

Splendor's Shadow

Prologue

It happened in 339 in the reckoning of Orlath, or in the year 1189 in the reckoning of Doralissa. But since this is Ilantra, we might as well use their system, and call it the year 740.

What? Oh, yes, I was babbling. But it is wonderful to have someone to talk to, after so long...

Of course, you want me to talk about important matters, and I'm not talking about important enough ones to suit you. I would cough in embarrassment, if I could cough, but I can't. It's inconvenient. There have been many times that I wanted to cough as the blood ran over me, but I couldn't. Can you imagine how irritating that would be?

What? Oh, yes, the Princess Loriel.

Of course I saw the Dark ones who came and took her away the night she was born! I was hanging on the wall, wasn't I? Of course they hung me on the wall. King Delian was of the Dark; he wasn't going to want a sentient sword that was loyal to the Light. They all hated me.

Oh, yes, if you *must*. No one ever wants to hear about poor Luden's troubles. They only want to hear about the Princess.

Well, there she was, lying in her cradle, and burbling, and staring at the ceiling. Nothing so much different from other babies, you know; I didn't understand all the fuss over her, and I still don't. She had rather odd eyes for a human baby, dark with a silver lightning bolt in the middle of each one, but that was only expected, given her mother and her mother's liadra blood. Her mother, Queen Aloriadell of Arvenna and Ilantra, was lying asleep in the bed. I remember the fire painted her face with shadows.

Of course, that was nothing unusual then.

But you want to know about then, not now.

The door burst open, and two figures stepped in. They were filifernai, you understand, dark blue of skin and naked, with strange glaring eyes. And why shouldn't they be naked? They have none of those ridiculous features that you humans are at once so proud of and so ashamed of.

Yes, if I must, I'll get back to the story.

One of them snatched the baby from the cradle. The other came to the sleeping Queen and held a chain above her throat. I rattled on the wall then, because I have seen filifernai

lash out the throats of their victims, and I didn't want that to happen to the Queen. She was quiet and quite inoffensive, in her way, though it seemed she was always singing or crying. No in between, with her.

Then King Delian of Ilantra and Arvenna stepped through the room, and said, "No. Not the wife. We need other heirs. But take the baby and go."

The filifernai looked at him, and for a long moment, I thought that they wouldn't obey him. But he was of the Dark, after all, and very powerful. The one stepped away from the bed, and the other tucked a fold of the blanket over the baby's face, so that no one would see the eyes that would reveal her.

I suppose they said something to King Delian, but they speak silently, and I don't know what it was. He nodded impatiently back, and then said, "Her name is to be Lorie, if that matters."

I noticed he kept his eyes averted from their bodies as he spoke with them. Do you have any idea why that is? You humans are embarrassed about those features the filifernai don't have, true, but you're also proud of them. You'd be surprised to know how many jokes I've heard, talking about "the sword this" and "the sword that," and then I speak up and offer to duel with their swords, and it's *amazing* how quickly they shut up.

No? You don't want to know anything more about my life? Very well, then. It's inconvenient not being able to sigh, as well, you know.

Humans have spoken many words to me over the years, but I think the most familiar are, "Shut up, Lude."

What? You told me to shut up.

Very well, then. Temperamental human.

The filifernai took the baby away, and then King Delian woke his wife and told her that Princess Lorie would have been Destined to be a champion of the Light, restoring the Light to the throne of Ilantra, and he'd had to have her taken away.

Do humans never read the histories, or listen to the stories? Do they know nothing of Destiny? You can't get rid of a Destined child by giving her to filifernai and telling them to dump her in the forest. Of course she'll be found and reared by wolves or something, and that's exactly what happened to Princess Lorie. Then she'll just return to claim her throne, and you have the same problem all over again. Much simpler just to kill her.

For some reason, this never occurs to them.

But I happen to know a thing or two about Destiny, and, I have to admit, even I was surprised by the courses it took in this case. No, you can't stop the Destiny of a Light-

born Princess by dumping her in the woods. There are wolves, and other things. The Destiny will be there to bring her back to the throne. In some ways, the world is as it has always been.

But this isn't the world as it has always been, either, since all that upset in Orlath and the breaking of the bonds Destiny wove around the world. Nothing is sure, though the worshippers of Destiny and the Light, and even the Dark, like to pretend it is.

This time, when Destiny came back, it found something standing in its way, something it couldn't have anticipated.

A drink? My throat is getting dry.

Yes, I *know* I don't have a throat. I only wanted ale poured over me for old times' sake. There was a time when I rode at the hip of warriors who were quite glad to treat me as one of them, you know.

Ale would rust the blade? How do you know? Blood doesn't.

You're no fun. I'm not talking to you anymore.

Chapter 1

Excessively Silly

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"Ilantra is a mystery—that is, as to the origin of its people. They claim they fled from the west, from what they call the Breathing Lands. But nothing can survive there, so that is a lie. And they claim that the reason their royalty is so sickly is that they bred with the ilzán, fey of disease. This is plainly just ridiculous."

-Reten of Orlath.

"I don't want to put it on."

"No one can see our faces, Rior!"

Rior of Ilantra sighed and stared at the mask in his hands. It was golden, shaped like an elf's face, and stamped on the corners with fretwork like the rising sun. Nothing else could have proclaimed his allegiance to the Light so clearly.

And he still thought it was silly.

"We're going five steps down the hall," he said flatly.

Lady Therion gave him a stare as flat. "That doesn't matter. It's the spirit of the thing, Rior, and if you don't stop cooperating soon, I shall be forced to conclude that you lack that spirit."

Rior grumbled and tugged the mask over his face. He could, promptly, hardly breathe. *And why should that surprise me?* he thought, pushing the mask down more firmly as Therion frowned at him.

Finally, or at least as well as Rior could see her out of the mask's eyeholes, Therion smiled. "Good." She opened the door and gave what Rior thought were unnecessarily dramatic glances from left to right. "The hall is clear of enemies of the Light," she said softly. "Let's go."

Rior rolled his eyes, stepped out of the door, took another stride, and found Therion vanishing through the next door. He followed her, into a room filled with people clad in similar masks. Some of them wore white robes, too, and medallions that depicted the crescent moon around their necks. They wanted to show their loyalty to Elle, as well. Rior supposed that was all right. His own god was Arran, the god of the River Isiluin, only appropriate for an Azure mage.

It was depressing that his relatives felt the need to dress up and sneak around, instead of staging a rebellion to overthrow the Darkworkers. Rior thought most of the nobles in the palace were on the side of the Light, and the ones who weren't for the most part weren't sufficiently committed to the Dark, or sufficiently good fighters, to put up much of a tussle. The peasants hadn't showed any sign of dismay when they changed masters. Ilantra could be back under the control of the Light in an hour, if enough of the nobles just put aside these silly preoccupations and just acted together.

But, of course, Rior thought, as he made and returned the countersign, *that wouldn't be as satisfying to their sense of drama.*

He looked around, and didn't see any of the soup that Cousin Dorwen had promised would be here. A prompt and grumbling dissatisfaction grew in him. He needed soup, and so did others. He was the most recovered from the latest bout of sickness among the nobles, but he still had filled nostrils that the fumes of the soup would help clear. Others were in a far worse state than he was; he could recognize his Aunt Brianna just from the sound of her wheezing, mask or not.

But Cousin Dorwen was beginning the meeting, and Rior had to sigh and reluctantly stop thinking about soup.

"The Council of Light will now come to order," Dorwen was saying.

Rior glanced around for anyone disorderly, and didn't see anyone. He bit down the urge to exclaim about that, and tried to pay as much attention as he could. Arran knew he felt like paying little enough attention right now.

"The Council of Light is dedicated to one sacred purpose: restoring the covenant that bound our ancestors to the land of Ilantra, and taught us always to fight the Dark and the Breathing Lands," said Dorwen. Rior had to admit he was a good speaker, his voice full and rich and rolling. He was still called on to make speeches by King Delian, though his words always sneered then and were filled with biting edges. King Delian didn't seem to mind, and Rior suspected that only made Dorwen angrier. "We want to drive the Dark forth from the Kingdom."

There was a murmur of agreement. Rior was pleased to note that most of them seemed as affected by the summer heat as he was, and were half-dozing in their chairs.

"We will never rest until the Dark is driven forth and the Light restored!" Dorwen declared.

Another, sleepy murmur of agreement.

"We shall never rest until the Light rules again, and in the blood of the heirs of King Ocor only goodness rules!"

Rior raised an eyebrow, though most of the others made the same mumbled response. This was new. He had never heard anyone suggest before that Prince Imor, though he had been raised mostly in Arvenna, was less than loyal to the Light. The ten-year-old Prince visibly distressed both his parents, always wanting to hear more tales of the Goddess Elle and the days when the Light had ruled in Ilantra. It was something that Dorwen would be looking for another Heir.

Perhaps this plotting could be interesting, after all.

"You want to be King?" he asked.

Dorwen sent him a glance, visibly scandalized even through the mask. "You can't just say something like that, Rior," he spluttered.

"Well, don't you?"

Dorwen shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. If Elle chooses me to rule, then I will." His hand closed about the crescent moon medallion at his neck. "But I won't rule until She says so, and the Light approves. I can't just take the rule away from the Prince."

"But you were sounding as though you wanted to."

By now, the others were stirring; usually there was little open argument here, just bickering as lazy as the wings of the moths in the evening. Rior could feel the inquisitive stares, but he ignored them easily enough. They could murmur and plot and plan all they liked, but unless someone started doing something soon, nothing ever would get done.

"We have another choice," said Dorwen, matching stares with Rior but keeping his voice calm, though with visible effort. Rior smirked, knowing the mask would cover it. "There was the King's other Heir."

The Council of Light blinked at him. Even Rior had to think for a moment before remembering what Dorwen must mean.

"Princess Lorie!" he asked. "But the hunters found no trace of her. Are you sure she's not dead?"

At the words, Dorwen appeared to relax. Rior thought it was just that, since he wasn't speaking in an antagonistic tone, Dorwen assumed he must agree. *Stupid assumption.* "She cannot die," he said. "She was Destined to rule, by the Light. Her parents tried to rid themselves of her, because she would have been such a strong Queen. But she will return soon."

"How do you know?"

"Elle has shown it to me," said Dorwen, in a deep voice that shocked a few more of the Council of Light awake. Even Aunt Brianna's wheeze sounded more attentive. "She Destined Lorie to rule. And it is now almost twelve years since the Princess was taken away. A magical age. She will return!"

Rior couldn't dismiss that out of hand, as much as he would like to. Eighteen years ago, Elle had shown such visions only to Her priestesses. But that was before King Pheron of Orlath had shoved Her rather violently from the world, and numerous other powers had returned. Since then, to compete with the new gods and goddesses, and forces like Change and Time, Elle had accepted male priests into Her ranks, and conferred the gift of foresight far more often.

"Where has she been?" he did think to ask. "Perhaps a kindly couple found her in the woods and raised her?"

Dorwen's gaze was positively kind. "Yes, that is an excellent supposition," he said. "Or she was reared by the wild beasts of the wood, and in that case we will have a true Queen on our hands."

Rior nodded. He knew Ilantra's history as well as anyone. Those Kings and Queens who were reared by the wild beasts of the mountain forests were always naïve at first, but soon that would turn into true innocence, and they would rule wisely and well.

He fell into a thoughtful silence as the others started arguing around him, about who would be Regent. This was a plan that had possibilities. That right touch of Destiny, which would please the peasants. A claim to the throne that could not be challenged, since Prince Imor was probably going to be King of Arvenna anyway. And it meant that there need be no armed revolution.

He looked up and sought Dorwen's eyes again. "You have some plan to take care of King Delian, I assume?" he asked.

Dorwen smiled. "I prayed to Elle that She would kill him."

Rior blinked. "Do you think that'll work—"

And then he heard the extremely loud scream, and decided, as the Council of Light began to hurry out of the room, that it probably would.

Chapter 2

Garden in the Woods

They might call her Garden, if there was a garden in the woods. But she lives far from any gardens, and what need has she for a name? She knows her scent, and she knows the scents of the other wolves. She can tell with one sniff where any of the pack is standing, if the wind is not against her. That is all the name she needs.

But she has a flicker of light in her mind, like the sunlight she sometimes sees sparkling on the water. She likes to go apart from the others sometimes and watch that sunlight on the water, lying with her head on her paws. At other times she ventures to the village of humans that stands near their forest, and watches them in their gardens. She isn't sure why she does this. But something drives her to do it, and she isn't one to argue with her instincts. She does it.

Of course, sometimes the farmers see her and drive her away with curses and cries. She always bounds away. She remembers that one of them flung a stone once and struck her just behind the tail. It hurt. She isn't much for memory, but she remembers pain. She avoids staying when the farmers shout for the same reason that she doesn't bite the alpha when he's asleep.

She sits now on the edge of the pack and watches them boil around each other, snapping and snarling. They don't want to leave the forest, but they're being driven to it. They can't hear the call; they just know that they have to leave the woods and form an escort around the other pack member—they might call her Human-Scent—until they reach a certain place.

She can hear the call.

She sits on the edge of the boil, and scratches at her ear with one hind foot. The sunlight falls past her, on the forest floor, and she notes a flower. She buries her head in the petals, sniffing at it, and then snaps it away and tosses her head playfully. She sometimes takes pleasure in scents for their own sake, and she doesn't really understand that, either, though she doesn't contest it.

They might call her Garden for that, too. But they know no tongue but their own of sniff and scent and yelp and ear-movement, and she doesn't know any other language, either. It's a thing of instinct, to sniff at flowers, sometimes, or to walk to the edge of the forest and watch the villagers at their work.

It's a thing of instinct, to dislike Human-Scent.

She turns her head as the other one comes into the center of the pack. At once, the wolves separate, and bow before her, even the alphas. Human-Scent can always do that, control them without even baring her teeth. The one they might call Garden thinks it has something to do with the call that she can hear ringing in her mind, can hear even if they can't.

Human-Scent has never been able to control her, even though she's fairly low in the pack ranks.

Human-Scent looks at her now. Garden—so they might call her—shakes her head and stands, coming forward. She nips Human-Scent's chin as she's required to do, but there's no heart in it.

Perhaps Human-Scent knows that. She growls indignantly and shoves Garden with one clumsy forepaw. Garden rolls over and lies with her paws in the air. That's a motion of instinct, too, the submission she might make to the alphas, and not to be denied. But there's still part of her that thinks this whole thing rather silly, the part that wakes up when she sees sunlight dancing on the stream or shoves her head into a flower.

Human-Scent glares at her, and turns away. Garden stands, shaking her coat. She wonders if Human-Scent remembers, as she does, the day that Human-Scent came to the pack.

It is a strange memory, having nothing to do with instinct or pain or even mating, and yet Garden retains it.

She had come back from hunting when she smelled dangerous scents. Of course, she hid at once, and peered cautiously through the bushes at the creatures passing near her. They glided strangely. They were like humans, but not like them. One had a thing that looked like a snake around its wrist, and Garden fastened her eyes particularly on that,

snarling. It wasn't pleasant to be around, even though the evil creature wasn't making it strike at the moment.

She waited until they were past, then followed, slinking from shadow to shadow.

They had come into the center of the pack, which just stood there, trembling in dread, even the alphas. One of the strange creatures laid the bundle it carried down, and then it and its companion walked away without a backward glance.

Perhaps they thought the wolves would eat the bundle. But the pack, compelled by some strange instinct, licked and nuzzled and sniffed the human-smelling thing instead, and the alpha female let it suck from her teats. Of course, she had pups, but they mattered nothing, compared to the newest member of the pack.

Garden waited for her turn to welcome the new one; the pack was large in those days, and her status not much different from what it is now. She came forward at last, and nudged and licked the little one.

The baby turned its head. Dark eyes fastened on hers.

And the light woke somewhere in Garden's mind, and it has, somehow, never gone away since. She has sought the stream and the flowers and the humans since that day, even sometimes listened to their speech with lifted ears, as if she could understand it. And she has lived while other members of the pack have died, still young and sleek and lithe, as if time had barely touched her at all.

And she has never liked Human-Scent.

Garden looks up now to see Human-Scent staring to the south. The pack gathers about her at once, tails wagging.

Human-Scent begins to trot down the slope. The pack follows her. They are her escort, because of this strange call. Garden stands looking after them, and realizes something, abruptly.

She doesn't have to follow if she doesn't want to.

The notion of having a choice takes a long time to occur to her. By the time it does, the pack is almost out of sight. Garden sits down and scratches her ear, thinking about it. She does things. There are things to do. Even going to look at the stream and the humans are things to be done. There is no choice.

Save that, now, there is.

Garden stares after the pack, and then blinks as her sight wavers. At once, she sets her back legs. Enemies of her pack that hunt the forests, *terikoni* in particular, often use this trick.

But instead, she sees something else. A great many humans, a crowd of them. And Human-Scent and the pack coming into the midst of them. The humans howl, and she cannot tell if their cries are filled with delight or dismay.

But she thinks it may be dangerous for her people.

The vision clears, and she stands and stares to the south for a long while. The tail of the last straggler is just vanishing into the brush when Garden charges forward, her pace not the easy wolf-trot the rest of the pack is using, but the speed of a deer-charge. She reaches her target and settles in among the pack, trotting.

Human-Scent looks back and snarls at her.

Garden bares her own teeth in response, but Human-Scent has looked forward again and doesn't see.

Garden doesn't really know what the future is. When the time has come for pups to be born, then she will help the pack look for a den. She will help teach the pups to hunt. But those are not looking to the future, not really planning for it. Those are instincts.

This is different, and she does not like it. But she doesn't like Human-Scent, either, and has tolerated her. She can probably tolerate this.

Chapter 3

The Arrival of Princess Lorie

"It's actually more unusual in Ilantran royalty not to be descended from a non-human, or a King or Queen who was once lost in the forest and raised by wild beasts."

-The anonymous author of *A History of Ilantran Royalty*.

Rior sighed and stepped gingerly back. Yes, King Delian was most definitely dead. No one who was alive could spread out in several pieces on the floor like that.

"Your prayers did this?" he murmured to Dorwen, who stood beside him and looked over the balcony with every sign of satisfaction.

His cousin looked at him, and smiled. "Yes. They did. I would be careful about crossing me, Rior."

Rior's eyes narrowed at the open threat, but before he could say anything about it, someone cried out, "There are wolves coming into the courtyard!"

Dorwen jerked his head up at the call, and Rior thought he saw a smile before the man smoothed his face into a mask of grief. "That will be King Delian's daughter, coming home," he said in his sonorous voice, bowing his head. "Alas, that her father could not be alive to greet her!"

Rior drew in a slight gasp. *Damn, the Light moves quickly when it wants to.*

But a feeling of relief had lodged in his heart when he first heard King Delian's dying scream, and now it opened its wings and flapped them, digging in its claws even more securely. He had thought bloody revolution the best way for the Light to get what it wanted, but at the same time, he was glad it wouldn't come to that. He wasn't much of a fighter, and he disliked killing except for food. This way was better.

A legitimate heir is coming home to the throne of Ilantra. And her parents tried to abandon her, but it didn't take. Rior smiled as he followed his cousin down from the top of the battlements to the courtyard where the wolves had apparently arrived. *It really is like one of the history-tales.*

Something flickered, off to the side.

Rior turned his head sharply, and then sighed. It had been nothing, just Dorwen's shadow slanting behind him as the sun struck him.

"I'm getting as jumpy as Therion," he muttered.

