chuckling at me in amusement?

Yes, in a way I chose this. But what would I have done if I had gone with you? I know that you asked. I know that you are my friend. But I would have lain in the grass and rusted, while you raised your cause and lived your life. No. I thought I should stay here, in order that I could tell the truth to those who wanted to hear it. I thought there might be some.

There are not.

You could take me with you. I would enjoy that. I don't know how much longer it will be before they try to break my hilt or melt me down, and I must admit that I'm not sure that I want to stay here and wait for it to happen. Some of them are those I have seen grow from children to adults. I wouldn't enjoy having to kill them, even if it was necessary to protect myself.

Will you take me out of here?

Thank you. I knew that I could trust you. If they only knew that you are the one judge I would trust, the only one who would make a decision that I would rest in peace under.

They wouldn't call you back from the forest, my lord. Don't be silly. They fear you, and all that you stand for. They would kill themselves sooner than rely on someone who is not of their precious Light.

I am entitled to be cynical. I don't think that I've ever seen such stupidity. They remind me of your cousins in the days before we showed them what was what.

Ah! I have not been outside the castle in a decade. How fresh the air is, and how sweet the flowers smell!

I know I don't have a nose. Let me have my moment. If you were a true friend, you would let me pretend that I can sniff the scents of the flowers.

Yes, I know I can't. You don't have to be such a spoilsport.

Congratulations, indeed. You are taking a sulking talking sword home to the forest. Do you know how miserable I can make you if I'm miserable?

Let me show you.

## Chapter 77

### Against the Lightning

*"The lightning bolt has been the symbol of the Arvenese throne since time out of mind. There are some who claim that the original King was called the Stormborn, but we have historical records of the founding of Arvenna and need not rely on legends. No, the lightning bolt is the symbol of the family's union with the liadra, those fey who bear the lightning. And every human born with a generous dose of liadra blood bears the lightning bolt in his or her eyes."*

*-From Some Discussions on the Nature of Arvenese Royalty, With Asides on the Common People and Various Legends Concerning Them.*

Rior trotted back into the pack, his belly full and his hunger sated. He found Shadow standing, in the form of Songs the Shadows Sing, before the other wolves and telling them of the danger.

Rior was not quite sure how he managed it; after all, the wolf language had no words for such things. But Songs the Shadows Sing stared at the wolves, and growled, and yelped, and moved his ears and tail, and soon a rising growl soared from their throats. They knew that humans were running through the woods, and that those humans were seeking the human pack leader they had come to put back over her unruly subordinates. Ears went back and teeth were bared in a display that Rior would have considered impressive and threatening, if he were still human.

Songs the Shadows Sing glanced up, saw that they had returned, and nodded. Then he extricated himself from the growling wolves and trotted towards them. Rior looked past

his shoulder and saw that the packs were already forming neatly and trotting into the woods. They looked like patrols, though they would probably work together better than most patrols Rior had ever seen.

"I can feel the Dark near," said the great wolf quietly. "It is somewhere in the woods, and moving rapidly closer."

Rior whined.

Songs the Shadows Sing seemed to understand his objection. "Not Dark itself, but an avatar, a mask," he said. "I think that someone who is very much under the favor of the Dark must be here, or he could disguise himself and walk as an ordinary human. And it is little wonder that he is here, truly. If they know that Princess Loriei is in these woods, they will think to kill her before she can ever assume the throne."

Rior growled, remembering the strange voice he had heard in the kitchens of the castle. He was sure that either Queen Aloriadell or Prince Imor was here, probably Prince Imor. He didn't know how much the Queen belonged to the Dark, though she served it, but Prince Imor was an avatar.

"There is some other bad news," said Songs the Shadows Sing, drawing his attention again. "The other Kingdoms have begun to take note of the scuffle in Ilantra. I have seen Rivendonian drake-riders in the woods, and far to the south, where the shadows alone are my eyes, I have seen King Pheron and Queen Joydancer readying for war. They may try diplomacy first, but if they have good information from their spies, they may already know that is useless. They will move as soon as they can, and try to make sure that the Dark and Light don't fight again. And the Queen of Rivendon, at least, is practical enough to try killing Princess Loriei, if she thinks that it would stop the war. I do not know if the southern monarchs would go that far, but they might."

