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# THE HEIR OF WESTFELL

*Christopher W. Wilcox, Sr.*

Whiskey Creek Press  
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THE HEIR OF WESTFELL

by  
Christopher W. Wilcox, Sr.  
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*THE HEIR OF WESTFELL*

“Rory’s life is transformed from the existence of a nobody to being the heir of royalty after his mother is murdered by evil men. He journeys to his grandfather, the Duke of Westfell’s, home where he is welcomed and learns that not only was his mother the daughter of a duke, but the father who was barred from his life is an elven prince. Thus, he begins learning how to be one of the nobility and discovering skills that make him a valuable warrior. However, his mother’s slaying was only the first dark deed. Jealous men and far darker beings have evil plans for the realm, endangering not only the world of men, but the elves and dwarves as well. Yet, against the vile machinations stand Rory, whose love and whose gifts have made him into a warrior well suited to stop the darkness.

This tale of Rory’s journey to maturity is sweeping in its scope. Mr. Wilcox’s world building skills are effective, telling us all we need to know without going into the excessive detail that often makes epic fantasy ponderous and boggy. Fans of Mercedes Lackey in particular should find this a good addition to their shelves, as the tone of the story has a great deal in common with her Valdemar saga.”

~~Reviewed by Amanda Killgore, Independent Book Reviewer and posted at: The Huntress Book Reviews: ([www.huntressreviews.com/efant.htm](http://www.huntressreviews.com/efant.htm)) and The Eternal Night

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*Æthereal*

*Æthereal Revealed*

*Æthereal’s Clans*

*Æthereal’s Pride*

## Dedication



~~To Bob Fisher—for starting me on this journey

~~To Debi and Steve Womack—for taking a chance on a novice

~~To Jinger Heaston—for all the phenomenal covers

~~To Chere Gruver—for being a real editor and a good friend

~~To my family—for their unstinting love and support

And most of all,

~~To the readers, for without you, we're just whispering tales in the dark

## *Part One*

### *WESTFELL*

#### Chapter 1

« ^ »

Rory peered through the brush where he had hidden as the Outlander soldiers rode away from the flaming remains of what had been his home. He hadn't been there when they arrived; he'd been hunting for game in the forest. It was the sound of Grandmother Abigail's screams that had brought him back through the dense woods. Fearing the worst, he had slowly crawled the last quarter of a mile through the densest shrubs he could find to mask his approach from the marauding soldiers. The small log cabin was already in flames when he reached a spot where he could see the clearing, and he had seen two of the soldiers casually toss Abigail's body into the flames before they mounted their horses and rode away.

Tears made tracks down his dirty face as the roof of the cabin collapsed. *Gone*. Everything he had ever known in life was now gone; destroyed by a senseless act of brutality by the Outlanders. Grandmother Abigail had raised him out here in the deep woods and, for as long as he could remember, it had just been the two of them. In addition to practical things dealing with surviving in the forest through the different seasons, she had also taught him how to read and write. For a no-name lad of sixteen, Rory was probably far more educated than anyone other than the great nobles of the kingdom. Now, she was gone and he had no idea what to do.

He eased his way out of the thicket into which he had crawled and walked down to the remains of his home. The small broken spade he had meant to fix yesterday was still lying near what had been the back wall of the cabin, so Rory picked it up and carried it over to what had been Abigail's favorite spot; the small bend in the creek where an abundance of wildflowers bloomed every spring. Kneeling in the center of the spot, he began to dig using the broken spade. First, he carefully lifted up the sod and moved it aside. Then he dug the grave itself. Abigail had not been a very big woman to begin with and he knew little would remain after the fire, but what was left would be respectfully interred where she would be safe from any marauding animals.

The fire was just embers as he sifted through the ashes for her remains. Reverently, he gathered the bones and fragments and gently placed them in the grave. Once he was sure he had found all that remained of Abigail, he filled in the grave and replaced the sod over the top

of it. He edged the area with smooth rocks from the creek. He bent his head and quietly said a small prayer to the All-Father.

By now, the sun had completely set and the full spring moon had risen in the sky. When he was growing up, there had been many nights where he had heard night predators prowling around outside their cabin so Rory knew he had to find some kind of shelter in which to pass the night. After retrieving his bow and arrow quiver, he climbed high into one of the trees at the edge of the clearing. He settled himself as best he could, wrapped his arms around his chest in an effort to ward off the chill, and went to sleep.

\* \* \*

Rory washed the dirt and ash from his hands and arms in the creek. He had spent the morning seeing whether there was anything that could be salvaged from the ruin of his home, but all he had gotten for his efforts was dirty. All of Abigail's treasured books were gone. He had found a few misshapen metal lumps that may have been her prized candlesticks. There was no trace of anything of value; what little they had must have been taken by the soldiers.

Well, there was nothing for him here anymore. He had briefly considered rebuilding the cabin, but realized that such a task was beyond him right now, if only because he did not have the necessary tools. Besides that, Rory felt uneasy in the clearing, as if expecting the soldiers to return for him, though he had to wonder just what a group of Outlander soldiers would want with a sixteen-year-old no-name like himself.

Recalling what Abigail had told him of the geography of the kingdom, Rory knew the woods in which he stood were located near the western border with the Outlands. An uneasy peace had existed between the Kingdom of Aluria and the Outlands for almost half a century, although there had been raids across the border more frequently in the past few years. North of here were the vast Kendrahl Mountains soaring high into the sky, many of them still snowcapped in the height of summer. East and south were the settled lands of Aluria. Rory decided he would be better off if he traveled both north and east, entering the sparsely settled lands at the foothills of the Kendrahl Mountains and getting a feel for the state of the kingdom before he entered any major cities.

\* \* \*

The days melted into weeks as he made his solitary way through the vast woods of the Great Forest. He lived off the land, taking whatever small game strayed across his path as well as various edible plants he found along his way, while small creeks provided ample water to meet his needs.

Once he neared the foothills, he began to see signs of other people. First, the game trails he had been following became well-traveled paths. Next came various bits of discarded debris along the trail: a broken leather strap here, an arrow that someone failed to recover over there. Rory found abandoned campsites, the ashes in the fire pits long cold and dead. At the edge of the Great Forest, he found a lone tower with a curl of wood smoke rising above it.

The stone tower was close to fifty feet across its circular base and tapered slightly as it

passed between the floors until the parapet was only thirty feet across. The dressed-stone blocks fit together tightly with limestone mortar filling in the tiny chinks in the stone. Small windows with stout oak shutters pierced the walls at the second and third levels, although they were closed at the moment. Green moss covered the lower stones while ivy vines clung to the sunny side of the tower. A single massive oak door leading into the tower stood ajar.

Rory brushed the worst of the travel dirt from his clothes then stepped out from under the trees to stride confidently up to the open entryway to the stone tower.

"Is anyone within?" he called as he stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"Come in, boy. Come in," came a grumpy voice from near the hearth across the large single chamber.

Rory came carefully closer, trying to make out the details of the elderly figure near the fire.

"Hell, boy, I don't bite. My teeth aren't up to it." The old man cackled a rusty laugh. "Don't suppose you got any rabbits in that rucksack?"

Rory smiled at the plaintive wistfulness in the old man's voice. "I have one nice fat hare and a brace of quail I would be pleased to share in exchange for a night's lodging."

"Only a single night, boy? You need to work on your bargaining skills some," the old man muttered. "Well, get the game cleaned while I stoke up this fire."

Rory spent the next hour cleaning the game and preparing a hunter's stew of the meat, potatoes, and some onions he found in the kitchen area. Once the pot was hung from a swivel hook over the fire, he finished cleaning and preparing the rabbit pelt so he could use it later to make some form of mittens for his hands before the first snows. Finally, he gathered the offal and took it outside to the edge of woods where he buried it.

After washing up, he went back into the tower and started to look around. For all its unprepossessing exterior, the inside was richly appointed. The furnishings were crafted of oak, smoothed and well polished, with all joins tight and virtually seamless. Fine brocade and colorful tapestries draped the stone walls. They simultaneously softened the room's appearance while providing an insulating layer between those within and the stone walls. There was a large, compartmented cabinet containing hundreds of scrolls.

The old man watched as the boy prowled the room. When he was standing before the cabinet of scrolls, the old man asked, "Can you read, boy?"

"Yes, sir," Rory replied. "This is quite a collection. I have never seen so many scrolls in one place before."

The old man snorted. "Bah. Those are just scrolls about cooking and herbs and such. The real library is on the second level, or should I say, *is* the second level, since it takes up the whole floor." The old man sniffed appreciatively at the bubbling stew. "What's your name, boy, and where do you come from?"

"My name is Rory and I come from the western edge of the Great Forest."

"There's no town or settlement in the Great Forest," snapped the old man.

"I didn't live in a town or settlement. I lived alone with my grandmother in a clearing about a mile from the Greater Tyree River inside the Great Forest."

"Your grandmother, you say? I know of only one woman given leave to live within the Great Forest. Abigail was her name."

"Aye, that was my grandmother's name," Rory replied sadly.

"Serve up the stew, Rory, and tell me your story while we eat," the old man said. "You'll find some bowls in the cabinet to your right and there's bound to be some spoons in the drawer below the bowls."

Rory dished up the stew and poured a glass of wine for the old man from an unmarked flagon, opting for a glass of cold water for himself. Once they settled down, he started his tale for the old man, pausing every once in a while to eat his own dinner. "There's really not much of a tale. The only memories I have are of the cabin with Abigail. She told me to call her Grandmother Abigail and I did. She taught me to read and write, as well as the skills needed to survive in the woods. We grew various vegetables and, once I was old enough, I hunted for game. We lived a very simple life, and rarely ever saw anyone else."

Rory took a sip of his water and then continued. "One day while I was out hunting, having gone farther from the cabin than normal, I heard a faint scream carried on the wind. I raced back to the cabin to find it fully engulfed in flames. A group of Outlander soldiers were there. Two were already mounted on their horses and the last pair picked up Abigail's body and threw her into the flaming cabin. They mounted their horses and the group rode away."

"I dug a grave for her in her favorite spot and, once the flames burned out, I gathered her bones and placed them into it." Rory shook his head as if clearing the memory of that painful episode, and then said, "Since there was nothing left for me there, I decided to leave the Great Forest so I walked north and east until I found my way to your door."

Rory was surprised to see tears glittering on the old man's cheeks in the firelight. "Sir, are you all right? I did not intend to cause you distress!"

The old man reached up one withered hand and angrily wiped away the tears. "Distress? Aye, that's the word for it. You see, Rory, Abigail was my daughter, though we hadn't spoken in over fifteen years."

"How is that possible, sir? I mean, she was ... old."

The old man chuckled. "Old? Abigail? No, son, she wasn't old. She'd have turned forty last summer and that's not old. I suspect her appearance had been altered in subtle ways by her use of dyes and colorings to disguise who she was. By getting you to call her grandmother, she furthered that illusion."

"But there was no one else there."

"There must have been someone at some point. Why else would soldiers have gone there? Tell me about those soldiers, Rory. You called them Outlanders. Why?"

Rory thought about it for a moment, recalling the four men on their horses. "Who else could they have been, sir? Abigail always warned me not to stray too far from the cabin 'or the Outlanders will get you' was what she would say."



"Think hard, son. What color was their livery?"

"Black, sir. Everything about them was black. From their boots to their clothes, even the saddles and tack used on their horses, everything was black."

"Very good. Do you remember anything else about their clothes or their saddles?"

"They were kind of far away and I was having trouble seeing through my tears, but it did seem that the fire glinted off something worn on the left breast of each man's tunic."

The old man shook his head sadly. "That's what I was afraid of. Those weren't Outlanders, Rory. They were the Duke of Eastfell's men." The old man drained his wine and said, "He's taken his revenge at last. It's a long story and I am too tired to speak of it tonight. How about helping an old man up the stairs and we'll see about finding you a place to sleep and some clean clothes."

Rory reached over and eased the old man to his feet. Rory could feel how frail Abigail's father was; his thin body seemed to have no muscle to it at all and his bones seemed light. "Sir, what may I call you?"

"Call me? I guess I never did introduce myself, did I? I am Richard, Duke of Westfell, my boy. Since my Abigail is now gone, that makes me your sole living relative and you my only heir." Patting Rory's arm, he added, "All in good time, my boy, all in good time. When we reach the third floor, my room is to the right and the one you will consider your own is to the left."

They climbed the stairs in silence from that point. Passing briefly through the second floor library, Rory noticed the light from the candelabra made the shadows dance amid the stacks of scrolls as they moved to the stairwell to the next level. Reaching the third level, the duke guided Rory to the left. Rory opened the door to a vast bedchamber. The large four-poster bed was dark with age, but the thick featherbed was plump and fresh. "There are clothes in the wardrobes that will probably fit you. Feel free to wear whatever you like." As he turned to go, the duke said, "You can sleep without worry in this tower, Rory. Nothing can harm us here." With those words, the duke walked out of the room and across the hall to his own chamber, closing the door behind him.

Rory looked around the room. There was not a speck of dust anywhere. The bed linens were fresh and clean. There was fresh water in the ewer beside the washbasin. *How is all this possible?* He had not seen any sign of servants in the tower. He knew how much work it was to keep a home clean. Abigail had been quite insistent in daily cleaning. There was no way the duke had done all this.

## Chapter 2

« ^ »

Rory opened his eyes to find bright sunlight streaming through the open shutters of the room. He reluctantly climbed out of the huge featherbed. It had been the most luxurious night's rest

he had ever had, warm and cozy. He just knew it would be chilly once he climbed out of the bed and put his feet on the stone floor. *Oh, well, can't stay in bed forever.* He slid out of bed and walked over to the washstand. He poured some of the water from the ewer into the basin and was surprised to find steam rising from the bowl. The water was hot. What was a reluctant chore had been transformed into something wonderful. *But how had hot water been put in the ewer without waking me?*

His ablutions completed, Rory padded over to the wardrobe and opened the door to reveal many fine tunics and breeches, all in a dark forest green. He slid his hand over the fine fabrics. *I can't wear these! They are much too fine.* He looked around for his own homespun clothes but they were gone, taken, Rory presumed, by whoever had brought in the hot water. Since there was no choice in the matter, Rory picked out the least ostentatious of the tunics and breeches. He found thick hose in one of the drawers and he slid his foot gratefully into the dark green woolen sock. The breeches and tunic fit as if they had been made for him. He tied his long hair back using a thong he found in the wardrobe then started trying to find his boots. They, too, had vanished from the spot where he had placed them the night before. In their place sat a pair of dark green suede half-boots. Rory was no longer surprised when he discovered they fit perfectly.

Rory went down to the second level and found the duke sitting in a chair by one of the windows. There was a table beneath the window and upon it were platters of eggs, rashers of bacon, several chunks of bread, and a pitcher of what smelled like spiced tea. "Sit down, boy, and have something to eat!"

Rory drew up the second chair and helped himself to the food. As he ate, he looked at the man across from him, seeing him clearly for the first time. The duke was perhaps sixty or sixty-five years old, with hair of pure white still thick on his head and eyes of a piercing blue like that of a crisp, fall morning. While thin, Duke Richard appeared hale and sound of wind. For the first time, Rory saw the garnet signet ring worn on the duke's left hand, carved in the likeness of a dire wolf. Realizing he was staring, he glanced away and his gaze was arrested by the portrait of a young woman that hung on the wall behind the duke. She was incredibly beautiful, with long black hair that fell over her shoulders in waves of ebony. Her eyes were like the duke's and they were even more compelling by the contrast of the blue with the black hair. The low-cut emerald gown revealed a creamy expanse of throat and bosom, making Rory wonder how she could move without revealing more than she should. The long sleeves were close fit, hinting at shapely arms that ended in elegant hands with long, slim fingers. The gown's full skirt denied any indication of what lay beneath it, but Rory could tell the woman was perfect in every manner.

"Yes, Rory, that is Abigail. That was painted just before she went to court to become one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. She was just twenty years old then. I know it's unusual for a woman of her station to be unwed at that age, but my Abigail was of her own mind about such things. I had hoped that a season or two at court would allow her to find someone she could accept as a husband, so I reluctantly let her go." The duke sipped his tea and then continued. "She was a big hit at court, as cultured and educated as she was beautiful. She soon became the queen's favorite and they were inseparable. Unfortunately, by being what she was, Abigail also attracted the attention of the wrong people and stirred up some jealousy among the other ladies-in-waiting. There was a scandal and Abigail fled the court, finding her refuge in the solitude of the Great Forest.

"I knew none of this, of course, until I received a notice from the king that Abigail had been banished from the court. I was dumbfounded. I immediately traveled to Aluria and sought an audience with the king, but none was granted. Everywhere I went, there were whispers at my back. I grew increasingly distraught. One night, about a fortnight after I had entered the capital, I received a note from the queen granting me an audience.

"At the appointed hour, I presented myself at the specified audience chamber and was admitted to see Her Majesty. The queen was a beautiful woman in her own right, although her coloring was the opposite of my Abigail's. Long blonde ringlets and green eyes. I could imagine what a striking pair the two of them had made. I bowed before her, waiting for her permission to rise. It was not long in coming. 'Rise, Richard, Duke of Westfell. You must tell us what news you have of our dear Abigail.' I explained to her that I had no news at all and I knew nothing of what had befallen Abigail since she had arrived at court. The queen looked at me and then dismissed her attendants to wait across the room out of earshot. The queen hesitated for a few moments, as if working up the courage to speak. 'Your daughter was taken from the bed of her lover and imprisoned for a night while the king determined her fate. In the end, he ruled she would be banished from the court itself. Had she been a man, of course, the sentence would have been death.' Now I was truly confused and it must have shown on my face, for the queen whispered, 'It was my bed she was found in, Duke Richard. It took me many hours to convince my royal husband that our dalliance meant nothing and she should only be banished. He was very angry for he had planned to make a match between your daughter and the Duke of Eastfell, even though he knew Abigail loathed the man. I learned later the duke had been admitted to Abigail's cell in the dungeon where he raped her before she was sent from the castle clad only in the soiled nightdress she had been wearing when she was captured.' I was openly sobbing by this point and the queen was quite moved. She went on to tell me that she had learned Abigail had traveled back to Westfell but had vanished at the edge of the Great Forest.

"Once I had taken my leave of the queen and ultimately the court, I traveled back to Westfell. I contacted the Lords of the Great Forest and learned that Abigail had set up residence in a secluded glen near the western edge. I was also told she had no wish for any visitors and my every petition to see her has been denied."

Duke Richard fell silent and after a few moments, Rory asked, "Excuse me, but who are the Lords of the Great Forest?"

"The Great Forest may lie within Aluria, but it belongs to the elven folk. There has long been a pact between Westfell and the elves for our mutual protection. As long as there is a Westfell, the elves will guard our western border while we protect the Great Forest from the east."

"I have lived in that forest my entire life and I have never seen an elf," Rory declared.

"I guess if you have never seen something, then it must not exist. Have you ever seen the Kendrahl Mountains?"

"Well, no..."

"Do you doubt their existence?"

"Of course not."

"Then doubt not the existence of the elven folk. They have watched over you your entire life. How else could a boy of eight have taken enough food to keep his mother and himself alive? How else would a strapping lad of sixteen have found his way directly to the one place in the world where he would be welcome?"

Rory thought about this for some time as he stared out the glazed window. *Could the elves have guided my steps here?* As he recalled, whenever he had thought about changing direction in his travels, some game animal would appear just a little further down the path. It was subtle, yes, but the clues were right there in his memory. So if he accepted the presence of elves, it would explain much about this mysterious tower.

"The elves take care of you here in this tower, don't they? It was the elves who took my clothes and left me the hot water. They were ones who made these garments so they fit me exactly and prepared this meal for us and keep the tower so immaculate."

The duke broke into hearty laughter. "Now that would be a sight to see! No, son, it's not the elves who maintain this tower. They arranged for some of the lesser fey to do the work. Pixies and sprites, mainly. They aren't much company, but they sure do great work."

The duke said, "Stand up and let me look at you."

Rory stood and walked over next to the duke. "You are going to be tall, lad, and time will fill out that slight frame of yours." Comparing the boy to the painting, he said, "You are definitely Abigail's child. You have her features, you know. Your eyes are very much like hers and you have the same black hair, as mine was in my youth."

"So if Abigail of Westfell was indeed my mother, who then is my father?"

"As to that, son, there is the slight chance your father is the bastard of Eastfell and you're the product of his rape of Abigail in the dungeon at Aluria. I see nothing of him in your face, though, so I discount that possibility. I have no idea who your father is but I do know who your mother was, and that's my daughter, Abigail. As I said last night, that makes you my heir. One major clue to that is your name. She named you Rorrick, Rory for short, after my father. She loved her grandfather." He shook his head sadly, then said, "Tomorrow we will leave for Westfell Keep. There is no reason for me to stay here any longer."

Suddenly a small pixie appeared on the table next to the duke. It was perfectly formed, looking like a human female only six inches high and had golden wings on her back. Her tiny voice was as clear as the tinkling of small bells as she said, "Your Grace, the Lords of the Forest request that you speak with them in one hour at the edge of the Forest."

"Very well. Please express my pleasure at their invitation and let them know we will be there at the appointed time." The duke turned to Rory and said, "This is rare. It has been many years since they last spoke with me. It is very important for us both to be completely unarmed when we are with them. The elven folk do not like iron or things even containing a bit of that metal."

Rory nodded his head. "Abigail used to tell me tales of the elven folk when I was little. Those tales included the fact that iron is an anathema to elves."

\* \* \*

Rory walked slightly behind and to the left of the duke as they followed the pixie past the edge of the forest. As they moved deeper into the woods, the quality of light penetrating to the forest floor seemed to change. Rory realized the very trees themselves were different; far older and taller than any he'd ever encountered growing up. They soon entered a clearing in which three elves stood waiting.

The duke said quietly, "The one in the center is the Elven King, Alaric. To his right is his son and heir, Brightblade. I don't know the third one."

Rory studied the elves. As a species, elves were taller than most humans, well over six feet in height. Their lean builds belied their wiry strength. They were garbed in the colors of the forest itself, various shades of greens and browns that blended into a harmonious pattern yet would camouflage them easily.

The elven king raised one hand in greeting as he said, "Hail, Richard, Duke of Westfell."

The duke came to a halt ten feet from the elves and said, "Hail, Alaric, King of the Forest Lords. It is an honor to stand in your presence once more."

Rory realized the elven prince was staring at him, as if memorizing everything about him. He returned the other's look with one of his own. The elven prince was tall and darkly handsome. His long black hair was bound behind his neck by a silver clasp. He bore on his hip a single sheathed dagger and wore a scabbarded sword across his back. As he studied the prince, Roy was assailed by the feeling he had seen this elf before.

"Duke Richard," Alaric said, "please accept our deepest condolences on the loss of your daughter, Abigail. She was much loved by the elven folk and will be missed. Know that the four soldiers who murdered her have been dealt with and never left the Great Forest."

Rory had caught a fleeting glimpse of pain in the eyes of the elven prince as Abigail's name was mentioned. The harsh set of the prince's mouth left no doubt in Rory's mind who had dealt with the soldiers.

Alaric continued. "I see that Rorrick has found his way to your side."

"Yes, Abigail's child has returned to his family. I have made him my heir. The pact between our peoples will continue for another generation," Duke Richard said. "We will depart for Westfell Keep tomorrow so Rorrick can learn what he needs to in order to rule when I am gone."

"Before you depart, we must come to an agreement, for there are things you do not know about young Rorrick. First, you must know he is not the result of his mother's terrible experience in the dungeons of Aluria. He is, in fact, the result of a loving relationship between Abigail and Prince Brightblade, which makes him not only Heir of Westfell and your grandson, but mine as well."

Rory then said to the prince, "Why did you abandon my mother so I have no clear memory of you at her side?"

Brightblade replied, "It was at her request. When she decided to masquerade as an old woman living with a foundling boy, she begged me to stay away so the ruse would not be discovered. I tried in vain to convince her that she need not fear while she lived in our forest, but time has proven that in this matter, she was wiser than I. I spent years watching over you both and, on that terrible day, I chose to follow you deeper into the forest than you had gone before. Her screams brought me back but I was too late; the curs had already killed her. I watched over you as you buried her and, while you slept, tracked down the four men and took my revenge." His tone was cold and implacable as he spoke of tracking them down. Rory did not want to think about the grim deaths they had endured at the hands and blades of this elven warrior prince.

Brightblade stepped forward and laid his hand upon Rory's shoulder. "I know not what strengths you may have gained through the mingling of our blood, but you are a child of both heritages. As you go out into the human realm, I would ask that you take a bit of your elven heritage as well." With that, he slipped off the scabbard of the elven sword he wore and handed it to Rory. "This is Wolf Fang, a blade I made for you. It is forged of star metal without trace of iron and has been enchanted with runes of power. The blade will never shatter, nor will it ever dull."

Rory drew the magnificent sword from the scabbard and exclaimed at the sheer beauty of the deadly weapon. The blade was almost four feet in length and was burnished as bright as a silver mirror. Delicate elven enchantments were incised into the metal itself, light traceries of script that seemed to flow along the length of the shining blade. The hilt was wrapped in straps of dark green leather while the pommel was topped by a snarling wolf's head. The matching scabbard was also of dark green, as was the chest strap that held the scabbard across the wearer's back.

"Even a duke's heir cannot wear a sword at all times, but no one would think twice about a personal dagger. I want you to carry mine. It is, in all ways, as enchanted as the sword and made from the same materials." As he handed over the sheathed dagger, Rory noticed this one was less ostentatious with a plain leather hilt and a small silver ball at the pommel. Drawing the dagger from the sheath revealed the exquisite craftsmanship on the blade. It, too, had the faint traceries of the elven enchantment sealed into the metal itself and the blade seemed to shine with an inner light.

Returning the dagger to its sheath, Rory said, "I thank you for these magnificent weapons, but I must ask you one thing. They seem to shine. How do you do anything with stealth if your blades become such beacons?"

Brightblade chuckled. "When you draw them outside this forest, they will appear as ordinary blades to human eyes. The fact you can see them shine shows elven blood is strong within you." Turning to the duke, he asked, "Tell me, did you see the shine Rorrick spoke of?"

"No, Prince Brightblade, I saw nothing out of the ordinary at all," the duke replied.

Alaric said, "And that brings us to another point. Young Rorrick must learn of his elven heritage as well as his human one. We would like you to take one of our warriors with you on your trip to Westfell Keep. He will serve as Rorrick's weapons master and teach him the elven ways of fighting and answer any questions he may have about his father's race." Gesturing to the elven warrior, he added, "This is Swiftstalker."

The duke studied the warrior and nodded. "Lord Swiftstalker, I welcome your company for the road and your skills in training my heir. You do understand that most humans either no longer believe in elves or are afraid of them."

The elf warrior gave a small smile. "Those who do not believe will think me just a tall human. Those who fear will avoid me or understand too well the reason they are afraid of elves." To Rory, he added, "I have seen you use a bow and for someone relatively untrained, you have a good eye. I know you have no experience with a sword but that training will wait until we reach Westfell Keep."

Alaric turned to Duke Richard, saying, "The pixies will continue to serve as our means of contacting one another. They are upset you are leaving the tower and are worried they have failed you in some manner."

Brightblade said, "Do not be alarmed if I should happen to drop in to see my son. I would like to get to know him just as he should become acquainted with me."

"You are always welcome in Westfell, Prince," the duke said. "Please, assure the pixies that their service has been exemplary. If they should so wish, I would welcome them to continue to serve in Westfell itself."

## Chapter 3

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Rory had not expected the large escort of soldiers in dark green livery with the wolf's head on their banners. The master-at-arms and Swiftstalker had been like two stray tomcats when they first met; each sizing up the other in case they had to fight. The duke had settled that possible conflict quite thoroughly when he said, "Swiftstalker is the personal weapons master and trainer to my heir, Rorrick of Westfell. He answers to Rorrick and Rorrick answers to me. Is that understood by everyone?"

The escort had brought three horses. Swiftstalker had already calmed his roan after removing the human saddle, bridle, and bit. He replaced them with a simple blanket pad and a woven halter. As Rory walked over to observe, Swiftstalker said quietly, "I know you have never before ridden a horse. You are in for an uncomfortable few days until you grow accustomed to it. However, I doubt this escort will press a hard pace since the duke is old and it has been long since he sat in a saddle."

As they had set forth from the tower, a small number of the escort took the lead, riding far in front of the main group. At the duke's request, the master-at-arms rode at his side and answered questions about the conditions throughout Westfell. This allowed Rory to ride next to Swiftstalker, who initially explained to Rory the art of riding a horse. Under his instruction, Rory soon grew comfortable in the saddle.

"Swiftstalker, did you know my mother?" Rory asked.

"Whenever Brightblade would go to visit her, I would stand guard over the cabin. I saw

your mother when she first arrived in the forest. She was quite beautiful for a human and I understood how the prince could become so enamored of her. Midway through her second winter in the clearing, you were born and I was assigned to hunt for your family so you would never want for food. It was after your birth when Abigail decided to disguise herself as an old crone. Such a waste that was."

They rode along in silence for a bit until Rory asked, "How did this pact between the Lords of the Forest and Westfell come into being?"

"The pact has been in force now for almost three hundred years. Back then, there was no kingdom of Aluria. Instead, there were smaller kingdoms constantly at war with one another. The largest two were Westfell and Eastfell. As humans moved farther west up to the Great Forest, we elven folk were hard pressed to keep them out of the woods. At that time, we would do silly mischief to anyone we caught, unless we found them with an axe. Anyone who chopped a tree was doomed per an ancient agreement between the elven folk and the wood nymphs. One day, word came to the Forest Lords that humans were building a tower at the edge of the forest.

"The Forest Lords gathered many of their fiercest warriors, who were ready to destroy the tower and all who were building it. When they reached the edge of the forest, they chanced upon a single man sitting on the ground with his back against a tree and a sketch pad in his hands. He was designing the tower; discarded first attempts lay scattered around his feet like dried up leaves. The first attempts looked more like castles, with curtain walls, corner towers, a portcullis, and drawbridge.

"Forest Lord Alaric stepped out of the forest and questioned the man about what he was doing. 'I need to build a fortification here to defend my lands,' the man said. When asked from whom he was defending the land, the man explained about the rival duchy of Eastfell and the constant skirmishing taking place along the borders. Alaric asked why he was building the tower in the west rather than along that border, and the man replied that his people had told tales of the fierce Lords of the Forest and had begged their liege lord for protection. 'What else can I do?' the man replied. Alaric then revealed himself as a Lord of the Forest and they sat there under the boughs of the tree throughout the afternoon talking about the forest and the lands of Westfell. In the end, the Forest Lords agreed to protect the lands of Westfell from all enemies who might approach through the forest, as well as from all harmful forest creatures. In exchange, Westfell agreed to prevent any attempt to occupy the forest or to harvest its trees. Hunters and other folks were permitted to go no farther than a single arrow's flight into the forest or they would be subject to the justice of the Lords of the Forest. The man then built the Tower of the Pact, a single stone tower without any means of defense, to serve as a visible reminder of the pact. It is there that each succeeding generation of Westfell has come to meet with the Lords of the Forest and renew their mutual pledge, as you will when it is your turn."

As the vanguard passed a thicket of trees along the road, they startled a stag and three does that darted between the two groups of riders. Before anyone else could move, Swiftstalker had swept his longbow off his shoulder and nocked and fired four arrows. Each had flown true and the four animals dropped before they took another step. Returning his bow to his shoulder, he said, "Venison tonight, Rorrick."

\* \* \*



It was late afternoon of the third day when they rode up the valley toward their destination. Westfell Keep was a mighty fortress of stone atop a hill overlooking the broad valley below. Surrounded by a curtain wall thirty feet high and ten feet thick, topped by battlements with large towers every fifty feet, it contained the grand keep itself as well as the necessary supporting structures, such as barracks for the men-at-arms, stables for the horses, storage buildings and kitchens. Outside the curtain wall was a wide, deep moat edged in stone crossed only at two points by drawbridges. A clear field existed between the walls and the start of the town of Westfell, a bustling community of shops, markets, and homes. The townsfolk had all gathered along the edges of the main road that led into the village and up to the keep, and they cheered as they caught sight of their duke. They also cheered for Rorrick, which surprised the boy.

"Why do they cheer for me?" he asked Swiftstalker.

"You are their future, lad. The people of Westfell have long worried about the succession if something happened to the duke. You are an answer to their prayers."

"But they don't know me!"

"No, not yet, but they do know their duke and they trust him to pass the duchy on to someone worthwhile," Swiftstalker said. "It will be up to you to live up to that trust."

Taking those words to heart, Rory sat a little straighter in the saddle and smiled at the waving people. He noticed the evident prosperity of the town and its people. Everything was clean and orderly, the people well dressed and well fed. There were also many young and pretty girls along the route, too, and they smiled freely at the young handsome heir.

"Remind me, lad, to have a talk with you about girls. You will soon find yourself in a position to take advantage of these lovely lasses and we must talk about the consequences of that before it happens."

"I would never..."

"Lad, trust me. Don't say anything you cannot possibly hold to. The lure of a pretty lass has toppled the best of us, even among the Lords of the Forest. Your father took one look at your mother and one hundred years of 'I would never' came to an end."

The procession eventually passed over the drawbridge, through the sally port, along a winding passage with only room for two to ride abreast, and eventually into a large courtyard. The grooms rushed forward to take hold of the bridles of the horses ridden by the duke, Rory, and Swiftstalker. As they dismounted, the duke groaned. "I had forgotten how long it has been since I'd last ridden a horse. My backside is cheerfully reminding me of each and every year that has passed and just how many miles we've traveled. I am for a long hot soak." Looking about, he shouted, "Chamberlain! Where the devil is the chamberlain?"

The housekeeper came down the steps and curtsied before the duke. "Your Grace, may I be of service?"

"Oh get up, Mistress Margaret. First off, we will need rooms readied for Rorrick and for Swiftstalker, each with a nice hot bath to soak away the dirt and aches from three days on top of a horse. And I want to see the chamberlain immediately."

"Your Grace, the chamberlain is not here. He has been at court for the past six months," Mistress Margaret replied hesitantly.

"He's been where? Whatever for? Who has been handling things in his absence?" Duke Richard demanded.

Mistress Margaret looked a trifle uncomfortable as she said, "Well, I have been taking care of things inside the keep itself."

"But what about my duchy? Who's been running it?"

The silence that followed was all the answer he received or needed. The duke stormed into the keep and shouted for the captain of the household guard. When that man knelt before him, the duke asked, "Will you please explain to me exactly what has been going on here in my absence?"

The captain was obviously afraid his answers would not please the duke. "Your Grace, the chamberlain went to court six months ago. He decided that you never intended to return to the keep and that, since you had no heir, it was the king's responsibility to determine who should assume the Duchy of Westfell."

"Captain, I want you to take to your horse this afternoon along with a company of your men. Ride day and night to reach the king and hand him the proclamation I will have for you in one hour. This document will notify the king and everyone else that Rorrick of Westfell is my heir. Once you have delivered that document to the king, you are to arrest the chamberlain and bring him back to me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Grace. At once, Your Grace." The captain backed away until he reached the chamber door and then turned and bolted down the corridor to ready his men.

The duke strode into his study and took up a pen, writing his proclamation.

*I, Richard, Duke of Westfell, designate my grandson, Rorrick of Westfell, legitimate son of Abigail of Westfell, as my heir to the Duchy of Westfell with all rank, rights, and privileges thus entitled.*

He signed the document with a flourish and then stamped it with his seal. He rolled it and placed it in a message tube which he then closed with a wax seal marked with his personal signet well known to the king.

As he finished, Mistress Margaret came in. "Your baths await in your rooms. Should I have supper ready in about two hours, Your Grace?"

"That would be excellent, Mistress Margaret. Perhaps I should introduce these two. The younger one is Abigail's son, Rorrick. The other is his personal weapons master, Swiftstalker of the Forest Lords."

Mistress Margaret curtsied before Rorrick, saying, "I know your mother well, young Rorrick. Will she be joining us?"

"I regret that will not be possible, mistress. My mother was murdered two months ago," Rory said.

"Oh, my sweet Abby!" With those words, the housekeeper began to sob. Swiftstalker moved to her side and put an arm around her shoulders, slowly leading her from the room to someplace she could regain her composure.

"Well, lad, let's give this message to the captain and send him on his way, then we can find those baths and soak away the miles on the road."

"Sir, what's a bath?"

\* \* \*

Rory lay in the large copper tub soaking in the hot water, letting it ease the soreness from his muscles. Although he had never complained, he had found the past few days a bit uncomfortable. To be more honest, his backside and the insides of his thighs hurt like the blazes from the chafing and bouncing on the saddle. Once he had learned to "post" properly, he had saved his backside from even more of a pounding. With this luxury called a "bath", he no longer minded how sore he had been. The one thing he had stubbornly refused was letting someone else wash him. He had forced the valet assigned to him to leave the room before he had undressed and climbed into the tub.

"You'd better start scrubbing the dirt off, lad, before Mistress Margaret comes in here to do it for you. And don't forget to wash your hair."

Rory spun around to find Swiftstalker leaning against the wall behind him. "How did you get in here? I swore I locked the door."

Swiftstalker pushed away from the wall and walked across the room to sit in one of the chairs by the table across the sitting room. "Door? Lad, I'm an elf. We don't need to use doors when we want to get in somewhere. Now, don't change the subject. Get washing!"

As he washed, Rory asked, "What was all that business about the chamberlain? What is a chamberlain, anyway?"

"The chamberlain is someone the duke appointed to act in his stead when he was away from the keep. In this case, it looks like the chamberlain was attempting to declare the duke as unfit in order to take over himself."

"There's nothing wrong with the duke! Why would the king set him aside?"

"In the kingdom of men, you have the king on top. Below him come the dukes. There are four dukes in the Kingdom of Aluria. You know about Westfell and Eastfell. There are also Kendrahl in the north and Solange in the south. These dukes own vast areas of land and have their own standing armies, but owe their allegiance to the king. Next you have the various earls. Earls live within Aluria itself, on lands owned by the king. They do not have armies and usually hold some political office in the king's court. The lower offices are held by counts. With me so far?"

Rinsing the soap from his hair and slicking it back from his face, Rory said, "Yes."

"The most powerful men, after from the king, of course, are the Dukes of Westfell and Eastfell. Between them, they hold over sixty percent of the land in Aluria. Well, make that

usable land. Most of Kendrahl is composed of high mountains and the majority of Solange is desert. As a result, these two dukes have the largest armies, aside from the king's own troops. Kendrahl's forces are all specialists in mountain fighting, while Solange has their famed desert nomad forces. Oh, Kendrahl also has a small navy since their land borders the North Sea and they have our only ports."

Swiftstalker tossed a towel to Rory. "Get out of the tub. You're turning into a prune. Now, for the last twenty-five years, peace has been maintained throughout the kingdom by carefully balancing one force against another. When the old Duke of Eastfell died and his son took over, that balance became very precarious. For a while, the king sought to appease the new Duke of Eastfell by promising to arrange a marriage for him with Abigail, the only child of the Duke of Westfell. Frankly, that would not have been a smart move since Eastfell would rule both duchies and then have a standing army larger than the king's, plus the two remaining duchies combined. At that point, the kingdom itself would have been in jeopardy."

"So why did the king suggest it?" Rory asked.

"To buy time, I suspect. The young Duke of Eastfell was quite taken with our lovely Abigail. When she was banished, it put an end to any possibility of a marriage between the two duchies." Swiftstalker paused a long moment in thought. "You don't suppose the king himself *arranged* for Abigail to be caught in the queen's bed, do you? It solved his dilemma without making an enemy of Eastfell."

Rory looked stunned. "I thought the queen was Abigail's friend."

"She was, lad, and a good one for all that. But, and this is something you must never forget when dealing with the king or the queen, the good of the realm comes before anything else. If sacrificing the good name of the queen and banishing the Heir of Westfell could serve the kingdom, they would not hesitate to do so. The more I think on this, the more likely it seems that poor Abigail was deliberately set up."

Rory walked over to the wardrobe and looked at the clothes within. Holding up a thin pair of silk breeches, he looked confused.

"You wear those under the heavier breeches, lad."

Coloring, Rory slid the silk breeches on and then a pair of woolen hose. He then donned a pair of heavy breeches and a silk undertunic and dark green doublet. He slid his feet into the soft leather half-boots and fastened his belt with the dagger around his waist. Turning, he saw his valet standing in the doorway and sat in the chair the man had indicated. The valet started to brush out Rory's hair and then gathered it into a clip at the back of Rory's neck. After Rory stood once more, the valet fussed around him, straightening the collar of his undertunic, fixing a sleeve there. Finally, the man knelt and began to brush the half-boots.

"Is all this really necessary?" Rory asked.

"You are the Heir of Westfell, my lord," the valet said. "You must look your best at all times."

"Get used to it, lad." Swiftstalker laughed. "Soon it will be second nature."

"So the King of Aluria is maintaining stability in the realm by balancing the dukes against

one another, and you suspect Abigail was sacrificed to further those aims. So what purpose was served by permitting the duke to attack her before she was banished?" Rory asked.

"I doubt the king was involved in that. I am sure the Duke of Eastfell merely paid the jailers to look the other way. It matters little now as far as the Duke of Eastfell is concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother made your father promise not to take any revenge against Eastfell for what happened in that dungeon cell. By having her murdered, Eastfell signed his own death warrant. His life is for the taking by any of the elven folk. If I should chance upon him before the prince does, I will kill him myself but I doubt I will have much of a chance of that. The prince is undoubtedly on his way to Eastfell at this very moment."

"What effect would the death of Eastfell have on the balance within the kingdom?" Rory asked.

"Aside from the immediate disruption created by the death of anyone in power, it would probably reduce the overall tensions within the kingdom. The Heir of Eastfell is a lad of about your age, still too young to rule without a regent. The regent will probably be his mother, the Duchess of Eastfell, formerly the second daughter of one of the various earls in the court. Not known for her brains."

A new voice broke into the conversation. "You are remarkably informed for someone who lives in the forest." The duke followed his voice into the room. "For what it is worth, your analysis of the state of the realm was cogent and accurate. I have long suspected Abigail was manipulated into that scandalous position since she had never exhibited any tendency in that direction before. There is very little that goes on around this keep I am not fully aware of." The duke looked Rory up and down, then said, "You look nice."

"Your Grace, I cannot thank you enough..."

"Rory, you needn't be so formal when it is just us like this. I wish you would call me grandfather." Duke Richard smiled. "After all, you *are* my grandson and heir. No thanks are necessary. You are all the family I have left." As he turned his attention back to Swiftstalker, his tone became more serious. "Should you happen to encounter the Duke of Eastfell, you may *not* kill him. To do so while in my party would be to declare war between the two duchies. As much as I would like to see that bastard boiled in oil very slowly, I must set my personal need for revenge aside for the good of my people."

Swiftstalker bowed his head. "I will obey, Your Grace."

"Very well. I do believe Mistress Margaret has had ample time to regain her composure and to arrange something for us to eat. Shall we?" the duke asked as he gestured toward the door.

As they approached the dining hall, they came upon a very large, very muscular man standing outside the door waiting for them. The man automatically sized each of them up, and his hand twitched toward his dagger as he studied Swiftstalker. His hair was a pale shade of grey which blended to white and there was an ugly scar that stretched from just below the corner of his right eye, across his cheek, and reached the tip of his chin; it was made more noticeable by the fact no hair grew along its length and it divided the grizzled beard like a furrow in a field of winter wheat. The man's leathers were thick and bore evidence of being

worn under chain mail in the form of small spots of rust brown and worn impressions of where the mail would bind against them. He wore a sword at his hip with a familiarity that spoke of decades of experience. Here was a man meant for the battlefield.

"Gustav!" the duke bellowed. "It is good to see you!" Turning to Rory, he said, "Gustav is the head of our army. Gustav, this is my grandson, Rorrick, and his weapons master, Swiftstalker of the Forest."

The gravelly voice was in keeping with the man's appearance. "My Lord Rorrick, welcome to Westfell." There was no warmth in the voice as he said, "It is not often a Lord of the Forest comes outside the trees, and I cannot help but wonder what you are really doing here."

"As His Grace said, I am here to train Lord Rorrick in the use of weapons. While I am at it, I will serve as his personal bodyguard to prevent anyone from harming him. Nothing more, nothing less." Swiftstalker looked him up and down. "Your legend precedes you, General Gustav. While you may not really be eight feet tall as some say, I can see you have earned your formidable reputation. Perhaps we can find the time to spar with one another, purely for the edification of the young lord, of course."

A small smile touched Gustav's lips. "I would enjoy that."

"Good!" Duke Richard said. "It is important both of you are involved in training young Rorrick, for he needs to learn more than just how to handle weapons; he needs to know how to handle men, as well. Join us as we dine, Gustav."

Once the four had been seated, Mistress Margaret watched as the serving staff brought in the repast she had prepared. There was roast venison, several roasted ducks, potatoes and greens, baskets of bread, and flagons of wine. She watched carefully as each was served their choices and then sent the serving staff to the kitchens while she remained in the background in case something more was desired.

The duke tasted the duck, turned to the housekeeper and said, "Delicious as usual, Mistress Margaret, as is the venison. My thanks to the staff."

Mistress Margaret curtsied in acceptance of the duke's compliments.

General Gustav said, "Well, Lord Rorrick, from the look of you, I would say your previous weapons training has been solely with a bow. We'll need to build up those shoulders and arms before you can do much sword work."

"It is true that I have never held a sword, General. There is not much call for one hunting in the woods. I can, however, hit what I aim at with a bow or a sling," Rory said, as he picked up his goblet. Finding the wine not to his liking, he asked Mistress Margaret if he could have some water.

"My grandson has spent his entire life living in the Great Forest, Gustav," the duke explained. "Since he was around eight, he has been providing the daily food for his mother and himself though his skill with a bow."

General Gustav looked troubled. "Your Grace, I have heard it said that Lady Abigail was murdered by Eastfell's men."

"Unfortunately, that is true, although none of the men escaped the Great Forest to tell

Eastfell of their success," Swiftstalker responded. "I am quite sure the Duke of Eastfell will learn of it just before he dies on the sword of Prince Brightblade."

"And why would the son of the elf king do such a thing?" Gustav asked.

"Because he's my father," Rory replied quietly, "and he loved Abigail."

Swiftstalker said, "It was he who hunted down and killed the four Eastfell soldiers after interrogating them to see who was behind it. He will accept Eastfell's death at no hand other than his own. In his own way, our prince is quite ... determined."

Duke Richard said, "We will leave the punishment of Eastfell to Prince Brightblade, for now. It will remain a matter of the honor of Westfell, however, that we extract our revenge in some fashion down the road."

"How will we do that, Grandfather?"

"By that time, it will be up to you, lad. Let us be honest with one another. You have perhaps five years to get ready to take control of this duchy." The duke held up his hand to forestall any comments. "No, we must face facts. I am over sixty years of age. While I am strong enough at the moment, it is a certainty that will change as the years go by. You can be certain I will do everything I can to delay the inevitable, at least until you reach your majority. I want no regency in Westfell."

"It is up to you two to teach him how to fight, both alone and as a member of a team. Once he has learned that, you must teach him how to lead men in battle. At the same time, I will instruct him on how to govern. We have much to do to ready Rory to be the next Duke of Westfell. Fortunately, he has no really bad habits we must break."

"Rest well tonight, young lord," Gustav said. "Tomorrow, we start building some muscle on that frame of yours. Wear old sturdy clothes you won't mind getting dirty."

## Chapter 4

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Rory was so stiff and sore he was not positive he could move. Never before in his life had he done such hard labor. Before the sun was even up, Swiftstalker had dragged him from his warm bed and had him dress in the worn leathers of a common soldier, complete with a pair of heavy boots on his feet. It was still quite chill outside with a brisk wind that cut right through a man, but Swiftstalker assured the shivering young lord that steady exercise would soon warm him up.

First, Rory had to split firewood for the kitchen. He had a lot of practice doing that but he soon discovered that the kitchen for the keep used much more wood than he had ever chopped before. Cord after cord, he chopped and split stacks of firewood until his arms were too sore to lift over his head and he began to lose control of the axe. "Not bad. But you will do better tomorrow," was all Gustav said.

Next, after a short break for some hot tea and toasted bread with jam, they made him move rocks. All kinds of rocks, from small pebbles to ones the size of a pig. If he tried to move one incorrectly—like when he tried to pick one up the size of a cartwheel—his erstwhile trainers would laugh at him and then show him ways to accomplish his task using levers or ropes or some other tool that happened to be lying about. “The point to this is not just to move the rocks, but to move them smartly.”

After moving rocks, he helped the groomsmen tend the stables. Actually, he mucked out the stalls and then put in fresh straw. Before he could spread the straw, he had to first move the hay bales from the loft to the stable floor using a small platform and a block and tackle arrangement. He started the task a bit skittish around the animals but by the end of it, he was finally comfortable around horses.

After a brief lunch, they took him to the training arena. At one side of the arena, there was a thick log, standing a good six feet high, imbedded upright in the ground. Lines were painted on the pole, one at five feet above the ground, another at three feet. Gustav said, “Okay, lad, this is about the same height as a man. This top part here is his head, and underneath that is his chest. I want you to practice hitting him in the chest, alternating sides, with every fourth hit to his head on the opposite side. I want you to start out slowly until you get the feel for it and then pick up speed. Watch me.” Gustav picked up a blunted sword and stepped away from the pole until he stood slightly more than an arm’s length away. “Remember, if you can touch an enemy with your hand, you are in knife range rather than that of the sword. Step back and let the sword reach out to him. Smack him on the side.” The sword swung in from the left, hitting the pole with a backhand swing. “Then on the other side.” This time it struck the right side. “Back to the first side.” Another backhand blow to the pole. “Then up to the head.” The sword came in from the right, striking midway through the space for the head. “Now you do it all over again on the opposite sides.” Gustav began slowly but soon moved to almost a blur, the clang of the blunt sword on the wood sounding one after the other, faster then faster again. Suddenly he stopped and flipped the sword to Rory.

The first surprise to Rory was how heavy the sword was. The way Gustav had whipped it around made Rory believe it was lighter than a normal sword. If anything, this one was heavier and out of balance, with more weight toward the tip. It required much more strength in the forearm to keep the tip up. His first swing at the chest area was almost acceptable but his backhand swipe at the other side came in very low, just above the waist line. “Keep swinging, lad. You’ll get the hang of it after you have had some practice,” Gustav said as he watched. Swiftstalker then walked over to one of the racks and picked out a pair of balanced practice swords. He flipped one end over end to Gustav as if it were a throwing knife. Gustav snatched it from the air and swung it down in time to parry a strike from Swiftstalker. The speed and ferocity of their parries may have distracted Rory, but it didn’t disturb them for they each shouted at him to practice even as they traded blows.

By the time they had taken each other’s measure with a sword, Rory could barely move his arms. Every muscle he had was screaming in agony and he could no longer keep the sword tip up. “That’s enough for today, lad,” Gustav said as he pried the sword out of Rory’s clenched fist. “Go along with Swiftstalker and soak those muscles loose again.”

So that was where Rory now lay, soaking in the large copper tub in very hot water with some kind of oil that smelled like evergreen trees. It was as close to bliss as he’d been and he



drifted off to sleep since he was more exhausted than he had ever been before. He awoke to a slap on the back of his head. The water in the tub was now chilled.

“Get out of the tub and lie face down on the floor,” commanded Swiftstalker.

Still too tired and sore to object, Rory stretched out on his towel. Swiftstalker knelt beside him and began to massage an aromatic oil into the stiff and sore muscles of Rory’s back, shoulders, and arms. The release of tension under Swiftstalker’s kneading fingers was incredible and Rory drifted back to sleep. He awoke hours later and staggered to his bed.

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This was his routine every day for the next several days. Firewood, rocks, stables, and smacking a pole with a dull sword. After the first week, a slight variation was introduced. Instead of moving the rocks, he now had to sort those he’d already moved according to size: large rocks in one pile, medium rocks in another, and small rocks in yet a different one.

Once he had them all sorted, he was joined by a stonemason and together, they began using the rocks to build an extension to one of the storage buildings. This was a labor he could appreciate for he could see a positive result forming from his work. The walls took shape slowly as the mason showed his new young lord how they fit together, placing medium and small rocks in the gaps between the larger ones. A mortar made of limestone and rock chips was used to fill in all the gaps and to seat the stones. Day by day, the height of the walls grew until it became an effort to move the larger rocks into place. The final rows were set using several other men to assist; no one would take the chance that a slip might injure the heir.

Once the walls had reached the desired height, Rory joined a group of men sent to fell trees to make the timbers for the rafters and joists. They would ride out on empty wagons in the morning and then work until noon cutting down tall trees. The limbs were lopped off, the trunks cut to the desired lengths, and then it was all loaded into the wagons. Once again, Rory enjoyed the task. The rhythm of the axes, the crash of the trees as they fell to the ground, all struck a chord within him. He was always the first to start cutting and the last to stop. He was always there to help load the tree trunks or to gather and load the branches. The people of Westfell soon knew their new heir was not afraid of hard work and that he enjoyed the simple pleasures found in getting dirty while making things better for his people.

Once the trunks and branches were back at the keep, the branches were piled in the area for firewood while the trunks were taken to be trimmed into the crossbeams, joists and rafters for the expanded storage area. Here, Rory worked with the woodcrafters to trim the trunks with adzes and chisels, hatchets and lots of hard work. Hand awls were used to bore holes at strategic locations in the wooden frame parts. Once all was cut to fit the demands of the master crafter, the pieces were taken to the newly finished stone walls and hoisted into place, one by one. As each piece was seated in its final position, wooden pegs were pounded into the holes drilled in them to lock them together. The joints were then doused with water to make them swell, further locking the pieces in place.

The roof supports now in place and planking applied across the rafters for additional storage, it was time to put a roof over the shed. Rory joined the others in scything the long grasses, which he then helped gather into sheaves. In the late afternoons and evenings, he

would assist the women of the town in plaiting the grasses into long flat panels, to which other layers were stitched using a sturdy vine. The panels were then fastened into place on the joists in overlapping layers starting at the bottom. This panel technique for thatching was unique to Westfell, but it was clearly more efficient than the old way. It resulted in fewer leaks, more resistance to wind, and trapped heat within better than the old way, too.

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Throughout this entire process, Rory continued to strike at the pole with the sword every day. He now could maintain a respectable rhythm in his strikes, and was slowly gaining speed. All this work had also filled out his shoulders and chest. No longer was he sore in the evenings when he finished his labors.

Joining his grandfather and Swiftstalker in the dining room one night, he realized three weeks had passed since they had arrived at the keep. Much had changed in that time, and most of those changes had been within himself. Not only had he gained in strength, he also had an appreciation for the skills necessary to work this land. He had met most of the people in the town and had grown to understand their concerns.

As they were eating, the captain of the guard returned from his mission to Aluria. "Your Grace, forgive my intrusion."

"Nothing to forgive, Captain. How were the roads? I had expected you back long ago," the duke asked, handing the captain a glass of wine.

"The roads were fine, Your Grace. When I arrived at Aluria, I found the king and queen had departed for Eastfell to attend the state funeral for the Duke of Eastfell. When I handed the king your letter, he wanted to know when you had returned to Westfell. When I explained you returned the same day as the date on the letter, he seemed much relieved. After the funeral and the confirmation of the new Duke of Eastfell under the regency of his mother, the king bid me ride here with the news. The king and queen will arrive in Westfell in three days."

"The king is coming here? How much of the court is coming with him?"

"The king is accompanied by the Duke of Kendrahl, who is on his way home, and the queen has one of her ladies-in-waiting as a companion."

"I imagine the Duke of Kendrahl will remain for at least a day or two. So we will need chambers for the royals, the duke, and for the lady-in-waiting. How many of the King's Own accompany him?"

"His escort numbers thirty mounted, Your Grace."

"What can you tell us about the Duke of Eastfell's death?" asked Duke Richard, sensing there was more.

"The Duke of Eastfell was murdered, Your Grace, by an assassin who entered his chambers in the dead of night. No one saw the actual killer, but he was taken from his bed and butchered without disturbing anyone else in the castle."

"When did this happen?" Swiftstalker asked.

"The night after Your Grace and the others arrived in Westfell. The fact you were here that night has taken suspicion off of Westfell, especially when I reported the duke's heir was a stripling of a lad of barely sixteen seasons." Glancing at Rory, he said, "Your pardon, young lord, but it was the truth, although I can see you have added some muscle in the time I have been on the road."

"Through the dint of hard labor, Captain. That I can assure you of," Rory replied.

"Of that I am sure, Lord Rorrick. General Gustav's techniques are well-known among the duke's men-at-arms."

The duke smiled and then asked, "And what of the wayward chamberlain?"

The captain smiled. "When I reported that you were hale and back at Westfell, and the king read your message, he summoned the chamberlain. When that worthy arrived before the king, the King's Own placed him under arrest to be brought before you in judgment. Your chamberlain has walked the whole distance from Eastfell in chains. He is a much chastened man."

"Very good. I thank you, Captain, for your excellent report and your haste in bringing me all this news. Ask Mistress Margaret to step in, if you would, and get yourself some food from the kitchen," Duke Richard said.

A few moments later, the housekeeper entered the dining room. "You sent for me, Your Grace?"

"Brace yourself, Mistress Margaret. The king and queen, accompanied by one lady-in-waiting, plus the Duke of Kendrahl, will arrive in three days. There will also be thirty members of the King's Own. It's been almost twenty years since His Highness visited Westfell, so we'll have to do our best for him."

Mistress Margaret was unflappable. "Very well, Your Grace. Lord Swiftstalker, can I count on your bow to bring us enough venison?"

Swiftstalker grinned. "That you can, Mistress Margaret, along with a nice fat boar if I can get General Gustav to go hunting with me."

"By your leave, Your Grace, I will get started. I will notify the townsfolk so they can prepare as well." With a swift curtsey, she departed from the room.

Since they were once again alone, Swiftstalker filled his wine goblet and lifted it in toast. "To Prince Brightblade!"

"Hear, hear," said Duke Richard as he raised his glass. Rory toasted with his goblet of water.

## Chapter 5

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When King William and Queen Beatrice of Aluria rode through the valley leading to the town

and keep of Westfell, they were struck by the beauty of the area. The trees still held their vibrant leaves of red, orange, and gold. There were autumn apples in some of the orchards. The fields were all neat and well maintained, with split-rail fencing to keep livestock from wandering into the ones under cultivation. The livestock was obviously well fed and contented for they did not scatter when the mounted troop rode past.

The village was neatly laid out. The buildings were all sturdy and made from the field stones common in the valley; a gift brought down from the Kendrahl Mountains at some age in the past. They were aligned along wide, orderly streets and avenues, periodically broken up by market squares or stable yards. The streets were currently lined by the villagers themselves, all cheering and waving at their king and queen. A small girl, no more than five, darted out to run alongside the queen while trying to hand her a small bundle of wildflowers. King William leaned over and picked the little girl up, settling her on the queen's palfrey so she could give Queen Beatrice the bundle of flowers. The little girl laughed and waved at everyone as she rode with the queen the rest of the way to the keep.

As they reached the drawbridge, Queen Beatrice signaled for Lady Bethany, her lady-in-waiting, to take the child so she could enter the keep unencumbered. As the royal party passed under the sally port, a fanfare of trumpets sounded to herald their arrival. The King's Own formed a double column behind the royals as they entered the keep.

Entering the main courtyard, the king and queen found the entire staff of the keep turned out to greet them. The Duke of Westfell stood in front of the line of people on the steps, with a tall young man slightly behind him. As the king and queen rode up, the duke and his heir descended the steps to greet them. As the king swung down from his saddle, Duke Richard bowed and said, "Welcome to Westfell, Your Majesty."

Rory hurried over to the queen's palfrey and held the bridle as General Gustav, resplendent in his best clothes, came over to assist her from her saddle. "With your permission, Highness." At her nod, he lifted her from her sidesaddle and gently set her on her feet on the ground next to the king.

"As strong as ever, General," she said sweetly. "And who is this handsome young man?"

"Your Majesty," Duke Richard said. "May I present my grandson and heir, Rorrick."

Queen Beatrice looked Rory up and down, then concentrated her gaze on his face. "You have your mother's eyes and nose, Lord Rorrick. How is she? We have missed her very much."

Rory was too awestruck to speak and the duke responded, "Your Highness, I regret to inform you that Abigail was murdered about two months ago in the Great Forest."

The queen was truly stricken by the news, and her hand flew to cover her mouth as tears welled in her eyes. She turned her face against King William's chest, clinging to him for support.

"This is ill news, indeed, Duke Richard," said the king. "Do you know who was responsible?"

"The men who committed the crime were tracked and killed by the Lords of the Forest, Your Majesty, after they had learned exactly who was behind the murder." Duke Richard's voice was flat and toneless. "That person has since paid for his crimes."

King William locked stares with Duke Richard, and their glance said they would speak more about this privately. The duke nodded his acquiescence.

"Shall we move inside, Your Majesties? Perhaps the queen would care to refresh herself from the road?" The duke signaled to Mistress Margaret and she directed a couple of footmen to assist with the baggage. As the royals followed the duke into the keep, the household staff knelt as the king and queen passed by, then hurried to their stations to settle their prestigious guests.

Mistress Margaret led the queen and her lady-in-waiting to their chambers, arranging for hot water to be brought for their use. Several of the younger chambermaids had been detailed to wait on the queen and her lady-in-waiting as personal maids, while the duke's personal valet had been assigned to King William and Rory's valet would assist the Duke of Kendrahl.

As the ladies all went upstairs, Duke Richard led King William and Duke Armand of Kendrahl into the library. After pouring each of them a brandy, Duke Richard asked, "How was the road, Your Majesty?"

"Why so formal, Richard? You have known us since we were small and you helped our father unite the kingdom, along with Armand here," King William said.

Duke William looked at the king for a long minute before replying. "Since you decided to listen to that whining, self-serving weasel of a chamberlain for almost six months. Only after receiving formal notice, written by my own hand I might add, that I had an heir did you act to stop him. How many people had he talked to during that time, ruining my reputation? How much of my wealth has he squandered while you waited?"

"You are right, old friend. We did you a great disservice. You have every right to be angry with us."

"Angry with you? No, sire, I am not angry with you. Years ago when I realized how you and Beatrice had manipulated Abigail so you could avoid upsetting Eastfell, then I was angry with you." Duke Richard raised his hand to stop the king from speaking. "Oh, I understood why you did it, and I acknowledged it was a masterful stroke all while I was angry. Eventually, my anger faded. What I am now is very disappointed."

"We knew you were smart enough to realize that we used Abigail shamefully. We were desperately trying to get Eastfell's ambitions under control and his infatuation with Abigail was a tool we could exploit. As you recall, we had only ascended to the throne the year before and were still trying to establish our control. Duke Eastfell had likewise just taken over from his father. Abigail and the chance to gain Westfell were too tempting a target for him. It was Armand who reminded us that if Eastfell married Abigail, he would control the largest army in the realm. We knew then his ambitions rose much higher than just Westfell; he wanted all of Aluria." The king sipped once more from his brandy. "It was Beatrice, our sweet wife, who suggested the arranged scandal to discredit Abigail. Your daughter was innocent of the charges, Richard, as was Beatrice. We timed their 'discovery' to preclude that. It wasn't until years later that we found out about what happened between the time we had her arrested and the next morning when she was banished. By then, it was much too late to do anything about it except hang the jailers involved. In all those years since, not once did we hear from you. You avoided the court and shunned public life. We heard you had gone into seclusion at the Forest tower, and we feared our actions had broken your spirit. When that false chamberlain began his

campaign of whispers and innuendos, it matched our fears and, to our regret, we listened. The arrival of your messenger was like a breath of clean mountain air. As much as we wanted to punish the man, we could not because we knew our anger was due to our sense of guilt and shame over how we had treated one of our most loyal subjects." The king paused. "Can you ever forgive us, old friend?"

Duke Richard looked at his liege lord and remembered the boy he'd watch grow up; the boy who was always underfoot while Richard, Armand, and King Roland had united Eastfell and Solange to the growing realm of Aluria. At one time, King Roland had suggested that Abigail be wed to Prince William, but that was not to be. The canny old Duke of Eastfell had made his daughter Beatrice's marriage to William a part of the price for Eastfell's submission to the realm. Now, as Duke Richard studied the man before him, he could see the toll the years had taken on his king.

While the realm had been at peace for the past two decades, there had been much internal strife as Eastfell had schemed and plotted to destabilize it. Unable to collect sufficient proof to act against Eastfell, the king had spent his time trying to counteract the man's plots and stratagems. There had been rumors that Eastfell was meeting secretly with some of the Outlanders, although that never could be proven. Duke Richard knew King Roland would have long since separated Eastfell's head from his shoulders, but King William was not as ruthless as his father had been, partly due to his own temperament but mainly due to the influence of Queen Beatrice. She was, after all, Eastfell's younger sister.

The queen was also another source of the heavy load the king carried. The trick used to discredit Abigail had backfired in an unexpected manner. The queen's barrenness was widely attributed to her fictitious sapphic leanings, and many of the king's councilors had pleaded with King William to put her aside and take a new wife. Thus far, he had refused and the king had no heir.

The Duke of Westfell felt all his past issues with the king dissolve. He stepped across the room, knelt before his king, and said, "Forgive you? It is not my place to forgive my king. I do forgive my friend, however, and hope he can forgive an old fool who has stayed away too long."

King William pulled Duke Richard to his feet and embraced him. "Gladly." As they pulled apart, the king looked at his duke. "Now tell us about Abigail's murder and who was behind it."

Tears rolled down Duke Richard's face as he spoke, his voice choked with emotion. "There were four men, all in Eastfell livery. Young Rorrick was off hunting when they came, so it is not known exactly what happened to Abigail. He heard her scream and rushed back in time to see them throw her body into the burning cabin. They rode off without ever seeing the boy. After he buried her remains, he left the Great Forest. At the time, he did not know Abigail was really his mother. He thought he was a foundling. She had assumed a disguise as an old woman and he called her grandmother. Anyway, the Lords of the Forest guided his steps to my tower."

The king's voice was cold as he asked, "Did you arrange for Eastfell's death? We could understand if you did. The All-Father knows you have had ample reason to hate the man."

"No, I did not. The Lords of the Forest hunted down and killed the men who murdered my daughter. While I had no hand in the death of Eastfell, I suspect I know who did and I will not

betray him." The duke's gaze was steady as he looked at his king.

The king nodded. "We will accept that. Know that we are truly sorry for Abigail's death. We had hoped to make amends with her and explain why it was necessary to sully her name in the manner we did. We shall, therefore, make those amends to her son and your heir." King William looked sharply at Duke Richard. "In all this, there has never been any mention made of the boy's father. It had occurred to us that he is the person you seek to protect. Is there some reason we would find objection to the man's lineage?"