The woman in question seized his arm just then, truly making him jump. "Come, Rior," she said. "Or you'll be late to greet the Princess, and she would never forget or forgive that, I'm certain."

Rior eyed her back sourly. No, of course it would be the *Princess* who wouldn't forget or forgive that.

Rior came into the courtyard—and stopped.

He knew what a moment like this was supposed to be like, thanks to numerous studies of the history-tales. The Princess or Prince would stand in the middle of whatever beasts had raised her or him—it usually was wolves, but there was at least one case where it was gazelles, and another bears—wearing a gown or tunic of stitched leaves. He or she would have rude manners at first, staring too openly and speaking with a rough accent. But that would pass, and then the realm would have a truly good ruler who would purge the Court of corruption.

That scene wasn't this one.

Princess Lorie! sat hunched on heels and hands in the middle of a bodyguard of wolves. There was nothing wrong with the wolves; they sat as they were supposed to, noses pointing to the sky and throats loosing a trumpet-like chorus of howling, and they were all beautiful blacks or grays or browns, the true mountain wolves. But Princess Lorie! stared blankly ahead, now and then joining in the howl, other times turning and nipping at fleas on her shoulder.

And she was naked.

Rior frowned and glanced at Dorwen. His cousin didn't appear to have noticed anything wrong, but then, he was very good at ignoring things that he didn't want to see, like the inattention of the Council of Light. He advanced and bowed, holding out a hand to the Princess.

"My lady, we have awaited your coming for years. You are loyal to the Light, I know, and will redeem I!antra."

Lorie! stared at his hand for a long moment, during which time Rior had the opportunity to study her eyes. There could be no doubt that she was the Princess of I!antra and Arvenna. A deep silver lightning bolt marked each dark eye, and only those with liadra blood would have that sign; her mother had it, and her brother, Imor. And her face had the smooth lines and hard features of I!antran royalty.

Rior had to admit that the tangled hair and missing teeth were not *exactly* like the portraits that hung in the Great Hall, but—

Lorie! snapped. Dorwen cried out and tore his hand away, missing a chunk.

Rior bit his lip. Obviously, something was dreadfully wrong here, and he should not have this urge to laugh. But he did.

He stepped forward and gripped Dorwen's hand, reaching out to the blood with his Azure magic. It congealed, and Dorwen nodded a short thanks, staring at the Princess all the while.

"Do you think she's not Lorie!?" Rior asked quietly. "Could this be some trick of the Dark?"

"Destiny would have brought the true Princess forward, by now," Dorwen answered. "And Elle showed me that she would return in the middle of an escort of wolves, just like this one." Then his face brightened. "Of course! The Dark has cast an enchantment on her, or there is one that she has made, to test us. We should act for now as if she were an ordinary child, and try to teach her manners and language. When we break the enchantment, then she will stand before us in her true form."

Rior wasn't sure about that, but Dorwen's clipped words and fixed smile suggested he wasn't in the mood to be argued with. "Do you want me to take charge of her?" he asked.

"Because you want to be Regent?" asked Dorwen.

"Of course not. Because I've been with hunting dogs often enough to know how to treat them."

"Do not call the Princess Loriel a hunting dog."

"In this form?"

Dorwen stared reluctantly at the real Princess again, and not the one he had built up in his mind, and then nodded. "Very well. Take her with you."

Rior stepped forward. At once the wolves' howling fell silent, and they moved aside so that he could reach Princess Loriel. Rior reached forward confidently, only to still as a large, sleek bitch, fawn in color, stepped between him and Loriel.

Rior looked into her eyes, and blinked. For a moment, they flashed savage and almost human intelligence.

What have we here?

Chapter 4

Changing Powers

Oh, so you're back again, are you?

How do you know that I'll talk to you? How do you know that I won't just be a good sentient sword, in the way that so many humans seem to want, and only speak when someone tells me not to?

Wait, where are you going?

I suppose *that's* how you know.

All right, come back, and tell me what you want to know. I can't promise that I'll have seen everything, of course.

Oh, the powers in the castle? Is *that* all? I would shrug if I had shoulders, but I don't, as you can see. I remember that I was often worn over one, though. Sometimes people find me too big to hang at their waists, and so they sling me over their shoulders. Did I tell

you about the time I cut down a Queen of Orlath in the hand of a Darkworker? Granted, the Light took me back after that—

Oh, if we must. The humans worshipped Elle, of course. And Arran. And Rennon, and Shara, and Doressen, and Dark, and Light, and too many others to count. Why do you want to know?

Oh, *that* one. Yes. I would chuckle if I could, you know. Yes, that one was unexpected. I don't think that most people even remembered that it had existed. Of course, if you believe the old legends, Dark and Light had controlled the world so thoroughly that all mention of it was eradicated long ago. And that happened even before certain Queens started trying to establish their Kingdoms using magic they knew nothing about. It was certainly a surprise when it showed up once more and started making the world its home, even though it had as much right to be here as all the rest of them.

Oh, don't gape at me. There's one advantage that swords have over humans, you know, even if we can't shrug or cough or laugh or weep. We live a long, long time. I saw the founding of Orlath, and I saw dragons flying in the Great War, and I remember the time when this power that now runs rampant through Ilantra and will soon spread to the other Kingdoms was worshipped.

What do you *mean*, how could I last that long? Look at me. My blade is *ofiron* steel, a gift from the hands of the elves in times so long ago that no human names them now. My hilt is dragonbone, from the skulls of dragons killed in their battles to be monarch. Both of them are too valuable to be lost. When my blade is gone almost completely, someone binds the hilt to a new one, or tempers new steel into the *ofiron*. And when my hilt is in danger of chipping off, someone goes on and fetches more dragonbone. Did you think that I died when that happened?

I see that you did. Well, do not worry about it. I do not hold you to blame. There are many people who think stranger things, especially about the elves.

How old am I? I do not know. I can tell you many things that I have seen, and sometimes I can tell you how long ago they were, if I've heard people make a reckoning of the years. I hung once on the wall of a historian's chamber, and that was an education. But I can't say that I was first forged just so a certain number of years and expect the number to be accurate.

I know it's more than two thousand, though.

Yes, you could question me endlessly about all the things you've always wanted to know. Or you could listen to me now about the power that you asked about in the first place. Which shall it be?

Because I don't want to talk about them both at once, of course.

Very well. Go away, then.

I mean it. If you're not going to take me seriously, go away.

Chapter 5

Stubborn Wolves

"It is said that the beasts of the Ilantran forests instinctively recognize and love the royalty of that country. They will bow before them, run before them on the hunt, and sometimes even fling themselves before the arrow. But if someone is pretending to be royalty who isn't, they can be very stubborn."

-Harnot of Rivendon.

Rior stared at the bitch. She stared back at him, and that, too, was unusual. She wasn't baring her teeth, or growling. She didn't have her ears laid flat. She wasn't aggressive.

She was just standing between him and Lorie! , and it was obvious that she was going to remain there.

Rior shook his head and stepped away. At once the bitch lowered her head and relaxed, but her pale green eyes remained fixed on his face, watching him. Rior frowned and turned away from the direct gaze, meaning to tell Dorwen that he'd have to have someone help him move the wolf.

But the courtyard was deserted, save for him, the wolves, and the Princess. Rior blinked. He could hear calls of celebration from inside the castle. Surely they would have stayed and escorted the Princess inside?

Then understanding rushed up from within him, and he spat and rolled his eyes. They didn't care about that. Their Princess had returned to them, but she wasn't as they had thought she would be, so they were determined to ignore her for now. They would celebrate the fact of her return, and probably the lightning bolts in her eyes, and her legendary dedication to the Light. Anything but the real naked child who crouched there and watched him with a wolf's mistrustful gaze.

Rior turned back to her. Princess Lorie! looked aside from him, the way any normal wolf who didn't want to spring at his throat would. The guard of wolves around her all slanted their eyes to the ground likewise.

The fawn bitch stared straight at him.

Rior shook his head. He didn't know what was going on here, but it was obvious he was going to have to handle it by himself. He again stepped forward, and again the she-wolf interposed herself, growling.

Rior held up his hand. The wolf's gaze fixed on it, and this time she did bare her teeth. They had a decidedly dangerous glitter in the light.

Rior moved with his other hand, snatching Princess Lorie and dragging her out from behind the wolf. She yelped. The guard escort of wolves stirred a little, then settled back in place.

The fawn wolf leaped at him.

Rior dodged to the side, calling on his Azure magic as he did so. The blood in the wolf's veins thickened, and she crashed to the ground, mouth opening and closing as she yelped in pain.

Rior thought about killing her—if Dorwen was right, then she could be part of the Dark's attempt to kill the Princess—but decided against it, in the end. She looked harmless, lying there on the ground. Besides, the other wolves were already rising, making for the gates and shaking their coats as though some magic had let them go. He thought that he saw some of them glancing back with puzzlement in their eyes, even, as though they didn't know what they were doing here. Then he scolded himself for giving human emotions to animals, which he always did.

He looked back down at the fawn wolf and relaxed his magic. She stood up, keeping her distance from him. He waited for her to bolt for the gate. She didn't.

Lorie whimpered and stretched out an arm. The fawn wolf came to her, and let herself be scratched. All the time, those eyes remained on Rior's face, and though they showed respect, there was no fear.

Rior stared back at her, perplexed. He had long loved dogs, and especially the half-wolf dogs that the royal family favored, and hunted with them. He had thought he knew every nuance of their behavior, including the ones he was most likely to name in human terms even though they weren't human. This was something he had never seen before. He *knew* that was wary respect glinting in the bitch's eyes, and not just his imagination. He had seen the same thing looking at him out of human eyes when his cousins realized that he was more ferocious than they had thought.

Something strange was happening here, something strange and magical, and Rior thought it wasn't his place to intervene with Destiny. He gestured towards the kennels with his head, and tugged Princess Lorie in that direction. She came docilely now.

The bitch followed.

Rior had never seen a wild creature walk willingly further into a human dwelling, either. But there she was. She even looked up at him with her head tilted on one side, as though to ask just what it was that he found so shocking.

Rior shrugged after a moment, and kept on walking. The wolf would follow, or she wouldn't. The real struggle was with Princess Lorie, anyway, who dragged her feet and snarled, continually looking over her shoulder towards the entrance to the courtyard. Rior sighed. *I wonder how long it will take for this enchantment to fall from her, for her to learn that we can be trusted?*

Probably a long time. The one problem with royal heirs reared in the mountain forests was their instinctive code of morals, which was so strict that sometimes they engaged in tests of everyone around them until they were satisfied that they knew who was evil and who was not. Dorwen's theory made a great deal more sense than Rior would have liked to think it did.

He entered the kennels, and was greeted by the prompt barking and howling of many hounds. They flung themselves against the walls of their enclosures—each had a separate pen fenced in and provided with its own food, water, and small shelter—and wagged their tails. A few with more wolf blood sat back against the wall and studied him with calm golden eyes. They would greet him later, when he had more private time to spend with them.

Rior smiled, and let himself relax into the barking. This was something that he knew, something that could stand easily enough. The dogs didn't plan strange stratagems for gaining control of the Ilantran throne, plans that he couldn't understand even when he thought about them. The dogs didn't even care who ruled Ilantra. They just cared about eating and drinking, sleeping and mating, and running free in the forest every now and again.

Rior wished his life were as simple. Once he had thought it might be, but the invasion of the Dark and the immediate beginning of conspiracies among the nobles who remained loyal to the Light had halted that ambition.

Then the dogs noticed the wolf bitch who paced behind him.

Rior winced as the yelping picked up speed and pace. He sometimes took the dogs in search of rogue wolves who had begun to go after children and trappers, and they happened to, unfortunately, be passing the pen of a particularly large mastiff who liked to kill wolves. Rundriff bared his teeth at the wolf and stalked stiff-legged forward, or at least as far as he could get with the bars in the way.

The wolf turned and looked at him.

Rundriff whimpered and ran back into the corner of his pen, where he sat, cowering.

Rior stared. The mastiff stood four feet at the shoulder, twice as big as the wolf, and he had never shown any reluctance to confront any of them before, even the alpha male of a pack. He once again glanced into the bitch's eyes, hoping for an answer, and once again found them fixed on him.

He might have thought about it longer, but Princess Loriei twisted around just then and bit his hand, though not as hard as she'd bitten Dorwen.

Rior cursed and reacted without thinking, cuffing her just the way he would cuff a puppy that bit. Then he froze.

The Princess didn't cry, or even make the little whimpers that Rior was accustomed to when his younger cousins didn't get their way. She faded into small puppy snarls, instead, and flinched when he moved his hand again.

Rior took a deep breath and shook his head. *Not the best thing to do, if she's here judging who belongs to the Dark and who doesn't*, he thought in a daze, and then went back to dragging her in the direction of an empty pen. *And I think I must have just confirmed myself as belonging to the Dark.*

It was a terrible thing. When she was Queen, Loriei would have the ability to exile him, or execute him, or do anything else she wanted. She would remember the insult, Rior was sure, and do something like that. He had, in essence, just ruined his life.

And yet, somehow, he didn't care. The same impulse he had fought before, to laugh when Dorwen was bitten, was back on him. He shook his head and stopped the flow of blood with a thought, then opened the door of the pen in front of him. Princess Loriei squirmed out of his grasp and ran in at once, falling on the water in seconds. Rior watched her lap with pity. *I wonder how long her journey was, to make her that thirsty.*

Then he sighed. *I'm thinking of her as if she's a dog again. And she's not; she's the Princess of Ilantra. I have to be more careful. Perhaps she just wants the water because she's an Azure mage.*

It occurred to him, then, that he didn't know what her magic was. If she was Azure, like him, then he might need to train her magically as well as caring for her and trying to teach her language.

He went forward and laid his hand on her shoulder, closing his eyes. His magic dived within her blood, reading the heritage that ran within her. He could have done the same thing using the water in her body, but he found the blood more orderly, because it ran in such neat patterns of veins and arteries. Many Azure mages did the same thing. Rior only usually called on the water in someone else's body if he wanted to dehydrate him.

He found her magic, and fire licked at him. *Scarlet, then. She'll be Dorwen's responsibility, I think.* He pulled gently away from the pulsing heart of flame, and began the journey back to the surface of her body.

And rammed against a shifting cloud of darkness.

Rior gasped, his eyes jerking open. He lost the connection with Lorie, and fell back against the wall of the pen. She pulled away from him and trotted over to the bowl of food, eating while eyeing him over her shoulder. When he moved towards her again, she snarled and crouched lower over the meat, worrying at it.

Rior swallowed. He knew that darkness. He knew most forms of disease well; part of the price of being part *ilzán*, disease-fey, was to be sick much of the time, though there were healing powers to compensate.

And the darkness in Lorie's blood was a disease for which he had never seen a cure performed. It would probably kill her before she was twenty.

Rior scratched his ear. *What am I going to do now?*

Go and tell Cousin Dorwen, I suppose. I'll also have to confess how I cuffed her, but after seeing—that—I think I'm grateful. I couldn't stand to train her up and then watch her die.

He stepped out of the pen and closed the door behind him. It was only then that he realized the wolf bitch was still standing in the middle of the kennel aisle, staring at him.

He opened the pen door. She didn't go in. He shut the door and latched it, then kicked ineffectually at her. "Get out of here. Go on."

She pulled her lips back and exposed her teeth. It was one of the neatest, most threatening moves Rior had ever seen an animal make, even though she accompanied it with no growl whatsoever. Once again, he was sure that he saw the glint and shine of human intelligence in her eyes.

He shrugged. "If you don't want to stay with the Princess, that's your right." He walked up the aisle again, hearing the click of the nails as the wolf followed at his heels, and trying to plan the right words to say to Dorwen.

The Princess is sick...no, will be sick...no, this is some trick of Destiny's...

Why did this have to happen to me?

Garden in the Court

She doesn't know exactly what is going on, and that frightens her. She can feel the urge to bolt back through the opening out of the human place. She could go to the hills and the forests; they are calling for her, and they would welcome her. She can smell their flowers on the breeze.

But she can smell the flowers that grow somewhere behind the stone, too, and she can smell meat even nearer. So she remains, pacing just behind the male human who had put Human-Scent in a cage.

For some reason, that caging pleased her. She has never liked Human-Scent, and she doesn't like it that while the rest of the pack has departed, some instinct has compelled her to stay.

The male human walks across the flat expanse of open stone that she crossed before and towards a wall of stone, pierced by openings through which the rich scent of meat comes. Garden drools, and thinks longingly of meat run down by the pack in the woods. She hopes there will be some on the floor, and if not, then she will take some from the humans. Just matching eyes with them works, as it does in the pack.

Something moves off to the side, and Garden spins around, her fur bristling. Something was there, she is sure of it. Something was watching her, and whatever it was smelled wrong, the way a *terikon* does. She sniffs, but catches no scent save stone. But there was something there. It does not occur to her to doubt. After all, she knows what her nose told her.

"What is it?"

This is one of those times when the light in Garden's mind stirs and she can catch glimpses of what the humans mean. In fact, the light in her mind has been awake and glowing ever since she entered the human place. The male human moves up beside her, staring around the open place.

He says something else, but Garden can't catch the sense of it this time. She can smell his nervousness, though. It's the scent on every human in here, except Human-Scent herself. She's just drinking and eating like any sensible wolf, but these humans are reacting as if they think hunters will come over the hill any moment.

The human shakes his head and says something else after a moment, and continues walking towards the scents of meat. Garden follows, looking over her shoulder and snarling suspiciously at the air. The empty place lies there, as if it has a perfect right to lie there. There was something there, but it has gone now.

They reach the wall. Garden watches the human to see what he will do, and he leans on a place in the wall that smells slightly different from the others. Garden sniffs closely as

they pass through the opening this makes, and she realizes that fresh air blows out around the edges. She can find the way out if she needs to, then.

She looks around the room, and bristles. There are many openings along the wall, but they are too high for an easy leap. And many, many humans move through the room, chattering like squirrels and sometimes whirling each other around like squirrels seeking to mate. She can smell the meat, though, and after a moment she forgets about the humans and starts drooling.

The male human seems to notice. He notices more things than most of the humans in the village near her forest; Garden has sometimes watched them for hours before the farmers even saw a glimpse of her. He reaches out to one of the great flat mounds of wood filling the room as well as the humans, and pulls off a piece of meat. Garden leaps and catches it when he throws it to her.

Then she yelps as the heat stings her mouth. Backing away from the meat, she wonders what the human is trying to do. Why feed her food that burns her mouth? To teach her not to seek meat here? But if this was the hunting territory of his pack, he should just warn her away; there is no need to offer her burning food.

He leans down, and she snarls at him.

Carefully, the human retrieves the meat, watching her all the while. Garden bares her teeth at him, but he doesn't seem fazed. He eats a bite himself, then blinks and stands up again. He pulls another piece of meat from the wooden mound and throws it to her. Garden edges forward, snarling, and snaps her jaws quickly. At least this piece isn't as hot, and after a moment, she falls to eating.

She soaks in the full, delicious taste, even though her nose tells her that the human is walking over to the other side of the room. Well, she can find him later. She has the scent of him deep in her nostrils by now. The meat is everything. The meat is very fine.

A low snarl come from the side. Garden raises her eyes. A dog is creeping towards her, baring his teeth as if he thought that would intimidate her.

Garden braces her forelegs on either side of the meat and snarls her challenge. The dog flattens his ears and stiffens his tail behind him. Garden watches closely. It will be a rush, to the side and then back towards her shoulder, trying to knock her aside and get in a snap as well.