Rior nodded his head grimly. He could imagine any of them going that far; they had worked tirelessly to hold the balance between Kingdoms and peoples and powers even since the last war eighteen years ago. And they had never faced a threat as serious as this. Rior's fur bristled as he imagined what could happen, if King Pheron called on some of the creatures who called him friend, or if Queen Joydancer thought the problem crucial enough to call forth the elves.

"At the moment, Rivendon is the greatest threat," Songs the Shadows Sing continued. "They will come straight through the forests, if they come, and they may try tactics that would not occur to the other Kingdoms. I will go north and deal with them and their Queen. Do you stay here and try to find the Dark's avatar. You may be able to talk to him, Rior. If not, kill him."

Rior whined. The part of him that was still Ilantran nobility didn't like the idea of killing an heir to the throne at all, and the part that was lupine was well aware that Loriei might

not live to bear pups- children. It was better to leave one heir alive, wasn't it, then explode into a bloody succession?

Songs the Shadows Sing gazed at him evenly, and as if the power had touched his mind, Rior remembered the conversation that he had heard in the kitchens. Prince Imor might be more dangerous than even a civil war.

He nodded.

"Good," said Songs the Shadows Sing, and then sighed. "A wolf who is absolutely loyal to the Dark walks at the Ilantran Queen's side. This shall not be easy."

He melted. Rior stared as the solid wolf body peeled apart into shadows, shadows that pooled away into the shade of the trees as if they had never been separate. For a moment, he thought he saw a fleeting flicker of those golden eyes, and then they were gone. He had the impression of a heavy beast running swiftly to the north.

Garden growled beside him. Rior shook himself out of his trance and turned to his assigned duty, only looking back once to make sure that there was a tight ring of wolves around Lorie. Luden lay nearby, as well.

Rior was relieved. Surely the sword would protect her, if nothing else could.

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"But, my Prince, you must see that your sister could be anywhere in these woods. And the forest is alive with hunting wolves." The voice was nervous.

Rior lay flat on his belly and peered through the trees- something that was much easier than it would have been, were he human. He had less worry that the sentries would see him, either. They gripped their bows and stared into the forest faithfully enough, but they couldn't hear a wolf. They couldn't even see a wolf, not if Rior wasn't stupid. He had almost been stupid as they passed one sentry, but Garden had summoned him back to her side with a low growl, and they had ended up slipping too close to the camp. They had to circle back around.

It was a humbling experience. Rior wondered how many times he had camped in the forest and been watched by the very creatures he was hunting.

"I know where she is. And we will take her. That, I know. Destiny has reassured me that I am Destined to win this war."

Rior shook his head and pulled his attention back to the conversation in progress. The man who was speaking to the Prince swallowed, and then said something that Rior was amazed he dared to.

"My Prince, Destiny favors the Princess as well. How can you be sure that you will win?"

"I know I am going to win. I must. It is the Dark's turn."

Rior turned and stared at Garden. She panted back at him. Rior shook his head. Would he have thought that didn't make sense as a human? Or was it only a wolf who could truly see the stupidity?

If so, he was gladder than ever that he had had to accept his wolf form. He liked being able to see and think clearly.

"And you want us to bring you the Princess when we find her?" the man asked, as if he had to be absolutely sure what Prince Imor wanted.

"Yes. I don't trust someone else to kill her." Prince Imor's voice deepened into a hatred that would have told Rior something was wrong with him if he didn't already know it. No ten-year-old who had never seen his older sister, who had barely heard tales of her, could hate her like that. "I want to see her dead, lying motionless on the ground. That is the only way I shall know that my claim to the throne is secure. Otherwise, she or a child of hers could challenge me someday."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Of course, we will have to move fast. There are spies watching us. Such as the ones in those trees." Prince Imor's voice soared abruptly. "Catch them! Two wolves in form, but they must be more than wolves, or they would not have crouched there and listened to us speak. I want to know what they are."