"No, his lineage is impeccable, although he is not one of your subjects," the duke replied.

King William was startled. "Not one of our subjects? Who would Abigail know in the Great Forest who was not one of our subjects?" The king's voice trailed off as he realized what the duke was saying. "We must meet your young lord and heir."

"Before you do, I must speak plainly for once with no more fencing. Rorrick was raised in the Great Forest with just Abigail for company. In the past few months, he has seen her murdered, learned she was his mother, was told the identity of his father, and became the heir of this duchy. Throughout all this, he has been remarkably self-possessed. My people have come to love him in the short time he has been here, and you will understand why once you meet him. However, in many ways, he is still very naïve regarding people. He is not ashamed of his heritage and freely admits to it. Time will temper that naïvety. I ask your understanding when you deal with him."

"Granted, friend. Now bring in your heir."

\* \* \*

Rory walked to the library door with some trepidation. Swiftstalker had refused to accompany him. The two members of the King's Own who flanked the door to the library reminded him of what Swiftstalker had said.

"I wasn't invited, Rorrick," Swiftstalker said. "You cannot come into the king's presence unless you've been invited. Those who try usually end up with about a yard of steel in their belly from one of the King's Own. When you get to the library door, tell the guards who you are and they will let you pass."

He came to a stop about six feet from the pair of guards and said, "I am Rorrick of Westfell."

The highest ranking of the two guards smiled slightly and said, "Pass, Rorrick, Heir of Westfell. The king is expecting you." As Rorrick reached to open the door, the guard added, "Remember that he is the king, lad. Kneel before him and do not speak until spoken to."

With that reminder, Rorrick stepped into the library. He heard the door close behind him as he stepped before the king and went down on one knee, with his head bowed. He felt the king place his hand on Rory's head.

"Rorrick of Westfell, we confirm you as Heir of Westfell. As you have not yet attained your majority, we will not require your oath of fealty until you either come of age or assume the title as Duke of Westfell." The king took his hand off Rory's head. "Rise, Rorrick, Heir of Westfell."

Rory rose to his feet and stood silently before the king. Even as the king studied him, he studied the king. King William was not a tall man compared to the Lords of the Forest, nor did he have the broad heavy shoulders that spoke of hours with a sword. His long brown hair was shot through with streaks of grey, as was his carefully trimmed beard. The king's eyes were an odd shade of brown and green combined. There were creases in the king's brow and the corners of his eyes from both worry and laughter. His body was still lean and trim, befitting of a monarch just past forty years of age.

"Do we pass inspection, young Rorrick?" The king laughed and Rorrick colored in embarrassment at being caught staring.

"I ask your pardon, Your Majesty. I meant no offense," he hastily responded.

"Nonsense, no offense was taken. We could see that you were taking our measure just as we were taking yours." King William slapped Rory's shoulder. "We like what we see in you, lad. Our queen was right. There is much of your mother in your face, although we suspect your height will come from your father."

"Do you know Prince Brightblade, Your Majesty?" Rory asked.

The king glanced sharply at Duke Richard and then said, "No, we have not had the pleasure of meeting the prince, although we once met his father. There has not been much contact between the Lords of Forest and the realms of man, Lord Rorrick. Perhaps you will become the bridge over which we may all travel to a better understanding between our peoples."

"I am at your service, sire," Rorrick responded. "I met with my father a few weeks ago for the first time since I was small, but he seemed a fair and reasonable man."

"The Lords of the Forest have been called many things, but rarely have I heard reasonable being one of them," said Duke Armand of Kendrahl. "Still, they have never broken their pact with man, despite the provocations posed by those who trespass in their domain. I'd rather have them as neighbors than some I could name."

Duke Richard said, "Rorrick, this is one of my oldest friends, Duke Armand of Kendrahl. His duchy encompasses the entire range of the Kendrahl Mountains as well as the coastline on the far side of them."

"How do you do, Your Grace? It is a pleasure to meet you." Rory bowed his head in respect.

"Well, the lad has manners, Richard," the king said. "Lord Rorrick, do you suppose you could lead us to wherever the queen is hiding?"

"It would be my honor, sire. If you would follow me?"

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Westfell Keep was ablaze with light. Torches hung in sconces along the inner face of the curtain wall and the exterior of the keep itself. The doors stood wide open as the invited guests from the town ventured inside. The large ballroom had been converted into a huge banquet room for the royal visit with seating for over one hundred. Candles burned in the large



chandeliers overhead and in candelabrum set upon each table. The King's Own stood guard in their ceremonial finest, spaced evenly around the walls of the room, with a greater concentration of them behind the head table.

A trumpet fanfare sounded and the guard at the door cried out, "The King!" The assembled male guests all bowed and the females went into a deep curtsy as the king and queen led the processional to the head table. The guests remained in their positions until the royals arrived at their designated seats. The king and queen were seated in the center of the table. Duke Richard and Duke Armand were seated to the king's right, while Rory and Lady Bethany were seated to the queen's left. General Gustav was seated next to Duke Armand and Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest was seated beside the lady-in-waiting.

The king first held out a chair for the queen and then seated himself. Once the king had taken his seat, the two dukes sat, followed by Rory and Lady Bethany, and then finally the general and Swiftstalker took their seats. Once the head table was seated, the king said, "Please, everyone, be seated."

The assembled guests all took their seats with a low buzz of conversation. The women openly admired the queen's dress; her fair blonde hair offset the rich blue of the dress magnificently. Some found her plunging neckline a bit scandalous but realized they may have been reacting provincially since the lady-in-waiting was also dressed in similar fashion, although in a soft rose, which contrasted nicely with Lord Rorrick's dark green and Lord Swiftstalker's forest green shot with silver.

At that moment, one of the Westfell guards came quietly up to General Gustav and whispered in his ear. The general looked startled, told the guard to wait a moment and moved over to whisper to the Duke of Westfell. The duke paused and then whispered to the king, who nodded. At the king's nod, the general signaled the guard.

King William stood and the crowd, who had been following this quiet drama intently, stilled to listen. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have some unexpected guests. We ask that you stand and welcome them appropriately."

The doors to the banquet room opened and the guard announced, "His Highness, Alaric, King of the Great Forest, and Prince Brightblade, his heir."

Even as they all bowed to welcome the elven royalty, the household staff bustled to reorganize the head table. Duke Richard moved down to permit the elven king to sit alongside King William, while Prince Brightblade was placed between Queen Beatrice and Lord Rorrick.

Alaric swept into the room, clothed in a swirl of silver silk with a dark green embroidered ivy pattern. On his head rode the golden band of his office, which bore a single large emerald the size of a pigeon egg on the center of his brow. Behind him strode Prince Brightblade identically clad in silver and green with the silver band of his rank around his head with its smaller emerald.

"Your Majesty, forgive us for being tardy but we had a bit of trouble passing your security screen. Our compliments on your guards; they are unusually alert." King Alaric was smiling as he spoke. "We heard you had come by to see our friend, Duke Richard, and we just had to come pay our respects. Especially since we could also see our grandson, Rorrick."

The crowd gasped as this statement registered. The heir was part elf! They looked up to see what the king would say.

Duke Richard, as host of the gathering, spoke first, "Welcome to you, King Alaric. It has been a very long time since you have been in this hall."

"The hall seems dimmer without Duchess Bridget or your daughter, Abigail, even though the radiance of Queen Beatrice shines among us tonight," King Alaric responded.

"Yet the presence of the Lords of the Forest adds a greater luster to this feast than would otherwise be felt. Welcome to you both. Come, join us at table!" King William said, gesturing for King Alaric to sit beside him and for Prince Brightblade to join Queen Beatrice.

Once again, the head table was seated and the guests also resumed their seats. With a fanfare of horns, the doors from the kitchens opened and a line of servers appeared. The first three pairs carried the large platforms upon which rested one of the three massive boars brought in by General Gustav and Swiftstalker. The next sixteen servers carried platters piled with venison, grouse, rabbit, duck, and quail. Others followed carrying bowls of potatoes, yams, various vegetables, and assortments of nuts and fruits. Once the promenade of the bounty had circled the room, the king stood and said, "Let the feast be served!"

As the serving staff began distributing the food, the assembled guests began to converse with their neighbors at the tables. While some discussed local events, others spoke about the banquet thus far. Still more wondered what lofty conversations were taking place at the head table. The kings were talking together, as were the dukes. The queen and the elven prince were in deep discussion, while young Lord Rorrick and Lord Swiftstalker were entertaining Lady Bethany, the queen's lady-in-waiting.

Each member of the head table was served before the others, getting their choice of the best cuts. King William consumed large amounts of everything, while Queen Beatrice ate sparingly of some of the quail. The elves partook sparingly of the meat dishes but ate heartily of the fruits, vegetables, and breads.

"Prince Brightblade, do not the Lords of the Forest eat meat?" asked Queen Beatrice.

"Some do, Your Majesty, while others among us refrain. It has to do with the level of our ability to work the forces of life. Those of us who can feel the forces deeply know the feelings of the higher orders of life. Once you have been inside the mind and heart of a stag, it is hard to consume his flesh," the prince explained. "However, do not think we look askance at those who do eat meat. Even among the Fair Folk, there are those who enjoy a hearty slab of venison or boar. Observe Lord Swiftstalker. If his platter held any more food, we would worry whether the table itself might collapse under the sheer weight of it."

"Some of us worked up an appetite hunting this food for the table, oh Prince," replied Lord Swiftstalker between bites. "One of these boars tried very hard to make me his meal so I relish the justice of our present positions."

Rory was awed by the position he was now in. Dining at the head table with two kings, one queen, one prince, two dukes, a lady-in-waiting, a general and another elf! Never in his wildest dreams did such an event ever occur. As much as he wanted to speak with his father, he was rightly concentrating on the queen. Unfortunately, each time he glanced toward the young

lady-in-waiting on his other side, his gaze was drawn to the amazing display down her plunging bodice. Rory had only known one woman before coming to the keep and that was his mother—and even then, he had known her as his grandmother! He had never seen so much bare skin in his life, and the view was making it very hard for him to breathe. As he glanced up from his last visual foray down Lady Bethany's creamy bosom, Rory's eyes locked with Lord Swiftstalker's. The smirk that crossed the elven lord's face showed he knew exactly where Rory had been looking. There was no doubt in his mind that his weapons master would have some pithy comments to make later on, and at a moment of maximum embarrassment for Rory.

Making sure his gaze was on her face, he asked, "Have you been with the queen for long, Lady Bethany?"

Bethany dabbed at her mouth with her linen napkin, then turned to face Rory. "No, Lord Rorrick, I joined the queen's service only three months ago. Since I was the youngest, I requested to make this trip to spare some of the older women the rigors of travel."

Rory could barely hear her words when she discussed the trip as he was falling deep into her sea-green eyes. Her heart-shaped face was framed by waves of hair the color of burnished copper, which was gathered at the nape of her slender neck in an ornate silver clasp. There was a delicate dusting of faint freckles across the bridge of her pert nose. She was, he decided, enchanting.

"Did I hear you say you are the youngest of the ladies-in-waiting?" Swiftstalker asked. "How young are you, if I may ask?"

She turned her head to Swiftstalker as she replied, "I just turned seventeen, my lord." Rory caught his breath and took a deep sip of his wine to clear his mind.

"Then you are of an age with Lord Rorrick then. He will soon be seventeen himself," Swiftstalker said.

Turning back to Rory, Lady Bethany said, "Is it true you have been living in the Great Forest, Lord Rorrick?"

"Yes, along with my mother. After her death, I was united with my grandfather," Rory replied. "I found this keep a bit overwhelming. I cannot imagine what it must be like in Aluria at the court."

"I know what you mean. Our estate is smaller than the Duchy of Westfell and I was not prepared for the differences at the court and Aluria." She sipped her wine. "I wanted to go back home but my service had been promised to the queen since I was a young girl, and I could not dishonor my family. It is another reason I asked to come on this trip; to get away from the press of so many people."

"What is it a lady-in-waiting does?" Rory asked. "Aside from waiting."

Bethany smiled at his small joke. "I am a companion and chaperone for the queen. I keep her company for the most part and am responsible for keeping her sewing basket organized. I know it sounds silly, but it really does take some work to keep all the threads free of tangles so she can embroider without fussing with them. When she wants to be read to, I do so. Should she wish a song, I sing or play the lute for her. And, if she should have a male visitor, I am

there to protect her reputation."

"Was this what my mother was doing when she was at the court?" Rory asked.

"I imagine it was, Lord Rorrick," Swiftstalker said. "It is a common practice for young women of noble houses to spend a season or two at court in this capacity. Not only does it provide companions for the queen, it also permits the young women to meet many of the eligible noblemen to see if there is one who might be suitable to become her husband. Free of many of the strictures, they can flirt with the men and are then much more likely to settle down in an arranged marriage."

"That is correct, Lord Swiftstalker. It is through these contacts that the noble houses make alliances by marriage," Bethany said. "My own father is hoping I attract the eye of someone or I risk becoming an old maid."

"No, fair lady, you will never be an old maid. As I recall, the new Duke of Eastfell is also about sixteen or seventeen. He will need a wife soon. That makes two of the largest duchies in search of a bride. And that, I think, is another reason the queen selected you to make this journey; to see whether you and young Rorrick or you and the new Duke of Eastfell would make a good match. Your queen is a wise and intelligent woman who does nothing without a reason. That is true of every noblewoman but especially those of the Great Houses and the crown."

"And what of noblemen, Lord Swiftstalker?" Bethany teased.

"Ah, lass, noblemen are just like every other man. Give them a woman's touch, a place to sleep, food and drink, and something to do that means something to them, and they are content." Swiftstalker laughed. "One of these years, even I might find myself a fine elven maid to spend a century or two talking about this and that."

Lady Bethany giggled quietly then she said, "I pity the maid who tries to settle you down, Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest. In the short time I have been in Westfell, I have heard plenty of stories about you and the some of the serving wenches."

"Believe every word of them, my lady. Only know this, the reality far surpasses the tales!"

"What did you think of Eastfell, Lady Bethany?" Rory asked.

"I found the duchy well disciplined, but the people seemed quite subdued, which I attribute to the death of their duke. I found the keep quite drafty and unkempt, unlike this beautiful one here. The new duke is a pimply-faced youth given to temper tantrums with no sense of decorum. He tried very hard to get me to kiss him and made it very plain he would enjoy further liberties, as well. I did not care much for him at all."

"Well, lass, I can understand his desire, even if I do not approve of his style," Lord Swiftstalker said. "You are a very pretty woman, Lady Bethany. Don't you agree, Lord Rorrick?"

Rory nodded his head as he said, "Very much. I must assume the new Duke of Eastfell is a fool for anyone can see that you are a chaste and modest woman of good repute. It would be a crime to sully your name."

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Armand, Duke of Kendrahl, turned to Duke Richard and said, "They make a fine couple."

"Who does?"

"Your heir and the Lady Bethany. You know that's why Queen Beatrice brought her along."

"He's much too young!"

"And you are much too old, my friend. Westfell needs him wedded, bedded, and with an heir before long. And if you don't consider Lady Bethany, recall that Eastfell is even more eagerly searching for a bride for the new young duke."

Duke Richard sipped his wine, the tart bite matched his mood. "You speak sense, although I am loathe to admit it. I just found the lad and we've only started training him for the role he must fill one day. Must we add a wife to the mix so soon?" Richard stared across the table to where Rory and the girl in question were seated and watched their interaction. A smile crossed his face as he noticed how attracted Rory was to the girl and, if Richard's experience was any basis to judge, she seemed just as interested in him.

"What do you know about the girl, Armand?"

"She's the only daughter of Earl Sudcliffe, the king's chancellor. She just turned seventeen and has been at court for less than three months. Her reputation is beyond reproach and she has not been given to flirtations with the young men at court. She is educated beyond most of her class, sings, plays the lute, and has obviously wrapped your grandson around her ... ah, finger."

"Why do I suspect the fine hand of the queen in this? I don't mean just the girl's presence; I mean the fact that you are the one presenting this to me."

"You think that because you are both a fine tactician and a shrewd judge of character." Armand laughed. "Plus, you and I have known each other for almost fifty years and I have never been able to fool you in all that time."

"So what happens now?"

"Nothing much publicly. However, if your heir and the girl suit one another, then in a few months, there will be a formal announcement of their engagement. When Lord Rorrick turns eighteen, they can be wed. That will give you a little over a year to work on his training and for them to get to know one another. You are planning on coming to court in the spring, are you not?"

"To be honest, I hadn't planned to, but I guess now I will have no choice," Duke Richard muttered.

"One always has a choice, my friend," Armand said as he lifted his cup.

\* \* \*

King William looked long at the elven king. "Your pardon, Your Majesty, but we must wonder what truly brings you here tonight."

Alaric smiled. "We have heard that you are plain spoken, Your Majesty, so let's speak plainly without all the titles and other trappings in the way. I came here to make sure you do not hold young Rory's heritage against him."

"Why in the All-Father's name would I do that? Alaric, while I may not have had much contact with your people, I hold them in the highest respect. I regard Rorrick's elven blood as an asset to him, the duchy, and the realm," King William said. "I have already confirmed him as heir."

"Did you really have a choice, William? He is the sole remaining descendant of the present duke and, unless you wanted open civil strife in this prosperous duchy, you had to confirm him. The real question was what you felt privately." King Alaric sipped his wine, made a face, and asked the steward for two empty glasses. When they arrived, he reached inside his great cloak and extracted a bottle of wine. He poured a glass for both himself and King William. "Be careful, William, this elven wine could spoil all others for you."

King William took a small sip and it was like drinking liquid sunshine. The bouquet was of spring flowers and freshly cut grass with just a hint of the buzzing of bees. It sent a pleasant warmth throughout his body and gave him a burst of energy and optimism.

"My word! That is quite ... exceptional." King William sipped again, and smiled.

"I am so pleased you like it. I will have some sent to you at Aluria," Alaric said as he watched William take another sip. "So how do you feel privately about the boy?"

"I like him. If all goes well, I want to see him wed to that pretty girl by his side. I hope his elven blood gives him a longer life, which will mean a stable Duchy of Westfell for years to come." King William eyed his glass. "Seems your wine has an interesting side effect."

"Yes, nice, isn't it? It's impossible to tell an untruth while drinking it." King Alaric sipped his own glass. "That's why it's banned at all elven councils."

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Queen Beatrice was fascinated by the handsome and dashing Prince Brightblade. She said, "Prince Brightblade, we have never before met any of the Lords of the Forest. Are you all so handsome?"

The prince chuckled, "No, Your Majesty. Some of us are quite plain. Look at Lord Swiftstalker. He's an ugly elf."

"Now we know you jest with us! He's quite a handsome fellow," the queen responded gaily.

"I will admit the ladies seem to find him attractive enough, at that. He never seems to want for feminine companionship."

Her face serious again, Queen Beatrice said, "How we miss Abigail. What can you tell us of her life in the Great Forest?"

"She lived simply, just her and Rory. She spent her days working with her flowers and teaching the boy things she thought he should know."

"How did you two meet?"

"I found her shortly after she entered the Great Forest. I knew who she was, of course, since our families have been in contact in the past. We sat and talked about what had befallen her. I led her to the clearing and arranged for her cabin to be built. Over time, we grew to care for one another a great deal. When young Rory was born, she was afraid there might be some stigma attached to his elven blood and to her own, so she chose to make him believe he was a foundling and that she was merely a kindly old woman who had taken him in." The prince paused. "Out of respect for her wishes, I stopped seeing them both, although I kept a close watch over them. Whenever Rory would roam away from the cabin, I would usually follow to make sure nothing happened to him. That is why I was not near the cabin the day the soldiers killed her; I was watching over Rory."

Queen Beatrice reached out and touched his hand. "I loved her, too."

"She knew that and she understood why you had to use her the way you did, although she was deeply hurt by it. Had you asked her, she would have willingly done it for you. She was only hurt because you didn't trust her enough to ask. That became one of her lessons for Rory, too. That royalty will always do what they think suits the realm, regardless of who else gets hurt in the process."

"Does he not trust us then?" the queen asked.

"Young Rory trusts everyone. In that respect, she failed to corrupt him. Only time and disillusionment will break him of trusting the way he does."

"Will you be staying here at Westfell for long, Prince?"

"No, Your Majesty. As much as I would like to spend some time with Rory, I believe we will depart soon after this banquet concludes. I believe my father's business with your husband is finished."

"That is a shame. Perhaps you will come to see us at the court in Aluria some day," the queen said. "We would like that."

"It would be my honor to visit your court, Your Majesty."

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As the feast came to an end, King William and King Alaric, accompanied by Duke Richard and Duke Armand, Prince Brightblade and General Gustav, went to the library to talk. Lord Swiftstalker disappeared on some amorous adventure of his own, leaving Rory to escort the queen and Lady Bethany to their chambers. When they reached the queen's door, she dismissed Lady Bethany for the night saying she was fatigued and heading straight for bed.

Lady Bethany's chamber was just down the hall, but as they reached the door, Rory suddenly asked whether she would enjoy seeing the stars from the battlement heights. She looked at him shyly for a moment and then nodded her head in acquiescence.

Bethany threaded her arm through his as they walked the corridors of the keep until they reached the doorway out onto the battlements. This particular vantage point overlooked the entire valley and town below the keep. It was above the normal torch line, so the area was black as could be. The stars overhead glittered in the thousands as there was no moon to overshadow them.

Rory was very conscious of her nearness and the pressure of her breast against his arm. He felt her shiver. "Are you cold, Lady Bethany? I should have thought to bring you a cloak."

"It is a little chilly up here in the breeze, Rory. Perhaps you could just put your arm around me and help block the wind." She stepped inside his arms, pulling one arm above her shoulders like a cloak. They stood there for a while, looking at the stars and catching a fleeting glimpse of a shooting star.

She turned to face him, standing very close. She reached up to touch the side of his face, and Rory awkwardly brought his head down toward her. She pressed a hand against his chest when his lips were mere inches away from hers.

"Rory, have you ever kissed a girl?" she asked in a whisper.

"No. I have never even been this close to one before," Rory admitted quietly.

She drew his lips the rest of the way down to hers in a brief kiss.

Her lips were warm, sweet, and soft under his.

"Please forgive my forwardness, Bethany," Rory said as he drew his head back.

"Don't be silly, Rory. I have a confession to make. You are the first man to ever kiss me other than my father. Kiss me again. How else will we know whether we are suited?" She pressed herself even closer to him as their lips met again.

Rory's head was swimming in the combination of the feast and the feel of this vibrant girl in his arms. He wasn't completely sure what he should do, but he knew he did not want to stop kissing her. His hand slipped down from her shoulder and across the creamy flesh of her breast. He jumped as if he had stuck his hand into a fire. As he started to stammer an apology, there came a noise behind them.

"Pardon my intrusion, Lady Bethany, but I need a moment of Lord Rorrick's time before the king and I depart," Prince Brightblade said.

Lady Bethany quickly curtsied to the Prince of the Forest, and said, "If you will excuse me, I must be off to my rooms. I will have one of the guards escort me so you two may speak."

After she left the roof, Prince Brightblade said, "Pretty girl. You could do worse."

"I beg your pardon, Father?"

"I believe they plan to marry that pretty girl to you some day, Rory."

"I'm not ready for marriage!" Rory cried out.

"Rest easy, son. It's not going to happen overnight. I suspect the engagement will be announced at Spring Court and you won't be married until you reach your majority at



eighteen. Don't frown so. It's not a terrible fate to wed a beautiful woman." Prince Brightblade laughed. "Until then, you will have much to learn from the duke. And that is what I wanted to speak to you about. Not all your lessons can come from him. Just as you must learn about managing the duchy from him, you need to be taught about your elven half as well. Some lessons will come from Swiftstalker, while others will come from me."

"From you, sir?"

"In three months, right after the Winter Festival, I want you and Lord Swiftstalker to leave the keep and come to me in the Great Forest. I have already discussed this with Duke Richard and he has agreed. You will rejoin the duke just before it is time to travel to the court in Aluria," Prince Brightblade said. "There are some things you must learn before you travel to that court."

"As you wish, Father," Rory replied.

## Chapter 6

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The morning dawned cold, dark, and wet. The large ballroom had been restored back to its normal function, the receiving chamber for the Duke of Westfell. The ducal throne was in place on the dais, flanked by two lesser chairs. The King of Aluria occupied the center throne, while the Duke of Westfell sat to his right and the Duke of Kendrahl sat to his left. The walls were lined with both the King's Own and the duke's guards. Standing slightly behind the Duke of Westfell was Lord Rorrick, Heir of Westfell. Standing on the first step of the dais, in his full mail and helm, stood General Gustav.

King William said, "Let's get this unpleasantness over with, shall we?"

General Gustav nodded, and the chamber doors were opened. The townsfolk silently filed into the room to bear witness to the morning's proceedings. Some would be called upon to speak. Once the chamber had filled, the general's voice boomed out, "Bring the prisoner forth."

Two guards dragged in the whimpering chamberlain. His fine clothes now in tatters, the soles of his soft boots worn through in places, he was filthy, and bound in heavy chains. It was obvious from the way his clothes hung on his frame, he had once been very fat and had recently lost a lot of weight. His hair was unbound, long and greasy and his face was covered in a dirty, ragged beard.

They brought the prisoner to a point ten feet from the dais and let him go. The man collapsed to his knees, begging for mercy.

"Silence!" General Gustav yelled.

King William said, "In our respect for our loyal duke and his valued service to the realm, we have reluctantly agreed to adjudicate this matter."

The chamberlain started to cry as he realized this meant he had been submitted for High Justice from the king himself.

The first to speak was Richard, Duke of Westfell. "This man was chosen to serve as my chamberlain, tasked to handle small matters involving the duchy in my stead. Large matters, especially those involving finances, were to be mine and mine alone. I submit to your review this warrant of office drawn up when he was appointed to the position. It spells out very clearly what duties and responsibilities the position contained, as well as the limitations upon the office." He handed the document to the king.

"Did his position include a stipend for the fine clothing he wore, My Lord Duke?" the king asked. "When he appeared in the court at Aluria, he was attired in the finest brocades and silks."

"No, Your Majesty, for in this duchy, we dress simply as a rule. Such fine garments do not wear well when one is working and are suitable solely for court. Since his duties did not involve any need for him to ever appear at court, such an allowance was not included," Duke Richard explained.

"Did you give him leave to travel to the court on your behalf?" asked the king.

"No, his absence from the duchy was a complete surprise to me when I returned from my time at the Tower of the Pact. We had routinely exchanged messages about the affairs of the duchy," Duke Richard said. "In none of those missives did he ever so much as hint about traveling away from the duchy."

"Thank you, Your Grace," the king said. "We call on Mistress Margaret, Head Housekeeper of Westfell Keep."

Mistress Margaret came forward and curtsied deeply before her king, holding the curtsy until bidden to rise. "Mistress Margaret, to your knowledge, has the duke spoken truthfully?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The duke is always honest and truthful," came her proud reply.

"Do you have any knowledge about the actions of the chamberlain?"

"Sire, at first the chamberlain did his work openly and simply. Over time, he began to take more and more upon himself, drinking the duke's wines and eating fine cuts of meat. He even beat one of the serving wenches when she refused his bed." Her disdain for the chamberlain came through in her tone of voice, which clearly said she thought the man was slime.

"Was she the only one he sought to force into his bed?"

"No, sire. She's the only one he beat badly enough to make her unfit for work. Others submitted unwillingly to his threats."

"Thank you for your information, Mistress Margaret. You are excused," the king said.

When the king asked for others to speak, there was a parade of serving girls, maids, and people from the village who reported the chamberlain's villainy, from his abuse of the women to outright theft from the villagers. When asked why they never approached the general with their complaints, they all admitted meekly that they were afraid of him.

The king turned his steely gaze on the general. "General Gustav, you have a long history supporting the realm. You have been said to be the perfect warrior. How could you sit by and let this happen?"

"Your Majesty, up until about five months ago, I had been on a patrol of our outermost forts and garrisons that took the better part of a year; a mission I had been sent on by the chamberlain who told me it was at the behest of the duke. When I returned, the scoundrel was already gone to the court. Apparently, no one but you and the duke know what an agreeable sort I am, so no one told me what had been happening in my absence. If they had, I would have come to Aluria myself and brought him to justice."

The king next turned his steely gaze upon the accused. "Well, chamberlain, now is your chance to defend yourself against your accusers. But first, we must ask you this. Did you not stand before us and swear to the All-Father that the duke was a dying, feeble old man who had lost all sense of reason and was no longer fit to rule this duchy? Did you not attempt to persuade us that you were his chosen successor?"

The chamberlain fell to his knees, groveling at the foot of the dais, whimpering, "Mercy!" over and over again.

"This then is our ruling. This man is convicted of being a thief, a rapist, a liar, and a traitor. We order his hands be removed so he may steal no more. Let his privates be removed that he may never defile another woman. We command his tongue be removed so he may speak no more lies. Finally, his head is to be removed and impaled on a pike at the keep gate for a period of three days as warning against treason to the duke and the realm." Turning his implacable gaze to the general, he said, "We are not satisfied that you did enough to prevent this from happening, General Gustav. For your punishment, you will be the one to remove this man's hands, genitals, tongue, and head. You will place his head upon the pike at the gate. As you do so, you will remember that your duty is to defend the people of this duchy from all enemies, including slime like this one."

The general knelt to his king in submission to his will, while the guards dragged the screaming and whimpering chamberlain from the room. The general rose and slowly followed after them, carefully avoiding the trail of urine on the floor.

The duke rose and followed the general, saying to Rory as he passed, "You must come with me, Rory. As the future leader of these people, you have to be present when justice is meted out, no matter how unpleasant."

After Rory came the people of Westfell. Only the king and Duke Armand remained in the hall, feeling this was strictly an internal matter to the duchy.

The crowd assembled in the main courtyard of the keep. In the center of the square a large wooden block had been placed, to which the former chamberlain had been lashed with his arms outstretched so his wrists lay across the center of it. To one side stood the general, a large battle axe in his hands. At a nod from the duke to proceed, the general swung the axe high over his head. With a mighty swing, he brought the axe down so fast it whistled through the air and sank into the block with a loud thunk, cleaving cleanly through the prisoner's wrists and severing his hands. Since his wrists had been bound tightly beforehand, there was no arterial spray.

The convicted chamberlain was jerked to his feet and his filthy pants were pulled down to his ankles. The general grasped the man's genitals in one mailed fist and used his knife to swiftly perform the gelding. Tongs were used to pull the man's tongue out from his mouth and the same bloody knife was used to remove it. Finally, the chamberlain was bent over the wooden block and the axe was used to remove his head. The general picked up the head by its greasy hair and jammed it down on a pike, then carried the pike with its ghastly burden to the gate, where he shoved the staff deep into the earth.

The general marched up to the duke and knelt once more. "It is done, Your Grace. Please accept my deepest apologies for failing you in this matter."

Speaking loudly enough for all to hear, the duke said, "The matter is settled, General Gustav. Such a lesson need only be learned once."

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It had taken all of Rory's nerve to watch the punishment of the chamberlain for never in his life had he seen another human being hacked apart by cold steel. The corpse was unceremoniously dumped into a cart along with the removed parts and taken out to be burned. Several buckets of water sluiced away the blood and the wooden block was tossed into the fire with the body. General Gustav sat near the fire, honing the edge of the axe to a razor sharpness once more, his eyes never leaving the head hung on the pike.

Lord Swiftstalker took Rory aside. "Leave him be, Lord Rorrick. We all must deal with our internal demons in our own way. General Gustav is a good man, but he has always defeated his enemies in the hot blood of battle. Never before has he had to serve as an executioner. No other lesson would have been as effective. Your king is a very wise man. Remember this day, Lord Rorrick, and remember what the king's high justice means. It is always swift and pointed, not only to the accused, but to all who see it carried out."

Rory and his weapons master went to the training arena and began to spar with the blunted swords, but Swiftstalker soon realized Rory's heart wasn't in it that morning. He racked the swords once more and sat down beside the boy on a bench in the arena.

"What's on your mind, Rory, besides the execution?" Swiftstalker asked.

"Many things. My father has told me that we must go to him in three months. That will mean leaving the duke and the people here I am just beginning to get to know. Then there is Lady Bethany."

"I would imagine she is much in your thoughts this day after the kisses on the battlements last night." Swiftstalker laughed at Rory's expression. "Don't be so surprised. Did your father not charge me with protecting you? Do you honestly think you have ever been out of my sight since we left the Great Forest? I saw the kisses and caresses last night, and was grateful your father broke it up before it went much further. Neither of you was thinking much about her reputation, which could easily have been compromised."

"It was so ... exciting. It made me feel..."

"I know what it made you feel and how exciting it can be, but Lady Bethany is not some trollop who can be tumbled into bed for a few coins. She is an earl's daughter and quite

possibly your future bride. You must promise me, young Rory, that you will not go beyond kisses with her until you are married to her. Her virtue is her future."

"You have my word," Rory said. "But I shall rely on you to make sure we don't cross that boundary despite our best intentions."

Swiftstalker stuck out his hand and grasped Rory's. "Done!"

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King William handed Duke Richard a brandy when he walked into the library from overseeing the execution of the chamberlain. The king said, "There is a lesson in this for you as well, old friend. Never leave others in control of your duchy, or you will deserve to lose all you hold. The only ones you can truly trust are those of your own blood, and even then, you must use caution."

"That point has been driven home. Never did I suspect he would abuse his position of trust in the manner he did. What breaks my heart was his abuse of the women," Duke Richard said.

"Yes, we imagine it does for you have always had a soft spot when it comes to women. My father once told me that even in your youth, you were never one to enjoy an amiable tumble with a serving wench. He swore you went to your marriage bed more pure than your wife, for she at least had been kissed before."

Duke Richard smiled in memory. "Your father should know because he tried to kiss my wife on many occasions. The skillful placement of a swift knee once quelled his lusty advances. She was no respecter of position, my wife. She held her virtue in much greater esteem than your father's pride. As for my virginal state, your father knows better since he and I went roving together quite often before he married and assumed the throne."

"We yield, Richard. We should know better than to match wits with you." King William laughed. "We should tell you that we are impressed with your heir, and not just because of his other connections. He seems to have a natural affinity with the people."

"Yes, he does. My people love him already for they feel he is one of them in spirit, if not in blood. Although last night I had a very interesting talk with his father while you met with King Alaric. I had to agree to allow Rory to go to the Great Forest immediately after the Winter Festival to spend some time with his father and learn about his elven heritage."

"How do you feel about that?"

Duke Richard replied, "Ambivalent. On the one hand, I need all the time I can get to train him to be ready to take over Westfell when I die. At the same time, I recognize the need for him to know the Lords of the Forest and what that heritage will mean to him in the future. In the end, I chose to honor the pact we have."

"The queen had a long conversation with young Bethany this morning. The young woman is quite smitten with Rorrick. It is the queen's desire that their engagement be announced at the Spring Court, unless you have some objection to the match."

"No objections, sire. I, too, have seen the way they look at one another and my spies tell me

they were kissing on the battlements last night until Prince Brightblade interrupted them." Richard laughed. "Perhaps an engagement will settle them down for the time being."

Duke Armand snorted. "I don't know about you two, but my engagement to my wife certainly did not settle us down! If anything, it lessened the restrictions between us a bit more than would otherwise have been acceptable. It was a good thing we were separated from each other until our wedding!"

Duke Richard looked a little guilty and King William laughed.

"Well, my friend and my liege, I must bid you farewell," Duke Armand said. "It is time I went home before the passes fill with snow. I will see you in the spring at Court."

"You must have an escort, Armand," King William said.

"I don't need one in Westfell and my own men await me at the border between our lands," Armand said.

"How would it look for a duke to be traveling alone? What if something happened to you? We insist you take at least four of our King's Own with you as far as the border," the king responded.

"As you will, Your Majesty."

\* \* \*

Rory went for a walk in the town to get his mind off his problems, knowing somewhere behind him lurked Swiftstalker, watching over him. As he walked along, he talked with those townspeople he met, gaining a feel for how they all felt about the morning's trial and execution. Everyone he spoke with was very adamant about the king's justice, although some felt that making the general carry out the sentence was a bit harsh; they all knew the general was a good and fair man. It spoke well of the duke and his heir that people would speak openly in disagreement with the king without fear of reprisal.

When he returned to the keep, he met with his grandfather and told his grandfather what he had learned. The duke said, "The people are wrong, Rory. The king was right. This is a lesson General Gustav had to learn; that his duty to the people overrides that to a temporary authority. When that authority becomes capricious, arbitrary, or steeped in abuse, then its moral foundation is gone and the implicit contract to obey it has become void. There is no such thing as divine right. We nobles hold our position based on the authority given to us by the people we serve. Never forget that."

The king's voice came from the back of the library. "Those words apply to us all, Lord Rorrick, whether duke or king. Those who forget them tend to have short reigns."

"Your Majesty! I did not know you were there," Rory said, apprehensively.

"We know, but we heard what you told your grandfather and they were words we needed to hear. His response to you was even more important for even we need to have that thought repeated every so often," King William said. "On to another subject. The queen has asked for you both to join us for a quiet dinner. We warn you, Rorrick, that the subject of the dinner will

be your engagement to Lady Bethany, who will also be there tonight. The queen has already arranged everything with your marvelous Mistress Margaret."

\* \* \*

Rory had been bathed, scrubbed, and dressed in his finest clothes for his dinner with the king and queen. He looked over at Swiftstalker and said, "Well, do I pass muster?"

"You look fine, Rory. Just remember not to eat with your hands and you'll be fine," Swiftstalker said.

"I would never eat with my hands!"

"I know that, but tonight when you feel tense, you will remember that comment and you'll smile inside and that will help you relax."

Duke Richard knocked at Rory's door and said, "Ready, lad? Mustn't keep the queen waiting."

\* \* \*

Mistress Margaret had arranged for a round dining table with five chairs so there was no question about precedence in the seating. The king and queen sat beside each other with the duke on the king's other side. Rory sat next to the queen while Bethany sat between Rory and his grandfather. Rory had little memory of the conversation over dinner; he spent most of the time lost in a fog that had descended over his senses the moment he had locked gazes with Bethany. He remembered the toast to their future offered by the queen and they had linked arms to drink from one another's cup. From that moment on, he imagined he could feel her lips on his cup whenever he drank from it.

At one point, Bethany had reached over and laid her hand on his, and he gently took hold of her fingers. They were long, elegant fingers with tapered nails. She wore a simple ring with a small pearl on her ring finger. His whole awareness sank to the point where their hands joined together.

Finally, the dinner came to an end and the queen suggested that Rory and Bethany take a walk to enjoy some time together since they would be separated the next day when the royals returned to court at Aluria. The two quickly donned their cloaks and went up to the battlements.

"Rory," Bethany said, "I hope you don't feel pressured into this marriage."

"I must admit that I hadn't given much thought to getting married before. I understand the need for another heir to Westfell as quickly as possible due to the duke's age."

"Is that why you agreed? For Westfell?"

"It's not the only reason. Although we just met, there is obviously a strong attraction between us. I believe we can use that to build a future together. Think of those who first meet at their wedding ceremony. We at least have more than that already, so just think how much

better our marriage will be.”

“You find me attractive?”

“I find you beautiful.” He pulled her into his arms and bent his head to her lips. Her arms went about his neck as she opened her mouth to his kiss. Rory slid his hands inside her cloak and began to trace the lines of her back.

She pulled her head back, and said, “It will be a long six months until the Spring Court in Aluria. These kisses will have to last until then.” She pulled his head back down and pressed her lips against his once more. Rory’s hands traced the slopes of her breasts and slipped inside her bodice to explore her firm breasts with their small pale pink nipples for a few breathless moments.

She finally pulled back, saying, “No more for now, my lord, before we go too far and throw caution to the wind. You create such delicious feelings inside me that I have trouble thinking of anything but your hands on my body.”

Reluctantly, Rory drew his hands away and watched her restore her bodice, catching a glimpse of her creamy breasts before they disappeared once more under the silk and brocade fabrics. With a sigh, he placed his arms around her as he said, “While it will be a long time until spring, it will be an even longer wait for our wedding. I cannot begin to describe what you make me feel.”

They stood and watched the stars until a polite cough from the shadows reminded them it was time to go back inside.

## Chapter 7

« ^ »

After the departure of the royal family and entourage, life in the duchy settled down into a routine for Rory. He would spend his early mornings helping the people of the duchy with the harvest or any other chores necessary to prepare for the coming winter. His afternoons were spent either beside his grandfather, learning the management of the vast duchy, or in the training arena, mastering the sword and other weapons. After six more weeks, General Gustav admitted that Rory was faster than he was with a sword and credited the speed to Rory’s elven blood.

Rory knew General Gustav was right. During their sparring matches, Rory would suddenly feel as if time itself had slowed. Every motion of his opponent seemed to flow very slowly to where he could see what they were going to do before they did it. He easily blocked every move while his own attacks seemed to blaze like lightning. With Swiftstalker, the matches were more even and moved with such speed that the flash of the swords was a blur to those who observed.

Rory’s ability with the bow was even greater. He could not miss. When he sighted on a target, it was as if he had telescopic vision and what he aimed at was merely a couple of yards



away. It didn't matter whether he took his time or snapped a shot off in the time it took to pull back the bowstring, the arrow always flew true. After a few days, Swiftstalker presented Rory with his own elven bow. It had taken Rory a couple of days to get accustomed to this mighty bow with twice the normal draw of a regular one, but with it, he found he could hit targets at seemingly impossible distances. If Rory could see it, he could hit it.

The only weapon of war Rory could not seem to master was the battle axe. He always felt clumsy and awkward trying to use the large weapon. In his heart, he knew it was because he had seen one used as an executioner's device and he felt the weapon was slow and without finesse. Since General Gustav was no longer able to disarm Rory when he held a sword, the general relented and dropped the axe training completely, saying, "You're right, lad. It's no different than cutting down a tree and a lousy weapon for defense. Stick to the sword and knife for close work and use your bow for long, and you'll live to an old age."

Rory found the time spent with his grandfather fascinating. Once again, Rory seemed to have an innate affinity for discerning the truth whenever a matter was presented to Duke Richard for judgment. Crimes against people or property were rare in Westfell, and the recent execution of the chamberlain had served as a lesson for all. Most disputes were based on a misunderstanding between the parties involved that they had been unable or unwilling to resolve between themselves. Almost all cases were solved by the simple expedient of having the involved parties explain their position to the duke and, in doing so, they usually reached an equitable solution. Only rarely did Duke Richard have to impose a solution, but when he did, it was fair and reasonable.

Soon, most of the villagers began to seek out Rory during his walks around the town. He would listen quietly to both sides, then ask some probing questions which would lead the villagers to their own solutions. Once Rory started doing this, the calls on the duke's time dropped to very little.

With his time thus freed, his grandfather began to tutor Rory on other aspects of being a duke, notably the interaction with the other duchies and the Crown. Rory found these lessons fascinating as they were filled with the more interesting examples of murder, treason, and rebellion. The war to unite the realm of Aluria had been brutal as neither Eastfell nor Solange wished to join. By working together, Aluria, Westfell, and Kendrahl had forced the other two into submission. While that peace had been maintained for over two decades, it was still fragile.

"Before his death at the hands of Prince Brightblade, it had been rumored that the Duke of Eastfell had been holding secret meetings with representatives from the Outlands," Duke Richard said. "Whether he meant to use them to overthrow the existing monarchy in Aluria or was seeking some sort of accommodation outside the borders of the realm, his plans died when he did. The only thing you can be sure of is the Outlanders will use his death and the regency period in Eastfell to further their own ends and spread turmoil elsewhere in the kingdom."

"If all suspected the duke was involved with the Outlanders, why didn't the king take some kind of action?" Rory asked.

"The king cannot act without proof. You can believe the king had his spies trying very hard to gather evidence against the duke, but even then, the monarch had to be careful. None of the Great Houses would stand idly by and let the king overthrow one of them. If he had acted against Eastfell, it is certain Solange would have rebelled to further destabilize the realm."

"This then is another lesson in the realities of power. The king rules by the consent of the governed, especially the Great Houses because they are ones who have the standing armies."

"Exactly! There are some who believe their positions are entitlements and a license to do as they wish. Among some of the Outlander countries, this is a common practice. In those places, a ruler has absolute power and no law applies other than the ruler's whim. Decrees are enforced at the point of a sword, usually wielded by the types of people we do not permit to serve in our armies in Aluria."

Rory shook his head in disbelief. "That would be chaos for those underneath. There would be no surety in life, nor any appeal from arbitrary abuses."

"Which is why we have refugees coming across the borders of Aluria every day," Duke Richard said. "And while most are simple, honest folk looking for a better life, there are those who seek to overturn ours. Those who spy on Aluria and seek to create unrest here are one of the biggest problems we face as a realm. We do not see many of them in Westfell because our people know we stand for justice and fairness. In this part of the country, these spies try to establish more unrest by assassinating the leaders of a community or even higher."

"Then it was for that reason the king insisted Duke Armand be escorted by the King's Own. It was not that the duke was in danger from the people of Westfell, but rather the king wished to protect the duke from the actions of some outside agent."

"Very good, Rory," Duke Richard said. "At a time when Eastfell is already in turmoil because of the murder of their duke, how much greater unrest would be caused by the questionable death of the Duke of Kendrahl or even Westfell? I know you sometimes chafe under the watchful eye of Lord Swiftstalker, but there has been good reason for that caution." The duke smiled. "Although he does tell me that any common bandit who tried to take you would soon find his parts scattered about on the ground. He is quite impressed with your skill with the sword, you know."

Rory smiled at this sudden praise. He had tried hard to impress his weapons master.

The duke said, "Based on his request, you are to wear your sword whenever you leave the grounds of the keep. And I do not mean one of the training swords, either. I want you to start wearing the one your father gave you. It needs to become a familiar weight on your back until it feels like it belongs there."

"Do you really think it is necessary here in Westfell village?"

"No, and I pray you never have to draw the blade in need. But I will not risk you needing the sword and not having it. If it were in any way practical, I would have you carry that great elven bow of yours, as well. You are the future of this land, Rory, and no effort to protect that is too great."

\* \* \*

The morning of Rory's seventeenth birthday dawned clear and fair. When he came down to break his fast, he found his grandfather, Swiftstalker, and General Gustav waiting for him at the table. Mistress Margaret served him herself, whispering a quick, "Happy birthday, Lord Rorrick," in his ear as she placed his plate in front of him.

"Normally," Swiftstalker said, "your weapons master would present you with a fine weapon as a gift on this day, but since you already own the finest anyone could desire, the general and I have conspired together to present you with your first suit of chain mail to protect your chest and back and some light armor, greaves and bracers, to protect your legs and arms."

Rory went over to the new suit of mail and armor draped over one of the other display sets in the room. Of the highest quality, the set was still very plain, free of embellishment that might catch a sword or spear point, or of any device that might draw unwanted attention to signify the wearer was more than a common soldier. The helm was also plain and utilitarian from a distance. It was only up close he noticed the snarling wolf's head engraved in the crown of the helm, signifying Westfell.

"I thank you both for this magnificent gift. It looks heavy," Rory said.

"Oh, it is that, lad," General Gustav said. "It takes a great deal of stamina to wear it for long and even more to fight in it. Starting tomorrow, you will wear it for one hour each day for three days, and then two hours a day for three days, and so on. After a week, we will begin training in it. I wonder if you will be as fast in mail as you are without it."

"Why are we waiting until tomorrow?" Rory asked.

"Because we thought you might like to spend today getting to know the duke's present," Swiftstalker said. "Once you finish eating, we will go take a look at it."

Rory quickly bolted down his eggs, bacon, and toast while the others watched him with amused looks on their faces. Pushing his chair back, he stood and followed his grandfather out of the room and into the main square in front of the keep, where a coal black stallion with a white blaze between his eyes stood. As Rory moved beside the horse, he realized it was at least seventeen hands high. The saddle and tack were also black, polished to a high luster, yet still plain and utilitarian.

"He is called Storm," Duke Richard said. "He is a trained warhorse, and General Gustav has consented to teach you exactly what that means."

Rory turned and embraced his grandfather, completely at a loss for words. The duke patted the boy's back as they hugged.

"Well, lad, shall we go for a ride?" Swiftstalker asked as he swung up onto his own horse that Rory hadn't even noticed in the square.

General Gustav handed Rory his sword and scabbard. "You're not going out without this, lad. And starting tomorrow, you will only ride out of this square wearing that mail and other armor. That's so both you and the horse get used to the weight of it."

Rory slipped the scabbard strap over his shoulder and across his chest, settling the sword across his back. He reached one hand back to check the pommel of the sword and to ensure it was seated in its scabbard. He knew from long practice he could draw the sword out in the blink of an eye. He also settled his dagger tightly into its sheath and adjusted it to ride naturally at his side while mounted. He knew he could draw and throw the dagger with the same speed and accuracy he had with the bow.

Swiftstalker watched with approval as Rory checked and settled his weapons. The boy was a quick study but they had never covered doing this when mounting a horse. His actions looked like they were something he had done a thousand times before. Swiftstalker had only seen one other who was such a natural warrior, and that was Prince Brightblade.

With a wave to Duke Richard and General Gustav, Rory turned the stallion's head and the pair headed toward the sally port.

"He looks good atop that horse, Your Grace," General Gustav said.

"Yes, he does," Duke Richard said. "We have certainly given him the necessary tools for war, haven't we? With the elven weapons from his father to a warhorse and armor, he has everything he needs, except experience."

\* \* \*

Rory was surprised as they rode through the village of Westfell. Many of the villagers called out birthday wishes to the young heir. Swiftstalker noticed his reaction and said, "Your people care a great deal about what happens in the keep, and they have come to know and, more important, trust you. Naturally, they know today is your birthday. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we were to find they already know about your betrothal to Lady Bethany."

"How can they all know something like that?"

"We may act like there is no one around us, Rory, but there always is. Whether it's a guard at his post or a chambermaid straightening our room or the valet laying out our clothes, there are always others around us. Don't you remember how strange you found it when you first arrived at the keep? You used to complain about never being alone anywhere.

"All those people around us see and hear almost everything that occurs, and they share that information with their lovers and friends, who repeat it to still others. Gossip about the Great House, especially since you have come to the keep, is one of the villagers' favorite pastimes."

Before long, the pair reached the edge of the town and the long road that led off through the valley. Rory dug his heels into Storm's flanks and began to race down the road with Swiftstalker right alongside him. It was exhilarating. Storm ran like the wind. When they reached a bend in the road, it was bordered by a rail fence. Rory felt the horse bunch his muscles and then Storm leapt over the fence into the field beyond without breaking stride. Rory pulled back on the reins and Storm immediately slowed to a canter.

As Swiftstalker brought his horse alongside Storm, he could see a wide grin on Rory's face.

"That was as close to flying as I think you can come without leaving the ground!" Rory exclaimed. "This horse is magnificent!"

"I think you *were* flying for a few moments. Your horse cleared that fence by several feet." Swiftstalker looked around. "I don't think I have ever been in this part of the valley before. Want to explore a bit before we head back?"

"Great idea. I guess we should head back to the road," Rory said.

"It would be best. Let's use the gate this time, shall we?"

\* \* \*

The road took a turn into a wooded stretch a short time later. The dense trees on either side were so close together that neither Rory nor Swiftstalker could see very far back into the woods.

"There is something about this I don't like," Swiftstalker said. "Be wary and ready for anything."

They hadn't ridden very much farther when a ragtag group of men stepped out of the trees, brandishing a mismatched collection of weapons ranging from old swords to staves. "Halt!" cried one of them.

Swiftstalker whispered, "There are more behind us. When it starts, ride straight at the group in front and pull up on your reins. Let Storm do some of the work but defend yourself at all costs."

Swiftstalker called out, "Who are you and why do you block the duke's road?"

"We are but simple men in search of wealth. Judging from your fine clothes and horses, you must have more than your share," the leader said. "Give us your horses, weapons, and other possessions and we might let you live."

An arrow suddenly skewered the man's throat. Rory slammed his heels into Storm's flanks and the horse raced forward and then reared, slashing downward with his front hooves, killing several of the bandits. Rory whipped his sword from the sheath on his back. Then he engaged the only bandit armed with a sword. That strange sense of time shift occurred and the bandits all began to move in slow motion. Rory's sword cleaved through the bandit's arm just above the wrist, severing the hand holding his weapon. His backswing passed through one of the staves, shattering the wooden staff into kindling. Those bandits remaining in front of him began to run back into the trees. Rory spun his horse to see what was happening to Swiftstalker.

Swiftstalker sat calmly on his horse with six more dead bandits around him. Most had been slain using the bow, but one had clearly been killed by a sword that had opened the man's throat.

"Well, that was exciting! Did you leave any alive?" Swiftstalker asked as he moved next to Rory.

They looked over the fallen bandits and found the one who had lost his hand was still alive. Swiftstalker slid from his horse and bound the wound tightly to stem the flow of blood. He then trussed the man's arms tightly behind him and looped a noose of rope around the man's neck, which he then tied to his saddle.

"You're going to make him walk?" Rory asked.

"I'm certainly not going to share my horse with him! He can walk or be dragged; it matters not one bit to me. He tried to kill you, Rory. Now is not the time to be sympathetic because he's wounded."

Rory thought about that for a moment and decided Swiftstalker was right. "Did you know you have three arrows stuck in your back?"

"Pull them out, would you? I couldn't reach those."

As he removed the arrows from the fabric of Swiftstalker's heavy doublet, Rory realized the elven lord was wearing a light coat of mail under his clothes. "I wondered why there was no blood. So what made you wear this light mail today?"

"Today? I wear it every day, Rory. The only time a Lord of the Forest is out of his mail is when he is deep in the safety of our own elven city in the Great Forest." Swiftstalker grinned as he added, "There are *other* times when we take it off, too. Most ladies detest the feel of mail on their skin." When Rory's face turned red in embarrassment, Swiftstalker laughed loudly and then began the long slow ride back to Westfell, their prisoner staggering along behind them.

\* \* \*

General Gustav was not amused. The Heir of Westfell had been attacked by bandits not five miles from the keep itself. Fortunately, they had brought back a prisoner so he could discover who was really behind this attack, because he did not believe for one minute there were real bandits in Westfell. The only bright spot in the whole affair had been Swiftstalker's glowing report of the heir's actions when they were attacked. There had been no hesitation that might have gotten him killed; the boy had charged straight at them and let the horse take care of some of the men while he attacked the others.

The mounted patrol the general had sent out had retrieved the bodies of the other bandits, including their so-called leader. No one from the village had ever seen any of the men before. The weapons they had carried were also collected when found; most had been of very poor quality, although the leader had carried a dagger of Outlander manufacture. *Could these so-called bandits have been foreign mercenaries bent on disrupting Westfell?*

The keep guards had taken the prisoner to the dungeon located beneath the guard barracks. A large metal collar had been fastened around the man's neck and was attached by a short length of chain to the wall of his cell. Amenities were few; a pile of straw to lie in and a honey bucket for bodily functions. Twice a day, the man was brought a small portion of food and some water. His amputation had been cauterized and bandaged, the white linen stark against his otherwise filthy appearance.

The general knew his great size and menacing appearance would cow the bravest man. Clad in his normal battle mail, greaves, bracers and gauntlets, he stepped through the cell doorway like a living mountain. He tossed his big two-handed sword to the guard outside the cell, saying, "Take care of this. I won't need it to deal with this scum."

The general reached down one mailed fist and grabbed the front of the prisoner's tunic. He lifted the prisoner with one hand until the man's feet were no longer touching the ground and the short chain was pulling his head backward as it stretched down behind him. "You are going to tell me everything I want to know. You can tell me freely or we can do this the hard way, but you *will* tell me in the end. The only real issue now is how much pain you will suffer before you do."

The man started blubbering, "I didn't do anything..."

The general drove his other mailed fist into the man's ribs. "You took up arms against the Heir of Westfell. If you are from this duchy, which I doubt, then you are guilty of treason against your liege lord. But you really aren't from here, are you?"

The man's trapped expression spoke volumes. If he said he was from Westfell, he was guilty of treason. If he said he was from another duchy, then he was a bandit operating without that duchy's knowledge, or guilty of an act of war if operating under orders. If he was from outside Aluria itself...

"Where are you from?" the general asked quietly.

"I live in the woods. I was forced..."

General Gustav's fist struck again. "That's a lie. Where are you from?"

"I told you. I live in the woods..."

The general threw the man down to the ground. "You know, it was only a few weeks ago that the king himself made me execute a man, but only after I had removed his hands, his tongue, and his genitals. I didn't like doing it but it was his will, so I obeyed. I won't have any problems making you talk. My duty is to protect Westfell by whatever means necessary." He drew his razor-sharp dagger. "I will start with your toes and then your fingers. If you haven't told me everything I want to know by then, I will take your testicles and penis. After that, it will be your eyes. Then I will start to flay the skin from your body the way you remove an apple's skin in one long strip. Between each step, I will douse you with brine to sharpen your senses.

"Now, everyone knows the Duke of Westfell does not believe in torture, and that's true enough. The important thing for you to remember is that *I am not the Duke of Westfell!* I have no problem torturing you if it helps me protect this duchy. So what's it going to be?" The general placed the edge of his dagger against the man's left little toe.

\* \* \*

"The group was not from here, Your Grace. Most of them were just mercenaries from all over hired by their leader, the one with the arrow in his throat. He was not from Aluria, but where he was from was not known by the prisoner," General Gustav reported. "I have the location of their camp and I will be leading a patrol of my best men to deal with them later tonight after they have had a chance to drink too much wine in celebrating their escape from the heir and the elf."

"Did you torture the man to extract this information, General?" Duke Richard asked, quietly.

"No, Your Grace. I merely talked with him about what would happen if he failed to answer my questions." General Gustav grinned. "It is amazing what a convincing fellow I can be when I put my mind to it."

Swiftstalker laughed. "I would agree that describing how you will peel off his skin while

you fondle your dagger with a maniacal gleam in your eye is a fairly convincing technique, Gustav."

"Did you really say that?" Rory asked.

"Amongst other things, yes." General Gustav grinned. "I can't help it if the man believed I would actually do those terrible things."

"I am sure he believed each and every word," Duke Richard said, "because there is no doubt in *my* mind you would do it if you felt it was necessary." The duke shook his head. "Very well, take your troops and clean out that nest of vermin. I have no interest in collecting any more prisoners, so leave them where they fall. Before you leave, hang the one we do hold as an example for those who would raise a sword to the heir."

The general bowed. "As you command, Your Grace."

The duke shook his head and laughed. "You don't fool me, Gustav. You'd have done it all whether I told you to or not since it is the only way to protect the duchy."

"Guilty as charged, Your Grace. Still, I prefer the illusion that I follow your will in all things," General Gustav said. "With your permission, I have some details to attend to before we attack the camp."

\* \* \*

The army of the duchy was known far and wide as "The Wolves of Westfell" for good reason. Like wolves, they fought as a group and were absolutely merciless in battle. They encircled the bandit camp silently, taking out the sentries with a dagger across the throat and a hand across their mouth to prevent any outcry. They fell on the sleeping drunken bandits, two men to a bandit, and slew them without warning with no quarter given. After the massacre, the soldiers sorted through the belongings of the dead, separating out what the bandits had stolen from the people they had waylaid along the road. Afterwards, they dragged the bodies of the dead to a pit near the campsite the bandits had been using to dispose of the remains of those they had killed and dumped them atop the bodies of their victims. They filled in the pit, gathered everything into the wagons at the campsite, and took it all back to Westfell Keep, along with the horses they had found.

\* \* \*

"It appears these bandits had been operating for about a month, Your Grace. Based on what we found, it seems they had ambushed several small groups. We may never know exactly who those victims were but we have recovered whatever remained and my troops are checking with the villagers to see if anyone recognizes any of the items recovered," General Gustav reported the next morning.

"Were any of your men injured?"

"No, Your Grace. We took them completely by surprise. None of them ever had a chance to raise a weapon against us," General Gustav replied. "It took longer to clean up the mess than the actual fighting."



"Very well. Please pass my appreciation on to your men, General." The duke sighed wearily. "Winter will be upon us soon, and travelers will be infrequent. Still, I would like your men to patrol the roads more closely for a while."

"I have already given those instructions, Your Grace. Dispatch riders went out to all the garrisons yesterday afternoon."

## Chapter 8

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The first major snowstorm of the season fell on the first day of the Winter Festival. The previous five days had been spent in preparing for the festival: laying in the necessary game, collecting the massive amounts of firewood needed for the keep and the village, and decorating with sprigs of holly and pine boughs. Warm fires burned in every room of the keep, the seasoned oak logs stacked nearby each hearth to replenish them whenever they burned low. Torches lit the dark hallways, for the sun set early these days and the heavy cloud cover diminished even that feeble light.

The fires and torches also lessened the bitter cold. The wind howled across the battlements, driving waves of snow into drifts in the sheltered parts of the keep while scouring exposed places bare. Those who, because of duty or necessity, had to go outside, did so bundled in heavy layers of thick woolen cloaks and furs. Indoors, people made due with heavy woolen hose, thick undertunics, quilted doublets, and fur-lined boots. None strayed far from the hearths if they could help it.

The only exceptions were those who worked in the kitchens. The huge brick ovens and roasting pits were in constant operation and the radiated heat kept the kitchen area quite comfortable to those who toiled at preparing the massive amounts of food that would be consumed at the evening's feast. Those who felt too warm had merely to step outside to retrieve another load of firewood to gain an appreciation for the luxury of warmth on this bitter night.

Rory had gained Swiftstalker's assistance in procuring his winter gift for Duke Richard. The duke had given Rory everything in the past year, so he wanted this gift to be something truly worthy of the love he felt for his grandfather. Without anyone realizing he was gone, Swiftstalker had slipped out of the keep a week before and taken Rory's request deep into the heart of the Great Forest, returning late in the night before the snow had started to fall. He laid the gift, wrapped in soft chamois and tied with a scarlet ribbon he had earned helping one of the town families haul in their winter wood supply, at his grandfather's place at the table.

A few minutes later, Duke Richard came into the room. After bidding Swiftstalker a festive morning, he walked over to Rory. He threw his arms around his grandson in a bear hug and said, "Festive greetings to you, lad."

"And to you as well, Grandfather. We seem to be in for a big storm."

"Yes, we are," Duke Richard said. "I expect this storm will rage for several days. In weather

like this, we have to remember to rotate the guards every half an hour. Of course, Gustav will already have thought of that and he will give me that small smile when he thinks I am telling him the obvious." Spotting the package, he said, "What is this?"

"Just a small token of my respect and love, Grandfather."

Ceremoniously, Duke Richard untied the ribbon and unwrapped the wrapper, revealing a long wooden box. The top was carved with the snarling wolf's head crest of Westfell with chips of garnet for the eyes. The duke ran his fingertips across the box in admiration of its craftsmanship. Each joint was perfect with matched grains on all sides. He slowly opened the box to reveal its contents. On a bed of dark green velvet lay a long dagger. Incised into the blade were eleven runes of power, its subtle enchantment visible to those whose eyes could see them. The pommel was a snarling wolf's head.

"This is magnificent. How did you ever manage to get this? I can see it is elven made."

"I drew up the design for the knife and the box. Swiftstalker carried them to the Great Forest and brought them back last night."

"I cannot thank you both enough," Duke Richard said, his voice choked with emotion.

Swiftstalker said, "Prince Brightblade bid me to say this dagger is the fitting gift for the Duke of Westfell. He asked that you consider this enchanted dagger as part of the official regalia for the duchy, much as the sword Wolf Fang should likewise become an eventual part of it as well."

Duke Richard looked once more at the beautiful dagger and said, "Westfell is proud to accept this dagger as an official part of the Westfell regalia in honor of the pact between our peoples. Please convey that to the prince when you next see him." Turning to Rory, he said, "On a personal level, I thank you for such a thoughtful and honored gift. Now, it is my turn." He clapped his hands twice, loudly.

The doors to the dining room opened and two guards came in bearing large wrapped packages, one for Rory and the other for Swiftstalker. "Well, don't stand on ceremony! Open them!" the duke commanded.

Simultaneously, the two tore away the wrappings to reveal a pair of cloaks. When the two shook them out, they realized the cloaks were made from the skins of several large dire wolves. The garments were thick and each had a hood that would cover the wearer's head to shelter it from even the bitterest wind and weather. The pelts were mainly white with streaks of grey and black, trimmed with the bushy tails around the hood. Each cloak was lined in fleece and dyed a rich dark green to signify the colors of Westfell livery.

"I knew you both would need something to wear in the harsh winter weather on your trip to the Great Forest. I arranged with Duke Armand to get a few wolf pelts and he sent these from the great dire wolves of the Kendrahl mountains. The linings were made by several women from the village as their gift to you both. The wool has been treated to be water resistant, so it will help keep you dry as well as warm." The duke smiled at their obvious happiness with their gifts.

When Mistress Margaret came in to oversee the breakfast service, she surreptitiously ran her hand over the soft pelts as she passed by, a fleeting expression of pleasure crossing her face.

As she reached the head of the table, she caught sight of the dagger. "Your Grace, that is a beautiful dagger. Why does the blade have that soft glow?"

Swiftstalker looked up at the housekeeper. "You can see the glow in the blade, Mistress?"

"Of course, I can see the glow, Lord Swiftstalker. I might be old but my eyes are still as sharp as ever."

Duke Richard said, "He meant no offense to you, Mistress Margaret. His reaction was caused by his surprise. You see, I cannot see the glow, yet Lord Rorrick and Lord Swiftstalker can. The glow can only be seen by those with elven blood."

Mistress Margaret's hand covered her mouth in surprise at this revelation. "I did not know that."

"I have known you all your life, Margaret, since you started working in this keep as a serving girl," Duke Richard said. "Yet in all those years, I never suspected you of being part elf."

"I never knew until this moment, Your Grace. I never knew my real family. I was a foundling and your father, Duke Rorrick, brought me into the keep as a kindness."

Lord Swiftstalker rose from his place at the table and walked to Mistress Margaret's side. He took her hand in his and said, "Festive greetings to you, lost sister of the Forest Folk. May your day be filled with joy. Should you wish it, I will tell you of our people when you have the opportunity to listen." He leaned forward and brushed his lips across her cheek.

"I would like that very much, but not today. I have too much to do to get ready for tonight. Now, sit down and eat before your food gets cold."

Once Mistress Margaret returned to the kitchen, Duke Richard turned to Swiftstalker and asked, "Did you have any idea she was part elf?"

"None, Your Grace. She displays none of the usual physical characteristics found in a hybrid. Perhaps she is only a quarter elf. It doesn't make a difference to the Forest Folk whether she's half, quarter or less. If she is attuned enough to the life force to detect the glow of elven enchantment, she is one of us and will be welcome among us."