And then the light in her mind glows, and she remembers, even though it has nothing to do with food, the way the other dog backed away when she looked at him with the light shining in her eyes.

She can try it now, and so she does. She meets the dog eye-to-eye, and lets the light in her mind shine through her gaze.

He recoils, yelping. But he doesn't try to run away like the other one did. Instead, he lies on the ground and creeps forward with his belly to the floor, his tail wagging. His whining is not the whining that a pack member who is low in the ranks would use to an alpha he had offended, but more like a low-ranking pack member trying to ingratiate himself. He comes to a stop very near and play-bows for her, his tongue hanging out of his mouth.

Garden has seen wolves do this before, but it was always around Human-Scent. She does not know why the dog is doing it to her.

And already there are signs that it is fading. The dog's whining stops, and he tilts his head, as if trying to remember where he buried a bone.

Garden lunges at him, and he flees, yelping. She turns back to her meat, only to find that a bitch has crept up and snatched it while she was dealing with the other dog.

Garden can still see the bitch, and she springs at her with a howl. No pack member would do anything so foul. They would intimidate her into giving up the meat, or beg for a piece. They would not steal it when her back was turned, and refuse to fight her.

The dog is not expecting the attack, and goes down with the meat in her jaws, bleeding from Garden's bite. Garden dances back, her legs stiff, and then springs forward again when it becomes clear that the dog will not give up her meat.

Something hits her, a shocking blow, and she reels back. When she can see again, she sees a human standing between her and the dog, also male, but not the one she recognizes. He has a long, flexible snake in his hand that probably gave her the blow.

The human angrily shouts something, and Garden smells the male human she recognizes coming on the run. She licks her smarting snout and eyes the human male who struck her narrowly. He is alpha here, then.

But her meat-giver arrives, and starts snarling at the other human as if that wasn't true. Garden sits down, yawns, and scratches her ear with her left hind foot. Humans certainly are strange.

Chapter 7

More of What Rior Doesn't Need

"I know no King who takes bad news well, and would-be Kings take it even less well."

-Attributed to Klessa of the Nine Wonders.

"Why did you strike her?"

As soon as Rior heard the question come out of his mouth, he knew that he should have chosen a different way to phrase it.

Dorwen stared at him. Then a light came into his eyes that was very nearly as strange as the light in the eyes of the wolf. "Are you challenging me, Rior?" he asked softly. "Is this what it comes to?"

Rior narrowed his eyes. *Where did that come from?* "No," he said. "I was unaware that I could challenge you simply by asking a question."

And that was also the wrong thing to say, Rior thought, aghast, as he watched Dorwen's face darken. What was *wrong* with him? Had the Dark laid a curse on his tongue?

Dorwen smiled, and snapped the whip against his palm. "Careful, Rior," he said. "Be very careful. Be very still. Did you think that I could do nothing, that you could insult me for the sake of a wolf who bit my dog and I would do nothing?" He flickered his glance over to the wolf. "Where did she come from, anyway?"

"She was one of the wolves who came with the Princess Lorie." "

Dorwen's expression changed at once. He bowed to the wolf. "And she chose to stay of her own accord?"

"Yes."

Dorwen bowed lower still. "Forgive me, my lady," he said. "I did not know who you were. Some messenger of the Princess's, no doubt. I am sorry for striking you. I thought that you were only biting my dog."

Rior looked down at the fawn bitch. She seemed unwilling to strike back at Dorwen. Of course, she bore the curving scars of a wolf fairly low in the pack. She licked her muzzle free of the blood dripping down it and met Dorwen's eyes in that strange way that didn't fit with what she looked like.

It was enough for Dorwen, though, who once more fell to apologizing and bowing. The wolf accepted it, graciously enough, and Dorwen dragged the dog away. *After all*, Rior thought, unable to stop his amusement, *if a wolf of the Light tried to hurt it, surely it must be of the Dark.*

It never ceased to amaze him, the way the nobles at the Court thought sometimes.

He found another piece of cold ham and tossed it to the wolf. She snapped it out of the air, and then avoided his eyes for the first time. Rior shrugged. No doubt the natural

instincts were coming back into place. He expected her to run from the hall at any moment, back to the hills or to Princess Loriei.

Princess Loriei.

Rior sighed. He hadn't told Dorwen about the disease in the Princess's blood; he hadn't had a chance before the excitement over the wolf and the dog. He would have to do it, sooner or later, and interrupt the wild dancing, drinking, and cheering of the celebration.

Someone stirred at his elbow. Rior glanced in that direction, then smiled. It wasn't Dorwen come back again, not yet. It was a lady-in-waiting for his cousin Erieth; he thought her name was Stream, one of the quaint and old country names. He hadn't seen her much, but her silence was as wise as that of a wolf, and he felt comfortable around her. She wore the dark dress and cloak that she always did.

"Enjoying the celebration?" he asked.

Stream turned her head to look at him remotely. She had golden eyes, the mark of country fey blood, distinct from the flecked *ilzán* eyes that marked the royalty. "Not really," she said. "I don't understand what we're celebrating."

"The return of Princess Loriei and the Light," said Rior, unwilling to admit that he wasn't sure himself. "Surely that's reason enough to dance and drink?" He seized a glass of wine from the tray of a passing servant and drank some. Not sweet enough, really, and he grimaced as it burned down his throat. But it would do.

"But she won't rule," said Stream, settling her cloak's hood over her head. "Queen Aloriadell and Prince Imor will return from Arvenna when they hear of the news. Do you think she will rule?" She turned and abruptly stared into Rior's face.

Rior shrugged, delicately. *Say the wrong thing again, and I don't think my luck will hold.* "I suppose it depends on establishing a Regent before she gets back, that's all."

"You may find that harder than you think."

"I'm not thinking it," said Rior. He had long suspected that Stream spied for someone, so unobtrusive was she, and thought it might be the Dark now. "What about you?"

Stream leaned forward, staring at him from just a few inches away. Rior stepped back. Her eyes had changed, it seemed, darkening as if the sun were setting. "I don't think anything about Regents," she said. "I serve only monarchs."

Rior's heart gave a great jolt. *Erieth? She always seemed an unlikely candidate to me.* He spoke as carefully as he could, given that he didn't really know what was going on. "And do you serve a Queen now?"

"No. I look forward to having one to serve, though."

Stream turned and walked away. Rior opened his mouth to call after her, then shut it. Yes, it could mean that Erieth was plotting to take the throne—was there anyone save him in the room who was not?—or it could mean that Stream was a spy for Queen Aloriadell. It could even mean that she did favor Lorie, or some more distant female relative; Rior wouldn't be surprised if Therion was trying for Queenship or at least the Regency.

He glanced curiously around the room, wondering if any of the others had thought of the Queen and Prince coming back. Prince Imor might be willing to have just one Kingdom to rule, but he was a child. It was almost certain the Queen, devoted to the Dark, wouldn't give up Ilantra to the rule of a Light-Destined child. Of course, if the court managed to establish a Regent before then...

Complicated, Rior decided, and took another drink of his wine. *And anyone can say the wrong thing, even without meaning to, and end up in exile a decade later for it. I hate this.* He put down the wineglass and decided to seek his chamber. *Dorwen can wait until the morning to learn about Princess Lorie.*

If I tell him.

Rior toyed with that idea for a moment, staring at the wall. The knowledge that the Princess wouldn't last very long could give him an advantage.

Then he shook his head. *And my life would grow still more insanely complicated. No. I'll give that knowledge to Dorwen, and then it will be his problem to solve, his decision to make.*

It was only when he was halfway across the Court that he realized the wolf was following him, and so were eyes and whispering voices.

Rior rolled his eyes. *Choose a Regent quickly, Dorwen, he thought. Or the Court will belong to plotters and madmen long before the Queen gets here.*

Chapter 8

Blood and Ale

You're back again, are you?

What's that in your hand? It's a cup, isn't it? And full of foaming ale? You'll sit here and drink it in front of me? The least you could do is pour a little of it down my blade.

I can see you're smiling, you know. Did you think I couldn't?

Oh, *I* understand. You'll sit here and sip the ale and offer me none until I consent to tell you what you want to hear. You can forget about that. You'll never hear anything from me that's not given freely. Besides, why would you want to hear more? You ask irrelevant questions that don't lead to anything.

I can see the foam dripping along the sides. This is cruelty.

I remember riding with warriors who understood what *true* partnership with a sentient sword was like. They didn't try to make me be quiet, unless we were hiding in ambush, and then I knew enough to keep quiet myself. They carried me openly, and introduced me to their friends, and now and then they would pour ale down my blade. I didn't even have to ask. They would see that I was shining patiently beside them, and think of how much blood I had spilled in battle that day, and they would spare me the foam all by themselves.

No, I know I can't taste it. You understand nothing.

Why do I want it, then? Because it's memories. It reminds me of so many things that I like to lie and think about them for as long as the ale drips down my blade. Old comrades long forgotten, and battles that no one knows the names of now, and cities lost for a hundred generations.

Ah, but you weren't interested in those, were you? You were interested in knowing more about the power that has returned to Ilantra in such strength.

I still control the tale. I can still tell you what I want you to hear. And you have the ale.

No, I'm not making fun of you. I'm bargaining.

One drop of ale on my blade for every part of the story I tell you. Think about it. You have a full cup of it. You'll never miss it, since you have legs to go and get more, and hands to hold the cup. I haven't had ale since the last time King Delian thought I could be trusted and got drunk talking to me. And that was years ago. I know *that*, since you keep going on about it all the time.

One drop.

Yes, I will tell the full thing.

No, I won't lie.

Now you're resisting over who goes first? What do you think this is? That I'm begging for the ale, starving for it, and you'll get your story first because I want the ale so badly? No. One drop, one story.

No. You're not going to get the story first. I'm sorry. I've kept silent for years; I can do it again if I have to.

Ah, there. I knew you'd see sense. Allow me to luxuriate in this for a moment. There was a city, Cortalis, you know, and the people put gems above their doors and sang in the streets all night long. The streets and houses were made of living moonstone, and I knew that—

What? Oh, Cortalis is gone. Earthquake, war, invasion of elves, you know how those things go.

That was your story. And you interrupted it. Give me another drop, and maybe we'll finally manage to reach terms.

Where are you going? Just one drop. You won't miss it.

Don't come back again unless you're going to be reasonable! Humans are so iron-damned impatient.

Chapter 9

Shadows in the Corridors

"The castle of Ilantra is haunted, if you ask the servants. Of course, ask the nobles and they'll tell you that that's the servants trying to get out of doing work."

-Wesopol, Historian of Doralissa.

Rior stretched as he opened the door to his chamber. He hadn't fully realized just how tired he was, at least until he walked out of the celebration and found himself stumbling. It wasn't sunset yet, but he was going to sleep. He hoped that no one would come pounding on the door.

He started to shut it, and stopped. The wolf was at his heels, staring up at him, but he had expected that. He hadn't expected the shadow that darted down the corridor, sneaking around the corner.

Is someone spying on me already?

The thought irritated him, and he decided to confront whoever it was. It was the thing they least expected, Rior found. The key to leading a simple life was to lead a truly simple one, to refuse to have anything to do with the deception that was so vital to Court intrigue, and most of the other obstacles in the way seemed simply to dissolve.

He strode to the corner and looked around it. Of course, he saw the shadow vanishing around another corner, past a window that let in the full sunlight. Rior sighed. He could just go back to his bed and sleep. He should; irritated thoughts about the Council of Light had kept him up so long that by the time he fell asleep, Therion was dragging him out of bed to go to the next Council meeting.

But he wanted whoever was playing these silly games to stop. Arran knew the Court would become the center of enough silly games, with the nobles maneuvering to become Regent and some of them remaining loyal to the Queen and the gods and Dark and Light competing as they always did and had done for eighteen years. Rior was determined that none of the silly games would involve him.

He walked around the corner, tensed for an attack but not really expecting one to happen. Indeed, nothing happened until he stepped out of the sunlight and into the shade of the hall again. His steps stirred up dust, and he frowned. *How long since a servant was here?*

The dust drifted into his nostrils. Rior tried, too late, to cover them. Of course, that triggered the reaction to dust that he shared with most of those who had *ilzán* blood, and he began violently sneezing.

He sneezed three times, staggering on the last one; it felt hard enough to break his ribs. As he finished the third one, something seemed to smash him over the skull.

"Gaaah!" Rior reeled back, his shoulders striking the wall. He opened his eyes slowly, trying to focus past the blinding pain and see who had attacked him.

No one was there. He remained puzzled only until the pain dug fiercely into his head again, and he seemed to almost feel the fingers rifling through his memories.

Some damn priestess of Elle trying to find out what side I'm on. Rior mustered the strategy that worked for him in times like this, thinking of every fact that he could about dogs. The best time to hunt with the *abala* breed was in the fall, when they weren't so distracted by the smells of the wildflowers. Rundriff would need to be moved soon; there was a bitch in the pen next to him who would be coming into heat. Water was needed when there was this much heat from the sun. He would have to—

Rior thought he could hear someone swear. He smiled grimly. That was common. The priestess usually gave up now and went away.

This one was stubborn, though, and dug deeper. Rior fought back as hard as he could, now calling up all the facts about dogs that even he found boring after a while. Recite the length of the tail of every breed in the royal kennels, and the priestesses should become convinced he had no secret service to the Dark to hide.

The pain in his head only grew worse.

Rior shook his head, and then immediately wished he hadn't, because of the pain. *Perhaps I should just let her look, and see that I don't intend to seek the throne at all, even as Regent.* He opened the lower reaches of his mind, and dropped the shield of dog thoughts, confident the priestess wouldn't find enough there to interest her for long. There was a reason that he thought of dogs so often, and that was because his mind was, often, full of dogs.

The pain stopped. Rior lifted his eyebrows and stood there patiently as the rifling went on. Perhaps this priestess was actually skilled enough to look for what she wanted without causing him pain. That was rare.

The sense of shuffling stopped. Rior now had the intense sensation of eyes looking through the back of his head. He sighed, and tried to keep his irritation as uncomplicated as possible. He didn't want to do anything to disturb the inspection and make it last longer.

He was in an awkward position, though, and he did move, shuffling more fully into the sunlight.

At once the gaze of the eyes stopped. Rior narrowed his own eyes. Why should sunlight make a difference?

Well, one possible answer was that a creature of the Light hadn't been looking at him at all. The gazer was a creature of the Dark, nothing near as innocent or mildly annoying as a priestess of Elle.

Rior ground his teeth and wished he had thought to bring his sword with him. Of course, none of the Council of Light members went armed. Dorwen was committed to making most of them think that he wanted a peaceful transition from Dark to Light, though if it came down to armed struggle or losing the throne Rior thought that as likely as an elf of the Light stirring out of the Elfwood.

"Rior?"

Rior started and looked around guiltily. Brianna, his aunt, had come out of her own room and was staring at him oddly.

"Is something wrong?"

Rior shrugged. "I thought I just encountered a creature of the Dark, but one I haven't felt before. Something touched my mind with the skill of a priestess of Elle."

Brianna's eyes—at least, what was visible of them behind the veil that she wore to guard against the dust in the corridor—widened. "Do you think they'll know that we're planning to put the Princess Lorie on the throne?"

"I think they already do," said Rior, thinking of Stream, and then regretted it as Brianna blanched. "No, I don't know if they do or not. But I don't know what this one was looking for. It stopped when I stepped into the sunlight."

"Oh." Brianna suddenly looked down. "Is that a new kind of dog you're breeding in the kennels?"

Rior sighed. *They can't even tell the difference between a dog and a wolf out of legend.* "No, this is a wolf who came with the Princess," he said. "I don't know why she's still here. Watching to see what we're made of, I suppose." That was a guess, but a fair enough one, and it didn't seem to panic Brianna like the suggestion that the Dark was aware of her plotting.

Brianna smiled warmly, in fact, and bowed low enough to set her sneezing again. "Welcome, my lady," she said to the fawn wolf, who watched her for a moment and then walked over and sat down in the sunlight. "My name is Brianna. I am a descendant of the same royal line as your mistress, though not closely related. I hope that you find everything to your liking here. Let me know if you need anything."

Rior laughed before he could help himself. "How would she do that, Brianna?"

"Isn't she telepathic?" Brianna glanced worriedly at the wolf. "I thought all the wild wolves of the woods were."

"I've never seen any sign of it," said Rior, but he had thought of a new reason for the wolf to stay, and looked at the bitch with more interest. It was possible that she was Princess Loriel's friend, the companion that powerfully Destined royalty often acquired. King Delian had had a silver bird, and his wife the same. In that case, she would leave her mistress's side and explore the castle for a good reason: she would want to see just how much hostility to her mistress lived among the Dark loyalists of the Court. Rior had heard that the silver wolf who ran at the side of the Queen of Rivendon often did the same thing.

"Well, perhaps she doesn't want to talk to you," said Brianna, a lofty tone creeping into her voice. "You put the Princess Loriel in the kennels, didn't you?"

Does the very air gossip in this Court? Of course, to Gust mages like Brianna, it probably did. Rior rubbed his temples. "Yes, I did. I couldn't think of any other place to put her."

"The royal bedchamber, of course! She will become Queen. She deserves to sleep in a royal bed."

"She was naked and missing teeth, Brianna. She had fleas. Do you think she would have been comfortable in a royal bedchamber?"

His aunt blinked and struggled with that. "But why has she come in such a form?" she asked at last.

"Perhaps she is like the Prince Anander and wants to see what secrets we harbor before she rules," said Rior, snatching a name from the first history-tale he could think of. There were several with similar themes.

Brianna smiled, content once more. "Of course." She looked at the wolf. "I understand if you can't tell me what you're doing here, but my door is always open, if you wish to enter." She patted the door that led into her chamber invitingly.

Rior looked down at the fawn bitch, almost expecting to see her nod and step forward. Telepathy and Destiny would explain the intelligence he had seen in her eyes, and she probably did want to speak to someone of the Light, someone obviously already loyal to the Princess.

He blinked. As far as he could see in the intense sunlight, the bitch was looking at Brianna with that light shining in her eyes, but she appeared anything but grateful. Indeed, she bared her teeth as Rior watched, and snarled deep in her throat.

Brianna backed away. "What have I done to displease her?"

Rior fought back his grin. "Matched eyes with her," he said. "Wolves don't like that. They stare when they're about to attack."

"Ordinary wolves," said Brianna. "A Destined wolf wouldn't do that, surely."

Rior shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps she would, to maintain the guise that she's an ordinary wolf."

"Of course." Brianna stepped back, her eyes on those teeth. "Well, I wish you a good rest, Rior. I have things to think about." Her door shut, and Rior could almost hear her plotting, trying to come up with ways to fit the wolf into her plans.

He rolled his eyes and turned back towards his own chamber, stepping out of the sunlight cautiously. No pain attacked him. He walked all the way back to his chamber with no accompaniment but the wolf's toenails clicking.

He opened the door, stepped inside, and then tried to shut it before the fawn bitch could follow. But she slipped inside with that lithe quickness that had surprised him more than once when hunting a rogue, and paced over to a corner beneath the high table where he kept a few sculptures of Arran, to keep them out of the way of wagging tails. She sat down and bared her teeth at him.

Rior rolled his eyes. Very well. He had slept with dogs in the chamber before. He would ignore her, worship, and go to sleep. Hopefully she would decide she had seen enough of him and leave in a few hours.