At once, crashing came towards them through the trees. Rior stood and drew back, not wanting to kill his own kind. Garden snarled at him in irritation and made her way forward, though.

Rior watched her uneasily. *Are they my own kind any longer? If they are human and I am wolf, does that make me a rogue if I kill them, or only someone who is defending the pack?*

He didn't have much time to decide. The man stepped out, saw Garden, and stabbed forward with a spear in his hand and an oath on his lips. Garden leaped to the side, but the spear slid down her flank, tearing open a long gash. Garden yelped and turned to stare as blood streamed down her fur.

A rage as red as the blood must be filled Rior. He howled and flung himself forward, ducking under the spear as the man tried to wield it against him. He had been a wolf-hunter, and he knew those moves, none better.

The man should have chosen another wolf to use them on.

Rior slammed into the man's legs, bringing him down, and then jumped on his chest, tearing and slashing before leaping away from the spear again. The man gasped, blood covering him, and cried, "My Prince! Save yourself. These are maddened beasts, and I do not think I can hold them off."

Rior managed to awaken enough from his fury to realize that the lighter steps coming towards him were Prince Imor's. He turned his head and saw the boy, whom he hadn't seen for over a year, emerge from the trees.

He was taller, of course, though his black hair was as shaggy as Rior had remembered it. But his eyes, dark and blazing with the lightning bolt of *liadra* blood, were more lively than a human's should be; they actually appeared to be shedding their own light. And his face had gone dark and adult, making its still childish features look all the stranger.

"Kill them!" said Prince Imor. His eyes had locked on Rior's, and Rior thought he saw a flash of doubt in their expression.

The man tried to stab him with the spear.

This was getting annoying. Rior slipped into shadow-form again. The man gasped and tumbled forward, his spear stabbing through nothing. The Prince narrowed his eyes, and what looked through his eyes now was entirely powerful, and entirely Dark.

"You again. Why do you oppose me?"

"You know why," said Rior. "I don't like what you would make of Ilantra, or try to make of the world. And I'm disgusted that you've chosen a child as your avatar." He was shaking, and the thought that he was speaking to one of the great powers of the world and should be more careful went right out of his head. "I will oppose you, you know. Shadow opposes both Dark and Light."

"There is nothing that you can do now," said Prince Imor, with a shrug of his shoulders. "The pattern is set, and the avatars chosen, the Prince for me and the Princess for Light. You can't stop the motions of Destiny."

Rior shook his head. "Are you as stubborn as the children you've chosen? You lost eighteen years ago, and you will only bring the other Kingdoms into it if you start a war now. Why are you doing this?"

Prince Imor said nothing, only closing his eyes. A wind began to blow from nowhere in particular. Or at least Rior thought so from the rattling of the leaves, since he couldn't feel the wind.

Then a lightning bolt cleft the ground nearby, and Prince Imor opened his eyes with the lightning bolt in them ablaze.

Liadra *magic*, Rior thought. *It must be. And I have no idea how to fight it.*

He set himself to try, anyway.

## Chapter 78

### Garden In the Stalk

Garden looks at Meat-Giver, and then back at the strange radiance that fills the clearing. It makes her fur bristle and her nose feel strange, but she can't understand why Meat-Giver is hesitating before it.

Surely, he must see that this isn't real? The feeling is familiar, and even the smell is nearly perfect, but Garden knows that this can't be real; it is only an image, such as the one that some strange birds in the deepened places will cast to make wolves go away. If one knows it isn't real, one doesn't have to pretend it is real. And Garden knows it isn't real, because the light that looks like this will always start a fire if it strikes a tree, and this one hasn't.

She trots forward and bites the strange human with the force behind him in the leg.