\* \* \*

As a part of the Winter Festival tradition, the duke's family and retainers would distribute food to the older villagers and those with small children who would be unable to attend the feast at the keep. Due to the heavy weather, Rory and Swiftstalker volunteered to fulfill the tradition to spare the duke. It also gave them an excuse to test their new cloaks under the extreme wind and snow.

The pair spent the afternoon delivering baskets of food. The traditional winter gifts of bread, salt, wine, and meat would become the basis for the villagers' festival dinner. In every house, they were welcomed with open arms and, in many of them, sent on their way with a hearty hug from the male head of the house and a kiss from the lady.

To spare the retainers who carried the food, only a few went with them at a time. When the

few baskets they carried were given out, those retainers would return to the keep and the next group would come out with more. In this fashion, each basket delivered contained bread still warm from the oven despite the cold.

As they walked between the houses on their list, Swiftstalker explained the tradition behind the festival itself. "As you know, winter itself is the ending of the year. It is also the time when most of the labor for the year is over. The fields have all been harvested and cleared, the livestock have been sequestered in their winter quarters, and most of their immediate needs have been stockpiled. It becomes both a time for introspection and a time to celebrate the release from day-to-day labor. As a result, a day of gift giving and feasting was born. Tonight there will be lots of food and drink, music and dancing. Many of the rules of normal propriety are relaxed, which results in a surprising number of babies born in late fall, such as those we have been delivering food baskets to all afternoon. Another quaint custom involves the decorations in the houses and the hall tonight. You will see small balls of a green plant with white berries. It is a parasite plant called mistletoe. Tradition calls for whoever stands beneath this plant on festival night to be kissed. There are no strings attached and no shame for the parties involved. While the plant is normally hung above the center of the ballroom dance floor, there will also be sprigs hanging in secluded alcoves where things can get more ... involved, hence the increase in babies I mentioned earlier."

Rory looked at him skeptically. "Why would anyone believe such nonsense? You are making fun of me."

"No, lad, I am not. As sure as it is cold here in this snow, some young lass will be very eager to plant kisses on your lips. Did I happen to mention that neither of you will know the identity of the other? Everyone will wear half masks and costumes."

"Costumes? What kind of costumes?"

"Oh some will dress as nobles, when they are really tradesmen. Some women will dress as fine ladies, others as fairies. The idea is to be someone you are not for this one night of celebration. Relax, I have already seen to your costume and mine."

"Really? What are they?"

"You, my fine lad, will be a Lord of the Forest, dressed in the finest garb—my own, I might add. I'm going as General Gustav, complete with scar and scowl."

\* \* \*

Rory looked at his reflection and was amazed. He'd realized that he'd been growing the past few months and putting on some muscle, but he did not recognize the image he was looking at. He'd expected Swiftstalker's elven garb to be a bit big on him, but it made him realize he was now as tall as the elven lord. The months of work with his sword had trimmed any excess fat from Rory's body while building large shoulders and chest and arm muscles which filled out the silken shirt. The close-knit hose emphasized his mighty thighs and tight buttocks, too.

Sprigs of holly had been plaited into his long hair, now drawn back in a queue that fell below his shoulder blades, its ebony luster as polished as the agate stones that adorned the

intricate feathered mask that covered his features above his mouth. The valet had trimmed his fledgling beard in a fashion that seemed to emphasize his strong jaw and focus the eye on the mobile mouth and its startlingly white teeth.

His overtunic, embroidered in a motif of evergreen boughs and holly, was a bright silver beneath the dark green embroidery. Where the holly berries would be in nature, tiny garnets had been shaped and sewn onto the garment. What would have been ice crystals on the tips of the evergreen boughs were tiny diamonds. A wide silver chased belt held the overtunic closed, and an ornate elven dagger was suspended from the belt. Fleece-lined half-boots, dyed to match his outfit, completed his *costume*.

Looking at his reflection in the glass, Rory had to admit that he actually looked like a Lord of the Forest. In fact, he looked a great deal like his father, Prince Brightblade. He was still trying to work up the courage to leave his room when the door opened. Rory wasn't sure how the wizened old man, a woodcutter by all appearances, had gained access to the family quarters within the keep but he obviously did not belong here. Rory was moving to usher the man from the room when he spoke.

"I didn't know you were coming tonight, Prince Brightblade. I was looking for my grandson."

"Grandfather? Is that you?" Rory was astonished.

"By the All-Father! You look like your father dressed like that! I thought for a moment he had come to collect you early. Are you ready? Most of the guests are already here and the party has begun."

"Already? How could they begin until you arrived?"

"It would defeat the purpose of the mask and disguise if they announced us, wouldn't it?" Duke Richard chided Rory. "To them, I will appear as a simple woodcutter, although I suspect I won't fool a soul. It is a habit of mine to dress as one of my subjects each year, choosing a different occupation each time. I think my most effective costume was the year I was a goat herder, complete with goat excrement on my shoes. For some reason, no ladies pulled me under the mistletoe that year!"

"Do you mean to say that all that nonsense Swiftstalker said about the mistletoe was *true*?" Rory asked, amazed.

"Certainly. Rory, a kiss or something more from you will be a treasured memory for the women involved, to be brought back in her mind whenever life seems hard or bleak. She will recall that for one brief period, the rules of class were suspended and she was in your arms. For that moment, she was as good as the Lady Bethany herself. It's not all one-sided, you know. For that same brief moment, you get to hold and kiss a delightful companion on a cold and bitter night without worrying about what anyone will say. So my parting advice for you tonight is to enjoy yourself. Eat plenty of food, drink the wine, dance until you are dizzy, and enjoy the willing company that will seek you out. This is one of the happier celebrations of the year and the only one in the winter. It is also one of your last nights here in the keep for a while to come; soon you will leave for the Great Forest and the Lords of the Forest." The duke tugged Rory's doublet straighter. "Come, let us go join the festival."

\* \* \*

The great room had been decorated with the traditional boughs and holly. The stone walls were all draped with great swaths of red and gold fabric to insulate against the cold. Large fires burned in the hearths and torches were burning in the sconces along the walls. The large tables had been placed along two walls and fairly groaned with the vast amounts of food available whenever someone felt hungry. Great kegs of ale and wine were placed around the room as well, along with a stock of tankards and goblets. The alcoves had all been curtained off, both as a means to ward off the chill and as a gesture to privacy for those who wished it. The center of the room was reserved for dancing and mingling for all the festivalgoers, with small clumps of mistletoe hanging above the crowd at various points.

Duke Richard slipped unnoticed into the room and made his way to one of the kegs of cider. He filled a tankard and stood back to enjoy the show as Rory entered the room.

The moment Rory stepped through the doorway, the entire crowd hushed and turned to see him. Completely unexpectedly, they all bowed to the Lord of the Forest who now moved among them. Rory, trying hard to keep up the appearance of his disguise, merely nodded in acknowledgement and then waved his hand for all to proceed as they had been. As he approached the edge of the crowd, it seemed to part in front of him and he followed the revealed path, intending to reach the wine on the other side. It wasn't until a young woman, dressed in what she imagined an desert princess might wear, grabbed his arm and pressed her lips to his that Rory realized the crowd had subtly directed him under one of the balls of mistletoe. Before he could move away from that spot, another had taken the first woman's place. Five women had kissed him before he successfully escaped from under the mistletoe.

As he reached a shaking hand out for one of the goblets of wine, a gravelly voice said in his ear, "You can't say I didn't warn you, lad."

He turned to find himself facing General Gustav. Or was it General Gustav ... the armor was correct and there was the scar parting the beard, but this apparition did not seem as menacing as the real Gustav. "Swiftstalker? Oh, that is excellent! You look enough like him to scare the sentries!"

"I know because I already have." Swiftstalker then laughed. "I upbraided one poor soldier for a tiny imperfection in his dress. The poor lad was shaking! But the laugh was on me for the *real* Gustav had come up behind me. How a man that big can move so quietly is beyond me. He must be part elf. Anyway, when he slammed his huge hand on my shoulder and spun me around, I almost wet myself. Then he laughed and admitted I had done a good job of imitation and offered me a job as his double ... on the fighting lines, that is." Swiftstalker shook his head. "I have truly come to admire that man and I will miss him when we leave."

After another sip of his wine, Swiftstalker said, "So, lad, how are the kisses tonight? Some of those lasses looked quite delightful." He set his goblet down. "Good man, never kiss and tell. Guess I shall go see if anyone will ever kiss this scarred old puss. This costume might not have been the best idea I ever had for a festival night."

Rory watched as Swiftstalker made his way across to one of the spots below the mistletoe. An older woman, dressed as a duchess, threw her arms about Swiftstalker's neck and pressed

her lips to his with great abandon. Swiftstalker slid his hands down and cupped the woman's buttocks as he kissed her. She broke the kiss, whispered something in his ear, and then dragged him to one of the alcoves. As the faux general closed the curtain, he flipped a jaunty salute across the room to Rory.

"Would you like to dance, Great Lord?" The sultry voice broke Rory's reverie and he turned to find a young woman of medium height, garbed in a revealing blue gown and a matching blue feathered mask. Her auburn hair was swept up atop her head and sprigs of holly and mistletoe were threaded within it. Her eyes were a soft hazel, but it was the tiny half-moon scar on the edge of her chin that identified her to Rory; this was Rachel, the daughter of the village leader.

"I fear I would disappoint, beautiful one, for I have no skill in dancing," Rory said.

"I find that difficult to believe, but I will accept your statement. Why don't we just slip to the edge of the dance area, you can put your arms around me, and we can pretend we are dancing. That way, we can enjoy each other's company without having to deal with the importunities of the others. Truly, there is one I seek to avoid and he will not bother me when I am in your company."

"Never let it be said I abandoned a lady in distress. Lead on and let us attempt this charade. But I warn you. Let it be on your head if I step on your dainty feet." Rory took her by the hand and soon found himself at the edge of the dance floor. Rachel slid into his arms and then began to sway in time to the music from the few musicians on the lyre, lutes, and flutes. Rachel was much closer than propriety would normally permit and his greater height gave him a view down the front of her dress that left nothing to his imagination. She looked up to him, mischief in those hazel eyes, and said, "We seem to be under the mistletoe. I suspect you should kiss me."

When their lips met, it was not the brief contact he shared with others that evening. This kiss was much slower, as if she were tasting his lips and finding them pleasing. As they kissed, she pressed her body against his and then the tip of her tongue traced a path across his closed lips. "Someone needs to teach you how to really kiss a woman, Great Lord." She slipped from his arms and took his hand, pulling him behind a curtain into an alcove. She pulled his head back down to hers and kissed him deeply, her tongue pushing its way past his lips and into his mouth. His hands slid down her shoulders and arms, his fingertips brushing the bare slopes of her breasts. Rory had no idea how long they kissed or even how he managed to breathe around her greedy mouth. All he knew for sure was his hands were now cupping her naked breasts with their turgid nipples, and both of them were breathing very hard.

"Your pardon, my lady, but perhaps it is time to return beyond this curtain before I take too many liberties," Rory said, trying to catch his breath once more.

She caught him staring at her bare breasts and teased him by tracing her fingertips across them to brush her own nipples before she pulled her bodice back up into place. As she leaned in to give him a final kiss, she whispered, "I would have let you take many more liberties than that, Great Lord, but only this one night. After that, you belong to Lady Bethany."

"So you know who I am, Rachel."

"From the moment you walked into the room. I have watched you ever since you came

here, Lord Rorrick, and dreamed of this night when the traditions of Festival would let me kiss you and feel you touch me as I have dreamed for so many weeks. Had it been your desire, you could have taken anything from me you wished. You will be a good duke, because I can see that no matter how tempted you might be to go on with me here and now, you would not risk damaging my name or reputation." Rachel ran her hand down across Rory's chest as she said, "Lady Bethany has a better man than she knows. Know this, Heir of Westfell, if you would like to join me in an alcove again this night, you have but to ask." With that, she slipped from the alcove and back into the crowd.

The old woodcutter came up to Rory as he stood at the table filling a plate with some food. "Well, are you having fun?"

Rory nodded. "It has been quite interesting."

Duke Richard laughed. "That's one way to describe it! I imagine it must have been interesting with Rachel in the alcove. Yes, I saw you go in and how long before you came out. Don't fret so, boy! Have fun! It's the thoughts of this night that will keep you warm in the bitter cold and snow between the keep and the Great Forest. So eat up, drink some more wine, find a pretty girl, and dance."

Swiftstalker joined them at that moment, "You are an old reprobate, woodcutter! Yes, you. I saw you kissing that young girl under the mistletoe."

Rory turned a shocked look on his grandfather. Duke Richard said, "Poor lass, I overheard one of her friends dare her to kiss the dirty old woodcutter. I will give her credit; she did a good job of it, too. Before we parted, I wished a duke's blessing in her ear. When she realized exactly who I was, she kissed me again, harder! Ah, to be young again!"

"The next thing you know, you'll be stealing away to the alcoves!" came the gravelly voice from the large suit of armor standing beside the table.

"All-Father! It's the general!" Rory exclaimed.

"And just how long have you been standing there?" Duke Richard asked.

"All evening. Most people think I am just a suit of armor that someone forgot to move. In a little while, I plan to scare some sweet innocent out of a year's growth." There was a pause. "Although I think I can subtract Rachel from the list of innocents."

"Not you, too," groaned Rory.

The party had been going for several hours when Rory was pulled into another alcove. This time he had no idea who the honey blonde woman was. He could tell she was older than most of the girls who had kissed him, and she was dressed as a common tavern girl, with a ragged edge skirt and peasant blouse worn low on her shoulders. Her breasts were heavier and more rounded yet still firm. He pushed his tongue into her mouth as he stroked her skin. Her hand slid downward beneath his belt and around to his front. Rory caught his breath as she touched him, then all went dark as a cudgel struck the back of his head.

The woman slipped her blouse back into place and slowly opened the window to prevent a billow in the curtains covering the alcove. She bent to help the man who had struck the heir



pick Rory's unconscious form up and lift him toward the now open window. She gave a soft whisper and waited for a response from outside. When there was none, she called out again.

The curtains whipped back to reveal two General Gustavs, one in heavy plate armor and the other in more normal mail and light armor. Both held swords whose points were a mere inches from the pair's throats. "Let the lad down gently now. Your friends outside are not going to help you because they are already dead."

The would-be kidnappers were quietly removed from the ballroom and few people noticed the fuss. Rory was already starting to come around by then and the duke wondered what to do with him until he was fully himself. Leaving him in the alcove was an option, but not alone. Spotting Rachel, he crooked his finger at her in an imperious *come here* gesture. When she approached, she said, "Your Grace."

"I never could fool you, could I? I need your help, girl. Lord Rorrick has been attacked. He's all right but just not himself at the moment, still groggy from the hit on the head atop the wine, I suspect. Anyway, I don't want to leave him alone in the alcove. Since you have already been in an alcove with him tonight, would you mind taking care of him as he recovers?"

"Of course not, Your Grace." Rachel slipped into the alcove and closed the curtains. She looked about. This was a larger alcove, almost a small room, that had been fitted with a small settee and some bookcases on either side of the windows. The drapes had once again been closed after the window had been secured.

Lord Rorrick was sprawled on the settee, one hand pressed against the lump on the back of his head. She moved over to the settee and slipped in alongside Rory, pulling his head down to rest in her lap. As he rested his head, she stroked his long black hair and remembered what it was like to be kissed and touched by this young lord. Rachel wondered if the duke had known what he was doing in asking this of her; she was so tempted to take advantage of the handsome young heir while he was still groggy. She would love to know what he would feel like inside her, but she knew she wouldn't. That was just a dream of Festival; her reality would be to marry someone from town or one of the officers in the duke's army. But no matter what her future might hold, she would always have the memory of Lord Rorrick's kiss and his touch.

## Chapter 9

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"There's nothing quite like the bracing effect of wind-blown snow to clear away the cobwebs of too much wine, lad," Swiftstalker said, his breath a steaming white cloud in the frigid predawn air.

"Tell me again. Why did we have to leave so damned early in the morning?" Rory grouched. "You barely left me time to change from the festival!"

"It was time to be off. And getting you away from the keep and into the Great Forest to complete your training is very important since someone seems determined to kidnap you,"

Swiftstalker said.

"Are you sure I was the target?"

"Very sure, lad. While you rested your head in the delectable lap of Mistress Rachel, I was having a chat with the two surviving kidnappers. How they expected to sneak up on the keep past the Wolves of Westfell shows what fools they were. The Wolves have a special winter cloak they wear when it snows. The cloak is made of totally white pelts and they vanish into the snow when they stand still. The outside group walked within inches of the guards without ever seeing them. After assuring themselves the pair was up to no good, the guards made themselves known. The pair resisted and died very quickly and quietly since the guards did not wish to disturb the festival. They notified the general, who then kept an eye on the alcove. When you were lured into that same alcove, he and I took action but not in time to spare you a thump on the head, I am sorry to say. How is your head, anyway?"

"Tender to the touch. I just remember kissing the woman and then everything went black."

"While she distracted you with her kisses and more, her confederate slipped in behind you. She must have done something to completely focus your attention on her and he hit you on the back of the head with a soft bag filled with small pellets. They were trying to pass you through the window when we surprised them. So what did she do to make you so unaware of your surroundings?"

Rory was silent, more than a little embarrassed. "She had ... ah ... slipped her top down."

"You're hedging, lad. Tell Uncle Swiftstalker all about it now. It will help pass the time."

"You told me a gentleman never talks about it."

"That was about amorous adventures, like with young Rachel. I want to know how you allowed yourself to become so distracted that a clumsy stranger could sneak up behind you and hit you over the head."

Rory's response was even slower in coming. "She started to slide her hand around to touch me someplace no one has ever touched me before."

"And that would certainly hold your attention, I expect." Swiftstalker chuckled. "Well, keeping aware in those circumstances would be hard for a saint, let alone a growing lad like yourself. I'll not tease you about it ... well, not much, anyway."

"So you thought Rachel was attractive?"

"Lad, the woman is beautiful but she's also going to be trouble to whoever marries her, for he will never know a moment's peace. I've seen her kind before. Sultry and passionate and rarely satisfied with what she has. She will be sneaking out on her husband before they will have been married a year unless the man she marries is a strong one who can exceed her wildest imagination and fantasies. I whispered a suggestion to Duke Richard about a good match for that one. A man capable of taming her without breaking her spirit. Think she will like being married to General Gustav?"

Rory threw his head back and laughed. "Sweet Rachel and Granite Face? Are you crazy?"

"Gustav has adored her since she was a baby and doesn't think she will care for him. I think she will see being the wife of the general to be a better future than she could ever expect and will accept." Swiftstalker chuckled. "The girl is in for a surprise. The good general is much larger than the average man. Much larger."

They rode on in silence, each wrapped in their own thoughts. Rory's mind whorled in a confusing series of memories from the night before and his few moments with Bethany. Each encounter had taken him a few steps farther along the road from being a boy to becoming a man. Even his erstwhile kidnapper had moved him much farther than the others. Rory suspected that was because she was older and more experienced. Touching him so intimately had been something she found familiar, rather than the profound event it still seemed to him. He found himself wondering what it would have felt like and what it would be like to touch a woman that way in return. That thought terrified him because he realized he had no idea what really happened between a man and a woman that way. Oh, he knew the simple mechanics involved but, like the different forms of kissing, he suspected there were nuances of behavior he had no knowledge of. If he was like other young men his age, he would be learning these things either from a girl like Rachel or an older brother wiser in the ways of the world. Since he was who and what he was, there would be no frivolous encounters with village girls and he had no older brothers to ask. His only relative was his grandfather, and he would certainly not ask the duke about sex!

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It was still early afternoon when they reached the traveler's shelter. Duke Richard's father had established these shelters along the main road to provide a safe place to rest in the heavy weather of winter. These places were kept stocked with firewood, grain and water. There were two rooms within the shelter, one for people and the other for housing their horses. "We'd better stop here," Swiftstalker said.

"It's still early."

"True, lad, but unless you have a hankering for spending the night in the open, we need to stop here. The next shelter is another thirty miles or so, and we will use that one tomorrow." Swiftstalker slid from his horse's back and led the animal through the door to the stabling area. By the time Rory had gotten Storm inside the shelter, Swiftstalker had already removed his saddle and was wiping the horse down with straw. The two worked on their horses in companionable silence; the only sounds were the hiss of the hay over the horses, and the clop of their hooves as they stamped about. Finally satisfied the horses had been groomed well enough, a ration of grain was placed in the troughs for them, along with some water.

Swiftstalker led the way into the other room and started a fire in the hearth. After the fire was blazing, he looked around and found an old pot someone had abandoned or lost. He took it outside and scoured it with snow, then filled it with fresh water and placed it on the fire to boil. While waiting for the water to boil, Swiftstalker quickly chopped up some carrots, potatoes, and cubed some of the meat they had brought with them from the keep, adding it all to the pot once the water began to boil.

Rory had brought their saddlebags in. While Swiftstalker was fixing their dinner, Rory prepared a place for them to sleep. First he swept up all the dirt and debris from around the

room. Afterwards, he examined each of the bedframes to make sure they were sound. Nothing more than square frames lashed together with a rope mesh platform, they actually proved comfortable to sleep on—when they held together. As the lashings aged, they became loose and many a weary traveler had been dumped to the ground when the frame came apart as they tossed during the night. Rory checked each lashing very carefully, replacing those he found suspect. He then inspected the rope mesh for weak spots caused by rodents or simple wear and tear. Deciding the beds would probably get them through the night, Rory unrolled their blankets on the two inspected frames.

The sun was almost below the horizon by this time and the shelter was getting very dark. Rory had closed and barred the exterior door from the animal enclosure. Since the shelter had no windows, the heat from the fire was enough to warm both their sleeping room and the stabling area when combined with the natural heat given off by two large horses and the pair of travelers. Swiftstalker dug through his saddlebag until he found a candle, which he lit from the fire in the hearth. Dripping a bit of wax on the table, he stuck the end of the candle into the cooling wax to hold it upright. The dancing light from the candle seemed bright after the gloom that had descended as the sun had set and they had closed the doors.

By this point, the stew Swiftstalker had prepared was ready and the pair sat quietly eating. Swiftstalker watched Rory in silence, finally saying, "What's on your mind, Rory?"

Rory was quiet a few more moments, trying to find the right words. "Swiftstalker, I'm not sure how to explain it. So many things have been happening and they have made me feel ... unsettled."

Swiftstalker hid the quick smile that crossed his face as he looked at the young man across from him. "Aye, lad, I've no doubt you are unsettled. It's a confusing time in life when a man first starts exploring the interaction between a male and a female. It has to be worse for you since you grew up in a very sheltered place with just Abigail for company."

"That is it, exactly. I feel there are things I *should* know that I don't, and I have no one to ask. I certainly can't talk to my grandfather about it."

"Oh, I don't know, lad. Your grandfather is a wise man with much experience." Swiftstalker reached into his saddlebag and drew out a flask, pouring them each a bit of wine. After sipping his, he said, "You can always talk to me. The Fair Folk are much more open about these things, perhaps because we live so long and have a different perspective. Humans tend to muddle up the simpler things with their views on property and such, while we stay more attuned to the natural flow of life. Take sex, for example."

"Humans created this thing they call marriage, where one man and one woman are joined together for life, supposedly. The real purpose is to protect their possessions, what they call inheritance. The human man wants to be sure the children he raises are his and not someone else's, so all he has worked for in his life will be passed on to his own descendants. Most human men are not above sliding into the bed of a woman other than their wife if they can, but do not feel their spouse should have the same freedom because then he would wonder exactly whose child he was raising. That's why I find the tradition of Winter Festival amusing, Rory. For that one night, they relax that strict view and let their natural desires take control. They see someone who attracts them, and they are free to act on it to whatever degree they mutually agree upon."

“And the Lords of the Forest are different?”

“Quite a bit. Among our people, we take lovers, not mates for life. An elven female has a child only when she chooses to conceive one, and that is done only when it is mutually acceptable to both people involved. Since we are not driven by possessions, there are no concerns about so-called inheritance so, to us, the actual paternity of a child is irrelevant. What matters is raising that child to be the best he or she can be in whatever area of life suits them. Children are raised communally, with each adult taking an active role in guiding them to reach their fullest potential.”

Swiftstalker took another drink. “When a couple feel an attraction for one another, they are free to express that desire in any manner they choose and it is no one’s business but their own. Whether they are together for an hour or a century is only of concern to themselves. Even during a prolonged period of commitment, they are still free to accept an occasional lover if they so desire, with no explanation needed by their partner. Sex among the Fair Folk is as natural as breathing or eating; what we find unnatural is the way humans repress their desires. Do you understand, Rory?”

“I think so, and I truly appreciate all that you have said, but it hasn’t really addressed any of my confusion,” Rory said miserably.

“Lad, your confusion is natural. You’re at an age where your hormones are raging out of control. The limited interaction you’ve experienced so far has merely whetted your appetite for more, and that is perfectly natural. Look, I know how exhilarating it was the very first time you were really kissed or touched a woman. The All-Father knows how distracting you found the first time a woman went to touch you! These are memories that will stay with you for a lifetime, as will all the other firsts yet to come. They are as inevitable as spring following winter, and seem to take just as long to come as waiting for that first real spring day.”

Swiftstalker stretched and leaned over to bank the fire. “I promise you this. When you finally marry Lady Bethany, you will be ready to teach her about the mysteries between a man and a woman in such a way that she will love you even more than she does now. You just have to trust me to take care of you. Can you do that?”

“Yes, of course I can and do.” Rory stretched out on his blankets as Swiftstalker extinguished the candle.

## *Part Two*

# *THE GREAT FOREST*

## **Chapter 10**

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It was early afternoon on the third day when they finally reached the edge of the Great Forest near the Tower of the Pact. The ride had been difficult through the blowing snow and bitter

temperatures, and they had shared the shelter the second night with a pair of travelers bound for Westfell Keep from the Kendrahl Mountains. The travelers had been eager to hear of the road conditions between this shelter and the village of Westfell, and Swiftstalker had told them what to watch for and how to find the shelter.

As they rode past the Tower and under the trees, Swiftstalker said, "Rory, do you know what a glamour is?"

"No, I don't."

"That's a term used to describe a kind of spell that makes something appear one way when it really looks another. A small example was the slight glamour I used during the festival to look like General Gustav. Do you recall when you last traveled through the forest? Do you remember how there seemed to be some stretches of trees that were just too dense or looked somehow inhospitable so you would take an easier path that appeared more welcoming?" At Rory's nod, Swiftstalker continued, "There are parts of the forest protected by a glamour. It is one of the ways we keep humans and others out of the areas where we live."

"That makes sense."

"No human can see through a glamour while some with elven blood, like you, can pierce the illusion easily. I expect you will be able to see through the illusions now that you know they are there, so I want you to concentrate on seeing what is really around you instead of what you may think is there."

"Okay, but how will I know the difference?"

"You will know when you experience it. Once you see through an illusion, it will hold no power over you ever again. You will be following me so keep your horse behind mine. You will need to maintain control over Storm since the horse will see the illusion and not the reality. Once we start through the illusions, we will pass several sentries who guard our home from outsiders. Even if you see them, make no sign that you do or they might slay you before I could explain to them who you are."

Rory nodded his acceptance even as he said, "I will do as you say."

"Finally, we will reach the Veil. This is one of the final defenses of our home. It is a shield that will only allow those who are truly elven in their body and hearts to pass through it. Prince Brightblade is sure you will have no problem with the Veil, but the potential is there. Should the Veil decide you are not a true Lord of the Forest, you will die before you can pass through it. Should you encounter any difficulty at the Veil, you must stop and back up immediately. If that happens, I will take you back to Westfell."

Rory swallowed and said, "I will place my fate in the hands of the All-Father. If it is my destiny to be united with my father, I will pass through the Veil."

"So be it. I expected no less from you."

Rory pulled Storm into line behind Swiftstalker as they slowly rode deeper into the Great Forest. After a while, he would experience something like a blurring of his vision as he looked ahead, as if seeing two Forests, one laid over the top of the other. The false forest was slightly blurred while the reality was crisp. *This then must be the glamour.* Rory followed Swiftstalker.

Storm was having trouble with the illusion, especially when the glamour showed they were about to ride right into a tree not really there. Rory dismounted, tied his scarf over Storm's eyes, and began to walk, leading the horse. Storm was content to follow in this manner. As he walked, he had more opportunity to look around. He could easily discern the real forest under the illusion now, and only Swiftstalker's warning stopped him from calling out to the elven archer he saw poised high in one of the trees. The way the arrow tracked his progress made Rory very nervous.

The deeper they progressed into the Great Forest, the warmer it felt. Perhaps it was from the exercise of walking and leading his horse, but soon Rory was too warm for the heavy fur cloak. Calling out to Swiftstalker to wait a moment, he shed the heavy cloak, rolled it tightly, and fastened it behind his saddle on Storm's back. Catching back up to Swiftstalker, he found the elven lord standing beside his horse, his own heavy cloak already fastened behind the saddle.

"Tie your horse to this branch, Rory. Storm cannot follow us through the Veil. Do not worry about him. He will be cared for and you will see him soon. We must travel the rest of the way on foot. It's not very far; perhaps a mile or two. Because your weapons are elven made, they will pass through the Veil. Had they been of human make, they would not and you would have had to leave them here with Storm."

As they started to walk along a barely discernible path, Rory was aware of a faint sparkle that seemed to hang in the air everywhere. It was not very heavy, nor even really very tangible, yet it was there. His ears detected a faint susurrant of sound yet he could not clearly hear what it was. After about a quarter of an hour, the path reached a fork. The sound was gone, as was the sparkle in the air.

Swiftstalker asked, "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Is it my imagination or is it much warmer? Are we near the Veil you spoke of?" Rory asked with a faint hint of trepidation in his voice.

"We have already passed through the Veil. In fact, we have been walking through it for the past ten minutes or so."

"That must have been the sparkle I saw!"

"You could see the Veil?"

"It is not that I could see it directly, but I did see a faint sparkle in the air from the corner of my eyes. I also heard a very faint sound but I never did hear it clearly enough to make it out. Why do you ask?"

"Not all of us can see the Veil itself, nor hear the whisper of the life force that powers it. I know it is there because I have been told by others where it is, yet I do not see the Veil or hear its voice. I bow to your abilities, Rory, for they are rare even among us." Suiting actions to words, Swiftstalker bent his head in a gesture of homage that Rory found disconcerting. Once he straightened back up, he said, "To answer your other question, yes it is indeed much warmer inside the Veil. It is always summer here, which means these heavy clothes are completely unsuited for us. How would you like a nice hot bath and some fresh clothes to start out?"

Swiftstalker led Rory along the left-hand path and around some huge hedges to find a series of three large pools of water. Heavy clouds of steam rose from the first pool and from the small waterfall that fell from one edge of that one into the second. A second waterfall from this middle pool fed the still lower third one. Swiftstalker walked to the highest steam-enshrouded pool and sat on a small rock bench to remove his boots. "Don't be shy, Rory. Believe me, this will ease away any aches from the road as well as the grime from three days atop a horse." Swiftstalker pulled off his heavy doublet and undertunic, revealing the mail shirt Rory had glimpsed long ago in the aftermath of their encounter with the road bandits. Seeing Rory's look, Swiftstalker said, "It is mithrail silver, Rory. It is incredibly strong, yet light as silk." He handed the shirt to Rory.

Expecting the usual thirty or more pounds from a normal mail shirt, Rory was amazed at the absence of any real weight from the mail in his hands. He stared at it, noting the myriad of interlocking rings of shiny silver. From its weight, it would seem the mail could be penetrated by a floating feather, yet he knew this shirt had stopped at least three arrows from the bandit's longbows. Feeling the weight of his own heavy mail, he envied the elven lord this fabulous armor,

"Are you going to stand there or join me in the pool?" Rory looked up to see Swiftstalker gracefully gliding across the pool in a breaststroke until he reached a niche carved in the side of the pool. Obviously designed for a lounging bather to relax, the niche featured a submerged seat of rock with a slanted backrest.

Rory placed the mail shirt on the pile of Swiftstalker's clothes and began to take off his own heavy clothing. He was grateful for the chance to remove the heavy doublet in the steamy moist air of the top pool. He quickly shed his garments, folding them neatly into a pile, and placed his sword and dagger atop it. He walked over, stepped into the pool, and almost jumped back out. *The water was near scalding!* He eased his way into the water and swam over to a niche near Swiftstalker.

"There is a hot spring here and it has kept this pool at this temperature for almost one thousand years. The second pool is cooler, while the third is almost chill in comparison. Whenever you come here, you can use any one of the three that suits your mood and your need. By your hand, you will find a basket of sweet sand mixed with some herbs. Use that to scrub your skin and wash your hair. Once we have washed and soaked enough road weariness from our bones, we'll move down to the middle pool."

After scrubbing away three days worth of grime, Rory felt clean. He'd washed his hair three times with the sweet sand, diving under the water to rinse it free each time. He had really come to enjoy a good bath back in Westfell, but this natural pool was far superior to the duke's copper tubs. He lay back against the niche wall and truly relaxed.

"Don't go to sleep! Why don't we move down a level where we can see without all this steam?" Swiftstalker said.

They climbed out of the pool and started to walk toward the lower pool when Rory noticed their belongings were no longer where they had left them. "Swiftstalker, someone had taken our clothes and weapons!"

Swiftstalker chuckled. "The clothes have been taken to be cleaned and readied for use whenever we go outside the Veil where it is still winter. Our weapons have been taken to our



*hiakehla* since they are unnecessary within the Veil.”

“What’s a *hiakehla*?”

“That’s our word for our houses. They are a bit different from what you are used to. First of all, our homes are up in the trees off the ground. More importantly, we don’t build a house; it is actually a part of the tree itself, grown to meet our specific needs.”

“That’s interesting but what am I supposed to wear?”

“If you look on the bench at the next pool, you will find a set of clothes more suitable for wear here. In fact, we need to get a move on so let’s just dry off and get dressed. Once you are settled in the *hiakehla*, I need to report our arrival to your father.”

Rory picked up a towel from the stack and dried himself off. “So who took our clothes and weapons?”

“We have a nice relationship with the several of the other Fair Folk. The pixies and nymphs provide us with basic services, much as they did your grandfather at the Tower of the Pact. In exchange, we protect them and the Great Forest from incursions by humans.” Swiftstalker gestured at the stone bench. “They also make superb clothes.”

Empty only moments before, a set of clothing now lay neatly folded on the stone bench. First was a pair of dark green silk pants, loose in the legs, and cinched with a matching silken cord at the waist. A matching dark green silk shirt, embroidered with a silver motif of snarling wolves, came next. The shirt wrapped around the body and was held closed by a wide silver sash, with loose sleeves trimmed with a thick silver band at the cuff. Rory stepped into the pants and tied the cord. The pants fit him perfectly, as did the shirt when he put it on. He slipped his feet into a pair of soft slippers of matching dark green. There was even a silver clasp to hold back his long black hair.

“Now you look like one of us! You have no doubt noticed your clothes have been designed to honor Westfell. Come on, let’s get you to settled in so I can make my report.”

They left the area of the pools and followed the path deeper into the elven homes. Swiftstalker pointed to a small obelisk, about two feet in height, along the path. “These markers tell you which direction things are.”

“How? There’s no writing of any kind on it.”

“Extend your senses, Rory. Look beyond the surface.”

Rory relaxed his mind and opened his senses much like he had in the forest to see past the glamour around the Veil. Suddenly the stone obelisk seemed to glow with meanings. The side facing toward the pool shimmered with an image of the pools; the opposite side seemed to glow with the images of food and shelter. “I see it!”

“Should you ever find yourself lost, all you need to do is find one of these markers. If you know where you want to be, just think about it and the marker will glow with the direction you need. If you can’t find a marker, just stop where you are and ask for help aloud. One of the Folk will help you find your way. Let me show you.” Swiftstalker faced the marker and in a clear voice said, “Assistance, please.”

A small pixie appeared atop the stone. "Welcome back, Lord Swiftstalker. How may I be of assistance to you?"

"Where is Prince Brightblade?"

"Your brother is in the Heart of the Veil at the present time."

"Would you see when it would be convenient for me to call upon him?"

The pixie vanished. Rory turned an astonished look on Swiftstalker. "Brother?"

"I told you to call me uncle, didn't I? Is it my fault you never took me seriously?" Swiftstalker said, a mischievous grin on his face.

The pixie reappeared. "Prince Brightblade asks that you call on him in one hour at his *hiakehla*, Lord Swiftstalker. And may I say it is nice to see Lord Rorrick among us."

Rory said, "Thank you," just as the pixie winked out once again. He turned back to face Swiftstalker. "So why didn't you say you were his brother before?"

"We are brothers in that we have the same mother. His father is Alaric, our king, while my own sire was just one of the elven warriors who caught Mother's eye before she became involved with the king. He and I have always been close, despite the difference in our ages and positions."

"There can't be that great a difference in your ages."

"Just shy of fifty years, which isn't that long for one of us."

"What! Just how old are you?"

"I'm just shy of two hundred and twenty years old, Rory, and your father just turned one hundred and seventy. I was sure you understood that we live a very, very long time compared to humans."

Rory was nonplussed to discover his father was actually much older than his grandfather! To give himself time to adjust to the idea, he asked, "What's the Heart of the Veil?"

"As the name implies, it is the center of the Veil, as well as what powers it. It is an area reserved for our greatest magic works. Surrounded by a separate veil of its own, the Heart is only accessible to those with the ability to penetrate its barriers. Your father is one of those who can pass while I am not. Now, before you stands my *hiakehla*."

Rory looked up at the vast tree before him. The tree was clearly far larger than any found outside of the Great Forest. It soared upward for several hundred feet. Its base was easily forty feet across, and a large spiral staircase wound around the trunk up to an opening about thirty feet off the ground. Once they reached the doorway, Swiftstalker laid his hand against the door and it opened. They walked in to the main room, which encompassed the entire diameter of the trunk. There was another stairway wrapped around the inside of the trunk that led up to the next level. This level was furnished with comfortable seating spaces and tables. Next to the doorway was a rack holding their swords and daggers. Their heavy wolf cloaks also hung from pegs near the door. Swiftstalker said, "Elona, this is Rory. He will be staying here. Rory, place your hand against that smooth spot next to the doorway so Elona can learn your touch. That

will permit you to pass through the door whenever you wish to enter or leave the *hiakehla*."

Rory did as Swiftstalker requested and for a moment, he had the fleeting sense that another hand was touching his own from inside the wood of the tree. It was just a flicker and then it was gone.

Swiftstalker led the way upstairs. "This next level is my room and yours is the level above it. I figured that made more sense since I may be coming in late and I wouldn't want to disturb you. There are bathing rooms off each bedroom. If you get hungry but don't feel like going out, all you have to do is ask Elona and she will have something delivered to you."

Rory was impressed by the bedroom, with its massive platform bed dominating the chamber. There were several trunks around the edge of the circular chamber, one containing the gear he had left on his horse. The others contained more of the silken clothing similar to what he was wearing, changing only in the blending of the colors, as well as other pairs of matching slippers.

"Why don't you get a bit of rest while I go meet with your father? If you get bored, feel free to wander about within the Veil. Introduce yourself to anyone you meet and get to know us. I will probably be out late as I have some other stops to make and some personal business to attend to, so I will see you in the morning." With a quick wave of his hand, Swiftstalker left the room and bounded down the stairs.

Rory wandered around the room, spotting a small doorway that led to the bathing room. It held the usual amenities but seeing the cramped tub he understood why the large pools would be popular. The tub here was barely large enough to sit in but not for soaking away muscle tension. He wandered back into the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. As he let himself relax, he began to sense the presence of another being in the room. Without moving, he slowly scanned the room until he pinpointed the source of that feeling. It was if he could see into the wood of the wall by the door, and within that space, he saw the faint outline of a woman.

"You must be Elona," he said quietly.

She just stepped out of the wall. Her hair, a wild mass of curls and ringlets, was the same green as the leaves of the tree, and her skin was the color of the pale wood beneath the bark of it. Her clothing, what little there was of it, was the same color as the bark itself. Her eyes were the same lustrous green as her hair. Her voice, when she spoke, reminded Rory of a breeze whispering in the leaves of a tree. "Yes, I am Elona. How did you know I was there?"

"I could see you in the wood. You must be a wood nymph."

"The proper name is a hamadryad, and yes, that is what I am. This is my tree."

"A very nice tree, it is, too. I thank you for allowing me to stay here." Rory bowed.

"Do you know you are the first to see me when I was not permitting it? The Gift is strong within you."

"I know nothing of any Gift. What do you mean?"

"You can see the Forces of Life more clearly than others."

"Is that why I could see the Veil?"

"Yes, because the Veil is a manifestation of those forces. Is there anything you would like? Something to eat or drink?"

When Rory admitted that he would enjoy both, a large bowl of steaming stew and a foamy mug of ale appeared on the table beside his bed. "Please extend my thanks for this food and drink, Elona."

A small pixie appeared near the food for a moment, and said, "You are most welcome, Lord Rorrick," and then disappeared once more.

When Rory looked up, it was to find that Elona had left, merging back into her tree once more, to give him some privacy to eat. He enjoyed the savory stew, filled with a variety of vegetables and meat he was unfamiliar with, and seasoned with unusual spices. The frothy ale was surprisingly light in taste, with a slight hint of hazelnut.

After he finished eating, Rory realized he was not tired and really wanted to walk around. He went down the stairs to the sitting room and said, "Elona, I am going out to explore for a while." The door slid open and he descended the stairs, looking around at the glade. He could see a couple of other *hiakehla*s in the distance, noticeable by the circular stairways around their trunks. Even though he knew they must have windows, he could not see any, evidence of the careful planning of each *hiakehla* to ensure the privacy of those who dwelt within them.

He started to wander the paths at random, finding a clearing filled with large tables where groups of elves were dining. They waved to invite him to join them but he politely bowed and motioned he was merely taking a stroll. The paths were bordered by many different kinds of plants and flowers, many of which he had never seen before. He found secluded bowers, vast fields of wildflowers as well as carefully tended beds of more familiar flowers. There were trellises of climbing roses and ivy that arched over the paths. Periodically, he would find some incredible statuary along the paths in isolated spots along with a stone bench, as if set there to afford a place for contemplation.

He would encounter others along the path, all garbed in the flowing silks of the elves. Some wore somber tones while others sparked like jewels. The eleven women wore flowing robes, which he later learned they called kaftans. These were embroidered or even painted in fantastic scenes or panoramas ranging from snowy mountains in blues, grays, and whites, to phenomenal sunsets with blazing reds, oranges, and pinks.

As a group, elves were tall and lithe in build, with a variety of skin tones and hair colors that ran the rainbow. When he thought about it, he realized many of the elves had changed their hair colors to harmonize with their chosen clothing as if it was merely one more accessory. After walking amid all this colorful plumage, he was startled when he rounded one corner and found an elven male clad in plain dark brown leather standing in front of him, a bared sword in his hand.

"Good evening," Rory said.

"You must be Rorrick, the prince's son. I am Winterstar, head of the Forest Rangers. I heard you and Swiftstalker had come in from outside today."

"If I may ask, why are you carrying a bared sword?"

Looking down at the sword in his hand, Winterstar chuckled and slid the blade back into

its scabbard on his back. "I find this particular pathway a quiet place to practice my sword moves. The training arena can be fairly crowded at times, and I find I spend most of my time correcting the techniques of the others using the facility."

"Would it be permissible for me to use the arena? It has been several days since I last worked out because we were traveling."

"Of course you can use it; it is available to everyone. Don't be surprised if you get challenged to spar with some of the others. They are always eager to test their skills against a new opponent." Winterstar looked Rory over. "I don't think I will be among your challengers, but I suspect I will be wagering heavily on you. Who was your trainer? Swiftstalker?"

"Yes, along with General Gustav of Westfell."

"Now I know I won't match blades with you! That combination would be deadly." Winterstar laughed.

"I will leave you to your workout. I am just out for a stroll, getting to know my surroundings. What lies farther down this path?"

"Other than the stables, there is not much down this path, which is why I practice here. Few of us visit the stables unless we are heading outside. But if you go back about fifty yards or so, you will find a branching path off to the right that will take you to the gathering grounds."

Rory bowed and then strode off in the indicated direction. He found the place where the path branched off and slowly wandered along its winding course. He turned around one hedge-obscured bend to discover another contemplation spot with a turn and another marvelous statue. What made this one different was that this spot was in use by one of the most beautiful women Rory had ever seen.

His first impression was of fire. Her hair was a mass of gold and red, and seemed to move with a life of its own as she sat there contemplating the statue. Her kaftan was also of the same hues, arranged to give the impression of leaping flames. Her face was incredible. Individually, each part was perfect, yet together, they combined in a fashion that seemed to surpass perfection. Her carriage was erect and absolutely still; only her eyes, the color of emeralds with a strong light shining behind them—a clear bright green—moved in her face as she examined the statue before her. Her skin was the color of new fallen snow, flawlessly white and without any visible blemish, marked only by rich full lips the color of fine claret. As he stepped forward, her gaze snapped toward him, freezing him in his tracks.

"I beg your pardon," Rory said, "if I have disturbed you."

She rose to her feet. The fluid grace with which she stood made all others seem clumsy and awkward. She tilted her head to the side as she studied him with the same intensity she had shown before. "You must be Brightblade's son. I had heard you described as being much like him, but he was never as large as you and your eyes are very different."

"Yes, I am Rorrick, son of Prince Brightblade. I have been told that my eyes are like those of my mother. I must say that I have never seen eyes as bright or as green as yours."

A faint rosy flush flashed over her skin. "The green is from nature, and the glow is a gift from the life force. It is a transitory aftereffect from manipulating forces within the Heart. I am

called Arianna."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Arianna. Would you explain what it was about this statue that had you so intent upon it?"

Arianna gestured at the bench. "Please join me and I will see if I can explain." After they both sat, she said, "Working with the Forces of Life requires intense focus to see and manipulate them. I have found that after several hours of work, that focus remains for a period of time. I spend that time studying things at a level deeper than I normally would. For example, I have been experiencing the life of this stone, from lying deep within the Kendrahl Mountains to being quarried by the dwarves, how it felt to be shaped and polished by the dwarven sculptor, and finally its satisfaction with its place here within the Veil."

"You speak as if the stone was alive!"

"All things are alive at some level, Rorrick. The deeper you perceive the Forces of Life, the more of it you can experience. Rocks experience life at a vastly slower pace than most things do, while small creatures such as insects have a fleeting existence. The Great Forest's trees have experienced eons and have very profound thoughts when you can convince one to talk with you. The focus and the energy needed to work with the forces also use an incredible amount of your own life force. Which is a roundabout way of saying I am famished and must eat something. Would you care to join me in something to eat and drink?"

Although he was not the slightest bit hungry, he did not want to let this beautiful and fascinating woman out of his sight, so he readily agreed. As she led him back to the large dining area he had passed before, he could not help but observe the way the silky kaftan clung to her body as she moved, accentuating and revealing then drifting away to mask and obscure. He realized there was nothing under that flowing garment except Arianna herself. The effect was electrifying.

As they entered the dining area, they were greeted by Swiftstalker and Prince Brightblade. "Why am I not surprised that your son has managed to find the most beautiful woman inside the Veil?" Swiftstalker said.

Prince Brightblade came over and clasped his arms around Rorrick. While this open display of affection surprised him, Rory was stunned to realize he was now the same height as his father but seemed larger because of the muscle mass of his shoulders, arms, and legs. "What have you been doing to him, Swiftstalker? He's huge!"

"What can I say, oh great Prince. He just keeps growing! Arianna, you are as ravishing as ever."

"And you are still a shameless flatterer, Swiftstalker. Will you never cease your relentless pursuit of every female whose path you cross and settle down for an age or two?" Arianna chided him.

"Was that an offer?" Swiftstalker quipped. "An offer from you would certainly be worth considering."

Arianna laughed. "The only offer you will ever get from me is for a swift kick where it would do you the most good!" She moved over to the banquet table and began selecting things to eat from the platters of vegetables and fruits. Rory recalled that those who dealt with the life

force often forswore meat. While she selected her choices, Rory drew himself another of those wonderful ales. He followed her over to the table where his father and uncle were sitting.

“Rory, Swiftstalker says you can see the Veil,” Brightblade said.

“That is true. I see a kind of sparkle in the air. I was also able to see Elona while she was still within the tree.”

“What! I have never known anyone who could do that!” Swiftstalker said. “Are you sure she did not let you see her?”

“She was quite surprised at the time, too. She made mention that no one had ever done it before. I’m not sure how I did it. I just felt like someone was watching me and I just seemed to see her standing there.”

Arianna looked puzzled. “Is Elona the hamadryad who lives in your *hiakehla*? You actually saw a wood nymph while she was still *in* her tree?” At Rory’s nod, she turned to Brightblade. “You must let me take him to the Heart. If he has this much power, it must be trained for his protection, as well as for the benefit of the Veil.”

Prince Brightblade turned to Rory. “You’ve been busy. Just after Swiftstalker met with me, we encountered Winterstar. He has requested that you put on a demonstration with your sword at the training arena. He suspects you may be of master class, even though he had not heard any of Swiftstalker’s report. Now one of our leading mages wants to bring you into the Heart of the Veil, a place that less than one percent of our people can pass into through its defenses. And now I find you have done something even most of our mages cannot do, and that’s detect a dryad.” He shook his head. “I knew you would be special but I never knew just how unique even among the Fair Folk. Tomorrow promises to be a very interesting day. Swiftstalker will bring you to the arena in the morning. Arianna and I will both bring you to the outer edge of the Heart in the afternoon. Going the rest of the way in will be solely up to you.”

## Chapter 11

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Rory woke as a shaft of light from the rising sun pierced the window and stabbed into his eyes. It seemed that wonderful ale with the hazelnut taste had the kick of a mule. It also seemed to coat the inside of his mouth with some kind of foul, sticky paste. *Why in blazes did I drink so much?* He just hoped he hadn’t made a fool of himself. As he swung his legs out of bed and groaned as the pounding in his head increased, the door to his room crashed open.

“Get out of bed!” Swiftstalker said. “Any man who drinks as much as you can should be ready to go by now. Come on. I know your head hurts because my own is killing me. A quick dip in the pools will either kill us or cure us.”

Rory slipped into his clothes and reluctantly followed his uncle to the pools. Mercifully, they were empty. Swiftstalker undressed and dove into the first pool. He swam in steady

strokes across the water, keeping his head submerged. When he reached the other side, he climbed out and dove into the next pool to sit on one of the carved niches. "Go on, lad. I feel better already."

Rory undressed and dove into the pool. In the last split second before he came into contact with the water, he realized there wasn't even the slightest wisp of steam anywhere around this particular pool. As he entered the water, he knew why. This pool was fed by an underground aquifer that carried extremely cold water just barely above the freezing point. Emulating his uncle, he swam the length of the pool underwater and then dove into the second pool, whose tepid waters now seemed scalding after the icy plunge.

Before Rory could begin to complain, Swiftstalker asked, "How's your head now?"

Rory realized his headache was gone. In fact, he felt pretty good. Perhaps he could face the challenge of the sword demonstration after all. "Much better, thanks. I'm not sure I can carry on a sword demonstration wearing the loose silks that seem to be the fashion here."

"I agree. I've asked the pixies to make you up a set of fighting leathers for this morning. They are already over there on the bench, along with some footwear more familiar to you. Your sword and dagger are also there."

Rory climbed out of the pool, dried himself off with one of the big towels, and then drew on the silky undergarment to protect his skin from chafing in the fighting leathers. As he slipped on the dark green leather shirt with its Westfell Wolf crest, he realized it was a sleeveless vest. He gave Swiftstalker a quizzical look.

"The better to show off your muscles, my boy. In fact, when you fight, you may want to consider going without the vest all together. There's nothing like bare skin against a naked blade to sharpen one's focus. Not to mention the fact that your broad shoulders, big chest, and heavily muscled arms are unusual among our people. The women will love it."

"Uncle, are women all you ever think about?" Rory laughed.

"Absolutely not. I also think about food and drink!"

Now dressed, Rory slipped the scabbard strap over his shoulder and settled the sword across his back. With his dagger once again on his belt, he felt fully dressed once more, realizing at last how much he had missed the weight of the dagger. He drew his sword with one swift motion and stepped through some of his moves to see whether the leathers bound in any way. Watching Rory, Swiftstalker quickly dried off and dressed in his more familiar leathers as well.

"So will you be fighting, too?" Rory asked.

"You could say that. I'm going to be one of your opponents, lad. I may have taught you everything *you* know about the sword, but that does not mean I taught you everything *I* know." Swiftstalker settled his own sword across his back. "I still have a trick or two left to show you some humility."

"Good! It's a poor day when you can't learn something new."



\* \* \*

The training arena was a large circular depression ringed with terraced seating. The stone benches were filled; many of the spectators had been drawn by their curiosity about their prince's son, while others had come to test their own skills against a new opponent. Rory was pleased to see Arianna there. She gave him a wink when she caught him looking at her.

Swiftstalker said, "Here's how this is going to work. First, we will start with our own slow individual exercises to limber up our muscles. Since we are using naked blades, we will be on opposite sides of the arena to prevent any accidents. Once we are sufficiently warmed up, you and I will spar a bit, slowly building up the speed of our blades. Should either of us draw blood from the other, the match ends immediately and whoever drew it loses because it shows a lack of control over your sword."

"Makes sense."

"Once we conclude, you may be challenged by one or more of the others. Whether you accept or decline a match is up to you, as is the number you choose to face. Again, these are friendly matches with the goal of comparing skills without drawing blood." Swiftstalker drew his sword and said, "See you in the center in a few minutes."

Rory pulled his sword scabbard off and set it beside one of the benches out of the way. He started going through his moves, slowly at first but steadily increasing the speed of his thrusts and swings. He felt calm and focused; the crowd had receded to the back of his mind and all he was aware of was his blade. As he finished a particularly difficult move, he decided he was ready. He walked back over to his bench and took off the vest as suggested by his uncle. In the upcoming demonstration, the vest might have offered a minor hindrance to his moves and he knew better than to give Swiftstalker even the slightest advantage. He was so focused on what he was doing, he didn't hear the sighs that came from many of the women present when he removed his vest.

Rory stepped to the center of the ring and waited for his uncle, his sword loose in his hand. Swiftstalker came into the center and stopped about eight feet from Rory. They gave each other a slight bow, their stares never leaving the other for even the slightest moment. As they came up from the bow, Swiftstalker sprang at Rory, his sword slicing through the air.

Rory felt the now familiar sense of time expanding. Effortlessly, his sword parried his uncle's move. *So much for slow*. They exchanged a rapid series of moves. Even with the expanded time sense, the moves were quicker than normal.

After a few moments, Swiftstalker sprang his surprise. In the blink of an eye, he drew his dagger and began to fight with both blades. Rory's own dagger seemed to just appear in his hand as he met Swiftstalker's. To the spectators, their moves were a blur and the sound of blade meeting blade was almost continuous. At several points, the crowd applauded particularly deft moves but Rory's focus was so intense he never heard them.

Their sparring had lasted almost a quarter of an hour when Swiftstalker stepped back from the ring to exchange his dagger for a second sword. Winterstar tossed a second sword to Rory. While Rory had never fought with two swords before, the flow of the blades seemed to come naturally. At first, Swiftstalker pressed him but before long, Rory was backing Swiftstalker

across the ring, their blades in a constant blur of motion. As Swiftstalker's foot crossed the boundary of the fighting circle, Rory's hands fell to his sides, the swords hanging loosely in his grip.

Swiftstalker bowed deeply to Rory, conceding the match, and then clasped forearms in congratulations for a match well fought. "That was wonderful, Rory. I thought I had you for a while when we started with two swords but you soon adapted to that with no trouble."

"It seemed awkward at first but I found I enjoyed it. I may start carrying two blades if I can ever find another one as good as Wolf Fang." Rory wiped down the blade of the sword his father had given him.

"Now comes the real question. Are any of these others brave enough to go against you with a blade in challenge?"

The majority of the warriors watching knew they were outclassed and declined to challenge, although a few wondered whether Rory would be interested in showing them some of his moves in slow motion since most could not follow them at the speed Rory had executed them. One very young warrior boasted he could beat Rory if he wanted to, but quickly backed down when Winterstar pushed him into the ring in front of Rory. Rory looked at the terrified warrior and said, "Remember that on any day against any warrior, anything can happen. The sun might flash off a blade and blind you for a critical second. Your foot might slip in wet or soft ground. Your scabbard strap might break and the scabbard might tangle your feet. Or an opponent might come at you with two swords rather than one, as Swiftstalker did to me today. You must be ready for anything and expect your opponent to take advantage of even the smallest of openings."

Winterstar said, "That's good advice for us all to remember," and the other warriors nodded in agreement.

Since there would be no challenges, Rory agreed to observe and critique some of the other matches. He first intended to put his vest back on after wiping away the sweat from his chest and neck caused by his exertions in the circle. A delicate hand took the towel from him.

Arianna said, "Let me dry your back." She stepped behind him and towed away the sweat. "I have never seen anyone move that fast before. I was sure one or the other of you would misjudge and someone would be hurt."

Swiftstalker said, "We weren't even fighting at full speed, Arianna. I have seen Rory fight much faster against a real opponent."

"Really?" she said, "I would hate to cross blades with him."

Watching the matches showed Rory just how unusual his talent was. He knew Swiftstalker also experienced the time effect when he fought and had believed it was something all elven warriors used, but watching some of them fight made him realize that few did. Of the others, only Winterstar and one other seemed to achieve it. Still, all of the warriors would be able to easily defeat most humans.

"Winterstar, perhaps you could explain why there are so many elven warriors. I know you do not fight humans, at least along the Westfell borders because word would have reached the keep had the pact been broken by either side."

"It is true that we do not fight humans in Westfell, but we do have the occasional raid from the Outlanders across the Greater Tyree River," Winterstar replied. "Not all our enemies are human, however. Raids from fell creatures have happened in the past and so we prepare should they come again."

Arianna said, "There are worse foes than humans, Rory. The fell creatures have their own dark plans for the lands above the ground."

"What are these fell creatures you speak of, Arianna?"

"They go by many names, such as ogres, demons, imps, and many more. Some of the creatures are neutral, such as the dwarves, who only want to be left alone in their mines and deep caverns, but others follow a sinister and evil path. They seek the enslavement of all others. They are the ones we must guard against."

Rory had always believed the stories of these fell creatures to be myths and tales to frighten unruly children. To hear her discussing them so matter-of-factly made him reexamine his own beliefs. He had already met many creatures of legends, including pixies and dryads. *Why shouldn't the others be real as well?*

Prince Brightblade came over to them. "That was the greatest display I have ever seen. I had thought Swiftstalker was exaggerating when he said how fast you were, but I see now he spoke only the truth."

"He sure challenged me today. I had never fought with two swords before and I find I like it."

"Then I shall find you a worthy partner for Wolf Fang," the prince responded. "It will take a while but you shall have it before you return outside in the spring. Now, I suggest you bathe and change before we visit the Heart of the Veil. It would be very improper to approach the Heart bearing weapons."

\* \* \*

Rory, now freshly bathed and dressed in the flowing silk garments favored by the Fair Folk, walked along the paths between Arianna and Brightblade. He had admired her color choices. While males tended to wear colors symbolic to them, such as his own Westfell green with the crest, the females changed their style to suit their moods. Today she was wearing a kaftan of flowing black. It was not just black; it was like looking at the reflection of moonlight on a placid pond at midnight. The blackness seemed to shift and move, drinking away any light that touched it. Her normally pale skin was even whiter in contrast to the inky darkness that shrouded her form; only her fiery hair and emerald eyes gave her any color at all. Her lips, devoid of any artificial color, were an extremely pale pink. Rory was shocked as he realized he had just been thinking that her nipples would probably be the same shade as her lips were now, palest pink adorning the white slopes. He was ashamed of himself as she had never given him any reason to think of her in this manner, although he had found it very sensual when she had wiped away his sweat from his back. It had felt as though she had lingered at the task.

The path they followed was one he had never taken before. The hedges lining the path grew taller and denser, and there were no markers along the way since there had been no

branches to other paths. He became aware of that same susurrations of sound he had experienced before at the Veil to the outside, and a sparkle was dancing in the air ahead of them. They stopped.

Arianna walked ahead and entered the shimmering sparkle. As she passed within, she seemed to fade out of existence, vanishing before their eyes. Prince Brightblade said, "She will be waiting on the other side for you. I will remain here until I am sure you have passed within. Should the Heart deny you admittance, I will take you back to your *hiakehla*."

Rory nodded his understanding and stepped forward. As he entered the shimmer, he felt the touch of something in his mind and deeper into his very soul. He mentally greeted the intrusion with a cheerful welcome and then he was through the Veil. Arianna reached out and took his hand.

"How do you feel?" she asked, peering intently into his eyes.

Lost in her eyes, he knew he couldn't answer that accurately or he would risk offending her. "I feel fine. What an interesting experience!"

She looked at where their hands joined and Rory realized he was running his thumb along her hand in a caress. He let go with a hurried, "I beg your pardon, Arianna."

She smiled at him, her even white teeth flashing in the odd light within the Heart. "Don't worry about it, Rory. I liked it."

Before he could respond, his father came through the shimmering wall. "Shall we?" Prince Brightblade gestured with his hand toward the path.

No one had described the Heart of the Veil to Rory. If he had failed to gain entrance, he had no need to know what was within the protected space, and if he did enter he would see for himself. As they left the hedge-lined path, he realized they had not explained because words had failed them.

The path opened into a clearing almost the same size as the training arena. In the center stood the Heart itself: a stone sphere of perhaps twenty feet in diameter that glowed from within with pulses of energy. The glow gave the sphere a rosy glow like the first rays of the sun as it pierces the dawn. Around the sphere were placed stone benches upon which various elves were seated, intently gazing into the stone.

"Rory, I want you to sit down on one of these back benches and truly open your mind to what is around you. In a few minutes, I want you to describe to me what you see," Arianna said, leading him to a bench set back from the others.

Rory obediently sat on the hard bench and opened his mind. At first, he became aware of great waves of energy flowing into the sphere from all directions along the ground. These waves were stronger along the four cardinal directions, yet still intense even in the smallest line leading to the stone. Opening his mind still further, he recognized smaller waves of outgoing energy as well. Some went to maintain the barrier around the Heart, while another went to the Veil encompassing the entire area. A trickle there heated the pools; another over there provided the energy to all the pixies doing the myriad tasks that supported the elven community. He concentrated still deeper, this time focusing his attention on one elven male. He could see the energy exchange between the mage and the sphere and followed the flow to its destination. He

was subtly guiding the clouds in an effort to break a blizzard high in the Kendrahl Mountains.

Arianna's touch on his arm brought him back to self-awareness. "What do you see?"

Rory described it all and she said, "The world is covered in lines of force we call ley lines. This force, created by all living things, is truly the most powerful thing in the universe. It flows along these ley lines. In certain places, these lines cross. At the point where they cross, they become stronger. Much like the place where the Lesser Tyree River joins the Aluria River to form the Greater Tyree River. Each river has power and force individually but when merged become even greater and more powerful."

When he nodded, she continued. "The Heart is located at such a junction. In fact, it is the junction of over thirty-two such major and minor ley lines. It draws on all that force and amplifies it in such a way we can use it to do things. The mages around the Heart are directing a small portion of the force to serve our needs. Some of them control the Veil while others, such as the one you described, are trying to help others indirectly. The blizzard raging in the Kendrahl Mountains has cut off large portions of that duchy, stranding people and creating huge risks of avalanches. By breaking up the storm, we hope to alleviate the suffering in Kendrahl."

"This is amazing! So the ability to manipulate these ley lines and the life force they carry is the source of the fabled elven magic."

"Exactly," Prince Brightblade said. "Only a small percentage of our people can actually manipulate the force with any degree of control. If your concentration wavers, the force can lash back and consume you."

Rory was studying the sphere and he sensed a small area where the line feeding it had been subtly changed. He reached out to that place with his mind, following the line back outside the Veil and far across the realm of Aluria. It grew steadily weaker as he approached Eastfell. He reached out to Arianna, linking her mind to his as he touched her arm. *'What has caused such a change in this ley line? I can sense it has changed dramatically over the past few months.'*

*'I don't know. None of us have been aware of this! How did you see it?'*

*'I don't know, but I could sense a wrongness; a disharmony that signaled a change that was harmful.'*

Arianna broke the contact and went over to a group of mages near the Heart. She took them to the spot and explained what Rory had done. They all came over to him.

"We are in your debt, Rorrick. The ley line you have pointed out has indeed been changed. Something either within Eastfell or beyond is draining the line of its force. Had this gone undetected, the drain could have extended back to the Heart itself." The mages bowed in Rory's direction. "It is a privilege to welcome a master mage in our midst."

"I am hardly a master anything," Rory said, "for I am but a youth of seventeen."

"We judge not on years but on ability, Rory," Prince Brightblade said. "It is your ability that declares you a master mage, just as today you showed the warriors that you are beyond master class with a sword."

"My ability with a sword is something that took a lot of hard work to obtain, Father. All I know about magic is that I can see the lines of life force, not whether I can manipulate them. I cannot assume any title I haven't earned."

"You have a valid point," the prince replied, a proud smile on his face. "What's more, you have the courage to stand up for your point of view. Very well, Arianna will begin to train you in the ways to manipulate the life force that surrounds us all. I have no doubt that, in the end, you will be convinced to accept the master designation."

After Prince Brightblade left, Arianna led Rory to a bench off to the side of the Heart, away from the others. Seated beside him, she said, "I think you will find you have been using the life force for a long time without realizing it. Tell me what you feel when you fight with your sword."

Rory explained how time itself seemed to slow when he fought and it was like he could see what his opponent was about to do before he ever moved, so he had lots of time to position his sword favorably to take advantage of the other's movement.

"As I expected. You are tapping into the forces around you to gain strength and speed while using the other's own life force to anticipate his moves. It is but a small step to actively manipulate those forces to achieve a goal, but like all things, that first small step is very hard. I want you to relax and open yourself to all the energy here within the Heart. Then I want you to visualize something you wish to happen in your mind. Holding that image, I want you to channel that energy into it."

Rory took a deep breath and slowly let it out, relaxing back onto the bench. He could feel the vast field of energy that surrounded them all and he reached out with a metaphysical hand to scoop up some for his use. Next he imagined a perfect rose laying on the bench between them. Not a real rose, but one made of crystal that would last forever. He channeled the energy into his image of the rose and heard Arianna gasp.

Between them now lay a beautiful white crystal rose. "A gift for you, Arianna."