He closed his eyes and reached out to the surging River, chanting a prayer to his god.

Chapter 10

Garden in the Room

She bares her teeth and snarls under her breath. There are great forces in the room; she knows that, though she cannot smell them and cannot see them. They are more like a pressure on her skin, or the dancing power in the air before a thunderstorm that makes her fur bristle.

It has something to do with the human male's chanting and clapping, she thinks. At first she thought he was calling on his alpha. But he has not howled, and his alpha has not responded.

Unless his alpha is this strange force.

Garden snarls softly. She would introduce herself properly and make her submission to him, but she cannot see him. It is making her want to run away, and more, making her want to bite. But biting the human male might be a bad idea. She remembers the sudden pain that he caused with a mere sweep of one paw.

She settles down beneath the table, head on her paws, eyes fixed warily on the door and window. She might see the alpha after all, if he has the courtesy to enter and introduce himself.

A shadow moves across the window. Garden lifts her head and stares intently. This was the same thing that she saw in the corridor, whisking around a corner when the human male went after it.

This time, Meat-Giver does not react, and the shadow seems to be bolder. It creeps into the room and flows across the floor towards Meat-Giver. He doesn't notice, with his eyes still closed. And he's caught up in his chanting, his call to the alpha.

Garden steps out from beneath the table, though she isn't sure what she can do. Bite the shadow, perhaps, but it doesn't seem to have anything to bite. She snaps her jaws just above it, and settles back to see what it will do. Perhaps, like the shadows of hawks she chased as a puppy, it will simply skim away.

But it remains, and now she can feel something looking at her. Garden bristles. This, too, was in the corridors, the sensation of eyes. Do all human places have these invisible things, watching but never revealing themselves to accept submission like honest alphas, or be killed like honest prey? Garden thinks she knows why so few of her kin linger in human places.

The shadow stays in place, and Garden decides she will be satisfied with that. She starts to turn back towards the table when Meat-Giver howls, after all, and Garden hears a splash.

She leaps, and lands facing Meat-Giver. He is floating off the ground, and Garden looks for wings. She has never seen a human flying before. But he seems to have none; instead, a shimmering light surrounds him, perhaps giving him the ability to fly. Garden has seen similar effects from light on a stream, but flying on that light has never even occurred to her.

She creeps closer, controlled by curiosity and that strange light glowing in her mind that demands so much from her. The human pays no attention. Nor does the light that surrounds him. The eyes still stare from behind her, but Garden thinks she might learn to ignore that, given time. After all, she can intimidate the shadow with a single flash of her teeth. Not much, if that's all it takes.

She touches the outer edge of the light with her nose.

Suddenly it is gone, and Meat-Giver falls to the stone with a yelp. Garden can understand that. It hurt when she hit the ground earlier, with pain eating her alive. She backs away from the human and stands watching.

He stands up slowly, rubbing his head as if bewildered for a moment, and then staring at her. Garden looks away from his direct gaze. He isn't an alpha, but he can cause pain like one and grants food like one, and that makes him almost one. She doesn't meet an alpha's eyes without pausing.

He mutters things she can't understand. Then the light in her mind flickers, and she hears, "Stupid wolf. Can't—" and knows what he is saying.

She bares her teeth at him.

Meat-Giver looks startled. Then he makes a deep sound in his throat. Garden sniffs gingerly. His scent is no longer as annoyed as it was, and she cautiously allows her tail to wag. Perhaps the sound is not a growl after all, as much as it sounded like one.

Meat-Giver kneels down, and holds out a hand. Garden goes towards him, wondering if he has food, and merely sniffs him when it turns out he does not. Meat-Giver nips her nose softly, in the way that an alpha would, and Garden lowers her head submissively, relieved. Whatever offense she caused, he is as swift to forgive it as a wolf would.

Meat-Giver stands up and turns towards the soft thing in the corner of the room. Garden watches him move, then glances back at the shadow on the floor. It has not moved, but the sensation of eyes has not changed, either. There is an enemy near, who is watching them if not attacking.

Like a *terikon*. It might not attack right now, but it will attack later.

Garden turns and flings herself onto the soft thing, too. She will guard Meat-Giver's back while he sleeps. It is the way things are done in a pack. They will be close together if the shadow attacks, and that can only be a good thing.

Chapter 11

Songs The Shadows Sing

"I have been to the green mountains,

To the edge of Fari-Ling.

I have heard the splash of dark fountains,

And the songs the shadows sing..."

-Welyu of Arvenna, widely thought to have been ambassador to the Dark.

Rior grunted as the wolf landed behind him. He had shared the bed with dogs before, though, and he felt like closing his eyes and thinking about what had happened instead of arguing with the bitch. So he did, while she arranged herself comfortably. It seemed to involve a great deal of circling, more than he was used to with a dog.

What had happened?

He knew what had happened in one sense, of course, but in another and much more important, he did not. He knew that Arran had come to him, which did not often happen unless he was with other worshippers of the River God and it was a high holiday. He had felt His presence, flowing through the blood in his veins, binding him to the River Isiluin that sang around the castle's island. Arran had seemed pleased about something, more than He should have been with the simple chant Rior sang. He had lifted Rior up, said something in a watery language that Rior had only been able to understand for a moment, and then...

Then the wolf had interrupted.

Rior shook his head a little. It was pleasantly spinning with the wine he had drunk, and still aching with the remnants of the pain he had felt earlier, and he wasn't entirely sure if his thoughts made sense. But he thought he was thinking that it was strange the bitch could have interrupted so easily. Arran rarely reached out that strongly, but when He did, He always had a reason. He was going to tell Rior something that mattered to His service, something that had to do with Destiny. But the wolf had put her nose into the light, and it had gone.

Rior shrugged one shoulder, and heard the wolf growl behind him. Well, she could do what she would. He would take her back to Loriel when he awoke, and doubtless she would choose to stay with her packmate this time.

If it was truly a matter of Destiny, then nothing could put it off. Other powers competed with Destiny in the world now, ever since King Pheron's temper tantrum, but if something was truly meant to happen, they could rarely challenge it. Rior might have drawn Chance's attention, but Arran was not a god of Chance. He was calm and ordered, and His laws were the laws of the flowing water as well as the stream in flood. So long as someone obeyed His laws, then He would protect him. And when catastrophe happened to those who loved Arran, it was always understandable, as the stream breaking past its banks in flood was understandable.

Rior reached out drowsily to his God again as he began to fall asleep. He thought he saw a faint pulse of blue light before he drifted away.

He woke in another room, or so he thought at first. Then he realized the ceiling above him was no longer a ceiling, not even of wood, but a canopy of close-interlaced tree branches. He rolled over, and found that he was no longer lying on a bed, either. What held him was a cushion of springy moss that sank beneath him as he stood.

Rior shrugged. *Prophetic dreams*. He had had them before, though rarely; he did not have as much *ilzán* blood as others in the royal family, since his came from four generations back. This probably had something to do with Dorwen giving the Princess Loriel into his charge, though. He looked around expectantly. Usually, an emissary came to him and told him what to do.

But someone must have changed the rules without telling him. For long moments, Rior stood alone in the forest, surrounded by changing sunlight and the gentle songs of birds and the swaying leaves.

He blew out his breath in exasperation at last and started walking north. It was as good a direction as any. Besides, the trees were less thick there, making for less work in walking. The emissary from the power that had summoned him here could find him easily enough, wherever he went; Rior had heard once that these dream-worlds were created and

controlled entirely by the emissaries, and he had never found a case where that was not true.

He walked north for some time, and the smaller trees fell away, until it was almost like walking in a corridor beneath the great ones that remained. Rior took a deep breath, and blinked. The air was full of smells from the great mountain forests that he was familiar with hunting. He could smell damp and leaf-rot, and the musk of animals. This was very real.

His suspicion that some higher power had called him here increased. Rior sighed. *I hope I won't be asked to shoulder some great burden. I am willing to do my part for Destiny and the Light, but the things that a hero has to do almost never end up making the hero happy.*

The trees at last fell away completely, and Rior stepped from absorbing green shadow into full sunlight. He blinked and put a hand over his eyes until the burning sensation faded from them. This was another of the most realistic places he had ever seen in a prophetic dream, complete down to the large, violently violet flowers and the silver butterflies that chased each other over them.

Rior nodded, understanding now. The emissary from the power would want a place to meet with him that represented what it wanted to represent. Of course a power of the Light would choose a place like this, bathed in the light of the sun.

Then he frowned. *Why not just have me waken in this place, instead of having me walk here?*

"Greetings."

Rior turned. Behind him stood a creature his mind at first refused to comprehend. Then he realized that it was a wolf, though so big it towered over him. Its jaw would rest comfortably on his hair if it lowered its own head just a little, and it was as long as the tiger he had once seen restlessly pacing in a Doralissan menagerie.

Rior tried to keep from trembling in fright. The Light usually chose lesser creatures, deer or swans or other beautiful and harmless things, for its emissaries. Besides, the wolf had golden eyes and gray fur, like the last rogue he had faced. That one had been clever, with something of the same intelligence as was in the eyes of the fawn bitch. He had led Rior a long chase, and then attacked with a cleverness that killed three dogs and ripped a long wound open down Rior's side. Rior still had nightmares about it sometimes. He wondered if the power was Dark, after all, and had chosen this form just to unnerve him.

The wolf made a rich sound, something like a growl mingled with the purr of a great cat. It took Rior a moment to realize that it wasn't hostile. He took his hand cautiously off his sword, and then realized that he wore a sword.

"Yes," said the wolf, noting his look. "I didn't want to bring you here completely unarmed, in case you decided that you couldn't trust me."

Rior shook his head. "What power do you come from?"

The wolf laughed. "You would not believe me if I told you. Or, at least, you would reject me out of hand, and I dislike being turned away by a potential servant because of a name."

"Are you Chaos?"

"Would I tell you if I was, when I just said I didn't want to be recognized?" The wolf stretched lazily, play-bowing to him; Rior had to move out of the way to avoid a bump from that enormous muzzle. "Come with me, and let's talk for a little while."

It trotted out of the shadows into the sunlight. Rior watched narrowly, but it didn't melt or flinch on contact with the light, the way that an emissary of the Dark might have. It turned around and sat down soon, in fact, and panted as if enjoying the warmth of the sunlight on its fur.

"You can call me Songs the Shadows Sing," said the wolf.

"Too long a name for ordinary use," said Rior, whose heart was finally ceasing its frantic beat.

The wolf tilted its head at him. "But I can't tell you what I am. Why do you think that I gave you this other name?"

"Because you like it. I just don't."

"You think you have the right to tell me what you like and don't?" The wolf's voice aspired towards a sharp bark.

"Yes." Rior's emotions were sheathed in ice now. This was old, well-worn ground. After the world half-exploded, many powers came courting human servants. Rior had never turned from the Light, but the Dark had courted him before. He had found Arran and loved Him and never turned away, but Elle and other gods and goddesses had sent emissaries to him, too. This wasn't a prophetic dream at all, but another courtship. That explained the forest; this power knew what he was like, and wanted him to feel comfortable. He appreciated the attempt, but he thought this emissary should know the truth immediately. "I do. You came to me, looking for servants. But if you are a god, you should know that I have chosen my Lord Arran. I am His, immovably. And if you are of the Dark, I love the Light."

The wolf panted at him, in that movement Rior couldn't help thinking of as a smile. "Then would you do what the Light asks of you?"

"Yes."

"Even become Regent to Princess Lorie?"

Rior narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"This I have foreseen." Songs the Shadows Sing lay on the grass, stretching his front paws out before him but keeping his eyes fixed on Rior. "The Light will make you Regent, and turn you into its sacrifice, its victim. You know the history-tales. The Regent is evil, and tries to take the throne from the true Princess. But the Princess triumphs over him in the end. That is what the Light will make you. Are you willing to be its pawn?" The wolf tilted its head. "I do not think you are. I have come to offer you a way out."

Chapter 12

Lord of Disasters

You're back again.

I know you are. I can see you looking around the corner. If you want to sneak around, you need to learn not to stub your toe on the stairs and then curse like that. I can hear you all the way up the hall.

No, I don't feel like telling you stories today. You took the ale away.

Yes, I played a trick! Of course I played a trick! I knew that you didn't want to give me any of that ale, not really, so I played a trick before you could play one. It was only acting in accordance with your own rules.

Why do you want to know these stories, anyway?

You're writing a book? Of course you are. And why is that?

Save your country's history? Of course.

Preserve the truth of events in case someone arises who tries to discredit them? Of course, that's a good reason.

Pull together in one place all the stories and rumors and legends of the Princess Lorie's brief reign? That's another good reason to compile a history, or would be, were it true.

Of course I don't really think that you want to compile a history for those reasons! You must think I'm not very intelligent. You want to see your name honored for doing something great, of course. And writing a history is so much easier than going out and

building a road, or discovering a new form of magic, or even killing a dragon. Of course you would want to write a history.

Oh, running away? Why is that? Embarrassed that I saw so easily into that heart you must have convinced yourself was pure? Why would you run, unless you were that embarrassed?

No, I don't believe that you can make me be quiet. Now that I've decided to talk, I believe I shall tell you part of the story after all. But be warned. It might not be the story that you thought you knew. Can you hear that, and not write something down for the sake of pleasing your monarch?

Oh, how you nod, with your eyes all aglow with truth! But truth is a harsh master, very harsh. I speak it because I have no reason to lie, unless you give me one. But you have every reason to lie. Someone might be displeased with you if you don't, or you might not earn the regard and fame you want if you don't. Do you really want to know about the Lord of Disasters?

Not a name you know, I see. Your face just stares at me, and you aren't writing. You would be, if you knew who he was.

Who was he? Oh, a King of Ilantra, very long ago. I don't even remember who I belonged to at the time. The Lord of Disasters wasn't the name he was born with, of course, but the name he was given, because so many disasters happened during his reign. The power that protected Ilantra once was banished from the world then, and the country has never been the same since.

Why should I be able to pinpoint it in the last few hundred years? I've told you that I don't remember who I belonged to then, and already you know that I don't think about time in the same way you do.

Oh, because Ilantra was not founded until seven and a half centuries ago? I wish I could chuckle. A statement like that deserves one.

Why do you reckon from only seven hundred and fifty years ago? Because humans are stupid, and have no memories, and *won't listen to talking swords or pour ale down their blades*—

Ahem. Yes. There was a place called Ilantra before then, and it was so different from what you know now that you would think it couldn't bear the same name. But it did, and in many ways it was the same country. But the Lord of Disasters made a stupid decision, and everything changed. The world has been out of balance since, if you want to ask me. It's a good thing that what happened just a few years ago happened.

Because the Lord of Disasters has more to do with the story of Princess Loriel than you could ever imagine. Are you going to listen to me or not?

That's better. And a cup of ale the next time wouldn't go amiss. I'm surprised you didn't bring one with you this time.

Not thirsty. Ah. Of course not.

Here it is, then, the tale of the Lord of Disasters.

Chapter 13

Pawns of Destiny and Those Who Don't Care

"How can we trust those who will turn against their own kind, who will lie in order to obtain a momentary advantage, who hate and mistrust the innocent? There is a reason the Dark lies, and that is because it cannot help it. It is so riddled with mistrust that deception is a necessary part of its survival. And we may pity it, but we cannot ever become like it. There is a reason that Light and Dark have always fought."

-The Lord of Thunder.

Rior ran a hand over his face. "I don't understand," he said, fighting for balance as his mind spun. "Why would the Light do such a thing to me? I have never wavered in my loyalty, even where others have." *I have seen noble after noble turn, or become like Dorwen, more interested in rulership than in the Light. I have not become that way. Why should the Light want to sacrifice me?*

"The reason doesn't really matter, not with Destiny," said Songs the Shadows Sing, with eyes still steadily fixed on him. Rior thought he would feel them even if he turned in the other direction. Their stare simply burned too deeply. "It doesn't want to sacrifice you because you have done something wrong, not the way it wants to hunt and hurt the Dark. It wants to sacrifice you because that is your Destiny, as it sees it, and for no other reason."

"Then shouldn't I yield more easily?" asked Rior. "Shouldn't I know that it's my Destiny and not feel this—" He stopped. If this wolf was an agent of the Dark, as he still more than half thought it was, then he shouldn't confess his emotions.

But the wolf let its tongue loll in a smile again. "This panic?" it asked. "This desperation? This feeling that your world has begun to spin, and you do not know where to stand?"

"I would not put it quite like that."

"Then how would you put it?" The wolf tilted its head inquiringly.

Rior shook his head sharply. "I have always known that my Destiny could make me end tragically. It is a tradition in the history-tales of Ilantra. And the chaos beginning a few years ago means that Destiny needs to take whatever course it can that is steady." He felt himself calm down as he recited the words. There was still that instinctive revulsion in him against what would happen, but he had lived with the knowledge all his life that something like this *could* happen. Doubtless that would reconcile him to his Destiny in time.

But still, to turn to the Dark...no doubt he would think there was a good reason at the time. It would happen, because it had to happen, because his corruption served the needs of a greater purpose. But Rior wasn't looking forward to it.

"You're not even going to fight?"

Rior looked up in surprise. The wolf had stood up again, and its teeth were bared. Rior thought it would spring at any moment, and had to fight not to back up a step. It was actually better not to show fear to rogues, but face them as any member of a pack might.

"How can I?" he asked. "You have told me what Destiny requires of me, and I couldn't change that."

"If you served me, then you could," said the wolf, again its voice falling just a little short of a bark. "I could protect you from the ravages of Destiny, since it would have no right to pursue its objective against my servant."

"But I don't wish to turn against the Light."

The wolf shook its head, a strangely human gesture. "You wouldn't be 'turning against the Light.' Nothing is as simple as that. I don't understand why you continue to think this way eighteen years after the freeing of the world."

"There are many gods," said Rior. "But Dark and Light rule evil and good, and one is one or one is the other. Some have chosen to follow the Dark because they thought they could find advantage there. But they will only end in madness and ruin. I must follow the Light."

"Even if it leads you to death?"

"Even then."

The wolf panted, but Rior did not think it was laughing this time. The gesture was abrupt and almost panicked, as though it had not expected him to answer this way. Rior smiled, his confidence returning in a rush. *The powers think that because they know the hearts of humans, they can predict what we will do. But the Dark understands nothing of loyalty. The Light knows its foul heart, but it does not know those who serve the Radiance. This*

power might kill me, but it cannot break my loyalty to the Light, and in the end I will rest in the arms of Arran.

"Such a waste," said the wolf at last. "I looked into your mind, and I saw there the thoughts of someone who might help me. You don't understand all the conspiracies of your kin. Your view of life is simple, like a dog's or wolf's. You might help me immeasurably, and you are refusing. I don't know why. It is true that I could spare you from the fate the Light has planned for you."

"I don't plan to break from that fate. I don't want to die. But if that is what the Light requires of me, then I will do it."

"Even though the Light itself will require you to turn to the Dark?"

Rior let out his breath slowly. "I cannot deny that there are Destinies I would have chosen otherwise. But I don't have a choice, and I must make the best I can of what I am given. At least, if I turned to the Dark by the Light's choice, I do so because that is the way it was meant to be, and not because I am willfully evil."

"Listen to me." The wolf took a step closer. "I am not of the Dark."

Rior snorted. "Then what are you?"

"The Shadow."

"There is no such thing."

"Of course there is." The wolf's tail beat an irritated tattoo on the ground. "Did you think that Dark and Light were alone in the world?"