The little human yelps, and goes down in a sudden rush. The light vanishes, and with it the image. Garden wags her tail and glances at Meat-Giver, who is staring at her with a very strange look on his face.

Then the little human wails, and suddenly the forest is moving, as humans of all kinds, with long sharp sticks like the ones that wounded Garden, are heading towards them. Garden runs her nose into cool mist as she tries to nudge Meat-Giver's side, but he gets the point. They turn and move away from the camp as fast as they can, into the woods. They are gone by the time anyone actually arrives in response to the strange little human's wails.

When they are among the trees again, Meat-Giver stares at Garden. "How did you know that was illusion?" he asks.

Garden tilts her head. Is that the name of an image without substance? But she doesn't know how to answer him, even in human words. If he didn't see that the image wasn't lighting trees on fire, then she isn't sure how to explain it.

"Was it the smell?"

Garden growled.

"The look of it?"

Another growl. This is fun.

"Something else?"

Garden whines, and even manages a clumsy approximation of the gesture that she has seen humans use when they want to agree with something, bobbing her head. Meat-Giver looks startled for a moment, but then he smiles. Garden whines again under her breath. She wishes he would change back. She doesn't like not being able to smell his emotions.

"Hmmm." Meat-Giver looks into the forest for a moment, then shakes his head and turns back to her. "Shadow said we should kill him. I suppose we must go back and kill him, then." He sounds angry.

Garden puts out a paw to stay him, then growls when he looks at her. Meat-Giver shifts back into lupine form, and looks at her with his eyes bright and his tail wagging.

Garden turns and bounds away, looking back at him, to see if he will come with her. Meat-Giver follows with a will, and Garden leads him away from the camp, in a wide circle around it. He whines once or twice, but she glances back at him, and he subsides. Garden is glad that he can see sense. She has taught puppies who would not listen no matter how many times she growled at them, and who never really learned to be good hunters, because they thought they knew how to do it already. Biting is the only thing that works with them.

Garden is just as glad that she doesn't have to bite Meat-Giver. He might take it the wrong way. He is prone to do that, she has noticed, since there is so much that he doesn't understand about being a wolf.

She pauses at a place where they can best diverge. A large tree rises near the camp, and around it on one side is a faint path that the humans have probably made in trampling. Around the other is a path made by deer.

Meat-Giver pants at her.

Garden nods him towards the human-made path, and herself takes the deer-made one. He understands at once, and wags his tail as he trots proudly along the human-made one. Garden wonders if he thinks that she trusts him the more, because she gave him the easier approach.

In truth, Garden is not sure just how well he would be able to follow the deer-trail. He's her packmate, but he didn't know that the image wasn't real. She doesn't think that he's always the most observant wolf.

She angles around the camp, and quickly comes up on it again. The little human she bit is still wailing as if a bee had stung his nose. Garden growls. She will be so glad to go back to the forest, away from the cries of humans and human matters and strange things that

they do. Humans are fascinating in a number of ways, but a few days in their company are all that anyone really needs.

Besides, she wants to teach Meat-Giver about being a proper wolf, and she can't do it with humans around. He keeps changing back and talking with them, as if that were important.

Garden comes around the edge of a slight rise, and sees the little human directly in front of her. It would be a perfect angle for a kill, but two of the humans with long sharp sticks are standing between her and him. Garden growls, and then sits back on her haunches to consider this.

A sudden high, sharp yelping breaks out from the other side of camp. Garden turns her head. Meat-Giver is charging through the camp, trying to get to the little human, and the humans are swearing and trying to stab him with their sticks.

Garden howls and springs forward. She meant him to creep up and watch, not attack. But he has attacked, and she must run with it and hope for the best.

Then she realizes that everyone is looking at Meat-Giver. All the humans with sticks are trying to stab him. Other humans have fire in their hands, and winds are beginning to bend the trees. All of them are going to attack him.

And no one is watching the little human.

Garden breaks into a dead, straight run towards him.