\* \* \*

Since they had established that he could channel the life force for creation, Arianna spent the rest of the afternoon teaching him to reach out and explore the natural order of things around them. Without moving from where he sat, he spent an hour following a single ant as it made its way through the foliage. He then caught sight of a hawk flying among the trees and spent an exhilarating period flying with it. He found the Veil held no terror to the creatures of nature because the hawk passed through it as though it wasn't even there. One moment it was flying in the warmth of the elven vale and the next, it was battling a storm of wind and snow above the trees outside. Spotting a magnificent stag, he merged with it for a while, brushing through the snow and running through the trees. In that moment, he understood the reluctance of those who eschewed meat; once he had been the deer, it was hard to think of it in terms of food.

The thought of food made Rory realize just how hungry he was. His awareness returned to his body and he opened his eyes. Arianna was sitting there, watching him. Her luminous green eyes seemed to glow in the twilight. "Your eyes are glowing."

"So are yours," she replied.

He stretched to ease the muscles cramped by hours of inactivity. His joints popped as he stretched them. "It is amazing how stiff one can become when they haven't actually been moving. I think a nice soak in the hot springs is just what I need."

"That sounds like an excellent idea. I know you have used the one near the Veil entrance and the one nearest your *hiakehla*. There is another one not too far from here even more secluded and rarely crowded since to get to it, one has to pass through the Heart. Would you care to see it?"

"Sounds perfect."

It wasn't until they reached the secluded pool that lay within the Heart that Rory realized what he had done. He had grown accustomed to sharing a pool with Swiftstalker in the manner that all men adapt to casual nudity among comrades-in-arms. This would be quite different, especially since he had never seen a woman naked before.

Rory turned his back to her when she started to untie her kaftan. As she slid into the water without making the slightest splash and swam over to one of the ever-present niches, he removed his clothes and dove into the water, knifing through the surface with hardly any splash. He swam over to where she rested and sat in a nearby niche, close but not too close.

Rory was trying very hard to appear calm but inside, his heart was racing and his stomach was churning. The water in the pool was as clear as glass, and the flickering torchlight cast enough light so he could see her clearly. He had been right in his supposition that her nipples would be pale pink, but he had misjudged the size and shape of her breasts. They were fuller than Rachel's had been back at Festival. He could see the shape of her hips and legs, as well as the secret junction between her thighs. She was completely hairless aside from the magnificent mane atop her head. Whether this was a matter of personal preference or typical of elven women, he had no idea.

Arianna tipped her head as she watched Rory. From the way he was staring at her while trying to appear he was looking somewhere else, she decided he had never seen a nude woman before. Which meant, of course, that he had little or no experience with one. She decided to tease him just a little bit to see what kind of reaction she could get. She reached both her arms in the air above her in a very pronounced stretch, which had the effect of lifting her breasts and presenting them to his view. His eyes grew very round as he watched her.

Arianna said softly, "Rory, have you ever been with a woman before?"

"No, not in this way. I have kissed a few and had some casual contact with a couple at Winter Festival, but you are the first I have even seen naked. Outside among the humans, this kind of conduct would not be acceptable between other than a man and his wife."

"I know. I once spent a few years among the people in Kendrahl helping them with negotiations with the dwarves. Humans have some funny ideas about what should be a perfectly natural act." Arianna slid over next to him. "Do you find me attractive?"

"I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"And I think you are the most magnificent male of any species I have ever seen. Not only are you physically beautiful, Rory, and gifted far beyond anyone I have ever met, but there is a kindness and gentleness in you that I find most appealing. Would you like to kiss me?"

His answer was to pull her into his arms and place his lips against hers. The kiss was long and gentle, a tender exploration involving equal parts wonder, desire, and elation. He shivered as she let the tip of her tongue caress his lips as they kissed and he responded in kind, letting his tongue touch the velvet softness of hers. His hands cupped her breasts and he felt her nipples harden against his palms.

"Let me teach you this, as well," Arianna whispered as she reached her hand down into the pool.

## Chapter 12

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Rory woke with a start. Reassured he was in his chamber in the *hiakehla*, he turned his head and realized he was not alone. A pair of luminous green eyes were watching him from inches away. She wore a secretive smile and absolutely nothing else. She pulled his lips to hers and kissed him deeply and thoroughly.

Guilt raced through Rory. He was engaged to marry Bethany and he had betrayed her trust. He struggled to pull back from Arianna but she was stronger than he expected and she refused to let him go. It became a game, with him trying to escape her kisses and her pursuing him with wild abandon. He found himself laughing in spite of his guilt and then thoughts of Bethany faded away as her lips claimed his once more.

When he awoke the second time, he was alone. Her scent lingered in the air and he knew the night before and earlier this morning had not been a fantasy. He had lain with a woman and he felt ... well, to be honest, he felt terrific. He recalled his earlier guilt but threw that aside as unproductive. His elven heritage had won that struggle easily for it was hard to accept anything so pleasurable and fun could ever be bad. Arianna knew he was engaged to Bethany and he would be leaving in the early days of spring to rejoin his Westfell family and travel to Aluria. Arianna made him understand there were no claims upon either one of them other than those of their own choosing. She chose to spend her nights with him and to teach him the ways of love, and in doing so, she was really making a gift to Bethany. Now, when they were finally wed in the late autumn, Rory would know how to please his wife and gain his own pleasure in return.

With that finally settled in his own mind, Rory smiled and stretched. That had been amazing. He had not been prepared for one facet of the experience. No one had told him it was possible for him to merge his life force with hers and let them each experience the other's pleasure.

He saw Elona watching him. "Good morning, Elona. I hope you are well this day."

Elona gave him a shy smile and said, "I would think you would still be asleep, considering



how little you two slept last night.”

“Elona! Were you watching us?”

“Of course. I see everything that happens in and around this tree. I must admit, even I was unaware that some of what you two did was even physically possible.” She giggled. “And I thought I had seen it all until last night.”

“Now I know you are teasing me.”

“Hah!” Elona winked at him. “If you ever want to try wood, I’m your nymph. And that is an offer I have never made to anyone else.”

\* \* \*

Arianna was waiting for him at the entrance to the Heart. “Today we shall take a different tack in your training. I spoke with your father this morning and we discussed your return to the outside. You will face many challenges there and I must prepare you for some of them.” She led him away from the entrance and back to another of the smaller eating areas. “Sit and we shall begin.”

As he sat at the small table, she placed two mugs before them. “Examine these two mugs and tell me what you see.”

On the surface, the two mugs were nearly identical. Each had a single handle and would hold about ten ounces of liquid. They were suitable for hot drinks as well as cold. They each held a steaming liquid he suspected was a tea of some kind. He extended his senses further and felt something wrong about the one on the right. The tea had been contaminated with something else. It had been poisoned.

“The one on my right has been poisoned.”

“Exactly. You must learn to gauge whether the foods and drinks offered to you are free of subtle poisons. Can you determine how the poison can be changed into something harmless so you may drink from the cup?” Arianna asked.

He looked deeper into the cup. He began to see how a minor change here and there would convert the poisons into a harmless mix. He reached out to the force around them and drew it into the cup, changing the liquid. Before she could react, he swept the cup up in his hand and drained it to the last drop.

Arianna gasped and extended her senses deep into his body, searching for the poison she had placed into the tea. When she found none, she looked at his smiling face and said, “That was foolish. You should have let me check to make sure it was safe.”

“Will you be at my side outside to check my food and drink? I must take my own risks. Not that I truly believe there was a risk. I suspected you would have been able to change the poisons even as they acted within me. That, too, I must learn to do, for there is always a chance that somehow a poison may slip past my guard. I must be able to fight them, even when they are inside me trying to kill me.”

“You are correct. That is yet another task we must complete. This will be dangerous

because there is, as you say, the opportunity for mischance for a poison to get inside you and you be disabled enough to prevent you from successfully altering it into something harmless. I will monitor you and be ready to intervene if needed. At random times, we will attempt to slip poison into your food or drink, so you must be vigilant."

"That makes sense."

"I should also warn you that Winterstar has told the young warriors to start stalking you and to attack without warning. The prince says you are to carry your sword at all times, except when you enter the Heart. If you look behind you, you will find your sword and dagger."

Rory looked back and saw Wolf Fang, along with a second sword that looked like a twin of the first. He buckled the special crossed scabbard harness across his chest and then checked the draw of the weapons. They felt ... right, sitting back there.

Rory drew the new sword from its scabbard and admired the craftsmanship that had gone into creating the gleaming weapon. "Does this sword bear a name?"

Arianna shook her head. "Naming this sword will be up to you, but you'll know what it is called when the time is right."

Rory returned the blade to its sheath. "So I can expect to be randomly attacked by the young warriors at any time outside of the Heart. I can also expect to be poisoned at any time." Rory laughed. "Was it something I said?"

\* \* \*

Rory quickly learned to keep his senses extended to detect anything unusual in his surroundings. While a warrior walking along a path was not usual, one hiding off of it was odd enough to attract his attention. Whenever that would happen, he would motion Arianna to hold back while he went forward to just short of the trap. He would then call out the warrior, identifying where he was hiding. The warriors grew frustrated at being unable to surprise him and started working together to develop more elaborate traps. They enjoyed a limited success when they used natural elements as passive traps, such as snares. Unfortunately for the warriors, his speed with the sword usually meant the snare was slashed to pieces before it could completely close over his foot.

One enterprising warrior positioned himself in a tree at some distance, along with a vine he could use to swing down on Rory, hoping to penetrate his defenses before Rory could react. To assist as a distraction, several snares were arranged along the trail at the point where the rope would swing across. As Rory stopped to deal with one of the snares, the warrior launched himself silently into space. Unfortunately for the warrior, Rory's sword spun through the air and cut the rope just as he reached the trail but before the warrior could employ his own weapon to block the slash. His momentum carried him across the trail and into the thorny rosebushes beyond. It was truly an ignominious moment as he crashed face first into the dirt and thorns.

One side effect of his constant vigilance was being able to immediately detect which dishes and drinks had been altered with a poison or even an emetic. He soon learned to adjust the adulterant as he approached the table so he could pick up the glass that had been poisoned a

moment before and toss its contents down his throat. The first few times, Arianna reacted with momentary panic until she realized the game he was playing with them. It was obvious the lessons had been learned.

Even amid this constant vigilance, he and Arianna found moments to explore their growing relationship. They spent time in the heated pool within the Heart, knowing they would be safe from the weapons of the warriors. Their nights were spent in Rory's chambers as Arianna furthered his education in physical intimacy. Swiftstalker and Prince Brightblade often teased the two lovers, but it was a good-natured harassment. Even Elona accepted Arianna's presence in the tree and started bringing food and drink to them each evening when they returned to the *hiakehla* and again in the mornings.

Within the Heart, Rory began using the ley lines to study the realm outside the Veil. Westfell Keep had been built on the junction of two lines and was easy to reach. He drifted like a ghost through the halls of the keep, seeing his grandfather sitting quietly in his study reading one of his many books and the general, now married to Rachel, working with a new batch of trainees. Another line took him to Aluria itself where he studied the king as he sat in Council, trying to understand the man to whom he would soon be swearing fealty to as the Heir to Westfell, and later, as the Duke of Westfell. He also cast about for a glimpse of Bethany but could not locate her within the court; perhaps she had returned to her family's estate now that an engagement had been arranged. Remembering the kindness he had felt from Duke Armand of Kendrahl, he explored in that direction. Following the ley line that led toward Kendrahl, he started to feel something wrong, a sick feeling coming from that direction.

"Arianna, as I recall, you have spent time in Kendrahl. Please join with me now. I sense something is wrong there." Taking her hand to establish a physical connection to their mental link, he led her along the ley line toward the wrongness he had felt but could not put a name to. As they explored deeper into Kendrahl, they came across isolated villages that had been destroyed. Here the feeling of evil was even stronger. *'What could have done this? It does not feel natural!'*

Arianna replied, *'I have felt this before, Rory. This is the work of ogres. We must inform King Alaric.'*

They withdrew from the melding and left the Heart. Stopping at the first marker they encountered, Arianna said, "Assistance, please."

A small pixie appeared. "How may I assist you, Lady Arianna?"

"Where is King Alaric? We must speak to him immediately."

The pixie vanished momentarily and then returned to say, "The king is in council with Prince Brightblade and Winterstar. He says you are to join him there."

Rory thanked the pixie and then followed Arianna as she raced through the maze of pathways. Even in the heat of their discovery, Rory never relaxed his vigilance. The poor warrior who tried to ambush him never realized Rory was close until he found himself staring at the point of the sword pressed against his throat. "I do not have time to play right now as peoples' lives are at stake. Pass the word that the next person who ambushes me between here and the king will bleed."

Whether it was coincidence or the warning, they encountered no further ambushes as they raced to the Council Garden. As the name implied, the Council Garden was a large garden that had been adopted as the meeting place for the King's Council. When Arianna and Rory entered, they found the king, the prince, and Winterstar waiting for them. Winterstar started to leave but Rory held up his hand. "Please stay. Your council will be valuable."

King Alaric stood. "Can this really be Rorrick? He has grown to be a giant among us. Arianna, my child, how are you?"

Arianna said, "I am fine, Your Majesty. We bring ill tidings. Ogres are loose in the Kendrahl Mountains."

## Chapter 13

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Despite the urgency of the situation, it still took several days before the war party was ready to leave the Veil. While they assembled, the mages in the Heart worked to ameliorate the worst of the weather between the Great Forest and the Kendrahl Mountains to permit a faster journey. Riders had been sent to the Duke of Westfell and the Duke of Kendrahl to inform them of the situation so they did not misunderstand the large group of warriors and battle mages who would soon be crossing their territory.

Prince Brightblade entered Rory's chamber in the *hiakehla*. "I have a gift for you. I had intended to give you this before you departed for the outside in the spring, but you will need it now."

Rory took the extended package and opened it. His breath caught in his throat as the mithrail silver mail shirt came into view. Incredibly light yet stronger than plate steel, mithrail mail could stop a direct thrust with a lance as it drew upon the power of the life force around it to protect its wearer. "I cannot find the words to thank you for such an extravagant gift, Father."

Prince Brightblade smiled. "You'll find the package also contains matching gloves and coif. The gloves are not the clumsy things worn outside but are supple and limber enough to pick up a small coin. They will not hinder your hands in any way. I have also had the pixies make a small alteration in the magnificent wolf cloak of yours. You will find two small slits have been added to permit the hilts of your swords to extend outside the cloak. This will permit you to draw your swords even while wearing the cloak should the need arise." Prince Brightblade sighed. "Fighting in winter is bad enough, but it will be even worse in the Kendrahls. At least we can draw on the force to help keep us warm while we push our way into the mountains hunting for the ogres."

"When will we be ready to leave?" Rory's impatience stemmed from the knowledge that every second wasted meant more innocent people dying at the hands and teeth of the ogres.

"That's another reason I am here, son. Get your mail on and gather your gear. It is time to go."

\* \* \*

Rory was mounted on Storm once more; his heavy cloak settled about his shoulders. The pixies had done their work well for the hilts of his swords slipped quite naturally through the slits they had made, yet the snow and cold did not penetrate. The mithrail gloves and coif drew a small level of energy from the life force to keep his hands and head warm as well. He rode on the right side of Prince Brightblade, who was commanding this war party, while Winterstar rode on the other side of the prince. It was Winterstar who insisted Rory stay close to his father.

"It is not because he is your son, my Prince. It is because he is the best fighter any of us have ever seen and I want him between you and whatever crosses our path. Your son is now your bodyguard, just as your brother Swiftstalker is his," Winterstar said. "If it has the added benefit of him learning how to lead a group like this, so much the better. Don't think the warriors believe this is any show of favoritism; most of them have tried unsuccessfully to ambush your son and they have a healthy respect for his abilities. They know why he's in front."

Embarrassed, Rory just shrugged his shoulders with a what-can-you-do expression. Finally, the party moved out. They rode in a column of three with the leaders at the head. The warriors behind them carried the pennants for Brightblade and for Westfell to identify themselves to all who chanced to see them. Behind the pennants rode one hundred twenty warriors and thirty battle mages, the most formidable force the elves had fielded in nearly a thousand years.

"Why so many?" Rory had asked his father, but it was Winterstar who answered.

"Two reasons, really. Our warriors are young and few have ever fought fell creatures. Ogres are nasty brutes and are very hard to kill, so we will lose more than a few of these warriors in the process. The second reason is we must have a decisive victory over them, and wipe out each and every one of them we find. Ogres cannot be permitted to roam above, killing and eating everything they encounter."

"And the battle mages?" Rory asked.

"Ogres are really very stupid creatures and not given to much ambition. We think someone is behind this incursion. That means we may run into more than just ogres, so we have come prepared to deal with whatever we find."

\* \* \*

It took two days to reach the border into Kendrahl, and they found a messenger from the duke waiting there patiently.

"I bring you greetings and welcome from Armand, Duke of Kendrahl. He extends his appreciation for the timely warning and invites the Prince of the Forest and the Heir of Westfell to Kendrahl Keep."

Prince Brightblade shook his head. "Please tell Duke Armand that I deeply regret being unable to accept his invitation at this time, but we must hasten to find and destroy the fell creatures that even now slaughter the citizens of Kendrahl. I ask his pardon and promise we

will stop by the keep on our way home after dealing with them.”

The courier smiled. “His Grace expected that response. He bid me to say, and I quote, ‘So why are you sitting there on your horse chatting with my messenger when you could be riding after the ogres?’ ” The messenger saluted the prince. “I bid you well, Prince of the Forest, and good hunting to you all.” He moved his horse to permit the war party to ride past. As they did, the messenger watched in awe. All his life, he had been told stories about elves but seeing the tall and beautiful beings made him realize the tales had fallen short.

\* \* \*

The morning of their second day in Kendrahl, a feeling of uneasiness came over Rory. He gestured to Winterstar to hold the advance, and Winterstar held up one hand. The war party stopped, and Rory slowly eased his horse forward, questing about with his expanded senses. He detected no life ahead but the feeling of danger remained. He scanned the rising walls of rock that defined this pass deeper into the mountains for anything that could be causing this feeling of impending disaster. There didn’t seem to be anything here except rock and snow. Snow. Rory returned his gaze to the heavy banks of snow along the edges of the pass. That was the source of the danger.

Before he had trained with the sword, Rory was quite proficient with a bow. His innate ability to use the life force to guide his arrows meant that Rory never missed. If he could see it, he could hit it. When Swiftstalker gave Rory an elven longbow, the range at which Rory was devastatingly accurate increased far beyond what any human could have reached. This shot would be a true test of his abilities.

He nocked an arrow with a blunt head to the string and drew far back, the great longbow bent almost double until only the tip of the arrow rested on the bow. He sighted very carefully, fixing the exact spot he wanted the arrow to strike. His focus was so great the spot seemed to be only a few yards away. He released the arrow.

Guided by his skill and the application of the energy of the life force, the arrow slashed upward at a blazing speed, slamming into the single boulder he had spotted above the snow with enough energy to shatter the rock in a small explosion. The concussion was of sufficient force to cause the massive bank of snow to begin to slip. Once in motion, it gained momentum and transformed from a still snowbank into a tumbling, raging avalanche that crushed and buried everything before it.

“Nice shot!” Winterstar said. “That looked like a bit more than half a mile. I would never have believed anyone could shot an arrow that distance with any accuracy.”

Rory shrugged. “It’s no real problem to hit what I aim at when I can use the life force to guide the arrow.”

Winterstar looked over the snow-choked pass as the rumbles of the avalanche died away. “Now that you buried the pass, which way do we go?”

Rory gestured. “Up there, above the snow. We may have to walk the horses for a while to get past the deeper stuff.”

Winterstar groaned. “I hate snow.”

Rory tugged on Storm's reins and led the way up the side of the pass above the fallen snow shelf. The avalanche had pulled away the snow from above, so the area to which he led them was relatively clear and the war party began to move even faster through the pass. Rory kept his senses questing around them.

\* \* \*

At the other end of the pass, Rory once again felt danger ahead. This time it was accompanied by a sense of evil. The war party halted and several of them moved forward to see what lay ahead.

There was a group of ogres gathered around in what remained of a village square. This was the first time Rory had seen an ogre and he decided the children's cautionary tales had not done enough to describe the hideous monsters. The average ogre in the group was about twelve feet tall with a misshapen body. Short legs, long arms, with a barrel chest. Their heads had short, rearward-sloped foreheads from which stubby horns protruded. Their lower jaws extended farther forward to permit the massive tusks to thrust upward at the corners of their mouths. Between the tusks were other teeth, yellow and twisted. Their noses resembled the snouts of a wild boar, as did their feral beady eyes, which were red in color. Overall, their skin was dirty gray in color and covered with long coarse hair. They wore garments made from poorly cured animal skins, with more of the same wrapped around their feet. Their long arms ended in massive hands tipped with talons that measured six inches in length. They were all squatting in a rough circle around the terrified and screaming villagers. Each ogre held a villager in one hand and they were slowly ripping the legs off and eating them. When one ogre bit down on the head of the villager he was holding, the crunch of the shattering skull could be heard where the elven scouts lay observing the scene.

"I count eight of them," Winterstar said.

"Lots of ground between here and there. They will see us coming and have time to prepare for us," Prince Brightblade observed.

"True, but while they ready themselves for us, most of the villagers might be able to escape," Winterstar said.

Rory was still watching the ogres when one reached into the circle and picked up a child. Rory snapped up his bow and fired an arrow at the ogre's head. Guided by the force and loaded with surplus energy, the arrow slammed into the beast's eye, releasing the energy in a concussive moment, showering bone, brains, and blood over the nearest ogres. As the now headless body toppled over, the child wriggled free and ran back to its mother.

"Seven left, and they know we are here," Rory said, as he nocked another arrow and let it fly. It struck a second ogre at the base of its skull, severing the spinal cord before punching out the front of its throat. "Make that six."

The remaining ogres roared in rage at the sudden death of two of their group, and they spun around to face the pass, sweeping up their massive clubs. Made from small tree trunks and embedded with flaked slabs of flint, these formidable clubs were now brandished as the ogres howled their challenge to the elven warriors.

Mounted once more, the prince led the charge. While the warriors thundered down the trail toward the remaining ogres, the war mages tapped in to the ley lines to cast about for whoever was in charge of this group and to defend the elves from any magical assaults. Rory drew his two swords and prepared for battle as Storm began to pull in front of the charging mass.

Storm suddenly veered to one side, causing the whistling club to swing harmlessly to the side. Rory's Wolf Fang whispered in pursuit, severing the thumb from the hand that held the club. The club fell to the ground and the ogre screamed in pain. Before it could strike at the source of its pain, Rory had slashed deep along its side with the other sword, scoring a deep wound along the creature's ribs. Storm surged past the ogre and it turned to keep him in view.

Swiftstalker was riding behind Rory. When the ogre turned to face Rory as he passed, Swiftstalker was suddenly looking at the creature's back. He leapt from his horse onto the ogre's shoulders and upper back, and drove the point of his great two-handed sword deep into the junction between the fell creature's head and neck. As the ogre toppled over dead, the nimble elf flipped from the creature's back, landing on his feet near Rory.

The other ogres had also been slain. The majority of the war party had formed a barrier between the ogres and the villagers. Seeing their nightmare over, the villagers surged forward in a wave of cheering, smiling faces. Seeing the color and badge on Rory's clothing, the village elders made their way to his side.

"We cannot thank you enough for saving us, but we never expected help to come from Westfell."

"I alone am from Westfell. I am Rorrick, Heir of Westfell. You owe your rescue to the Lords of the Great Forest, and here is their leader, Prince Brightblade," Rory said as the prince rode up.

A hush fell over the crowd as the villagers all bent their knee in homage to the elven prince. The prince said, "Please, rise. You have been through too much to kneel before a prince not your own." He turned to the village elder near Rory. "Do you know where these ogres came from?"

"No, Your Highness. They fell upon us during the night. This is an isolated village and we kept no watch. One moment most of us were sleeping in our beds, and the next, sheer pandemonium reigned as the ogres tore our homes apart around us. They herded us into the square and have been amusing themselves by ripping us apart and eating us in front of the rest." The elder looked over at the ogre with the arrow through its neck. "Who is the bowman who slew the first two ogres?"

Prince Brightblade said, "That would be Lord Rorrick, Heir of Westfell."

The elder rushed over and clutched Rory's hand. "I am forever in your debt, my lord. The child was my granddaughter."

Rory patted the man's hand. "Then keep her safe and help her forget this horror. That is all I ask of any man, to protect their children as best they can." Turning to his father, he said, "Prince, I believe the ogres came from further to the east. There are signs of the trail they broke approaching the village in the night."



As the war party readied themselves to move on, Swiftstalker struggled to pull his sword free from the impaled ogre. Rory rode over, leaned down from his saddle, and grabbed the hilt of Swiftstalker's sword. With a mighty heave, he wrenched the blade free. "You're supposed to pass between the bones, not through them, Uncle. You might want to see if you nicked the blade."

Swiftstalker wiped the blade with fresh snow then dried it with his cloak before sheathing it. "You know darn well the edge is enchanted. It would take a lot more than thick ogre bones to nick that blade."

Rory glanced up as the battle mages rode by on their way to rejoin the column. The sight of a familiar face wiped the smile off Rory's face.

"Arianna! What are you doing here?"

"My job, Rory, the same as you."

"I thought you handled negotiations with dwarves! At least that's what you said."

"That is true enough, but what is all this if not another form of negotiation? Making an offer of 'Stop what you are doing and I will stop killing you' and seeing how the other side reacts. Seriously, though, there has to be someone behind all this and that someone has to be using magic to control the ogres," Arianna said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Ogres never travel in packs. They are solitary creatures just as likely to attack each other as they are anyone else. Yet here we found a band of eight of them working together. It just isn't natural, if such a term could be applied to such a fell creature. So while you brave and stalwart types are dispatching the monsters, we are looking for the one controlling them. And speaking of brave, that was a nice move, removing the thumb so the club would fall."

"Just a lucky stroke."

Arianna had sidled her horse beside his, and now she leaned over to place her palm against his cheek. "Hardly that. I know how precisely you control that sword of yours and how accurately you can aim an arrow. Thank you for saving the child."

"Enough of that, you two!" grumbled Swiftstalker. "We have a war to win."

Arianna laughed and leaned over, kissing Swiftstalker on the cheek. "Take care of yourself, and of Rory." With a wave of her hand, she rode off to rejoin the other battle mages.

\* \* \*

Rory could sense another group of fell creatures in the next valley. This group felt different from the ogres. They were Orcs. Smaller than ogres, but just as nasty, orcs usually lived belowground. They were slightly shorter than a man, but much stronger and their long arms gave them a greater reach with the swords and pikes they carried. Their vision, adapted to life underground, gave them an advantage during the night, which was their preferred time to attack. These were pack creatures that were used to hunting together. They were sly and intelligent, unlike the larger ogres and they knew the elves were coming.

"They know we are coming," Rory said. "They are divided into groups and positioned to attack us as we enter the valley."

"How many of them are there?" Winterstar asked.

"About twenty groups of thirty or so," Rory replied. "This will get messy. We are going to take casualties unless we can figure out some way to take them on a few groups at a time."

Prince Brightblade said, "Orcs are not magic users, so they might be susceptible to some magical interference. We need a battle mage here to talk strategy. Send for Arianna."

Arianna arrived out of the darkness. "You sent for me?"

The prince explained the situation they would face in the next valley and asked if she had any suggestions.

"Yes, I do. The Orcs can see much better in the dark than we can, so we must attack them when the sun is at its brightest. We have already been working on the weather and tomorrow shall be bright and clear, with plenty of bright light reflecting off the snow. But we need to keep them trapped in that valley and not sneaking up on us, so we have established a barrier, somewhat like the Veil, around that entire group of Orcs. They won't know it's there unless they try to leave. Finally, throughout the night, we will systematically melt the snow around their feet and then freeze it into heavy ice, trapping them. When it is time to attack, we will drop the barrier in front of our warriors to let them pass, then put it up again to prevent any of the Orcs from escaping. The ice around their feet will hamper their movements and prevent one group from helping another. The rest will be up to the warriors."

"Sounds like a good plan, Arianna," said the prince.

"One more thing," she added. "We have also placed a barrier around this camp so everyone can get a good night's rest before the battle. We have established a watch among the mages so all the warriors can sleep."

Winterstar said, "That will be much appreciated, although I imagine some of the inexperienced warriors may find it hard to sleep tonight. The anticipation is often worse than the battle itself."

Rory walked Arianna back to the battle mages, pausing for a few stolen kisses along the way. She wished him well in the morning's battle then ducked into her tent.

\* \* \*

The sun rose in a cloudless sky, making the mounds of snow and ice sparkle like diamonds. The elven warriors wrapped a length of filmy gauze over their eyes to cut the glare. Their heavy cloaks had been rolled and tied to their saddles, and the horses had been picketed near the battle mages. In the battle to come, the horses would be a liability rather than an asset. In addition, any horse the Orcs captured would become their next meal; Orcs loved the taste of horsemeat.

The elven warriors had divided into four teams of thirty each, and they slipped silently into the valley. As the first group of warriors attacked a hidden pack of orcs, the rest of the elves

charged past to deal with the next group. Soon, the four groups were attacking four packs in an almost even battle.

While the numbers on each side may have been close, the battle was not even. The orcs had been blinded by the rising sun and completely unaware that their feet were encased in six inches of ice. Unable to move, they were quickly slaughtered.

While the warriors were engaged in the initial fights, the remaining packs began hacking at the ice around their feet with their swords. Many were unsuccessful at chipping away at the ice but still managed to free themselves from its icy grip by the unfortunate tactic of inadvertently cutting off their own feet. Their warm blood often melted the ice enough to free others. In this manner, the size of the packs was reduced by as much as fifty percent.

The fight now became a bloody *mêlée* with most warriors fighting multiple foes. Rory found himself confronted by as many as ten orcs at once but his use of the life force to speed his own reactions eliminated any advantage the Orcs may have had. His twin swords a constant blur showering blood and bits of orc in every direction, Rory hacked his way through an entire pack. A thrown pike slammed into his back, but failed to penetrate the mithrail mail. It did knock him forward momentarily, plunging his sword to the hilt through an orc. He was forced to let go of the blade as another orc tried to remove his head while he was off-balance. Wolf Fang intercepted the descending blade and Rory's dagger plunged into the eye and brain of his attacker.

As he spun to face his next attacker, Rory realized an orc was sneaking up behind Prince Brightblade to stab him in the back. Rory pulled his arm back and threw his dagger, sending it into the back of the orc's head to the hilt, the tip of the blade punching through the skull at the nose. Quickly retrieving his dropped sword from the corpse at his feet, Rory sprang to his father's defense. Together they fought and killed every orc they came against.

The battle lasted for close to two hours before the remaining orcs tried to break away and flee. Encountering the barrier erected by the battle mages, they turned to fight, but were slaughtered without quarter. The white snow of the valley was now a sodden mass of red with spilled blood and entrails, severed limbs, and bodies everywhere. Not all of the fallen were orcs; twenty-eight elves had also perished and another forty had wounds of varying severity. The battle mages moved among the wounded, using the Forces of Life to repair their injuries.

Prince Brightblade walked over to where Rory was sitting and sat next to him. "You seemed to have lost this," he said, handing Rory the dagger he had thrown. "I found it in the darndest place; embedded to the hilt in an orc skull. Took some doing to get it free again, too. Thanks. I never even knew the orc was there until he fell dead behind me." Shaking his head, he said, "Of course, throwing away a weapon in the middle of a fight is not the brightest move to make."

"Neither is letting someone kill our prince. That choice was easy," Rory said, tiredly. "What shall we do about all the bodies? I cannot see leaving them for the locals to deal with."

"Burn them. Two pyres. One for them and another for our warriors. We will deal with it tomorrow. Tonight we rest."

Rory lay in the darkness of his small tent, his mind reliving the bloody scenes of the day. He was not plagued by guilt over slaying the orcs, but he was remorseful over the death of so

many warriors. He wondered over and over if there had been any way to reduce the number of deaths. The flap of his tent whispered open and he knew it was Arianna. She nestled into his arms and pressed against him as he held her, both seeking comfort and companionship in this valley of cold and death.

\* \* \*

It had taken all morning to gather the six hundred and seventy-three orc dead into a single pile. It had been a bloody and gruesome task, made worse by the need to find all the detached pieces. The mound of the dead was close to fifteen feet high. The stack of elven warriors was substantially smaller, and gathering their remains had actually been easier since they were all intact. They had all died of a sword or spear thrust.

There was no wood in the valley so the pyres had to be lit and kept burning through the use of magic. Thick black smoke rose into the clear mountain air as the fires burned. The elven warriors and mages remained quietly nearby to ensure the job was done completely.

One of the sentries came up to the prince to report a large group of mounted warriors was approaching. Rory sent his senses questing outward and was relieved to see that it was the Duke of Kendrahl and his men. Winterstar called his warriors to order and, by the time the duke rode up, the elven warriors were aligned in neat rows as if for inspection.

"Hail Armand, Duke of Kendrahl," called out the Prince of the Great Forest.

The mountain air shook with the echoed, "Hail, Kendrahl!" from the elven warriors.

Armand rode directly up to Prince Brightblade. "Hail, Prince Brightblade of the Forest, and hello to you, Lord Rorrick, Heir of Westfell. I thank you for coming to Kendrahl's aid. I passed through a village a few valleys back that spoke of your valor in defeating eight ogres. The bodies in that pyre seem too small to be more of them."

"That is all that remains of six hundred seventy-three orcs that came against us yesterday," Prince Brightblade said.

"Your losses?" asked Duke Armand, nodding toward the smaller pyre.

"Twenty-eight," replied the prince.

The duke gazed out at the remaining ninety-two elven warriors and was awed. They had taken so few losses against such a terrible foe. He turned as Rory spoke.

"Duke Armand, I believe this incursion is over. Neither I nor the battle mages can find any further taint within Kendrahl. Like an evil fog, it has fled before the coming of the sun. We found no trace of whomever was behind this but we will not stop looking. You have our promise to watch over Kendrahl as we do over Westfell and Aluria."

"That is indeed good news, worthy of celebration. Please accept my earlier invitation to call on Kendrahl Keep while my men take over the patrol of Kendrahl lands. Your warriors have gained a place of honor among my people."

"Speaking for myself, Duke Armand, I would regretfully decline," Rory said. "The past few days weigh heavily on me. I brought no fancy clothes fit for your court and have only this

bloody surcoat and mail to wear. With your permission, let me call on you in the summer after we return from Spring Court in Aluria. Let my visit to your keep be in happier times.”

The sorrow and pain in Rory’s eyes was clear to see, and the duke could only nod his acceptance. “Prince Brightblade, the invitation to visit extends to you as well. Come back with Lord Rorrick and let me thank you properly for wiping this scourge from Kendrahl.”

“Your Grace,” Rory spoke once again. “I ask a boon from you. With your permission, I would create a monument here to honor our dead who died for Kendrahl.”

“We would be honored to create such a monument, Rory,” Duke Armand said.

“I’d prefer to do it myself.” Rory walked over to a massive granite boulder that lay right where the thickest part of the battle had been and where most of the elven dead had fallen. Rory concentrated, drawing on the life force from all around and tapping into the ley line that ran through the mountains. He visualized exactly what he wanted and then poured all that energy into his vision. Rory and the boulder were both shrouded in a golden nimbus of light that blazed like a miniature sun for several dazzling moments and then faded. The face of the boulder had now been planed flat and polished to a high luster. Etched into the surface were the words, *On this field, the following elven warriors died defeating an overwhelming force of 673 orcs to preserve the lives of the citizens of Kendrahl.* Below the words were the names of the twenty-eight dead warriors. The entire message was repeated again in the elven language.

As they rode out, Rory found himself riding beside Arianna. “You were right.”

“About what?”

“That I would know the correct name for the new sword when the time came. It shall be known as Dark Foe.”

## Chapter 14

« ^ »

Rory sat back in the steaming pool, soaking away the tension from his shoulders and back. If only the hot water would ease the tension in his mind and soul as well. Since returning from Kendrahl, he had been troubled by the thought that he might have done something that would have saved the twenty-eight who had died. Rationally, he knew he had not been in charge of the expedition, nor had he planned the battle. Yet he felt somehow, he should have used his many gifts to have saved those who perished. That survivor guilt fueled his search for the mysterious source of the incursion. *Who was behind it? Who stood to gain by letting monsters loose in Kendrahl?*

Arianna swam over to where Rory sat brooding. She reached a slender hand down and pinched his thigh. “Stop that! We have been over this time and again. Rory, you are not yet eighteen years old and you have already had the experiences of men three times your age. You

have fought in furious battles to protect innocents and prevailed. You have also learned the hardest lesson of them all: Good people die, too. Sometimes they die for no reason or through a senseless act of violence like your mother did. And others die in a war against evil. The warriors who died were there because, like you, they knew it was where they belonged. We all knew the risks we faced when we set out but we understood the reasons to go were stronger and more important than a fear of death. Elven warriors are all volunteers, Rory, not conscripts like in many human armies. We do this because we know in our hearts it is necessary for good to prevail. Just as you knew the life of that single child was worth giving the ogres advance warning and that it might mean the death of a warrior, we know it is better to give our lives to stop what is wrong than to hide away in safety while evil destroys what is good."

Rory smiled a sad little smile. "I know you are right, Arianna. I feel it in here..." He touched his head. His hand moved to his chest. "But in here, I feel that there must have been more I could have done."

Arianna shook her head. "I don't believe you. More you could have done? Did you know you killed two ogres all by yourself? Of course you do, because you did so calmly with a bow. How many orcs did you kill, Rory? You have no idea because that was in the heat of battle. Well, I know how many you killed because I counted each and every one of them. I was there by your side throughout that battle, following you with my mind because I care very much about you. You killed sixty-eight orcs with your two swords and dagger. You alone killed ten percent of all the orcs slain that day. You saved the lives of many warriors by killing their opponents seconds before the orc would have slain the elf, including your father, our prince. So stop this senseless brooding! It is in the past and nothing you can do now will bring those fallen warriors back. You need to focus on the present and the future."

"I need to find out who was behind it!" Rory said.

"That is for the future, Rory. Right now, you need to make love to me as a reaffirmation of life itself!" Arianna pressed her body to his and his depression melted away.

\* \* \*

King Alaric turned to Prince Brightblade. "You know it is almost time for him to go back to Westfell."

Brightblade nodded. "Yes, I know."

"Will he be ready to go? Can he get past this brooding he has done since Kendrahl?" King Alaric asked. "The duke will be very displeased with his present frame of mind."

"Father, please don't worry about it. Right now, Arianna is working her magic on him, and you know no one can resist her. She can alter anyone's perceptions. I envy my son, you know. I have always harbored a secret passion for her."

Alaric chuckled. "Not so secret. She knows exactly how you feel about her but she told me the time was not yet right for the two of you. She says there will come a time when you will need her as much as Rory does now. When that time comes, she will be at your side forever."

The mages of the Heart kept a careful watch over the realm of Aluria, but there were some areas they could not penetrate. The ley lines that stretched into Eastfell and Solange were somehow blocked off and nothing they did could penetrate beyond. Rory was very suspicious of Eastfell, and these blockages of the naturally flowing energy of life indicated that evil was rampant inside these duchies. Since he could not discern what was going on from the Heart, he knew he would have to find out the old-fashioned way; by going there and seeing with his own eyes.

Arianna had been successful in altering his point of view. The depression was gone, replaced by an eagerness to be outside once again. Spring Court would be his door to the lands of Eastfell and Solange. The training he had been given in the Veil would help him immeasurably outside. He no longer feared ambush or poison; his vigilance over the life force continued even when he slept. Should an assassin get close enough, his mithrail shirt would stop any blade from reaching his skin.

He looked down at the naked woman sleeping in his arms. Arianna had taught him more than simply what went on between a man and a woman. She had given him a sense of self-confidence that would carry him through almost every situation. A few months ago, he'd been terrified of being caught in one of the spa pools; last night, they had joined a crowd at one of the most popular pools. He found himself joking with many other naked women without a care that none of them were clothed. How could Spring Court hold any terror for him now? He hugged her tighter and felt her stir against his side. He would miss Arianna terribly but it was time for him to return outside.

## *Part Three*

### *ALURIA*

#### **Chapter 15**

« ^ »

After Rory dismounted from his horse, he gripped the hand of General Gustav and realized he was looking at the man eye to eye. He was now as tall as the grizzled veteran. "It is good to see you again, General."

"And to see you as well, lad. Duke Armand passed this way a few days ago and told Duke Richard about your adventures in Kendrahl. I have never seen your grandfather so proud and yet so worried in all my life. Go up, now, and give him a hug so he will know you are all right." General Gustav gave Rory a gentle push up the stairs.

Rory bounded up the steps and seized his grandfather in an embrace. *When had the older man become so frail?* "Grandfather, it is wonderful to see you again."

"What have they done to you, boy? If you hadn't been wearing Westfell colors, I wouldn't have recognized you. You're as tall as a tree and as hard as stone!" Spotting the glint at Rory's throat, he whispered, "Is that mithrail? A shirt your size must be worth a fortune!"

"Just a gift from my father before the Kendrahl adventure, Your Grace," Rory said. "Have you been well? You must tell me all the news."

\* \* \*

Duke Richard and Rory went into the keep. Swiftstalker slid from his horse and turned it over to one of the grooms. "Give them some extra oats today. They've earned it." Turning to Gustav, he said, "We rode from the Great Forest in two days. I am getting too old for this kind of thing."

The general laughed. "I agree that riding long distances is for the young. Come with me and let's see whether some ale will take the stiffness from your joints while you tell me all about Kendrahl."

Swiftstalker turned very serious as he said, "I'm not sure you have enough ale for that, but lead on. How's your new bride?"

"Pregnant, of course. I understand I have you to thank for that."

"I never touched the girl, Gustav!"

"Not that, you old fool. I mean that she's my bride." Gustav smiled fondly at the elven warrior. "Duke Richard told me it was your idea that we be wed. I have lit a candle in your honor every night since."

"I never knew you were religious, Gustav."

"Religious, me? Hah! I will leave to your imagination how beautiful Rachel looks by candlelight."

\* \* \*

"You've changed, Rory, and I don't just mean physically," Duke Richard said. "You are much more assured."

Rory looked at the fire. "I have learned much this past winter, Grandfather. Some of what I have seen and done has been at great cost."

"Armand came by on his way to court, so I know about the campaign against the ogres and orcs. Would you like to talk about it?"

Rory's voice was flat and toneless as he said, "There is not much to talk about. We discovered a party of ogres and orcs were raiding in the Kendrahl Mountains and we went to stop them. In order to save a child, I attacked the ogres before the rest of the war party was ready but it didn't matter in the end. We killed them all without losing anyone and saved the remaining villagers. A few days later, we encountered a large party of orcs and fought them for many hours. We killed them all but lost many warriors. We did not discover who was behind



the raids, although we are continuing to search for that information."

Duke Richard knew more than he let on. After Duke Armand had left for court, Richard had another visitor. Prince Brightblade had come in to the library late that same night and had given Richard the details so he would be able to watch Rory for any return of the depression that had haunted him for weeks afterwards. Rory had slain two ogres alone and another working with Swiftstalker. Then he had killed sixty-eight orcs single-handedly in bloody direct conflict. After the battle, he had created a monument to the dead using some kind of magic.

"There's more to your change than just being in a battle, Rory." Duke Richard looked at him. "Who was she?"

A smile touched Rory's lips briefly. "Arianna, one of their greatest mages and the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"I am happy for you, lad. Treasure her memory but do not measure Lady Bethany against the standard your Arianna has set. It would not be fair to Bethany, for how could she compete against the most beautiful woman and a mage?"

"What Arianna and I shared had its place, Grandfather, but that is in the past. Lady Bethany will have her place in my future. Each shall be treasured in their own way."

"Did I see two swords on your back when you rode up?"

"Yes, I have found fighting with two swords to be much more effective than just one, especially against multiple foes." Rory shrugged. "I had not considered it before my uncle used two swords against me in the training arena."

"Your uncle?"

"Lord Swiftstalker is Prince Brightblade's brother. They share the same mother. After our demonstration, none of the other elven warriors would challenge me. Instead, they had been tasked to ambush me at random times and places. It became a game for them until I came close to killing one on the way to see King Alaric about the ogres."

"Were any of their attempts successful?"

Rory shook his head. "No, none were. Grandfather, I have some other abilities that are not visible. I can use the Force of Life that surrounds us to detect threats before they come close. That was how I found the ogres in Kendrahl; I sensed their evil nature. Using the same sense, I can detect poisons in food or drink, and even change it into something harmless so I can partake of the tainted item and confuse those who meant me harm. As Arianna would say, 'Confusion to the enemy.' "

"Now that is what I would call a useful set of talents. It would be best, I think, if you were to keep those a secret from all except those you trust the most."

"I agree. Only you and my uncle know of it outside the Veil," Rory said quietly. "You are both my family and if I cannot trust you, there is no one who can be trusted. I also plan on following the elven tradition of wearing mithrail everywhere outside the Veil. One never knows when they can be betrayed or surprised."

\* \* \*

"I had never seen anything like it, Gustav. He was a fighting machine with swords that moved in a steady blur. Blood and pieces of orc flew everywhere. At one point, he threw his dagger a distance of over one hundred feet to punch through the skull of an orc before it could stab the prince in the back. He then resumed fighting the orcs around him until he moved to stand beside the prince. I was told later that Rory killed sixty-eight orcs by himself, over a tenth of their total losses," Swiftstalker said. "I will never, ever cross blades with him again. He has such control that he pushes me to my own limits and a bit beyond. I fear I would be shamed by drawing his blood by accident."

General Gustav drank the rest of his ale. "I could see it in his eyes. He is a man who has met and defeated death on so many levels that it no longer holds any terror for him. He will be a formidable duke some day."

Swiftstalker drained his goblet. "My friend, you do not know the half of it. I must know whether you have a problem with Rory because of Winter Festival."

"Because he kissed Rachel? Don't be stupid! Any man would have done the same and the callow boy he was then stood no chance in resisting her. She told me all about her plan that night, including her considering taking advantage of him after he'd been hit on the head." Gustav laughed. "She kept nothing back when I started courting her, hoping to make me mad enough to back off. All she did was show me how strong and determined she could be, and that made me know she was the perfect woman for me. Oh, we have our spats now and then, but that just adds spice to the loving after we make up again." He drank deeply from his refilled mug. "I think I owe the lad a debt."

\* \* \*

As Rory soaked in the copper tub, he knew he would miss the spa pools of the Veil the most. "Assistance, please."

A pixie appeared. "How may I be of service, Lord Rorrick?"

"Would you happen to know whether there is a natural spring anywhere near the keep?"

"I believe there is one deep under the keep. May I ask why?"

"I was wondering whether we could build one of the spa pools similar to those in the Veil."

"What a wonderful idea! There is an old chamber deep under the keep that could be used. Would you like us to begin work on this project?" The pixie was excited.

"Yes, but keep it quiet, especially from Lord Swiftstalker. I want it to be a surprise. Try to have it done by the time we return from Spring Court in Aluria."

## Chapter 16

« ^ »

"Uncle, you and I are going to start a new fashion trend today at court," Rory announced the morning after they arrived in Aluria. "I had a long chat with the house pixies who accompanied us."

"Really, and what did you decide we will be wearing?"

"I will not wear those confining hose and tunic combinations any longer. They are uncomfortable. Yet I do not believe the court is quite ready for the hedonistic pleasure of the Veil's silks. What I propose is a compromise between the two. I have asked the pixies to take the design of the silk trousers and make them from something more substantial for the sake of propriety. We shall retain the silk shirts and sash belts."

"I think that is a marvelous idea, nephew. You will never know how much I hated those damn tights." He opened the wardrobe and removed one of the new outfits. After examining the trousers, he said, "This is going to set them all on their rears, Rory! Even the king will want to wear these because they are practical and not constricting."

They quickly changed. The new trousers fit them perfectly and were cinched at the waist with a corded belt. Their silk shirts, trimmed in their house colors and bearing the Westfell motif of the snarling wolf in silver thread, went next and covered the mithrail they each wore next to their skin. A color coordinated silk sash held their daggers, the only acceptable weapons at court. Rory debated using a glamour to conceal his swords but decided to trust his dagger, mithrail, and senses to protect himself and his grandfather. Slipping his feet into his half-boots, he drew his thick black hair into the silver clasp Arianna had given him his final morning inside the Veil.

When Duke Richard walked in to their suite, he stopped. "What are you wearing? And more importantly, where can I get some to fit me?"

Rory laughed. "Somehow I knew you would say that, Grandfather. I had a set made for you as well." He opened the trunk near the wardrobe and removed a set of the new clothes scaled to fit the old duke. Swiftstalker served as valet, helping the duke exchange his hose and doublet for the trousers and silk shirt.

"Ah, this is so comfortable! Why have we never worn these before?" Richard mumbled. "I have seen these silks worn by the Forest Folk and admired them. It just never occurred to me that we could make something similar out of our fabrics." Taking a last glance in the looking glass, he said, "Let's go stun the court."

\* \* \*

"Richard, Duke of Westfell, and Rorrick, his heir. Accompanied by Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest." The crier's voice carried across the room, stilling all conversations. The crowd of courtiers and other guests of the court turned casually to see the new arrivals.

Duke Richard strode down the center of the aisle toward the pair of thrones, with Rory one

step behind on the right and Swiftstalker behind Rory on the duke's left. Richard's stare never left his king as he approached, watching the king's reaction to their new style of dress.

Reaching the dais, Duke Richard went to one knee as did Rory and Swiftstalker. "Westfell asks leave to join the Spring Court if it pleases Your Majesty."

"Your arrival has been the most anticipated event of the court, Duke Westfell," the king said loudly. "Since the Duke of Kendrahl reported the events in which your heir played no small part, the court could speak of nothing else. Now, however, they will have something new to gossip about. What are you wearing?"

Duke Richard rose to his feet and said, "Do you like them? They are so much more comfortable than hose and ever more practical."

The king glanced at Rory. "Can this possibly be your heir? We had thought Duke Kendrahl had exaggerated in his descriptions of the young giant who slew an ogre and fifty orcs by himself. It must be him, for there is his ever-present shadow, Lord Swiftstalker."

Rory rose to his feet, but it was Swiftstalker who spoke. "His Grace, the Duke of Kendrahl, did speak in error, Your Majesty. Lord Rorrick killed two ogres and sixty-eight orcs."

The king's eyes widened momentarily. "The past six months have changed you in many ways, Lord Rorrick. We welcome you to the court. As for your garb, Duke Westfell, we are intrigued. What do you think, my Queen?"

Queen Beatrice smiled at the trio before them. "We are also intrigued by this new fashion. We can see many possibilities from them. Duke Richard, we would suspect these are the product of your heir's time with the Forest Lords."

"You are quite correct, Your Majesty," Duke Richard said as he bent to kiss her hand. "Lord Rorrick became so accustomed to their style of dress that he designed this compromise of our fabrics with their styles."

Queen Beatrice looked up at young Rory. "We wonder why you felt a compromise was necessary, Lord Rorrick."

"The Forest Folk wear garments of the sheerest silk, Your Majesty. Such fabrics can be quite ... revealing as the person wearing them moves. It was my belief that would be a bit too provocative for the court of Aluria."

"Oh, my," said the queen. "And you wore such garments yourself?"

As Rory nodded, the queen and several of the other ladies of the court seemed quite flustered at the image that danced through their minds.

\* \* \*

"My boy, you are a genius. These new garments are the hit of the court," Swiftstalker said. "I spoke with one of the maids and every seamstress in the city is busy making copies for the nobility."

Duke Richard added, "Even the king will be wearing them from now on. The queen liked

them very much and demanded he set the tone for the rest of the court. Seems she is tired of seeing some of these flabby earls and others prance around in tights." He chuckled. "I must agree with her, for the sight of the many of them is enough to put me off food for quite some time."

"So what happens now, Grandfather?"

"There will be a feast tonight with the entire court, of course. Until then, we are left to our own devices. I plan on seeing some old friends. Why don't the two of you take a walk around the town and see what life is like in Aluria? We can meet back here later and get ready for the feast."

Once the duke left, Swiftstalker said, "I suggest we go dressed a little less conspicuously. Perhaps some of the garrison leathers so we will look like common soldiers rather than members of the nobility."

"That's a good idea. We should be able to get a better idea of what life is truly like that way." They dressed as simple soldiers, left the castle, and ventured into the streets of Aluria.

Aluria was a city built in concentric rings. The center of this was the castle, surrounded by a curtain wall and battlements, pierced by only two stout gates made of seasoned oak and banded with forged steel. The sally points through the walls were lined with arrow slits and the tunnel ceiling had numerous slits through which arrows or hot oil could be loosed upon any invading force. The next ring of the city contained the homes of the near nobility, the earls and counts who served as functionaries in the court but did not rank high enough to warrant chambers inside the castle itself. Here, too, lived many of the more prosperous members of the merchant class, hoping that proximity to the near nobility might result in a marriage and a change in status. The wall between these homes and the third ring was not quite as high as the one surrounding the castle, but it was no less thick. Boasting four gates with heavy oak barriers that could be lowered in times of crisis to seal off the second ring from the third. The streets within the second ring were paved with cobblestones and had wide gutters to drain away water and other refuse. These streets were washed clean every night by workers.

The third ring housed the markets and shops that supplied everyone with food and other necessities. It was here that seamstresses, tailors, butchers, and merchants of every type plied their trades. The area was patrolled by members of the King's Own to keep peace and protect the citizens and merchants from any who would prey upon them. The fourth and final ring was for the peasants and serfs, the day laborers and the indigent. Their housing was mean and miserable; the streets packed dirt when dry and rivers of mud when it rained. Livestock roamed at will amid the squalor; pigs rooted in the garbage while chickens scurried around searching for grain. Dirty children played in the streets, dodging horses and wagons, mangy dogs, and each other.

Rory and Swiftstalker had little trouble leaving the castle itself; the King's Own presumed that such a pair of scruffy soldiers must have been there on invited business, perhaps with one of the dukes. As they passed through the gate to the second ring, they picked up a pair of King's Own who followed them as they made their way through the ring to the next gate.

"Why do I suspect that our disguises are too good? We may have trouble getting back into the castle later," Rory said.

"Aye, lad, getting through these gates will be harder than I thought. Aluria seems a might more class conscious than ever. We'll just have to come back the elven way rather than the human."

"Elven way?"

"We can try passing the gates using a glamour to make us appear more what they would be expecting or we can just go over the wall and not bother the fine soldiers at the gate."

Rory glanced up at the wall but did not see any guards patrolling its heights. Perhaps the wall might be easier at that, and certainly more fun. Putting such thoughts aside until later, Rory began to explore the markets of Aluria. They stopped first at a food stall for some fresh baked bread and a slab of meat of indeterminate nature. The proprietor insisted it was beef, but Swiftstalker countered with a comparison to horse. The two bickered good-naturedly while Rory looked around. A tankard of strong ale washed down the meat and bread.

There were stalls selling a variety of goods. Boots, weapons (of inferior quality according to Swiftstalker's professional opinion), and clothing. One enterprising vendor even had the new "Westfell Trousers" for sale. There were jewelers, too, with their stalls guarded by hired men. Around the outside of the market square were the more established merchants, their wares for sale inside buildings. From furniture to fine wines, it appeared everything could be found in this market.

"This market caters to the nobility and near-nobility of the second ring, Rory, so their goods and prices are higher than what we will find farther out. You will note there are no stables here, nor any smithies. No foul smells or loud noise to disturb the gentlefolk. We will find the more lively activities elsewhere."

They eased their way through the bustling square. The patrol of King's Own looked them over as they passed but decided they meant no trouble and let them by. The streets from the market were narrower in this quarter, although still paved with stone. Here the gutter ran through the center of the street, but it was clogged with every manner of waste and debris. As they approached the outer markets, the sounds of music and laughter came through many doors on either side of the roadway. Rory glanced toward one window and thought he saw a flash of naked skin. He looked at his uncle with a raised eyebrow, and Swiftstalker said, "Bawdy house. That's a place men can go for bad liquor, worse food, and even cheaper female companionship all at a price few can really afford but most will pay willingly."

The sounds of a blacksmith's hammer striking steel met their ears as they entered the outer market. Here were located the stables and stockyards, the purveyors of things to the lowest classes. Anything and everything was for sale here, if one knew the right person to ask. The King's Own only appeared in this part of town if they were called, and even then it was a rare occurrence when they actually showed up. Thieves, pickpockets, and prostitutes mingled with the crowd freely. Most pickpockets took one look at Rory's size and the two sword hilts above his wide shoulders and the dagger in his belt and decided there were easier marks to fleece. The prostitutes, on the other hand, took one look and swarmed after him like bees after nectar.

As one rubbed her hand suggestively across the front of Rory's breeches, Swiftstalker said, "You don't want to mess with him, dearie. He likes it rough and nasty."

"Anything is fine as long as the price is right," she replied.

"He's got a real bad habit of not paying afterwards, and some of the girls have not been in a position to complain once he's through with him. Best if you moved along."

She moved off and had a whispered conversation with the others, mingled with fearful looks over their shoulders at Rory.

"Just what did you say to her?" Rory asked.

"I simply suggested that she would be better off with a different customer, lad. I hinted that you liked it rough and no girl wants to risk being hurt or worse by one of her clients. So what can you tell me about this town from what we have seen?"

"For those with wealth and position, Aluria is a nice place. For those without, it is miserable. Unlike Westfell, there is a clear division between the classes here."

"Think on this, then. If it is this bad here at the King's Court, what must it be like in less enlightened places like Eastfell and Solange?"

"How could it be worse than this, Uncle?"

"You haven't seen slavery yet, Rory. In Solange, they sell people like animals to work in the fields, mines, and worse. That is truly a dark stain on humanity's soul."

"And the king permits this?"

"The king cannot stop it. To do so would mean tearing Solange apart and rebuilding it again. If he tried, there would be open war in Aluria once more."

\* \* \*

They had little trouble retracing their steps toward the inner markets. The bawdy houses were full and rowdy. As they passed the door of one, a man was thrown through the door and into the street, just missing Swiftstalker. He was followed by a gang of toughs. Seeing the pair, they warned Rory and Swiftstalker to mind their own business. They advanced on the man in the street with drawn knives. There was the whisper of steel as Rory drew his swords and moved between the gang and the downed man.

"Leave him be," Rory warned in a quiet voice. "I'd rather not kill any of you over this man, but I will not stand by and watch you harm him, either."

"Stay out of this if you know what's good for you." One of the men spat in the street. Another looked up at Rory's broad shoulders and drawn swords and said, "Let it go, Rolf. He looks like he knows what to do with those two pig stickers of his."

"Naw, don't let his size fool ya. He's so big, he'll be clumsy." As he turned to face Rory once more, he suddenly found that Rory was no longer eight feet away; Rory was now standing right in front of him, and his swords were crossed under Rolf's neck like a giant pair of scissors.

"Are you willing to risk your life on that, friend?" Rory asked. "Perhaps you could explain why you wish this man harm. If I like your reason, I will stand aside. If I don't ... well, you'll be bleeding on the ground next to him."

"He was cheating at cards. He was! And we caught him."

"Still not enough to warrant killing, although a good beating would suffice," Swiftstalker said. "We'll just stand here and watch you administer that and then you can return inside. If you want more, then some or all of you will die."

The gang of men milled around, talking a few minutes, then most drifted back through the door to the bawdy house. Rolf walked over, gave the man a few kicks in the ribs, and then ground his booted heel down on the man's hands and fingers, breaking the bones audibly. Giving him a final kick, Rolf went back into the house.

"This kind of thing happen around here often?" Rory asked as he dragged the moaning man out of the center of the street and propped him against the side of a building out of the way.

"Often enough. Odds are they were all cheating at cards, but this fellow was just too clumsy or careless. There are always predators, Rory, just as there are always those who are prey," Swiftstalker said as they walked away.

Rory glanced back and watched as a dark furtive figure slipped silently out of another doorway and began methodically stripping the beaten man of everything he had, even the rags around his body. He shuddered. "Why would anyone live this way?"

"Most feel they have no other choice. When towns get too large, the lines between being comfortable and those on the ragged edge of starvation are deep and wide. To a person not knowing when they will eat next, dreams are the first things to die. They can no more conceive of leaving this life for another than you could imagine spending your days as they do."

\* \* \*

As they crossed back into the innermost market, the head of the King's Own patrol stopped them. "You two, stand where you are." Rory and Swiftstalker were quickly surrounded by the soldiers.

"Can we help you, Captain?" asked Swiftstalker.

"You can start by identifying yourself and stating your business."

Rory spoke up. "I am Lord Rorrick, Heir of Westfell, and this is Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest. Our business is our own concern."

The captain looked at Rory, a small measure of doubt in his eyes. One of the patrol spoke out.

"Your pardon, Cap'n, but I was on duty in the main hall this morning when the Duke of Westfell arrived. I got a good look at the heir and I believe this is him."

The captain's glance caught sight of the dagger in Rory's belt. The snarling wolf head on the pommel announced clearly the identity of its bearer for no one else would wear Westfell's totem without risking life and limb.

The captain straightened and said, "I beg your forgiveness, Lord Rorrick. Your attire belies your station. Are you returning to the castle now? If so, perhaps you will allow us to make amends by escorting you through the gates to avoid any further ... confusion."



Swiftstalker sighed as they followed the captain and his men. There would be other chances to test the walls. As they approached the gate into the second ring, the captain hurried ahead to converse with those on duty at the gate. Before they could start to pass, however, several mounted men raced up to the gate.

"Make way for the Duke of Eastfell," one shouted and he struck out with a lash at Rory.

Rory knew the lash would miss, so he didn't move. This infuriated the man and he raised the lash once more. "I said, make way."

"Swing that lash again, and your head will be laying in the street," Swiftstalker said. "That's the Heir of Westfell and if he doesn't kill you, I will."

By this time, the Duke of Eastfell himself had ridden past so the man just dropped his hand back to his reins and spurred after his master. The captain hurried over. "Lord Rorrick, are you injured?"

"No, Captain, just disgusted. May we proceed now?" Rory asked.

## Chapter 17

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Rory, resplendent in his Westfell trousers and silk shirt of forest green and silver filigree, stood at one side of the grand ballroom and compared the hall to the one back in Westfell. It was much larger, of course, with finer fabrics draping it in the scarlet and gold of Aluria. There were more tables since all of the nobility and near nobility would be present tonight, as would those wealthy merchants in favor with the crown.

Swiftstalker came over and said, "Did you know your grandfather will be sitting at the head table? He'll be next to Duke Armand. You and I will be seated at one of the lower tables."

"That's fine by me. Sitting up in front of everyone makes me uncomfortable. I never know what to say and I'm afraid of making a fool out of myself when I eat."

"You won't know the others at our table, either, except for one, I think." Swiftstalker had a smug smile on his face.

"Oh, and who would that be?"

"Your intended, the Lady Bethany."

Rory suddenly went very still. He knew he would see Bethany here at Aluria, and that as some point, the king would announce their engagement. He still did not know how he would feel when he saw her; his time with Arianna was still fresh in his memory. He also remembered his words to his grandfather. Arianna belonged to his past, and Bethany would be his future. Who knew his future would be upon him so quickly?

Then he saw her. Her copper hair was swept up and around on the top of her head, exposing her long elegant neck. Her dress was of sky blue embellished with gold lace, gathered

below her bust and then falling cleanly to the floor. The neckline was still as daring as he remembered and her skin was still creamy. She had done something to enhance her eyes ... somehow making those sea-green pools more vibrant than he recalled. She wore a necklace of plain gold around her neck and small gold combs in her hair. Her face flushed a little when she realized he was staring at her.

"My Lady Bethany, it is a pleasure to see you once again. You look wonderful." Rory took her hand and kissed its back.

"My Lord Rorrick, I would not have known you. You have grown so tall and strong!" Bethany said. "I have heard some fantastic tales about you."

"Do not believe all you hear, my lady. We did merely what needed to be done," Rory said as he led her to her chair between his and Swiftstalker's.

Moments later, the herald announced the arrival of the king and queen, and the crowd hushed and bowed as they passed into the room, followed by the dukes of the realm in order of seniority. First Westfall and Kendrahl, followed by Solange and Eastfell. Surreptitiously, Rory studied the Duke of Eastfell and did not like what he saw.

Although the Duke of Eastfell was only a few months younger than Rory, he had assumed his majority upon the sudden death of his regent, his mother, of an unfortunate piece of bad pork just as winter had set in. No one believed that, of course, but by the time news had reached the court, Eastfell had been ruling alone for several months. The king decided to leave bad enough alone and had confirmed the young duke upon his arrival at court. Named Rikard after some previous Duke of Eastfell, he was of average height. The bulge at his waist gave mute evidence to his slothful and indulgent habits, as did the stains upon his black and grey doublet. His hair was a dirty blonde and worn loose about his shoulders. A sparse beard sprouted from his cheeks and chin. His eyes were narrow and suspicious as they met Rory's across the banquet room. They were also as cold and as empty as the eyes of the dead.

Rory had spent the evening telling Bethany of life among the Forest Folk. She was enchanted by the idea of living inside a huge tree in a place where it was always summer, even in the dead of winter. He told her about the pixies and how they would bring a person food or drink whenever they wanted some. She was scandalized by the bathing pools, but he could see she was also intrigued by such a concept. He told her about the friendly competition he had with the warriors and she laughed as he told her about some of their failed attempts to ambush him. And while he told her of the mages and the Heart, he did not tell her of Arianna other than she was one of those who taught him.

\* \* \*

As the feast started to draw to a close, King William glanced at the queen with a raised eyebrow. She understood his implied question and gave him a smile and a nod. The king stood and tapped his goblet with his dagger. The assembled court hushed.

"It is with great pleasure that we announce the betrothal of the Lady Bethany, daughter of the Earl of Sudcliffe, our chancellor, to Lord Rorrick, Heir of Westfell. Their wedding will be held at Westfell Keep in six months. Join me in a toast to the happy couple."

The court rose to their feet and raised their glasses toward Bethany and Rory. As they all shouted, "Hear, hear!" and drank in salute, Rory noticed that one glass was not raised. Rikard of Eastfell had instead poured his wine on the floor. The Duke of Solange whispered something to Rikard, but the young duke just glared at Rory with a look of cold, implacable hatred. As Rory raised his own goblet in acknowledgement of the toast, he noticed the faint presence of a powerful poison. He quickly used the Forces of Life to convert it to something safe, then said, "To King William and Queen Beatrice!" A small smile of amusement played across his lips as he watched Rikard of Eastfell fumble with his empty goblet during the toast to the royal family.

The next few hours were spent accepting the congratulations of all who were in attendance. The court all knew that Queen Beatrice treated Lady Bethany as if she were the daughter the queen never had. Only with the queen's consent could a match be made. They had all heard the stories of the Heir of Westfell and his bravery in battle against the fell creatures that had swarmed in Kendrahl. Even if the tales were exaggerated, there was enough truth to make the heir braver than anyone they knew.