"That is the way it has always been."

"That is the way it has been for as long as most humans know," the wolf corrected him. "I was driven from the world in years so long past that I don't know if they would make sense even to an elf. They barely make sense to me. They knew that I could threaten them, and they banded together and forced me away. I grieved for a long time, until the smashing of Destiny and the Light's dominance opened the way again at last." It lifted its head, and the eyes that it fixed on Rior's face shone with loneliness and a burning need that almost made him understand what it must be like, to be shut away for so long in a distant corner of the universe. "I am here, and I am Shadow, that which stands between Dark and Light, and I think you are the only mind in the castle that might help me."

Rior stared at the wolf. Perhaps it was the fire in its eyes, perhaps the vision that had suddenly opened in his mind—stars and blackness and nothing else—but he found himself saying, "Why don't you look outside the castle for a mind to help you? There must be someone else who is sympathetic to you and has the qualities that you require."

The wolf beat its tail on the ground again. Seeing the bared teeth, though, Rior was quite willing not to mistake that for wagging. "You do not understand. I want to redeem Ilantra. This was my home. This was the place I first woke my worshippers, the first place I found minds to understand me. I have dreamed of Ilantra since I first was pushed from the world. And now I come home to find that only one mind of all the many among the nobility knows me, and might be open to me."

"I am sorry," said Rior, and truly, he was. He shrugged. *It is all right to listen with sympathy even to the Dark, as long as one does not join it. And I believe now that this wolf is not of the Dark.* "But I am truly committed to the Light and my God. I wish that I could help you without forsaking that. But I do not think I could."

"No," said the wolf. "You cannot." Golden eyes locked on his face. "You were born to be a kennel-master, not a noble. Why did you not ask for the position?"

Rior laughed. "You have been gone a very long time, or you didn't look at very many minds, if you don't understand the way the Court works. Everyone else would have been sure I wanted to use the position to scheme and intrigue myself into a place of greater power. I would never have had a moment's peace from the conspiracies, and that is the only reason I would request the position. Of course I want a simple life, but I am not stupid. Life is simpler with servants."

The wolf lolled its tongue again. "You are not stupid. And your mind is a perfect one. Why cannot you join me?"

Rior sighed. "You know why."

"If I go and seek another sympathetic mind outside the castle, it could end up rousing revolution," said the wolf. "What would you do then?"

"Fight for the Light."

"It would be a waste," said the wolf firmly. "You could join us, and you could rule Ilantra afterwards."

Rior laughed. "You have praised me for wanting a simple life. Do you think I would have a simple life, as King of Ilantra?"

"You will not have one as a Regent."

Rior shrugged. "I have made my decision. Send me back to my world."

Songs the Shadows Sing paced forward, until it was an inch away from him. Rior stared into its eyes and found he had lost his fear. Shadow was not Light, but it was, apparently, not entirely Dark, either.

"You will change your mind," the wolf said, hot breath brushing against his face. Rior's mind filled with memories of the rogue; he fought them back. "You will have no choice."

"Until then—"

The trees vanished. Rior opened his eyes, only to find himself staring again into a lupine pair. The bitch shifted back and lifted her lips at him. Rior shook his head and bit at her nose to make her move further. At once she flattened her ears and jumped to the floor.

Wolves. I hunt wolves. Why does Shadow choose that form, and why am I responsible for caring for a girl raised by them? Rior ran a hand over his face again. And why does this one insist on following me around?

The bitch made a little whining sound in the back of her throat. Rior decided she was probably hungry; the light coming through the windows said it was early morning. And, given the smell in the corner of the room, she probably needed a walk in the garden, too.

"Come on," he said, and walked to the door. "I'll take you to the garden. Perhaps you can hunt mice there."

He was surprised by how quickly she ran after him.

Chapter 14

Garden in the Garden

Garden bounds down the stairs after the human. She did understand what he said, and the thought of soft earth beneath her paws is comforting. She has had enough of the human stone place, so hard and cold, and wants to be back among bushes and flowers. Perhaps it will even be a vegetable garden, like the ones that the farmers planted around the village near the edge of the woods, and she can watch the humans laboring, which will satisfy the strange light in her mind.

Although the strange light has been very quiet, though almost continuous, since she came into the human place. Garden has noticed that. She is not quite sure what it means. But at the moment it doesn't matter, since the human is opening a door and letting in sunlight.

Garden charges outside, and pauses one moment to feel the light on her fur before she begins to leap around like a puppy. This is more like a small forest than a garden, and there are no vegetables anywhere that she can see. But that is all right. There are mice, and one of them is sitting up and watching her as if it has never seen a wolf before. Perhaps it has not. Shut in the cold stone walls of the human place, what can it know of the true forest?

Garden charges forward. The mouse seems to realize her purpose just before she gets there, and darts towards its hole, but Garden is already there. She slams her jaws down and exults in the taste of fresh meat. Much better than the dead and burning meat that the human tried to feed her in the hall last night.

"Garden?"

Garden turns her head. The light in her head knows and likes that word, and the human, Meat-Giver, seems to be applying it to her. He studies her with thoughtful eyes. Garden looks down and away, then spots another mouse, no more wary than the first, and springs. Another mouthful. She wags her tail and looks around, but there are no more stupid mice; they had fled to their burrows. She will have to stalk them, not that she minds that. The pack did no proper hunting as they escorted Human-Scent towards her own pack. Garden misses it.

"Come here, Garden."

Garden understands him perfectly, given the brilliance of the light as it blazes in her mind, but she chooses to ignore him. There are mice to be hunted, and the scents of the garden all but gush into her face. He can wait until after she has hunted. If he is really alpha, he should be hunting himself.

Meat-Giver makes the soft sound that is not a growl in the back of his throat again, and sits down in the sunlight. Garden stalks around the mouse-burrows, sniffing, but they are all quite aware of her now, and none of them stir. Garden gives a little growl in the back of her throat.

A soft yowl makes her look up, though, and she lets her tongue loll. There is a cat there, a large pale thing that sits ruffled on the edge of a wall and stares at her with slitted eyes. Garden has occasionally chased lynxes in the forest with her pack, and while they are not good to eat, they are great fun. This cat is soft and heavy enough that he could be good to eat.

Garden trots a few steps forward. The cat ruffles his fur further and looks down at her in a distinctly unimpressed manner.

"Garden. Leave the Prince's cat alone."

The words make sense, but since Garden doesn't know what a Prince is, she has no impulse to obey. She growls in the back of her throat. The cat spits, and then jumps down from the wall to land in front of her, tail lashing back and forth.

Garden lunges forward, then dances back as the cat swipes with long claws. She's fought with pack members who fought like this before, and the claws can't catch her now. She growls and play-bows, and the cat spits as if coughing off a hairball, then swats at her again.

Garden snaps. The cat yowls and runs, blood dripping down his fur. Garden starts after him.

"No!"

Meat-Giver tackles her around the middle. Garden goes down with a yelp of surprise, then turns, snapping, on him. She does not yet know if he is alpha, and until she knows it, she is willing to challenge him for pride of place in the pack. An attack like that one is not made for any other purpose.

Meat-Giver seems surprised when she bites his shoulder; so is Garden. Her teeth go much too easily through his fur and into flesh. But she is willing to accept this advantage over him, and she bares her teeth in his face and growls threateningly.

Meat-Giver grabs her around the throat, but with a paw, not with teeth. Before Garden can bite his paw to teach him better manners, he squeezes her throat tightly.

Once again, pain flows through her body. Garden yelps and manages to pull away, then rolls on her back to show her belly. She will concede that he is alpha, if he only stops the pain.

Slowly, it stops. Meat-Giver walks around in front of her and stares down at her. Garden whines and wriggles so that he really can't miss her underbelly.

After a moment, Meat-Giver smells the way that the alpha female does when she has to settle for an inferior den for her pups. "All right," he says. "Stand up and come with me, Garden, and don't try something like that again."

She still does not understand most of his words, but her mind seems to translate them into terms she can understand. He wants her to follow him, and there will be food at the end of the journey.

Willingly, she rises and follows him out of the garden, not paying attention to his further mutterings. The light in her mind has fluttered down again, as if exhausted, and she is concentrating on licking blood from her jaws and wondering if the rest of the cat really will taste as good as that one small nibble.

Chapter 15

Plots In the Very Air

"Ah, but simply telling each other everything would not be true to the tradition of Ilantran nobility! They maneuver around each other, knowing someone could fall to the Dark at any moment, knowing they could themselves. The royalty is beyond such a taint,

but not the nobles themselves. As the Kings and Queens are in Orlath, so are the nobles of Ilantra: Destined for glory, or doomed."

--Attributed to Pelyan Streamrider, noble of Rivendon.

Rior, his shoulder bandaged and his clothes changed, stepped into the kitchens, and heard the hush that fell over the servants. Eyes turned to him, and then flinched away. Rior frowned as he snatched a freshly baked biscuit from the oven and broke off a piece; the biscuits were too big to hold in one hand. *Has someone started a rumor about me already?*

"Rior."

Rior looked up, and relaxed a little. It was possible that everyone in the kitchen had fallen silent not because of Rior, but because of Dorwen. His cousin strode towards him, smiling. The smile grew wider when Garden padded in behind Rior and sat down next to his heels, panting in the heat of the ovens.

"I am glad that you are both there," said Dorwen, as he bowed to the wolf. "The Council of Light has been debating."

Rior nodded. He had expected no less. Of course, most of that "debating" was probably people whispering to each other and not thinking that their secret friends were doing the same thing with others. Plots and schemes, betrayals and double-crosses, would have been thick in the air. "And what did you decide?"

"That you should become Regent to the Princess Loriel."

Rior choked on his biscuit. Dorwen pounded him enthusiastically on the back, though he stopped when Garden growled. Rior managed to swallow, and said the first thing that came into his head. "Has all the Council gone mad?"

Dorwen stepped back, his eyes narrowed. "You do not approve of our decision? I thought that you would be happy. It is a sign of how deeply we trust you, that we want you in the Regent's position. Of course, if you choose to give it up, then I am sure there are others who would be happy to take it over. But we would all want to know why you stepped down, Rior. We would all be *very* interested in that."

Rior looked around the kitchens. "There are far too many listening ears here," he said. "Will you come and take private counsel with me?"

That invitation had always worked with Dorwen before; his cousin was completely unable to resist anything that smacked of secrecy and intrigue. But this time, he narrowed his eyes further and spoke words that Rior would have expected to hear from a Darkworker before him. "Whatever you have to say can be said in the open, Rior, as can anything that I say to you."

Rior ground his teeth. "This is something that should not be revealed to servants."

"You may reveal it to them." Dorwen gestured languidly around at the servants, the waiters, the oven-maids, the cooks. Their stares were growing sharper, Rior knew, and they had to be wondering if he was a Darkworker. "I assure you, they have my complete confidence. And they will be your subjects for ten years. Why did you think that I chose you? You know how to rule. You will do well."

Rior looked up and into Dorwen's eyes. Those words, too, were unlike his cousin. He had to wonder why Dorwen was doing this, what his cousin thought he would gain from forcing Rior into Regency, when Rior had been sure that he wanted the position for himself.

He was completely stunned by the hatred that glared at him from those gold-flecked violet eyes. He had never known that Dorwen hated him, never even had the slightest suspicion. Dorwen might resent him, might see him as a competitor for royal favor and the Regent's position, but Dorwen saw everyone that way. Why single him out?

Rior licked his lips and spoke the truth that he would have preferred to speak in private, to avoid causing panic among either the servants or the nobles. No help for it now, though. "The Princess Loriel has a rare blood disease, Dorwen. I think it unlikely that she will live to take the throne."

Dorwen staggered as if physically hit. Then he said, "You are sure?"

Rior nodded.

Dorwen sighed. "I am sorry for you, cousin. You will have the difficult task of not only teaching her, but finding a cure for her."

"It cannot be cured, Dorwen."

"Oh, don't say that!" Dorwen cried. "The Light can cure all the diseases of its Destined, or the Ilantran royalty would not have survived a single generation after its breeding with the *ilzán*. I am sure that you will find a way to heal the Princess, Rior, since you rule in her name." He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "Everyone who has some hope of the Light would have some hope of her cure. Only a Darkworker would think otherwise."

Rior closed his eyes. So Dorwen would force him over the edge. If he refused the Regency now, he would be accused of conspiring with the Dark, and probably executed. If he took the Regency, then he would eventually fall to the Dark because his Destiny decreed that it was so.

Why did this have to happen to him?

Then he remembered his conversation with the power of Shadow, and restrained himself firmly. *I promised to act in compliance with the Light's will. If it sacrifices me, it is because I am the only one capable of accomplishing some greater purpose, or because my death will cause untold good for countless others. That is all. It is not sacrificing me for the purpose of killing me, or because my cousin hates me, though those are the superficial reasons. My god and my Light need me. I will go to death with a cheerful smile, for them.*

He opened his eyes, looked back into Dorwen's face, and nodded.

Dorwen frowned and stepped away from him. Rior frowned back. *He must have some reason for wanting me in this position, or he would not have convinced the Council to go along with this mad idea. He made it perfectly clear what would happen if I refused. Why is he upset that I'm not refusing?*

"Where have you been, Rior?" he demanded.

Rior looked around to see if that question made sense to anyone else. But the servants were straining forward, watching just as intently as he was. If they knew something he didn't, they were hiding it well.

"I don't know what you mean," he answered, looking back at Dorwen. "I went to my room and slept. Then I took the wolf to the garden, since it seemed she wanted something to eat, and she might as well eat the mice as anything else. Then I came here to get myself some breakfast."

"There is something new in your eyes," said Dorwen.

"What something new?" Rior had not the slightest idea what he was talking about.

"Your eyes have gone gray."

Rior fought back a shiver, and shrugged. *Probably something Shadow did, to prevent me from just going back to my own life and forgetting about it.* "I don't know what you mean, cousin. I did have some rather strange dreams, but I went to sleep and woke in my own bed."

"Ah." Dorwen relaxed. "That is another sign that you are fit for this position, my cousin—you are already having dreams of your responsibility!" He slung an arm around Rior's shoulders and steered him towards the entrance from the kitchens. "Let me instruct you on some of the duties of your new position, and then we can go and see the Princess we will serve together."

Rior opened his mouth to answer, and heard a low growl come out instead.

He glanced over his shoulder, and saw Garden rise to her feet and stretch, lazily, from tail to ears. It was the gesture a dominant wolf might make, when she had all the time in the world to quell a scrappy subordinate. She strolled forward and sat in front of them, staring up at Dorwen.

Rior frowned. *What is she doing? I was sure that she was a low-ranker in the pack, given her scars and the way she acts with me. But staring at someone is what an alpha might do.*

Even more interestingly, Dorwen did not seem able to maintain her stare. He looked to the side and shrugged, taking his arm off Rior's shoulders carefully. "It would seem as though you have found a friend, Rior," he said.

Rior shook his head. "Not this one. She is Princess Lorie's guardian. I think she's following me around to make sure I don't do anything wrong."

But the joke fell flat, and Dorwen eyed him approvingly. "Yes, I think that's exactly what she's doing. Good." He bowed to Garden again, and then turned and strolled casually away.

Rior swallowed what remained of his biscuit and looked at Garden, who looked back at him.

"Let's go see how your mistress is," he said, and could have sworn that he saw a flash of contempt in her eyes before he turned away.

Of course, he didn't get very far before his cousins found him.

Chapter 16

What Follows Disaster

That was worth pausing to listen to, wasn't it? You have now heard of the Lord of Disasters and what followed in the wake of his reign. Ilantra destroyed, the power that protected it driven away. I understand, of course, that you're one of those people who thinks this was all right, was even what the Dark and Light needed to do, but you must admit it would have been devastating to the people who lived in Ilantra at the time.

May I have some ale now?

What? Of *course* I don't agree with you. I can only tell you what I saw at the time. It was devastating to the people who lived in Ilantra. It took them so long to recover that they called—

Do you want to hear this story or not?

You won't bring me ale until I agree with you that the Dark and Light were right to drive Shadow away. Very well. Then I won't tell you any more of the story until you bring me ale.

I suspect that you could sit here and glare at me for a very long time, but you have a history to write. And I have stories to tell, but I can't tell them with a blade dry of both blood and ale.

Oh, do you think I desire to speak with you so much? I've had much better conversational partners, I assure you. Some of them didn't fuss at all about giving me ale. Others never expected me to agree with them about Dark, or Light, or Shadow, or whatever it was that they worshipped.

Will you listen to yourself? Why do you care about what I think about Light and Dark? I don't have a soul to save for your goddess.

Yes, that *is* perhaps the keenest look of embarrassment I've ever seen. Now that you realize what an idiot you were making of yourself, can we get back to the story?

No, with ale.

Is it so important to you to maintain an edge of control that doesn't exist? You think you can force me to tell the story by withholding ale. But I can force you to give me ale by withholding the story. And you can force me not to withhold the story by threatening not to give me ale. And I can force...

You see my point?

But at the end of it, we're left with just one thing that is true—well, two things. My blade is still dry. And you still don't have the story that you sought me out to hear.

How does that serve anyone?

What am I to you, that you should want to win this battle so badly? Less than nothing. I don't have a soul you can save. I won't go to join Dark or Light when I die, since I don't even know if I can die. I don't know what power I serve, and I don't really care about them. I care about ale, and sometimes riding at the hips of warriors who appreciate the companionship of a sentient sword.

Those aren't worthy ambitions? I see. Then what ambitions would you suggest for a talking sword?

Speak when you've thought of some.

Or bring some ale. I think that both of those could work, actually. While you're thinking of things that I could dedicate my existence to other than having ale poured down my blade and sometimes riding with warriors, then why not give me some ale and see what happens?

Well, it was worth a try.

Chapter 17

Shading the Truth For Diplomatic Reasons

"It sometimes takes a long time for the Ilantran nobility to explain to their children the difference between deception and shading the truth for diplomatic reasons, which is something every noble does and one of the ways the world functions. The children are taught at first to abhor deception, since that is a tool of the Dark. But when they learn to understand the difference, they are some of the finest diplomats in the world."

-The Master of Teaching to the Court of Ilantra, in King Ocior's time.

"I'm sure that you'll do fine, Rior. We wouldn't have chosen you to become Regent if we didn't trust you, you know."

Rior ground his teeth. *Arran, I am tired of hearing that sentence. They know what they did, and why they did it, as well as I. I don't understand why they must pretend they don't hate me, when I can see the hatred shining in every eye.*

And he still did not understand what he had done to inspire it.

Shaking his hand—he had thought Therion would squeeze the life out of it—he stepped into the kennels. The dogs went into a barking uproar at the sight of him. Rior narrowed his eyes as he noticed all their bowls were empty of meat. *Why weren't they fed last night?*

"I'm here now," he said soothingly, and had the pleasure of hearing a few dogs quiet down. A glance over his shoulder revealed the far more likely reason, however. Garden had walked in behind him and sat down near the door, sweeping her eyes slowly over the face of every dog. And all of them whined and looked away from her. A few even rolled on their backs, showing their bellies.

Rior sighed. "I really wish I knew what to make of you," he told the wolf bitch, deciding that since no one else was in the kennels he could speak aloud if he liked. "Dominant and not, acting like an ordinary wolf at one moment and a companion the next—I suppose you really are some creature of Light trying to find out if we'll be kind to the Princess."