At last the couple had a chance to make their way to the dais to speak with the king and queen. Rory suppressed a smile as he noted the king's Westfell trousers in scarlet with gold trim. "Your Majesties, thank you for all this."

"It is our pleasure, Lord Rorrick. Bethany is like our daughter and her happiness is important to us. Now, before anyone else corners you, I want you to slip out of here using the door behind this curtain. I'm sure you have some catching up to do."

Rory and Bethany bowed to the king and queen, and then slipped behind the curtain and out the hidden door. One of the King's Own, standing outside the door, pointed to the right and the pair slipped down the corridor. They soon found themselves alone on top of one of the interior walls in a stretch that held no guards because of its height and placement. Although the wall was part of the castle, it still was above the town and gave them an unimpeded view of the stars and the moon.

"Remember the last time we were together like this?" Bethany asked quietly. "I have relived that memory every night since then."

Rory pulled her close and used one hand to tilt her head back so he could look into her eyes. The moonlight seemed to pool in their sea-green depths and he bent his head to taste her lips once more. The kiss was slow and teasing, the lightest pressure of his lips against hers. She moaned in her throat and brought her lips into greater contact with his, then her tongue slipped between his lips.

When he lifted his head, she whispered, "If you had kissed me like that last time, we would have had even more memories. Kiss me again."

After several increasingly passionate kisses, they broke apart to regain their composure. Bethany said, "I should warn you that the Duke of Eastfell has been pursuing me relentlessly. I had to remove myself from the court for several weeks until he returned to Eastfell in order to avoid his ardent overtures."

"That would explain several things," Rory said. "I looked for you a few times when I traveled the ley lines in spirit but could never find you here in the court. Since I do not know where your family estate lies, I couldn't look for you there."

"You said it explained several things."

Rory was silent for a moment. "During the betrothal toast, the Duke of Eastfell poured his wine on the floor rather than toast our happiness."

"I fear I have made an enemy of him for you," Bethany said.

"My dear, don't worry about that. After fighting an ogre and scores of orcs, that little man holds no terror for me. Should he ever try anything with me, he will rue it."

"Don't underestimate his evil, Rory. He's not the kind who will come after you openly. He's more likely to hire another to stab you in the back," Bethany said urgently.

"That has been tried before by the best elven warriors, Bethany, and none came close. And even if one slipped past my guard, it would not harm me." Rory pulled open his silk shirt to reveal the mithrail beneath.

Bethany reached a delicate hand and stroked the silver mail. "It's so beautiful. I wondered why you felt so hard when we were kissing. I thought it was just muscle." She slipped her hand inside the shirt along his ribs. "Do you *always* wear this shirt?"

"I will not wear it on our wedding night, Bethany, nor any other we share in the future," Rory said, understanding her meaning.

She pulled him closer for an even deeper kiss and guided his hand to her breast.

\* \* \*

After escorting Bethany back to her room, Rory walked down the empty corridors back toward the rooms assigned to Westfell. His mind was filled with the memory of her lips and the silky feel of her breasts. He now knew his time with Arianna was truly in the past; he was beginning to yearn for the next six months to pass quickly.

Perhaps the fact he was in the castle accounted for his failure to extend his senses. *Who expected to be attacked inside a building patrolled by the King's Own?* His first inkling of danger was when the knife slammed into his back and bent against the mithrail. Rory reached back, grabbed the wrist that held the knife, and flipped the man over his head. As the man slammed down onto the floor, Rory placed his foot on the man's throat and the tip of his dagger against the man's left eye. "You just ruined a good shirt. Why don't you tell me why you would do such a thing?"

\* \* \*

Rory dragged his assailant into the King's Own guard room by one leg. Before the stunned captain could react, Rory said, "This man attacked me in the hallway while I was on my way to my rooms." He threw the bent knife to the captain, who dropped it as if it were hot. "He failed to consider I might be wearing mail under my shirt."

"My lord, I don't know what to say!"

"I would suggest you think of something since I am sure King William will want to know

how someone like this could get into his castle in the first place. Either your security is lacking or he had help. The Duke of Westfell will be curious to learn who was behind the attack, as am I."

"My lord, I will get you the answers you seek."

"You'd better, Captain," Rory replied coldly.

\* \* \*

"I let you out of my sight for one evening in a castle filled with the best soldiers in the realm, and you *still* manage to find trouble," Swiftstalker grumbled. "I hope you don't mind company, lad, because wherever you go from now on, I will be there watching over you."

"Now, Uncle, that will not be necessary," Rory said, trying to placate the elven warrior. "You trained me well, and now I will be more alert. No one will get close enough to try this again."

"Of that you can be sure, lad."

Duke Richard said, "But who could be behind the attack? That is what concerns me the most."

"I have no doubt who was behind this, Grandfather. This was the opening move by the Duke of Eastfell."

"Eastfell? What does Eastfell have to do with this?"

"He wanted Bethany for himself, but she would have nothing to do with him. Even our pending betrothal did not lessen his desire for her."

"I saw his actions at the toast, Your Grace. He was very blatant in his disrespect," Swiftstalker said. "I would not be surprised if we find Rory is right about who was behind this attempt on his life. With Rory dead, the king would have to consider Eastfell as a possible match for Bethany."

"We shall all have to be on our guard now," Duke Richard said. "I think there is more to this than just a boy's anger of what he cannot have. There has been no news out of Eastfell for many months, and what little we have heard has not been good. Strange things have been happening in that duchy, and none of them are good for the realm."

## Chapter 18

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King William turned to the captain of the guard and said, "Exactly what happened, Captain? How did a prisoner under your care die before he could be made to tell us what we needed to know?"

"Sire, we had placed the prisoner in a dungeon cell for the night. When we went to collect him for interrogation, we found his throat had been slit. I regret to say that one of the guards on duty last night was also one of those covering one of the doors to the castle earlier in the evening. It would appear the guard let the assassin in and then killed him to prevent being identified," the captain replied.

"Where is this guard now?" King William asked, angrier than most people had seen him in decades. "Where is this motherless bastard who sold his soul to betray his king?"

"He's dead, sire." The captain looked even more uncomfortable now. "We found him at the base of one of the curtain walls this morning. He, too, had been murdered with a knife in the back and then thrown from the wall."

"We should be pleased that the betrayer was then betrayed, but we are not. His death prevents us from discovering who was behind the attack." Looking over at Duke Richard, he said, "We know what you suspect, Duke Richard, but we cannot act on suspicion alone."

The king turned back to the captain. "Every man who was on duty last night is hereby relieved of all duties within the castle, including yourself. You will all report to the border keep nearest Solange and begin patrolling that area. We are gravely disappointed in you, Captain."

The captain went to one knee in submission to the king's will. "It will be done, sire." He rose and backed from the room.

"This attempt on your heir, whatever its motivation, has impugned the honor of this court. For one of our guests to be attacked within our castle will make all wonder whether anyone is safe within these walls. There are those who will say that the involvement of that feckless fool of a guard must mean that the attack had our countenance." King William fumed. "You must know we were not involved in this, Duke Richard."

"Of that I have no doubt, sire, and neither does my grandson. He knows how much love you bear Lady Bethany and that you would permit nothing which would make her unhappy."

The king sat down on his throne. "They do make a fine couple, don't they? Underneath that beautiful exterior is a fine mind, Richard, educated far beyond what is common for our women. She will be an asset for Westfell."

\* \* \*

Rory stared into the fireplace as he said, "So the assassin has been killed before he could speak. I'm not surprised, nor is the death of the suborned guard unexpected. Leaving such loose ends that could incriminate those above would be stupid, and I doubt Eastfell is stupid."

"Impulsive, perhaps, but not stupid," Swiftstalker said. "A much wiser course would have been to let you wed and *then* kill you. That way, Bethany would also bring Westfell as a marriage dower to whomever the crown selected as her second husband."

"So you think I will be safe from further attacks for a while?"

Swiftstalker said, "We can assume nothing. The only safe approach is to believe that any one of us could be attacked at any moment, and act accordingly. We still may not carry our

swords within the castle, except for when we are leaving or returning to it from outside the walls. We will continue to wear mail and bear our daggers, as is our right, and General Gustav has arranged a contingent of the duke's household guards to stand at the entrance to these rooms."

At that moment, one of those guards entered the room. "Your pardon, Your Grace," he said to Duke Richard, "but there is a royal page outside to see Lord Rorrick."

"Send him in," said Duke Richard.

The page, a lad of no more than twelve, entered the room and bowed to the duke. "I bear a summons for Lord Rorrick to call upon Queen Beatrice in her receiving room at once, Your Grace."

"You'd best be off, then, Rory. Take Swiftstalker with you or he will just follow you anyway," Duke Richard said.

Swiftstalker smiled in acknowledgement of the accuracy of the duke's comment as they followed the page from the room.

\* \* \*

Rory went to one knee before the queen. "You asked to see me, Your Majesty?"

"Lord Rorrick, we have just heard about the attack upon you last night. We had to be sure you were unharmed."

"I am well, Your Majesty."

A door opened behind him and his senses identified Bethany by her scent as she rushed to his side. Throwing her arms around Rory's neck, she buried her face in his chest and sobbed, "I told you to be careful. I told you he would try to have you killed."

Patting her on the back in an effort to still her tears, Rory said, "There, there now. I'm not hurt. There's no need to make such a fuss in front of the queen, Bethany. I was in no danger."

She stepped back. "No danger! It must be untrue then that his knife bent as it struck your back, bouncing off that wonderful mail shirt you wear. Had you not been wearing it, the knife would have plunged through your heart!"

"But I was wearing it, Bethany, and I will always be wearing it. I promised you that I would, remember?" Rory took her hands. "Now calm yourself and apologize to the queen for this outburst."

It was then that Rory realized the queen had left the room, leaving the two of them alone. He drew Bethany into his arms. "It was partially your fault, you know."

"How was it my fault?" Bethany demanded.

"If I hadn't been thinking about your charms and your kisses, he would not have caught me so unaware."

Bethany blushed as she, too, recalled their passionate embraces of the previous evening.

"Perhaps I should not kiss you or permit any more such liberties with my person if they make you so befogged, my lord."

"Nay, my lady, deny me not the pleasures of your lips and embrace else I become surly as an ogre and no longer fit company for this court."

"Oh, fie on your sweet words!" Bethany settled into his arms. "I would not deny myself the sweet feelings I get from your lips and hands. Kiss me once so I know you are truly well."

He kissed her as slowly and as deeply as he could, wishing they were truly alone enough for him to loosen her bodice and tease her passions once more. Her sigh as they parted gave evidence to her own secret wishes.

Someone was evidently watching them for no sooner had they broken away from their embrace than the queen returned to the room. "We are pleased you two have found one another so ... acceptable. It is rare that arranged marriages among noble houses begin so well. Usually, it becomes tolerable over time."

Bethany's eyes sparkled as she teased her queen. "Who do you think to fool, Your Majesty? The whole realm knows how much the king loves you and how much you love him in return. I spent too many hours outside your chamber door when the king came to visit you in the afternoons to think your marriage is merely tolerable!"

The queen laughed. "Bethany, child, you are the only person in the world aside from the king who can speak to me in such a manner. You are indeed the daughter of my spirit and my heart." Turning to Rory, she said, "Lord Rorrick, why don't you take Lady Bethany for a walk outside to enjoy the beautiful weather? The royal gardens are in full bloom."

The engaged couple bowed to their queen and withdrew from the chamber. As the door closed behind them, Bethany said, "Would you really like to see the gardens, Rory, or would you rather go for a ride? Perhaps I could inveigle a picnic lunch from the cooks and we could eat beside one of the lakes nearby."

Rory said, "As intrigued as I am by the beauty of the royal gardens, I think a nice ride would be just the thing. I have neglected my horse since we arrived at the castle. Shall we meet in an hour?"

Bethany nodded happily and went off to arrange the lunch while Swiftstalker set off to arrange a suitable guard and get the stable boys to saddle the horses. Rory went to his rooms and debated about whether to wear his swords. While he did not think them needed for a lunch with his betrothed, it was better to have them and not need them than to need them and not have them.

At the appointed hour, Rory escorted Bethany down the castle stairs to her mare. After helping her onto the horse, he quickly mounted Storm and came up beside her. One of the castle kitchen staff handed a basket of food up to Lady Bethany while another passed an even larger basket to the contingent of twelve Westfell guards who would be accompanying them on their ride.

Bethany eyed the group of guards ruefully. "So much for a romantic picnic lunch for two."

The pace the group made through the rings of the city could best be described as leisurely.



Many of the townspeople stopped to stare as they went by for most knew Lady Bethany and had heard of Lord Rorrick. Seeing the tall young lord with his twin swords astride the equally large warhorse was like seeing a legend pass by. Half the guards moved to the front as they rode through the outer ring with its mean dirt streets, clearing a path for the noble pair to travel. Under Rory's orders, there were no threats or whips used to clear the way; a firm tone and a well maneuvered horse were enough to permit unimpeded passage.

Soon, they were riding through the open countryside of Aluria, a land of gentle rolling hills and wide areas of cropland. Here and there, small groves of trees dotted the land—some in fruit and others bearing nuts. In the distance, great stands of trees stood as the remnant of another Great Forest that once claimed Aluria. The sky, a bright blue dotted with small fluffy white clouds, was clear and a gentle breeze kept the day from being too warm. At a signal from Swiftstalker, the forward contingent moved farther in front while the rear guards dropped farther back, leaving the heir and his lady some privacy while they rode.

"It is so wonderful to be outside the castle on a day such as this!" Bethany said.

"Do you like the outdoors then, my lady? I would have thought you more sheltered than that," Rory said.

"My father's estate is much like this area, and I would ride every day when I lived there. When I was young, I would climb the apple trees to get the fruit at the top where the harvesters could not reach for fear of breaking the light branches. I'm afraid I'm not a refined court lady, Rory, but a country girl at heart."

"That is even better, for in Westfell, we all work together to bring in the harvest or put up a new building. Men and women alike share in the labor and that is as it should be since we will all share in its bounty. You will find few class distinctions in Westfell."

"Rory, do you think you will ever take me to the Veil?" Bethany asked shyly.

"Would you truly like to go there? The rules are much different inside the Veil, Bethany, and some of their customs may shock you."

"I do not shock easily, Rory, and I would like to understand that side of you as well as the Westfell portion. Plus, I would love to spend the night high in a tree, listening as the breeze sighs through the leaves while I lay safe in your arms."

"Then I shall take you there after we are married. I would enjoy spending the worst part of winter back in the summer of the Veil." Rory hoped he would be permitted to keep this promise. He had no assurances that Bethany would be permitted to pass through the Veil.

\* \* \*

They chose to make their picnic alongside a rushing creek that flowed through a wild patch of woods between some hills. Nestled out of sight of the road, there was a small bit of ground beside the creek carpeted with thick grass. In many ways, this spot reminded Rory of the area near Abigail's home in the Great Forest. The Westfell guards scouted through the surrounding woods even though Rory assured them no others were present. The guards picketed themselves around the area, far enough away to give the lord and lady their privacy, yet close enough to respond if there was need. Swiftstalker also withdrew to the limbs of the trees,

moving silently from tree to tree as he watched for any threat to the heir.

Rory spread out a blanket for them to use as their picnic area, and they lounged upon it while they fed each other slivers of roasted chicken, bread still warm from the ovens (kept that way by Swiftstalker's careful use of elven magic), as well as slices of fruit and nuts. Rory had scanned the food carefully as they had set it out between them. As they ate, Rory said, "I don't know the custom, but I would like to give you a betrothal gift, Bethany." He reached into his saddlebag and retrieved a small package.

He had worked hard on this gift, using the power of the life force to craft a small pendant for Bethany. It was the Westfell Wolf, made from a small portion of mithrail silver he had trimmed from his mail and manipulated to reveal a sitting wolf, ears erect, and large bushy tail wrapped around its feet. The magic had reproduced the wolf in lifelike detail, rendering the silver so cunningly the wolf's fur looked as if it should be soft. Small chips of emerald glittered for its eyes. It was suspended from a fine chain of mithrail of just the right length to allow the pendant to nestle between the upper slopes of her breasts.

"Rory, this is beautiful! Wherever did you find such a magnificent pendant?" Bethany asked as she studied the pendant in her hand.

"I made it for you, as a token of my love."

He slipped the chain over her head and she lifted her hair out from under it, settling the chain around her neck and the pendant in its proper place. Glancing down, she said, "I was worried that it might be cold, but it is not! It feels warm, almost as if it were alive."

"It carries a part of the life force within it, bonded by my love and the magic of the Heart of the Veil." Rory admired the way it laid so casually against her skin. "I feel as though I am always touching you now."

As she pulled Rory down beside her on the cover, Bethany said, "I have no such gift for you, my lord, except my love and the passion I feel inside." She pulled him lower until their lips met and those passions ignited.

\* \* \*

Much later, as the sun was beginning to set, the two reluctantly stopped their kissing and fondling. "Why couldn't it be as simple for us as it is for the peasants?" Bethany whispered huskily. "On my father's estates, a couple wishing to marry simply makes their love known to the community. If their families agree, they are then considered wed and set up their own household if they can afford it, or move in with one of the families until they can. There are no long waits between betrothal and the wedding because peasants know such a delay is cruel and unnatural."

"You know why we must wait. The king wants me to come of age before we wed."

"Come of age? You are more a man now than the Duke of Eastfell ever will be, and the king has confirmed him in his title without another regency. Oh, Rory, I don't want to wait another six months." She laid her head on his chest.

"I know, Beth, and I feel the same." Rory stroked her hair. "But the king's will is

paramount and must be obeyed.”

## Chapter 19

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The next two weeks followed a pattern. Swiftstalker had arranged for Rory to practice with his swords in the training arena used by the King’s Own. Many of the off-duty members of that elite force would come and watch as the heir of Westfell and the Forest Lord turned weapons master would spar in the arena. Whether it was with a single sword, a sword and a knife, or two swords, the pair could move at speeds the guards could only dream of achieving. The culmination of their sparring would occur when they would battle one another with two swords, blindfolded, to simulate fighting in the dark. Even then, their swords were blurs as they fought from one side of the arena to the other; their control so complete that neither ever drew blood from the other. Word of their training spread, and various nobles just happened to be touring the arena when the heir and the Forest Lord took to the floor. Finally, the king himself came and watched in awe as the four swords weaved their deadly ballet, the noise of their clashing almost a continuous ringing.

After bathing away the sweat of their exertions, Rory and Swiftstalker would walk about the town. It had never been necessary for them to scale the walls after all; the guards knew them on sight now. Several jewelers had importuned Rory to explain his technique at crafting Bethany’s pendant as the various ladies of the noble and near noble houses clamored for similar jewelry. Rory would just smile and say it was magic, and the jewelers would grumble, never realizing he was telling them the truth.

The evenings were spent either in court events or dining privately with the duke or even the king and queen. It was at one of these private meals that Rory finally met Earl Sudcliffe, Bethany’s father.

The earl was a man of wealth and had become the chancellor upon King William’s ascension to the throne of Aluria. A boyhood friend of the king, he had been the monarch’s constant companion and advisor as they grew up in the newly forged kingdom. He had married the only child of a wealthy merchant out of love rather than a desire for her money. When she died giving birth to Bethany, he had devoted his life to serving his king and raising his daughter to be everything he and his wife had dreamed she would become, educating her far beyond the norm for a woman in Aluria so she would become a formidable power in some great house one day.

Rory had taken an immediate liking to the earl. Although the earl was in his late forties, he was fit and healthy. Rory soon found his future father-in-law was of the same mold as Duke Richard, beloved by those who worked his estates because he was both fair and willing to work alongside them to accomplish the things that needed to be done. His estates, while on land that truly belonged to the king, always prospered and the king was more than happy with his portion of that wealth which found its way into the royal coffers.

“Lord Rorrick, you must promise that you will always look after my daughter. I am afraid I

have spoiled her completely, you see. I could deny her little, whether it was a new book or a new dress." Earl Sudcliffe looked at his daughter fondly. "She is a voracious reader, you know."

"I did not know that about her, sir. I, too, have a love of good books. My mother, Abigail of Westfell, taught me the love of learning and the joy to be found on the pages of a book. This then is another point we have in common."

"You have close ties among the Forest Lords, it is said," Earl Sudcliffe probed.

Rory smiled. "You could call them close. The Prince of the Forest is my father and I recently spent the winter living with the Forest Lords behind their Veil in the Great Forest. I also fought with them in defense of Kendrahl. I am proud to be one of them."

The earl nodded. "Good. The Forest Lords have always held a fascination for Bethany and now she will learn about them firsthand. I have heard the tales of the ways inside the Veil and I am afraid my daughter will take to them quite readily. She is no cloistered and vaporish female; there were many times when she was young that she would be found swimming in the lake on the estate, naked as the day she was born, much to the outrage of her governess. I sent her to court to learn how a lady is supposed to behave but I worry that the veneer is thin in places."

Bethany pretended outrage at this revelation of her childhood crimes but the love she felt for her father was plain for all to see. Her playful swat on her father's arm was more a gesture of affection than remonstrance.

"I do have one concern, and that is the animosity between you and Duke Rikard of Eastfell. While I have no doubt about your ability to defend yourself, it is the innocents who all too often suffer when the great houses quarrel. I would spare my daughter such conflict."

"This quarrel is not of my choosing, sir. All the Duke of Eastfell need do is accept that Bethany loves me and that we will be wed. I am willing to let go of my own hatred for his family."

"Surely you do not think he was behind the attack on you?"

"It was not that of which I spoke, sir. His father, the last Duke of Eastfell, raped my mother in the dungeons of this very castle and then had her murdered last year. Reparations for those acts may have been collected by my father, but I still recall all too clearly burying her burned body with my own hands. Some wounds are deeper than forgiveness can ever hope to heal."

Earl Sudcliffe was shocked and looked to Duke Richard for corroboration. Duke Richard slowly nodded his head. "Sadly, this is the truth. The Forest Lords themselves captured my daughter's killers and learned the truth from them. Prince Brightblade exacted his own vengeance upon the Duke of Eastfell."

"I fear the young duke is much like his father; vain, impulsive, and used to having his own way in all things," Earl Sudcliffe said. "His unwelcome advances toward Bethany would not be stopped, despite my protests and even with direct words from the king himself. I count on you, Lord Rorrack, to protect her from him."

"Should he ever attempt to harm her, I will kill him myself," Rory said coldly. "On that, sir,

you have my oath.”

\* \* \*

The Duke of Eastfell had stayed out of Rory’s way whenever possible, but their paths had crossed at various court events. Eastfell never condescended to speak directly to Rory. His sly insults and deprecations would be addressed to one of the many hangers-on that followed Eastfell everywhere. Rory would turn a deaf ear to whatever Eastfell said, regarding it as being of the same value as when a cow passed gas.

On the final night of Spring Court, a last grand ball was held. Much to his surprise, Bethany appeared dressed, not in the colors of Sudcliffe, but in the deep greens and silver of Westfell with her wolf pendant shining in her cleavage. Rory bent over her hand, kissing it, and said, “My dear, you look wonderful in dark green. It draws attention to your beautiful copper hair and brings out the green of your eyes. I fear you may outshine the queen herself tonight.”

“I am so happy you are pleased, my lord, for I wore this to honor you and your house.” She leaned forward to whisper in his ear, “And the bodice slips down quite easily. This is our last night together for quite some time, you know.”

Rory grinned in spite of himself. He was truly a lucky man.

Duke Richard could not restrain himself when he walked toward the head table. He had naturally looked toward his heir and turned to them instead of walking to his seat. Bending over Bethany’s hand, he said, “My dear, you look every inch the Duchess of Westfell. If I were but thirty years younger, I would marry you myself.”

Bethany laughed softly. “I think you would try if you were but ten years younger, Your Grace. Your gaze has not left my ... pendant since you bent over my hand.” She kissed the duke on his cheek. “You are a wonderful man, Your Grace, and I will love being able to call you grandfather.”

Bemused, Duke Richard patted Rory’s shoulder as he walked back to his seat at the head table next to the king. The byplay had not been lost on the others seated at the table, and the happy indulgent smiles on the king and queen were offset by the fury in the eyes of the Duke of Eastfell.

\* \* \*

The dining tables had been cleared away and the ballroom was now filled with dancing couples. The king and queen had led the first dance, and the Duke of Westfell had chosen the Lady Bethany as his partner. Rory watched as his grandfather tried to maintain his dignity while trying very hard not to stare down at the shining wolf pendant so prominently displayed.

Swiftstalker handed Rory a tankard of ale. “Ah, lad, I miss the ale of the Veil, don’t you? This stuff never tastes quite as good.”

Rory smiled at his uncle and concentrated on the ale that filled their tankards. A few seconds later, Swiftstalker took another sip from his and stared at it in surprise. “Ah, that is so much better. Thank you, lad.”

"Think of it as a final night gift, Uncle. Whenever you refill that tankard, it will automatically change to the ale of the Veil. Let this be our secret, shall we?" Rory's eyes never left the dancing form of his betrothed. The dress set off her figure admirably, and the colors were the perfect backdrop to her own natural coloring of hair, eyes, and skin. The mithrail wolf seemed to glow in the torchlight but Rory knew the real reason. It was the enchantments he had placed in the pendant and chain. Only Bethany or he could remove them from around her neck; anyone else who tried would be badly burned. With the pendant as a focus, he could locate her anywhere. Once they parted tomorrow, he could travel the ley lines and see her whenever he missed her too much.

Duke Armand of Kendrahl claimed Bethany for the next dance while Duke Richard danced with Armand's wife. The Dukes of Eastfell and Solange appeared to have left the ball unnoticed. No loss, in Rory's mind. With Eastfell absent, he could enjoy the dance.

Finally, he recovered his betrothed but before he could take her out on the dance floor, she took his tankard and sipped. "This is good! I don't normally care for ale, but this is so much better than anything I have tried before."

"That's because it is elven ale. Uncle Swiftstalker was missing the taste so I changed the ale in our tankards. I am glad you like it, too. Shall we dance?"

After a few dances and many conversations with the other guests, Rory and Bethany finally had a chance to slip out of the ballroom and find a private corner where they could be alone. Knowing Swiftstalker was standing guard outside the door gave them a measure of privacy; no one would come in on them unannounced. As they kissed, Rory discovered that Bethany was quite correct about the bodice. It did indeed come down quite easily.

\* \* \*

The Westfell guards had brought all the saddled horses to the main entrance of the castle in preparation for their return to Westfell. The king and queen were there to see the duke and his heir off on their journey home. Plans were being made for a royal visit in the fall to witness the marriage between Rory and Bethany, when Earl Sudcliffe rushed up to them.

"Where is she, Rory? I know the two of you want to marry sooner, but eloping is not the answer," Earl Sudcliffe said.

"Whatever are you talking about? Bethany is not here. In fact, I was waiting for her to come say goodbye before we left."

"She's gone, Rory. Her room in the castle is in great disarray but her bed has not been slept in. I had thought she had slipped off to your room last night. Such things have happened before between betrothed couples and I would have thought none the worse of you if it had."

"Earl, on my word, I saw Bethany back to her room last night and left her there. I have not seen or spoken to her since. If she did not sleep there, then someone has abducted her."

\* \* \*

The castle was searched but no trace of Bethany was found. The new captain of the guard

confirmed that two parties had left the castle during the night: the Duke of Eastfell and the Duke of Solange had departed within an hour of each other in the middle of the night.

The King's Own, under orders by King William himself, had ridden in pursuit of the Duke of Eastfell. The queen had been taken to her chambers, weeping for the safety of the girl who was like her own daughter. The king had railed and stormed, promising vile tortures to the men who had dared lay hands on Lady Bethany.

Duke Richard had ordered his men to return the horses to the stables and led Rory and Earl Sudcliffe back inside the castle. Swiftstalker poured Rory a draft of ale but Rory remained withdrawn and quiet. Everyone feared what he might do when he came back to the here and now. Even as Rory sat quietly, Swiftstalker stood close by. As a result, he saw Rory take a deep breath and saw awareness return to his eyes.

As Swiftstalker bent close to Rory, the young heir quietly said, "They are going in the wrong direction. Eastfell doesn't have her. She is heading south. She is being taken to Solange."

Swiftstalker said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, her pendant is enchanted and I can track it anywhere. She is bound in a wagon moving south. You and I are going after her. I want you to slip out the door and get our gear ready. You know what we need. Get some food from the kitchen then take it all to the stables. I will be there within the hour." Rory's voice was grim and filled with purpose.

After Swiftstalker left the room, Rory walked over to Earl Sudcliffe. "I gave you my oath that no harm shall come to your daughter, and I will honor that. The King's Own have been tricked into pursuing the wrong group. Bethany is on her way to Solange and I will bring her back. Those who took her will die."

Earl Sudcliffe looked into the eyes of the man his daughter loved, saw the resolve in them, and knew he spoke the truth. "Go with my blessings, Rorrick of Westfell. Find my daughter and bring her home."

Rory slipped from the room without anyone noticing. He raced to the stables and changed into the fighting leathers he and Swiftstalker had worn on their first trip to town. There was no place for fine clothes on this trip. This trip called for fast horses and sharp swords, with a swift death for all who stood between him and Bethany. And once he had her safe in his arms once more, not even the king himself would be able to separate them again.

## *Part Four*

### **SOLANGE**

#### **Chapter 20**

Bethany was tired and sore. She had entered her room after Rory had kissed her one last time, her mind awlirl from the powerful emotions and feelings that reverberated in her body. She was thinking about defying convention by slipping into Rory's room when a pair of strong arms enveloped her from behind. A gag was forced into her mouth and tied into place before a hood was placed over her head. She was carried across the room and rolled into some kind of enveloping cloth, which she later realized was one of the tapestries from her chamber. Her next sensation was of being carried out of the castle and dropped into the bed of a wagon. Other things were piled on top of her, obscuring the bundle to hide her from view. The wagon got underway, bouncing her against the hard floorboards as it traveled over the rough roads away from Aluria. It was daybreak before the wagon stopped and she was transferred to another one, still bound in the rolled up tapestry. Somehow she slept despite the terror she felt.

She was expecting to see the Duke of Eastfell's leering face when she was finally released from the carpet, so the strange dark faces that surrounded her came as shock. The men were garbed in long flowing robes and headdresses. Curved swords hung at their sides. Two of them held her arms while another ripped her dress from her body, leaving her standing in just her underskirts, hose, and court slippers. Spying the glimmering pendant between her breasts, the man reached out and grabbed it to tear it from her neck.

He began to scream as his hand burst into flame, letting go of the pendant which fell back between her breasts, still cool against her skin. The flames spread despite everything the man and his friends did to extinguish them, eventually consuming him. When the other men had rushed to his aid, Bethany had fled. She ran as fast as she could, clutching the pendant in her hand, realizing that Rory must have enchanted the mithrail wolf. Perhaps that same enchantment would lead him to her.

Her escape was short-lived. Obviously master horsemen, her abductors had easily caught up to her on the open ground and snared her with a rope. She was tumbled to the ground and her hands were bound behind her back. A short length of rope was tied between her ankles, effectively hobbling her so she could not run. The rope binding her hands behind her back also thrust her chest forward, making her breasts even more prominent. She realized a few moments later that the men were staring at the pendant and not her body.

They spoke to one another in a harsh language she had never heard before, gesturing angrily at the pendant and back at the corpse still smoking back by the wagon. One finally picked up a long stick and tried to slide it underneath the chain. He jerked back as if he'd been shocked and dropped the stick as it burst into flames. More muttered words Bethany could only surmise were curses and then she was jerked to her feet by her arms and pushed back to the wagon.

One of the men picked up the material from the skirt of her dress, tore away the bodice, and after cutting a slit roughly in the center of one of the skirt panels, he pulled it over her head to cover her body and the pendant. He looked at the wagon and then at the three horses. Bethany could see his mind working; the horses would be faster than the wagon but she would also be able to use the horse to escape if they were careless. Expediency won over that concern as he untied the rope around her ankles and pushed her up on the horse while the other man held its reins. Once she was astride, the man bound her ankles again by passing the rope under the horse. Her hands were still bound behind her and she knew she would die if she lost her balance and slid under the horse. The man rearranged the draped cloth to more completely



cover her body then looped another rope around her waist to hold the drape securely in place.

He mounted and took the reins to Bethany's horse from the other man. Once he was mounted, they rode out into the countryside and far away from the road that led to Aluria.

\* \* \*

Rory and Swiftstalker had been riding for many hours yet had not been able to intercept the convoy of wagons and soldiers that carried Bethany away. Rory had been almost knocked from his saddle by a physic backblast that occurred the moment someone attempted to remove the pendant from around Bethany's neck.

"What is it, Rory?" Swiftstalker asked as Rory suddenly swayed in his saddle.

"Someone has triggered the enchantment in the pendant. The pendant cannot be removed by anyone other than Bethany or me. Someone just found that out the hard way."

"What happened to him?"

"He was burned alive and nothing in this world will extinguish the flames until they consume him completely."

Swiftstalker stared at Rory. He hadn't known such an enchantment was even possible. *Why would Rory create it in the first place? Of course, if Eastfell had ever tried to remove the pendant, Rory would have ensured his death in as horrible a manner as could be imagined.*

"She is well, then?" Swiftstalker asked. "Can you still sense her?"

"Yes, she is now on horseback rather than a wagon. There are two men with her but they are not the ones who took her. These are Solange nomad warriors," Rory said, a touch of despair creeping into his voice. "We will not be able to follow them much longer if they head into the open desert because our horses will not survive there."

They spurred their horses on, watching the trail for any sign that might lead them to Bethany. The ruts in the road made by the wagon wheels were easily seen, and Swiftstalker's sharp eyes detected the place where a different conveyance had been waiting. A small campfire indicated this group had been here for some time waiting for the main body. Tracks could be seen where something had been carried to this new wagon and then it left by a different trail. The main body had continued on.

"Which way do we go, Rory?" Swiftstalker asked. "Do we follow the original group, or this new wagon with its narrow track?"

"The new one, I think. It would make sense to transfer Bethany from the main group in case someone like us was to intercept them. Without Bethany, we could do nothing to prove their involvement in her abduction," Rory said after a moment.

They quickly followed the tracks and eventually came across the wagon itself, with the grisly remains of the smoldering corpse beside it. "This is the place, Uncle. She was taken from here by horseback." Spotting the shredded bodice lying on the ground, he added, "They will pay dearly for this outrage."

"Rory, you do understand that we may not be in time to prevent anything from happening to her, don't you? If she is in the hands of the nomads, then she has been given over into slavery."

"I am well aware she may be abused by those who hold her, although I do not think it has happened yet. It will not make any difference to me, Uncle. They may steal her virtue but not her honor or her heart. Now, let's quit wasting time and see whether we can catch them before they reach the desert."

They rode swiftly through the scrublands and low hills, following the faint tracks of three horses until the light faded from the sky and they could no longer see. Forced at last to stop, Rory stood staring out into the blackness before him, feeling Bethany getting farther and farther away.

\* \* \*

Her captors never spoke to her but conversed easily between themselves as they rode. As the sun was fading from the sky, they came down a defile between two hills and she saw before them the great expanse of the desert of Solange. Huge rolling hills of sand stretched as far as she could see, shaped by the vagaries of the blowing wind. She could see nothing green, only endless dunes of tan.

The transition from the defile to the desert was abrupt. The pounding sound of the horses' hooves on the packed dirt and rock of the scrubland and defile was replaced by the soft whisper of sand. While not in the same class as her captors, Bethany knew enough about horses to know these animals were not suited for travel in the desert. She could feel the dance of their feet on the shifting sands made the horses unsure and skittish.

Her captors pressed on. Although the desert looked the same to her, they seemed to know exactly where they were going. She realized after a while that they must be following the stars, much as those who sailed the seas used them to find their way across large bodies of water. As the night went on, she grew cold and increasingly uncomfortable. It had been almost a full day since she had last eaten or attended to any of her bodily functions. The men ignored her muffled pleas to stop, and her tears dampened the gag round her mouth.

Finally, they crested a dune to find a nomad camp sheltered in its lee. They rode up to a picket line and the men dismounted, tying their horses' reins to it. One man pulled a wicked curved dagger from his belt and slashed the rope that bound her feet under the horse, and then he reached up and tumbled her to the ground. Only the cushioning effect of the sand softened the impact as she struck the ground.

He called out in their strange language and a shrouded figure in a black robe and veil came from one of the tents. As the figure approached, he retied Bethany's hands in front of her. Her arms were numb and she almost screamed as her tortured shoulders moved back to their normal alignment. Another short length of rope was tied around her neck and the end was handed to the shrouded figure. Short tugs on the rope made Bethany follow behind the shrouded figure into a nearby tent.

Once inside the tent, the shrouded figure removed the veils, revealing herself to be a woman. She was dark like the men, but her eyes were a startling blue. Bethany realized her

dark skin was caused by the sun and this woman was probably a native of Aluria or one of the other northern duchies.

"Please, you must help me," Bethany said.

The woman looked at her a long minute before she said, "There is no help for you here. Whoever you were before no longer matters. Here you are a slave, just as I am." The woman shook her head. "No doubt the men just rode all night without stopping, yes? You must need to relieve yourself. I will take you to the place for that, but you must not try to run. There is no place for you to go, for there is nothing but sand for many, many miles. If you run, they will hurt you. Do you understand?"

Bethany miserably nodded her head and the woman once again wrapped her veil around her head before leading Bethany outside and off into the rolling dunes until they were out of sight of the camp. She released Bethany's bonds and stood back as Bethany gathered her skirts up and squatted in the dark. She pushed fresh sand over the wet spot and meekly followed the woman back to the tent.

Unveiled once more, the woman said, "I am called Ilara. I have been told to teach you what you need to know and help you adjust to your new life."

"You don't understand, Ilara. I am Lady Bethany, daughter of Earl Sudcliffe, the king's chancellor. This must all be some kind of mistake. I am to marry Lord Rorrick, Heir of Westfell. He will come looking for me."

"How can he hope to find you here in the Great Desert, child? And if he did, if he was so foolish as to try to rescue you, these nomads would cut him down like a dog. The life of an infidel is nothing to them. Now, take off those rags and we will dress you properly."

Bethany reluctantly pulled off the remains of her dress, blushing as she exposed herself to Ilara.

"All of it, child. None of it suits life in the desert, especially for a slave."

Coloring even more, Bethany removed her underskirt and hose. She now stood nude and somewhat defiant as Ilara walked around her, assessing her body. When she saw the wolf pendant, she said, "What is this? I am surprised the men did not steal it." Ilara reached out to take it.

"Stop, I beg you. Don't touch it. One man tried to take it but was burned to death as he touched it. It bears an enchantment that prevents anyone from removing it," Bethany said.

Ilara withdrew her hand quickly, superstitious fear in her eyes. "It is bewitched? Truly?"

"Would I still have it if it were not?"

Ilara helped Bethany pull the heavy black desert robe over her head, showing her how to tie the black band around her waist to secure the robe from underneath. Black slippers covered her feet. Ilara then brushed and plaited Bethany's hair into a single braid, which she then covered completely with a black scarf. "This is how you will dress every day from now on. I will help you with your hair and you will help me with mine. At no time will you leave this tent without a veil over your face. All that may be exposed is your eyes. You must never look directly into a man's eyes or he will think you challenge his authority. Should you displease a

man, he will beat you. Should you challenge him, even without meaning to, he will whip you or perhaps kill you.”

“What will be my duties? What will they expect of me?”

“For now, you will assist me and do what I tell you. You must quickly learn their language and I will teach you. If a man gestures for you to fill his cup, you do so. We exist only to satisfy their needs. If we fail or displease them, they can kill us, for we are less than nothing in their eyes. We are slaves. We are women. And we are infidels. Of the three, the last is the worst in their eyes, for they regard killing infidels as a way to honor their gods.”

Seeing the tears forming in Bethany’s eyes, Ilara said, “Cry your tears now, but never in front of them. It is a sign of weakness and they despise it. Go lie down upon those mats and rest. In the morning, we shall begin.”

\* \* \*

Rory stared at the edge of the defile where it met the limitless dunes of sand that seemed to march forever into the distance. The tracks had been clear up to the edge of the defile, but vanished when they reached the sand. The night wind had scoured the sand clear of any trace of the men who had taken Bethany. He could feel her across the distance and knew she was still asleep in some kind of tent, but he could not tell how far away she might be.

“What next, Rory?” Swiftstalker asked, his voice compassionate as if he could feel Rory’s pain at having failed Bethany.

“We shall go pay a call on the Duke of Solange, Uncle, and gain his help in finding her. Since we know he had a role in her abduction, he must know who has her now. He will tell us what we wish to know or he will die.”

## Chapter 21

« ^ »

Ilara woke Bethany as the first hint of day began to lighten the sky. She led Bethany to the spot behind the dunes to take care of their morning needs, and then to a much larger tent toward the center of the camp. Here, Bethany found many women clad in the same shapeless black garb and veils, preparing food. Ilara led her to one side and told her to wait. Bethany stood and watched as platters were laden with many covered dishes. At Ilara’s signal, Bethany picked up one of the trays and followed her back outside.

She led Bethany to yet another tent, this one guarded by a pair of fierce nomad warriors. One said something to Ilara and she led Bethany inside. The floor of this tent was covered in thick carpets with bright designs and bold colors. Thick pillows were scattered around a low table upon which Ilara set her tray and then took Bethany’s to place beside the first one. She removed the covers off the dishes, revealing slivers of roasted lamb, rice, dates, and other foods Bethany could not identify.

Bethany followed Ilara to a corner of the tent where a large samovar was located. Ilara taught Bethany how to make the heavy hot tea, thickened with honey, that was the favorite beverage of the nomads. As the morning meal progressed, she scurried silently to refill each man's cup whenever he gestured at her. No one spoke to her or Ilara; they were invisible to the men as they sat talking among themselves in the language of the nomads. As the men finished eating, Ilara brought them bowls of warm water with which they washed their fingers since all their food had been eaten with their hands. Bethany gave each man a towel, which was used to dry their hands and then thrown onto the ground as they left the tent. Once the last man had left, the two women quickly collected the towels, bowls, dishes, and cups to return them to the cooking tent.

Ilara then led Bethany to yet another tent, this one more sumptuous than the last, with four guards at its door. A brief word with one of the guards and the two women slipped inside. This tent was empty. Ilara showed Bethany how to clean the tent, brushing any sand from the carpets and straightening the sleeping mats and floor pillows. They collected the small oil lamps from their hangers and took them outside to refuel, then returned them to their places.

They spent the rest of the morning cleaning all the tents of the camp and refilling the oil lamps. By then, the sun had risen high in the sky and the heat was becoming oppressive. The nomads had all slipped back inside their tents and Ilara brought Bethany back to their own tent.

"They will all rest during the heat of the day until about an hour before sunset. At that time, one of two things will happen. We will start cooking for dinner, or we will begin to tear down the camp to move out. If it is the first, then you will do just what you did this morning. If it is the latter, stay by my side and help me with the tents."

"Ilara, when do we get to eat? I have had no food or water in almost two days now."

"I'm sorry, I forgot. There is some water in that pot behind you. I will see if there is anything left at the cook tent. What you need to do is what I did; scavenge anything left after the men finish before we return the dishes." Ilara slipped from the tent and returned a short time later with a small cloth, enclosing some slivers of meat and some dates. "These are all I could find. I'm sorry. Now eat up and then rest."

A call from outside the tent woke Bethany hours later. The hot still air in the tent was stifling but she remembered to wrap the veil around her face before she ventured outside. There was much bustling about as the women began pulling the carpets and pillows out of the tents. Neatly rolled, the carpets were then tied to the saddles of large dromedaries. Soon the tents themselves were brought down and also strapped to other camels. The men were all mounted on camels to which the laden ones had been fastened in long lines of beasts of burden, carrying the entire camp on their backs. A small group of warriors led the strings of horses off in a different direction than the lines of camels were heading.

Ilara came up to her and said, "Don't just stand there, girl. Pick up one of those packs and follow the camels." Suiting her actions to her words, Ilara swept up a large pack and settled the weight on her back. After watching Bethany do the same, the two women started to follow the camels deeper into the desert.

"Where are we going, Ilara?" Bethany asked.

"Deep in this desert is an oasis where the chiefs of the nomad tribes gather. We are going there. From what I overheard, you are to be a gift to the chief of all the tribes. This is a great honor for you. If he likes you, you may become part of his harem and be pampered for life. If he doesn't, you'll be no worse off as a slave there than you would be here."

\* \* \*

Rory and Swiftstalker backtracked to the road that led into Solange. Skirting the deep desert, the road would take them to the banks of the Solange River and then to the city itself. While most people in Aluria thought of Solange as all desert, the areas around the Solange River were much like Aluria itself, fertile and cultivated, green with crops and trees. There were date palms, citrus trees of many types, and some hardy scrub pines that somehow survived. The people along this region were like those in the other duchies; peasants for the most part who tilled the land and grew the crops, harvested the fruits, and made it possible for the aristocracy to survive.

The city of Solange seemed to be made entirely of white stone, but as they neared the buildings, Rory could see that most were whitewashed mud brick structures. There did not seem to be any sense of order around the outside of the city and it reminded Rory of the outer ring of Aluria, except cleaner. As they neared the markets, they found swarms of people, all haggling at the top of their lungs, with the vendors for various things. Most wore the traditional desert robes over trousers very similar to the Westfell trouser, except they gathered at the ankles. The women were all veiled, covered completely by shapeless robes.

"Do not stare at their women, Rory. To do so would be considered an insult, and the men have been known to kill anyone who looks too hard at their women. Not that you can see anything except their eyes," Swiftstalker said.

As they rode through the market, many stopped to stare at them. Not only were strangers rare in Solange, but few had ever seen anyone as tall as they were. Their style of dress, even the simple leathers of a common soldier, was also unusual. Rory drew Storm to a halt as a group of mounted nomad warriors thundered up to them.

Swiftstalker said, "We come in peace. I am Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest and this is Lord Rorrick of Westfell. We have come to see the Duke of Solange." He addressed his words to the center rider, whose more elaborate scimitar inferred he was their leader.

The leader spat into the dust. "You don't look like any lords I ever saw. You just look like trouble. You will surrender your weapons and come with us."

Rory said, "No, we won't. As Lord Swiftstalker said, we have urgent matters to discuss with the duke. You will stand aside and let us pass."

The leader said, "You are not in Westfell now, nor Aluria. This is Solange where we bend no knee to a foreign king. Surrender or die. It matters not to me."

Rory knew that he and Swiftstalker could easily cut their way through the small group of nomad warriors, but the sounds of additional mounted men coming from behind him made him realize the odds were rapidly changing. Just as he started to reach for his swords, a voice spoke behind him.

“Are you having a problem, Lord Rorrick?”

Rory glanced over his shoulder to see about thirty of the King’s Own, led by the same captain of the guard who he had delivered his erstwhile assassin to back in Aluria. The king had banished the captain and his men to Solange as punishment for allowing the assassin to be killed while in their care.

“Just discussing our need to see the Duke of Solange, Captain.” Turning his attention back to the leader of the nomad patrol, Rory said, “I believe you were about to lead us to the duke, were you not?”

With ill grace, the nomads wheeled their horses and led Rory, Swiftstalker, and the King’s Own deeper into the city. As they rode down the narrow streets, Rory observed the surroundings. The mud brick walls had changed into dressed stone and the streets became wider. Small parks with date palms and fountains came into view as they were led up to a large fortified gate in a truly massive wall that stood at least fifty feet high. The opening was narrow, permitting no more than two horses to pass side by side, and led through a long sally port lined with arrow holes in the walls and a grated ceiling through which boiling liquids could be poured. Another set of heavy doors stood open at the end of the sally port, and Rory could well imagine the killing zone that entry would become if those doors were closed and the defenders held the walls.

Exiting the sally port, the street made a hard left turn, still narrow, followed by another one to the right. This passage would limit the number of mounted warriors who could travel between the walls and prevent them from moving with any speed. When the passage finally emptied out into the grounds of the fort, Rory found himself faced with hundreds of nomad warriors.

“Your weapons, please,” the leader of the nomad patrol said again, holding his hand out. Rory lipped the strap of his scabbard over his shoulder and passed his swords to the man. “I will expect those back. You do not want me to come looking for them.”

“The dagger, too.” Without another word, Rory handed over his dagger.

Swiftstalker and the King’s Own were also disarmed, although not without incident. One of the King’s Own at the rear of the column tried to break away but was shot down by several arrows before his horse had moved more than a few feet.

“Regrettable,” was all the nomad patrol leader said.

With a gesture to follow him, they rode the rest of the way across the square to a stout door in one of the stone walls. “If you would come with me?” said the patrol leader as he dismounted.

As they walked through the door, Rory realized they were not being taken to see the duke. They were in fact being taken to the dungeon.

\* \* \*

The caravan traveled all through the night and into the morning hours. Calls of nature were made behind a dune along the march and then having to catch up with the others who had

kept plodding long beside the string of camels. Even in these moments, Bethany was not left alone; Ilara always watched over her. It was not for her protection or to keep her from becoming lost, Bethany realized. Ilara would be held responsible if Bethany ran away.

At last the caravan came to a halt and the women quickly built fires using dried camel dung as fuel. Water was boiled and tea was made. After the men had been served, the women ate what was left; Ilara made sure that Bethany received a share of the food. It was important that Bethany reach the oasis in good condition so she would be pleasing to the caliph.

Everyone wrapped themselves in their robes and veils, then bedded down on the sunward face of the dune. That made no sense to Bethany.

"Why aren't we lying on the shady side of the dune? Wouldn't it be cooler?"

"As the sun moves overhead, that shady spot will be in full sun during the hottest part of the day while this place will become shady. Now rest, because we will resume walking as the sun starts to set once again."

\* \* \*

The guards had been quite excited when they found the mithrail mail. It, along with all their other possessions, had been taken from them once they had been brought into the dungeon. This prison was not actually a dungeon since it was not below ground; and all the prisoners had been placed into a common room where they had been shackled to the walls and to the pillars in the center of the room. There were small grated openings along the tops of the walls to admit air and sunlight, and torches lit the room during the night.

The guards had taken one of the King's Own to the center of the room and amused themselves by cutting off parts of the man's fingers, one joint at a time. His screams had echoed off the walls of the cell, and many of the others had shouted curses and other imprecations at the sadistic nomads. In the end, the man had finally passed out from the pain and blood loss so the guards cut his throat, leaving his body to hang there as a lesson for the others.

Several hours later, the door to this room opened and the Duke of Solange walked in. He was accompanied by another man wearing a hooded robe of strange design, covering him so completely none of his features were visible. Rory suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of evil that came off the man like a miasma. "What an unexpected pleasure this is!" said the Duke of Solange. "The impetuous Heir of Westfell and an elf lord."

"What have you done with Lady Bethany?" demanded Rory.

"Was that her name? I merely transported her as cargo. A gift from the Duke of Eastfell to the Caliph of the Nomads. The caliph has a taste for young exotic beauties, you know."

"You will pay for this. I will personally cut your throat."

The duke laughed. "Will you? I think not. We have taken away the enchanted mithrail and swords, the sources of your much vaunted strength and speed. You hang chained in this room where you will watch each of your companions die before your eyes with this elf saved for last. I will have him flayed and we will see how long he can live without his skin." The robed figure



whispered something to the duke. "What? Oh, yes. My friend here has asked for the pleasure of torturing you so he can learn about the Veil and the Heart within. His masters are very curious about them for some reason." The duke smiled. "I think you will regret his interest in you."

## Chapter 22

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Once the duke and his companion left the cell, the guards withdrew, locking the door behind them. Rory closed his eyes and reached outward for the life force. He drifted along in spirit, watching where the guards went and noting that his mail and swords were still lying in a pile in the guardroom. The nomads, convinced the weapons were enchanted, were afraid of them and none would touch them. The same held true of Swiftstalker's weapons. All they needed to do was get out of the cell, overpower the ten guards in the guardroom, and they could rearm themselves. First, he needed to deal with the manacles that held him to the pillar.

"Rory!" came the whisper from Swiftstalker.

"What?"

"Would you mind explaining why you let us walk into this trap?" Swiftstalker asked. "You evaded every ambush the elven warriors ever set, you detected ogres and orcs at great distances, yet you rode into this fortress like it was Westfell Keep."

"How else could we have seen the duke? He wasn't likely to invite us for tea."

"This is the dumbest, most idiotic idea I have ever heard! Your father is going to be really mad at me if I let you get killed."

Rory smiled at his uncle's grumbling rant even as he concentrated on the material the manacles were made from, seeking any flaw that he could exploit. The bands were pinned together with a steel pin. He altered the composition of the pin, making it brittle. The slightest strain would shatter the pin and release his hands.

"Swiftstalker!" he whispered.

"Yes?" came the whispered reply.

"Whatever you do, do not put any strain on your manacles or the pin that holds them closed will shatter."

"Good lad," came his reply.

"Captain, did you hear what I said?" Rory asked.

"Yes, my lord. I will pass the word to my men."

"Make sure they understand we will only get one chance. If they suspect we are free, they will never open that door and we'll die here."

Once all had been briefed on the plan, Rory once again concentrated to change the rest of the pins. Once he finished, he leaned his head back against the pillar to wait for morning.

\* \* \*

Six guards entered the cell the next morning, laughing as they passed Rory and reached for one of the King's Own to torture next. Rory snapped his hands down, breaking the pin, freeing his hands. When he shouted, "Now!" the King's Own and Swiftstalker surged free of their chains and swarmed over the surprised nomad guards. While the King's Own dealt with the guards, Rory and Swiftstalker picked up the dropped scimitars and raced through the door into the guardroom.

His senses shifted into the familiar time expansion and the four nomad guards seemed to move in slow motion. Not interested in finesse, Rory's first slash decapitated the closest guard, the arterial spray temporarily blinding the second. He never saw the blade that pierced his heart. Swiftstalker had taken care of the other two with a slash across the throat of one and disemboweling the second.

The King's Own came into the guardroom brandishing the dead guards' swords. While Rory and Swiftstalker donned their mail and clothes, the others searched the room for other weapons. Their scabbards and daggers in place and swords in hand, wearing the concealing desert robes they stripped off the least bloody dead warriors, Rory and Swiftstalker led the way out of the guardroom into the courtyard, which was luckily deserted at the time. Rather than head for the heavily defended gate, Rory led the small party up one of the exterior stairs to gain access to the main building itself.

Letting his senses find a route that bypassed any roving guards, Rory led the group deep inside, searching for the duke and his mysterious companion. He followed the pervading sense of evil, knowing it was just as important to find the man in the shroud as it was to get his revenge on the duke. He would have expected to find the source of evil in some dark hidden place but the feeling was drawing them upward, into one of the minarets that topped the fortress building. The narrow winding stair was only wide enough for one person to pass at a time, so Rory led the way. At the top of the stairs stood a lone warrior, scimitar held across his chest, watching Rory advance.

Rory stopped and waited just beyond the warrior's reach, baiting him. When the warrior just stood there smirking, Rory leaned slightly forward and spat on the man's foot, knowing this to be a grievous insult in the Solange culture. The warrior sprang forward, enraged, using his height on the stairs to come down at Rory. He'd failed, of course, to take into account Rory's superior physical height, swift reflexes, and the fact Rory's swords were two feet longer than the scimitar he carried. Rory's first slash took the man's hand off at the wrist, spinning the scimitar out into the center of the stairwell. His second sword took the man's head, which followed the weapon into space. A large booted foot redirected the corpse into the void. The entire struggle had taken less than ten seconds.

Rory entered the chamber ready for anything, but what he found made him halt in his tracks in sheer disgust. The room was an abattoir, the walls splashed with blood—some old, some fresh and still dripping. The body of a young girl was stretched across an altar in the center, her chest torn open, and the shrouded man clutched her heart in his hand. Pointing

one hand at Rory, he began to chant an invocation in a language that Rory had never heard before but before he could finish, Rory threw his dagger with unerring precision, hitting the man in his open mouth and punching through the back of his skull.

"So much for getting any answers from you. That just leaves the duke."

They retraced their steps out of the minaret while Rory let his mind search for the duke. He located the man, still in bed, one of his many slave girls at his side. Killing anyone who got in their way, the group broke into the duke's private quarters. His sword at the duke's throat, Rory said, "I believe we had an appointment, Your Grace."

The duke opened his eyes, gazing up at Rory in shock. Swiftstalker shooed the naked slave from the room and the King's Own took up positions to defend the chamber.

"We have several things to discuss, Your Grace. First, of course, is your part in the abduction of Lady Bethany. You will tell me all about it and how I can find her. Next, we will talk about your strange companion and what he was doing in the minaret. Oh, don't expect him to help you now because he is quite dead. And finally, we will discuss your treason against the king."

"I have nothing to say to you," the duke replied. "You'll never get out of this fortress alive."

"I will surely live longer than you will, Your Grace, and I can assure you that your final minutes will be excruciating. I learned much watching your men in the guardroom and Lord Swiftstalker has assisted General Gustav in questioning people before. I think that between us, we can make you want to tell us everything we wish to know."

\* \* \*

The fortress resembled an anthill that had been kicked over. Nomad warriors raced everywhere and large patrols surged through the gates looking for the escaped prisoners. The confusion enabled Rory, Swiftstalker, and the others to slip out by mingling with the outgoing warriors in their purloined robes, scarves over their faces, riding their own horses. No one seemed to even notice that two of the warriors racing out of the fortress were taller than the rest, or that one of them wore two swords on his back. They rode at the rear of a nomad patrol and when the time was auspicious, broke away as if patrolling in a different direction. Finally, they came to a halt.

Rory said, "Captain, I want you and your men to ride for the castle in Aluria. You must tell the king what has happened here."

"Yes, my lord. And when he asks what you are doing, what shall I say?"

"Tell him my mission is unchanged. I will find and return Lady Bethany."

As the King's Own contingent rode off, Swiftstalker said, "We're going to need some camels."

## Chapter 23

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It was a long walk to the oasis, and Ilara spent the time teaching Bethany the language of the nomads while pointing out some of the beauties of the desert. At Bethany's urging, Ilara explained her own history.

"I was raised on a small farm in Aluria. When I was sixteen, I was taken in a border raid by the nomads. I wasn't pretty or exotic enough to appeal to anyone for their harem, so I have just been one of their many slaves. For the first few years, I was like you, working at cleaning the tents and serving their food. One day, something about me attracted the eye of one of their younger leaders, a man named Omar, and I was given to him. I was terrified but he was really a kind and patient man who took his time to teach me about what goes on between a man and a woman. I grew to love him and bore him two sons. One day, he was killed in a border raid into Westfell and the Great Forest. I was sent back to the slave tents and have been there ever since."

"What became of your sons?"

"They are still with the tribe. They were both part of the group that moved the horses to their summer pastures. Each nomad tribe has a defined territory and they roam within that area. As summer approaches, all of the tribes head for the Oasis of the Moon to renew their bonds with the caliph and discuss affairs that impact all tribes. After that meeting is done, they will separate again to roam their territory once more. When they reach the edge of their lands near the borders, they will recover their horses and begin to raid Aluria again."

"How many tribes are there?"

"There are ten major tribes but each one has smaller groups such as this one. You see, the desert is such a harsh place that it would not be possible for a major tribe to travel as a group due to the scarcity of food and water. Instead, they are broken down into these smaller groups while they roam the desert. The only time they gather in one place is at the Oasis of the Moon so they can demonstrate the strength of the tribe to their caliph. The stronger the tribe in terms of men, weapons, and camels, the better their standing within the ten and the more influence they have with the caliph."

That discussion did not prepare her for the sight of the Oasis of the Moon. Bethany had been expecting a small clump of trees around a small spring. Instead there was a very large freshwater lake and a huge walled city, surrounded by a sea of nomad tents numbering in the thousands. She had never dreamed there were so many nomads. It gave her a chill when she finally grasped how large the Great Desert of Solange must be to support such a huge population of wandering tribes.

Their group made its way down through the sea of tents to an area reserved for them within the boundaries of their tribe. The close proximity of their camp to the walls of the city told Bethany that this small group was high in the hierarchy of their tribe, a fact confirmed when Ilara explained, "Our group leader is the first son of the tribe leader. Once day he shall take over the position, so his father keeps him close to learn. This is why our group brings the gifts for the caliph."

“What kinds of gifts?”

“The caliph receives a part of all things taken during raids against the infidels, which includes everyone who is not a nomad. Whether it is gold and jewels or just livestock and slaves, a part must be given over to him each year. You will be one of those gifts. The presentation will be in three days. While the camp is set up, I am to take you to the First Wife. If she accepts you as the Gift, we will begin to prepare you for presentation to the caliph. You must cooperate with everything we do, child, or you will be punished.”

There was a whirlwind of activity ahead of them as the caravan reached their designated place. Hundreds of slaves, men and women, began to strip the camels of their loads. The tents seemed to spring up from the ground in mere minutes and campfires were set ablaze to begin cooking for those fresh from the desert. After having their heavy packs taken away, Ilara led Bethany through the bustling confusion to a grand tent closer to the city wall. Although this tent was ringed with warriors, none stopped them as they ducked through the opening. “Do not speak unless given leave, child,” Ilara whispered as they passed inside.

This was the tent of the tribal leader and within its walls lived his harem. Ilara led Bethany deeper into the carpeted interior, finally reaching her goal. Motioning Bethany to kneel as she did, they knelt before an empty cushion and waited, their foreheads pressed to the carpet.

After a few moments, a woman’s voice spoke in the language of the nomads. “Greetings, Ilara. You have brought the Gift. Does she understand our words?”

“She has learned much as we traveled, honored mother.”

“And what do you think? Will she please the caliph?”

“I believe so, honored mother.”

“Show me,” the woman commanded.

Ilara told Bethany to stand and then removed all of Bethany’s clothing. As the woman stared at Bethany, Bethany was able to study her in return. The honored mother was the First Wife of the tribe leader, a position of great power for it was she who ruled all the other wives and the staff that served in this household. Expecting to see a woman in the shapeless black robe, Bethany was surprised to see the woman did not dress that way. Instead she wore a beautiful silk form-fitting dress in vibrant colors. Her long black hair had been dusted with crushed pearls and hung down her back in a loose braid that reached the floor as she sat. A band of cloth with gold disks the size of a robin’s egg circled her forehead. Her dark eyes had been lined with kohl, and pearl powder had been used to color her eyelids. Many gold bracelets adorned her arms, which were otherwise bare from the shoulders down. The nails of her fingers and toes had been painted with still more crushed pearls so they glittered.

“Turn her around, Ilara.”

Bethany slowly turned so the First Wife could view all of her.

“You are right, Ilara, she is quite exotic and may appeal to the caliph. You must prepare her well,” the First Wife said. “Why does she still wear that necklace?”

“It is enchanted, honored mother, and none may remove it without death.”

"Do you believe such nonsense?"

"I do, honored mother, because one who tried was burned alive by a fire that nothing would put out. She has told me the enchantment was set using the magic of the elves even as the pendant was crafted."

"This may be a problem, Ilara. I must think on how best to explain this to the caliph when she is presented."

The First Wife pondered a moment and then looked directly at Bethany. "Do you understand me, child?"

"Yes, honored mother," Bethany said.

"Good. It is possible you may be acceptable to the caliph. If you are, it will bring great honor to this tribe. If, by some action of yours, he rejects you, then I shall make your life as a slave a living hell to repay the damage done to us. Do we have an understanding between us?"

As Bethany nodded, she was struck by how much this woman reminded her of Queen Beatrice.

Ilara told Bethany to kneel once more and both women pressed their foreheads against the carpet as the First Wife withdrew from the room. Once she was gone, Ilara told Bethany to get dressed and then led her from the tent. Ilara then led her to a gate in the city wall. They passed down many winding and narrow streets until they reached a door no different than the hundreds of others they had passed. Ilara knocked and the door swung open.

The man who answered the door was the largest one Bethany had ever seen. From the top of his bald head to the soles of his bare feet, he stood almost seven feet tall. He was naked from the waist up, and Bethany could not believe how muscled his chest appeared with arms as big around as most men's legs. His skin was black as night. He wore a flat gold collar around his neck, bright red pants, and a wide gold sash. He also carried a curving sword that seemed to be as long as Bethany was tall.

"I am Ilara and I bring the Gift to be prepared."

The black giant stepped aside and permitted the two women to enter. After closing and barring the door, he leaned his massive shoulders against it, still holding the oversized scimitar. Ilara led the way deeper into the building. "These are the caliph's baths that have been assigned to our tribe. Half of the building is reserved for the men, and the rest is for the free women of the tribe. The only slaves you will find here are those who work within the building. As the Gift, you will be sequestered here over the next few days. I want you to pay attention to what happens. This is what your life will be like if you are accepted by the caliph. You do not want to know what it would be like should he reject you."

Bethany looked around as she listened to Ilara. While the building had been plain white outside, inside the floors and walls were covered with ceramic tiles in colorful repeating patterns. They entered a room with turquoise-colored tile walls and stark white flooring. Islands of colorful pillows in red with gold tassels dotted the floors. There was also a very fat bald man wearing white pantaloons, a powder blue tunic, and gold slippers and sash.

His voice was high, more like a woman's, when he said, "Greetings, Ilara. This is the Gift?"

"I am pleased you remember me, Sasha. It has been a long time since I was permitted through those doors," Ilara said in response. "Yes, this is the Gift. We will need all the time available to prepare her." Turning to Bethany, she said, "Child, this is Sasha, the caliph's master of the baths. You must do as he says."

Sasha waddled over to Bethany, and she realized he was also very short, barely reaching her chin. "Take off your veil and headdress."

Bethany removed her veil and the black scarves that covered her head. Sasha told her to kneel, and once she was on her knees, he began to explore her hair. "No lice or other vermin. Her hair is a lovely color, like she is wearing the final rays of a sunset." He walked around her, cupped her chin in his chubby hand, and said, "Unusual eyes, too. More green than blue. Hmmm."

"Well, let's get started. Take her to the baths, Ilara, and then we'll see what we have to work with." Sasha waved a fat hand toward the other door.

Ilara led Bethany through the door and into a chamber with a large pool of water sunk into the floor with wisps of steam rising from it. There were three slave girls in the room, each wearing only a cloth wrapped around their waist. They came over to Bethany and began to remove her robes.

"What are they doing, Ilara?"

"Preparing to bathe you, child. Get into the pool now."

After being bathed and having her hair washed, Bethany was told to lie upon a nearby pallet where the slave girls began massaging a scented lotion into her skin. "This lotion will not only soften your skin, it will also retard the growth of your body hair. Over the next three days, you will be bathed and massaged with this lotion twice a day. Should you be accepted into the caliph's harem, this will only be needed once a month."

One of the slave girls began combing out Bethany's long hair, creating a shimmering fall of copper that cascaded down her bare back. The scented oil the slave combed into Bethany's hair eliminated any tangles and increased the natural shine. Bethany realized she was enjoying having her hair brushed this way as she had always had trouble doing it herself because of its length.

Sasha walked into the chamber carrying some clothes and Bethany screamed as she tried to grab a towel to cover herself with.

"Oh, don't be silly. Your body holds no interest to me except whether it will be pleasing to the caliph. Now stop that noise and stand up straight."

Ilara said, "Sasha is not a man. He is an eunuch. Why else would he be in charge of the women's bathhouse? Now do as you're told, girl, and stand up."

Bethany had never met a eunuch before but she knew of the practice of taking a young boy and gelding him. She slowly dropped the towel and stood up. She'd never imagined the first time she would be nude in front of a man, it would be a eunuch!

Sasha walked around her, commenting, "Nice figure but her nipples are too pale. We'll need to enhance them with some color, I think. Beautiful hair. Is she a virgin?"

Ilara said, "It has been verified by the tribe midwife."

Sasha looked pleased. "That is good. I recall what happened when one of the tribes gave the caliph an impure woman as a Gift. Oh, stop glaring at me, you silly girl! Look at the pretty clothes I have brought for you." He held out the filmy garments to her. "Ilara, help her dress and take her to her chamber at once. I cannot abide women!" He stormed from the room with all the grace of a pregnant cow.

The sight of the fat eunuch waddling from the room with his nose up in the air was enough to bring a smile to Bethany's face. Until she caught a good look at the clothes Ilara expected her to wear.

"Ilara, I can't wear those. You can practically see through them!"

"Child, you will be living in this bathhouse for the next three days. No one will see you except me, the slaves, and Sasha. Now you can either put these on or go naked, your choice. I've had enough of your nonsense. You are a *slave* and you better learn to do as you're told."

"I will not wear them. Give me back the black robe if there will be no one to see me in this place."

"You *defy* me? I warned you that you must obey or be punished. Put these on!"

"No!"

"Very well." Ilara signaled to the three slaves, who rushed over and pushed Bethany back onto the raised pallet. One sat on her calves, another on her back, while the third held Bethany's hands outstretched. Ilara picked up a limber length of thin wood, swished it through the air with a whistling sound, and then slapped the flat of the wood across the instep of Bethany's left foot. Bethany screamed at the unexpected sharp pain.

"The beauty of this punishment is, for all the pain it brings, it leaves no mark on the skin." Another swing of her arm and the wood slapped the right instep. Bethany screamed again, both her feet on fire.

"I can keep this up for far longer than you can withstand it. Now put on the clothes."

Bethany grudgingly put on the immodest garments. The first item was a small translucent garment, which looked like a pair of legless breeches that fit snugly across her hips, covering her from there to her waist, yet left her legs bare. Over this was worn a pair of sheer trousers gathered at the ankles and waist which caused them to balloon out over her legs. The sleeveless vest was also translucent and ended just below her breasts, leaving her stomach exposed. One small ribbon held the vest closed. Soft slippers were placed on her feet and her hair was braided into a single braid that fell the length of her spine.

She looked at herself in the polished metal mirror and did not really recognize the reflection as that of Lady Bethany, lady-in-waiting to Queen Beatrice of Aluria. The woman looking back at her was a stranger.

"Come with me," Ilara said. "I will show you where we will be staying and get you something to eat. You're becoming skinny and nomad men like some meat on their women."



## Chapter 24

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Rory and Swiftstalker sat atop their camels and stared in awe at the assembled mass of humanity represented by the sea of tents that surrounded the Oasis of the Moon. The tents stretched for miles around the city and every foot of that distance was covered by nomad warriors.

“And just how can we possibly slip through there to reach that city, lad?”

“Can you swim, Uncle?”

Swiftstalker looked out at the vast lake. He knew they would have to enter the lake far from the encircling tents and swim out into its center. Then they would have to swim as silently as possible to the wall, find some way to gain entry into the city itself, and then locate Lady Bethany. If that weren't hard enough, they would then have to get back out again without being slaughtered by the million or so nomad warriors outside the city walls. “Yes, I can swim but I don't think it's the best way in or out.”

“It no longer matters, Uncle. We have company approaching.” Rory indicated the large dust cloud approaching from beyond the dunes behind them.

Rory stripped off his robes, revealing his mithrail mail shirt and freeing him to fight. Swiftstalker quickly shed his own robes as the first of the host of nomad warriors crested the dune.

Rory slipped from his camel and waited as the warriors came to a stop.

\* \* \*

There was a muttered conversation between the warriors as they eyed the two gleaming apparitions before them.

“What can they be except *djinn*? Look how tall they are and how they shine in the sun,” said the leader of the warrior patrol.

The warrior next to him said, “They are infidels, no more. If you fear to face them, I shall do it.” With those words, he spurred his camel forward and charged toward Rory, waving his scimitar wildly in a circle over his head.

Rory waited until the last possible second and then ducked. His swords flashed briefly in the sun then returned to their scabbards. The warrior's saddle slid off the camel's back, dumping him onto the sand where he tumbled down the face of the dune. There was not a mark on the camel as it galloped past the downed warrior and away to the city beyond.

Two warriors charged at Rory and once again he waited. He dropped into a forward somersault as they passed; his swords flashed, and both warriors followed their predecessors down the dune, their saddles tumbling behind them.

The warrior leader held up his hand to stop anyone else from charging, and said, "Greetings, mighty warriors of the *djinn*. How may we be of service?"

Swiftstalker said, "We have come to speak with the caliph."

The warrior considered this. "We can escort you to the caliph's court but we cannot be sure he will see you."

"Lad, remember the last time we had a nomad escort," Swiftstalker muttered.

"Would you prefer to kill them all and still have to fight our way into the city, oh great Lord of the Forest?" Rory whispered back. "They refer to us as *djinn*. Is that not a magical being of the desert?" Facing the warriors once more, he spoke loudly, "We would be honored to have your escort but know this. We are, in truth, *djinn*." Concentrating while pulling from the immense life force around them, Rory created a good-sized snowball and tossed it to the startled warrior leader.

He had seen snow before in the high mountains once during a late raid one season. He passed the snowball to the other warriors to examine and then told one to race with it to the city, promising a reward if the warrior could present the lump of snow to the caliph's grand vizier.

Rory mounted his camel and turned it toward the city with Swiftstalker close behind. The warriors fanned out around them, giving them a wide berth.

They reached the outskirts of the tent city and began to travel through a wide lane between two of the tribes. The warriors of the tribes gathered along the sides of the lane to watch as the caliph's men passed with two tall shining strangers in their midst. There was obvious tension between the warriors of the tribes and those of the caliph, and most of the men had their hands on the hilts of their scimitars.

When they rode into the Oasis of the Moon, they found the square in front of the caliph's plaza filled with rank upon rank of turbaned nomad warriors, each armed with a scimitar that hung from a broad gold sash. Their escort held back after pointing toward the central steps where three figures stood. The one in the center could be none other than the grand vizier. The other two were the largest men Rory had ever seen, both massively muscled, bared to the waist, with tremendous scimitars held across their chests.

"Here we go again," muttered Swiftstalker.

"Look at the vizier's left hand," replied Rory.

Swiftstalker looked. Bouncing in the palm of the man's hand was a small melting ball of ice.

Rory concentrated for a moment and made the two camels kneel in unison. Once they were down, Rory and Swiftstalker dismounted and stepped toward the vizier, who tossed the melting chunk of ice to Rory. "You claim to be *djinn*, yet you do not match the description of any in our legends."

"Then your legends speak only of the *djinn* of the desert. We are *djinn* of the northern forest." As Rory spoke, he recreated the giant snowball and then converted it to a ball of flame.

"We are not impressed by simple conjuring tricks. A true *djinn* will be able to get by these two guards and through this door, but without harming them in the process. They, on the other hand, will do their best to take your heads from your shoulders."

The two walking mountains come down the steps, their huge scimitars sweeping the area in front of them in a synchronized manner.

"Any suggestions?" Swiftstalker asked.

"The first thing that comes to mind is avoiding getting hit by one of the swords."

"I never would have thought of that." Swiftstalker drew his sword.

As Rory drew his twin swords, his sense of time expansion began. This time he reached out to the life force to increase its effects, permitting him to move even faster and slowing the two large warriors to a relative standstill. Rory moved over to the first one and eased the large scimitar from his grasp, substituting a freshly created palm frond. He then cut the cord holding up the giant's pants, and slid them to his ankles. He did the same thing to the other one. He moved back to his original spot and relaxed the control he held over time.

To everyone there, it seemed no time had elapsed. One second the two warriors were advancing with their scimitars and the next they were stumbling about, pants around their ankles and waving palm fronds. Their giant scimitars rested at the feet of the strange silver *djinn*. The situation had been suddenly transformed from a deadly confrontation to something very humorous, and the assembled warriors began to laugh in spite of themselves.

At that moment, Rory and Swiftstalker began one of their high-speed sparring matches; their swords a blur in the sunlight and the sound of the metal clashing almost a continuous ringing noise. There was no one in that square who doubted the *djinn* could have carved their way through them all if they had so desired. When Rory and Swiftstalker stopped, Rory gestured at the two scimitars as if inviting the two warriors to pick them up and try again. Both shook their heads and stepped back, still holding their pants up with one hand and grasping the palm fronds with the other.

The grand vizier stepped forward. "Surely you are *djinn* for never have we witnessed such a display of magic and swordsmanship. The caliph will be pleased to receive you."

The grand vizier escorted them inside the palace of the caliph. Rory admired the beauty of it, with its tiled hallways and graceful gardens, even potted palms strategically placed to add a touch of the outside to the richly appointed dwelling. They finally reached a large pair of double doors. "If I may be permitted to ask, what names shall I give to the caliph?" asked the grand vizier.

Swiftstalker said, "I am Lord Swiftstalker of the Great Forest and this is Lord Rorrick, son of Prince Brightblade of the Great Forest."

The grand vizier nodded and opened the two doors, leading the pair into the caliph's receiving hall. There were groups of nomad chieftains as well as functionaries of the caliph's court on either side of the aisle that lead to the central dais. Upon that dais, seated upon a large floor pillow, was the Caliph of the Desert, ruler of the nomad tribes.

"Oh, Grand and Glorious Caliph, I bring you two *djinn* who have come to you from the

Great Forest far to the north. This is Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest, and this is Lord Rorrick, son of Prince Brightblade of the Forest.”

The caliph was the oldest man Rory had ever seen, with a long white beard that fell past his ample waistline. Dressed all in gold, from his tasseled slippers to his large turban, with gold silk pants and jacket, each festooned with precious gems that sparkled in the sunlight entering the room through the windows that pierced the walls, he had the piercing gaze of a hawk, however. His eyes showed that while the body may have been old, the mind was clear and sharp as the blade of the jeweled scimitar that rested on his knees.

“It is not often the *djinn* come to visit in peace. Never in the memory of the Oasis of the Moon have we received anyone from the Forest *djinn*.” The caliph’s voice was steady and assured. “I have been told of the feats of magic you have performed, as well as the swordsmanship that surpasses mortal men, demonstrated both here in front of the grand vizier and outside the city in front of my patrol. I must ask myself what would bring two *djinn* such as you to call upon me at this particular time. Could it be linked, I wonder, to the news I have received of the death of that odious viper called the Duke of Solange, along with his vile sorcerer?”

Lord Swiftstalker replied, “The caliph is well informed about things that happened beyond the Great Desert. Yes, the deaths of these men have a bearing on the reason for our visit to you. We have come on both a personal mission, as well as a political one.”

The caliph pursed his lips as he thought about Swiftstalker’s reply. “Does your political mission or even your private one require a private meeting, or can we discuss them openly for all to judge?”

Rory said, “We invite all to hear our words, Great Caliph of the Desert. There are those, for reasons of their own, who seek to embroil the peoples of the desert in a great war against the *djinn* of the Great Forest. By doing so, they seek to bring the warriors of the *djinn* against those of the desert so the great tribes will be decimated for, as brave and as numerous as they may be, they could not stand against us.”

The tribal leaders all muttered as they heard this. The caliph held up his hand to still them. “How would they create this conflict between us? Our warriors do not go near the Great Forest in the north.”

Swiftstalker said, “The son of our prince has been engaged to marry a woman from the court of Aluria. She has been stolen away by those behind this plot, and given to one of the great tribes to be brought here, where she will be presented to you as a gift. The plotters believe that Lord Rorrick, with his great love for this woman, would stop at nothing to bring her back to the Great Forest, and if she had been harmed or violated by those who held her, Lord Rorrick would exact a terrible price. The Great Caliph, who would not have known of this, would be the target of Lord Rorrick’s rage.”

Rory spoke up once more. “The details of the plot have been established. The Duke of Solange admitted his part, bringing my betrothed to Solange as an accommodation to those behind the plot. For that, and his treason to his liege lord, the King of Aluria, he has paid a very heavy price.”

The caliph grinned sadistically. “No price that vermin could pay would ever be high

enough. He sold out this land to a foreign king and was then false to that alliance as well. What I have heard of the King of Aluria and his goals, I admire and would learn more. This so-called Duke of Solange had no right or authority over the peoples of the desert, yet he bartered away our freedom as well. We had long been considering taking some recompense for his actions, but you have done that for us. Did you really flay his skin from his hands and feet?"

"And more, Great Caliph, would have been done but he was in a great hurry to tell us everything he thought we wanted to know and a great deal we had no interest in. Although the location of a hidden mine of gold might be of interest to you and your people since it apparently lies within the Great Desert," Lord Swiftstalker said.

"And what of that black-hearted sorcerer who performed perverse rites in the tallest minaret?"

Rory said, "His evil smell annoyed me."

"Truly, you are great *djinn* for we have tried many times to end that one's existence. All we have sent have died in agony in that tower." The caliph looked pleased. "We thank you for eliminating those enemies of the Desert People and we are interested greatly in the location of this mine." Turning his attention to Rory, the caliph said, "So the Duke of Solange said he shipped the girl here. The duke was a notorious liar with little acquaintance with the truth. Can you be sure she is here?"

Rory looked at the caliph, his eyes quite cold. "She has been here for three days and is being kept in a building near the edge of your city. She bears an enchanted pendant I gave her and I know where she is and how she has been treated. One man who mistreated her and tried to take her pendant was immediately burned to death by an unquenchable fire. She is here and I will know if anything happens to her."

The caliph nodded his head. "What would you have me do, mighty *djinn*?"

"I do not hold the tribe responsible for her abduction for they have merely sought to follow your customs and were duped by those who would sow discord between us. I do, however, hold them accountable for their treatment of her since she is of noble birth and spirit. Her safe return to me, unharmed, will satisfy that account."

The caliph nodded his head. "Will you trust me in getting this set right, mighty one? The presentation of the Gifts will be this afternoon. It would dishonor the tribe if I were to remove their gift before they have had a chance to present it. Until then, would you accept our hospitality and join us in food and drink?"

"It would be our honor to be your guests, Great Caliph of the Desert People."

\* \* \*

Before they could dine, Rory and Swiftstalker were taken to the caliph's personal baths and allowed to refresh themselves. The chance to wash away weeks of sweat, dirt, and sand lifted their spirits greatly, although the presence of body slaves disturbed them. The caliph's master of the baths, a short, fat eunuch named Sasha, oversaw their treatment, and was in despair over the condition of their clothes. "Mighty *djinn*, what would you have me do? These rags are

not fit to wear to eat with the caliph."

Rory looked at the sad pile of clothes. Concentrating very hard, he said, "Assistance, please."

Before Sasha's startled eyes, a small desert sprite appeared. "How may I help you, Lord Rorrick and Lord Swiftstalker of the Forest?"

"We find ourselves in need of suitable clothing to dine with the Great Caliph. While we wish to do him honor, we would prefer something more natural to the Fair Folk of the Great Forest. Would this be possible?"

"It shall be our pleasure, Lord Rorrick." The sprite vanished and seconds later, two piles of clothing replaced the sad remnants of the fighting leathers they had worn since leaving Aluria weeks before.

"Before you dress, great ones, would you permit us to trim your beards and care for your nails?" Sasha asked.

As they let the body slaves trim and style their beards into elegance, Rory said, "Sasha, this does not seem like much of a job for a man to do."

Sasha said, "I do not just care for this bath. I am responsible for all the baths in the Oasis of the Moon, and there are over three hundred. Most of the time, only a few require my direct attention, but during this time of year, I also oversee those used for preparing the Gifts."

Rory went very still. "Then you must have seen one of them with hair like spun copper and eyes like the forest pines."

Sasha rolled his eyes. "Oh, *that* one. She was a lot of trouble, that one was. She certainly didn't like the clothes she was given and they had to beat her to make her submit."

"What did you just say?" Rory's voice was very hard and even.

"Oh, not seriously. Just enough to make their point that a slave must obey. Of course, the beating left no marks that might detract from her value to the caliph, which is good since she has such beautiful skin. Since then, she has been pampered." Sasha then prattled on about some of the other Gifts and Rory stopped listening.

When the slave had finished trimming his beard and then arranged his long black hair into a single braid down his back, Rory dressed in the clothes provided by the sprite. First he put his mithrail shirt back on, then the flowing silk trousers commonly found in the Veil. Dark forest green in color, they had a wide silver band about each cuff. Above that band, a pack of tiny silver wolves seemed to be running. The accompanying silk shirt was silver in base color, with a motif of dark green pine boughs and the wolf's head crest of Westfell upon the left breast. A dark green sash of silk wrapped around his waist and held his dagger. He swiftly placed his scabbards over his shoulder and fastened the straps in place across his chest. He then placed a glamour over the swords so none would see them until drawn. When Swiftstalker was finished dressing, Rory repeated the glamour over his weapons as well.

Catching a glimpse of themselves in the polished metal wall inside the dressing room of the caliph's personal bath, Rory realized they looked every inch the Lords of the Great Forest they were. *Wouldn't Bethany be surprised!*

## Chapter 25

« ^ »

Bethany had just finished her second bath of the day and her hair was once again combed out. *Whoever thought the luxury of having such a bath would become boring and tiresome?* All she had done for three days was bathe, have her hair brushed, and eat. Frankly, she was sick of it all. It had taken the better part of the three days for the soles of her feet to stop hurting whenever she walked anywhere. She had expected to find a mass of bruises or a welt across her feet when she'd looked, but they were unmarked. That was an effective punishment in the hands of someone who knew how to swing a switch!

For all her boredom, she knew this afternoon would be very different. Today was the presentation of the gifts, and in a short while, she would be taken to the palace. *What do I hope for? Do I want to be acceptable to the caliph and live a pampered, pointless existence in the palace, and perhaps have to submit to the lusts of the most powerful man in the desert? Do I wish to be found unacceptable, and live the rest of my life as a miserable slave either in the palace or with one of the tribes?* To be honest, she wished she would be struck dead than live either way. She clung to life by virtue of the small wolf pendant that hung around her neck; the last link she had to her former life and Rory. *Why hasn't he come for me?*

Ilara came in carrying the new outfit she was to wear. Bethany realized the colors had been chosen to bring emphasis to her hair and eyes, but they also brought tears. They were the dark green of Westfell. Small traces of silver shot through the fabric around the edges of the vest and waistband of the sheer overtrousers. This color would make her eyes even greener and her hair shine like the sunset in a forest. One of the slave girls had painted the nails of her toes and fingers a shiny silver, too.

As she reached for the garments, Bethany realized one very vital item was missing. "Ilara, a part is missing."

"No, child, it is not. Today you shall be veiled by only these garments so the Caliph can appreciate the beauty of his Gift." Ilara looked at her sternly. "Do not make me beat you again, child. It will do you no good to fight against this and in the end, you will have to submit, even as I did when I was presented to the Caliph."

Bethany knew Ilara was right. Rebellion would just bring more pain and possibly make her unacceptable to the caliph. She slowly drew on the gossamer pants, realizing the cloth did nothing to conceal anything. The vest was made from the same material and lacked a tie to hold the vest closed. As she moved, it would part, providing a clear view of what the vest hardly concealed. As if the garments were not humiliating enough, Ilara took a small brush and painted Bethany's lips and nipples with a ruby stain to make them stand out under the filmy garment. Finally, a veil of the same gauzy material was pinned into her hair covering her face from the tip of her nose to just below her chin.

*How can I walk through the halls of the palace dressed like this?* Even as she wondered, Ilara draped the familiar black robe of a slave around her, carefully covering Bethany's hair and

clothes to preclude any damage or imperfection. Her face veiled, Bethany was led from the baths, her home for the last few days, to an uncertain future.

As they walked toward the palace hall, they were joined by other women leading the other tribes' gifts. At the doorway to the caliph's chamber, the gifts were admonished. "Remain silent and keep your gaze to the floor at all times. You must never look into the caliph's face unless he tells you to do so. Obey all commands instantly."

The doors were opened and for a brief moment, Bethany saw into the room. It was filled with hundreds of men, all looking toward the doorway. All she could see of the caliph was a figure dressed in gold before a prod from Ilara made her look at the floor as she had been told. One by one, the Gifts were led into the room. When they reached the front rank, their heavy robe was removed to reveal the frightened girl underneath. Each was then led before the caliph and judged whether she was acceptable.

Some of the tribes had tried to mask the girls of average appearance by embellishing their outfits with bangles of gold or silver. Pearls were braided into their hair as a further distraction. Bethany knew she hadn't needed that sort of help. Her tribe had left her hair unbound so it would speak for itself and she wore no jewelry except the mithrail pendant that hung between her breasts. Two of the girls had been found to be unacceptable, and those tribes would have to add more gold and silver to their tribute to the caliph. Three had been of such worth the caliph had added them to his harem, while the next four were chosen as slaves within the palace. It was finally her turn.

Ilara removed the concealing robe and a hush fell over the room. She knew every man in the chamber could see her almost as clearly as if she had been naked, and she felt a moment of shame. She also realized she was perhaps the most beautiful and exotic of all the gifts and that made her proud. She held herself straight with her shoulders back yet she looked to the floor until she was centered in front of the caliph.

"Look at me, child."

Bethany raised her face to see the old man in gold who sat before her and, for a moment, she felt a glimmer of hope because in some way, he reminded her of the Duke of Westfell. There was something in his eyes that spoke of kindness and decency.

"Which tribe presents this gift? Let the naib come forth," the caliph said.

The leader of the tribe came to stand beside Bethany. "This is indeed a princely gift you have brought, for in presenting us with this woman you have done great things for the People of the Desert. You have rid our land of the Duke of Solange and his vile sorcerer. You have created an opportunity for us to align with the mighty *djinn* of the Great Forest and given us a voice among the councils of the King of Aluria. I accept this gift and reward your tribe as follows. You may keep all the silver and gold, precious spices, and other goods you would normally pay as tribute for this year."

The naib was speechless in his gratitude and knelt before the caliph and bowed until his head rested at his ruler's feet. He then rose to his feet and walked proudly back to his place in the front ranks of the room.

The caliph spoke to Bethany. "The *djinn* has spoken truly. To the one who loves you, you



are well worth fighting a war to keep. It is my will, therefore, that you will be given to the *djinn* as a token of our good will and everlasting friendship." The caliph nodded and someone moved up to Bethany's side. Confused and scared of what this might mean, she turned her head to find herself staring into Rory's eyes.

Rory had conjured up a silk cloak of Westfell green and silver and wrapped it around Bethany. He took her into his arms and kissed her deeply, then said, "You're safe now, Bethany. No one will ever keep us apart again." He swept her up into his arms and carried her from the chamber as the nomad naibs and their subchiefs erupted in cheers of approval.

\* \* \*

Rory kept his word. For the three nights they stayed as guests of the caliph in his palace, they were never apart. They were truly man and wife now; a wedding would be a formality to be completed once they returned to Westfell. The caliph had presented Bethany with a vast wardrobe of silk dresses and her own servants, although Rory had secretly saved the gossamer outfit she had worn at the presentation. He would never forget how beautiful she had looked wearing it, or how enticing.

On the morning of their third day, Bethany said, "My husband, I would ask a boon of you."

"If it is mine to grant, you shall have it, my love."

"I would like Ilara to come with us back to Westfell, Rory. Although she has lived most of her life here among the desert people, she is nothing more than a slave to them. I would bring her home with us."

"You have a good heart. I know she is the one who beat you."

"She is the one who taught me how to survive here, Rory. My own stubbornness caused the beating and even then she was careful to administer only what was required. Had she failed, she would have been killed."

Rory thought for a moment. "If she has lived her life here among these people and borne two sons who still live among the tribe, perhaps she will not wish to leave, Bethany. I shall summon her and you may ask whether she wishes to come with us. If she does, I shall seek out her naib and see what can be done."

Bethany kissed him and then said, "Thank you, husband."

\* \* \*

Ilara was filled with trepidation as she was led to the rooms of the *djinn*. No one had explained why the mighty spirits had summoned her, and her mind worried the question as she approached the door. As she entered the room, she realized only an honored mother waited within. Eyes downcast, she knelt before the woman and said, "I am the slave Ilara summoned to this place."

"Oh, Ilara, have I changed so much you cannot recognize me?"

Ilara glanced up in astonishment. *It was the Gift herself!*

"Ilara, I have a question for you. In a few days, we shall leave the palace of the caliph and the Oasis of the Moon to travel across the desert and return to our home in the north. Would you like to come with us?"

"A slave has no wishes, honored mother of the mighty *djinn*."

"If you come with us, Ilara, you will no longer be a slave. I would like you to live with me in the land of Westfell as my friend to help me become the best wife I can be and to care for me and my husband."

Ilara sat there, stunned at her good fortune. To no longer be a slave. To return to the land of her birth and away from this land of heat and sand. "I would like that very much, honored mother."

"Then you must stop calling me that immediately. You may call me Lady Bethany and my husband is Lord Rorrick." Bethany laughed. "And that other one is Lord Swiftstalker. Now, we need to get you some better clothes. No one wears the black robe of slavery around me."

## *Part Five*

# *ALURIA, WESTFELL, THE GREAT FOREST, AND SOLANGE*

## **Chapter 26**

« ^ »

The King and Queen of Aluria were dining in their chambers with Earl Sudcliffe, the king's chancellor, when a page knocked at the door.

"I ask your forgiveness at this intrusion, Your Majesties, but you have visitors who beg leave to speak with you. It is Lord Rorrick and Lady Bethany of Westfell."

"Send them in! Tell the kitchen to send up more food," King William ordered. "By the All-Father, he found her!"

When the door opened again, Rory and Bethany stepped in. Queen Beatrice rushed to her former lady-in-waiting and held Bethany tightly in her arms, tears of joy running unabashedly down her face. "Oh, child, I never thought to see you again!"

"I am fine, Your Majesty. My husband saw to that."

"Husband! Your marriage is still some months away yet, young woman," said Earl Sudcliffe.

"Please, sir, I ask you to withhold your judgment and comments until you have heard the

facts. Bethany is indeed my legal wife and has been so for several weeks now. This will be clear once I have explained all that has happened," Rory said, trying to calm the situation.

Earl Sudcliffe looked angry but agreed to bide his time. The king and queen were bursting with their curiosity but the arrival of the kitchen staff with additional place settings and food forestalled any more discussion until they were alone once again.

The king asked, "Where is Lord Swiftstalker? We thought nothing could keep him from your side."

"He has gone to the Great Forest, sire, to advise my father of my success."

Once the staff had withdrawn and the food served, the king said, "We received the report from the captain of the guard you sent back after you escaped from the Duke of Solange. We commend you on your actions there, by the way, and are still considering whether to invade Solange and bring them to heel."

"That will not be necessary as you will see when I finish our tale." Rory then explained how he and Swiftstalker had arrived at the Oasis of the Moon, gained access to the caliph, and then regained Lady Bethany.

Earl Sudcliffe said, "So how do you consider yourselves married? That I do not understand."

"Sir, when the caliph presented Bethany to me, he did so as my first wife rather than as a possession or slave. He explained that by their laws, we became married at that moment in front of the entire host of tribes of the Desert Peoples. We were then given a wedding feast hosted by the caliph and his naibs, and again by their customs, taken to the bridal chamber. The next day, the bloodstained bed sheets were displayed for all to see that Bethany had gone to the marriage bed a pure and chaste bride, confirming for all time her position as First Wife to Lord Rorrick of the Forest. We will, of course, have a ceremony in Westfell to confirm the wedding for all to see." Rory was quite firm as he said, "But understand me well, sir. We *are* married and no one, not you and not even the king himself, will ever separate us again."

The earl had been watching his daughter during the time Rory had been talking. He had seen the pride and happiness in her face as she watched this young man at her side, and knew that in his daughter's mind, they were indeed man and wife. To offer any further objections would risk losing any connection he had with her. "Fear not, son. I recognize the validity of this marriage as you have explained the circumstances. I would like to suggest that we all travel to Westfell and hold this confirming ceremony quickly to still any wagging tongues."

Queen Beatrice said, "Of course we will travel to Westfell immediately! The duke must know his heir has returned with his new wife."

The king shook his head. "No matter how much we may wish to leave immediately, we will require some time to prepare for the journey. It will take us four days to get everything ready and three days to travel to Westfell. We will dispatch a message to Westfell immediately informing Duke Richard of the happy news and of our arrival in seven days."

The queen was too busy hugging Bethany to raise any objections. "Beatrice, why don't you and Bethany withdraw for now while we discuss the fate of Solange. We sense Rory has more to say that you will probably find boring. We are likewise sure you wish to hear about Lady

Bethany's ordeal from her own lips."

After the women had withdrawn from the room, King William poured each of them a brandy. "First, a toast to Lord Rorrick for his amazing rescue of Lady Bethany."

The king and Earl Sudcliffe raised their glasses in a salute to Rory and then Rory said, "Thank you, sire, but I had help. Swiftstalker was with me every step of the way."

King William said, "You said earlier that invading Solange would not be necessary. Please, explain what you meant."

"Sire, I carry a message to you from the Caliph of the Desert Peoples. Before I give it to you, I must place the message in perspective. The Desert Peoples have never recognized the so-called Duke of Solange, nor do they recognize the right of anyone to control what they do. When the duke joined the Realm of Aluria, he did so without the support of the Desert Peoples. The duke's nomad warriors everyone talked about were outcasts among their own kind, who had chosen to abandon their tribes to live the easier life in the city along the Solange River. Compared to the true desert warriors, those troops were a joke. With twenty-eight King's Own, Swiftstalker and I slaughtered all the duke's warriors we came into conflict with. The caliph's warriors would not have been so easy. You must also understand that the areas around the Solange River have a population of around one hundred thousand people, including women, children, and the elderly. The caliph can field an army of over one million warriors, and their total population exceeds ten million."

"We never realized how large the Great Desert was," King William said. "To support that vast a population with a nomadic lifestyle, the territory must be enormous."

"That it is, sire. The Great Desert is, therefore, a separate nation just as the Great Forest is within Westfell, yet is apart from the realm. The caliph rules this separate realm with absolute authority. In many ways, sire, he is a great deal like yourself and has similar aims for his realm: peace and security, a better standard of living for its inhabitants, and the freedom from outside interference." As the king nodded at each point, Rory knew it was time for the caliph's message. "The Great Caliph of the Desert People has told me to give William, King of Aluria, the following message. He offers a mutual alliance between the Desert People and the Realm of Aluria. Should you need military support in defense of the realm, he pledges his warriors and as many of the tribe warriors as you may require. In exchange, he asks that you cede control of the area formerly known as the duchy of Solange to him."

"Lord Rorrick, the realm is in your debt. You have done something that neither we nor our father, King Roland, before us could accomplish and that is to secure our southern border. You have created the opportunity for an alliance with a major power that will assist in protecting this realm from the threat we all know is looming from the east. Somehow, we will find some way to adequately reward you for what you have done," King William said.

Rory went to one knee. "Sire, what I did was what any loyal subject would have done, and most of it was pure happenstance as opposed to any conscious act on my part. My goal was to find Bethany and bring her home. She is all the reward I could ever desire."

Earl Sudcliffe cleared his throat. "Lord Rorrick, please accept the grateful thanks of a father and his blessing upon your marriage. I am proud to call you son."

\* \* \*

The queen sat in rapt attention as Bethany described her experiences with the desert people. As she described the final outfit she wore to be presented to the caliph, the queen was scandalized. "You mean, you had to wear this in front of hundreds of men! And they could see through it!"

Bethany laughed. "Yes, Your Majesty. At first I was both humiliated and mortified, but I soon realized I was so much more attractive than all the others that my pride took charge. I straightened my spine, squared my shoulders to thrust out my chest, and thought, 'Look all you want and dream about what you can never have.' I knew I would be acceptable to the caliph and I would never be a slave. Once I saw him, I knew my virtue would never be in danger as he was older than any man I had ever seen. His eyes were kind and made me think of Rory's grandfather, the Duke of Westfell. Then he announced he was giving me to some *djinn*, some magical being, and my heart fell to my feet. I slowly turned and realized the *djinn* was my very own love."

"That is so romantic. And you found yourself married."

"Yes, Your Majesty, and that is more than I had ever dreamed it would be," Bethany replied with such a look of complete satisfaction that the queen momentarily envied her.

There was a knock at the door to the queen's chamber and Earl Sudcliffe stuck his head in. "Your pardon, Your Majesty, but I would like to spend a moment with my daughter before I retire."

"By all means, Chancellor! We shall go hug that rascal Rory and leave you two alone." Queen Beatrice walked toward the door to the outer chamber.

Once the queen left, Earl Sudcliffe held out his arms and Bethany rushed into his embrace. "My child, it is so wonderful to have you safe once more. Are you truly as happy as you seem?"

Bethany looked up at her father and said, "There are no words to tell you just how happy I am, Father. I was to be either a concubine or a slave, and was rescued by the man I love. He has proven his love in ways most men never can or need to, by facing incredible danger while rescuing me. I never had any doubt that he would find me, and I know he will always be there whenever I need him."

The earl hugged her tighter. "I know he will. I have told him and I will say it to you now. You both have my blessings. Your husband is everything your mother and I wanted for you and more. I am proud of you both." He kissed the top of her head and then said, "Now go to him while I head for my bed, a happier man than I have been since the morning we realized you were missing."

## Chapter 27

The Duke of Westfell stood atop the curtain wall at Westfell Keep, staring at the approaching throng. They were still more than an hour away, and they would slow once they reached the village of Westfell itself to permit the people to see the heir and his new wife riding at the side of the king and queen.

Duke Richard had been beside himself with joy when the king's messenger had arrived with the news that Rory had returned with Bethany at his side as his wife. The king has also said they would be arriving at Westfell this day to join Westfell and Sudcliffe in celebrating the marriage of their two heirs. The news had spread throughout Westfell like a wildfire before the wind, and everyone in the duchy began their own preparations to welcome their heroes home. The village was immaculate with everything tidied up; General Gustav had said it appeared they had even groomed the chickens!

They were just starting to enter the village now. He could see Rory riding beside the king and Bethany next to the queen. The people were cheering them loudly, waving flowers and calling out blessings on Lady Bethany. Duke Richard realized he had better get moving if he was going to be in the courtyard to greet his monarch.

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"They do seem to love you, Rory," King William said as they rode past the cheering people.

"The people love anyone who they know cares for their well-being. The Dukes of Westfell have a long history of working beside their subjects to bring in the harvest, setting the stones for a new building, or even thatching a roof. They know the dukes believe in service *to* the people, rather than service *from* the people like so many others."

They continued to wave at the people while maintaining their conversation. "Your Majesty, I must tell you that I am concerned for the queen. She has not been well these past few days."

"Now is not the time to have this discussion, Lord Rorrick," the king admonished. "We are aware of the queen's condition and she will be fine."

Chastened, Rory said, "I beg your pardon, sire. I had no right to pry. I was merely expressing my concern over the health of the queen."

"We know that, and no offence was taken," King William replied. "All will be clear in a little while."

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Duke Richard was waiting at the base of the steps when the royal party rode up. As the king dismounted, the duke went to one knee and said, "Welcome, sire. Westfell Keep is honored to host you for the second time this year."

"Rise, Duke Richard of Westfell. We are pleased to escort your heir and his bride home from their adventures in the deserts of Solange," King William said loud enough for all to hear. Then quietly, he added, "Go ahead, man! Greet your grandson."

Duke Richard wrapped his arms around Rory in a great hug, saying "Welcome home, lad. You look happy."

"I am, sir. Quite happy. Excuse me for one moment, Grandfather." With those words, Rory went over to help Bethany from her horse even as General Gustav once again assisted his queen.

Duke Richard welcomed Queen Beatrice even as his eyes went to the radiant face of Lady Bethany. Her happiness gleamed in her eyes as she came up to the duke and said, "Greetings, Grandfather. It is wonderful to return to Westfell."

"Welcome home," Duke Richard said. "And this is your home now, you know." Turning to the royal couple, he said, "Why don't we go inside and get everyone settled? I am sure the ladies would like to refresh themselves after the long trip from Aluria." Seeing a strange face among the group, he added, "And who is this?"

Bethany said, "This is Ilara, my companion who, like me, was kidnapped and held as a slave in the desert of Solange."

"Welcome to Westfell Keep, Ilara," Duke Richard said. "Mistress Margaret will show you where everything is."

Ilara curtseyed to the duke and followed Mistress Margaret inside, with the housekeeping staff carrying the luggage of those staying within the keep.

"Bethany, why don't you escort Queen Beatrice to her rooms while your father, Rory and I entertain the king in the library. Once you have had a chance to freshen up, I would like you and Her Majesty to join us there," Duke Richard said as they entered the keep.

\* \* \*

Rory had just finished telling Duke Richard about their adventures in Solange when the queen and Bethany joined them in the library. Once the queen was settled in a chair, Duke Richard said, "Bethany, since you are now married to Rorrick, there are some things I want you to have. Rory, would you please bring me that small chest over on that table?" Once the chest had been brought, Duke Richard said, "This chest contains the jewelry once worn by my late wife. They would have gone to my daughter when she returned from court but that was not fated to be. As you will be the next Duchess of Westfell, it is only right that they pass to you. Please accept them with my love as your new grandfather."

Bethany opened the chest and was amazed at the collection of precious gems it contained, each set in gold, silver, or platinum. There were rings, earbobs, hair combs, tiaras, bracelets, and necklaces too numerous to count. Bethany rose from her chair and gave the duke a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, Grandfather, for this magnificence. I am at a loss for words."

He patted her on the back, pleased with her reaction. A flash of silver caught his eye and he realized she still wore the mithrail pendant that led Rory across the world to find her.

"You're staring at my ... wolf again, Grandfather," Bethany chided him. "You are as bad as Lord Swiftstalker. I guess some men just never outgrow their fascination with ... silver."

Everyone laughed as the duke blushed and mumbled, "Men never outgrow an appreciation for a beautiful woman. The day I stop looking is the day you can declare me dead and Rory will become the next duke."

"Flatterer," she said before she kissed his cheek once more and then returned to her seat.

"Before we get to the part where we start planning the recognition and celebration of the marriage between Bethany and your heir, the queen and I wish to make an announcement," King William said. "After all these years, we are thrilled to tell you that the queen is expecting a baby in about six months."

Bethany rushed to the woman who had been like a mother to her and gave her a loving embrace in congratulations, while the men all congratulated the king. Bethany whispered, "So that's why you've been unwell on the road. Oh, Your Majesty, I am so happy for you."

Queen Beatrice smiled shyly. "I suspect it happened the night of your betrothal dinner, my dear, so I owe you a debt myself. Oh, Bethany, we have waited so long for this and I worry that I am too old."

"Nonsense, Your Majesty." Although secretly, Bethany had thought the same thing. The queen was nearing her fortieth year and was far older than most women who carried their first child. "We will just have to take extra care of you from now on."

Duke Richard poured them all a large brandy to toast the news, although the queen and Bethany both demurred from the potent alcohol. "To the heir!" offered Duke Richard.

"To the queen," said the king.

After the toasts were drunk and everyone returned to their seats once more, Duke Richard said, "The whole kingdom will rejoice in this news."

"A proclamation will be read tomorrow in Aluria and copies will be sent to Kendrahl and Eastfell. Another copy accompanies my envoy to the Great Caliph as we have accepted his offer of an alliance and returned Solange to his control," King William said. "You may spread the good news within Westfell."

"It will be my great pleasure, sire." Duke Richard rang for Mistress Margaret. When she appeared, he said, "Mistress Margaret, I want you to spread the joyous news. The king and queen are expecting an heir to the throne of Aluria. The happy event should occur in about six months."

Mistress Margaret said, "Your Majesties, this is indeed wonderful news. It will be my pleasure to tell everyone I see." With a quick curtsy, she left the room to start spreading the new gossip.

"I have found she is faster at getting the word out than any proclamation could ever be." Duke Richard laughed. "She has more connections among the people than one would expect."

\* \* \*

The feast at the keep was a joyous event for not only did they celebrate the marriage of the heir and his lady, they were also joining with the king and queen in celebrating the



long-awaited heir to the throne. The queen had drawn the very pregnant Rachel, wife of General Gustav, aside to ask those questions that only another pregnant woman could answer. The feast was well underway when a bedraggled Swiftstalker walked in to the room. His clothes were muddy and torn, mute evidence of a hard trip to Westfell.

He walked straight to the head table, picked up Rory's wineglass, and drained it. He then picked up Lady Bethany's and drained it as well before he could speak.

"I bring ill news. King Alaric has been murdered," Swiftstalker said. "You must come to the Heart of the Veil at once. Your father, King Brightblade, extends an invitation to your wife as well."

When Swiftstalker refilled a glass and started to drink once more, pandemonium broke out. The king motioned for Duke Richard, Rory, General Gustav, and Swiftstalker to join him away from the hall. They withdrew to the library, where the king said, "Tell us what happened, Lord Swiftstalker."

"King Alaric had received a message requesting a meeting near the Tower of the Pact. Since the message was signed by Duke Richard of Westfell, the king thought it might concern the whereabouts of Lord Rorrick, so he went with his usual guards who travel with him within the Great Forest. When King Alaric did not return in a reasonable period, we went to find him. His guards had been slaughtered, literally dismembered. Our king had also been mutilated in an effort to disguise the method of his death. He was slain by magic, a fact verified by our Master Mages." Swiftstalker turned to Duke Richard. "The fact that magic of the darkest sort was used to kill him is all that kept the elven warriors from riding on Westfell Keep. It was only through Arianna's intercession the warriors were averted. She rightly pointed out that no one in Westfell was capable of performing such dark magic and, after examining the message, she declared the seal and signature as fakes. The mood within the Veil is dark."

"Lord Swiftstalker, this news is upsetting to us all. You say that Lord Rorrick and Lady Bethany have been summoned to the Veil. Would there be a benefit if I and Duke Richard were to accompany them?" King William asked. "We could leave Queen Beatrice here in Westfell to rest, as well as all of the King's Own. We would entrust our safety to you and Lord Rorrick."

"I honestly don't know, Your Majesty. It would either defuse the tensions between the Veil and Aluria or result in open warfare as the pact would be broken."

"Would our being there break the pact?" Duke Richard asked.

"No, Your Grace, but your deaths would."

## Chapter 28

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Bethany left Ilara behind in Westfell to care for the queen. Much to the consternation of all the men, she had appeared in the courtyard wearing a pair of Westfell trousers and shirt and boots

rather than the expected riding habit.

"Be reasonable. The traditional garb would require that I ride sidesaddle, and that would slow our pace to a sedate walk. That would be inexcusable in these circumstances. This way I can ride astride and we can trot, canter, or even gallop as needed." She looked at Duke Richard, and said, "I have already had this discussion with my husband and he has seen the wisdom of my attire."

Duke Richard knew when to stand his ground and when to walk away. In this battle, he had lost before he knew there was one to be fought. He caught the glint of humor in the king's eye and he sighed, which made the king laugh.

"Lady Bethany, you will be a formidable duchess." King William laughed. "We see nothing wrong with your attire."

Bethany smiled at the king and kissed her new grandfather's cheek as Rory appeared leading his new horse and one for Bethany. Both were saddled with standard war saddles. Rory helped his wife mount and then spent several minutes adjusting the stirrups to fit her feet. "Beth, place your boots in these and post for me, please, so I can see if they are set up right." She did as he asked.

The king turned to Duke Richard. Indicating the young couple, he said, "Seeing the way she fills out the seat of those trousers, we would support making all women wear them from now on."

"Sire, for shame! What would the queen say?" Duke Richard laughed even as he agreed that Lady Bethany did indeed fill those trousers quite attractively.

"Her Royal Highness would call us a dirty old man even as she demanded several pair of her own. Perhaps your good wife never said anything, but we know the queen hates to wear the formal dresses society says she must. She has often told me how much she envies men the freedom of movement granted by our clothing. Well, my good Duke, it appears they are ready for us. To horse, old friend, and let us see if we can keep the Pact between elves and man intact."

\* \* \*

They had ridden hard, reaching the Tower of the Pact in just two days. Bethany had thoroughly enjoyed the ride, racing her husband and jumping fences whenever the chance presented itself. Her face was flushed with excitement and they had often raced ahead in order to steal a few private moments alone for a kiss or two. The king and the Duke of Westfell would lag behind with Lord Swiftstalker, granting the couple those brief moments together. They had spent the night in one of the small hamlets along the road to the tower, much to the surprise of the farmer who lived there.

They had ridden up to the front of the farmhouse just before sundown. The farmer had come out to see who his visitors might be. He had recognized the Duke of Westfell immediately. "Your Grace!"

"Good evening, Goodman Farmer. Would you have room by your fire for five weary travelers?"

"It would be an honor, Your Grace, but surely you would rather have our bed."

"Perhaps you should give the bed to King William." Duke Richard indicated the tired king.

The poor farmer had fallen to his knees before the king's horse, babbling about the great honor he felt. King William slid off the horse and helped the man to his feet, saying, "Nonsense, we will not deprive a hard-working man of his one comfort. We are so tired that a blanket and a warm fire will be more than enough after, perhaps, a bit of food and drink. Lord Rorrick, did you happen to pack any food we can give this goodman's wife?"

"Aye, sire, we have a great many items to give to her, more than we shall ever need since we will be in the Veil tomorrow," Rory said to the surprised farmer. "Lead on!"

\* \* \*

On their second day of travel, they had reached the Tower of the Pact shortly after midmorning. As they passed the site of the murder, Rory opened his senses completely. He was overwhelmed by the massive presence of evil. Whatever happened in this place involved such a great evil that Rory had no words to encompass it.

Swiftstalker reined up and asked, "Are you all right, lad?"

Color slowly returned to Rory's face as he shut down his senses, focusing them solely on Bethany's concerned face. Drawing a shaky breath, he said, "I am now. This was not done by anything human, Swiftstalker."

"We must move on if we are to reach the Veil. We still do not know whether we can get the others inside, and if we cannot, then we must return them to the tower with sufficient protection."

"The only protection from whatever did this is to be found inside the Veil, Swiftstalker. We must get them inside. When we get to the entrance, you must go inside and find Arianna. She will know what must be done."

Turning to the king and his grandfather, he said, "From this point forward, each of you and your horses must be blindfolded. The Veil is protected by a glamour that is meant to confuse and mislead. By covering your eyes, you will not be affected. We will lead your horses as well as our own. Once we reach the Veil itself, you will be able to remove the blindfolds."

The king reached down and pulled a scarf from his saddlebag. "The queen's. She always gives us some token of hers to take with us on a journey away from her."

Swiftstalker quickly wrapped some cloth around the eyes of the five horses, while Rory tied the king's reins to the back of Swiftstalker's saddle. Then he affixed the duke's reins to the king's mount. Bethany's reins went on his own saddle. After securing all the reins, he helped Duke Richard with his blindfold and then went to Bethany. She leaned down and kissed him quickly, and then let him fasten her blindfold. As he started to move away, she said, "Just don't run me into any trees."

The passage to the Veil was slow, made necessary by leading five horses on foot. It gave Rory plenty of time to think. *What could possibly have made such an impression in that spot?* As

he thought, he kept an eye on their surroundings, remembering his first passage through this forest and the sentries who guarded the approaches to the Veil. He caught sight of one of the sentries, who did something that surprised him. Instead of following the group with his bow, the sentry lowered it and placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head as the group passed. Even as he puzzled over this action, he noticed that each sentry in turn did the same thing.

"Swiftstalker, is there some way the sentries have recognized King William?" Rory asked quietly.

Swiftstalker turned his head, catching sight of one of the sentries. "Lad, they do not honor the King of Aluria. They honor you."

"Me? Whatever for?"

"You've not realized what this all means, have you? Lord Rorrick, the Heir of Westfell, is now also Lord Rorrick, the Crown Prince of the Forest."

\* \* \*

"You can remove your blindfolds now," Rory said once they reached the passage to the Veil. He helped Bethany off her horse and then began to tie the horses' reins to one of the nearby tree limbs. "Swiftstalker has gone ahead to arrange for your passage through the Veil."

As King William and Duke Richard stretched the kinks out after many hours in the saddle, Rory observed Bethany as she looked around. "The trees seem different, much older and taller than those at the edge of the forest."

"They are, yet these are nothing when compared to the ones beyond the Veil."

King William and Duke Richard joined them. King William said, "You speak of the Veil likes it's a physical thing. Where is it?"

Rory gestured toward the sparkling motes that danced in the air beyond them. "The Veil lies a few yards in that direction. I know you can't see it or hear its song, but I do. Those with impure minds cannot pass through it, and it will not admit those who are not of elven blood, which explains why Swiftstalker has gone before us. He must find some way to get the Veil to admit the three of you."

"Such a way has been found," came the sultry voice from behind them.

Rory spun around and said, "Arianna!" He gave her a brief hug, and then turned to introduce her to the others. "Everyone, this is Arianna, one of the Master Mages of the Forest. Arianna, this is King William of Aluria. You probably know my grandfather, Duke Richard of Westfell, and this is Bethany, my wife."

"We were expecting Lady Bethany; so much thought had been given regarding the passage through the Veil." Arianna stared at the king and duke for a moment before asking, "I know why she is here, but why did you accompany Rory? What do you hope to gain by coming here at this time?"

"Gain?" King William said. "We hope to gain nothing! We are here to honor your fallen

king, whom we greatly admired, and to pledge the support of the Realm of Aluria in bringing his killers to justice."

Her gaze flicked to Duke Richard, who said, "I have known King Alaric my entire life and I too have come to honor him. I also wish to show your people that Westfell still honors the Pact."

"Very well. Before we can pass through the Veil, you must remove all your weapons, even personal daggers. Your cold iron has no place within the Veil. They will be kept safe and will be returned to you when you depart."

Rory collected the weapons from the king and duke, wrapped them in a silk cloak to insulate the iron, and handed the bundle to one of the sentries who had silently appeared. Rory said, "Your horses will be taken to the stables and your belongings, other than your weapons, will be waiting for you in an assigned *hiakehla*."

"Because you are not of the Forest Folk, we have keyed some mithrail talismans to permit your passage through the Veil. The pendant Lady Bethany wears was keyed to the Veil as it was created. Do not remove these talismans while inside the Veil or you might be seen as intruders. You may sense some warmth from the talismans as you pass through the Veil itself; this is to warn you of its proximity."

"Beth, take my hand and come with me," Rory said. He led her into the Veil. Arianna guided the king and Duke Richard along the path after each had placed their mithrail talismans around their necks and against their skin.

Bethany looked around as they passed through the Veil. Her mithrail pendant had indeed warmed slightly as they walked along, but not unpleasantly so. The path was bordered by a great many flowers, some varieties of which she had never seen, and butterflies danced in the light that fell through the trees, which were far larger than any she had ever beheld. After a while, the talisman began to cool to its normal temperature and she knew they had passed through the Veil. She gave Rory's hand a final squeeze and let go.

Arianna said, "I am sure the rigors of your trip have made you all tired and stiff. Prince Rorrick, why don't you take the king and your grandfather to the hot springs nearby so they may refresh themselves? I will take Lady Bethany to another, for I am quite sure she would prefer to bathe separately rather than with a mixed group."

Rory smiled at the look that passed over Bethany's face as she realized how close she had come to having to do just that. While she would have enjoyed bathing with Rory, having the king and the duke present would have been more than she could have handled. "That is a fine idea, Arianna. Sire, Grandfather, if you will come with me, please? Beth, I will see you soon."

\* \* \*

The Fair Folk had all agreed to permit the three outsider guests to have some privacy, and the springs were empty when they arrived. Rory said, "It is the custom to bathe in the highest pool, which is quite warm and relaxing, first. Between the heat and the rejuvenating waters, it will take away any stiffness and aches you may feel from the ride from Westfell. Afterwards, we can move to the cooler middle pool or the much colder one if you prefer. I personally find

the bottom pool a bit too chill, but it is a great way to recover from too much ale the night before," he added, then laughed at the memory. "Just drop your clothes on the bench and they will be taken away to be cleaned and readied for when you depart from the Veil. Suitable clothes will be provided throughout your stay." As he spoke, he began removing his own clothes, as well as his weapons and mithrail shirt.

King William paused to admire the shining mail. "Such a magnificent work of art! And it saved your life from that assassin in Aluria, did it not?"

"Yes, sire. His blade would have pierced my heart but bent against the mail instead. It was also the mithrail shine that held back the caliph's desert patrol long enough for us to establish a dialogue." Now nude, Rory strode to the edge of the pool and dove in, swimming to one of the niches built into the side.

He was soon joined by the king while his grandfather slowly stepped into the hot pool rather than dove. Once they were all seated in the niches, Rory said, "You will find baskets of sweet sand mixed with some herbs near at hand. Use as much as you like to scrub away the dust from travel. Then relax and let the spring soak away your aches."

The three bathed and then lay back in the water to soak. Duke Richard said, "Ah, this feels so good on my old bones. Hard riding makes me feel my years, Rory. Too bad we don't have something like this at Westfell."

Rory smiled. "But we do, Grandfather. There is a hot spring under the keep and I had the pixies create such a pool in an unused chamber within the lower levels. Once you return, just ask one of them to show you the way."

"We do? That is excellent!" The old man sighed happily.

"Rory," King William said, "do the Fair Folk really bathe together in these pools?"

"Yes, sire, they do. It comes as a bit of a shock, especially when you are as young and as inexperienced as I was, but you soon realize it is really quite natural and enjoyable. It is only our cultural conditioning which makes it awkward for us."

King William sighed. "We could really enjoy living here. Tell me, lad, how does it make you feel, suddenly becoming the heir to all this as well as Westfell?"

"To be honest, sire, I'm not sure how I feel about it. It was just a little over a year ago that I went from being a no-name foundling to Heir of Westfell. It never occurred to me that being the son of Prince Brightblade might one day involve me in the succession here. I'm concerned whether this will present a conflict in *your* eyes regarding Westfell and Aluria," Rory replied honestly.

King William replied, "We have been considering that same point since the news of King Alaric's death. The Great Forest and the Fair Folk are outside the realm, even though they reside within the boundaries of Westfell. The longevity of the Fair Folk and their limited interaction with men has meant this issue has never arisen before. Let us ask you this. Would you have any problem swearing your fealty to the realm of Aluria, with the caveat that such an action would not impact your responsibilities to the Veil and its inhabitants?"

Rory thought for a moment, weighing the question. "Sire, as long as my duties between the

Realm and the Veil never come into conflict, I would have no problem with such an oath."

"And if they did conflict?" King William pressed him.

"Then I would have to follow my heart, Your Majesty, and support the path toward the greater good."

"An honest answer, and a good one. Our concerns are eased and your status with Westfell remains unchanged. Would that we were as assured of the loyalty of all our liegemen as we are of yours."

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Arianna led Bethany to another secluded pool and invited her to undress and bathe. As Bethany removed her trousers and shirt, Arianna said, "I was under the impression that the ladies of the realm wore heavy dresses with all sorts of underskirts and things."

Bethany laughed. "We do, but one cannot ride a horse at a fast pace in such an outfit. And while I found the clothes as the Caliph's Gift to be too revealing, I did revel in the freedom of movement they presented." At Arianna's questioning look, Bethany explained about her kidnapping and time as a slave in the desert of Solange.

Arianna shuddered. "How horrible. I mean both your time as a slave and the idea of a place of all sand and heat, with no green trees and flowing water. I cannot conceive of such a place."

After bathing, the two women settled back in the pool to soak. Bethany had been looking at Arianna from under her eyelashes, examining the elven woman. Finally, she declared, "You're her, aren't you? You're the woman who taught Rory all those delicious ways to make a woman find pleasure."

"Yes, I am. Will this be a problem for you?"

"No, I am quite secure in his love. If anything, I am grateful to you. He's a wonderful husband and lover."

Arianna smiled. "Yes, he was. I would like to be your friend, Bethany. I know you will spend much of your time within the Veil in the years to come as Rory honors both his duties to the realm and the Veil."

"I would like that, too, Arianna. I knew someday I would meet you, but I never imagined it would be soaking in a pool of hot water."

"Bethany, I need your advice about something."

"My advice? What kind of advice could I possibly offer a mage?"

"More has changed within the Veil than Rory yet realizes. Some of those changes affect Rory directly, such as his elevation to prince, but others may affect him indirectly, as well."

"What are you trying to say, Arianna?"

"When Alaric died and Brightblade was crowned, he was in great turmoil and grief. Never in his lifetime had he needed me so much, and it was for this, that I was born. I am now King

Brightblade's wife and queen."

"If you worry how Rory will react, you can put such worries aside. He will be pleased for you both and wish you happiness. The man does not know how to do otherwise."

\* \* \*

Rory was the first to leave the pool, drying himself with one of the thick towels stockpiled for just that purpose. As he expected, a set of richly appointed silks were there for him. No longer were his silks predominantly dark green; they were now mostly silver with a dark green trim of embroidered evergreens. The Westfell colors adorned the silks to be worn by the duke, while the king's were scarlet trimmed in gold.

King William ran his hand down the silk shirt and said, "Now we understand why you felt some compromise was necessary between these and the outside."

"It was not just complying with convention, sire. Can you imagine what it would have done to the cost of silk?"

"It would have been outrageous." King William laughed. "When we return to Aluria, do you think we might take some of these with us? We look forward to seeing the queen's reaction to the real thing."

"You may have all the garments you wish, sire. I would also suggest some gowns for Her Majesty, as well. She will enjoy the feel of the silks against her skin, especially as her condition advances."

King William groaned. "As long as we have waited for an heir, we must confess that we are not looking forward to having a baby in the chambers."

Duke Richard laughed. "You will change that tune the first time you hold your child, sire. At that moment, you will know that whatever comes will be worth it."

Rory asked, "Are either of you hungry?"

When they both nodded, Rory said, "Great! I know just the spot to get some really good food and drink. Wait until you try the ale here in the Veil. I should warn you that it will spoil you for the ale outside!"

\* \* \*

Bethany smoothed the flowing silk kaftan across her body, reveling in the sheer sensuality of the feel of the fabric against her skin. "These are so beautiful and yet so comfortable. I love the way the Westfell colors are reversed, with the dark green on the silver."

"This color pattern is not that of Westfell, Bethany. These are the colors of the royal house of the Forest. Rory will now be wearing the same colors. Only Duke Westfell will be in Westfell green, while the King of Aluria will wear his own colors."

"Oh! I keep forgetting the real reason why we are here. Rory had promised that we would come to the Veil once we were married and for a moment, I had put aside the rest."



The sudden rumble of Bethany's stomach made Arianna laugh. "It appears your stomach has not forgotten its own needs. I imagine that is where we will also find the men. Shall we?"

\* \* \*

Rory recognized the significance of the colors of Arianna's kaftan immediately and he took her hands, saying "Congratulations! I am pleased for both you and my father. You will be good for one another."

Bethany laughed. "I told you that would be his reaction." She turned to King William and Duke Richard to explain. "Arianna has wed King Brightblade and is now queen here in the Veil."

As congratulations and best wishes were extended, Rory looked at his wife. The colors of her kaftan matched his, and he loved the way it clung to her when she moved. The caliph had it all wrong, Rory decided. Nothing was as exciting as a woman concealed and yet at the same time revealed; gossamer outfits left no room for imagination. Judging from the king's appreciative glances at both Bethany and Arianna, he also approved of this style of dress.

Rory glanced up just as his father entered the dining area, clad in the same colors and wearing the gold band and emerald of his office. Rory stood and clasped forearms with the new King of the Forest, a silent communion passing between them that surpassed words. "Father, may I present to you my wife, Lady Bethany."

"We've met, Rory, almost a year ago in Westfell, remember? Of course, I wasn't given much chance to speak with you then, was I, Bethany? It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you into the family." He pulled her gently into an embrace and then kissed her forehead. "I gather, son, that you are aware I have taken Arianna as my queen."

Rory laughed. "Somehow, Father, I doubt it was truly your decision alone. I seem to recall that Queen Arianna has a very strong mind of her own, and the will to back it up."

King Brightblade grinned. "She had always told me that the day would come when I would need her very much, and on that day, she would be mine forever. When word reached us of King Alaric's death, I was overcome with grief. I reached out and found her by my side, where she will stay forever."

Rory laid his hands on the joined hands of the king and queen, and said, "For whatever it's worth, you have a son's blessing."

Arianna laid her other hand atop Rory's and said, "Thank you. That means more to us than you know."

King Brightblade turned and said, "King William, it is indeed an unexpected pleasure to greet you within the Veil. We thank you for coming."

"We would not stay away once we heard the news. You must know that the realm had nothing to do with your father's murder."

"We will speak about that later," King Brightblade said. "Duke Richard of Westfell, well met, sir. Your visit here is long overdue."

"I am honored to be permitted inside the Veil, Your Majesty. All Westfell shares your grief and outrage."

"We must attend a brief ceremony now that you have all had a chance to be refreshed and fed. Tomorrow will be soon enough to speak about the future between our peoples. I would ask that both King William and Duke Richard accompany us and serve as witnesses."

\* \* \*

King Brightblade and Queen Arianna led the group deeper within the Veil in a direction Rory had not explored on his previous visit. They entered a vast clearing surrounded by towering trees. Within this place, all sound was hushed and the center was illuminated by a shaft of sunlight. Also present were hundreds of the fey of every variety; sprites and pixies, wood and water nymphs, and elven folk of every kind. A small group of dwarves were standing off to one side and King William and Duke Richard were directed to stand near them. Rory and Bethany were led to the center and bid to kneel before King Brightblade.

"We have gathered here today to witness the elevation of Lord Rorrick, son of Brightblade and Lady Abigail of Westfell, to the position of Crown Prince of the Forest. Are there any present who challenge his fitness?" asked one of the Master Mages present.

"I speak for Lord Rorrick," came a voice from the back.

"What say you, Winterstar of the Forest, head of the Elven Rangers?"

"Lord Rorrick is a cunning and skillful warrior who is ruthless to his enemies, yet seeks to preserve life whenever possible. The death of a single warrior, even in earnest battle, is one death too many for him. The rangers support his elevation," Winterstar said.

"I speak for Lord Rorrick," came yet another voice, far closer.

"What say you, Queen Arianna?"

"Lord Rorrick is a Master Mage, perhaps the greatest of us all in his use and understanding of the Forces of Life. He can sense the presence of evil from afar, and risks his own life to put an end to the suffering caused by the Forces of the Dark. The mages support his elevation," Queen Arianna replied.

King Brightblade stepped forward and placed a circlet of mithrail around Rory's brow, centering the oval emerald on his forehead. A similar circlet with a smaller emerald was placed around Bethany's forehead. "Arise, Crown Prince Rorrick and Princess Bethany. Let your people greet you."

They turned and the hush of the forest was broken by the great cheer that rose from the assembled multitude. Tears of pride ran unnoticed down Duke Richard's face as he grasped Rory's hand and hugged Bethany. Even King William was touched by the evident love the fey had for Rory.

The coronation feast lasted well into the night. King William and Duke Richard had been taken to a new place prepared especially for them; a shelter built on the ground for them to stay in. Although the structure was temporary, it was outfitted in grand style as befitting their

ranks and position outside the Veil.

Swiftstalker turned to Rory and said, "The *hiakehla* you used before is yours now, my Prince. It is my wedding gift to you. Well, actually, it is Elona's gift."

"How can I turn you out of your home, Uncle? Where will you sleep?"

Swiftstalker laughed, gazing across the way at a particularly attractive woman with long blonde hair. "Don't worry about me, lad. I have made other arrangements." He kissed Bethany's hand and bid her a good night, then walked off to join the blonde.

Bethany laughed. "He's incorrigible, but I must admit that I love him for it. The world will not be the same when Swiftstalker stops prowling among the ladies."

"Come, my Princess, let me show you our new home," Rory said.

\* \* \*

Much later, her head resting on Rory's bare chest, Bethany said, "It is hard to believe that just a short year ago, we met for the first time in the hall at Westfell. So much has happened since that night. I dreamed for months about that first kiss we shared, you know, and what might come later, but never did I imagine all of this."

"Neither did I. I seem to recall accidentally brushing my hand across your skin and feeling as if I had committed an unpardonable offense. Yet the memory of that first touch haunted my dreams that night, as did the more intimate moments that came later."

"Arianna and I talked about you this afternoon, you know," Bethany teased him a little. "I thanked her for teaching you so well."

Rory stroked her hip as he said, "Don't give her all the credit, my love. You taught me how much more it can be when there is love involved."

## Chapter 29

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The council garden was filled. King Brightblade and Queen Arianna sat in the center, with Crown Prince Rorrick and Princess Bethany on one side and Winterstar and Windwalker, the master mage who had presided over the coronation the day before, on the other. Also present were several of the other mages and many of the warriors. As invited guests, King William and Duke Richard were also present.

"Thank you all for coming. It is a grave time for us all, but we must start making plans for action against those who have attacked us," King Brightblade said.

"Your Majesty," King William said, "You must know that the realm of Aluria will stand beside you and not just because of the Pact between Westfell and the Forest."

"We will accept your assistance, King of Aluria, and welcome it. But first, we must clear the air about one thing. The Pact between Westfell and the Veil is dead. Our son, Crown Prince Rorrick, is now heir to both lands, so the pact is superfluous.

"Furthermore, unless we work together to defeat the great enemy that gathers even now to strike against us both, our lands will be destroyed. Windwalker, please explain to our guests what you have determined."

Windwalker said, "King Alaric's murder was not committed by human hands, King William. He and his guards were literally torn to pieces by a savage force of great evil. We believe our enemy has used the darkest of magics to raise a demon from the underworld."

Rory interjected, "That would explain the foulness I felt as we passed by the place where my grandfather was slain. I sensed such a depraved evil that I had no choice but to shield myself from it."

"Is such a thing possible?" asked Duke Richard. "I've always dismissed such things as folklore and fable."

"It is indeed possible," Queen Arianna replied. "Long ago, before men came to these lands, there was a horrific war between the Forces of Life and those of the Dark. During those dreadful times, evil sorcerers began to plumb the depths of the darkest magic and unleashed forces from the underworld. Demons, goblins, imps, and others roamed the world, degrading and killing the Forces of Life. This war devastated the land and reduced the Great Forest that covered most of it to this small pocket inside the area you call Westfell. Through the sacrifice of a great many fey, the Forces of the Dark were defeated and the denizens of the underworld were banished."