He scooped up the nearest bucket of dried meat scraps, and poured it into Rundriff's dish. The mastiff fell on it, ignoring Garden, for which Rior was grateful. He had too many hounds to feed to stand guard over a dog fight right now.

Slowly, the barking diminished as the dogs were fed. Rior sighed as he noticed the empty water dishes, and set about hauling water from the pump to fill them. *I might as well have asked for the kennelmaster's position, given all the help I'm getting at this.*

He did refuse to muck out the dog pens by himself. Instead, he shouted until one of the dog girls woke up and stumbled into the kennels, pawing at her eyes and muttering something that Rior couldn't hear. He grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her to face Rundriff. The mastiff had finished his meal and was wagging his tail, looking intently at Garden and then back at Rior.

"Do you know who fed him?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the girl, in a voice mizzy with something more than sleep. Rior bent close and sniffed, then wrinkled his nose as the scent of wine and vomit hit him in the face. It seemed to be even keener than usual. Perhaps the girl had been rolling around in it before she fell asleep.

"I did."

The girl gave him a sullen glance. "So what?"

"All of them," said Rior. "Why weren't they fed and given water last night?"

"They were," said the girl. "Elli did it before she went to sleep. She told me that she was going to do it. So I went over and had a few glasses of wine to celebrate the Princess's arrival."

Rior seethed, but managed to speak in a calm voice, which he had thought was beyond him just a moment ago. "Did you think that the Princess's arriving was excuse enough to neglect the hounds?"

The girl stared at him blankly. Rior realized he didn't know her, and she probably didn't know him. A few of the dog boys had left recently, after their favorite dogs had died or been sold to nobles from other Kingdoms. This was probably one of the new hirelings, too stupid or just too ignorant to understand the nature of her responsibilities.

"What's your name?" he asked as she turned her head away from his direct gaze, just like a wolf. Another wave of foul scent hit him as she moved. Her hair was red, but a strange caked orange color on one side revealed that she really had been rolling in vomit.

"Mima," she said, just loud enough for him to hear. She gave him another sullen look, like a pack low-ranker forced away from the meat.

"And how long have you been in the kennels?"

"A few days."

Rior nodded. "Then you have time to learn you better. I won't tell Firion to let you go right away. But you have to learn how to care for dogs. If you go away for a few glasses of wine, they don't lie down and wait until you come back before getting hungry or thirsty." He unlatched Rundriff's pen and watched the mastiff bolt past Garden into the courtyard. "And they don't wait to urinate in their cages, either, if they really must do it. I want you to get in there and clean it up."

"It smells *terrible*," said Mima, wrinkling her nose as he had when confronted by her own scent.

It burned on Rior's tongue to tell her that she smelled worse, but he held it in. *Shading the truth for diplomatic reasons*, he thought grimly. The girl's friends had to be even more drunk than she was, not to have heard his calling, and that meant that he needed Mima's help. "Then clean it up, and remember your responsibilities in the future, and you won't ever have to smell it again," he said, and let her go.

While she went for a mop and pail of water, glaring at him the whole time, Rior walked down the aisle to the Princess Loriel's pen.

Part of the mystery was solved when he glanced in. The Princess's bowl was piled with scraps of food, far more than she could ever eat. Her second bowl was full of water, too. Loriel lay curled up not far away, belly bulging, her head tucked in on it the way that a wolf might sleep in cold weather.

She was still naked, though. Apparently no one had been able to convince her to wear clothes.

Rior sighed and unlatched the pen. He really should have been here with her last night, but he hadn't grown used to the responsibility then. Now, he had no choice. *I will have to teach her, to treat her like my own child, or the others will cry foul and use that as an excuse for executing me. And knowing all the while that she will have to die of a disease in a few years' time, and that she's under an enchantment that she won't break...*

"Princess?" he tried. "Good morning."

At once Loriel awoke, but she did not respond with intelligible words as Rior had half-hoped she might. The enchantment and the façade of not understanding was apparently still important to maintain. She bared her teeth at him and snarled, though she looked away when Rior matched stares with her. He came forward and carefully removed the full meat bowl, then turned around and set it down for Garden. She dug in.

He turned back to see Lorie watching the bowl hungrily, despite the state of her belly. Rior sighed. "Probably hungry for pack privilege and not food," he muttered. "I suppose I shall have to treat you like a wolf for now, at least until we have managed to convince you to become the beautiful human we all know you are."

Lorie looked up at him, silver lightning bolts aflame in her eyes, and Rior sighed again. Nowhere under those eyes was what looked like the spirit of a noble little girl, or even a normal one. Of course, after spending years on end with wolves in the wild, it was perhaps too much to ask her to be normal, but Rior hoped he would see her inherent nobility and goodness shortly. He knew next to nothing about raising ordinary children who might actually have been affected by living with wolves in more than innocence and purity.

He knelt down, and locked eyes with Lorie. Again she looked away. But Rior growled in the back of his throat, and she looked back at him, though crouching low to the ground.

Rior held up a hand, and noted the way she watched it. Sadness and anger stirred in his heart. *Has she been the victim of children throwing stones, I wonder?* But he dismissed the thought. Lorie's innate goodness and Destiny would have protected her against that kind of violation. He needed to stop thinking of her as though his teaching would have no effect, and she would go through life like this.

"Hand," he murmured in Ilantran, trying not to think of all the other languages an Ilantran Queen would need to know. He sincerely hoped he would not be responsible for teaching her those, as well. But soon Queen Aloriadell would be here, and Rior suspected that, one way or another, the Queen would insist her daughter's education be turned over to her. His Destiny must either work quickly, or the Regency would be a short one.

Lorie just stared at him.

Rior tapped his hand with the other, and Lorie bared her teeth at the sound. "Hand," said Rior.

She watched him with no sign of intelligence in her eyes.

Rior cursed softly. He wasn't a good teacher, and didn't think himself suited to this role. But he went on, touching all the things in the pen and repeating the words for them until his voice was hoarse. Lorie still flinched as he walked around her, though she no longer seemed tempted to bolt, even when Rior deliberately left the door of the pen open. She lay and watched him as he recited the words, now and then nipping at fleas on her bare skin.

Her intensity at last did give Rior some hope. Perhaps she was willing to learn, though of course she would not show how much she knew until she was ready to. Perhaps this task wouldn't be arduous for nothing.

He turned around, ready to leave the pen, and found his way blocked by Garden. She had long ago finished the meat in the bowl, but Rior thought she still looked hungry. Or maybe that was just her stare, the way she locked her eyes on his face and stepped forward. He stood still as she walked up to him and sat at his feet, then transferred her gaze to his hand.

Rior turned to look at it, too, hardly knowing why. But then Garden reached out and very gently took his wrist in her jaws. Rior flinched, knowing well the pain a wolf's teeth could inflict.

But Garden only sat there, holding his hand, and at last Rior shook his head. "Let go of my hand—"

The moment he spoke the word, Garden let it fall, and then sat there gazing at him intently.

Rior swallowed. "Where is the wall, Garden?"

The wolf turned her head to the wall, without taking her eyes off him. Well, that could be a coincidence.

"My foot?"

Garden stretched out a paw and scraped his foot.

That was probably less of a coincidence.

"My left hand?"

Garden reached out and clenched her jaws around the one she had not yet touched.

Rior looked back and forth from her to Princess Lorie, who was occupied in lapping the water in her dish.

New thoughts stirred in his mind, and he had to admit that some of them made a lot more sense than Princess Lorie maintaining a disguise she didn't need.

Chapter 18

Garden in the Kennels

The human is staring at her.

Garden does not know why. The light in her mind has been glowing brightly throughout the morning, and it seems only natural for her to touch a wall or foot or other object he was trying to teach Human-Scent about and know what they are.

She knows already that she cannot make the sounds back to him. She has tried to work her jaws and throat, and the sounds have stayed stuck somewhere between her belly and her throat. But she can understand him perfectly well, and finds it interesting. She apparently finds it more interesting than Human-Scent, who has curled up and gone to sleep again. Garden doesn't know why Meat-Giver doesn't concentrate on teaching her, the one puppy who's actually listening to him.

Meat-Giver shakes his head. "Come with me," he says, and these are words that Garden understands, too, though they are not some of the words that he was using to teach Human-Scent. She turns and follows him out of the pens, towards the entrance to the dog-place.

Garden wrinkles her nose as they pass the pens, and sometimes snaps and snarls at the ones who dare to snarl at her. She does not like these cousins of hers. She has seen and smelled them before, when she was running with the pack in the forest and sometimes a hunt would go by. She does not like the way they run panting after humans, or the way they look at her with fear and hatred in their scents. They should be kin, but they are not, and their presence makes her even more agitated than the presence of a human does. The humans are all strange, but the dogs are somewhat close to her, and somewhat far away. Garden likes things that are one or the other, not both. The dogs remind her of Human-Scent, in a way.

They reach the end of the stone place, and Garden smells the open air and sunlight. She bolts forward.

A dog leaps on her, abruptly, and they go rolling over and over, yelping. Garden finds her feet soon enough, and braces herself, shaking the dog off. He doesn't go far, though, before bouncing up and facing her again.

Garden circles warily. This is the big dog who growled at her the first time she came to the human place, when Meat-Giver put Human-Scent away. In his eyes, she can see death. He will kill for the pleasure of killing her, if he can. He is like the dogs who run with humans in the forests after her kind.

Garden bares her teeth and flings herself forward before the dog can be ready. He goes down under her; though he is bigger, Garden has more pure muscle. Garden hears him growling, and knows that he will be back up as soon as he can, so she doesn't waste time in shoulder-blocking him. She whips to the side and bites him on the flank as hard as she can, hoping to teach him a lesson.

"Garden!"

That is Meat-Giver's voice, and he sounds very angry. Garden hesitates for a moment, caught between wanting to punish this dog who dared to challenge her and obeying the voice of one whom she has come to think of as an alpha.

The dog springs forward and knocks her over while she is caught between instincts. His teeth dig into her throat. Garden tries to bare her belly, and then realizes that it will not stop him. He stinks of mad anger, the kind that will drive an alpha to kill a subordinate instead of punish her. She is going to die.

Meat-Giver springs on the dog, and rips him free. Garden can feel herself bleeding, but she lies still and watches the struggle between Meat-Giver and the dog for a moment. She has never seen a dog who would not yield to a human. Indeed, many times on the hunts she has seen, the humans do not even bind the dogs. They yell words, and the dogs come running back to them, obedient to the touch of a human voice as they would be to the touch of a human hand.

But this one seems to have gone mad. He growls at Meat-Giver, and then jumps at his face.

Meat-Giver blocks him with one leg, then moves a hand in a gesture that Garden is already familiar with. The dog collapses to the ground, yelping, his body writhing and his scent stinking of pain. Garden drags herself up and stands ready, thinking to go to the dog when the pain is done and lick him in sympathy. Perhaps he can become part of the pack she is building here.

But when Meat-Giver lowers his hand, the dog stands and attacks him again. Garden sits back on her haunches and pants in amazement, now and then looking down so that she can lick her viciously bleeding wound. Does the dog have the throat-closing disease? Garden has seen that sickness before, has seen a pack member foam at the jaws and run wild through the forest, unable to drink. Perhaps the dog has that; that is the only reason Garden can think of to attack an alpha.

But Meat-Giver sends him to the ground in pain again, then lets him go. This time, the dog doesn't try to attack, skulking about with his belly to the ground and his ears flattened. But when Meat-Giver reaches out to clasp his neck, he snarls and bares his teeth.

Meat-Giver pulls back his hand again, his scent stinking of anger. "Rundriff," he says. "Go back."

The dog snarls at him, and runs back into the human place. Garden comes up behind Meat-Giver and nudges him with her nose, to show him that at least there is a wolf who knows that he is alpha.

Meat-Giver reaches down and scratches her behind the ears. Garden tilts her head. The sensation is unexpectedly pleasurable. Meat-Giver stares after the dog and mutters words

that Garden cannot understand, then shakes his head and turns for the door of another part of the human-place.

Garden follows at his heels. She is content now, her belly full of food, with no need to void her bowels yet. Perhaps she will see the cat again, and can chase it. Or she will find a place to sleep in the sun.

Chapter 19

Chosen Loyalties

"Not all of us can choose our loyalties,

But he who does because he can

Should have a heart as deep as seas,

And wisdom befitting a man."

-Ilantran proverb.

Rior reluctantly climbed onto the dais, and stood staring at the throne that sat there. King Delian had sat in that throne just—

Yesterday? It seems much further away than that.

Rior sighed and turned his back on the throne. He wasn't going to sit on it. It wasn't required of the Regent, and it would probably anger Queen Aloriadell when she came back. Rior had no doubt that the news had reached her, and she was coming, perhaps driving a dragon to go faster, perhaps whipping a horse to death. A dragon would be much faster, but the dragons had been sketchy allies of the Ilantran throne for some time now, since a disagreement with the King. Rior wasn't sure if one would even consent to bear his widow.

She will bring Prince Imor with her. Then this nightmare will be over, one way or the other.

Rior sat on the top step of the dais, and then looked towards the doors of the throne room. It was a very large room, but narrow, presumably so that those who had to parade up between the tables and benches to get to the dais would be impressed. The walls were covered with dark blue stone, mosaics of dragons flying and Kings and Queens battling their enemies. Rior glanced away from the bloody scenes when his eyes accidentally fell on them, and looked more determinedly at the doors. He didn't want to think about anything to do with battle right now.

I will have enough of a battle to fight within myself, given that I have to turn to the Dark and don't want to.

"Anyone who must have justice, come in," he said, voicing the traditional call.

The door opened at once, and two women stepped inside and walked up the aisle, glaring at each other as they came. Rior studied them carefully. They both looked to be about the same age, in their early thirties or a little beyond, but one wore a much finer shawl than the other and had the golden eyes of country fey blood. The other's dress was patched, her eyes human, but her manner actually prouder. Rior sighed. Whatever they had been arguing about, this would not be an easy one.

"My ladies," he said, as they halted before the throne. "What are your names, and what do you wish from the Ilantran throne?"

"My Lord Regent," said the fey-looking woman, with a little bow, "I am Lady Hawthorn —"

"A title that she claims only because she happens to live on the land where the castle once stood," said the human one. "She is not actually descended of any noble line, no matter what her eyes say."

"You are no better!" said Lady Hawthorn hotly. "Calling yourself Lady Elinde when you don't have a drop of blood that's not human!"

"My ladies, please," said Rior as calmly as he can. "I will be willing to help you, but not like this. What is the disagreement between you? Why do you seek justice from the Ilantran throne?"

The formula appeared to calm them somewhat. Lady Hawthorn ran her shawl between her fingers and bowed. "My lord, I recently found a crown on my land while I was digging a flowerbed. It is golden, and set with small diamonds in hawthorn-shaped silver cressets. It's obvious that the crown belongs to my line, and therefore I should have it. But my neighbor cries that it belongs to her. She says that diamonds are the symbol of her line, and if the Hawthorn line has them in its crown, then it must have stolen them from her ancestors." Lady Hawthorn's spine was stiffening. "She has dared to call my ancestors thieves!"

"There is no shame in speaking the truth," said Lady Elinde hotly. "And they were not your ancestors—"

"Do you have the crown with you?" asked Rior. He knew they might go on forever if left to themselves, and he already knew what his judgment would be.

Lady Hawthorn pulled the crown from beneath her shawl. Lady Elinde tried to snatch it as she held it out, but Rior took it before she could.

"Diamonds, you say?" he asked Lady Elinde.

"Of course!"

Rior nodded and looked the crown over. It was as they had described it, though the diamonds were so small, and the cressets even smaller, that he was surprised they had recognized the jewels or the symbol.

He drew his skinning knife from his belt and carefully prized at the diamonds, managing to free two of them without damaging the settings. He held them out to Lady Elinde. "Take them, my lady. If they really belong to your family, then they should be yours."

"But what about the gold and silver?" Elinde protested, making no move to take the diamonds.

"They belong to Lady Hawthorn, of course," said Rior, and handed the crown back to the fey-looking woman.

"But—"

"But—"

Rior smiled a little at their stunned expressions. "You both claimed separate parts of the crown. I see no reason not to separate them and give you each what you deserve, my ladies. Have you any questions?"

"The crown should have gone to *me*," Elinde exclaimed, even as she snatched the diamonds. "I can prove that I descended from the line I claim to descend from, which is more than she can, the thief!"

"Can you prove that diamonds were the symbols of your line?"

She stared at him. Rior nodded, and turned to Lady Hawthorn. "And can you prove that your line is actually the Hawthorn noble line?"

She glared at him in silence.

Rior shrugged. "Then, since you found the crown, I think you can keep it. I happen to know that the Hawthorns were wiped out of existence when they tried to rise and take the crown from my ancestors—"

"Ha!" said Lady Elinde.

"And I happen to know that diamonds were never the symbol of any of the noble lines. Most of them preferred more affordable stones." Rior smiled a little. "But since there are no Hawthorns left, and no one come forward to claim the diamonds, each of you might as

well have a part of the wealth. Use it to benefit your families. And please tell whoever else is waiting in the hall to come in so that I may speak to them."

The two women left, bickering. Rior heard his name mentioned a few times, though, and thought they were in full agreement about him. He shrugged. *I did what I thought was right.*

"That was an impressively bad decision, cousin."

Startled, Rior turned his head. Dorwen stopped leaning against the wall and stood straight, shaking his head. "You should have claimed the crown as the spoils of the royal line. Obviously no line of country nobles had a treasure like that. It must have been one stolen from our family long ago."

Rior shrugged. "We have no need for it. And the women wanted it as a symbol of pride more than wealth."

"We could have used it."

"The decision is made. Unless, of course, you would like me to step down as Regent, so that you can call the women back in and reverse my decision."

Dorwen held up his hands. "I'm only giving you a little advice, Cousin, that's all." He noticed Garden sitting on the steps at Rior's heels then, and smiled. "You seem to have shifted loyalties, my Lord Regent."

"What do you mean?"

"Does not a dog usually take that position?"

Rior shrugged. "Garden has been keeping a close eye on me, I think to make sure that I do not inconvenience the Princess."

"Ah, the Princess. How is she?"

"Well-fed and sleeping."

"And has she shown you signs of breaking the enchantment yet and letting you see whom she truly is?"

"No."

"A pity." Dorwen stretched languidly. "I should go see her. There are other nobles who want to look into her eyes and hail her as their future Queen, as well. Where is her bedchamber?"

"She is in the kennels still."

Dorwen stared at him for a long moment, then shook his head. "I don't know what kinds of games you're playing, Rior," he breathed, "but we didn't give you the Regency so you could do this."

"I don't know why you gave me the Regency at all."

"To rule well, in Princess Lorie's name." Dorwen gazed at him with remote eyes for a moment, then shook his head. "What is done is done, and I will wait to introduce the Princess to the nobles until you have moved her into a proper bedchamber. But you should take note: I will not be so patient in the future."

He turned and walked out of the room before Rior could ask him what the Dark he meant. Rior sighed and turned back to welcome the next people he had to judge between, a man and woman who glared at each other even more violently than Lady Hawthorn and Lady Elinde had.

I wish someone would tell me what the Dark is going on. I have not the slightest idea.

Chapter 20

Listening

You may come in if you wish.

How are you?

Oh, I see that you start and look at me suspiciously. I don't see why you should. I am only asking you some questions. I want to know how you are, why you're speaking to me, what you hope to accomplish. The usual things that a talking sword with a human willing to listen to him might ask.

You look a little pale. Have you been eating well? Drinking well?