"Do you know who is behind this now?" King William asked.

"While we suspect the real source is beyond the borders of Aluria, we believe they have established a foothold in Eastfell," King Brightblade replied. "The dark figure in the shroud Rory described killing in Solange was probably one of their minor sorcerers. The blood rites Rory described are a common practice of the Dark."

"Then it is past time we put things in order within our realm," King William said. "We will march on Eastfell as soon as we can call out the armies of Westfell and Aluria."

"As much as you would wish it so, it is too late to march on them now," Queen Arianna said. "It is already moving into autumn and by the time we would all be prepared, winter would be upon us. It is far better to use this time to prepare and march in the spring. In the meantime, the mages of the Veil will do what we can to ferret out what we will face once we cross into Eastfell."

\* \* \*

King William knew he had to return immediately to Aluria, but was hesitant to say anything because he knew this would pressure Rory and Bethany into leaving as well. He was sitting off to one side of the dining area, sipping a tankard of the excellent ale, brooding about his dilemma when Winterstar and Duke Richard approached him.

"May we intrude, sire?" Duke Richard asked. "Lord Winterstar has a suggestion I would like to put before you."

"By all means, Richard, have a seat. You, too, Lord Winterstar," King William said. "We were just sitting here enjoying this excellent ale."

"Sire, I know you must be eager to return to the queen and begin organizing for the campaign in the spring. I, too, have obligations in Westfell that must be addressed, even as General Gustav prepares the Wolves for the upcoming battle. Lord Winterstar has suggested he lead a party of his rangers as an escort to accompany us to Westfell. Rory has responsibilities that prevent him from leaving right now, and this would permit him to remain here in the Veil," Duke Richard said. "As much as I am enjoying the hot springs and the wonderful ale, I really feel we must get back, although not, I pray, at the frantic pace we set coming here."

"You must have been reading our mind, old friend, because we too feel we must head back but we were loathe to suggest it so soon for fear of offending our hosts. Who likes a guest that rejects one's hospitality?"

"Only those who have never had one that stayed beyond their welcome, Highness," replied the gruff Winterstar. "King Brightblade is aware of your conflicted emotions and bids me say to you that he understands your desires to return to your queen and your realm. He also extends to you an invitation to return with your queen at some future, happier time."

"Thank your king for his gracious understanding and welcome invitation. We would indeed like to bring Beatrice here some day after the birth of our heir and this trouble in Eastfell is put to rout. When can we leave?"

"I would suggest we depart in the morning after a night of fine ale, good food, some singing and many stories told under the stars," Winterstar said. "That way we will be on the road with lighter hearts, although perhaps aching heads."

"Agreed." Then the King of Aluria laughed. "Care for some more ale while you tell us about your rangers?"

"Better still, we will have a lot of ale and I will tell you about Prince Rorrick in the Kendrahl Mountains. I was there and saw it all. Then you can tell me about the rescue of the beautiful Bethany."

\* \* \*

*Princess Bethany.* What an odd feeling that name gave her as she rolled it around in her mind. As a girl growing up, the highest she dared to dream was a match with the son of a duke, and that had appeared to be limited to Eastfell. She had many a nightmare about just that; being married off to that slimy, self-centered, egotistical cretin. When she was chosen to accompany Queen Beatrice for the state funeral of the Duke of Eastfell, she had seen that time had not improved the new duke; in fact, he had gotten even worse. Then had come the news that the Duke of Westfell had returned from his self-imposed exile, accompanied by a new heir of the same age as Bethany. She recalled the shy young man she had met last year and that first hesitant, tentative kiss; the first for each of them. Now he was both the Heir of Westfell and the Crown Prince of the Forest and she was his wife, Princess Bethany of the Forest. She sighed, a

moment of sheer happiness at how things had turned out. Oh, there was a dark side. War was coming to Aluria; a frightful civil war against Eastfell and whatever dark powers were now ruling through the boy duke. Although she knew her husband was a fearsome warrior few could prevail against, as well as a mage whose powers hardly any could surpass, she also realized people died in wars, and Rory could be among them. It was imperative, in her mind, that she complete one important task before spring: she must conceive his child to provide an heir for both great houses.

\* \* \*

Rory saw the somber look on his wife's face so at odds with the happy sigh he had heard seconds before and he knew she must be thinking about the impending war. He said, "As I stand here and look at you in your new silk gown with the firelight beyond, I can't help but wonder whether you realize your body's outline is quite visible from where I am standing."

"Is there anyone else standing there with you?"

"No."

"Then it's all right that you can see me. Husband, after appearing before over one hundred men clad in gossamer that revealed every inch of me, the fact someone can see the outline of my body holds no terror for me." Turning to face him, she added, "Is the view any better this way? The only person who matters to me is you, husband. We could bathe with the entire population of the Veil and it would not embarrass me one bit because I know deep inside, you find me beautiful and desirable. I say, let them all see and envy their prince, just as I gloat that you are mine when I see the eyes of other women follow you."

Rory took her in his arms. "Ah, Bethany, I am so glad you came into my life. We should join the others. Both King William and Duke Richard will be leaving in the morning and we will remain here for a while, probably through the winter, for there is work I must do in the Heart to prepare for the war to come. Will you mind missing the Winter Festival?"

"I am content to be at your side, my husband," Bethany said, her arms around his waist. She looked up at his face, and added with an impish grin, "Of course we will stay here until it is time to go against Eastfell. You promised me a long time ago we would spend our winters in the Veil, remember? And I intend to hold you to that promise!"

\* \* \*

They had all gathered to escort King William and Duke Richard through the Veil. When the king reached to remove his mithrail talisman, Queen Arianna said "Keep it, William, as a token of the new bond of trust between our people. You will need it again when you bring your queen to visit us someday. The same goes for you, Duke Richard of Westfell. The hospitality of the Veil is open to you at any time."

Winterstar rode up at the head of a company of twenty elven rangers. "Are you ready, Your Majesty?"

As he climbed into his saddle, Duke Richard asked, "Won't we need blindfolds?"

Winterstar laughed. "No, Your Grace. That is only needed on the way in to get past the glamour that hides the Veil. On the way out, the glamour will guide your horses on the safest and quickest path to reach the Tower of the Pact and the road to Westfell."

"Just not too quickly," grumbled the Duke. "I feel every one of my sixty-three years when I am on the back of a horse, especially after all that ale last night."

"Grandfather, just remember to ask the house pixies and they will take you to the spa underneath Westfell."

As they group rode off, Queen Arianna began to chuckle. Bethany looked at her and asked what she found so amusing. "Did you see the look on Winterstar's face when the duke grumbled about his age? Winterstar just celebrated his two hundred and tenth birthday. The youngest member of that group of rangers is seventy-five years old. Imagine the duke's reaction to that!" With that, they all began to laugh as they reentered the Veil.

## Chapter 30

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Bethany stretched in the early morning sunshine that lay softly across the sheets of her empty bed. "Elona, where is my husband?"

The wood nymph stepped out of the wall and said, "He has gone to the Heart, Princess. He said he would be there all day, just as he has been for the last six weeks."

"Humph," Bethany muttered, "the one thing I never considered is what I can do to occupy my time while he is working in the Heart. I suppose I could go for a walk but even in this beautiful place, that has gotten old fairly quickly." She looked out the window at the perfect day outside. "I suppose Queen Arianna is also in the Heart."

"Yes, she is. All the mages are inside still trying to penetrate the wall of darkness that now hides Eastfell from our gaze."

"I suddenly feel very useless, Elona. Other than being a willing bedmate and confidante for my husband when he needs me to be, what skills do I have to offer to this war? I'm no mage like the queen nor a warrior to take up arms against the Dark. I always thought I would be of some use to my husband when I married. I am well versed in running an estate and a household, but here, I can do neither. I can sew and prepare good meals, yet that is done for us by the pixies and sprites. I can play the lute but compared to the music here, my abilities are modest indeed." Bethany sat down at her dressing table, suddenly overwhelmed by her perceived inadequacies.

"Do you, for one minute, think the prince feels that way, Bethany? He would scold you if he could see you right now. Of course, once he realized the reason for this mood swing, he would be shouting his happiness for all to hear."

"What are you talking about, Elona?"

"The baby you carry, of course. When were you planning to tell him? This will bring great joy to both lands, Princess. Babies are rare in the Veil and each one is treasured by everyone."

"Are you sure, Elona?" Bethany asked, hopeful her dream was coming true.

"Quite sure, Princess. We hamadryads can sense growing things and what else is a baby if not another growing thing? I would say you are about six weeks along, which means it was conceived the night of your coronation." Elona smiled a little wickedly. "That makes sense as you were both very lusty that night!"

"Elona! Do you spy on us?"

"Princess, I see everything that happens in and around this tree, whether I wish to or not. For example, right now there is a squirrel running along one of my branches carrying another hazelnut to add to his collection. He'd better hurry because a hawk has seen him and thinks the squirrel would make a tasty treat. Ah, the squirrel found his hole just in time to avoid the hawk. Some things, like loud cries and squeals, attract my attention. How was I to know that at that moment you were..."

"Never you mind what we were doing at that moment. I recall quite vividly." Bethany realized she was blushing almost to her navel. She looked down at her stomach and imagined it swollen by pregnancy. "Oh, damn. Now I will be fat as well as useless."

"That is quite enough of this nonsense. You will not become fat for you must do a great deal of walking around the Veil to get anywhere at all. Plus, the diet you will be on from now on will be targeted to maximize the nutrition for the baby while helping you maintain your ideal weight for carrying it. I will, of course, be monitoring you and the baby and together, we will keep you as lovely as you are this very moment."

\* \* \*

Rory came home exhausted by the intense mental strain caused by manipulating the Force of Life. No matter what venue they tried, they could not find a way to see what was happening within Eastfell. As he climbed the spiral staircase that led to the *hiakehla*, he looked forward to a quiet evening. Perhaps he could convince Bethany to join him at a secluded spa pool with some chilled wine and they could make love in the moonlight beside the pool. When he entered the lower level, he knew his fantasy was not to be. The dining table was set for four, which meant his father and Arianna would be coming for dinner. He wondered what the occasion was that warranted a private family dinner.

Bethany was radiant in a flowing silk kaftan of silver with tiny green leaves around the hem and outlining the bodice. Her copper hair was worn loose and fell across her back like liquid metal. Her jade green eyes seemed to glow in the flickering light of the candles that decorated the room.

"You look so beautiful in the candlelight, Beth. Is there some reason for all this tonight?"

"Yes, there is, but you will have to wait for your father and Arianna to find out what it is." A small smile crossed Bethany's lips. She *knew* he had forgotten. "You have about ten minutes before they arrive. I have drawn you a bath upstairs and laid out your clothes, so get a move



on, my Prince."

By the time Rory returned downstairs, Arianna and his father had arrived and were each sitting in a chair, sipping a glass of elven wine. Arianna looked as fresh as she had that morning. His father looked relaxed and happy. Rory walked across the room, bent and kissed Arianna on the cheek as a greeting and then poured himself a glass of the wine. Taking a sip, he said, "This is the really good stuff. So what's the occasion?"

"Arianna, you are definitely working him much too hard," King Brightblade said. "But then, he may not actually know what day this is." He looked toward Rory. "We are here, son, to celebrate your eighteenth birthday and recognize your official coming of age."

Rory was surprised. "I have never known the actual date of my birth, Father. My mother was so busy pretending I was a foundling that she never told me. Of course, you had been asked to keep your distance so you could never tell me either. Anyway, she would arbitrarily pick a day each year to celebrate my birth, never the same date from one year to the next."

"I am truly sorry for that, son. I wanted to be a part of your life very much but had to content myself with watching over you both from a distance in order to honor your mother's wishes," King Brightblade said sadly. "I would like to make that up to you in some way, but I don't know how."

"Father, that is all in the past. We have one another now, and you have given me a life I never could have imagined when I lived with Abigail in that cabin. Thanks to both of you, I am the heir to both a Great House in the world of men and the Great Forest in the world of the fey. Never believe I hold my past against either of you."

Arianna said, "We tried to think of a gift for you that would fit this auspicious occasion but decided you already had enough weapons and body armor, and your lovely wife takes care of the rest of your needs."

Brightblade said, "Then Bethany reminded us that you had lost Storm, your warhorse, during your pursuit of her kidnappers. So we have gotten you a new one, trained by our elven rangers far beyond what they can achieve outside. I will take you to the stables tomorrow to show him to you."

"Thank you, Father, Arianna. That is indeed a timely gift for I will need such a horse come spring."

"I, too, have a gift for you, my husband but you will have to wait a bit longer for it to arrive." Bethany's hand unconsciously brushed her abdomen.

"A baby? We're going to have a baby?" Rory was stunned with the news. He was going to be a father. He rushed across the room, swept her into his arms, and kissed her.

Arianna looked to the wall. "Elona, I think we are ready for dinner now."

\* \* \*

Rory admired the dappled grey stallion his father had given him. "His name is Thunder. Winterstar says he is capable of acting on his own, meaning that in the heat of battle, you can

release his reins and concentrate on your enemies and your swords. He can be directed by merely pressing your knees in the direction you wish him to go.”

“He’s magnificent! He must be close to nineteen hands high, even taller than Storm was. I can see that as a distinct advantage in battle, but also a disadvantage if an enemy gets below my swords.”

“Thunder will take care of anyone foolish enough to try that. Our horses are trained to trample anyone who gets within range of their hooves. And their hooves are shod with mithrail, which makes them even more effective against the minions of the Dark.”

“A princely gift indeed. And you have just given me an idea. I must ask your forgiveness, Father, but I must get to the Heart immediately.”

\* \* \*

Rory sat on the bench below the stone sphere that was the Heart of the Veil. He opened his mind to the sphere and rode down the ley lines toward the border between Westfell and Eastfell. General Gustav had mustered the Wolves of Westfell and they now manned every tower and fort along that border. Scouts regularly patrolled there, watching for any incursion from the east. Rory probed deep into the earth, searching and then finding exactly what he was looking for, a thick vein of mithrail silver that ran east. He shifted his senses along that mithrail, deep in its core, masked from the dark forces guarding the borders above.

Every so often, he would send up a tiny tendril of thought to examine what lay above. What he found sickened him. The lands of Eastfell were ruined, fields lay fallow and empty. What livestock there was appeared to be starving and abandoned. What he couldn’t find were any people. He moved deeper along the mithrail, coming ever closer to the keep itself. It was here he found what had become of the people of the farms and other holdings closer to the border. The old and infirm were herded into pens like cattle. Guarding those pens were orcs and goblins. The very young were all grouped in a crèche, tended by young girls. The older girls were also penned up; they were inside and were being used as pleasure slaves for the duke and the Outsiders who lived within the keep. Those who were used thus were actually the lucky ones; others were being given to the dark sorcerers for their blood rites. The central tower of the keep gleamed red in the sunlight from the fresh blood that coated the sides of the building. The young boys were being raised in regimented barracks as future soldiers for the vast army into which all the older youths and able-bodied men had been conscripted. The older women, those middle-aged or worn out through the labors of their lives, were also penned, and were being fed rich foods. It wasn’t until one woman was taken away that Rory realized why. She was food for the demon that lived under the keep.

Rory slipped away before the Dark could detect him, traveling quickly through the mithrail back to the Heart of the Veil. As he reopened his eyes, he drew a deep shuddering breath. It was far worse than they had believed.

“Did you succeed?” asked Arianna.

“Yes, it worked. We face our worst nightmares in Eastfell. Not only do they have dark sorcerers practicing blood rites, but they have also released goblins and at least one demon from their dimensional hell. The people of Eastfell are being forced into slavery or worse. Some

are sacrificed by the sorcerers while others are being eaten alive by the demon and the goblins. We shall be forced to fight on this plane of existence, as well as several others. Their army is far larger than before, more massive than the combined forces of Westfell and Aluria, even with our elven warriors added to the mix. And while our warriors fight the physical battles, our mages must combat their dark sorcerers in a metaphysical struggle which could easily determine the fate of our very world."

## Chapter 31

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"I agree the news is dire, Rory, but all we can do with the information is to plan our strategy for Eastfell," King Brightblade said. "Obviously, we must account for the superior numbers of their forces while dealing with their dark sorcerers as well. You have had experience dealing with orcs before; you know how formidable they can be when they can mass in large numbers. Goblins are far worse."

Arianna said, "The physical attack is not what worries me. Rory has seen that the dark sorcerers call upon their blood magic even now, and have done so enough that they have painted the outside of the tower with the blood of their sacrifices. What are they doing with all the dark magic they are calling up? I grant that some of it must be used to summon their dark allies from the netherworld, but what else are they doing?"

"We have no way of knowing. Rory was lucky to have penetrated as deeply as he did without being detected. You know the risks. Had the dark sorcerers detected him and captured his essence, even now his soul would be in torment in the darkest regions of the netherworld," Windwalker said. "I must forbid any further attempts to probe Eastfell in this manner. Those of you strong enough to make such an attempt are too important to risk."

"Rory, I need you to travel to Westfell and Aluria and explain your findings to the king and his councilors. They must know what we face," Brightblade said.

"Of course, Father, and I ask your leave to take my wife along while she can still travel. She does not know it yet but once we return from this trip, she will not be leaving the Veil again until after the baby is born and the war against Eastfell is settled."

Arianna said, "I don't think she will like that, Rory. Perhaps you should refrain from telling her just now. One war at a time, if you don't mind."

The king's council laughed, acknowledging the truth of the queen's words. Princess Bethany had a temper few cared to cross, a fact which no one knew until she became pregnant and felt out of sorts.

"I think you're right." Rory laughed ruefully. "Did you know she actually threatened to burn the tree around Elona the other day when Elona refused to let my wife have some pickles? Elona had merely pointed out that eating pickles would just make Bethany vomit again. Are all women so unreasonable when they are pregnant?"

"Normally, pregnant women have other concerns to occupy their time. Taking her back outside will give her something else to do, and that should improve her state of mind and her temper," Arianna said. "At least, I hope it will. I'll admit to having no personal experience with pregnancy."

\* \* \*

Rory reached the *hiakehla* in time to hear yet another shouting match going on between his wife and the wood nymph. He threw open the door and shouted, "That's enough!" He walked over to his crying wife and said, "Get hold of yourself, Beth, and stop acting like such a spoiled child!"

This, of course, made her cry that much harder. Dealing with the shifting hormones of her first trimester, combined with her absolute boredom, was shredding her dignity and her emotions.

"Elona, would you please join us?" Rory asked quietly.

When the angry wood nymph appeared, Rory said, "I am sorry about all this, but it will stop right now. Bethany, we are leaving the Veil. Change your clothes into something suitable for a trip to Westfell right now. Elona, please make sure enough clothes are packed into our saddlebags for the journey, which should take four days as I do not intend to push very hard in light of Beth's condition. We will also need some journey rations."

"Oh, Rory, we don't have to leave. I'll behave, I promise!" Bethany sobbed.

"This trip is not about you, Beth. I must confer with my grandfather and the king. I thought you might enjoy coming with me and seeing Ilara and the queen. We will be back before winter truly sets in."

As she started up the stairs toward their bedroom, Bethany said, "What can I wear? I came here in men's trousers and they will hardly fit me now."

"Beth, I think you will find they will fit just fine. I keep telling you that you hardly show at all yet." Rory shook his head. "Believe me, if you were that far along, you would not be making the journey on a horse!"

\* \* \*

Queen Arianna had her own surprise for Rory and Beth waiting at the stables. Neither one would be making the journey to Westfell on a horse. Instead, a wagon had been prepared for their use. Inside the back of the wagon were some kegs of ale and bottles of wine for both Duke Richard and King William, along with trunks of clothes and food. "I thought this would make your journey more comfortable and safer for Bethany. The wagon will force you to travel more slowly than you otherwise would."

"Arianna, thank you for being so thoughtful. I have been behaving poorly and I know it. Please forgive me."

"Child, there is nothing to forgive. No one, not even Elona, is mad at you," Arianna said

gently. "We all just want you to be happy, and to have a healthy baby. Now, give me a hug and get up on the wagon. You have a long journey ahead of you."

After Bethany was seated, Rory hugged the Queen of the Forest. "Take good care of my father."

"I shall," Arianna said, a tear forming in her eye. "And you both be careful. Aluria is not a safe place anymore."

They had not traveled far from the Great Forest when Rory heard the pounding of horse's hooves coming from behind them. He drew the team of horses to a stop and waited. Moments later, the horse and rider reached them.

"Mind some company on the road, lad?" Swiftstalker said.

"I was wondering when you'd show up!" Rory laughed. "Of course we will enjoy your company, Uncle, but you must promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"That you will leave the ale and wine alone! These are for King William and my grandfather, but if you're lucky, maybe they will share."

\* \* \*

No one appeared to notice the wagon and its occupants as they drove through the village outside the keep. It was a cool evening and the wind was developing a bit of winter's bite, so most people were indoors near their fires. The lone horseman and the couple in the wagon were shrouded in nondescript heavy wool cloaks, with the hoods pulled up over their heads. As they reached the gate to the keep, one of the Wolves stepped out into the wind and waved them to a stop.

"What brings you folks out on a night like this?"

Rory pulled back his hood. "Coming home for a visit."

"Lord Rorrick! Lady Bethany, too!" The guard glanced at the horseman and added, "Lord Swiftstalker! Please, go on through and get out of this wind and cold."

Maneuvering the wagon through the twisted entry of the sally port took every bit of skill Rory could muster but he finally drew it to a halt in front of the steps just as the main doors opened and Duke Richard strode out. "Rory! Bethany! I could not believe it when one of the guards ran in saying you had arrived. And in a wagon, no less."

"How else could we bring you half of this wine and ale, Grandfather?" Rory laughed.

"Only half?" asked the duke.

"The rest belongs to King William, sir!" Swiftstalker said. "And I shall protect it from anyone who dares think otherwise."

"And who shall protect it from you, Lord Swiftstalker?" Bethany asked as Rory assisted her from the wagon.

\* \* \*

"Rory, you are a sight for sore eyes. I hadn't expected you home until spring," Duke Richard said while they enjoyed their dinner. Mistress Margaret and Ilara had shared the duties in the dining room, with Ilara hovering protectively over Bethany.

"I have news of Eastfell for you and the king, and thought I would bring Bethany along to give her a break from the Veil." Rory sipped his ale. "Once my business with the king is done, we shall return to the Veil, and I think we will take Ilara with us to keep Bethany company."

"On days such as this one, I sit by the fire and think about how nice and warm it must be in the Veil. I have found your spa, and use it regularly to ease my aching joints. Thank you for having it made."

"I did it as much for myself as I did for you, Grandfather. I am getting too tall for your copper tubs." Rory looked over at Bethany and lifted one eyebrow.

"Grandfather, we have something else to tell you. You are going to be a great-grandfather in the summer. Arianna says it will be a boy," Bethany said, a proud smile on her face.

Richard, Duke of Westfell, abandoned dignity and let out a loud whoop of delight. He rushed over and embraced Bethany, then pounded Rory on the back. "Wait until General Gustav hears about this. He will have much advice for you, lad. Bethany, you may wish to talk with Rachel. She recently gave birth to a strapping boy, you know."

Mistress Margaret offered her congratulations while Ilara just beamed with tears of joy running down her cheek. "With your permission, Your Grace, I would like to spread this happy news," Mistress Margaret said.

"By all means," replied the overjoyed duke. "Invite them all to a celebration in honor of the happy parents to be held tomorrow night."

\* \* \*

By mutual and unspoken agreement, the discussion regarding Eastfell was not held until the following morning. General Gustav and his top staff joined Duke Richard, Swiftstalker, and Rory in the duke's library. Rory had explained how he finally penetrated the magical screens guarding Eastfell and the terrible price being paid by the people there for their duke's treason.

"This will make the war to unite Aluria seem like a picnic on a summer's afternoon in comparison. Are you sure of the numbers, Lord Rorrick?" asked General Gustav.

"It appears that every able-bodied lad and man within the borders of Eastfell has been conscripted into the duke's army. There were hosts of orcs surrounding the camp, probably to prevent any mutiny or escapes. I do not know what roles the goblins or the demon will play in the actual fighting."

Duke Richard shook his head. "I cannot understand how anyone could welcome the Dark as Eastfell has done. Rory, how do we fight a demon?"

"To be honest, Grandfather, I don't know. It is the worst of the dark creatures that dwell in the netherworld and it will require magic to stop it. Queen Arianna is studying the ancient ballads of the last war between Life and Dark to see if she can find any clue how the demons were defeated and banished then." Rory sighed. "Putting aside the magical elements, we are physically outnumbered and we will be fighting on their ground. I pray the Great Caliph honors his pledge."

"What do we do now, Rory?" his grandfather asked.

"Continue what we have been doing. Spend the winter training the new soldiers in the Wolves while making sure Eastfell does not attack us first. Vigilance along the border is a must. If there is time, build more fortifications at key points where they might attempt to invade." Rory looked at the map lying across the table. "I shall advise the king the same. We must keep their forces within Eastfell until we are ready to face him. Otherwise, he will swallow Aluria piece by piece."

\* \* \*

The feast the night before had been smaller than those Rory recalled from the past and it took him a while to reason out why. There were fewer men. Once the harvest had been brought in, those who could had gone off to be trained to fight. The people had been called upon to give what they could in the defense of Westfell, and they had answered. Those who were left behind were too old to fight or whose occupation too vital to the villagers and the keep.

While the celebration may have been smaller, it was no less joyous. The people of Westfell had grown to love their heir, and the news that the line would continue with the birth of his son had cheered them. Some happy news to mix with the threat of war, and thus it was given even more weight. The birth would imply a future beyond the war and this gave them even more reason to celebrate.

Duke Richard had even broached one of the kegs of elven ale and between himself, Rory, General Gustav, and Swiftstalker, they had finished it. Lady Bethany had long departed the festivities, amused at her husband and his grandfather as they stood atop a table singing bawdy songs with Swiftstalker and the general, yet tired from the trip and her pregnancy. So she had retired for the night.

Duke Richard's head was pounding. He had but one thought, and that was to soak in the spa beneath the keep. Since he knew the way quite well, he didn't bother any of the pixies and just went down the winding staircase that led deep under the keep and over to the heavy door that sealed the spa, trapping the heat and steam inside.

As usual, he couldn't see anything as he made his way inside. The heavy steam always did that to him but it didn't matter as he knew his way around the chamber. He dropped his clothes on a bench and eased into the pool. Ah, the blessed heat felt good as it eased his muscles and joints. The steam would clear his head soon enough. He dunked his head under the water, keeping it there as long as he could and then surfaced, brushing his sodden white hair back from his face. That was when he realized he was eye to eye with Rory.

"Good morning, Grandfather."

"Rory! I didn't know you were in here!"

"Obviously. Don't worry about it, Grandfather. I have spent the past several months living in the Veil, remember? And if your head feels like mine, then this is the place you need to be. Of course, in the Veil, we would have first plunged into an icy pool before soaking in one like this." Rory chuckled. "I had thought it was Bethany coming to join me as she was still asleep when I slipped from our chamber. It wasn't until you were already in the pool that I realized it was you, instead."

"I am quite sure you would find her more pleasant company." Duke Richard chuckled. "At least she had the wisdom not to drink as much as we did."

"Since she found out she is with child, she has stopped drinking alcohol altogether except for the rare sip to acknowledge a toast. It also gives her great joy to tease me whenever I drink a little too much."

"Ah, this heat feels good on my old bones," said the duke as he lay back in the hot spa along one of the stone rests that had been built for this exact purpose. Both men were dozing slightly as the door to the spa eased open.

Bethany started to slip off her robe when Rory said, "Before you go much farther, darling, you might want to know Grandfather is in the pool with me at the moment."

Bethany gave a small shriek as she pulled her robe up quickly. "I will leave you two to your baths. Would you please let me know when the spa is available?"

As the door closed, she could swear she heard laughter from her husband and the Duke. *Men!*

\* \* \*

When Duke Richard and Rory returned upstairs to face the day, they found a courier waiting for them outside the library. "It's from the king," Duke Richard said as he examined the seals. He scanned the message and the color drained from his face. "The queen is gravely ill, and none of the court physicians can determine why. They fear for her life and that of the unborn heir."

"We must go to Aluria at once." Looking toward the fireplace, Rory said, "Assistance, please," to summon one of the house pixies.

"Prince Rorrick! How may I be of assistance?" said the diminutive sprite.

"Get a message to Queen Arianna that she is needed immediately in Aluria. Queen Beatrice is dying. Tell her that we are on our way there today."

"At once, my Prince." The sprite vanished in a sparkle of light.

Bethany's voice came from behind them. "I am coming, too. Queen Beatrice has been like my own mother to me, and I must be at her side."

"Beth, they don't know why she is so ill. This could be a threat to our baby."



"Rory, some duties must be met no matter the risk. This is one of them."

## Chapter 32

« ^ »

As they approached the outer ring of Aluria, they found King Brightblade and Queen Arianna waiting for them before they reached the final stretch of road. Neither was dressed in the regal attire normally associated with the Forest Lords; in fact, they were dressed in the style one normally associated with the personal attendants to someone of the duke's rank and position. "Obviously, you wish to enter the castle unannounced by traveling incognito. Very well, you should ride behind Rory and Bethany and try to act a little humble," Duke Richard said after he greeted King Brightblade and his queen.

The two fell in line in the place indicated and the group proceeded on. The outer ring was even more squalid than Rory remembered from his visit the preceding spring. There was a hint of desperation on the faces of the adults now, and the children were silent to mask their fear. The markets in the third ring were smaller and less energetic, with fewer items for sale. The homes in the second ring were shuttered tightly and those they passed hurried along without a greeting even as they acknowledged the true nobility with a sketchy bow. The King's Own were also silent as they ushered the duke and his party into the castle.

Earl Sudcliffe, the chancellor, greeted them. "I am glad you've arrived, Duke Richard. If ever there was a time when the king needed his friends, it is now. The queen is slipping away from us."

Bethany placed her hand on her father's arm. "If you have ever trusted me, you must trust me now. Take us to the queen at once and ask no questions. All will be clear later, I promise."

The earl stared into his daughter's eyes for just a moment and saw the sincerity that lay within them. He knew his daughter loved the queen and would do nothing to bring her sovereign harm. He would do as she asked, but how he would explain this to King William was beyond him. Earl Sudcliffe nodded and motioned for them to follow. He led them to a set of doors within the royal wing of the castle, ones which Bethany knew led to the queen's private bedchamber.

King William surged to his feet as the group entered the chamber. "Earl Sudcliffe, you had better have a good explanation for this unwelcome intrusion." Then he saw who was with the chancellor. "Princess Bethany, it was good of you to come. We doubt the queen will know you are here but one never knows. However, this is no place for your servants, Duke Richard." When she slipped off her hood, King William said, "Queen Arianna!"

"We have come to see if we can help, William," Queen Arianna said as she moved to his side. "Brightblade, Rory, if you would join me from either side. Bethany, stand at the foot of the bed, if you would."

"Me? I have no powers!" Bethany said.

"The child you carry does, although they are nascent at this point, but that will suffice." Once everyone was in position, Arianna said, "Everyone join hands and open your senses to the Forces of Life. I will serve as the guide so surrender your will to me."

Using the powers of the others to expand her own, she channeled their energies and opened herself to the dying woman who lay on the bed so still and silent. It was as she feared. What ailed the Queen of Aluria was nothing natural; she was the victim of a magical attack. She lent some of her energy to the dying woman to ease her suffering and then withdrew.

Raising her eyes to the haggard king before her, she said, "I am deeply sorry, William, but there is nothing anyone can do for her now. Your child has already perished and Beatrice is not far behind. Perhaps within the hour, her suffering will come to an end. This was not a natural death; she was murdered by the use of dark magic which stole her very life force after first attacking your child."

"Eastfell." King William's voice was almost as lifeless as his dying queen. A little more fire crept into his voice as he said, "I will level that land and everything in it. I will sow salt into the soil itself, turning it into a vast barren wilderness where nothing will ever live again."

Queen Arianna walked up and slapped him. "Stop that! Beatrice was about life, not death. The people of Eastfell are not responsible for this atrocity. The animals are not responsible, nor the land itself. If you must have a target for your rage, it should be the source of this dark magic, the Outlander sorcerers and your renegade duke."

William fell to his knees, his face buried against Arianna, and his shoulders shook with the force of his sobs. "What shall I do without her, Arianna? She has been my life."

Duke Richard walked over and put his hand on his king's shoulder. "You go on, William. You make the effort to get through each day by asking yourself what she would want you to do. It will be the hardest thing you have ever done but you have no choice because you are the king. Your subjects count on you, especially now. You must be in control of your emotions."

King William lifted his teary eyes and looked at the man who had been his father's friend long before becoming his most trusted duke. "Was that what you did? I always wondered whether your stoic perseverance after Bridget's death was due to some alienation between you two. Yet you always spoke of your great love for her, and I know in the many years since her death, there has been no other woman for you."

"Yes, King William. Bridget is with me always, as Beatrice will be at your side forever more. Every decision from now on will be made with the thought of what Beatrice would say. It will make you more deliberate, which is a good thing in a monarch. Now, go hold your love's hand for the final time in life. We will wait with you so you are not alone."

And so it was that the King of Aluria was surrounded by his closest friends, advisors, and allies when Beatrice, Queen of Aluria, passed into the great mystery called death. Princess Bethany wept silently into the chest of Crown Prince Rorrick. Tears rolled down the faces of King Brightblade, Queen Arianna, and Duke Richard of Westfell. The chancellor kept his emotions in check until after he had spoken to the guards at the door. As the great bells of the churches began their sad tolling, he too began to weep.

## Chapter 33



The state funeral for Queen Beatrice and the unborn Prince Stephan was held three days later. The queen lay in state in the main ballroom of the castle and the lines of mourners stretched through all the rings of the city and beyond. As the mourners passed her bier, the king and his advisors met in another room of the castle.

"Your Majesty, the enemy has achieved their goal by this murder. They believe their murder of your heir and queen to be untraceable back to them. They have disrupted the realm and believe they have left you prostrate in grief. This was done to slow or even halt your preparations to attack Eastfell, their foothold within the realm," Duke Richard summarized. "It would be to our benefit were they to continue in this belief. You must seem bereft, perhaps even driven mad by the loss of your queen. Meanwhile, we can continue our mutual preparations. If you would prepare a secret decree giving authority of the King's Own to General Gustav, he can begin integrating the armies together, establishing a unified command structure between the Wolves and the King's Own."

Queen Aluria spoke up. "It is vital that you name another heir, William, and do it in secret. The name of that heir must not come to the attention of the enemy. Also, it is imperative that Princess Bethany get back behind the Veil as soon as possible since she is carrying a child which could be used against Prince Rorrick. Unfortunately, their happy news had already been shared before we knew of the magical attack against the queen. The enemy could be targeting her and her child even as we sit here."

King William nodded. "I understand and agree with all you have said. The matter of my heir has been on my mind for many years as you may imagine before we were blessed. I had made up my mind that there was only one person who could possibly lead this realm in the years to come should something happen to me. I prepared a secret document that will be opened only upon my death. I have not rescinded that letter, and only intended to do so after the birth of my child. You all should know who that person is in case circumstances prevent an orderly transition of power, such as my death in the war to come. My designated heir is Prince Rorrick."

Stunned silence greeted this announcement. "Sire, I am not fit to be your heir..." Rory began but the king interrupted him. "None of us is ever fit to become king. Ask your father whether he was ready to take over when his sire was murdered."

King Brightblade nodded sadly. "I never felt so unprepared in my life, despite the years I had spent at his side."

"That is as it should be," Queen Arianna said. "No man should be eager to be king if he has any idea of the great responsibilities involved. Those who seek the throne do so for all the wrong reasons and invariably become despots. Rorrick would make a good king if necessary. Princess Bethany and I will leave early in the morning for the Veil, taking Swiftstalker and Brightblade. We will travel with as little flair as possible to avoid notice. We must get her safely behind the Veil before the enemy shifts his attack to her."

\* \* \*

Prince Rorrick, Heir to Westfell and the Great Forest, now secret heir to the Realm of Aluria, looked down from the curtain wall of the castle. His gaze followed the passage of a lonely wagon bearing an old crone and her homely daughter as it rolled through the empty streets, accompanied by two riders. They were obviously poor, their clothes shabby and worn. The horses were old and slow, the possessions in the wagon were meager. To anyone who saw them, it would be evident they had nothing worth stealing.

It was all a glamour, of course. Queen Arianna and Princess Bethany wore warm and comfortable clothing of high quality, and sat upon thick cushions in the sturdy wagon. King Brightblade and Lord Swiftstalker rode their elven warhorses, with their swords strapped across their backs, daggers at their sides, and longbows on their saddles. It was one more means of confusing the enemy and protecting the future represented by the child Bethany carried.

Rory sighed. It was so hard to let Bethany ride off without him. Each of them had a role to play in the upcoming conflict in order to secure the future. If he had to sacrifice his time with Bethany for her safety, it was a small price to pay. In the meantime, he had work to do.

He went down to the stables and quickly saddled Thunder, adding extra saddlebags with journey rations and other supplies for a long trip. It would feel strange to be on the road without his uncle at his side; Swiftstalker had been there with him since he first left the Tower of the Pact with Duke Richard. None of his elven family knew what he intended or Swiftstalker would have refused to accompany Bethany.

He checked his bags one last time to make sure he had everything he needed and then mounted Thunder. He rode from the castle and turned in a different direction than the one used by the wagon. While they rode to the north and west, he rode to the south and the deserts of Solange. He had argued the need for this mission with his grandfather and King William and both had finally agreed it was necessary. Someone had to travel to the Great Caliph at the Oasis of the Moon to see whether he would honor the alliance so recently forged.

\* \* \*

It took only two days for Rory to reach the edge of the Great Desert. As he had hoped, he was intercepted by one of the caliph's patrols just after crossing the border into Solange. He raised his hand in greeting to the patrol leader.

"You have returned to us, great *djinn* of the Forest. May I ask why?" The patrol leader recalled the great display for the grand vizier and the honors the caliph himself had bestowed upon this *djinn*.

"I must confer with the Great Caliph," Rory said.

"You are in luck, then, for the Great Caliph is in the city along the river, consolidating his hold over the region. You need not trek across the Great Desert and ruin such a fine horse. Would you like an escort?"

"I would not interfere in your duties, and I know the way to the city. But I thank you for your offer and wish you well."

Rory turned Thunder's head onto the road to the river and let him run. The warhorse's ground-devouring strides soon carried him out of sight of the desert patrol and into the fertile region around the river. Everywhere, Rory could see signs of the changes being made by the Great Caliph. The people seemed more energetic and friendly; it was not uncommon for them to wave a greeting as he raced along the road. The markets were thriving, forcing Rory to slow his pace through the crowded area. One vendor, seeing Rory as a foreign traveler, tossed him a sweet blood orange as he rode past. Rory slowly savored each slice of the fruit as he moved further along the road. Once he had finished, he stopped at the edge of the river to wash his hands free of the juice from the orange.

As he prepared to remount his horse, another patrol rode up. "Greetings, Lord Rorrick of the forest *djinn*. I had not thought to see you so soon. Are you chasing another stolen woman?" The patrol leader laughed. "Or have you come to tumble more of my warriors from their camels or take the pants from the grand vizier's guards?"

Rory recognized the patrol leader from his initial encounter atop the dune outside the Oasis of the Moon. He joined the man's laughter then he said, "Neither, for my trip to see the Great Caliph of the Desert Peoples is not one for such pleasurable pastimes. As for women, the one your caliph gifted to me is more than sufficient, thank you!"

"It is said that one woman can rule a man yet two or more allows the man to rule instead," the patrol leader said. "Perhaps our Great Caliph will give you a second wife to restore peace in your house."

Rory tried to imagine explaining a second wife to Bethany, and shuddered at the thought of her reaction. "Unfortunately, I must speak to the Great Caliph about terrible things happening in the north. The pleasures of my house must be set aside for now until these grave events run their course. Could you direct me to the Great Caliph?"

"I will do more than direct you. I shall take you there myself. Amal, take charge of the patrol and continue. I will catch up to you later." After the patrol rode off, the leader said, "My men could continue their patrol without anyone in charge, but this will be good training for Amal, my new second-in-command. The Great Caliph is at the fortress of Solange, a place I believe you once visited."

"Yes, I was once an unwilling guest in that fortress." Rory laughed.

"The warriors still speak of that day when the *djinn* broke free and killed the black sorcerer in his tower and then awoke the duke with a sword at his neck. Many said you walked through the walls without ever being seen."

"We rode out the gate with their own patrols," Rory explained.

"Your visit this time shall be much more pleasant, that I swear. You are honored among us now, Lord Rorrick of the Forest *djinn*, for freeing us from the evil ones and restoring Solange to the Desert People."

\* \* \*

The Great Caliph of the Desert People was overjoyed to see the *djinn* when he walked in to the receiving room at the fortress. He had often wondered what had become of the young man who had traveled across the desert in search of his stolen woman. *And what a woman she had been!* The caliph still recalled the beautiful girl with the bright copper hair and eyes of jade, not to mention the skin like alabaster and ... well, he envied the *djinn*.

"Greetings, Lord Rorrick and welcome to Solange. Come, sit beside me and we can eat and drink to celebrate your return." The caliph clapped his hands three times and a bevy of serving girls, wearing only diaphanous pants with matching veils, scurried in bearing a tray of food and carafes of wine. Rory sat on one of the floor pillows and lifted his glass. "To you, oh mighty Caliph. And the peoples of Solange."

They drank and the caliph said, "And another toast to the beautiful woman who brought you across the desert. How is she?"

After sipping his wine, Rory replied, "Princess Bethany is expecting our first child this coming summer, Great Caliph."

"That is wonderful news! Did you call her princess?"

"That is part of the reason I have come here to see you, Great Caliph." Rory went on to explain about the murder of King Alaric by a demon, the elevation of his father to King of the Forest Folk, and his own coronation as crown prince. He then told of the vast army being built up in Eastfell, along with the dark forces used to augment it. Finally, he told the caliph about the dark murder of Queen Beatrice and the unborn Prince of Aluria, omitting his own selection as the new heir.

"These are dark tales, indeed," responded the caliph. "Solange will come in spring to aid in the crushing of this rebellious duke and his evil associates. My warriors may be of little use against demons, but they will be more than a match for any human army the duke can put in the field. You may tell your King of Aluria that the Desert People honor their word. I must think on this matter of demons and such. While I do so, let us have some entertainment."

Rory had never seen belly dancers before, and he found the writhing gyrations of the near naked dancers quite entertaining. He smiled as he thought of what his grandfather would think of the display of naked breasts and the glimpses of the rest of the dancers' trim bodies through their gossamer pants. However, as pert and attractive as the dancers may be, they could not compare to his wife.

"Perhaps we should consider whether to give you a second wife since your first is now with child. A man's physical needs do not abate merely because a woman is no longer interested."

"Alas, Great Caliph, in this, the Forest Folk and the people of Aluria are not as civilized and open-minded as your nomads. While the Forest Folk will accept a temporary liaison between two consenting partners, I am afraid the princess would not be as understanding. I think facing the demon in Eastfell would be much easier than facing Bethany with a second wife."

"That is too bad for you, then. One wife in a house..."

“...Rules the man. So I have heard, Great Caliph.”

“You are both young. Perhaps, time will bring wisdom and she will see the logic of the situation.” The caliph clapped his hands twice and the grand vizier responded to the summons. After kneeling before the caliph and bowing his head to the floor, the grand vizier waited for his master to speak.

“Contact the astrologers, oracles, and learned historians. I wish to know all that is known about combating demons and other fell creatures. Send word to the Oasis of the Moon to search the archives. I will expect an answer in six days.”

“It shall be done.”

“Send word to the naibs of the ten tribes to prepare for war in the north in the spring. We shall be helping our new ally, the King of Aluria, deal with a rebellious duke and some dark sorcerers worse than the one in Solange so ably dispatched by Prince Rorrick.”

“It shall be done.” The grand vizier bowed his head once more and rose.

“One final thing,” added the caliph. “Prince Rorrick shall be our guest for the next several days. I want quarters arranged for him with his own bath and garden. He will join me for all meals and councils. His voice is to be considered mine.”

“It shall be done, Great Caliph. Welcome to Solange, Prince Rorrick. It is good to see you once more.” The grand vizier bowed a final time and left the room.

“More wine?”

\* \* \*

Rory awoke to the sweet scent of orange blossoms from the many fruit trees that filled the garden outside his room. He stretched and a soft voice asked, “Would you like your bath now, Prince Rorrick?”

It was Jasmine, one of the many slave girls assigned to this apartment to see to his comfort while he was the caliph’s guest. “Yes, that would be nice.”

Jasmine bowed and walked to the doorway to tell the others to prepare Rory’s bath. She could not be much more than fourteen or fifteen, Rory decided. Amused he suddenly thought that such a young age when he himself was only eighteen, Rory slid from his bed and walked to the bath. His time in the Veil had eliminated any thoughts about personal modesty so being nude in front of the bathing girls did not trouble him, and neither did their nudity bother him, outside of an appreciative eye for their beauty. The caliph only had beautiful slaves, and these were perhaps some of the best in terms of physical perfection and intelligence.

Once he had bathed and been dried by the attentive girls, he followed what had become their morning ritual done as much to amuse the girls as it was to be practical. He summoned a desert sprite. “Assistance, please.”

The desert sprite appeared. “Good morning, Prince Rorrick. How may I assist you?”

“The Great Caliph has informed me that we shall be meeting with the astrologers, oracles

and historians today in what promises to be a long session. I would like to be comfortable as I sit through that meeting, so I would like my elven silks and other accoutrements as Crown Prince of the Forest.”

“It shall be done,” intoned the desert sprite in a fair imitation of the grand vizier.

After dressing in the silver silks with the dark green trim, Rory let Jasmine comb and style his long raven hair. Once she had combed it free of all tangles and smoothed it, she drew it to a spot behind his head and enclosed it in a silver clasp. The long tail of hair was then plaited into a braid that reached to his waist where it was tied off using a fine silver wire. The circlet and emerald of his position as crown prince was then placed on his brow. When he stood, Jasmine slipped his dagger into the dark green sash that completed his outfit while another slave fastened his slippers to his feet.

Far taller than most of the desert people and dressed in his elven robes, Rory made an exotic sight as he walked to the chamber where he was to join the caliph and his advisors. The grand vizier was waiting for him as he approached.

After bowing respectfully, the grand vizier said, “Prince Rorrick, I was just coming to get you.”

Rory smiled. “Sorry I’m late. The girls were playful this morning.” Rory knew the vizier would make his own interpretation of those words; Rory had been encouraged to take one or more of his slave girls to share his bed but he had not done so. Let the vizier think what he wished, Rory decided as they entered the chamber.

Rory greeted the caliph respectfully but without the kneeling and bows practiced by the Desert People. He sat on the indicated pillows on the caliph’s right and focused his attention on what the historian was saying.

“Great Caliph,” continued the historian, “we did an exhaustive study of the archives as you requested but found only one document that dealt with a battle against great demons in the far past. This document was long believed to be an allegorical fable, and dismissed as just a fanciful tale. Your request made us reexamine it. Long ago, when we were first settling the Great Desert over a thousand years ago, our forbearers sent scouts to explore the lands around us. One group of scouts was sent to explore the vast forest of incredibly large trees that stretched from the edge of the Great Desert to the wall of mountains that lay far to the north. This tale was the report of the only member of that expedition to return.

“First, they encountered magical spirits of the trees and waters. Appearing as females, they enticed the scouts with earthly pleasures that defied description. Some of the scouts were lost in this manner, choosing to remain with these spirits rather than continue on.”

Rory explained, “I know these spirits the tale describes. These would be the hamadryads and naiads, tree nymphs and water nymphs, who dwell within the trees and springs of the land. They are indeed female and quite attractive, and are given to luring the unsuspecting into relations both incredibly passionate and usually fatal as men cannot live inside the wood of a tree or beneath the surface of water.”

The historian made some notes as Rory spoke. “Next they encountered small magical beings, no bigger than the length of an arm, which seemed to delight in playing mischievous



tricks on the scouts."

Rory smiled. "That would be the pixies and sprites. While you have sprites that dwell here in the desert, I have not seen any pixies. I can see by your faces you find this hard to credit. Observe." Rory cleared his mind and said, "Assistance, please."

The same small desert sprite appeared. "How may I be of assistance, Prince Rorrick?"

"I thirst for some ale from the Veil, and I would like to share it with the caliph. Would you bring me two tankards of it, please?"

Seconds later, the sprite appeared with two large mithrail tankards and a message. "Princess Bethany said to tell you they've reached the Veil safely and for you to stay away from the harem girls." With a high-pitched laugh, the sprite vanished.

Handing the second tankard to the caliph, Rory said, "Seems your sprites like to play games, too. To your health, Great Caliph." He raised his tankard and took a generous swallow of the sweet ale. The caliph tried a small sip and then followed that with a much deeper one. With a nod to the historian to continue, Rory sat back on his pillow.

"The scouts then encountered terrible beings just slightly smaller than themselves that hunted in groups. They seemed to hunt only at night and could see in the dark. If they caught a scout, they would fall on him and begin to eat him while he was still alive. As the scouts grew fewer, they were suddenly rescued by tall *djinn* wearing the colors of the forest, who wielded long swords and used great bows with which they shot arrows long distances and with incredible accuracy. Though their intervention, some of the scouts were saved. As the night crawlers fled, another foe appeared. Larger than any two scouts, with great tusks that jutted up from their lower jaws, these creatures would snatch a scout or even a *djinn*, rip them to pieces and then eat each piece one at a time. It took many of the *djinn* working together to slay the big creature." The historian looked to Rory for confirmation.

"Sounds like orcs and ogres. Orcs are nasty pack fighters while ogres usually travel alone. I have fought them both and know they are hard to kill, although a sword or an arrow can usually do the job." Rory took a sip of his ale. "The *djinn* were the Forest Lords, my people."

"Now the scouts traveled with the *djinn*, the Forest Lords, and they came to the area of a great battle. Hundreds of the Forest Lords were fighting against many hundreds of these orcs and ogres, yet they were prevailing for a long time when a great beast appeared. Standing as tall as four men with red skin and flames where its eyes should be, this fell beast began slaughtering the Forest Lords. Nothing seemed to work against it, neither sword nor arrow, nor spear, not even the workings of the Forest Lord mages. It would rip trees from the ground and use them to batter scores of the Forest Lords down so it could scoop them up to eat. It would reach into the trees and pull out the screaming spirits and eat them as well. It laughed a bitter, haunting laugh as it consumed the Forces of Life that came against it."

Rory nodded his head. "That's a demon, a Lord of the Netherworld that thrives on terror and despair and feeds on the spirits of the living."

The historian blanched and then, swallowing hard, continued, "All appeared lost as the battle raged on for days and weeks. Vast areas of the forest were destroyed. Even the small rivers and brooks were wiped away in the devastation of the land by this demon. The Forest

Lords and the sole remaining scout decided to make a final stand. As the Lord of the Netherworld approached, something wondrous appeared in the sky. A great blue flying beast with a long neck and tail, plus great wings that swept the air, and breath of fire. Upon the beast's back was a Forest Lord, shining silver in the sun from head to foot. He bore a huge lance that also shone in the light, all silver except for its tip which bore a point made of diamond. The Lord of the Netherworld roared its challenge. The flying beast dove upon the creature, breathing its fire at the demon's head. The fire did not bother the Lord of the Netherworld but it was momentarily blinded and in that moment, the Forest Lord drove the lance into its open mouth and through the length of it, exiting through its back and pinning it to the ground. The flying beast landed on the demon and began to rip it to pieces with its great fangs and claws, roasting the chunks until they burned away to nothing. The Dark Forces, seeing the great demon destroyed, turned and fled. The Forest Lords no longer had the strength to pursue them."

The historian concluded his tale by saying, "The scout reported they held a great feast in celebration of their deliverance from the Dark and invited the scout to remain with them. The scout demurred and was escorted back to the edge of the Great Desert. He returned to make his report, yet none believed him and he was banished into the desert."

Rory was stunned. Since every other creature described in this tale existed, it must be true then that the only way to defeat the demon was to find a dragon and convince it to help them. He would also need to fabricate a lance tipped with a huge diamond point to penetrate the demon's body, anchoring it to the earth so the dragon could destroy it. He shook his head. *Where does one look for a dragon?*

## Chapter 34

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Queen Arianna listened intently as Rory reported what he had learned during his recent visit to the Great Caliph of the Desert People and ruler of Solange. The news the caliph intended to honor his commitment to provide warriors in the war to come in spring was greeted with great cheers. As he discussed the tale told by the historian about the scouts sent north and their version of the battle that reduced the Great Forest to its present size, Arianna mentally compared it to the records she had studied in the archives of the Forest Lords. There had been tantalizing references that had been unclear before and yet now stood revealed in amazing clarity. The Forest Lords had indeed used a blue dragon, an ice dragon, to fight the demon raised against them but how that came to be was still a mystery, as well as what became of the diamond-tipped lance.

When he concluded his report, Arianna cleared her throat to attract the attention of her husband. "I believe this tale explains many of the ambiguities in our own records. There are references there to the mithrail rider with his spear born of fire and ice, while other passages speak of the steed he rode only as *The Blue Death*, which historians have decided was merely a horse's name. It could very easily have been a blue dragon."

King Brightblade said, "This explanation for how the demon was defeated in the past

unfortunately does not help us now. Not only have we no idea what became of this lance, but we also have no knowledge whether dragons even still exist. None have been sighted in centuries and they have become creatures of myth and legend."

"So were elves until we began to interact with men outside the Veil," Arianna reminded him. "Dragons may still exist somewhere. The challenge before us is to find one and convince it to help us once again. We must also find the lance."

"And where would you suggest we begin?"

"With the dwarves, of course. They must have made the lance in the first place. I have many contacts with them since my days of negotiating with them. We will go to them and see whether they can help us."

"Exactly who is the 'we' in your plan?" King Brightblade demanded.

"Rory and I, of course. Rory is the deadliest warrior we have and he's also a master mage. I'm a battle mage. I have experience with the dwarves no one else does. It should be self-evident."

"Why just the two of you? In case you haven't noticed, the enemy has been targeting queens lately."

"I'm hardly going to succumb to one of their attacks, if only because I'm not pregnant. Plus, who is going to look for us in the mountains of Kendrahl in winter? And once we go underground to the dwarves, they would have an even harder time reaching us. You may as well stop arguing about this with me because all you're going to do is embarrass yourself even more when you lose."

King Brightblade locked stares with Queen Arianna for a very long minute and knew she was right. Not only was she right about losing the argument, he also knew she was correct about taking Rory to see the dwarves. No matter how much he hated to admit it, Rory was a much better warrior and mage than he was. He was aware his own pride was all that prompted this argument and worse, he knew she knew it, too.

\* \* \*

"You're going where?" Bethany yelled. "You just got here!"

"The queen and I will be leaving in the morning for the Kendrahl Mountains to meet with the dwarves," Rory explained again. "We have to get there before the heavier winter snows block the passes that lead to the kingdom of the dwarves."

"Why does it always have to be you, Rory?" whined Bethany.

"Because it just does, Beth. The mission to the dwarves must be small to avoid the appearance of being a threat and to limit detection. Arianna must go since she's the one with the contacts and she needs protection. Since I am both a master mage and one of the better warriors, she has commanded that I accompany her. She's the queen and I cannot tell her no."

Bethany admitted, "I know that, Rory. I really do. I just need you, too. I need to have you hold me in your arms and kiss me and make love to me and laugh with me. I need you for all

the things a husband is supposed to do for his wife when she is pregnant. I know I am being selfish and stupid."

Rory took her in his arms, whispering, "We do have tonight, Beth. Let's not spoil it by fighting when we could be in one of the pools under the open sky filled with stars."

## *Part Six*

### *KENDRAHL*

#### Chapter 35

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It was still dark when Arianna and Rory rode out of the Veil. Rory had left Bethany sleeping in their bed with a satisfied expression on her face. Elona had wished him luck and promised to keep an eye on Bethany. His father had come to see them off and he, too, promised to watch over his daughter-in-law. Gone were the silks and circlets; they each wore the mithrail mail and leathers of the warriors, along with their swords, daggers, and other weapons of choice. His extra weapon was his longbow and a quiver of arrows; hers was much more surprising. Strapped to her horse was a battle axe.

As they traveled through the Great Forest on the path that would eventually lead to the Kendrahl Mountains, Rory asked her about the axe. "This axe was a gift to me from one of the dwarves. He said that whenever I needed their assistance, I was to send the axe back with a messenger."

"I would say that you will make an unexpected messenger, Your Majesty."

"Rory, we will be on the road for a long time; both alone and in the company of the dwarves. Why don't we leave the titles in our saddlebags for the duration? I know you can recall the time before I married your father, when we were just Rory and Arianna. Can't we go back to that while we are on this trip?"

"I think we can do that, Arianna, although we cannot go back to the way things were. You are married to my father and I am wed to Bethany."

"Bless you for that!" Arianna laughed. "I will admit that I enjoyed our time together and those memories sometimes cross my mind, but that was not what I was thinking about when I made my request."

"Arianna, I know but I couldn't resist teasing you just a bit. It *is* going to be a long road after all." Rory laughed.

\* \* \*

They ran into the first snows as they climbed the pass into the duchy of Kendrahl. The sentry just waved them on, two anonymous figures on horseback. When Arianna asked aloud, Rory replied, "It's the dire wolf cloaks. These are the most well-known cloaks in the Kendrahl Mountains, especially this one with its two slits for the swords I wear. That sentry knew one of the figures who passed tonight was Rorrick of Westfell and the Great Forest. Sadly for you, I suspect he thought the other figure was Lord Swiftstalker."

Arianna laughed. "I can live with that, for it aids our cause of confusing the enemy. As long as I don't have to live up to Swiftstalker's reputation!"

They turned off the main road after two days, following an obscure path that wound up one of mountains. They passed a few isolated settlements, but were soon far away from anyone. Snow fell once again and before long, it was too dark to push on so they had to stop. After building a small fire to cook their meal, they settled in for the night, wrapped in their great wolf cloaks. The qualities of their mithrail mail provided a small level of warmth that kept them snug and warm throughout the cold night.

In the morning, they found themselves buried in snowdrifts. They stood and brushed the snow away from themselves and their horses. Another small fire heated some water for hot tea and the mush for their horses. Once the horses were fed and brushed, their tea drank and the fire extinguished, they mounted up and rode on.

This was their routine for almost a full week before they reached a small cleft in the side of one of the peaks. Shrouded in fog, the peak vanished above them. Arianna took the lead as they entered the cleft, the war axe held across her saddle in front of her. They had traveled about one hundred paces when one of the snow-covered rocks moved, revealing it was really a dwarf.

Rory had seen dwarves before at his coronation but hadn't really paid attention to them in the course of events that day. The dwarf stood only about five feet high, yet was almost three feet wide. A long red beard hung down past his waist and his red hair was braided into several braids tucked into his belt. He wore a helm of dull steel and matching steel chain mail that hung past his knees. His feet were bare despite the nearly twelve inches of snow on the ground. The massive war axe he carried was nearly as tall as he was, but he hefted it as if it were a feather.

"Be ye lost?" he growled. "Wait a minute. I know that axe. Who are ye?"

Arianna slipped back her hood, revealing her face. "I am Arianna, friend to the dwarves of the Guild. I have come to seek advice and counsel from the Guild."

The dwarf grumbled as he mulled over her statement. He didn't much care for the Forest Lords, but the axe she carried made assisting her a matter of Guild honor. "Do ye know the way from here? 'Course ye do, else how would ye be here in the first place! Well, go on. The Guild doors are open to ye." As they rode past, the dwarf was still grumbling as he settled himself back against the rocks.

"Are they always so cheerful and open?" Rory asked quietly.

Arianna chuckled. "He's fairly typical. Most dwarves don't like being outside. They much prefer being in their deep mines and workshops. The Guild has to maintain a rotating roster to

schedule the guards for the entrance or no one would do it."

"You keep talking about the Guild. What is that?"

"The dwarves don't have one ruler. Instead, they created the Guild which controls just about every aspect of their lives, from which claim they work to who has to guard the doors. They set the wages for labor and the prices for goods and services. The members of the Guild board are elected by the dwarves by a process that could charitably be described as unruly, involving lots of beer, lots of speeches, and lots of fighting."

Arianna led them back deeper into the cleft, finally reaching the opening to a cave. She dismounted from her horse and strapped her cloak to the saddle. "We won't need the cloaks inside the Guild Hall." She reached into her saddlebag and removed her circlet of rank, placing it on her brow. "Dwarves love titles and such so we might as well use what we have to our advantage." Rory quickly found his own circlet and tied his cloak to the saddle. They left the horses in the corral inside the cave, and walked deeper inside to a set of huge carved doors made of stone.

"How in the world do they hang such doors, let alone open and close them?" Rory asked.

"Guild secret," came a reply from the darkened doorway. "Who be ye and what business do ye have with the Guild?"

"I am Queen Arianna of the Forest and this is Crown Prince Rorrick. By this axe, we seek the Guild's advice and counsel."

"Queen Arianna? Prince Rorrick? Strange times indeed when elven royalty comes to call on the Guild," grumbled the wizened old dwarf who stepped from the doorway. "When did ye move up in the Forest, girl?"

"Guildmaster Barwin, I did not expect to find you sitting at the door!" Arianna replied.

"As ye may have risen, so have I fallen. I be Guildmaster no more," said the old dwarf. At least Rory assumed he was old since his hair and beard were white and his face had more wrinkles than a spoiled apple. "Some say I be fit for nothin' but sittin' here at the door. They be wrong, o' course, but that's the problem with the young ones. They think they know all there is and that the old ways are best left in the past."

"It is about the past that I seek the Guild's wisdom."

Barwin eyed the axe she held in her hands. "The Guild's honor requires that we assist ye, Arianna, but I know not whether they will have the answers ye need. I will take ye to them but have me doubts."

Rory had been expecting the tunnels under the mountain to be small and cramped since the dwarves were so short, but he was surprised to find them soaring high above his head. Instead of torches, the tunnels were lit with the glow of phosphorescent rocks that gave the ceilings and upper walls of the tunnels a soft radiance.

"Aye, look around, boy. 'Tis not often a Forest Lord is permitted past the door," said Barwin. "The Guild guards its secrets well. See those great doors ahead? Past them lies the Guild Hall. That room and this tunnel is all anyone other than the Guild gets to see."

The doors soared thirty or so feet in the air, and were intricately carved in strange runes, trimmed in mithrail. They hung so perfectly counterbalanced that Barwin opened the left door with the slightest push of his hand. He led the two Forest Lords into the Guild Hall, past the rows of empty benches to the high table where the Guild Board sat, waiting.

"Why do ye bring these surface dwellers before us, Barwin?" demanded one of the board members.

"A matter of Guild honor," Barwin replied.

"What would a Forest Lord know of Guild honor?" sneered another board member.

"I know much of *this* Guild's honor, as I have been here many times before assisting it in negotiating with the men of Kendrahl and with the Lords of the Forest. I am Queen Arianna of the Forest and this is Crown Prince Rorrick."

"The slayer of ogres and orcs himself, is it?" said the first board member. "What happens on the surface is of no matter to us."

"Yet without the surface trade, your Guild would become useless," Arianna countered. "How long would you retain your seats if the Guild members found out you dishonor the Guild and its commitments?"

"Speak yer request, Queen Arianna," said the dwarf seated in the center.

"Guildmaster, long ago the Guild assisted the Forest Lords in defeating the fell forces of the Dark. At a time all was thought lost and a demon threatened to devour the Forces of Life, the Guild fashioned a weapon to vanquish the demon. The fell creatures arise once more. A demon has been raised in Eastfell, along with goblins, ogres, and orcs, and soon they will move against the Forces of Life again. Will the Guild sit idle while the struggle resumes?"

The board members muttered among themselves for several minutes before the Guildmaster spoke again. "The Guild does not involve itself in the petty squabbles on the surface. We can do nothin' to help ye."

Rory said, "If the Dark conquers Life, the Guild will also fall. Neutrality will only mean your death will be longer in coming, but it will still come. These fell creatures care not whether you are on the side of Life or merely sit on the fence. You exist and therefore your essence will draw the demon here to consume you. There can be no neutrality with death."

Barwin spoke up. "Guildmaster, she speaks o' the lance."

A hiss of disapproval sounded from the board. "Yer words reveal a Guild secret, Barwin. For that, ye can be banished."

"Aye, ye could try. But the failure to support Guild honor in request o' the axe 'tis a far graver betrayal than openly discussing what the Forest Lords already know. Queen Arianna, 'tis true the Guild fashioned a great lance and a suit of mithrail for the rider of Blue Death so he could defeat the demon and drive back the Forces o' the Dark. 'Twas the failure o' the Forest Lords to pursue the minions o' the Dark afterward that allowed them time to regain strength and power to challenge ye once again."

Arianna said, "What you say is true. I understand why this happened as the Forest Lords

and their allies were exhausted from the battle and the devastation of the land was so widespread, they no longer had the heart for war. They only wanted to start the long road to recovery for both themselves and the land. Now we must fight the same battle again and even more shall die unless we work together to prepare in time." Seeing the reluctant agreement on the faces of several board members, she pressed the point. "We know the lance disappeared after the defeat of the demon. Did the Guild take it?"

Rory could see the internal struggle waged inside the Guildmaster as he pondered how to answer her question. Finally he said, "Aye, the Guild recovered what remained o' the lance."

Barwin said, "Not even an enchanted mithrail lance could withstand the concentrated fire from Blue Death. All that remained twas the hilt and a length o' the shaft, blackened and scored; the end melted away."

Rory said, "Then we must make a new one."

"And a new mithrail suit," added Arianna.

"Who shall ride Blue Death and bear this lance? The young prince here?" the Guildmaster jeered. "Has anyone even asked Blue Death if she be willin' to bear another rider or even to fight the demon once more? Of course not, because no one has seen Blue Death in a millennium. She flew away after the last battle and has not been seen since."

"I've seen her," Barwin said. "I know where she lives."

## Chapter 36

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In the end, the Guild Board decreed that a new lance and suit of armor would be fabricated to fit Rory. They took careful measurements for the suit which required that Rory take off his current mithrail mail.

Barwin exclaimed, "What happened ta this mail? 'Tis all ragged at the ends!"

"What? Oh, that. I used a small bit of the mithrail to make a pendant and chain for my wife."

"Ye what? How in the blazes did an overgrown, muscle-bound oaf manage ta undo the careful work o' many dwarven craftsman and mages? Did ye use brute strength ta tear it away?" Barwin mumbled.