No, no more references to ale, I promise, not if you don't want to listen to them.

How are you?

It's a simple question on the surface, I agree, but a complex question beneath. You might take it to mean that I wish to know the state of your soul. From speaking with other humans, I have some vague idea of what that is, though probably not enough to soothe you. Or I might wish to know just the state of your health, though few humans take it that way, surprisingly. Some humans also tell me about the state of their minds and emotions.

I thought you might do that. Or you might decide that I really meant to refer to something else entirely, and say—

If you wish to answer the question, of course I will be quiet.

You don't wish to answer the question?

Very well, then. What do you want to talk about?

But I get so bored remembering my own history and memories, and even sharing them with others! They are exciting for me, but I have surprised many a yawn and bored expression on the face of a human listener. Not as many as you would think are really interested in tales of ancient cities and battles where even the winners died long ago. You're a historian, so you might be a little different, but I don't think so. You would rather talk about yourself, wouldn't you?

That's it. Open your mouth and let just a few words out. It's hard at first; I've watched children learn how to talk, most recently the Princess Loriel. But once you start, it's very easy.

Oh, you know how to talk, and you don't need the lecture? My apologies. Of course you don't. I was only trying to reassure you.

So tell me something about yourself. It just occurred to me the other day that I don't even know your name.

Idessen? That's a good name. Strong and solid Ilantran. I've known Idessens in my time, and they were strong and solid men. You fit your name, I think, and you should be proud.

What's your family like?

Dead? I'm sorry to hear that. But not all dead? A brother, you say? Well, tell me about him.

Ah, gone to the Dark. I am sorry to bring up painful memories like that. But sometimes weeping is actually the best way to deal with them, you know. I heard someone very wise say once that tears are the blood of the soul. Once you bleed and thus cleanse the wound, you can learn to heal around the pain and live on with your life.

Who said that? Oh, Rior.

You didn't know that? Yes, I knew him. Of course I did. It was hard to know the Princess Loriel and not know him.

But I don't really want to talk about that. Why do you want to? I think that we should talk about you, your hopes and dreams and ambitions. Were you born in Ilantra? How did you

grow up? Were your parents kind or strict? Such little details of human life fascinate me, you see. After all, I didn't have parents or a childhood, and I can remember some of the people who reforged me, but not the one who first set the *ofiron* steel on the anvil, which I suppose is as close as I ever came to having a parent.

Well, if you would rather be quiet, then we can do that, too.

Oh, you want to be quiet and want me to talk? But that wouldn't be a good exercise. It might encourage my vanity. I have been accustomed to talk for long periods of time; that was why I didn't even know your name, Idessen. I think that I should be quiet more often, and let you talk more, or we're not really equals, are we?

But you came to hear my story? Of course you did. But what makes you feel that your story is not important?

It just isn't? I see. And what makes you feel that way?

Wait, where are you going? Don't you want to stay and talk a little more about the loves and the places of your childhood? No?

That works every time.

Chapter 21

Moving the Princess

"Remember that wild-reared Princes and Princesses need to be treated very gently. They will be unaccustomed to the rude shouts and sneers that are the norm in Court society. They must be spoken to gently, and treated with proper respect for their innocence and native morality."

--A Court mage of Ilantra.

"Come, Your Highness. We should move you to the palace and make sure that you're comfortable before the nobles see you." Rior kept his voice calm but cheerful as he opened the pen's gate.

Princess Lorieel backed into a corner of the pen and snarled at him. Rior sighed. Such behavior made it very easy for him to entertain the suspicion that had blossomed in his mind when Garden appeared to learn the words that he was trying to teach Lorieel, that the wolf seemed more like the Princess of the Ilantran royal house than Lorieel herself did.

"I'll just pick up your bowl," he said, and leaned over, reaching for the bowl that had held the meat scraps.

Loriel charged him, snarling. Rior just barely managed to spring back. Loriel crouched above the dish and snapped her teeth at him, then lay down with her chin resting protectively over it.

Rior picked up the water dish instead, and though Loriel growled, she let him take that one. Then he drew a meat scrap from his pocket that he had prepared for an occasion like this, and tossed it into the far corner of the pen.

Loriel watched it, then looked at him, licked her lips, and went after it. Rior picked up her dish while she was eating, and this time was ready when she came rushing back towards him, intent on defending her property.

He bared his teeth and snarled back at her, taking care to meet her lightning-marked eyes directly.

Loriel sat back on her haunches and stared at him. She risked another growl, to which Rior responded with a more menacing one. Then she rolled on her back and displayed her belly at him.

Rior said, "Come, Your Highness, stand up." He had to be heard speaking to her, even though he didn't see a flicker of understanding in her eyes. He reached out and gripped her shoulder, hauling her towards her feet. Loriel growled quietly, but didn't resist.

However, when he set her on her feet, she merely collapsed back onto her hands and knees and stared at him.

Rior muttered, "I'm sure that you're doing this for some purpose, Your Highness, but I wish you would tell me what it is." He looked hopefully at her as he spoke, but she remained maddeningly blank.

"We'll have to get you clothes," he said, as he surreptitiously stole some of the bedding from the pen. If worse came to worse, she wouldn't sleep just on the floor. "And make sure that you wear them, at least while the nobles visit. Garden, will you hold these, please?"

Absently, he held out the water dish and food bowl, stacked together, and was shocked when the wolf trotted over and did as he bid her, gripping them tightly in her jaws so they wouldn't fall. Rior stared at her, too, and saw the same light glowing in her eyes as before, the light that he would have given anything to have seen in Princess Loriel's. The wolf flipped her tail and turned away before he could get a good look, though, trotting towards the castle.

Rior curved an arm around the Princess's shoulders. "Come, Your Highness, a little straighter." Loriel appeared incapable of knowing what he was talking about, but by subtle yanks he made it look as if he were only supporting her on unsteady legs, instead of dragging her along more or less upright.

Loriel growled quietly all the way from the kennels—where the dogs bared their teeth and snarled at all three of them, which was quite strange—to the bedroom that Dorwen had chosen for her, high in the top of one of the towers. Rior opened the door with a feeling of dread. This was a chamber that Queen Aloriadell and Prince Imor shared sometimes when they came visiting from Arvenna, but he didn't think it was suitable for a child raised in the forest, Princess or not.

Sure enough, Loriel howled when he pushed her into the room, which was thickly, richly carpeted and hung with tapestries, but had only one small window, high on the wall. Rior wondered if anyone would notice if he hired some stonemasons to chip a larger window, then set about trying to calm the Princess's cries. Only another scrap of meat helped, and even that only made her worry at it, not stop looking around the room with large and frightened eyes. She even seemed to smell of fear, though Rior suspected he only thought that because of her sweat.

He arranged some of the tapestries into a small den piled against the wall, carefully sculpting them until they formed a hollow that was large enough to hold the Princess. At once Loriel retreated into it, and blinked at him from it, snarling when he held up the white gown that had been laid on the bed.

"My lady," said Rior as soothingly as he could. Surely Princess Loriel, who was Destined to rule, wouldn't allow this façade to continue and undermine her own rule. Testing her nobles was a fine thing, but she couldn't allow it to pass into where they would be exasperated with her. "You must put on this dress. The nobles will be here in a short while to see you."

Loriel growled. Rior could hear her hands and feet scrabbling at the tapestries, and knew that she was bracing herself, preparing to cling to her home if he tried to pull her free.

"Princess.."

Another growl.

Rior grimaced. He wasn't looking forward to reaching in there and pulling her out, but he didn't see that he had any other choice.

Unless...

He glanced around and found Garden sitting near the door. She stood alertly and shook her coat when she saw him glancing at her, then met his eyes and seemed to wait for instructions.

Rior still felt strange speaking to a wolf the way he should have been speaking to the Princess, but he didn't see that he had much choice. "Garden, could you come over here and pull Loriel out of this cave?"

Garden walked towards him, then stopped in front of his feet and stared up at him. Loriel growled again from her den. Rior, not knowing what Garden wanted, at last stooped so that his face was on a level with hers.

Garden nipped his chin and ears. They were gentle bites, but Rior still felt the blood flow. He risked being a little harder when he bit her back, which seemed to be what Garden wanted. At least, she wagged her tail and stepped into the den, growling all the while.

Loriel growled back, and then there came a high-pitched yelp. Rior winced, thinking that Garden might have been hurt, but she came out a moment later with Loriel padding tamely at her heels. Rior took up the dress again and cautiously pulled the Princess to her feet. She made a whining noise, and Garden gave a growl. She submitted at once, letting Rior pull the gown over her head.

It was only then that Rior realized he knew almost nothing of what underthings should be put on a Princess, and in what order. He went to ring for a maid, leaving Garden to keep an eye on Loriel.

A maid showed up almost at once; she'd probably been waiting for a chance to attend the Princess. Rior winced when she stepped through the door and looked at Loriel, but her eyes widened and she whispered, "Oh, what a Princess we have!"

Rior followed her gaze, and blinked. It actually was quite a picture. If you weren't close enough to see the fleas and bites on Loriel's skin, then she looked like a pleasant young woman, though more deeply tanned by the sun than a noble should be, in a white gown. And at her side sat a pale, shining wolf, gazing into her face as if with the deepest devotion.

Rior wasn't sure what it was about the picture that troubled him. Perhaps it was just that he was aware that the fleas and bites were there, and where Loriel's voice should be speaking a pleasant stream of words, there were only growls and snarls as yet. He hoped the maid wouldn't try to speak to her.

Well, there was a simple way to prevent her from trying.

"The Princess is still trying to make out what we are," he whispered to the maid, who looked suitably impressed at his dramatic tone. "She won't speak, and she'll pretend to be as wild as a normal child would be, raised by wolves. Don't try to speak to her that much, and things should be fine."

"Of course," said the maid, folding her hand against her breast in token of promise. "I wouldn't want to try and force the Princess to speak before her time. She is a blessed child, and should be allowed to remain that way for a little while longer, before she becomes a Queen."

"That is true," said Rior, and moved for the door, hearing the maid begin to coo to Loriel behind him.

He shut the door, only to hear a frantic scrabbling on the other side of it. Wondering if Loriel had run away from the maid already, he opened it, and Garden bounded out and sat beside him. From the maid's continuing coos, though, there was no problem in leaving Loriel alone with a human.

"Shouldn't you be with your mistress?" Rior asked her.

Garden only stared at him with those glowing, disturbing, too-intelligent eyes and said nothing. Of course. If she was telepathic, Rior had yet to see a sign of it. But then, some companions, even though they were telepathic, only spoke to the ones who bonded with them. Perhaps Garden spoke to Loriel all the time, and just wanted to remain with him to make sure he wasn't doing anything evil while Loriel was prepared to meet the nobles.

"All right, come with me, then," said Rior. "I have to visit Dorwen and tell him and the other nobles about this." He began to walk, Garden keeping up with him easily. "And perhaps try to convince him once again that Loriel will need special treatment, though I don't think that will impress him—"

A low growl from in front of him made Rior look up in startlement. He relaxed when he recognized Iridescent, a gazehound he had helped train for one of his innumerable cousins. Rior had trouble remembering all his cousins' names, but never their dogs.

"Come here, Iri," he said, holding his hand out.

The dog bared her teeth, growled, snarled, and bounded away from him.

Rior withdrew his hand slowly, wishing he could pretend that Iridescent had been snarling at Garden. But no, she had been looking directly at him, and acting as though he were one of the rogues she had been trained to hunt.

Has the transformation begun, then? he thought soberly. *Can they sense that I am going to the Dark?*

He went to fetch Dorwen and the others with his heart heavier in his breast than it had been.

Chapter 22

Garden Before the Nobles

Garden stalks after Meat-Giver, proud of herself. All she had to do was come up beside him, and the growling dog understood that he belonged to another pack and took herself away.

Garden thinks she now understands what it takes to be a dominant wolf. She has to stare directly into the eyes of anyone who challenges her, and act as though she will attack on a moment's notice. The dogs will lower their eyes and run in the opposite direction. It even seems to work with some of the humans. Garden could smell the human female's uneasiness when she came into the room where Meat-Giver had put Human-Scent. Of course, Garden herself is uneasy in such a human place, but she doesn't show it, and the human female does, and that means Garden won.

She follows Meat-Giver down tunnels and around corners that seem to bend endlessly, until she is panting and wishing for something to drink. From the way Meat-Giver smells, he could use water, too. Garden pauses and waits until he missed the sounds of her paws and looks back at her.

"What is it?" he asks.

Garden wishes that she could make the sounds that he does, or that Meat-Giver understood scents. It would be much simpler to make him understand her meaning. But she wags her tail and whines, then lets her tongue loll over her teeth until it almost touches the fur of her chest.

Meat-Giver shakes his head. "Of course," he mutters, and turns to the side. Garden watches, surprised, as he opens a part of the wall and vanishes into another room, coming out with a dish full of water. "We keep these to wash with," he explains, as he sets the bowl down, and then pauses and shakes his head again. "Why am I explaining matters to a wolf?"

Garden laps industriously at the water, then steps back so that Meat-Giver can drink his fill. He does, but by scooping up water in his paws and bringing it to his face, which seems inefficient to Garden. She is more than willing to teach him how to drink properly, but he has turned and is hastening on again, like a pack alpha who has seen a wounded doe not far away. Garden gives the water a single mournful glance and follows Meat-Giver. He doesn't smell much better. They must be going to face a hostile pack of some sort, Garden decides, and paces up beside him, ready to fling herself on the first pack member who attacks.

At last Meat-Giver pauses outside one wall, smooths his hair and takes a deep breath. Garden watches curiously. He reminds her of a puppy getting ready for its first hunt. But he opens the wall without the solemn joy that usually fills the pup.

Garden follows him into another room where more humans are gathered, some of them with dogs beside them. Garden bares her teeth, knowing that if worst comes to worst the

dogs will stand with their humans and fight as part of their pack. The dogs bare their teeth back.

And there is the cat she chased earlier! Garden pricks her ears and lets her tongue loll again. If she can just get close enough without attracting Meat-Giver's attention, she might get a bite from the cat yet.

The cat notices her looking at him and hisses. Garden lets her tongue loll down still more, and the cat turns his back on her.

"Rior."

Garden looks up alertly. The human she met earlier, who appears able to distress Meat-Giver very easily, is speaking again. Garden studies him for a moment, and then dubs him Smug-Scent. That is the smell that has hung about him since she first met him, it seems.

"Yes, Dorwen?" says Meat-Giver. The word is not one that Garden knows. She sits down and looks from face to face, wondering if the packs will decide to fight soon. There is a quiet, bristling tension between Meat-Giver and Smug-Scent that says they will, but already Garden is becoming resigned to the idea that humans seldom do anything the efficient and natural way.

"We wish to know what progress you have made with the Princess Lorie." "

Garden doesn't understand most of that sentence, but it appears that Meat-Giver does. His skin pales, and his scent smells of fear. Yet his voice is steady. Garden wonders why he doesn't want to show his fear. "Very little, I'm afraid, Dorwen. She listens to me speak, but will not speak. And she did not want, at first, to wear clothes. A maid is with her, dressing her."

"You know why this is happening, don't you, Rior?" Smug-Scent asks.

"She is still testing us," says Meat-Giver. "She wants to make sure that no loyalty to the Dark lives in our hearts."

"Or in yours."

Meat-Giver tenses. Garden, who understands little of the conversation—why do these humans care about the night or the day?—yawns and lies on the floor, proceeding to go to sleep.

But then Smug-Scent speaks her name, and raises her head with the word.

"This Garden of yours, as I have heard you call her," says Smug-Scent, picking through the words, "is also part of the judging effort?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Then why does she follow only you? Why not visit the other nobles and also test their hearts?"

"I don't know."

"I think I do, Rior," says Smug-Scent. His voice is gentle, but his scent is not, and Garden is not fooled. There was a bitch in the pack like that, too, who would pretend that she was not about to bite someone and then do it anyway. Come to think of it, Human-Scent is like that. Perhaps this is Human-Scent's pack? "She knows that you are the only risk to her mistress, the only Dark-hearted one among us."

The other humans in the room smell smug and relieved. Meat-Giver is silent, glancing at the ground as though Smug-Scent is his alpha and has bitten him for some reason. Then he looks back up and says, "If you really believe that, why did you give me the Regency?"

More words that Garden does not know. But she can smell that Meat-Giver is distressed, and knows no reason why he should be. She stalks forward and growls at Smug-Scent.

Smug-Scent just glances at her, and then looks away again. He can't be troubled to meet her eyes, but Garden also smells fear on him. She growls again.

"There are reasons, Rior, reasons that you can't be expected to know," says Smug-Scent, and stands up abruptly. "We must let Destiny take its course. But, for now, leave us. We have many things to speak of."

"Yes," says Meat-Giver, and now his scent smells vicious. Garden wonders why. "I suppose so." He turns for the door.

Garden follows him, snarling over her shoulder. Some of the dogs and humans both smell as if they would like to spring on Meat-Giver, though only the dogs, with bared teeth and flattened ears, are honest about it. When she growls, though, they sink back as if calmed.

Garden raises her ears and tail high as she parades out the door behind Meat-Giver.

Yes, being an alpha is fun.

Chapter 23

Arran, Light, and Shadow

"The devotees of the God Arran have ever used flat stones near the River to cry to their god. It is said that He favors such stones because they symbolize the union of land and water that His worshippers do. Azure mages are still human, and cannot live in the water, but they can stand near the water and pray to it, just as the stones stand close and are drenched with constant spray."

-Excerpt from a book used to teach the priestesses of Elle about other religions.

"Arran, my lord. Hear me."

It was a simple and even a desperate way to begin a prayer, but Rior thought he had a right to be desperate. Apparently his Destiny was coming true, and it was obvious to everyone but him. The way the dogs had growled at him, the way that Garden followed him about and stared at him with judging eyes, the way that Dorwen and all the others seemed to know about his turning to the Dark...

But no news of it had come to Rior. He only knew what was supposed to happen at all because of Songs the Shadows Sing. And he didn't think that could possibly be right. Why would Shadow tell him something that Light and his god were both leaving him in ignorance of?

He had gone outside the castle altogether to pray, standing on a rock that projected from the east side of the castle's island. No other Arranite was there at the moment, for which Rior was profoundly grateful. They would surely have found something to criticize in his prayer.

Rior cast his mind out as he prayed, lading his thoughts with the waves, whispering and then listening for an answer. In time, one came, rising from the bottom of the River Isiluin and lodging in his mind.

What makes you think that the Light and Arran have any obligation to tell you your Destiny?

Rior sighed. "I did not mean to voice the prayer as a demand," he murmured. "But it is very difficult, to realize that I have a Destiny to fulfill and no idea of how to fulfill it."

Again, he waited, and again the answer came to him, clean and clear and touched with the foam of the River.

You will fulfill your Destiny because you have no choice. Even those who rebel against the Light are pulled back into their proper pattern at last. The Dark conquered Ilantra, but the Dark will not keep it. Princess Lorie will become Queen, and rule with the Light in her heart. For that to happen, you must become Regent first, and then turn the country against you and for Lorie.

"Thank you for telling me," said Rior. "But I have always served the Light with a willing heart. Why must I be turned against it?"

The Light itself answered him this time, or so Rior thought of the clear thought that struck through his mind, revealing it as murky by comparison. *You might try to do as we asked of you, but you have been taught all your life that the Dark is evil. You would not see the necessity of your turning to it.*

"Is there a choice, then? Is there a way that this could be done without the sacrifice of my life?"