"No, good Barwin. I used the power of life to strip away only a little bit at a time until I had what I needed."

"Next time, give her flowers or candy! Ye weakened the enchantment with yer meddling. An arrow could go right through this now, just push itself right through the links." Barwin shook his head. "Whole thing's ruined. Have ta be melted down and done over again. What a waste."



"You mean that mail has not been any good since I took part of it?" Rory blushed as he thought about the battles he'd fought and the risks he'd taken since the day he'd made the pendant for Bethany. The entire trip to Solange had been *after* he'd done that.

"Oh, it might stop somethin' slow and dull, like a hammer, but then, anyone usin' a hammer would likely hit ye on yer head. Of course, judgin' from what ye did ta this mail, hittin' ye on the head isn't likely ta cause any noticeable damage. Just as well, though. The shirt was made for someone smaller than ye are. How long have ye had it?"

"Less than a year. My father gave it to me just before we came into the Kendrahls after the ogres."

"By the beard of the First Mother! Are ye still growing? What do they feed ye? Are ye sure you're an elf? I mean, Forest Lords be tall but they sure donna have shoulders and arms like ye do. Maybe a little frost giant somewhere in the family tree?"

"Not that I know of, Barwin." Rory laughed. "My father is King Brightblade and my mother was Abigail of Westfell."

"Westfell? Nice place. Keep's built o' good stone. So that would make ye..."

"...The Heir of Westfell, yes. And I am the Crown Prince of the Forest since Brightblade was made king after Alaric was murdered by the demon."

"Ye have a busy future, lad, providing ye live that long, which ye won't runnin' about in bad mail." Barwin eyed the twin swords riding Rory's shoulders. "I remember those blades. I wondered who carried them. Seems like there's a matchin' dagger, too."

"Yes, there is but the dagger is carried by my grandfather, the Duke of Westfell."

"Ye'll have it some day, then. Complete the set. That's good."

"So how long is all this going to take?"

"'Bout three weeks for the suit and almost twice as long for the lance, assumin' we can find a big enough diamond for the tip. Maybe Blue Death will have one we could use."

"That long? What are we going to do while all this is being made?"

"We be payin' a call to Blue Death to see if any o' this be even necessary."

\* \* \*

"How can Blue Death still be alive after a millennium?" Rory asked as they moved through the lower tunnels in the Guild mines.

"Dragons are not creatures of this world, Rory. They are denizens of a higher plane of existence. When the war between the Dark and the Forces of Life began, a rift was torn between several of the planes. It is through this rift that demons can be summoned to this world. Several dragons were also ripped from their plane and brought here by the dark sorcerers to be used against the Forces of Life," Arianna explained. "The dark sorcerers were not powerful enough to control the mighty dragons and they rebelled, but only a few of them

escaped back through the rift and home. Those remaining have hidden themselves away. According to our legends, the rift will be sealed forever once the last dragon returns to its plane of existence and thus, end the war."

"Barwin, how is it that you know where to find Blue Death when everyone else does not?" Rory asked.

" 'Bout a century or so ago, back when I was but a mere worker in the mines, there was this major earthquake. Me Guildmaster sent me ta the lowest levels to see what damage had been done. The quake had opened a fissure in the side walls of an abandoned shaft so I crawled in ta see whether the fissure had exposed anythin' that might be useful. That fissure went on for a very long time and, just when I was about ta give up and turn back, I came to a vast cavern so I slipped inside ta have a bit of a look around. Lucky for me, the spot I emerged was behind a stalagmite 'cause I saw Blue Death before I fully exposed meself. I quick like returned to the fissure and crawled back to the safety o' the mines. Since there were no useful ores exposed in the fissure and the last thing the Guild needed was ta awaken the wrath of Blue Death, I just posted the shaft as unstable when I filed me report." Barwin shuddered as he remembered his encounter. "Blue Death be unlike anything ye've ever seen before or ever will again."

"Why is she called Blue Death?" Rory wondered aloud.

Barwin answered as though the question had been meant for him. "She be called Blue Death because that be what she is. The touch o' her skin will suck the life force from yer flesh. Her maw drips corrosive acid, and she breathes liquid flame. Her gaze can freeze ye in yer tracks while makin' yer mind abandon reason. 'Tis a cobalt blue color she be, with large wings like a bat, yet she has a serpent's neck and tail. Her claws are like some large raptor's with talons bigger than a man."

"If she is all that, how did the Forest Lord ride her?"

" 'Tis the purpose of the mithrail suit, lad, ta protect the rider from the touch o' her flesh, the bite o' her acid, and the searin' heat o' her flames. Protectin' the rider's mind be beyond our skill and is solely up to ye, Prince Rorrick. Ye must make peace with her or destroy ye she will and all will be lost."

It took almost two days to crawl through the narrow fissure that led from the shaft to the cavern. In many places, the passage was too narrow for Rory and Arianna to pass without making the openings larger. This was how Rory learned about the affinity between dwarves and stone. Barwin would examine the blockage at some length and then he would extend his hand in just the right place. His hand would actually pass inside the rock, gripping it along some unseen fracture, and he would pull the obstruction free. Most of the obstructions would be reduced to small enough parts that they could be passed behind them, but one stubborn boulder could not be fractured and had to be pushed ahead of them along the fissure. This actually proved to be a boon since anywhere the rock would pass through was large enough for Rory as well.

When they reached the entrance to the cavern, they left the boulder in the passage as a barrier while they curled up to sleep one final time before confronting Blue Death. Barwin admitted his terror and Rory relented, telling the dwarf to remain hidden in the tunnel.

As they each tried to sleep, Arianna crawled over to Rory and put her head on his chest and

her arms around him. "Just hold me. I find I am quite afraid, and that is something I have never felt before," she said.

Rory settled his arms around her shoulders. He remembered holding her like this the night before they fought the orcs, and realized she had come to him that night not to calm her fears but his. He had spent the night being stoic and brave for her, and had calmed his own fears at the same time. He'd not known fear since. Even now, he was not afraid, although he knew he should be. He could very easily die tomorrow but he knew that some part of him would go on in his son and the memories of those who loved him. He whispered, "Arianna, I want you to stay in the fissure with Barwin. Should I fail, the Forest Folk must know so they can find someone else to try again. Promise me!"

"I promise, Rory." She leaned her head up and kissed him. "That's for luck and for love. I have never stopped loving you, you know. Even being married does not change the heart of an elf, Rory."

"Yes, I know and on many levels, I love you, too. It does not diminish my love for Bethany any more than my love for Duke Richard or Swiftstalker does. Had we the privacy, I would be tempted to do more, as an affirmation of life in the face of the uncertainty of tomorrow."

Arianna smiled in the darkness. "I know exactly what you mean, and I feel the same way. Now, go to sleep. You will need your wits about you tomorrow."

## Chapter 37

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Rory slowly walked around the edge of the cavern until he was opposite the fissure from which he had crept. Dignity had been abandoned as he had occasionally crawled around the various obstacles so he would be as far away from Arianna and Barwin as he could be when he confronted Blue Death. The dragon was aptly named and Barwin's description had fallen short of the reality, perhaps because mere words could not describe the creature before him.

She had a triangular-shaped head with twin horns spiraling upward from her skull. Just down from her horns along her sloped forehead were her blazing eyes, faceted like cut blue diamonds. Her long muzzle narrowed as it extended toward her flaring nostrils, from which tendrils of smoke arose. Long fangs extended both upward from her bottom jaw and downward from the upper past her lips, and a slow drip of corrosive acid splattered the rock beneath her as she lay looking for him.

Her wings were folded around her, masking her sleek body from his view. What he could see was covered in shiny cobalt blue scales that sparkled even in the dim light of the cavern. Her long tail, barbed with spines taller than a man, was wrapped around her legs. She was both beautiful and terrifying to behold.

*'I smell you, elf lord.'* Her voice, if you could call it that, echoed in his mind.

"I bring you greetings, mighty one. Long has it been since you graced the skies above,"

Rory said, stepping out into the open.

*'I sense you are unarmored and unarmed, elf lord. Do you think that wise?'*

"Even if arms and armor could withstand your powers, mighty one, I would not need them. I do not seek to cause you harm but to converse with you."

*'Your friends inside the rock fear me, yet you do not. Why is that?'*

Rory replied, "They fear death, and I do not. If I fail in my mission, I will die. But even if I fail and you were to spare me, I would still die when the demon of the Netherworld consumes my life force. I die either way. It is only through my success that I and those I love may live. You, then, are life and I will never fear life."

*'So the demon has returned. I fought such a one once before with one of your kind. It was not easy but we did destroy it.'*

"Tell me, great one, what becomes of the demon when it is destroyed? Does it cease to exist or is it returned through the rift to its normal plane of existence?"

*'What do you know of the rift?'*

"They say it is a tear in the fabric of creation, allowing the different planes of existence to touch. It is also said that the rift may be closed for all time once both the demons and the dragons are returned to their normal planes."

*'Do you believe this is possible? That we may return home?'*

"I do not know. Our greatest minds believe it to be true. They believe the rift remains open even when the demons have been destroyed only because the dragons remain. Only through repairing the balance between the planes by returning all to their rightful place can the rift be sealed. Do you know how many demons are loose on this world?"

There was a long pause, as if the dragon was searching the world during that brief moment to ascertain the answer. *'One.'*

"And how many dragons remain?"

There was an ever longer pause before the soft reply came back. *'One.'*

"Then if you were to help us slay this one demon, you could then be sent back yourself, sealing the rift, and putting an end to this needless cycle of death and destruction."

The dragon seemed to shrink in on itself a little as it said, *'I'm afraid. What if death does not send us back home through the rift but is just an ending of our spirit?'*

"Then all of us will die and the Dark will win. Is it not better to take the chance? To risk it all on the possibility of returning home while saving others? Or would you prefer to cower here in this deep hole for all eternity while innocents die above?" Rory took a real chance as he added, "If that is your answer, to cower while the Dark wins, then slay me now so I don't see any of those I love perish."

Blue Death slowly reared up. *'Do you accuse me of cowardice, elf lord?'*

"I say those that choose to hide are cowards while those who face the challenges of living are not. Which you choose will answer the question you ask."

*'You will need the shiny suit to protect you from my touch, elf lord, as well as a lance to impale the demon.'*

"The suit and the lance are being made as we speak, great one. We have not found the diamond to tip the lance, however."

*'This demon is much stronger than the last one, so a diamond will not be enough.'* Blue Death reached out one forelimb, extending her claws. She smashed her claws against the rock again and again until the tip of one claw broke away. She carefully collected the fragment, placing it a few feet from the entrance of the fissure. *'Take this claw tip. My body is not from this plane and my claws and teeth are harder than your diamonds. But you best hurry! The Forces of the Dark are on the march as we speak and the killing has begun.'*

\* \* \*

Arianna threw herself into Rory's arms as he crawled back into the fissure dragging the three foot tip of Blue Death's claw. "You are the bravest person I have ever seen. I thought I would die when you told the dragon to kill you rather than face the Dark triumphant."

"It wasn't that big of a risk. The feeling I got from the dragon was a desperate longing for her home. She needed her pride stung a little to get her moving but she really couldn't afford to kill me in case I was right. We need to get this tip back to those making the lance, and we must hurry things up. The dark forces have launched their attack."

"Do you know where? Is it Westfell or Aluria?" Arianna asked.

"If I had to guess, I would imagine the attack to be aimed at Aluria. Remember, they believe the king despondent and grief-stricken. They do not know we have integrated our command structures and that they face General Gustav and the combined forces of the realm. There is something I must try." Rory calmed himself and said, "Assistance, please."

A very bewildered sprite answered his call. "Prince Rorrick, why are you deep underground and with a *dwarf*?"

"That is not important. I need you to convey a message to the Great Caliph of the Desert Peoples. Relay the message through the desert sprites if it will be faster because time is of the essence." Rory paused to see if the sprite had any objections. "Tell the caliph the war in the north has begun and he must send his warriors as soon as he can."

"It will be done, Prince Rorrick." The sprite vanished.

Arianna was looking at him with a very strange expression on her face.

"What?" Rory asked.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Summon a sprite to this place deep underground. No one else can summon a sprite anywhere except at the marker stones in the veil. It's part of our agreement."

"I've been doing it for a long time and from all over the place, even in the Great Desert of Solange. Of course, there I summoned a desert sprite." Rory looked at her incredulous expression. "Look, no one told me it wasn't possible, so I just did it."

She just shook her head, muttering, "He just did it. No one said it couldn't be done so he just did it. Unbelievable."

## *Part Seven*

### *EASTFELL*

#### Chapter 38

« ^ »

The war between the Dark and the Forces of Life began at dawn on a bitterly cold morning along the border between Eastfell and Aluria. The icy wind knifed through the sentries standing watch along the fortifications built up during the fall, so many of them chose to stay behind the windbreaks. This meant they could not see the approaching troops until they were right outside the walls.

Not that it would have mattered. Seventy-five thousand conscripted warriors crossed into Aluria all along the border, hitting every fortification at once. Behind that line of troops were several thousand orcs, pushing them forward. Behind the orcs came the goblins, eating the dead and the wounded on either side with complete impartiality.

Aluria's front line was wiped out in a matter of minutes and none escaped to warn the second line of what was coming. At least, that was the plan when Eastfell attacked and had they been dealing with just Aluria's soldiers, it would have worked. However, Aluria was allied with the fey and various winter sprites had been posted along the borders of Eastfell in case they chose to attack in the winter. Those sprites reported the mass attack to the mages assigned to the command center.

General Gustav looked up as the master mage assigned to his staff walked into the command center.

"It has begun. Eastfell has crossed the border into Aluria in force."

"How big a force and exactly where have they crossed?" asked General Gustav.

"They attacked everywhere along the border at the same time with thousands of troops. I know sprites aren't very bright, but they stuck around long enough to see each garrison overrun. Behind the front line troops were orcs and goblins," the mage reported. "I don't have to tell you the fate of the wounded."

"We can't stop that many. And there is no way to move the troops from Westfell without leaving it wide open to any other forces Eastfell may deploy."

"There is some good news. I don't know how, but apparently Prince Rorrick got word of the attack. He sent word to the Great Caliph to muster his legions now rather than in the spring. Word has just returned that the first wave of desert nomads should arrive in about two days."

"How many are in the first wave?"

"Around one hundred thousand, give or take. There will be some losses along the way as they hit the heavy snows, but the majority will make it to the city of Aluria itself about the same time as the Eastfell advance."

"Send word to the second line troops to fall back and fight skirmishing battles to slow the Eastfell advance. We must keep them back as long as possible." General Gustav studied the map. They might have a chance after all.

\* \* \*

Dawn of the second day saw the opening of the second front. Using almost identical tactics, Eastfell hit the long border with Westfell. Reinforced by Kendrahl's mountain warriors and the elven rangers, the front line at Westfell held, although losses on both sides were high. Losses did not concern Eastfell, however, and they pressed the attack throughout the day and into the night. Some garrisons were finally overwhelmed, mainly the small temporary forts established to bolster the border. Counterattacks by the elven rangers retook the captured fortifications by slaughtering every orc, goblin, and Eastfell conscript they found. For a distance of three hundred miles, the snow on the Westfell border was stained red with blood.

Battle mages from the Heart of the Veil launched magical attacks against the creatures of the Dark. Orcs and goblins were blinded by sudden flares of light that would appear in a flash in front of their eyes. Since they were adapted for dwelling deep underground in the Netherworld, the brilliant light seared their optic nerves, causing flash-blindness. Once blinded, they fell easy prey to the bows and swords of the elven rangers.

Eastfell sent in a wave of fresh conscripts. The Wolves of Westfell surged out of their protective fortifications and decimated the conscripts even as they attempted to cross the border. Drawn by the scent of so much blood, the orcs and goblins rushed forward and were engaged by three warriors to each fell creature. The warriors were methodical and merciless and nothing survived their onslaught. The Wolves returned to their fortification only after they had run out of things to kill.

The dark sorcerers sent spells against the leaders of Aluria and Westfell. Both King William and Duke Richard were targeted but the spells failed for both still wore the mithrail talismans given to them when they visited the Great Forest and the Veil. As the spells struck, mages within the Heart tapped the Forces of Life to counter them, sending surges of energy back to the sorcerers, and blasting them with massive bolts of psychic energy. General Gustav, protected by the battle mages assigned to his staff, never knew about the attacks made against him. Earl Sudcliffe, the king's chancellor, and Armand, Duke of Kendrahl, were not as fortunate. Both men were struck with the full force of the spells. The earl's heart was stopped

instantly while he was walking along a hallway in the castle, and he was dead before he hit the floor. The Duke of Kendrahl was struck while fighting alongside his warriors along the border with Eastfell. Distracted for a moment by the crushing pain that gripped his heart, he never felt the blade that thrust through his chest.

King William took the news of the death of his chancellor calmly. The death of one man in the midst of such slaughter was a small thing, even though it was the result of magical attack. He knew he would grieve for all of the dead if he survived the battles still to come, and the butcher's bill would be that much higher when it was finally ended.

The mages' confirmation of the magical nature of the earl's death reminded him of the sudden warming he had felt from the talisman around his neck. It was reminiscent of the time he had passed through the Veil, and he knew the Forest Lords had warded him against such attacks. He hoped the same was true for the Duke of Westfell.

King William turned his attention back to the briefing by General Gustav, who was saying, "We've done all we can to delay the forces of Eastfell but they are overrunning any troops that attempt to stand against them. We've lost over sixty percent of the King's Own in the past two days of fighting and barely slowed the advance. With the orcs and goblins behind them, Eastfell's conscript soldiers cannot stop advancing because they fear what follows behind them more than they do our troops in front of them. I think most of them would prefer a clean death by a sword, axe, or spear compared to what the orcs and goblins do to those who refuse to advance. Our estimate of conscript deaths is almost forty thousand, over half of their original force. Even with those losses, they still outnumber us almost two to one. We have been forced to withdraw as many combat capable warriors as we can into the rings of the city. The outer ring is indefensible, but the gates into the third have been sealed and the curtain wall is manned. Additional troops are in the second ring but the gates there are still open at this time. Still more of the King's Own control the high walls of the inner ring around the castle itself."

King William studied the deployments indicated on the map and said, "It's all you could have done, General. Westfell has promised a blocking force to keep the invaders from sweeping around their lines to strike behind them."

"The mages have promised to do something about the miserable weather. It will mean heavier than normal snows in the mountains, but for the next few days, they will effectively stop winter in Aluria. They promise temperatures high enough to melt the snow, which will swell the rivers and make them harder to cross. The ground will become a muddy morass and be hell to march across, let alone fight in. However, winter will remain in Westfell to slow the advance there. You know they have held against every attack along their border. Their losses have been lighter than ours, and those of the Eastfell conscripts have been proportionately heavier. They have even slaughtered several scores of orcs and goblins. The only jarring note was the loss of Duke Armand of Kendrahl. Those who witnessed his death say he suddenly faltered just as he was struck by an orc. His body was recovered and examined by one of the Forest Lords, who confirmed the taint of dark magic. Like the earl, he was struck down from afar; the sword stroke was incidental."

King William looked up from the map and asked the one question haunting his mind. "Where is the demon?"



\* \* \*

The poor had fled the outer ring of the city long before the invaders had appeared over the hills. By the thousands, Eastfell's conscripts slogged their way across the muddy terrain and encircled the beleaguered city. They began tearing down the structures in the area, using the wood for fires and to construct battering rams with which to attack the wall around the third ring. Archers on both sides traded arrows, taking shots at available targets whenever there was a likely chance of hitting someone. While the conscript army archers were not very good, those with the King's Own were excellent marksman and always hit what they aimed at. Before long, none of the conscripts would go near the wall unless forced by the orcs, and the King's Own would then target the orcs. Whenever they could, they would strike at the goblins and scored several lucky shots which destroyed the subdemons.

As late afternoon came, the ring of the Eastfell Army was drawn tight around the besieged city. Then the ground began to shake and there was a sound like thunder. The rumbling grew louder, and the undulating cry of the desert nomad warrior called from one hundred thousand throats as the nomads raced over the hill and encircled the invaders. Even the goblins were no match for the nomads when they attacked as they circled, the speed of their horses adding force to their swords, cleaving anything they struck. A thunderous cheer echoed from the city, and the King's Own burst forth on their own chargers, hitting the Eastfell conscripts from the center while the nomads ground away at the outside. As the sun set, the fight raged on, now lit by the hundreds of fires the conscripts had set. The conscripts were doomed. The goblins and orcs tried to break away, attempted to flee back to Eastfell, but none were successful. They either died in the attempt or, if they did break out of the encircling ring, they were hunted down and destroyed by the King's Own or the caliph's warriors.

Under the bright full moon, two men met at the center of the tremendous battlefield, both spattered in blood and gore but none of it their own. Both mounted on horses bred for combat and both carried swords red to the hilt with blood.

"Greetings, I am Michael of Aluria, commander of the King's Own. Your timing was impeccable," said the tired commander.

"I am called Omar, naib of the caliph's warriors. It was very hard to wait until they were packed tightly around the city but the results have been very gratifying," replied the grinning nomad warrior.

"How were your losses?"

"Almost not worth mentioning, perhaps five percent. Those goblins were harder to kill than we expected. Yours?"

"We lost about fifty men with another seventy or so wounded." The commander of the King's Own was stunned by the desert warrior's casual dismissal of a five percent loss. That meant almost five thousand dead or too badly wounded to continue fighting.

"Would you like our physicians to tend to your wounded?" asked the naib. "They are quite good with sword wounds."

"I was going to offer the use of ours to treat your men, Omar." The commander smiled. "It

was a good fight.”

“It was a better trap! They never saw us coming.” The naib was grinning.

\* \* \*

General Gustav and King William stood atop the battlements of the castle where they had watched the end of the siege unfold. They had joined in the cheering as the nomad warriors charged the army of Eastfell conscripts and fell creatures, then watched in admiration as the nomads had slaughtered their enemy.

“Amazing fighters,” King William said as they watched the commander of the King’s Own meeting with the naib of the caliph’s warriors below on the battle-scarred plain.

“Yes, they are. I know I would hate to fight them. Do you feel this was just too easy? Their army has been stopped at Westfell, Kendrahl, and now here in Aluria, yet we have not seen that demon. Where is it and what is it doing?”

## Chapter 39

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The first alarm went out when the Veil was torn asunder and a host of goblins and the demon entered the protected area of the forest. Almost all of the elven rangers had been sent to augment the Wolves of Westfell along the border with Eastfell. What few remained were no match for the goblin forces. Forest Lords were torn to pieces by the creatures of the Dark. As the great trees themselves were ripped from the ground, the hamadryads tried to fight but the demon scooped them up and devoured their life force. The pixies and the sprites fled.

The demon tore at the Veil of the Heart as if it were a living thing of flesh and blood. Great holes were gouged out of the Veil, thinning its strength until the demon finally burst inside. It stomped over to the Heart itself and grasped the sphere in its mighty talons. The mages used every bit of energy they could draw from the ley lines to attack the demon, but it was to no avail. The huge creature picked up the stone and slowly ground it to powder in its hands. When the stone was destroyed, the Forest Lords no longer had anything to focus and direct the life force around them. Defenseless now, the mages were quickly consumed by the demon.

The goblins struck down every Forest Lord they encountered. Winterstar put up a gallant fight to defend King Brightblade, but they were both overwhelmed. As the king fell, a piercing scream rent the air as Bethany witnessed it.

Two goblins immediately gave chase and quickly captured her. They dragged her before the demon whose blazing eyes of fire burned brighter as it recognized the target they came to find. It tore open a dimensional doorway back to Eastfell and they stepped through, taking Bethany with them. Her screams were cut off by the closing of the doorway.

\* \* \*

A terrified sprite appeared before Rory and Arianna deep within the mines of the Guild. It took them several minutes to calm the shaking creature enough so it could speak and its message was something neither expected. "The Veil of the Forest is no more. The Heart has been destroyed and all within the Veil have been killed. The demon and goblins came and destroyed everything."

Rory desperately reached out to the ley lines and followed them back to the Veil. It was as the sprite described; the Veil was gone; the great trees felled and shattered, and the Heart itself no more. There were dead and wounded Forest Lords everywhere. And though he searched everywhere, he could not find Bethany nor any trace of her mithrail pendant. There was only one place in the world where he could not trace that pendant. Bethany was in Eastfell.

Arianna had likewise traveled the ley lines, seeking the condition of the mages and the king. Most of the mages were dead, yet the king still lived.

"Rory, your father is still alive although he is grievously wounded. We must get back there quickly but I don't know how. The passes are now all buried under heavy snow, made heavier by the interference from the mages with the weather in Aluria. It will take us weeks to fight our way back to the forest, and the wounded don't have that long."

"Bethany has been taken to Eastfell, Arianna. I have to rescue her but to do that, I will have to face the demon and *the suit and lance aren't ready!* It will take another week before they are. What will become of Bethany in that time?"

\* \* \*

Barwin snuck away from the two Forest Lords and raced to the Guild Hall. He bowed before the board and the Guildmaster said, "What do ye want, Barwin?"

"Guildmaster, the Veil has been attacked and virtually destroyed. There be wounded in need of immediate help."

"What be that ta the Guild? Let Westfell help 'em."

"Westfell still fights the war, Guildmaster. There be none but the Guild who can help the Forest Lords now."

"What profit would there be for us ta help 'em? Arrogant people, all of 'em. Think they be better than all o' us because they be elves. Let 'em take care o' themselves."

"How can ye be so short-sighted?" Anger flared up inside the elderly dwarf. "Ye know the ancient texts of the Guild. Should the elves leave this world, magic itself will be disappearin'. If we can no longer penetrate stone, how will we survive? If the fey be no more, how much longer do ye think the Guild or even our very species exist?"

The board members were stunned. Truly, most of them had never bothered to study the ancient texts because they believed the past was simply that: the past. What possible bearing could it have on the present or the future? Yet, events of the past had already returned to affect

them. Had not demons come back? Were they not fashioning a lance to be carried once more on the back of Blue Death, who lived under them all this time? Could the old dwarf be right after all?

"What would ye have us do, Master Barwin?" asked the Guildmaster, bestowing the honorific for the first time since Barwin had been ousted from the board.

"We must be openin' the lower tunnel ta the Great Forest ta permit Queen Arianna and Prince Rorrick ta git back ta their land. We must aid the injured and we must help them rebuild."

"And the suit and lance?"

"Work must be sped up. If the demon can tear open the Veil and shatter the Heart, what protection be there for us inside this mountain? Unless Prince Rorrick succeeds in destroyin' the demon, we'll all be lost."

"It shall be done. Gather whoever can aid the wounded and what free labor ye can find and head for the lower tunnel. Leave the skilled craftsmen here ta finish the suit and the lance." The Guildmaster looked steadily at the old dwarf. "When this be over and the demon destroyed, this board demands one thing from yerself. We demand ye return as Guildmaster once again."

\* \* \*

Barwin approached Queen Arianna. "Your Majesty, 'tis agonizin' ye be over reachin' the Veil in time ta help yer people. We have a way of doin' so that be much quicker, although it be all underground. The Guild offers their help in rescuin' the wounded and in rebuildin' the Veil."

Turning to Rory, he said, "Work on the suit and lance will not be stoppin'. If anythin', 'twill be done the faster. The attack on the Veil convinced the Guild they can no longer be sittin' back and waitin' ta see what happens. They agree the most important thing now is ta save the Veil and destroy the demon."

Rory was torn by his duty to rescue the wounded at the Veil and his love for Bethany. He knew he could not save her yet, and the thought of what she might be enduring was a sword thrust in his heart. He heaved a deep sigh and said, "Lead on, Barwin. At least in the Veil, I will feel like I am accomplishing something."

\* \* \*

It took five days of following dark, twisting tunnels before they reached their destination. As they had traveled, Rory asked Barwin about the genesis of the tunnel.

"We dug this here tunnel followin' a vein of mithrail. As the vein twisted, so did the tunnel. Finally, the vein be endin'. We dug a little farther and found ourselves far from the mountains. We hid the entrance and use it on those rare occasions when we be forced to travel to the Veil, like for yer coronation." Seeing the surprised look on Rory's face, he added, "Aye, I be there. I watched as ye and yer wife were elevated to the ranks ye now hold. I be not surprised ye don't remember me as the glade were quite crowded and we be easily overlooked."

When they reached the end of the tunnel, Barwin reached inside the rock wall blocking the entrance and released the locking mechanism. Completely balanced with the usual efficiency the dwarves of the Guild were known for, the door opened with a slight push from the elderly dwarf.

"I know this spot!" Arianna exclaimed. "We are close to the Tower of the Pact. Rory, we can be at the Veil in just a few hours."

Rory and Arianna quickly went ahead of the dwarven relief column. By the time they reached the entrance to the Veil, the scope of the destruction was all too clear. Many of the larger trees had been uprooted and were lying on the ground. The carefully tended hedges and flowering plants had all been smashed or trampled. The statuary was also toppled and smashed, as were the nearby benches used for contemplation. The least wounded had dragged themselves to those more badly injured and were tending to them as best they could. Surprisingly, King Brightblade was sitting propped up against a tree, carefully mopping the brow of the unconscious Winterstar.

"How fare you, my husband?" Arianna softly asked.

King Brightblade looked up, an expression of incredulous joy suffused his face at the sight of his wife and queen. "I've been better, but I cannot recall a time when you ever looked as beautiful as you do right now."

She knelt beside the king and placed a hand against his face, staring deeply into his eyes. "Help is here. Barwin is leading a relief mission from the Guild to succor the injured and to help us rebuild. They were behind us by about an hour."

The king replied weakly, "I always said Barwin was a good man, for a dwarf, that is. How did you get here so fast?"

"I wish it could have been faster. I despaired of reaching you for another two or three weeks because of the very heavy snowfalls in the passes, but the Guild has an old tunnel that comes out near the Tower of the Pact."

"We have been aware of it for quite some time, but felt it did no harm to let them think it was still secret." King Brightblade looked at her with feverish eyes. "You must do something for Winterstar. He has not regained consciousness since he was struck by a goblin's axe when they attacked us. He fell defending me, Arianna, not that it mattered in the end."

Arianna bent her attention to the fallen elven ranger. She knew he had refused to leave the Veil completely defenseless and so had stayed behind when the other rangers had gone to Westfell. She opened her senses and gathered the energy from one of the nearest ley lines, then focused her awareness on the fallen ranger. He had taken a bad blow to the head, albeit a glancing one. The axe had struck at an angle, ripping away a flap of scalp and part of Winterstar's prized hair. Underneath the skull, however, lay a massive blood clot applying pressure to the brain. She used the energy she had gathered to seal off the ruptured blood vessels and tried to drain away some of the excess fluid, but there was only so much she could do. It was in the hands of the All-Father now.

Arianna sat back and gazed up at her husband, preparing to tell him the status of his old friend and bodyguard, and realized Brightblade had lost consciousness. She quickly focused

her attention on him and realized with horror that he had concealed the extent of his own injuries. His left arm had been crushed and was beyond repair. From the nature and extent of the damage, it looked like a goblin warhammer had slammed into him, catching the arm squarely. Several ribs behind that arm were also broken, and one had punctured the king's lung, collapsing it. He had lost a great deal of blood and infection was setting in along the shattered arm.

"Rory, I need your help if we are to save your father. First, we must carefully move Winterstar off his lap so we can lay your father out where we can work on him. Would you please move Winterstar while I hold your father still?"

Rory shifted the unconscious ranger to one side, making the elder comfortable with his own shirt as a pillow for the fallen elf's battered head. He turned back to Arianna to help her stretch his father out.

"Rory, his arm is crushed and infection is starting to take hold. We will have to remove it at the shoulder, which is the hardest amputation to do. Your sword Wolf Fang will do the job quickly and cleanly. I have already closed off the blood vessels and nerves, so he won't feel it. There will be some superficial bleeding but I will deal with that once the arm is out of the way. Underneath that arm are some shattered ribs. We will need to slowly set them back in place and use the life force to speed the setting of the bones and to heal the puncture in his lung. Then we must deal with the infection and his overall weakened condition by pumping as much energy as we can into him." She looked up at Rory. "Can you do this? Can you take your father's arm in order to save his life?"

Rory knew he had the skill with his sword to do as she asked, and he nodded his agreement. She slowly extended the wreckage that had once been an arm, holding it at the proper angle for his sword cut. He brought the sword over his head, focused intently on the exact line the sword must cleave, and then swung swiftly and accurately. Arianna fell back as the sword separated the arm from Brightblade's torso, the arm still in her grasp. She let go of the resected flesh and focused her energy on sealing the open wound. New skin covered the spot of the amputation, bright pink in the pale light of the forest.

Rory linked hands with her and together, they carefully guided the broken ribs back into alignment, fusing the fragments into a partially healed whole. Arianna carefully mended the jagged hole ripped through the pleural lining and the lung itself, draining away the blood and other fluids that had collected. Rory concentrated on reinflating the lung, slowly drawing the lung to its normal shape while removing the air that had entered the pleural cavity. Soon, the lung was functioning in tandem with the other one. Finally, they attacked the infection while allowing their own energy along with that from the ley lines to fill the depleted reservoirs of the king.

Rory sat back and realized Barwin was sitting beside him. The dwarf had already dressed and bandaged Winterstar's scalp wound, and now held out two steaming mugs of stew. "Eat this. You both be as grey as a foggy morn. 'Twill do no one any good if ye collapse. Eat and rest. Guild doctors be attendin' ta the others."

As they sat back against the shattered trunk of a tree, Barwin said, "The king be lookin' better. Fact be, he's more color than ye two do. Shame about his arm, but better an arm than his life."

Rory sighed. "I wish I had some ale right now. Swiftstalker always claimed it would give energy to a corpse."

A slim pale brown arm extended a frosty tankard over Rory's shoulder as a sultry voice said, "My pleasure, Rory."

"Elona! You're all right," Rory said, astonished.

"Several hamadryads were slain, but most of us survived. I'm sorry we couldn't stop them from taking Princess Bethany. Although her capture is probably what saved the king and many others from death. Once they had her, they left."

Rory buried his face in his hands. "My poor Bethany. She never bargained on this when she chose to marry me."

"No. None of us ever thought the Dark would attack the Veil, Rory. We all felt it was the safest place for her to be, and we were wrong. What's past is in the past and nothing can change it. All we can do now is rebuild the Veil and continue the fight against the Dark. It will be up to you and Blue Death to destroy the demon once the suit and lance are ready," Arianna said. "We will all be changed by this war, some of us profoundly. We've lost homes, friends like Duke Armand and Earl Sudcliffe, and our complacency. As long as the dark sorcerers live and the rift between the planes exist, this nightmare will go on."

Barwin came back up to them and said, "Queen Arianna, I be surveyin' the damage. Most be superficial and easily repaired. Plants can be regrown, new statues and benches can be made. The biggest loss, aside from those who died, was the destruction o' the Heart itself. I ha' sent a message back ta the Guild to prepare a new stone ta be keyed ta the pathways o' the forces o' life. 'Twill be delivered here in five days, along with the suit and the lance. In the meantime, we shall begin clearin' away the damage and plantin' the new paths." He bowed and walked away before they could respond.

"A new Heart!" Arianna whispered.

"In five days the suit and the lance will be here and I can go find Bethany!"

## Chapter 40

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Once the siege at Aluria had been broken, the combined armies of Aluria, Westfell, Kendrahl, and the caliph's warriors from Solange began to advance against the forces of the Dark in Eastfell itself. As they pressed deeper into Eastfell, they began to tighten the wall of steel that enclosed the dark forces. Each day, the command structure of the consolidated army wondered whether this would be the one in which they faced the demon. However, so far the worst they had to face had been the conscripts and their orc handlers. Even the goblins had been withdrawn.

As they reached the midpoint between the border and Eastfell Keep, they encountered a massed formation of conscripts. The orcs behind them were wielding whips and spears to force

the troops to charge the oncoming consolidated army. With a great roar, the conscripts surged forward, outdistancing their fell wardens. Just before the two armies clashed, however, the conscripts threw down their weapons and openly begged the consolidated army to save them from the orcs and Eastfell. Outraged and hopelessly outnumbered, the orcs fled while the former conscripts fell to their knees amid the forces of Aluria and Westfell, openly weeping in piteous gratitude.

They were starving and weak; the majority had not seen, much less eaten, decent food in months. Disobedience meant to die painfully and some had lost hope so badly they had openly courted a quick death by defying their overseers. Unfortunately, the death they earned was not quick and was often accomplished by being devoured slowly by the goblins. When they saw the massed armies of the realm advancing toward them, and the orcs had begun to force them to advance, they knew they had only one chance to survive or perhaps be granted a quick, clean death. Without a word passing among them, they just abandoned their weapons and hoped in the mercy of the man who had been their king.

A detachment of the King's Own was left with the former conscripts, more to assist than guard them. On instructions from the king, the poor ragged men were led to Westfell, along with a letter to the duke requesting Duke Richard render whatever aid was necessary to restore the men's pride and dignity.

It took another five days to reach the valley that led to Eastfell Keep. King William surveyed the approach in disbelief. He had last been in Eastfell only eighteen months before. It had been early autumn when the state funeral for the previous Duke of Eastfell had brought the king here. The approaches had still been lush with ripening hay, orchards with ripened fruits bordered the neatly fenced roadways. Prosperous farms were everywhere and the people waved at their king and queen as they passed by. The keep, smaller than Westfell, but much taller with its single tower rising above it like a finger pointing to the sky, stood on a high hill overlooking the approach. Grazing cattle and sheep dotted the landscape, separated from the fields of hay by the split rail fences. It had been picturesque and peaceful.

Now it looked like a scene from the Netherworld. The farms, fields, and livestock were gone, as were the orchards and all the fencing. The land was uniformly devoid of life, the soil itself a sickly grey as if it were dying. The corrals Rory had described at the base of the keep now stood empty; the king had no illusions what that meant for those who had been penned in them like cattle. The fruit trees had all been chopped down and sharpened into spikes that jutted from the ground like spears to stave off the horses of the nomad warriors. Behind those outthrust spikes milled over five thousand orcs, each wearing some form of armor and carrying swords and spears. Above them on the curtain walls were the goblins, waving great two-handed swords around as they exhorted the orcs to defend the keep. Above the walls stood the tower, its sides a reddish-black with both old and fresh blood. Some of the dark sorcerers evidently remained in Eastfell, sacrificing the last of the people from the pens or perhaps those unfortunates who had been serving as slaves within the keep itself, satisfying whatever their depraved whims desired.

The elven battle mages, whose anger over the death of so many of their friends during the attack on the Veil fueled their spells, began blasting the spikes. Many orcs were badly injured as shards and splinters of jagged wood flew through the air and impaled those too close. The remaining orcs were showered with the slivers of wood as well as the blood of their injured.



The mages then turned their attention to the high stone walls, and huge explosions hurled stones high into the air to come crashing down on the wounded orcs and goblins alike.

Suddenly they could see the demon as it came from beneath the keep. Its skin was a deep red mottled with black, studded with rows of black spikes across its shoulders and arms. The two great horns of black curled from its head reminded many of the Kendrahl warriors of the big horned rams that roamed in the mountains. Great tusks thrust upward from its bottom jaw, much like an ogre. Its eyes were pools of yellow flames that capered and danced within their sockets. It stood thirty or more feet in the air, with massive arms that hung almost to its knees ending in hands with black talons easily longer than a man was tall. Its legs were short and its wide feet also bore claws, as well as a wicked hooked spike by their heels. The demon also had a tail that lashed from side to side like a whip, and there were smaller claws imbedded along the length of it capable of shredding the flesh from a man's body in great bloody patches.

The demon picked up one of the shattered stones and hurled it at the surrounding army. Men fled from its path yet it still managed to crush a few of them. The demon bellowed a roaring laugh as it threw more stones, first to one side and then the other to make the advancing army sway. The demon reached out a clawed hand and seemed to snag the very air itself as it tore an opening. It leaped into this rent and vanished, only to reappear right in the middle of the consolidated army.

Twelve horses and riders were crushed when the demon appeared atop them. Its tail lashed out and tore the heads off two passing nomads. Still others were ripped from their horses by its huge hands and tossed into the air, where the demon snapped them up with his mouth, eating them alive.

Hundreds of archers loosed flight after flight of arrows at the great creature but most either bounced off the spikes on its body or stuck ineffectually in its skin. A few brave men fired right at the flaming pools that served as its eyes but the arrows were devoured without any harm to the demon. The brave nomads raced at the demon, their shrill undulating war cry sounding from their throats. Their swords slashed at the beast's legs as they passed, but all to little effect. Most of those who charged the demon were killed by either its taloned feet or its grasping hands.

As the army concentrated its attention on the nightmare suddenly in its midst, the orcs and goblins swarmed from Eastfell Keep and began attacking. The fight was much more even and scores of orcs and more than a few goblins were killed even as hundreds of men lay still on the ground, broken and dying. The nomad warriors of the desert and the elven rangers of the Great Forest had the best success against these fell creatures, though the King's Own and the Wolves of Westfell destroyed their share as well.

\* \* \*

Bethany stood in her cell inside the tower, watching in horror as the demon slaughtered those standing against it. She shuddered as she recalled her own encounter with the demon, after seeing the King of the Forest struck down and the Veil tore apart. Seized by two of the loathsome goblins, she had been dragged through the rent in the very air and brought here to Eastfell, appearing in the courtyard near the entrance to the tower. There she had been confronted by the Earl of Eastfell and the dark sorcerers.

Rikard, Duke of Eastfell, was no longer the plump and slovenly teenager he had been last spring. He was skeletal in appearance, and his clothes hung on his emaciated frame. His hair was lank and dirty, and his eyes were vacant. Drool slipped unnoticed from his slack-jawed mouth as he shambled over to her. He reached out one grimy hand and grabbed the neckline of her dress, ripping away her bodice and exposing her breasts, which he then grabbed and twisted cruelly.

"Marrying that upstart in Westfell was a huge mistake. You were meant to be mine." His voice was filled with his insanity. Twisting her breast harder and crushing her nipple, he said, "The whelp you carry has power and the double sacrifice of you both on the altar will bring us the final victory over all who stand against us. Take her to the tower cell. Let her contemplate the horrors still to come as she sees her baby torn from her womb to be followed by her own still-beating heart."

One of the dark sorcerers came over and examined the mithrail pendant that dangled between her swollen breasts, purpling with bruises from Rikard's harsh treatment. He passed his hand over the small wolf, muttering some incantation, then reached out and grabbed the pendant. Bethany held her breath, waiting for him to burst into flames, but he merely ripped the chain from around her neck and threw the pendant to the ground, where he smashed it with his boot heel. "See that and despair. The powers of the elves are weak compared to ours. Nothing can withstand the Forces of the Dark."

The door to her cell faced the altar. Each time they performed a sacrifice, the sorcerers would first weave a spell over her to make her unable to move so she would be forced to watch every horrifying moment. The sacrifices were usually young women and these were the last of them held in the tower. The ritual fed off their terror, so they were not drugged or bespelled in any fashion; they were dragged into the chamber, screaming and fighting every inch of the way, by two goblins. Once they reached the altar, the young woman was forced on top of it by the simple expediency of one goblin grabbing her legs while the other held her arms. They would pick the struggling victim up and then hold her atop the altar while special ropes were tied around her ankles and wrists to secure her in place. The girl's clothes were then ripped from her body by the goblins, baring her flesh to their lustful gaze.

The sorcerer would then stand beside the altar in blood-splattered ceremonial robes, brandishing a dagger made of some black metal. He would begin some long incantation in a language Bethany had never heard before. As he would speak, he would carve symbols in the girl's flesh with the tip of the dagger, trickles of blood running down her flanks even as she screamed and begged for mercy. No inch of her flesh was spared; from the tops of her feet to her forehead, the arcane symbols were etched into her flesh. Reaching a crescendo in the incantation, the sorcerer would use the dagger to cut open the sacrifice's body just below the ribs. He would plunge his hand into the agonized victim's body, grab the still-beating heart, and rip it from within. Holding it high in the air before the dying woman's eyes, he would speak the final words of the incantation while he laid the heart onto a brazier of burning coals. The smell of charring meat would war with the copper scent of blood. The ritual now completed, the sorcerer would step back from the altar and signal the goblins to come forward. After the sorcerer would leave, the two goblins would then eat the remains of the victim before Bethany's terrified eyes.

This had happened every day for the past ten, and she knew her turn would come soon.

Rikard had visited her cell each day after the goblins had consumed the body of the sacrifice, playing his cruel games with her. Her clothing had been taken from her and he would gloat over her pregnancy, delighting in telling her how the sorcerer would cut the baby from her body and remove its heart before taking hers. He would abuse her, beating her breasts and buttocks with a lash. She had been afraid he would rape her but she soon realized Rikard was no longer capable of functioning as a man; this sadism was his sole avenue for release. She refused to give him any satisfaction he might derive from her tears; she would not cry out as he beat her, nor give him any indication she feared her upcoming death upon that altar.

The arrival of the consolidated armies had given her hope. She had cheered each blast from the mages as they had shattered the wooden spikes and then the stone walls; each detonation had shaken the tower itself. When they appeared, the sorcerers sacrificed more victims, one after the other, their mutilated corpses tossed aside like scraps as the next one was forced down upon the bloody altar. Once the last five remaining women had been sacrificed, they used the power they had called to release the demon.

What had filled her with hope was turning to despair as she watched the demon killing so many of the armies. She knew of nothing that could withstand that great beast.

## Chapter 41

« ^ »

Rory watched in amazement as the mighty dragon Blue Death approached the shattered Veil. Airborne, she was an astounding creature. Her wings glittered like huge jewels as light refracted off the scales that covered her flesh. She carried a huge net beneath her; the load within it oscillating from side to side as her wings moved through the air.

She brought the net overhead and then gently lowered it into the former Heart of the Veil. Dwarves, one eye still on the dragon, rushed forward to free the load inside from the net, even as Blue Death began to fly lazy circles in the sky.

The load contained an immense stone sphere, perhaps twice the size of the one that had rested in the Heart before. The dwarves reverently moved the sphere into the cradle they had constructed at the exact spot where the ley lines all met.

"All that must be done now is key the sphere to the ley lines. Unfortunately, this will take more mages than we have in the Veil at present. Once the battle mages return, we should be able to restore the glamour and the shields around the Veil and the Heart," Arianna said.

Barwin came over to Rory with a package in his hands. "This be also in the cargo net, Prince Rorrick."

It was the mithrail suit of armor. *Finally*. Rory shed his clothes without any hesitation and donned the shining garments. The coverings for his feet were a part of the leggings that reached his waist in a single piece. It was awkward to put on and tended to pinch sensitive parts at unexpected moments, but he finally managed to get it on correctly. He slipped the mail shirt over his head and Barwin showed him how the two pieces fastened together at his

waist, connecting them. The coif had been extended to cover his face except for the eyes and flowed down over his neck to where it attached to the shirt. Over the coif was worn a shiny helm made of mithrail, with additional shielding that curved around Rory's face. Mithrail gloves also went on to cover his hands and connected to the sleeves of the shirt. Rory was now completely enclosed within a shiny suit of mithrail.

"Has anyone considered exactly how I am supposed to ride upon Blue Death's back? And where's the lance? This suit does me no good without the lance."

Barwin said, " 'Tis a fine time ta think of that now, laddie. The Guild has made ye a fine mithrail saddle which e'en now rests on Blue Death's back and the lance is lashed ta it. I'll not bore ye with the details, but the dwarves who made the saddle and placed it upon the dragon will long live in song and legend within the Guild. 'Tis time for ye to go, Prince Rorrick, and destroy the demon."

Rory stopped to hug Arianna. She helped him strap his swords and dagger in place before he headed out to meet the dragon. "Better to have them and not need them..." she said.

"...Than need them and not have them." Rory gave her a final hug.

\* \* \*

Blue Death landed next to the Tower of the Pact as Rory emerged from the Great Forest. The grass underneath her withered at her touch.

*'Are you ready, rider?'*

"Yes, I am." Rory swiftly climbed up into the saddle. The saddle itself was made of stone and was held in place by straps made of mithrail. The lance, thirty feet long and tipped with the dragon claw fragment, was heavy and awkward to hold, but the dwarves had cleverly balanced it by placing a flaring wrist shield at a point about five feet along the shaft. If he grasped it behind the shield, he found it easier to maintain his grip and maneuver.

Even as he adjusted to the seat and the lance, Blue Death sprang into the air, her vast wings raising them high into the sky. They flew east, toward the Keep of Eastfell and his destiny.

\* \* \*

Over a thousand men from the combined armies had been slaughtered by the demon without receiving a single injury itself. King William was afraid nothing would ever stop the fell creature from destroying the entire army. He and General Gustav had run out of ideas; nothing they had tried had worked. They had tried fire but the demon just laughed as the flames tickled along his side and head. An immense spear was tried but it shattered against the demon's side. It had picked up the remaining length and used it to swat the men around him, crushing chests and smashing skulls with abandon. Magical spells from the battle mages had no effect, either.

The demon suddenly stopped and looked to the west, roaring challenge and defiance at the very air. Slowly, King William began to make out a shining light approaching. He signaled his men to fall back away from the demon. Many risked their lives to rescue the wounded, some

from near the towering fell creature's feet. Others tried to drag away the dead, as well, to spare them the trip down the gullet of the demon. Soon, the area for a thousand yards was empty except for the dead horses none could move. No one would risk their lives to move a dead horse for the flesh might distract the demon long enough to allow other men to escape.

The demon ignored the men at its feet as it stared into the western sky. The shining spot slowly grew, resolving at last into a figure riding the back of an immense blue dragon. The legends were true. Somehow, somewhere, Rory had found a dragon and convinced it to help them.

The demon snatched up the splintered remains of the immense spear and hurled it at the dragon, but the spear was too slow and the flying creature circled away from its path with ease. The spear flew another mile or two before crashing to the ground, imbedding its length deeply in the soft earth. The demon strode over to one of the huge rocks it had thrown at the army earlier and lofted it at the dragon but again, the stone was easily evaded. Unfortunately, the stone continued on its path, aimed directly at Eastfell Keep, where it smashed into the tower about a third of the way up from the ground.

The impact shook the tower and made the goblins dragging Bethany to the altar release their grip. She scrambled for the stairs, ducking past falling stones as she ran down the winding staircase while the goblins roared their anger and chased after her. One goblin was struck by a massive stone from above and was knocked off balance, falling past her to its doom at the bottom of the tower. A hole had been punched in the side of the tower by the impact of the thrown stone, and debris filled the stairs. She fought her way over the stones, not caring about the flesh torn from her hands and feet as she worked her way past the obstruction. She had to edge her way around the worst part, her feet swinging precariously over the edge of the stair and the long drop to the bottom. If she could get around it, she should be able to escape the goblin.

The goblin lunged for her as she made the turn around the top of the pile, one claw scraping painfully along her swollen stomach, but it failed to secure a grip on her. Bethany grabbed a jagged rock the size of her fist and smashed the goblin in the face, one jagged edge striking its eye. Instinctively clutching its wounded face, the goblin lost its grip on the rocks. It fell off the pile and down the shaft to land atop the broken remains of the first goblin. Bethany had to scramble down the pile as it began to shift and fall over the edge, tumbling down upon the goblins and burying them under a cairn of rocks. With one hand pressed against her bleeding side, she slowly made her way down the stairs and searched for an opening she could use to escape.

\* \* \*

King William had ordered his forces to advance on the keep to destroy what remained of the orcs and goblins and to prevent the dark sorcerers from escaping. The sight of the naked pregnant woman who fled from a door in the base of the tower spurred him on. He and General Gustav, along with half a dozen of the King's Own and the Wolves of Westfell, aimed their warhorses toward the running woman.

Bethany heard the charging horses even before she saw them. She recognized King William first and then the dear grizzled face of General Gustav and knew she was safe. She slowed her

flight to a more cautious walk, still clutching the burning, bleeding wound in her side. She didn't care that she was naked before the world. Then she caught sight of the shining rider in the sky and her heart caught in her throat: *Rory!*

Even from high above the plains, Rory had caught sight of the running woman. Her long copper hair told him it was Bethany. When she reached the king, he knew she would be safe and he could focus on his task: killing the demon. Blue Death dove down at the demon and Rory braced the lance, aiming for the center of its chest. At the last moment, the demon shifted aside, trying to swat the dragon from the sky. The dragon spun, pulling its wings close to its body as it ducked under the demon's outstretched arms. The dragon's serpentine tail wrapped around the demon's lower legs and jerked it from its feet. It fell, but the demon lashed out with its own tail, scoring a bloody furrow along Blue Death's side.

Blue Death snapped its wings open and clawed for the air once more. As it passed the tower, Rory said, "Can you set fire to that?"

The dragon responded with, *'I can set fire to anything of this world, rider.'* She loosed a blast of flame at the base of the tower. Fueled both by the burning liquid that made up her breath and the layers of blood that coated the stones of the tower, flames raced up its length. Spotting the gaping hole in the side, Blue Death sent another blast of fire into it, turning the tower into a blazing chimney. Nothing would escape that tower alive.

The demon's roar and another thrown rock reminded them both of their primary target. Blue Death said, *'This is the time, rider. I will fly straight at the demon and will not veer. You must plunge the lance through him and then jump free just before we collide. You will only have seconds to do this or you will still be on my back when I fight this fell beast.'*

Rory braced himself, letting his battle senses take control to slow time. His entire focus was on the tip of the lance and the center of the demon's chest. The fell creature seemed to sense this attack would be different and it tried to escape by opening a rent between dimensions. Blue Death increased her speed and even as the demon started to step into the rent, Rory guided the mithrail shaft exactly into the center of its chest. So great was the force with which they collided that the lance pierced through the demon's chest and spine, emerging coated in slime. As the fell creature toppled backward with the weight of the dragon, the lance was forced into the bedrock of the plain of Eastfell.

The demon and the dragon tore at one another with their fangs, claws, and tails. Rory had been unable to free himself, and he was tossed around as if he had been swept up inside a tornado. Great rips appeared in Blue Death's wings as the demon savaged them. Blue Death was tearing at the fell creature's belly with her massive rear claws, dragging out the beast's intestines which hissed and boiled in the sunlight. The demon pushed the dragon back and then slammed her forward in a massive embrace. This pushed the embedded lance through the dragon's chest, the shield tearing a gaping wound in Blue Death's body as it was forced through. The corrosive acids inside her spilled down upon the torn belly of the demon, eating away at its innermost flesh. It also dissolved the mithrail band that held the saddle in place, and the next convulsive struggle between the two beings from other planes threw the saddle and Rory into the air to crash to the ground a distance away, shattering Rory's left leg and arm. As Rory struggled to free himself from the saddle, the lashing tail of the dragon slammed into the side of his head and everything went black.

\* \* \*

He awoke to the splash of hot tears upon his face. His head lay cradled in Bethany's lap as a team of elven battle mages worked on his injuries. "Stay still, Rory. You're badly injured."

Rory's vision swam and for a moment he saw two of Bethany's head. He fought to quell the nausea; closing his eyes helped. "Blue Death?"

King William said, "Both the dragon and the demon have died, Rory. Once they died, their corporeal bodies just slowly faded away. All that remains is a shaft of mithrail embedded in the rock. It wasn't until they were gone that we were able to reach you."

"How badly am I hurt?"

One of the battle mages said, "You have a broken leg, a broken arm, a couple of broken ribs, a hairline fracture of the skull, and a concussion. All in all, you're pretty lucky."

"Why do you say that?" Bethany asked. "He's hurt so badly."

"The last one to ride Blue Death died in the battle. No one knows where his bones lie since he was still in the saddle when she flew away."

"Oh. Guess I am lucky, at that." He tried to reopen his eyes and realized Bethany was wrapped in a cloak from one of the Wolves of Westfell. "What happened to your clothes, Beth?"

"I was in no position to look for them so I ran without them. It wasn't until I reached the king that I even realized I was naked. General Gustav insisted I take his cape."

"I'll bet a tankard of ale it was offered only after he took a long look!" Rory started to chuckle but stopped as the pain of his broken ribs lanced through his body. "Some hero I turned out to be. Aren't they supposed to come through unscathed to save the girl?"

"Hush that nonsense. You earned these injuries since you saved the world instead." Bethany stroked his head. "The girl managed to save herself thanks to a distraction from the shining rider of Blue Death."

## Epilogue

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The king's first priority was to make sure the threat had been eliminated. A few brave souls, including a pair of battle mages, had ventured into the tower. The stone structure had survived quite well, although everything flammable inside had been consumed by the blast of dragon fire. Reaching the uppermost rooms, they searched for evidence of the fate of the renegade duke and the dark sorcerers. In a chamber relatively untouched by the flames, they found the remains of Rikard, Duke of Eastfell. He had apparently fled into the sealed chamber ahead of the flames. The stout oak door had eventually succumbed to the heat and flame, but he had

died before that happened, suffocated as the fire consumed all the oxygen. Bethany, as one of the last to have seen him alive, had to verify the identity of the remains since he had changed so much since the Spring Court. Seeing his face, drawn back in the rigor of a horrible death, she felt immense satisfaction. She later admitted she would have gladly thrust a knife through his heart herself so she could watch him die, but she settled for spitting in his face before the king guided her away.

One of the battle mages treated her damaged hands and feet. He was most concerned about the long cut that slashed from below her breasts and across her distended belly and abdomen. The wound was cleaned several times with some very powerful solutions and ointments before the mage was satisfied. As he applied the dressing and wrapped a bandage around to hold it in place, he said the cut would probably leave a scar but Bethany didn't mind; it was a testament to her escape from death.

No trace was found of the dark sorcerers, however. While many believed they perished in the flames, others were concerned that ample time had existed for them to escape the tower. The battle on the plain would have provided all the distraction they needed to escape.

The wounded from Aluria were loaded into the first wagons and escorted home by the caliph's remaining warriors. Of the one hundred thousand who came north, less than half would be returning to the desert, many bearing the wounds they suffered against the goblins and the orcs. Their dead had joined the rest in a huge pyre that had burned for a week.

The fell creatures had all melted away, transforming into a mist that dissipated in the wind. The mages insisted this meant the rift in the dimensions was sealed, but that was something only time would reveal.

King William had asked the battle mages to completely destroy the keep. Using the power of the reopened ley lines, they demolished it, breaking the stone down into smaller pieces suitable for building homes, towns, barns and sheds; the structures necessary to pastoral life. The king abolished the duchy of Eastfell, giving the northern portion to Kendrahl and keeping the rest for Aluria. It would take time to repair the ravaged land and to convince people to settle there once more, but that was for the future.

The mithrail spear was firmly embedded in the rock and could not be removed. King William had decreed that it would forevermore be regarded as a monument to the epic battle fought on the plain between the Forces of Life and the minions of the Dark.

Armand, Duke of Kendrahl, had two sons and three daughters. Thomas, the eldest son, was confirmed as the new duke in absentia since he was back at Kendrahl Keep. His younger brother, Martin, who had fought beside his father and seen him die, stood in for the new duke during the ceremony. As a reward for his gallant service, King William appointed Martin the governor of the new territory awarded to Kendrahl. The young man was already planning how to get settlers in time for spring planting, many of whom he had recruited from among the mountain warriors he had fought with. The wounded especially wanted to stay rather than face the rigors of traveling in the mountains through the heavy snow.

The wounded Wolves of Westfell began their long trek back home. One of the wagons had been set aside for the heir and his wife. His broken leg and arm had been immobilized in plaster casts after the initial healing spells, and he spent most of the ride home resting with his head in Bethany's lap. He later said he didn't know which was rougher: being jolted when the



wagon hit a rut or a rock, or being kicked in the head by the baby in Bethany's belly. He, of course, made the comment far from Bethany's hearing.

\* \* \*

King William stared at the invitation left on his throne. The guards swore no one had entered the throne room, and the king believed them since the invitation was from King Brightblade and Queen Arianna. The six weeks since his return from Eastfell had been hard ones, complicated by the grief he finally had time to feel. There had been much to do, of course, in repairing the city and finding a new chancellor, but that still left many lonely nights. An invitation to visit the Veil would be a welcome break in his life.

\* \* \*

Ilara fussed around the comfortable wagon prepared for the journey to the Veil. A thick pallet had been installed in the bed of the wagon to provide a relatively comfortable place for the recovering heir and his very pregnant wife. Ilara had said Princess Bethany had no business traveling at this stage of her pregnancy. However, Bethany herself had brooked no demurrals. She was going to the Veil no matter what, and she intended to stay there through the rest of her confinement. Ilara then announced that where Bethany went, she would go as well, so she would be driving the wagon. Duke Richard would ride alongside on his horse, leaving General Gustav to manage the duchy in his absence.

The trip to the Veil had been uneventful, although the king and his few guards had joined them the night before they reached the Great Forest. King William instructed the guards to remain at the Tower of the Pact while he accompanied Duke Richard's party the rest of the way to the Veil.

\* \* \*

The dwarves had done many remarkable things in their reconstruction of the Veil community, including the fabrication of several guest houses located on the ground. Several of the injured rangers had been unable to climb the spiral stairs into the *hiakehlas* so adequate housing for their recuperation had to be found. When Queen Arianna saw them, she had requested larger ones be built as well to house visitors of high rank, knowing King William and Duke Richard would return one day, as would Prince Rory and Princess Bethany. These new quarters were now filled by the visiting groups.

\* \* \*

At the appointed moment specified in their invitations, everyone was assembled at the new Heart for its consecration and dedication. In addition to King William and Duke Richard, representing the world of men, there were representatives from other groups as well. Barwin, now reinstated as Guildmaster, and all the members of the Guild Board were there. Elona and several of the other hamadryads were in attendance, along with myriad sprites and pixies. King Brightblade and Queen Arianna stood at the head of the procession of mages, while the

recovering Winterstar sat near Prince Rorrick and Princess Bethany. Swiftstalker, the remaining rangers and other elven folk were massed behind them.

The procession of mages wound around the great sphere, each one reaching out to grasp a ley line and anchoring it to the sphere. Rory opened his senses and could feel and see the connections being made. The great sphere began to glow with an internal fire as the Forces of Life combined and collected within it.

Queen Arianna took the center, facing the crowd, as she said, "The Heart is now joined and keyed to the Forces of Life. May it always shield and nurture life in its great diversity. May its power only be used for the betterment of all."

The assembled mass began to clap and cheer as the queen said, "The Veil is now reestablished. However, those of you who are from outside the Veil need have no fear, for the Heart now recognizes you. You shall have free and open access to the Veil for as long as you shall live. We do this not just in recognition for your services to the Forces of Life and the Veil during the struggle against the Dark; we do it out of the love we feel for you all. Without our mutual efforts, the Dark would have triumphed. It was only through pooling our diversity that we prevailed."

Once the Heart was cleared of all but the mages, the secondary Veil was established to contain the magic they used within and to shield the Heart from outside influences. This second consecration of power was dedicated to Windwalker, the elderly master mage who had been killed defending the Heart from the demon.

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A grand feast was held to honor all those who attended the ceremony. Even as the gathered guests enjoyed the hospitality of the Veil, deals were being struck between several of the parties. King William and Duke Richard both met with the Guildmaster to arrange for the quarrying of stone needed for various projects, including the rebuilding of the fourth ring of the city of Aluria. In exchange, King William granted the dwarves the right to establish a new Guild presence in the region formerly known as Eastfell. When the Guild seemed a little less than enthusiastic, Rory mentioned the rich vein of mithril he had found that stretched under the land from one side of the territory to the other.

Their meetings concluded and the deals toasted in fine elven ale, Queen Arianna pulled King William aside. "William, Beatrice would not want you to mourn the way you have been. Your kingdom needs you to move on with your life, and to rediscover the joys of being alive."

"I know that in my head, Arianna, but my heart is not yet a believer. For now, it is only the nights that are difficult, and this fine ale will help me through them for a while."

"Might I suggest some time in one of the pools, William? The ale and the pools will make all things clearer to you." Arianna then directed one of the sprites to lead the king to a specific pool she had set aside for his use. As she watched the monarch follow the small fey into the darkness, a secret smile crossed her lips. He would find more than ale and hot water tonight; she had arranged for one of the more attractive of her sisters to join the king "accidentally" at the pool. Perhaps he would discover the joys of this world once more sooner than he expected.

\* \* \*

Everyone had finally settled down for the night when Bethany felt the onset of labor. At first she just thought it was simple pains brought on by the trip and the festivities, but they grew in strength and frequency.

“Rory, wake up.”

He raised his weary head and looked at her with somewhat bloodshot eyes from way too many ales with his father and grandfather. “What is it, Beth? I’m trying to sleep.”

“Well, sleep is out for the time being. I’m in labor and you need to summon someone to help us.”

Rory called out, “Assistance, please,” but Elona responded rather than the expected pixie or sprite.

“Elona! It appears Beth has gone into labor. Would you please summon the midwife?”

“Certainly, my Prince, along with someone to help you out of the room. We can’t have you right in the middle of things.”

Mere moments went by before a veritable army descended on the couple’s temporary home. Two elven warriors picked Rory up and took him back to the feasting area where Swiftstalker poured him a frosty tankard of ale and kept him company during his wife’s delivery. Queen Arianna and the midwife shooed everyone else out to give the princess some privacy, and most of them drifted back to join Rory as the waiting began.

The wail of a crying baby finally split the night and everyone relaxed, eager to hear the news from the queen. She entered the glade and walked over to Rory to say, “You have a fine, healthy son.” It was only after she had gotten Rory alone that she added, “There is one thing, and it probably means nothing, but the child has a rather distinct birthmark. There is a black mark that runs from his left shoulder across his back to his right hip, matching in size and position the scar across your wife’s stomach from the goblin’s claw.”

“I thought everyone felt the claw didn’t penetrate her womb,” Rory said.

“It didn’t. We don’t know what it means, Rory, and it’s probably nothing to be concerned about. Now, I will have someone take you to see your new son and your exhausted wife.”

As Rory was carried away, Queen Arianna wondered if she truly believed what she just said or if, in fact, the child had been marked by the Forces of the Dark.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Fantasy always held a special place in my heart as a boy. Edgar Rice Burroughs took me to

many fabulous places through his various series—Pelucidar, Mars, Venus. Other great writers soon followed—J.R.R. Tolkien, Andre Norton, Mercedes Lackey, Anne McCaffery, R. A. Salvatore. The fantasy world of elves, dwarves, ogres, orcs, and dragons fascinates and inspires in a way few other places can, which is why it touches even my *Æthereal* series.

After spending 24 years traveling the world for the Air Force, I retired to South Carolina and presently work as an IS Regional Infrastructure Support Manager for a Fortune 500 company covering facilities from Florida to New Jersey, plus Wisconsin and Minnesota. I have six children, thirteen grandchildren and step-grandchildren, two dogs, and a library of over 1,500 books of almost every genre.

For your reading pleasure, we invite you to visit our web bookstore

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