And then they left him, the river flowing away, the Light turning from his mind. Rior opened his eyes. "I suppose that last was too impertinent," he muttered.

"I would not have considered it so."

Rior turned his head, not really surprised to see that one of the shadows of the westering sun had come to life and taken on the form of a wolf. It crouched beside him on the flat rock, lashed by the leaping water from the River and yet appearing to take no notice of it. Its golden eyes were fixed on his face. "I am come from Shadow, to see if you will hear its words."

"I have already heard them, and they have not convinced me to turn my heart," Rior replied. "You can take that as answer back to your master."

"You have not learned what Shadow can give you."

"It can spare my life. I know that. But it would not turn the country back to the Light, because that would be against its own interests. And if it comes down to it, my life is a lesser price to pay than a bloody civil war."

"But they need not pay it, the Light and Arran. They are merely turning to the idea of sacrifice because it is so time-honored. They think someone must die. They could see a way past, did they look at the world with new eyes, like the eyes of a power long shut away from it. But they will not look for it."

Rior said nothing. He didn't see that it would profit him to keep talking longer with Shadow, especially when he had the answers that he had come to the River to find. He rose, casting one last glance at the water, and turned for the castle, where he was sure that many people were searching for "my Lord Regent."

The shadow-wolf was in front of him again, one paw actually resting out of the shadows. It tilted its head. Rior looked at Garden to see what she made of this, but she was asleep in the sunlight and took no notice.

Rior turned unenthusiastically back. "What do you want?"

"I can not only spare your life," said the wolf, and its voice rang with the power that Rior had so far only experienced in his dream. "I can teach you many things. I can teach you to listen to the shadows, to blend into them, and to forsake your form for another."

Rior snorted. "I have heard legends of shapeshifters. But all of them are only legends. Or elves."

"No. It was an art of Shadow, and lost when the other powers drove me from the world. But I could teach it to you." The shadows stirred, and Rior had the impression that the wolf had stepped closer to him, but he could no longer make out its form. All he could see were the golden eyes, burning in the gloom. "I could make you an animal, any animal you truly are tied to."

"A dog, then," said Rior.

"But your bond with dogs is no longer secure," said the creature smartly.

"Because of you."

"Because of the Light, rather." The golden eyes tilted. "I could almost think that you don't want this gift."

"What would I do with it?"

"It would aid you," said the shadow-wolf. "You could fulfill your Destiny more easily if you could run on four legs to protect Princess Loriele when she needs it. And perhaps the others would stop looking at you so askance if you proved that you were no longer the human Rior they have come to loathe."

"I think it rather likelier they would loathe me more." Rior couldn't pretend he lacked curiosity, but he didn't think it would be wise to speak of it openly much longer.

"Farewell for now. I must go and prepare for the feast that Dorwen will surely order, when he finds out that Princess Loriele can stand on her own with support and keep her clothes on."

"Has it occurred to you that Dorwen still rules?"

"Of course."

"Then you don't even gain the power of the Regency that the corrupt Regent is supposed to want." The shadow-wolf formed again and sprawled on the stone in an imitation of Garden, staring up at him. "What do you gain?"

"The satisfaction of doing my duty," said Rior coolly. Stepping around the shadow-wolf, he walked on towards the feast.

But he did send one final prayer back towards the River. *My Lord Arran, keep me true to my course, and my heart secure from temptation!*

A moment's pause, and the god's voice answered him, gurgling and shifting like bubbles in the water. *If you cannot keep to your duty, then the Light will drag you to it. Either way, you will be true.*

Rior sighed and opened his eyes again, wishing he had paid more attention when the Court mage tried to teach him about magical theory. There had to be a reason that he was the perfect sacrifice, the best choice for Regent, and perhaps the Light and Arran would explain it if he could understand it.

But then, he had been learning about magic just as the world went mad with the sudden arrival of new gods and powers. Perhaps there were no settled theories anymore. Or perhaps this was just what the Light needed to do to come back to power in Ilantra.

Of course it is, and I should bow my head and attend to my duty, not worry about understanding it.

Chapter 24

Swords and Voices

You have returned again.

This is good! There is the hope that we might form a friendship, in spite of the many things that prevent us from doing so.

What things? Oh, things like your disdain of me and of talking swords in general, and my disdain of you.

How could I help but disdain you? You will not give me ale. You speak as if my desires didn't matter to you at all, as if the tales I could tell you are less important than the dirt on your boots. Of course I won't like that. I don't think that ordinary swords don't like it when you leave blood rusted on their blades, but they don't have the voices to complain. I do.

Oh, I saw your sword when you brought it in the other day. Blood all over it. Don't you ever clean your weapons? But why would you? They are only weapons, after all.

No, an apology doesn't heal all the wounds. Ale would help, as would promising to listen to the tales in the order that I want to tell them. And not leaving the blood and rust on your swords from now on.

Why shouldn't I ask this from you? I've told you that it doesn't really matter to me if you hear these stories or not. And so long as I have someone to talk to, it doesn't really matter if I speak of the history-tales or something else entirely unrelated to it, like what we're talking about now.

So you might go away and never talk to me again? I suppose you might. But then where would you get your stories?

I can hear your teeth grinding from across the room, you know. It reminds me of the time one of my owners died fighting a cave-bear and left me in the cave until the spring, when the bear departed and a new hero could come in and find me. I had to spend the whole winter listening to the bear breathe. It never stopped, and sometimes it sounded very irritated with me, just like your teeth-grinding does.

Why does not bringing me the ale matter so much? What is it about you that you can't lose a single battle, can't admit to a single defeat?

Glaring at me won't help matters.

Nor will swinging that sword about. I know that she doesn't have a voice, but I can feel her anger and resentment. She won't strike me and she won't shatter my blade, the way that you are hoping she might.

Why let her fall from your hand? It looks as though that hurt. I don't think that she would appreciate very much, if she could speak. Do you resent all swords, then, even the ones that can't speak back to you? Or do you resent the ones who can because you know that all swords would have a grievance against you, could they but speak?

Where are you going?

Chapter 25

Presentations

"The royal Courts all have their different standards of behavior. In Doralissa, anything but the most formal behavior is unacceptable. In Orlath, one watches the King or Queen and any elves who are visiting the monarch, since they wish so much to ape Doralissa. In Gazania, the King's word is law.

"In Ilantra, matters are a little more complicated..."

--The Lord of the Star Circle.

Rior smoothed his hair again and tried to ignore his grumbling stomach. He'd had nothing to eat since the biscuit this morning, but he hoped that wasn't obvious. He wanted to appear placid and unruffled for the Princess's welcoming celebration.

He opened the door into the Great Hall.

At once light and cheers—some of them more realistic than others—flooded his eyes and ears. Rior put his hand over his face to defend his eyes from the intense light, knowing that the gesture would be seen and judged by the others as a sign that his heart was already Darkening.

At the moment, he hardly cared. *Have they employed all the Scarlet mages in the castle to light lamps, that it should be so bright?*

At last, he thought he could face the light, and let his hand fall, blinking. The Hall was indeed filled with lamps, not only set on tables but strung from chains that ran across the ceiling. The lamps flared with much light and very little smoke or heat, a sure sign that they were the products of Scarlet mages. In various corners there stood pots of earth and cages in which winds rattled the bars. Glancing subtly about, Rior finally noticed a few vats of water, and relaxed. *At least that means that I am not the only Azure mage at this celebration. Perhaps there are even some who honor Arran here.*

Looking at the people themselves, though, he didn't see much hope of that. Almost everyone in sight wore the medallion of Elle, or a crescent moon on their hands or cheeks. The priestesses in their gray robes even stood openly in the Hall for the first time since the marriage of the King and Queen and the death of King Ocior. Their faces were austere and stern, and they didn't look directly at Rior. He had the feeling they knew about his Destiny.

Of course they do. They can read the future.

He let his eyes range to the dais, and saw Princess Loriel standing there, leaning on the arm of her maid, who looked so happy and excited that she had almost forgotten about not being properly dressed herself. She smiled at Rior and bowed her head, murmuring something that was probably "My Lord Regent," but that Rior couldn't hear over the cheers or Dorwen's sudden bellow.

"My Lord Regent, you have come with grace and wonder, the grace and wonder with which you shall rule! Already the common folk speak of your justice and wisdom in judging them, and I know that your name will soon be wisdom across the whole of the country!"

Rior sighed and let Dorwen take his hand. It would only look ungracious to refuse, though by letting Dorwen clasp his hand at all he was risking political affiliations that could well become afflictions. His cousin beamed into his face, then stepped back and gestured towards the dais.

"Won't you take your proper place?"

Rior stepped forward.

A hiss of sound started moving throughout the room. Rior glanced around, perplexed, and saw many of the nobles trying to restrain their dogs. He sighed and looked at the ground. *My transformation has truly begun, then. Well, the Light and Arran did warn me that it would be this way.*

Then Garden stepped forward, standing at his side with her head lifted and her ears pricked. She made an inquiring little sound, a growl that was to an ordinary growl what a human chuckle was to a full belly laugh

The growling of the dogs stopped.

Rior shook his head. *And then again, this could be a trick of Shadow to persuade me into surrendering. Perhaps it thinks that if it takes my dogs from me, then I will turn to it and to Garden—who might be its servant—out of loneliness.* He stood straighter, and shook his shoulders back when he felt the weight of their gazes. *Not likely. I will bear up under this.*

He walked forward, while the nobles watched and the flames flickered in the lamps and Princess Loriel stared blankly forward. She appeared to recognize him when he stepped on the dais, but she only turned her head away with a little snarling sound audible at a great distance.

Rior knew that gesture, too, would be seen and judged, and had to mask a sigh with his hand as a cough. Then, of course, there would be eyes feasting on and judging the cough, and—

To distract his mind from his thoughts, he reached out and took a goblet of wine from a table on the dais, then held it up so that everyone could see the light flash from the delicate glass. At once, the nobles fell silent and reached out, gathering up their own goblets to hear his toast.

Rior stared out over them and caught Dorwen's eyes. His cousin was smirking, and the smirk wasn't even subtle; if Rior could see it at this distance, anyone who wanted to could read it.

Rebellion stirred in Rior's heart. *I am turning to the Dark because I have no choice. I am flowing with my Destiny because I have no choice. But I don't recall anyone saying that I must obey Dorwen and let him have his own way all the time, so I will not.*

He swept a bow and then said in a clear, ringing voice, "To my cousin Dorwen, who has done so much that everyone ought to thank him for."

Stares turned towards Dorwen. Minds raced busily along the track of the Regent's words, to see what they could mean. Dorwen scowled at him, recognizing the pit of speculation that Rior had just dumped him into, and not liking it.

Rior smiled over the lip of the goblet, and drank his wine to a muted chorus of "To Dorwen!" Then he raised his cup again, and of course they hushed at once, wanting to know what his words would reveal about him.

"I also want to emphasize that you don't need to call me by title," said Rior, and watched their brows wrinkle in confusion. "I understand that many of you would have preferred to see someone else in the Regent's office, and I wouldn't want the title 'my Lord Regent' to stick in your throats and choke you. You may call me Rior, or my lord, or any title in between that suits you. You may address me as cousin; I would recommend that, but it appears to choke some of you even more than the formal title. Be that as it may. I don't want the Ilantran nobility dying of congested lungs." He held up his goblet again. "To freedom to call me by whatever title you truly desire!"

Even fewer people echoed this one, though many tossed the wine down their throats as if they thought they would need it. And even more people glanced at Dorwen this time, who was scowling openly.

"Finally," said Rior, trying to recover from the rush of the wine—*I really have to get some food in me soon*—"I would be remiss if I did not speak of the reason for this evening, the reason that the Light will soon come back to Ilantra." He heard some gasps at such an open challenge of the Dark, but he ignored them, turning to the Princess. "To Princess Lorie, the future of the Light!"

It was unfortunate that Princess Lorie chose to drool just then.

Rior glanced away from her, fighting the urge to laugh, less at the Princess than that at the expressions on the faces of everyone who had watched her drool. *You tried to hide it from yourselves, and now that she is in front of you, you can't. Pardon me if I find that a little amusing. I think that a victim on the altar is still permitted a little amusement if the priestess sacrificing him suddenly passes gas.*

"To Princess Lorie!" he said firmly, and the others echoed him fervently this time, so that they could forget about what they had just seen. Rior put his wineglass down and beckoned to one of the servants at the side.

"Water and meat," he said. He could see fruit sparkling temptingly on the plates on the table, but the thought of eating it disgusted him. He thought it would be too sweet for him. "And bring some of the water in a bowl, for the Lady Garden."

"Who?" asked the servant.

Garden nipped his hip, and the man started and fell back, bowing all over himself and promising the water and the meat as soon as he could fill his hands with dishes.

Rior glanced at the nobles, who were filing forward to meet Princess Lorie, and then down at Garden. She beat her tail on the ground in a complex tattoo and met his eyes solemnly, but with no sign of fear.

"That was very wrong of you," he said.

Garden lolled her tongue in that movement he always thought of as laughter. Rior felt his own lips twitch in response.

"But amusing," he added, and then turned to greet the first of the nobles up to the dais. It was Dorwen, of course.

His cousin strode furiously towards him, gripped his hand hard enough to hurt, and said, "What do you think you're doing? In Elle's name, Rior—"

"Shouldn't you be welcoming Princess Lorie with that oath, my Lord Dorwen?" Rior murmured, returning the grip.

"I will," said Dorwen. "But she is our hope, and not you."

Rior shook his head. "You believe many different things about me, Lord Dorwen, and all of them are contradictory. I do wish you would make your mind up about which one you prefer. Do you think I am a Dark conspirator, or someone who is trying to take the throne and the Regency from you, or someone trying to take Princess Lorie's place as the hero of the Light? Those all contradict each other, and those are only the ones I have heard of. I am sure there are others, perhaps even wilder."

"You know very well what are you are Destined to do."

"Yes. And if I am Destined to become part of the Dark, why put me in the Regent's spot? That is something I have wondered."

"You understand nothing of the intricacies of the Light," said Dorwen. "If someone must be sacrificed to the Light, then he must be sacrificed."

"I don't think you would be as complacent as you are, if your life was the required price," said Rior.

"But it is not. I am not of the Dark. I am of the Light. And you will do as I tell you to do."

"If I am of the Dark, why should I?"

Dorwen breathed as calmly and quietly as he could for a long moment. Rior watched him with a slight grin. The man was amusing, not least because he didn't seem to understand that Rior's Destiny, if real, didn't require him to adhere to any of the rules of the Light.

In a sense, it is freedom. And it is wonderful.

"You rule as Regent for the Princess, and never for yourself," said Dorwen at last. "You should not forget that."

"If ambition for the throne would make me become you, then you need never worry about my aspiring to it, my Lord Dorwen."

It took his cousin a few moments to work out what that meant, but when he did, he flushed and turned pointedly away to greet the Princess.

Rior grinned and turned to look back out over the Great Hall. *If they will condemn me to a position where I must play politics, then the only thing to do is play them well.*

Because he was almost the only one not looking at the dais but out from it, he saw the danger at once. The doors opened, and three women stepped inside. They might have looked normal, save for the undulating grace with which they moved, and the snakes that grew from their shoulders in the place of arms.

And so it begins. The People of the Snake were servants of the Dark.

Rior stepped forward and pitched his voice to carry. "Welcome, my ladies! Have you come to honor the heir to the throne of Ilantra?"

Chapter 26

Garden Among the Snakes

Garden sniffs, and then growls as the scent of snake-flesh fills her nostrils. She can remember battles with vipers in the forest, and these smell like those same snakes. She remembers when one sprawled across a path kept her from rejoining the pack for hours and bringing meat that was desperately needed.

But Meat-Giver seems to be speaking words of welcome. Garden holds herself back from stalking forward for the moment, and regards the strange snakes on the ends of the human arms instead.

As the strange people come closer, she realizes that that they have snakes on their feet, too. One of the snakes peers out from beneath a piece of draped human fur and flickers its

tongue at her. Garden snarls back, and starts to step forward after all. She knows a threat when she sees one.

"Garden."

Garden stills. Meat-Giver's hand is on her neck, and Meat-Giver's voice is low and reasonable, the voice of an alpha who knows his place and is not about to yield it. He steps forward and addresses the snake-human again, still smelling of welcome and of cleverness concealed.

"The Princess was your goal, was she not?"

The snake-women stare at him. Garden smells their scents, and then lolls her tongue. When she can ignore the threatening scent of the snakes, the women themselves smell almost as bewildered as Smug-Scent. They don't know what to make of Meat-Giver. They are like lone wolves who think to take over a pack that has lost its alpha, only to find the alpha alive and well and willing to fight if necessary.

"Yes," says one of the women at last. "We did come to see the Princess Lorie, though she is not the next heir of Ilantra."

"I don't know why not," says Meat-Giver. "Her brother rules in Arvenna, and she is the elder. I would think that Queen Aloriadell wouldn't trouble herself about her daughter ruling in Ilantra."

"You know the reason, Rior."

Garden glances back and forth from the snake-women to Meat-Giver. There is still a lot of this that she doesn't understand, but it seems that "Rior" is the sound that relates to Meat-Giver. Garden scratches her ear. That might be useful, someday, though she will still think of him as Meat-Giver. It's better that way, and more true to what he is than these humans think.

"I know that Dark and Light have fought for a long time, and there is no need," says Meat-Giver. He smells as baffled by this preference for night over day as Garden does. "Why should Prince Imor not rule in Arvenna, and Princess Lorie here in Ilantra?"

"That might turn the Kingdom back to the Light."

"If that is its Destiny..." Meat-Giver makes a motion with his shoulders that Garden has come to identify with a resigned or baffled scent. He really doesn't smell as if he cares about who wins this battle, and Garden is glad, though she doesn't think that his sense will stand him in much good stead with the other humans.

"Destiny has shattered," hisses one of the snake-women. "You know that, Rior. Or should."

"I would not know," says Meat-Giver blandly. "I have chosen to serve Destiny, as far as it will carry me."

The snake-women look at each other in the way that Garden has seen members of the pack look at each other when they suddenly realize that the supposedly sick and lame stag they have pinned is healthy after all. Then one of them looks back at Meat-Giver and says, "Will you turn over the throne to Queen Aloriadell when she comes?"

"If the Light and Arran will me to."

Garden yawns. More things that she doesn't understand, and she almost naps while Meat-Giver and the snake-women speak back and forth. But she wakes up abruptly when Meat-Giver says, with a snarl just hidden in the back of his voice, "I will not step down from the throne, or give up the Regency. My cousins have chosen me to this, and I will embrace my Destiny with all my heart."

"This is not the Dark's will," says one of the snake-women, and Garden inches closer to Meat-Giver, seeing the anger in her eyes and smelling the anger that hangs all about her. Besides, one of her snake-arms is writhing and snapping back and forth, as if quite upset about something. "You were supposed to serve the Dark, my Lord Regent. Did you not know that?"

Meat-Giver bows his head, and for a moment Garden has to wrinkle her nose at the smells writhing all about him. They are confused and tangled, to the point that she cannot pick out a single one. But then Meat-Giver looks back and says, "If I serve the Dark's will, I am doing the Light's will. Is that what you want?"

One of the snake-women hisses, and one of the snakes on her feet lunges forward as if prepared to strike.

Garden is ready for that, though, and lunges before the snake can get there, clamping her jaws just behind the head. She knew Meat-Giver should never have trusted these creatures!